

Boris Porshnev's Dialectic of History

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Abstract

The article explores the legacy of Boris Porshnev, a remarkable Soviet Marxist thinker who contributed to history, psychology, physiology, and philosophy, from a particular dialectical perspective. Porshnev elaborated an innovative hypothesis of the origin of human species. He saw this origin in the emergence of *language* as (1) a means to mutual subjection and (2) means to resist subjection. A vivid, almost mythical picture of early human history is at the same time made rigorous through a consistent use of dialectical argument. This argument, in contrast with the Soviet doxa of “dialectical materialism,” privileges *negativity* as a special force and moment of development, and *negativity* takes the form of *contrariness*. The article discusses the value of Porshnev's theory in the international context, and puts it into the broader context of Soviet unorthodox philosophy, all the while contributing to a general theory of negativity.

Keywords

Porshnev, Soviet philosophy, negativity, dialectic, human evolution

¹ I am grateful to Vladimir Ryzhkovsky for his help and advice in accessing Boris Porshnev's archive and more generally in writing this article. Ryzhkovsky's own work on Porshnev's legacy will give a fuller view than my article, which is chiefly written on the basis of Porshnev's published work.

I. Introduction

Soviet philosophy had a peculiar destiny. After a period of boom and lively international exchange in the 1920s and early 1930s, it became subject to repression and normalization by an ideological party-state, while also becoming increasingly isolated from the rest of the world. Of course, leftist philosophers in the West² tried to keep track of Soviet thinking, but most of it remained untranslated, and the problems and viewpoints between the two regions became more and more divergent with time, so the lack of translation turned into *untranslatability*. The main cause of this substantive untranslatability was, in the 1950s and 1960s, the asynchrony whereby Soviet philosophy was for the most part a normative left-wing theory of a progressive stable society, while the Western leftists were mostly negativist critics of modernity—normative theories being left to liberals. In the 1970s and 1980s, the terms shifted: Soviet intellectuals became daring and virtuoso critics of the system—from the right. It would then be, again, a rare niche in the West, since the right there was mostly statist, positivist, and normativist (an exception were the French “new philosophers” widely appreciated in late Soviet intellectual circles³). After the demise of the Soviet Union and a complete (though short-lived) ideological victory of liberalism, even the little attention previously received by Soviet philosophy in the West quickly dissolved.

There were some exceptions to the situation of relative isolation: most notable being the case of Mikhail Bakhtin who, alone from the entire period, became an international star of philosophy, or “theory,” but was interpreted mostly without regard to Marxism or more broadly to the Soviet intellectual discussions in which he matured. Tragically, many of the Soviet thinkers, while contextually important, in a way “missed” their historical moment of universal validity, so that their resurrection today risks hitting on the already familiar strings (such, I tend to think, is the case of much of Evald Ilyenkov’s and Merab Mamardashvili’s heritage). However, for this same reason, some of these thinkers deserve translation and re-reading because they suddenly become relevant—“citable,” in Walter Benjamin’s terms—in a new historical situation. Such, as I will argue below, is the case of Boris Porshnev.

² Anticipating potential scrutiny for essentialism, I specify that by “West,” I mean here non-socialist countries of Europe, United States, and Canada. During the Soviet regime, this category, which is obviously constructed, made perfect sense and had an objective meaning.

³ For instance, Mihail Ryklin included a conversation with Henri Glücksmann into his book of interviews with leading French thinkers. Vladimir Bibikhin frequently quotes Glücksmann.

Soviet philosophy, except maybe for its last decades, developed with reference to Marxism and Soviet socialism, even though the best part of it did not coincide with the “dialectical materialism” (diamat) orthodoxy and often fell under repression. The Soviet period was intellectually rich, due at least to the generous support of professional philosophy and of humanities by the state, at a price of ideological control. The orthodox diamat that built on Friedrich Engels and Georgi Plekhanov and presented dialectics dogmatically, as a species of the law of nature, was dominant. But alternative schools existed, which synthesized Marxism with various recent trends of Western and Russian thought and often came up with new, inventive, and original theories. One of them, perhaps the most prolific and certainly the most renowned in international academia, was the tradition that enriched Marxism with the idea of the linguistic mediation of subjectivity and the research into the formation and social determination of individual consciousness. Even though the two thinkers probably never met, both Bakhtin’s and Lev Vygotsky’s circles belonged, as we can now judge, to this school. Many of Vygotsky’s disciples managed to survive, with losses, through Stalin’s era: Alexander Luria, Alexey Leontyev, Dmitry Elkonin, among others. Even Ilyenkov’s work in the 1960s is close to the same circle of ideas. Boris Porshnev, the protagonist of the present article, was obviously heir to this school of thought, at least in his writings on human evolution.

If I dare to very roughly sum up the main ideas of this school, I will emphasize the following:

1) The key role of culture (a sphere of meanings and their material embodiments) being a central object of study, not a mere “superstructure” as in dogmatic Marxism.

2) The agency of the subject as a key to the understanding of society and culture. No mechanical determination of human behavior by physiological mechanism. Culture as ideology, in the “good” sense of the word. Self-control and self-creation of the subject or “personality” (as opposed to the Western emphasis on the unconscious).

3) The originally collective nature of the human subject. Society, or collective, *precede* individual agency or personality, while the *individual* is the site of much theoretical and practical attention.

4) Teleology of progress, belief in society’s favorable effects on the individual.

5) Linguistic mediation. Language is not a self-sufficient form but an indispensable material medium of purposive activity and of higher goal-setting.

6) The role of people/“common folk” in social life, their “spontaneity” as an explanatory category: this emphasis is most significant for Bakhtin and Porshnev, but occasionally surfaces in the other thinkers. A diversion from the orthodox “class” point of view, this theoretical attitude goes back to the Russian nineteenth-century Left (the so-called pop-

ulists) and represents a leftist if not Marxist theoretical standpoint, quite tolerable in the 1940s and 1950s since it coincided with the political maneuvering of Stalin himself.

Each of these themes does not represent anything unknown in the West, and some of them may seem naïve or purely liberal to a contemporary external judge. However, taken together, they did produce several theoretical oeuvres of astounding intellectual force, and Boris Porshnev is certainly one of them: a towering figure of Soviet intellectual life who became known to international scholarship only within the historical field and for a specific empirical study, not as a universal interdisciplinary theorist and methodologist of the humanities that he was. His works on French history were translated, became the subject of debate, and are now a classical reference in the field. However, his later work devoted to human evolution, which is also his most philosophically accomplished contribution, was never translated and remained largely unknown within international scholarship. Even specialists on Soviet intellectual history rarely mention Porshnev, with a notable exception of Galin Tihanov, who rightly points at Porshnev's work as a "high intellectual endeavour that deserve[s] to survive the tectonic shifts of history" (Tihanov, in Leatherbarrow and Offord 2010: 330).

Boris Porshnev belongs to the second generation of Soviet thinkers, his most active period falling in the 1950s and 1960s. He was born in 1905 to the family of a brick factory owner. As a young man, before entering university, he ran away to a wandering circus as an assistant juggler (a telling detail of his mature personality and style). After being forcibly returned home, he received his education in Soviet Petrograd and then Moscow universities, combining successful studies in history and psychology (both were taught in one department of social sciences) with a training in the biology department (which he did not officially complete). However, for the first period of his career he was known mostly as a historian of the early Modern period. It is as such that he became known internationally, first of all in France, for his book on the mass peasant uprisings in France before and during the Fronde civil wars. The idea behind a meticulous archive-based account was simple and quite conventional for the Left: Porshnev argued that the "elite" movement of Fronde was just the visible part of an iceberg whose hidden core was the peasant movement, in fact a class war against their landlords. History is moved forward by masses and not by elites who feed on their spontaneity. The book was translated into French and strongly impressed the French left-leaning public; it led to an intense dispute with R. Mousnier, a French historian of peasant uprisings who rejected the "class" theory in favor of a more nuanced empirical account and saw the conflict as the one between the feudal-type estates and the Modern state in the making (thus implicitly seeing the latter as a more progressive force).

