



Valentin Asmus’s historico-philosophical articles in the journal “Pod znamenem marksizma”: between philosophy and ideology

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Abstract

The article discusses the original critical dialectical approach of the Soviet philosopher Valentin F. Asmus. His publications on the heritage of Western philosophical thought in the journal *Pod znamenem marksizma* are examples of this approach. In the 1920s and 1930s, Asmus published a number of articles analyzing a variety of the ideas developed by Western European philosophers: “An Advocate for Philosophical Intuition (Bergson and His Critique of the Intellect)” (1926); “The Alogism of William James” (1927); “The Dialectics of Necessity and Freedom in Spinoza’s Ethics” (1927); “Kant’s General and Transcendental Logic” (1928); “Cosmogony and Cosmology of Descartes” (1937); “Fichte and the Vocation of Scholar” (1937); “Nicholas of Cusa. Selected Philosophical Works” (1938); and “Tommaso Campanella” (1939). These articles differed from the journal’s usual rhetoric, which was shaped in accordance with the official Soviet state ideology. Asmus, through the thinkers he examined, showed the fundamental importance of philosophy for the human personality. This article argues that Asmus, despite his closeness to dialectical materialism, adapted the official terminology and issues in his historical and philosophical articles in a way that he advanced the human right to spirituality, creative activity, and individual freedom.

Keywords Soviet philosophy · Valentin Asmus · History of philosophy · Dialectics · *Pod znamenem marksizma* · Marxism philosophy

Introduction

During the past ten years, some historians of philosophy have been successfully reviving key names of the Soviet philosophical tradition. In fact, in the 2010s and so far in the 2020s), many projects on Russian thought of the Soviet period have been

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realized. Publication of a series of studies entitled *Philosophy of Russia in the Second Half of the Twentieth Century* began in 2009. This series includes books about Valentin Asmus, Yuri Lotman, Ivan Frolov, Alexander Zinoviev, Evald Ilyenkov, and Alexey Losev, among others. In addition, in 2019, Vladislav Lektorsky and Marina Bykova prepared a collection devoted to the same period (Lektorsky and Bykova 2019). The collection introduces nondogmatic thinkers who saw, in philosophy, a means to reform social and intellectual life. In addition, authors from other nations, such as Evert van der Zweerde (2018, 2017), Daniela Steila (2011, 2018), and David Bakhurst (2018) have made valuable contributions to contemporary studies of the Soviet era's Russian thought.

Despite the fact that today the study of Soviet philosophy is dynamically evolving, the predominant point of view is that Russian religious philosophy, which originated in the pre-revolutionary period and flourished in emigration, was an original and independent phenomenon that affected the European intellectual space. Soviet philosophy, limited by an ideological framework, did not have such a large-scale influence.

In 2015, however, in the journal *Voprosy Filosofii*, the researcher Sergei Korsakov invited historians of Russian philosophy to discuss this issue. He pointed out that the importance of Russian religious philosophy is overestimated and that many areas of professional philosophy appeared in Russia after the revolution (Korsakov 2015, pp. 69–85). In Soviet Russia, philosophy acquired its own new methodological framework and created its own scholarly field of study, problems, and methods. In a certain sense, this was caused by the spirit of the times and the need to clearly define the boundaries of philosophy that did not clash with the political and ideological program of the Bolsheviks. Obviously, in Soviet Russia, philosophical thought was developing in a Marxist vein, based on the Hegelian dialectical principle embodied in the materialist approach. Prominent Marxist philosophers, such as Lyubov Akselrod and Abram Deborin, were among those who remained in the country after the revolution. In addition, Valentin Asmus offered his own interpretation of the dialectical principle based on the belief that the dialectical way of thinking was the only means to discover truth.

Valentin Asmus as a historian of philosophy

It is important to point out that the history of philosophy emerged as a science in the USSR precisely after the revolution. Daniela Steila noticed that early Soviet Marxism paid attention to the history of philosophy for both theoretical and pedagogical reasons (Steila 2018, p. 217). In the new political reality, the historical and philosophical frame became the only possible way to consecrate the philosophical questions around which European thought had been formed for centuries. Asmus made a significant contribution to the development of the history of philosophy as a separate philosophical discipline in the USSR.

