

## **On the independence of the humanities: Tartu–Moscow School and official Soviet politics of science**

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**Review: Maxim Waldstein, *Soviet Empire of Signs: A History of the Tartu School of Semiotics*.**

In scientific discourse, a school or circle usually refers to a phenomenon or a movement that converges either around particular leading figure(s) or around particular scientific principles and presumptions. These are not mutually exclusive, but complementary. At times, the existence of a particular school is explicitly acknowledged by its representatives, although usually in retrospective reminiscences. More frequently, we hear about schools and circles discussed from an outside viewpoint, be it from competing scientists or from historians of science — for the former, it is a way of identifying and differentiating themselves by way of drawing such boundaries, thereby creating oneself as an independent subject in scientific discourse, whereas for the latter, the school is the object of scientific study.

The Tartu school of semiotics is indeed a school — this was acknowledged by their contemporary researchers in humanities, by its own representatives, and is also testified by it being an object for the history of science. Maxim Waldstein's 2008 book *Soviet Empire of Signs: A History of Tartu School of Semiotics* is a confirmation of this. The author, Maxim Waldstein (Kupovykh), received his PhD in sociology from

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the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 2005 and currently works in Leiden University.

Despite the book's title, Waldstein strictly focuses on the Soviet period of the Tartu–Moscow School and thus the book contains almost no information about contemporary developments in Tartu. Further, the author indicates that the study deals not so much with the narrowly defined Tartu Lotman's school, but rather with the Tartu–Moscow, or Moscow–Tartu network of scholars and associated ideas and research projects<sup>2</sup>.

Interest in the placement of the Tartu–Moscow school in 20th century humanities, and in its predecessors and influencers, has reached its way to the printing press before. Some of the more noted and widely discussed works include Edna Andrews' *Conversations with Lotman: Cultural Semiotics in Language, Literature, and Cognition* (2003) and Ann Shukman's *Literature and Semiotics: A Study of the Writings of Yu. M. Lotman* (1977), as well as Julia Kristeva's (1968) paper on Soviet semiotics and literary studies published in the journal *Tel Quel*, and Stephen Rudy's (1986) treatment of a similar topic. By and large, these texts deal with the predecessors of the Tartu–Moscow school and with working out its precise specificity, whereas the emphasis is mostly laid on the paradigm of literary studies. To this list we can also add the anthology of reminiscences and recollections by the members of the Tartu–Moscow school of semiotics *Moscow–Tartu School of Semiotics. History, Memories, Thoughts* (MTS 1998; in Russian).

When it comes to philosophical influences, the roots of Lotman's ideas have thus far been seen as stemming from Kantian (Lotman, M. 2000) and structuralist traditions (for example, Edna Andrews' monograph referred to above). On the other hand, according to Peet Lepik, a more notable source is the influence of Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, which probably reached Lotman via the works of Roman Jakobson and Husserl's student Gustav Špet (Lepik 2007: 108), and Marcel Danesi points to parallels between Lotman and Vico (Danesi 2000). Admittedly, reconstructing the philosophical context demands great skill and

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<sup>2</sup> From Waldstein's letter to Kalevi Kull on November 20, 2008.

empathy from the person doing the reconstruction, since the members of the school themselves rarely paid much attention to explicating their philosophical premises — whether this was due the monopolistic status of the Marxist-materialist philosophy that they did not wish to engage publicly, or merely lack of interest (Živov 2009; Lotman, M. 2000).

With this in mind, Waldstein's book differs considerably by its stated goals and purposes. First and foremost, it is a work of intellectual history and historical sociology. The book takes the reader to the landscape of Soviet science, moving chronologically along its temporal axis together with the Tartu–Moscow School. With a few necessary glances back at the pre-Soviet period, it provides an overview of the conditions of Soviet scientific practice, especially as it pertained to the humanities.