But in fact, conventional as the “class analysis” was for a Soviet historian, the actual argument of Porshnev in this and other historical books was nuanced, and was accompanied by a metatheoretical reflection. It was not the familiar economic determinism but a purely historical logic with *revolution* as the main explanatory category.

Written in a grand literary style, Porshnev’s books hold an intellectual intrigue and abound in romantic imagery; he metaphorically likens popular uprisings to a “tempest,” a “tornado.” In Russian, the natural “elements,” *stikhii*, are the root of the word “stikhiynost,” spontaneity. Porshnev is working both on an implicit and explicit level with the familiar discussion by Lenin, Luxemburg, and others, of spontaneity and organization in a revolution: you need both to succeed. But Porshnev metaphorically emphasizes the destructiveness of the “elements.” He thus implicitly agrees with the anarchist tradition, particularly with Bakunin, on whom he had written his first historical work (Kondratieva 2012).

Porshnev’s work on the seventeenth century culminates in the systematic work *Feudalism and Popular Masses* (1964), which defends the existence of feudal formation and presents it, again, as a permanent class war. What is perhaps most interesting in this book is not the theory of feudalism per se, but the theory of slaveholding in archaic societies. Porshnev argues that such societies are not exclusively characterized by internal class division but more essentially by the “external state” that is oriented at a slavehunt in the adjacent “barbaric” communities (Porshnev 1964: 513–14). There is a certain symbiosis between the civilized state and the savage tribes that it feeds on. For Porshnev, this is a (so-far) latent reference to his subsequent theory of archaic prehumanity that consisted of cannibals and domesticated early humans on whom they fed. This theory obviously extrapolates the famous theory of capitalism as analyzed by Rosa Luxemburg (2003 [1913]). Porshnev knew her work and referred to it in one of the unpublished drafts of *On the Origins of Human History* (Vite 2007: 479). Porshnev’s theory of the archaic society matches Luxemburg’s capitalism as a regime that parasitically coexists with the non-capitalist relationships that it marketizes through conquest or internal reform, and extorts surplus value.

Feudalism in its turn, appears to Porshnev as “feudal synthesis” between the aforementioned antagonistic groups of Antiquity, civilized states, and the “Barbarians”; the latter being originally a negative, destructive force that fractured the great empires of Antiquity into small kingdoms and castles.

Both historians are right, the one who points at the decay of ancient technology, and the one who remarks the increasing de-forestation, crop rotation, successes in animal husbandry, but in the emergence, development, and progress of something third—a new quality that was born both in this decay and in this success [...] Every European feudal state

contained in itself both a political tendency of transformation into a supranational power, and the reverse tendency of dissolving into ancient tribal elements, but in the final count both tendencies increasingly annulled themselves, and the new quality [a feudal nation state] was holding more and more between the extremes (Porshnev 1964: 515–16).

In 1966, Porshnev published a theoretical book *Social Psychology and History*, aspiring to provide a metatheoretical anthropological basis for the histories he tells in his previous books. Of course, this is the anthropology of class war, and its core feature is class identity. But, here we move into a less orthodox territory, because Porshnev's broader "psychological" notion is that all human behavior is conditioned by a self-identification of the subject as "we" against "them." The subject (Porshnev does not use the Freudian language of identity or identification) thus precedes any substantive determinations, but "I" (*contra* Freud) is always secondary to the collective "we." As to others, humans define them as "us," "them," or as "you." "You" (against the "dialogical" humanists like Ludwig Feuerbach or Martin Buber) is defined as a contested intersection between "us" and "them," where we choose whether to classify a new person into this or that category. The "we" grouping emerges *spontaneously*, and Porshnev explicitly dwells in this book on the issue of spontaneity (*stikhiynost*) and organization. Language plays a crucial role, since it is a powerful tool of persuasion, and the subject defines "us" as a group with which s/he is not afraid to share a common language, which explains for instance the useless proliferation of dialects between adjacent lands. The book also briefly sketches out the theory of language that Porshnev simultaneously elaborates for his human origin project.

All the while he was writing his historical texts, for the last twenty-five years of his life Porshnev was working on a very different topic: *the prehistoric origin of the human species*. He had early planned his "return" to psychology from a period "training" in the seventeenth-century history of revolutions, and accomplished this return in the 1950s and 1960s, but a social psychology of mass consciousness would be insufficient without a materialist theory of human being that would involve neurophysiology. For Porshnev, the early human history represented both a philosophical and empirical key—"origin" in the full sense of the German "*Ursprung*"—to the question of history, and once again combined his rich background in history and psychology. It was already a bold move to consider the paleontological discussions as a part of the *historical* discipline, while they usually pass as anthropology if not biology: what interests Porshnev is the threshold, not just of humanity, but of the underdetermined, constantly evolving, and conflictual, human essence in its historicity.

Porshnev thoroughly studied the state of literature, arguing not just from paleontological data, but from the Soviet tradition of empirical psychophysiology. The resulting picture, published in 1974 in a censored

shortened version as *On the Origin of Human History*, presented a striking reconstruction that, unlike his historical works, was directly mixing philosophical reflection and a descriptive narrative, thus bordering on a *myth* (as it is common for any story about origins) but escaping it through continuous use of dialectical logic. The book was supposed to become the second and central part of a trilogy under the eloquent title *Critique of Human History*—a philosophical *summa* with a focus on the philosophy of history and an overview of human history in its entirety (Porshnev 2007: 11). Extensive drafts of other two parts exist in Porshnev’s archive (which I consulted), but the Soviet scholar was unable to complete them due to his premature death in 1972 that was triggered in part by the ideologically motivated refusal of the publisher to print his book.

Very roughly, the argument of the book is this: humans emerged through the invention of language that allowed them to subject animals and other human groups to their will. As with *Social Psychology and History*, we see with surprise how a seemingly staunch orthodox Marxist defends theories that do not sound particularly Marxist either to us or to his contemporaries. *Social Psychology and History* would sound like Carl Schmitt. Porshnev’s ideas were later shared and confirmed without his knowledge by some American and British social psychologists, for instance, in the “social identity” theory by Henry Tajfel and John Turner, created roughly simultaneously with Porshnev’s (Tajfel 1978). *On the Origin of Human History*, in its part, de facto denies the “Marxist” (actually, Engelsist) theory of “labor as the origin of language,” or rather transforms it by saying that labor was only possible through subjection or self-subjection through language. Human relations emerge as conditioned by power/domination: a picture inverse and complementary to the revolutionary ontology of Porshnev’s books on feudalism. Porshnev quotes Russian “materialist” and “mechanicist” physiologists Pavlov and Bekhterev, and the less materialist physiologist Alexei Ukhtomsky. But he uses their intuition for building a peculiar ontology. If of anything in the West, his theory smells of Nietzsche (whom of course it never mentions), mixing his cynical ideas of universal struggle for domination with a certain Hegelian Marxism of master/slave dialectic. A striking evolution for a theorist of class war. Now, I will spell out Porshnev’s theory of human origin in more detail.

II. Theory Of Human Evolution

In his book *On the Origin of Human History*, Porshnev advances a complicated dialectical theory that I will now try to summarize.