Asmus began his academic work in Kyiv. From 1927, he worked in Moscow and taught at the Institute of Red Professors (*Institut Krasnoy Professuri*), at the Academy of Communist Education, and at the Moscow Institute of History, Philosophy, and Literature. He became associated with the influential school of dialecticians led by

Abram Deborin. As a result, Asmus “produced a number of significant writings in the history of philosophy” (Bakhurst 1998). From 1941, he was a professor at the Faculty of Philosophy at Moscow State University. Asmus’ student, philosopher Konstantin Dolgov, wrote about his teacher “that he differed from all other professors at this faculty as he gave excellent lectures, essentially on the entire history of philosophy, which he not only knew well, but also wrote in-depth and exceptionally interesting works about almost every great philosopher” (Dolgov 2015, pp. 210–212).

Asmus was a younger contemporary of the Silver Age philosophers who ended up on the philosopher’s steamboat. In 1919, he graduated from the Philosophical Department of the Kyiv University of St. Vladimir. His teachers were Vasily Zenkovsky and Evgeny Spektorsky, who influenced the evolution of Valentin Asmus’ views. Their work resembled the idealism of Russian religious philosophers. Vasily Sokolov, who was one of Asmus’ students and later became a prominent Russian philosopher, noted that the young thinker’s position was clearly “idealistic” (Sokolov 2010, p. 12). Asmus was focused on describing the creative nature of a person, which was incompatible with Marxist economic materialism inseparable from the simplified mechanism.¹ As a philosopher, Asmus evolved outside the Marxist paradigm because it was not taught at the Kyiv University, and, as a result, he was not familiar with Marxist philosophy. Asmus was close to Nikolai Berdyaev in his understanding of freedom (Korsakov 2017, p. 10).

However, Asmus’ philosophical fate took a different path. He did not emigrate, received Soviet citizenship in 1920, and became the first scientist in the Soviet Union to defend a doctoral thesis in philosophy in 1940. In the 1920s, he studied the works of Marx and Engels, and the philosophical aspects of certain works of Lenin. Asmus became an exemplary manifestation of how the previous philosophical tradition had merged with the Soviet ideological framework. Olga Kusenko noticed that “in his works from the 1920s (and in later works), we do not find that critical stance towards Marxism. In Marxism, Asmus saw the expression and continuation of the fundamental traditions of classical philosophical thought” (Kusenko 2019). His book *Dialectical Materialism and Logic: An Essay on the Development of the Dialectical Method in Modern Philosophy from Kant to Lenin* (1924) was the first result of the synthesis of Asmus’ inclination to study philosophical issues and the spirit of the new times, which made its own adjustments in terms of ideological connotation. In 1929, Berdyaev wrote in his review that “the author [Asmus] of this book possesses a high philosophical culture, he knows the history of philosophy, and has a taste for philosophizing . . . However, he freely and truly philosophizes only when he forgets Marxism, and the Soviet authorities expect materialistic views from him” (Berdyaev 1931, p. 356).

The principle of synthesizing the Marxist framework and the ability to illuminate the fundamental philosophical questions raised by the philosophers of the European school can be clearly discerned in Asmus’ articles in the journal *Pod znamenem mark-*

¹In 1919, Asmus published in the journal *Zhizn* an article “The Great Captivity of Russian Culture”, in which he deliberately used the term captivity, drawing parallels with the Babylonian captivity and the Horde captivity of Russia. In the article, Asmus criticized the social-democratic intelligentsia in the spirit of the *Vekhi* authors.

sizma.² Through the thinkers he studied, Asmus showed the fundamental importance of philosophy for the development of the human personality. A prominent Russia's philosopher and Asmus' pupil Nelli Motroshilova wrote that, "on the one hand, he followed the elementary norms of scientific research, which are immutable for philosophy. On the other hand, Asmus had the courage to be guided by these basic human and scientific moral principles when these principles became exceptions and when, following them, became simply dangerous" (Motroshilova 2010, p. 62).

In essence, Asmus adapted Marxist terminology to defend the human right to creative activity and individual freedom. He presented his understanding of dialectics as the principle of creative development of thought and highly appreciated those philosophers in whom he found a similar passion for creativity. Asmus exclusively focused on the following ideas: "a commitment to the development of culture as a whole; an aversion to the mechanistic approach to social, cultural and philosophical life; and a negative attitude toward the direct reduction of spiritual processes to economic relations" (Kusenko 2019). His articles fitted into the journal's strategy only formally. Despite their ideological language and style, they were engaged with topical philosophical problems while, at the same time, introducing his own approach to the dialectical principle.