The text of the book is divided into two main parts. In the first part (the introduction and chapters I–IV), Waldstein provides an overview of the social, cultural and intellectual history and prehistory of the School. Particular attention is paid to its changing (self-)definition and its thematic foci. By analyzing the friendship, colleagueship and patronage network, as well as the rituals of belonging to close-knit communities, the author sets forth a theoretical understanding of Soviet science and public sphere under the conditions of socialism. In addition, Waldstein discusses the reception of the School's work in the West. In the second part (chapters V–VII) he turns his attention to specific theoretical contributions by the representatives of the School to communication and narrative theories, as well as theories of art and culture. The shift from a structuralist conception of text to a more post- or neo-structuralist approach in Lotman's works is considered in this section. In chapter VII, the author analyzes Lotman's studies on early modern Russian culture.

“The model of interpretation developed here aims at capturing both the historical particularity of Tartu School and its place within the larger framework of social and cultural process” (Waldstein 2008: 12). The ideas of the Tartu School, like all other ideas, are products of human practices. This statement, however, does not imply social determinism because both “science” and “society” are seen here as products of these

practices. Traditional studies and even many contemporary ones that deal with the Soviet society depict Soviet academic life in a highly simplified manner. In particular, there is a binary presumption that the Soviet Academy of Sciences was under the complete control of the Communist Party and proceeded in its activities from a rigid system of basic ideological principles prescribed by the latter, and that the only way for conducting honest and non-ideological science free from power games was to do science outside the Academy (Waldstein 2008: 5). Yet already the presumption that there existed something like a closed, ideological Soviet system that divided the society into two is deeply erroneous: the Marxist-Leninist scientific ideology was by no means a coherent system of ideas (Walker 1989: 163; Ventsel 2009). A combination of Marxist ideas with the tropes of, among other things, nationalist and technocratic discourses, “Soviet ideology” was more a floating signifier than an all-encompassing worldview (Waldstein 2008: 9). By taking advantage of its slogan-like nature, it was possible, in these power games, to retain a certain amount of freedom from the dictates of the Party and to get past the censorship (Waldstein 2008: 24).

Indeed, Waldstein replaces the conception of power built on a narrow and rigid, asymmetrical opposition (power-subordination) with a symmetrical conception of power, proceeding primarily from the works of Bourdieu, Latour, Foucault and others (Waldstein 2008: 5–6). In such a conception, power relations appear between any two given elements that are in a state of mutual interaction; in actual societal texture, different discourses do not exist in isolation but are intertwined, and the relationships between them can never be perceived as asymmetrical. Thus, by developing a symmetrical perspective on the Tartu School, Waldstein’s book criticizes the myth that Soviet science cannot be productively subjected to such analyses. On the contrary, he demonstrates that it can be studied on the bases of principally the same methodology as is Western science. The difference may be one of emphasis:

If Western students of science have been more concerned about problematizing the presumption of science’s autonomy, the students of Soviet science may contribute with the emphasis on understanding how scholars negotiate for higher autonomy of their endeavours under the conditions of more direct

involvement of the state with practise, discourse and internal differentiation within academic fields. (Waldstein 2008: 185)

In order to better understand the mutual relationships between institutions in the landscape of Soviet science, Waldstein introduces the concept of “parallel science”. The primary benefit of the concept of “parallel science” is that it does not presume the aforementioned binary picture of Soviet reality, but rather allows analyzing it. Despite and even because of emphatic distancing from official procedures, discourses and symbols, an informal parallel science coexisted symbiotically with formal institutions and official discourses. Parallel science served as a particularly advantageous position within the Soviet academia, a site from which Soviet academics negotiated their place in society and established their effective control over knowledge, culture and language as valuable social resources (Waldstein 2008: 186).

These values, however, have nothing essential about them, but are rather themselves the result of struggle — a struggle conducted both in the Academy and among each other. One possible way of demonstrating one’s loyalty to “the truth” was the so-called Hamburg Test — a conversation among equals who were chosen presumably not according to their ideological or even formal credentials but according to their “purely academic” and “genuine” contribution as estimated by their peers. The idea of the Hamburg Test communication evoked the old imagery of the “republic of the scientists” (Waldstein 2008: 47). It is important to emphasize, however, that the tests were conducted by human beings made of flesh and bone, not by saints.