1) A true science of history, or philosophy of history, must address the issue of human origin, because this is where nature ends and history begins. Origin in a strong sense (not the same as cause, but cause of his-

torical causation), this is the key to human essence, because if the latter is to be historical, to freely evolve, then the essence must emerge *historically*, eventfully in its turn, and not just be given from heaven. This is the continuity that connects Porshnev's paleopsychological work with his "normal" historical research, and this is his road to the fundamental questions of history as a philosophical discipline. "We approach, in the human sciences, to a shift that can be compared to the revolution in physics that took place in the first half of the twentieth century. The role analogous to the "atomic core" is here played by the origin of human history" (Porshnev 2007: 381). The argument of the published book *On the Origins of the Human History* limits itself to the question of origin. But, as mentioned, the book was supposed to be a volume in a larger, more ambitious work under the tentative title *Critique of Human History*. The latest existing draft in the Porshnev's archive bears the name *History and Philosophy*. Here, the argument is more comprehensive. The manuscript starts with the question of the *end of history*, and it claims that "the notion of end of history logically leads to the question of the onset of history" (Porshnev's archive, ORGBB, K.17, E.kh.1, L.47). The *Origins* book was supposed to become one of the subsequent volumes. The question of eschatology, for Porshnev, antedates the question of origin. Human history acquires meaning from the logical and real borders between which it exists. What is born, dies, what can come to an end, was once born. The end, and telos, of history is the gradual self-overcoming of humanity, that is, the overcoming of the violent origin with which it once broke off nature. In this article, however, I will focus, following the published version of Porshnev's legacy, on the historical *origin*.

2) Humans are speaking animals: this explains not just consciousness, but also history, which on this account appears as a history of evolving class struggle, and class domination. Human domination over one another is a fact that only became possible through language. Other human essentials are then secondary with regard to language, such as labor (the result of linguistic injunction from a master to a serf) and consciousness (auto-instruction, self-domination, as Lev Vygotsky had already explained it, following Pierre Janet [Vygotsky 1983, vol. 3: 142–43ff]). Therefore, we need to explain language as the constitutive fact of power.

3) Early human beings survived on the ground without means of defense against predators. One may conjecture that they could somehow stop them or control them through voice. Or, more probably, they tamed some predators and use them against one another. But before and above this, they exercised their power of "suggestion" *against each other*, which gradually led to the division of the species into the dominating and the subordinate group. The future "humans" ("neoanthrops," as Porshnev calls them) emerged from this latter subordinate group.

4) Neurophysiologically, this means that early language must have developed through an "inhibition dominant": a stimulus that blocks an

action by making a targeted animal reproduce its *antagonist* through spontaneous imitation. Experimentally, Porshnev shows, any motion scheme in the organism has such an antagonist: a motor complex that is incompatible with it, blocks it. Porshnev relies on the important physiological theory of the “dominant,” by Russian physiologist Ukhtomsky: according to this theory, the organism does not just react on the relevant stimuli by way of conditional or unconditional reflex, but gathers the *irrelevant* stimuli that reinforce a dominant reaction (Ukhtomsky 2002). Thus, Pavlov’s “reflex” is in fact a reaction not only to trigger stimuli but, after a relevant trigger had emerged and at a certain point of arousal, to *any* stimulus. Activity is thus, so to say, a general mobilization of organism. Ukhtomsky thus interprets what was previously known as “Sherington’s funnel,” interpreting it in the terms that he borrows from Richard Avenarius. What Porshnev adds is the “inhibition dominant,” a center that is paralyzed through overstimulation, thus facilitating a reciprocal action. A motion that is thus reciprocally exclusive with another is the first linguistic sign. Language, then, was originally an *interdiction*, a “not.” In this way, the “dominant” reveals a previously hidden connotation of *domination*, a negative condition of a positive *élan*.

5) This is not, however, the end of the story. A simple interdiction is still an indeterminate blockage: specifically, a blockage of aggressive behavior that allows one to control a counterpart. But the early humans developed a skill of *counterinterdiction*, again, using and imposing physiological antagonists of the prior signals, at the next level. This particular skill is closer to the negation, properly speaking, which we find as an intralinguistic expression. This anti-signal language was closer to ours: it inverted some qualities of the original signals. But it was also not the end, there was yet a third level, a negation of negation, by which those who had interdicted, learned to break through the barriers of counterlanguage. Only this is what we can recognize as a proper linguistic injunction, which has a positive determinate content: there is a constant play of forces at this level. Porshnev summarizes this, using Kant’s categories of modality: the first interdiction says “not allowed,” the counterinterdiction says “allowed,” the final injunction says: “you must” (Porshnev 1974: 432).

6) The early human hypnotizers directed their powers against their peers, but the counterhypnotizers turned theirs against *themselves*, thus creating political power, consciousness, and labor. History is not about the relationship between an individual and the species, but about a split *within* the species into “us” and “them,” and the relations of domination and emancipation. According to Porshnev, contemporary humans evolved from the subordinate class that resisted and fled from its cannibalistic masters. But masters, the “paleoanthrops,” thought Porshnev, survived too and existed parallel to the new humans. He even thought that these monstrous prehumans still existed today and was an enthusiast of the

then popular search for “snowmen” or “yeti” (Porshnev 1963, 2012). (This “sensationalist” moment of his work badly affected his reputation, even though in principle there was nothing impossible in a discovery of a “relict hominid”). However, Porshnev proceeds to argue that by analogy, the species continued to divide into the dominant and subordinate group (classes), and to evolve through their continuous struggle, so that the condition of the subordinate class becomes more conscious and less desperate.

Porshnev explains perpetual conflict among humans by the desire to flee each other (for the oppressed class, to flee the oppressor), and to distinguish themselves from others for the sake of differential identification. (This negative explanation of violence looks somewhat close to Pierre Clastres's theory of violence as a means to forceful dis-integration, as his notion of labor as a result of political oppression is close to Clastres' debate against Engels (Clastres 1989, 2010)—except that the class aspect is missing from Clastres's state-centered doctrine).

7) Porshnev emphasizes a *gap* between humans and animals, a gap that is reflected and reinforced in the human language. Human language is *opposed* to the animal language: it *must* be materially unrelated to the designated object. It is an “anti-language” (Porshnev 2007: 42). “Human linguistic signs are essentially determined as antagonists to those given or received by any animal” (Porshnev 2007: 93). This has to do with its inverted function: blocking, not facilitating a reaction.

Along the same lines, says Porshnev, the first origin of humanity is *anti-humanity*: a fierce hypnotizing power. To arrive to this conclusion, he needs a methodological rule of searching difference in the past: “If history is development, if development is a mutual transformation of contraries, then, out of an animal, there emerged something contrary to what had developed in the course of history. The question is, to reconstruct the beginning of history by contrasting it with the current and recent state of things” (Porshnev 1974: 40). A truly historical approach requires not a recognition of the *same* essence, in a different shape, in the distant past, but in a discovery of an essentially contrary substance even in what may seem similar to our own time. In the epistemological part of his manuscript, Porshnev call this a “method of contrast” (Porshnev's archive, ORGBB, K.17, E.kh.1, L. 48). Michel Foucault (whose early work on madness Porshnev knew and held in high esteem)⁴ states literally the same in

⁴ Porshnev knew and respected Foucault's early work on madness. Foucault, on his part, knew and respected Porshnev's early work on the French popular movements. In his lecture course from 1972–73 at Collège de France, Foucault relies extensively on both Porshnev and Mousnier in his version of the French seventeenth century “Pieds-Nus” uprising (Foucault 2015a and 2015b. The English translation lacks most of the notes and the interpretive essay by Claude-Olivier Doron, so for the Porshnev connection one should consult the French edition). Not surprisingly, it is precisely the

his *Archeology of Knowledge* (Foucault 1972: 162) and other methodological works, even though Foucault opposes both dialectics and Marxism, and prefers the language of *rupture* and *difference* not contrariness. “A transition from an animal to a human being should not be thought as a struggle of two principles. One must conceive also a principle that gradually regresses, and is absent both in the animal and in a human: a negation of the zoological, which is even more increasingly denied by a human” (Porshnev 2007:44).