Asmus' most notable articles in the journal were "The Advocate of Philosophical Intuition (Bergson and His Critique of the Intellect)" and "The Alogism of William James". Deborin, who was one of the three editors in charge of the journal, highly appreciated the articles. In these texts, Asmus emphasized the criticism of intuitionism as an unscientific method of bourgeois philosophy in Europe, meaning not only Western European thinkers, but also, above all, the representatives of the Russian philosophical emigration, especially the Russian intuitionists led by Nikolay Lossky. The Russian intuitionists discovered many important ideas in Bergson's concept, such as the criticism of positivism and Kantianism, the assertion of freedom and creative causality, the vision of the world as an organic whole, and the position of direct comprehension of reality by consciousness. Semyon Frank also agreed with Bergson's position that philosophy was a penetration into being, following the French philosopher's consciousness of complexity and the immediacy of the depth of philosophical experience. As a Soviet thinker, Asmus also considered philosophy to be a rational science, capable of explaining the laws and processes of the world with the help of logic. He criticized Bergson's philosophy of life, arguing that it brings society into a resolvable contradiction with scientific and technological thought and progress. Asmus viewed Bergson's philosophy as the result of contradictions in social psychology and the social ideology of the West and considered Bergson an exponent of the spirit of bourgeois philosophy. It is also important to point out that, alongside external criticism, Asmus insisted on the importance of certain provisions of Bergson's thought.

²The journal *Pod znamenem marksizma* was a significant printed organ of the Soviet period, reflecting the development of philosophical and political thought. It played a great role in the development of Marxist thought in the country. In the first issue of the journal *Pod znamenem marksizma*, Lev Trotsky defined the goals and objectives of the journal, and in the second issue, Vladimir Lenin, in his article "On the Significance of Militant Materialism" explained the party's demand for the development of Marxist philosophy in the country. Within the framework of the history of philosophy, the journal saw it as its task to consider the problems and prospects of dialectical materialism and to analyze the main historical and philosophical problems and concepts.

He considered the pathos of Bergson to be the main positive feature of his philosophy. In the works of the French thinker, he saw the enormous creative potential that true philosophy must have. It was also important for Asmus that Bergson criticized intelligence and intellectualism from the standpoint of the mechanistic and positivist understanding of development. Asmus (1926a, 1926b, p. 56) wrote: "Bergson's philosophy, for all its exquisite sophistication, seems imbued with pathos and inspiration of true creativity". From Asmus' point of view, Bergson rightly criticized the mechanistic one-sidedness that ignored the specifics of life and history. In fact, Asmus not only lambasted "bourgeois philosophy" but also indicated which direction of the development of Marxist philosophy was most acceptable to him. It is obvious that he considered the epistemological methods of mechanistic natural science to be insufficient and did not accept the approach of the mechanists.

This position is very characteristic of the debate with Alexander (Sandor) Varyash, who was one of the prominent representatives of the school of mechanists, and which unfolded in the mid-1920s. Sokolov argues that Asmus, after a dispute with Varyash, came to the special view of dialectical materialism as a philosophy that developed within the philosophical tradition and rebuilt the world according to its principles found in both nature and society (Sokolov 2010, p. 14). Varyash posed the problem of reforming the history of philosophy on a materialistic track. He connected ideological postulates with the economic realm, showing that metaphysical and religious thinking was characteristic of the bourgeois mode of production. In this way, Varyash proposed to pursue a monistic line and directly derive all emerging philosophical systems from the production process of their era (Mochalov 2021, p. 279). From Asmus' point of view, this approach dealt only with the external frame of the theory and not with its internal content. He pointed out that Varyash mistakenly emphasized the social and economic factors, arguing their fundamental importance for social evolution. Asmus thought that the process of thinking is dialectical and the social and economic realm was a reflection of such thinking. Therefore, Asmus objected to the mechanical and static application of the logic of dialectics to "processes as facts of social life" (Asmus 1926a, 1926b, p. 208).

In this context, it becomes clear why Deborin highly appreciated Asmus' article and invited him to work in Moscow. Deborin wrote that mechanics was only a special case of dialectics and could not be considered a full-fledged method. The Mechanists, in turn, accused the Deborinites of absolutizing the specifics of life and of separating the living from the inanimate. However, the article about Bergson, "The Advocate of Philosophical Intuition", was also intended to sanctify the main feature of bourgeois philosophy, i.e., its lack of integrity and the rejection of the true dialectical method, which was capable of removing epistemological duality. The article consistently revealed the main method of Asmus' historical and philosophical research, relying on previous ideas and stating his current vision of dialectics and logic.