With this, we arrive at certain problems that many similar historical overviews have. Waldstein writes that he had no intention of writing a history of the Tartu–Moscow school, but rather a “prolegomena to a history [...], a kind of a preliminary theoretical and empirical work without which the growing amount of memoirs, post-factum reflections, reprinted texts and accessible archives cannot be understood, or appreciated, by no person outside of the Tartu circle”<sup>3</sup>. A considerable

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<sup>3</sup> From Waldstein’s letter to Kalevi Kull on November 20, 2008.

amount of the material he analyses is derived from recollections and memories of people who in one way or the other became in contact with the Tartu–Moscow School (the list of interviewees and other informants is provided on pages 191–192). In addition, the analysis makes use of a large number of published life histories. This means that the construction of history is based on selective memories. Unlike the overviews of the Tartu–Moscow school referred to above, which to a large extent are engaged in analysing theoretical and philosophical influences, this kind of a sociological analysis is considerably more difficult to conduct, since it is all too easy to fall into the deceptive trap of recollections and self-justification. In the first instance, it is the written works that speak, in the latter — the people. For the people of the Soviet period, this distinction is even more acute, because there is a tendency to forget or re-interpret in a different context deeds and expressions that were originally more or less voluntary. As one member of the school notes, “memory, reflection is not only something that enables a man to bring his own life into correlation with history, but also a deeply moral principle opposing forgetfulness, oblivion and chaos, and serving as the basis for creativity, faith and truthfulness” (Levin *et al.* 1974: 50).

Naturally enough, the author has to bring a certain amount of unity to these memory shards, and to provide it with a narrative structure for the benefit of the reader. Here the author pays his dues to the vocabulary stemming from his theoretical framework. In analysing the phenomena that were part of the Soviet scientific discourse, the concepts of struggle, power, autonomy, antagonism etc. divert the author to perceive them as filled with intrigue and conspiracy. Indeed, this pathos is testified even by the title of the book — *Soviet Empire of Signs* — which unambiguously points to the field of politics and power games. I will provide just one example, on the so-called “Jewish question” in the Soviet Union, and Lotman’s role in it:

For instance, the Jewishness was often considered a symbol of the Tartu School’s identity by Jewish and non-Jewish participants and the opponents of the group. The Jews bore an ambiguous status of having privileged access to knowledge and being politically disenfranchised. Thus, other things being equal, a Jew was a more probable candidate for in-group membership. This is

particularly visible in the politics of the Tartu University department of Russian Literature headed by Lotman. (Waldstein 2008: 51)

After 1962, when fluency with the Estonian language was no longer a requirement for the entrance exam in the University of Tartu, Lotman and his colleagues made efforts to enlist as many students as possible from Soviet centres, such as Moscow, Leningrad and Kiev. Until the department became a fashionable place to study, the pool of non-Estonian candidates consisted mostly of those who did not get enough points to enrol in major Soviet universities. In this category, the Jews had the highest probability of being considered because, in places like the Kiev State University, they were often rejected clearly due to their nationality. “As a result, Lotman’s department produced a large number of significant scholars, dissidents and simply intellectuals with the “wrong fifth entry” (that is, the ethnicity entry that stated “Jewish”) in their passports” (Waldstein 2008: 51). It does appear that an explanation of the peculiarity of this national make-up would be more believable if the emphasis was on the talents of the accepted students, rather on their Jewish descent. The latter may have played a role in them not being able to study in Moscow, Kiev or Leningrad, but not that it was a criterion for gaining entry to the University of Tartu.

Fortunately (in this writer’s opinion), such artificial search for suspense that is reminiscent of a Western movie is very rare and should be treated as one possible interpretation that will, in any case, provide food for thought. In general, what we have here is a magnificent and very thorough research that suits well anyone who is interested in the model of the space of communication between power and science during the Soviet era, and its peculiarities.

Whereas Juri Lotman seems to be in vogue in Russia at the moment, Western humanities and social sciences may soon be hard-pressed to reconsider the significance of one more “Russian” (Waldstein 2008: 187). Whatever will be the ultimate decision — although we know that it is not going to be the final one, Waldstein hopes that his “book is an

invitation to a dialogue<sup>24</sup>, an intellectual dialogue across disciplinary and national borders. Hopefully, this book will generate a wider need for a companion in this dialogue — a companion that could perhaps be written up at the place where many of the ideas of this school have been born — in Tartu.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> From Waldstein's letter to Kalevi Kull on November 20, 2008.

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