In this sense, there is a violent, *monstrous* vanishing mediator of history, which is lost, even though it occasionally returns, in the repeated acts of terrorist cruelty. A civilized human being is only possible as a negation of negation, a negation of its own natural essence. The human against the human—the argument is uncannily close to Nietzsche, with an opposite evaluation: Nietzsche (2006) also saw the possibility of humans overcoming themselves and becoming “overmen,” and also described human nature as divided between inborn mastery and inborn slavery. Nietzsche deplores the loss of the violent “master” element while Porshnev celebrates it and sees a positive potential in the resistance and emancipation of slaves as domesticated civilized humans.

Arguing against the theory familiar to us from Arnold Gehlen and other philosophical anthropologists who find that a human being is defined by a lack of instincts (Gehlen 1988, see more on this below), the real question to answer, says Porshnev, is: “*What destroyed the instincts*, what kind of a hammer smashed them during the relatively fast transition from the paleoanthropos to neoanthropos? The new regulator that annulled, inhibited, annihilated the injunctions of the inherited instincts again and again, was the “second signal system,” the speech interaction” (Porshnev 2007:119).

Clearly, Porshnev’s reconstruction contains many guesses and sometimes falls into myth. The same, however, is true of any reconstruction of origin (think for instance of cosmology of the Big Bang or of early childhood psychology). The benefit of his theory is its *historical* and *eventful* understanding of humanity. At the same time, the story is immanent, in

issue of historical continuity that interests Foucault. Porshnev argued that the seventeenth-century French state was still essentially feudal; Mousnier contended that its fiscal policy and sale of offices was an autonomous state interest allied with the bourgeoisie. Foucault used their accounts to claim there was a total civil war (not class struggle), and the Modern state grew out of it, with its militarized apparatus of repression that was thus legitimized. Although Foucault insists on the “rupture,” and agrees with Porshnev on many issues such as the wide plebeian coalition of rebels and the warlike structure of social reality, it must be said that paradoxically on Foucault’s methodological terms Porshnev would be more Foucaultian than Foucault himself! It is Porshnev who insists on the alterity of the past, while Foucault focuses, quite conventionally, on the eventful emergence of a contemporary political form such as state.

that it clearly associates early history with what is so important for us now: communication, the information bomb, and the ubiquity of hypnotic, fascinating forces around us.

III. Discussion And Relevance

1. Plausibility

With all of its persuasive philosophical meaning, Porshnev's paleontological and anthropological ideas are apart from the current state of the art questioning of human origins. There are some specific details where he was obviously wrong, such as the attribution of anthropogenesis to a recent period of forty to fifty thousand years ago, the idea of a late divergence between Neanderthals and humans (today the former are considered to be a lateral branch of evolution that genetically separated around seventy thousand years ago), and so on. The genetic evidence shows a recognizable human genome emerging in Africa about two hundred thousand years ago (Cann, Stoneking, and Wilson 1987), while the migration from Africa, with which Porshnev associated the evolutionary divergence of paleoanthropoi and neoanthropoi, happened about sixty to fifty thousand years ago (Forster and Matsumura 2005). Still, on this issue of timing, Porshnev is wrong only if we agree to identify the species with its genetic stability and not with its culture, because the struggle between the two hominid groups he describes could theoretically have taken place without evolutionary organic changes. Also, some recent discoveries such as the widely discussed detection of "mirror neurons" (Gallese et al. 1996), actually confirm Porshnev's theory that depends on the spontaneous imitation by prehumans of the prelinguistic signals of interdiction. Porshnev heavily relies on data on the imitative behavior of monkeys and humans that were already known to him (Porshnev 1974: 298–321), and the mirror neurons are also viewed by some now as vehicles of language and its link to behavior (Arbib 2005; Rizolatti & Sinigalia 2008). It is not, however, fully clear what the neurobiological discovery of mirror neurons as a vehicle of imitation brings new to the old, already Aristotelian, knowledge of human mimetic behavior.

However, it is not as if Porshnev does not know the correct answers to his questions. The present situation with the problem of human origin is far from being clear. There is a number of influential studies (Bickerton 1981; Byrne and Whiten 1988; Deacon 1997; Dunbar 1996; Knight 1998; Masataka 2007; Revonsuo 2000; Franklin and Ziphur 2005; Tommasello 1999, 2008) all of whom formulate hypotheses on the emergence of language and mind that are as conjectural as Porshnev's. Moreover, they very transparently reflect the ideological and philosophical premises of their

authors. Even though my task is here not to prove that Porshnev was factually “right,” I will, for the sake of illustration, evoke some of the present theories.

Many of them focus on the social nature of language and point at the contrast between hominids and the highest primates, chimpanzees and bonobos, in that the latter are silent and “egotistic,” although social, animals. Something happens that allows early humans to act in cooperation. The causality order is uncertain, but it seems that language and sociability co-emerge. Many anthropologists believe in an archaic “social contract” (Deacon 1997: 407–08), which must have taken place for solidarity to emerge. Terrence Deacon thinks that language starts with ritualistic symbols of marriage that allow stable couples to develop and to create the sexual division of labor; Nobuo Masataka thinks that early language was a musical constitution of social unity; Dereck Bickerton maintains that early language was used by scavenging hominids to “recruit” peers for collective work; Robin Dunbar sees language, with its “gossip” function, as a stronger replacement for the socially integrative practice of grooming. Chris Knight reverses the order of causation and claims that language *required* a social contract of sorts so that language becomes possible: otherwise, given the imperative nature of early symbols (here Knight sounds similar to Porshnev), there is a high risk of being cheated and becoming an object of behavioral manipulation. The contract implies solidarity in those who can influence each other through speech, but it does not dictate universal honesty, accepting all language as metaphoric, deceitful in part.

What is striking is not just the conjectural character, but the mytho-ideological nature of these narratives that are uncannily similar to the liberal political myth of (1) originally isolated humans coming together and always-already forming a “social contract,” (2) these humans establishing a regime of suppression and partial toleration of their immoral tendencies such as aggression, cheating, egoism. Thomas Hobbes and Bernard Mandeville are the greatest representatives of this paradigm.

Porshnev, coming from the leftist Soviet tradition, explicitly states in the conclusion to his book:

The psychic development of a child, as stated our wise psychologist Lev Vygotsky, happens not from the individual toward the social, but from the social toward the individual: he is social from his very words. This is applicable also to the psychic transformation of humans in history: they are social from its very start, while an individual, with his/her thinking, is a product of interiorization, of individualization from a primary community, in a stubborn war against suggestion (Porshnev 2007: 477).

Notice the nuance: both the present-day anthropologists of US and British origin and Porshnev insist on the importance of human sociabil-

ity. But for Porshnev, the sociability *precedes* and needs not to be explained through the mutual adaptation of individuals. Moreover, this sociability is neither a nice contract of solidarity nor the immoral, but ultimately cute “Machiavellianism” of Byrne and Whiten (1988, note the preliberal influence of Machiavelli on Hobbes and the rest of political theory, even if it was based on a misinterpretation missing Machiavelli’s grand ethics), but a monstrous and murderous oppression of one group by another, which later develops into class war. The contemporary subject is the product, not of laudable solidarity or toleration, but of negative separation, secession of the oppressed from their tormentors. The origin of intelligence is not the good will of the strong, but resistance of the weak. Individuality emerges through interaction of social power relations. As though following Benjamin’s famous injunction (in its turn influenced by the Soviet memory politics), Porshnev identifies with the vanquished not with the victors. Of course, his narrative is closer to Freud’s than to contemporary liberal anthropologists. Freud also starts with the violent collective. But his conclusion is pessimistic: the new human is a guilty perpetrator of a past crime, while in Porshnev s/he is, on the contrary, its dignified victim who successfully fights back, while still hearing in its ears the iron drums of archaic orders and therefore capable of free will.

2. Significance

As any story of origin, Porshnev’s story aims at resolving contemporary puzzles. In part this application is already sketched out in *Social Psychology and History*: humans are defined via group identities and shibboleths of self-nominations, and they are continuously in a group struggle. This struggle is akin to natural elements or explosives: Porshnev uses strong language of “hammers,” “bombs,” “earthquakes” both for popular revolutions, for the linguistic violence of early prehumans, and for the force of intrahuman separation. His theory both lays a foundation for seeing history as a ruthless class war and gives a sober diagnosis of human history, smelling of Schmitt with a touch of Hegelian master-slave anthropology added. Such dark, counter-hegemonic world-picture which was not unlike the political realism of Soviet policymakers (it borders on pessimism albeit describing a historical progress in freedom and in the inclusivity of “we”) is interesting enough. But Porshnev, as with his peer Soviet philosopher Bakhtin, adds a *populist* dimension. His class war stories virtually ignore proletarians: he focuses on the peasants, with their “spontaneous/elemental” struggles, and generalizes their fight to characterize the human essence as the ongoing revolt of the subaltern group.

The emphasis on the end of history, and on its origin in domination and subjection, brings Porshnev close to the roughly contemporary phi-

losophy of his former compatriot Alexandre Kojève. Like Kojève, Porshnev philosophically identifies the essence of human being with negativity and like him, derives the idea of the end of history. However, Porshnev's emancipatory vision and optimistic tendency is worlds apart from the liberal and moderately pessimistic interpretation of the end-of-history by the future European bureaucrat Kojève.

Yet another important contemporary vector, as mentioned, is the reflection on the hypnotic, sacramental role of language, which neatly describes the condition of contemporary humans in the media-filled universe of unprecedented linguistic bombardment, to which they must and can learn to resist, and which brings him close to the circle of ideas of the French disciples of Kojève (Georges Bataille, Roger Caillois), of whom he probably did not know, and to the Russian linguistic mysticism of Sergey Bulgakov and Alexey Losev. In a 1966 article that anticipates the argument of the book, Porshnev quotes the latter, his peer, the heterodox Soviet dialectician who complemented Plato's dialectics of one with a notion of *name*:

Losev, a philosopher-idealist, elaborated, in a speculative and mystical form, a "philosophy of name," out of which, I believe, something rational and empirically valuable can be extracted. Losev, while disarticulating a number of logical layers or spheres in the word, paid special attention to what he called "*meon*." In a word, it is implicitly and negatively implied everything that does not belong to its proper meaning. It is as though surrounded by a gigantic sphere of all the negated other words, other names, other senses. If we now translate this abstraction into empirical terms, one may say that a word is a signal towards inhibition of all other actions and representations except the single one in question (Porshnev 1966: 30).

This reference to the 1927 book by the Russian Neo-Platonist Alexey Losev, *Philosophy of Name* (1994 [1927]) is far from being accidental. Porshnev refers to it in his book draft as early as in 1939–41 (Porshnev's archive, ORGBB, K.17, E. Kh. 6, L. 66–67). Losev thought that language—which starts with a *name*—is the completion of *idea* in the medium of its Other—the *meon*, Platonic "otherness." The genesis of language is the need to take into account this negative aspect of idea, and therefore it is important that the material of language, the sound, has absolutely nothing to do with the meaning embodied in it. Porshnev's "inhibition dominant" is based on the same thought: human language is entirely unlike its referent, and this makes it possible for it to *negate*, and only then, to denote and to idealize.

What matters to us theoretically is (1) Porshnev's understanding and practice of dialectic in a concrete empirical/historical study, and (2) the place of his argument in the twentieth century's discussion of human es-

sence, now newly relevant because of the “posthuman” anticipations (Haraway 1991; Braidotti 2013).

1) Negative dialectic

Soviet orthodox “laws of dialectic” omitted negativity. But, in the heterodox Soviet dialectics of Losev, Vygotsky, Bakhtin, and Ilyenkov, it played a crucial role. Losev, who reconstructs the Neoplatonic dialectical system, presents material world as a “meon,” non-being, a result of negation which is *far from disqualifying it*. Similarly, Losev points at the role of meon in the linguistic meaning, notably in the meaning of names. Vygotsky, in his masterpiece *Thought and Language* (1962 [1934]), points at the antagonistic and mutually destructive relationship between the faculties of thinking and speaking. Thought destroys speech and makes it irregular, only to culminate subsequently in the synthesis of *verbal thinking*. Early Ilyenkov, in “Cosmology of the Spirit” (2017), presented the mission of the human being as being the destroyer of universe. Bakhtin, closest to Porshnev, built on the interplay of simple negation and *inversion*. He and his disciple Valentin Voloshinov (2013) describe psychoanalysis as an ideological project: it discovered sexuality as an ideological obverse of the bourgeois mainstream culture. Later, Bakhtin (1968) analyzes popular culture, which to him is a vehicle of the higher artistic culture, as an “anti-world” of official ideology that is polemically directed against it. However, there is no synthesis here, if we do not count as such the very novel of Rabelais that interiorizes the carnival “antiworld” and makes it acceptable for the upper class.

It is within this context, although relatively independently of it, that Porshnev develops. His theory also emphasizes negativity as a force: what might appear to us as a simple deficiency, is always an effect of an active negation, which is not an independent force but polemically engages with what it negates, thus forming an inversion. This reinterpretation of the negative as the contrary (*nihil negativum* as the *nihil privativum* or *contrarium*) is in my view the core of the Modern dialectic from Kant to Hegel, Marx, and Freud (Magun 2013).

Human being is “negative,” deficient, weak, because of the ongoing struggle in which it engages against its own nature, and because of the negative work of its monstrous ancestor that domesticated humans and then fell prey to its organized resistance. Humanity is anti-nature. Human language is originally anti-language (opposite to the analogous/mimetic language of nature), but then it develops and overcomes its merely negative nature, in full agreement with Hegel’s logic of the negation of negation. Politically, humans are revolutionaries who revolt against humanity, if, by humanity, we understand the original monstrosity of linguistic domination and of the enslavement of peers.

The social cannot be reduced to the biological. The social cannot be deduced from anything but the biological. In my book, I suggest a solution for this antinomy. It is based on the idea of *inversion*. The latter can be briefly expressed in the following way: a quality (A/B) is transformed in the process into its contrary (B/A)—nothing is new here, but all is new. But one must envision not one but two inversions that followed one upon the other [...] A consistent historical method [*istorizm*] leads one to the conclusion that in the beginning of our history everything was reverse, bottom up, from what it is now (if we discount the fact that we still carry a lot from the ancient legacy): the course of history represents the gradual reversal of the original state. But this “original” state was in its turn preceded by another inversion: a “reversal” of the animal nature into the one from which humans started their history (Porshnev 2007: 13–14).

In his unpublished work, Porshnev takes the significance of negativity even further and formulates its world historical and ethical significance which closely correlates with his aforementioned theory of the end of history. In his manuscript magnum opus, *Critique of Human History*, he writes: “We affirm, support, and welcome this struggle to the degree and from the moment that it is subordinated to a final purpose, to move forward step by step towards the complete liquidation of social life” (Porshnev’s archive, ORGBB, K.17, E. Kh.17, L. 38).

The end of history as a telos dictates a univocally negative understanding of the human mission and of the highest good, which is happiness understood as truly negative freedom.

Negation can be both complete and free, this is the spirit of history of which anarchists have guessed.

[...]

The process of destruction, the liquidation of history, this is happiness, the very happiness to which humanity has been striving in the course of the latest millennia and especially the last centuries. The discontent with the existing order of things, which grows, unfettered, like an avalanche, all-victorious in its destructive power—this is the happiness. It is the most awaited, moreover, most all-human happiness (Porshnev’s archive, ORGBB, K.17, E. Kh.17, L. 39–40).

There is thus a twentieth-century negative dialectic not only in the Frankfurt School but also in Soviet Marxism. However, the latter emphasizes the violent revolutionary inversion where the former mostly understands negation as indeterminate openness. Still, if we take early Adorno, his understanding of the human subject re-imposing the archaic sense of mimetic mastery via the anti-mimetic abstract rationality, the understanding of negation of negation is not without affinity with Porshnev.

The latter however sees a chance of liberation from slavery where the former can only detect a return of an archaic master.

Porshnev is in some way closer to the psychoanalytic dialectic of Freud and Lacan, but the psychological focus of these two usually prevents them from thinking historically and understand the sociopolitical thrust of violence (“the death drive”) and the externally caused nature of oppression and alienation. Still, Freud’s theory-myth of history as a continuity of the feelings of guilt of our ancestors for the revolt against the father whom they had eaten (Freud 1999), and a resulting superposition, in our culture, of the sons’ violence with the violence of the father whom they had eaten, sounds vaguely akin to Porshnev’s, even if Freud sees this violence from a conservative and clerical ideological standpoint, and has much less objective historical arguments for his construction.

It is a highly important dialectical thesis that negation often precedes position, in the genesis of meaning. I used it in my work on revolution, showing that the self-inhibition of emancipatory effort proceeds from the violence with which revolution reacts and denies everything that associated with the Old Regime (Magun 2013). But Porshnev’s theory is even more valid when applies to aesthetics.

2) Negative Aesthetics

Porshnev’s theory describes language in its fascinating, early functions, but it also focuses on the mechanisms of subversion of meaning which, today, are familiar from the aesthetic sphere. Thus, Alexander Kozintsev points at the validity of Porshnev’s theory of inhibiting, “displacement” activity for understanding the *comical* element in art (Kozintsev 2010: 110).

Porshnev’s theory understands language as a negation of negation. Negativity is a key feature of art, particularly of the modernist art like Celan’s or Beckett’s, which takes a conscious aim to destroy or subvert language through art. Paul Celan even calls poem a “Genicht” (1986:31; cf. Weller 2016).

Porshnev, in his *Origin of Human History* (2007), himself briefly spells out an aesthetic theory that emphasizes negativity in art. Explaining early cave painting, he writes:

Archaic images can be considered in the aspect of bypassing or compensating for the prohibition to touch. If we look closely at the object being pictured we see that all of them fall under a common meaning: “That which cannot (or should not) be touched, in natural circumstances.” They are female statuettes depicting the untouchable Mother [...], red and yellow ochre meant fire or blood, that is, human life (both untouchable), animals’ teeth, mostly claws, depicting a predator’s mouth (not to

touch), sea shells found at great distances from the sea and depicting this sea as being inaccessible for this population, pictures of houses and big wild animals. All of these are so many transcriptions of one and the same category “not” (*nelzya*), not allowed, not possible, but modified into “but we still touch it.” By the way, our children’s toys are also predominantly images of what they are naturally not allowed to touch, what they do not have a free access in the adult life. It would seem that toys just depict objects but in fact they also express the category of prohibition by which they are foreclosed from the world of adults.

The very creation of paleolithic images was in truth a touching of images or the very images were generated by touching [...] The most primitive and maybe earliest cave drawings are various lines—traces of fingers in the clay. A serious argument in favor of my hypothesis of the primacy of touching (that is, of the liberation, in the darkness of a cave, from the prohibition to touch, via an artificial exception from rules) is the very old age of the stamped hands on the cave walls [...] For these stamps, the palm was either painted and then pressed upon a wall, or pressed, and subsequently painted by its contour (Porshnev 2007: 463).

Thus, art is not a sphere of neutralized meaning, but rather an overcoming of linguistic negativity from inside. It is a careful testing of a forbidden fruit, a violation of a taboo, and at the same time its *expression*. Beautiful is what touches on the forbidden (Porshnev thinks that first painting was the rebellious imagery of the oppressed group that was denied access to the animals it depicted). Traces of Kant’s “sublime” are evident in this doctrine. But, Porshnev emphasizes, the latter refers to objects, not the signs and not the subject. He makes his observations in the section that treats the emergence of objective reference in language that used to be purely pragmatic.

What Porshnev describes here fits well with an ancient and rich tradition of art as depiction and transgression of taboos (e.g., the *Noli me Tangere* motif in painting from Fra Angelico to Picasso), which culminates in premodernist and modernist literature. What is closest, and probably not by chance (Porshnev must have known it), is the work of the great Russian poet Ossip Mandelshtam, particularly his “Swallow” (also cited by Vygotzky as an exergue to *Thought and Language*):

Oh, what if I could get back the shame of sighted fingers,
And a convex joy of recognition!
I’m so afraid of the Aonides’ tears, of their mist, clamor, and void.
The mortals have a power to love and recognize,
For them, a sound will flow into fingers.
But I forgot what I was to say,
And the bodiless thought will return into her shadow dwellings (Mandelshtam 2009: 1, 109).

Notably, Porshnev's aesthetic theory had undergone a dialectical development. The earlier draft of an aesthetic application of his general theory, in his "Scholar's Diary" from 1951–52 (Porshnev's archive, ORG-BB, K.27, E. Kh. 17, L. 19–21), he gives a somewhat different version of negative aesthetics. Here, the *beautiful* is a counter-image. It is the activity of inhibition itself, which uses a portion of spontaneous imaginative activity as a contrary antidote against the rest of such activity.

"Beautiful is the limitation of the ugly, it is the tiny remainder from the interdiction and the repression of the ugly: because the ugly cannot be forbidden or repressed in any other way but through opposing to it a strictly fixed portion of itself" (Porshnev's archive, ORG-BB, K.27, E. Kh. 17, L. 20.2). Clearly, in the period between the diary and the book, Porshnev inverted his understanding making it better fit the Leftist tendency of his theory: the beautiful is not the symbolic inhibition of the imaginary, but rather an illegitimate *revolt* against this inhibition.

It is also in the aesthetic domain that Porshnev is currently most present in Russian culture, namely through the leading Russian prose writer Viktor Pelevin. In his short story, "Anti-air complexes of Al-Efes-bi" (2011), Pelevin describes a Russian IT specialist who invents a method of downing US drones, by writing on the ground large characters that form a phrase that is supposed to go exactly counter to everything presumed in US ideology, for example: "greenspan bernanke jewish (rothschild | federal reserve | builderberg group | world government)" (Pelevin 2011: 181). Here, like in Pelevin's other texts, the key is the idea of an *anti-formula* that destroys a certain virtual world. Pelevin actually knows the work of Porshnev—which is unusual even for a late Soviet subject: Porshnev is known to academics but is not a widely read author. Still, in the beginning of the aforementioned short story, Pelevin refers to him, without giving his name.

My ancestors were hairy low-headed corpse-eaters who chiseled skulls and bones of the carrion that was rotting along the river, and sucked the decomposing brains out. They did it for millions of years, using same silicon chisels, without any idea why this happens to them—just following their instinct, like the birds who nest or beavers who build dams. They did not mind eating each other as well. But then a demon of intelligence descended upon Earth and taught them the magic of words. The herd of apes became humanity and started their vertiginous ascendance by the stairway of language. And now I stand at the crest of history and see that the highest point has been passed. I was born after the last battle for the soul of humanity was lost. But I heard its echo and saw its farewell lightning. I schemed through Soviet dusty textbooks that declared that the Soviet Union had made humans free and allowed them to step into outer space. Of course, even as a child I felt this was a lie—but there was truth in it, which was as hard to separate

from lies, as cancer metastases are hard to detach from healthy flesh (Pelevin 2011: 224).⁵

Clearly, Pelevin sees in Porshnev a key to his own literary mission: a demystification that requires not a simple prosaic skepticism, but a projection of counter-worlds, *antiworlds*. Note Pelevin's perceptive association of Porshnev's theory of origin with eschatology: he guesses it without probably knowing Porshnev's manuscripts on the end of history.

In another story from the same collection, "Operation 'Burning Bush'" (Pelevin 2011: 7–144), the FSB, the Russian secret service, talks to George Bush from inside his tooth with a voice of a fake God. This "God" is in fact a Russian Jew who is given heavy drugs and then has to listen to mystical theological literature. As he describes it, under the influence of drugs these words "sounded otherwise than a usual human speech. They seemed to cut through, by consciousness by fully occupying it by their meaning and became the only and ultimate reality while they sounded" (Pelevin 2011: 46), "I became prey of every whisper that reached me" (Pelevin 2011: 47), while the authors "couldn't imagine that their words would transform into psychic reality in the brain of a person suspended amidst black eternity and deprived of our usual immunity to others' speech" (Pelevin 2011: 47). George Bush, to whom this newly converted "mystic" speaks through his tooth, experiences a similar effect of direct penetration by words, and thus the FSB convinces him to start the war in Iraq and do other catastrophic things. The phrase about the "usual immunity to others' speech" is, in Pelevin, a latent reference to Porshnev. Unlike what Porshnev says himself about art, Pelevin seems to see it as a counterstrategy against the fascinating power of language, the "counter-suggestion." It is not a blind subversion of all meaning through humor, but a targeted inversion of linguistic and ideological codes, meant to protect and arm the subject.

To conclude, it appears that linguistic negativity functions ambiguously—as a deliberate reversal of authoritative speech that subverts it by performing its expelled unconscious, and as an access to the genuine phenomenon that had been forbidden by this speech. A fully Porshnevian art is then a dialectical tension between a resistance (to language) and a reach (for a forbidden object). In the first turn, art is a counter-language and counter-figure in the style of Celan or (*mutatis mutandis*) Pelevin.

⁵ A reference to Porshnev's theory, namely its short recapitulation, appears again in Pelevin's 2016 novel, *Lampa Mafusaila ili kraynyaya borba Chekistov s Masonami* [Methuselah's lamp or the last fight of CHEKA and Freemasons]: "The book stated that humans became humans by having learned to enchant each other by the invincible force of first words" (Pelevin 2016: 115). The novel, like many others, tells of a struggle between two teams of powerful hypnotizers. One object of their fight is the so called "hutzpa," a device of the Federal Reserve System that sustains the faith in the dollar.

This would be the poetic layer of art, before image. Then, on the referential level, the original traumatic words become a stamp forbidding an access to the thing they evoke. Art courageously counters, and turns inside out, the strong words of “authoritative language,” and simultaneously it delicately liberates what these words have referred to from these same words. It saves “work, clothes, furniture, one’s wife, and the fear of war” (Shklovsky 1921: 16) from the flat linguistic formulae that cover them up and lets us “touch stones” by renaming them in a weird arche-language and by seeing them as though for the first time.

3) Philosophical Anthropology

Porshnev’s theory-myth of human origin, explicitly addressed to paleoanthologists and evolutionists, is actually a rejoinder in the history of European philosophical anthropology. The problem of human being (or of being human) is a question of an empirical, or existential, anchoring of the problem of knowledge as such. A true anthropological theory should somehow combine the *immanent* (“correlationist”) analysis of the world as an object of our possible action (how is the world possible, why, logically, are our habits and institutions necessary and just), and the *ontological* analysis of something else that produces or delimits this world (which, taken without the former immanent analysis, risks falling into dogmatism: the now fashionable “speculative realism” runs this risk). Let us call such joint theory a *reflexive egocentrism*: where our inescapable sphere of meaning appears as finite in the context of a larger decentered unity. Such theory can take various forms: as a theory of universe, theory of life, theory of humankind, theory of the Western enlightenment, theory of Modernity, finally, theory of *ego*. In each case, there is a further bifurcation into a mythical and logical account.

The archaic *myth* made the question of meaning into the question of *origin*, and resolved it via a narrative of emergence and/or of heroic breakthrough of consciousness out of obscurity. A *logical* path, on the other hand, deduces consciousness either from something absolute (as in Anselm of Canterbury’s ontological proof of God) or from a certain instability (as in Hegel) inherent in the very notion of being.

What we need is something in between, namely, a theory of eventful origin that would remain immanent, and thus leave space for meaningful agency and logical understanding. As in Badiou’s famous metatheory of history (2005), it is only an *event*, a tectonic shift within a situation, which can ground subjectivity in an ontological horizon, while at the same time leaving it agency and explaining *motion* not rest.

Hence the importance of *anthropology* as one version of this reflective egocentrism, and its question on the essence of the human. For this question to be put philosophically, and not mythically or logically, it has

to be tripartite: *What would our consciousness/free agency mean from the point of view of non-human life.* And vice versa: *What does being an ape mean from the point of view of freedom and truth?* Finally, what was the event of emergence of humanity from mere animality? If such an event of origin is thinkable, it should be one that would have an immanent meaning, and to some extent continue today, because a human being is something that emerged, and *keeps emerging*. Otherwise such an event would only have an archival value and would not constitute essence. We see a proximity but also a superiority of this questioning in comparison to the “speculative” question of “fossils” (Meillassoux 2008): here, in exploring early human skeletons, we are looking *for our own fossils*, and are ourselves fossils for ourselves. This would provide ground for a rational, immanent, and phenomenologically grounded understanding of a “world without us,” as opposed to Meillassoux’s plea to dismiss immediate experience as a ground of knowledge.

Now, in the twentieth century there was almost a consensus on the direction in which to search for human origin. And this direction was, under different titles, *negativity*. Against the former attempts to sacralize humans and relate them to the absolute here, on the contrary, human being was now presented as *deficient* with regard to animality. A great solution to the problem of immanent and transcendent: nature only plays a role in the birth of consciousness in that it *recedes*. Free agency is proven, and solipsism, avoided. An event of emergence, if it is evoked in such theories, is some kind of disaster—a negative revolution of nature. The essence of humans is conveniently generalized as pure indeterminacy and “openness”: the essence is to have no essence. Negation is then implicitly understood as *nihil negativum*: a sheer indeterminate absence.

The price of this solution is, however, the danger of nihilism, in its double face of opportunism and melancholia. How to avoid it, and what are the most interesting attempts to reconstruct the origin of humanity, will be my subject in what follows.

The brilliant solution evoked above was first suggested by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. According to him, a human being is a weak and fragile animal whose *differentia specifica* is perfectibility: an infinite plasticity that makes him/her elaborate technology, but also to abandon its freedom (Rousseau 1992: 25–26). The interesting thing here is this idea of lost origin, or more precisely the quality that makes humans continuously lose their origin. It is to replace this origin that we need an all-powerful republican state. Here Porshnev agrees on the weakness of the first humans, and on the fact that the contemporary human being is very much unlike (even contrary, Porshnev says) to its original ancestor, but he asks a dialectical question, against whom was the human weak, who made him/her weak, and who was interested in it so that this weak creature survived.

In the twentieth century, German philosophical anthropology, and most importantly Arnold Gehlen, followed Rousseau’s path. According to

Gehlen (1988), humans are prematurely born, and therefore deprived of instincts. This leads them to an infinite creative capacity, but also to sensory overload in their perception, because they react to *all* stimuli and not just to those that start off a reflex. But humans are capable of a purposive action, which allows them selecting the sensory data.

For Gehlen the problem of excess stays, and humans eventually develop a capacity of *unloading* their overfilled perception, by diverting attention from the trivial details of their own activity and of external world. Speech, for Gehlen, is an instrument of such unloading of oneself. (Gehlen did not know Ukhtomsky's work on "dominant" but made a similar observation: for Porshnev as for Gehlen an excess of stimuli is a problem for humans, and for him, similarly, language emerges already out of a successful policy of blocking this excess through the "inhibition dominant." Language is originally part of a screen against excessive perception).

But Gehlen's conclusion is conservative: it is the need of strong social institutions that would set some limits to the negative freedom of humans. Any failure of these institutions would logically lead to *melancholia* as a reflection on the negativity of one's condition. Unlike Porshnev, Gehlen understands negativity in an abstract indeterminate way, not as a *force*, and he is far from seeing language as this force.

Somewhat similar to Gehlen is early Heidegger who, though rejecting anthropology as a focus, and biology as a foundation, did nevertheless give an account of human being along the same lines (Heidegger 1962, 1995). A man is infinitely open, not because of a biological deprivation, but because of its unusual attendance to finite situation ("world"), as though proceeding from a fall from grace. An obverse side of this openness is the intuition of the "Nothingness," which is not a human condition, but the truth of being itself. This produces anguish (*Angst*), but also a capacity of a resolute responsible agency.

In the second half of the century, biology and philosophy mostly parted ways in continental Europe, while the focus of anthropological theories switched to language in its structuralist version: as a system. There is only now a time of a renewed interest in the origin of humanity. And in this context, we have the recent work of Paolo Virno, most importantly his *Essay on Negation* (2013). Virno inverts the argument of Gehlen and Rousseau. The biological essence of humans is, according to him, not the deficiency or deprivation, but the capacity of active negation, which is inherent in language. Human language, unlike the animal one, possesses this peculiar power of *undoing* what has been said, or even experienced sensually. This allows a human being to become less sensitive to the behavior of other beings, less mimetic, than other animals. Here, Virno makes a seemingly materialist reference to "mirror neurons," the cells in the brain that are supposedly responsible for spontaneous imitation and empathy (Virno 2013: 5–6, referring to his compatriots Gallese and Rizzolatti 1996). Humans, thanks to language, know how to block the action of these neurons.

Hence a complex dialectical structure of the human relationship to others. Humans are individually emancipated, but capable of brutality to peers, they are capable of intrageneric struggle, and thus, radically evil. But, at the same time, they must develop, also through language, a set of countermeasures to this danger: language resocializes humans by creating a sphere of artificial mimesis: the public sphere, as formed by commonplaces in language. The state does the same thing, but brutally, while the public sphere is an organic linguistic way of reacting to negativity within its own milieu: a negation of negation. The contemporary references of this account are obvious: today's information society is pushing for constant imitation, so humans are blessed by being able to negate and reject peer pressure, but they run into risks of horrible crimes like the Holocaust, if unchecked. Therefore we need communitarian publicness as opposed to the neutral monstrosity of capital and state; rhetoric as opposed to bureaucratic rationality. Note that, by negation, Virno emphatically means *indeterminate negation*: a non-X, which evokes X and neutralizes it, by alluding to something infinite and indeterminate in the universe outside X.

Ingenious as this account by Virno is, and justified as he is in returning, from the objectivist negative anthropology, to the active Hegelian "no" as a locus of origin, there are also some problems in this. First, as with Gehlen, and unlike Rousseau, the given picture is completely ahistorical. The human being emerges "fully armed" (or rather, "disarmed") and presents a perennial problem of combining socialization with individuation. This has to do with the understanding of negation as sheer *nihil negativum*: as such, it does not have enough real force to undo what it negates or to subordinate to a new order. Second, there is asymmetry between the materially inbuilt, reified empathy (mirror neurons) and the voluntaristic and miraculous negation by language. This contradicts our anthropological requirement that the origin is *immanent*, and raises sociability into a dogma. And third, there is a delicate but important problem: Virno clearly knows nothing of the 1974 book published by Porshnev in Russian, which makes a claim very similar to his, and in a way much better grounded in neurophysiology (this neurophysiology of "dominants" is now dated, but the theory of "mirror neurons" does not seem to make an adequate substitute for it).

Porshnev, like Virno, thinks that the essence of language is the "no," and he also sees its mature form essentially as a protection against mimesis. Virno's reflections on the contemporary public sphere may have an implicit analogue in Porshnev's account, too (why is counter-suggestion becoming so relevant today?). What is lacking in Virno is the idea of the other side of the conflict, historically and actually: Who is it that pushes for imitation, against whom we defend ourselves? Porshnev asks these questions and points to the dual, divided nature of humans, seeing resistance as a political force, even though falling close to a myth. Virno does not ask them, remains on an ontological rather than mythical territory,

but ignores the class struggle aspect of the public sphere and the *forceful* nature of negativity as contrary inversion.

IV. Conclusion

Porshnev was among the brightest representatives of Soviet Marxism, and among the most ignored, in spite of his earlier fame as a historian of class wars. Who knows what would have happened if his book on the origin of human language would have been available in the West in 1974, in the heyday of linguistic philosophies (Derrida, Deleuze, on the one hand, Foucault, Austin, Searle, on the other) and shortly after the creation of philosophically inspired anthropologies by Girard or Clastres. Who knows what would be happening now, when these traditions are belatedly discovering physiology that they find in “neuroscience,” in ignorance and dismissal of the much older Soviet psycho-physiological school which was also close to philosophy but tried to avoid a neural reductionism and insisted on the totality and teleology of human activity as well as on the role of mediation in any material determination. But, without these counterfactuals, it is now that we open Porshnev's books again, and look if there is anything still fresh. In this article, I have tried to overview the ideas that still carry through:

—The essential role that negativity, qua active force, plays in history.

—The originally negative nature of language that is transformed in our developed languages into a multilayered dialectic of hypnotic and counter-hypnotic violence.

—The essentially divided nature of the human species and the subsequent value of collective subjectivization.

—The political nature of economy as driven by labor, understood as a function of domination.

—The linguistic origin and nature of any politics and domination.

—A rigorous methodology of using dialectical method in a historical (or metahistorical) research.

—A logically coherent negative dialectics whose spring is inversion and not difference (as in Adorno).

—The human species as gradually overcoming themselves: surpassing both their self-domestication and their original savagery and becoming, in the end of history, back into an organic part of nature.

The dark picture drawn by Porshnev gives, however, a teleological horizon of humanity becoming a “we,” thus becoming, only now, a true animal species. But, it also warns against the underestimation of language as a political medium, as in the utopias of “rational discussion” and models of instrumental rational behavior: anyone who is subject to the violence of orders and names, may develop a rational logical discourse only as a reactive strategy of relative weakening of the other's voice.

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