The article "The Alogism of William James" was a continuation of the article about Bergson. Asmus further developed his idea of a single channel of European philosophy, showing the ideological influence of Bergson's intuitionism on James. Alogism became the point that formed the unified field of European bourgeois philosophy—from Schopenhauer to James. James adopted alogism from Bergson. In this regard, Asmus moved from considering James' pragmatism as a theory on the

practical usefulness and relevance of tasks and teachings to considering James' logical views. Asmus insisted that his philosophy was a new decisive form of struggle against intellectualism and declared the failure of the intellectual method in the cognition of reality.

It is also instructive to remember that Asmus transported James from the realm of social and *historiosophical* problems to the sphere of the theory of knowledge. From Asmus' point of view, the philosophy of James was ambiguous. In it, positive practicality existed together with a nihilistic rebellion against logic and intellect. In the third part of the article, Asmus noted that James could avoid this duality by understanding the foundations of the dialectical method. According to Asmus, James discovered only one facet of dialectical truth, i.e., the category of separateness, but the aspect of connection and interaction remained incomprehensible to him (Asmus 1927a, 1927b, p. 54).

It is worth noting that, from Asmus' point of view, the problem of duality was the key problem of European thought. This was particularly manifested in the philosophy of Kant. He recognized an absolute "natural" necessity in accordance with the data of mechanistic natural science and recognized absolute free will. This recognition was also accompanied by a dualistic structure of the world in the sphere of sensible phenomena and supersensible things in themselves.

In his philosophical biography of Kant, Asmus criticized the German philosopher, arguing that Kant's intellectual heritage fully reflected the dual nature of German bourgeois thought. On the one hand, it was novel, and "even revolutionary in form", and on the other hand, it was impotent because it was firmly grounded in religious tradition and "the ideology of Protestantism" (Asmus 1973, p. 231). It is also instructive to remember that Asmus was one of the premier experts in Kant studies in the USSR. He believed that Kant, who subjected the dialectical principle to a thorough criticism of traditional and dogmatic metaphysics with its theological postulates, was ahead of Hegel, who revived metaphysical philosophizing in an updated dialectical form. In addition, in his articles on Spinoza, Descartes, and Nicholas of Cusa, Asmus showed how European thought, even before Kant, gradually approached the truth of the dialectical method. In an article in the journal issue dedicated to the 250th anniversary of the death of Benedict Spinoza, Asmus wrote that Spinoza was the true philosopher as he was capable of not "only knowing being, but also changing it" (Asmus 1927a, 1927b, p. 23).

He noted that the solution of the problem of the contradiction between necessity and freedom became Spinoza's primary challenge. The problem of freedom was not a problem of autonomous ethics for him since its solution followed from a naturalistic view of human beings and the laws of morality. From Asmus' point of view, Spinoza's main merit was the conclusion, long before Hegel and Schelling, that necessity and freedom were not only mutual negations, but also elements of a dialectical relationship. Asmus wrote: "The dialectic of necessity and freedom is the most important case for understanding Spinozism, since only in it the visible contradictions of the system are resolved" (Asmus 1927a, 1927b, pp. 22–56).

In subsequent articles, he presented Descartes and Nicholas of Cusa³ as the budding dialecticians in the era of the dominance of the metaphysical way of thinking. From Asmus' point of view, Descartes approached the dialectical understanding of the origin of the world. The dialectical nature of Cartesianism was manifested in the famous cosmogonic hypothesis, which was the first modern concept of the formation of the cosmos, based on the laws of mechanics (Asmus 1937, pp. 64–82). Asmus demonstrated the positive aspect of Nicholas of Cusa's philosophy in its dialectical attitude towards truth inseparably linked with error. The thesis of Nicolas of Cusa on the need for thinking to be dialectical fully corresponded to similar views held by Asmus (Asmus 1938a, 1938b, pp. 182–193).

Thus, following his predecessors, Kant also used modern dialectics in his approach to philosophy. Asmus noted that Kant had a correct synthetic view of the origin of forms of consciousness. The German philosopher became aware of the need to abandon formal logic and replace it with a different format of logical reasoning based on the synthesis of pure ideas with transcendental logic. Kant understood the concept of synthesis dialectically. He accepted the thesis that contradictions exist only in thinking and not in things themselves, and this thesis was fully accepted by Asmus (Asmus 1928, pp. 130–176). In this regard, he disagreed with the Deborinites, who believed that it was necessary to recognize not only the synthesis of various features, but also the synthesis of opposites, and to discover negation not only as a logical process, but also as a driving moment of real processes. Korsakov noted that, in philosophical terms, Asmus' critique of Hegel was the obstacle in his relationship with the Deborinites (Korsakov 2017, p. 12). For them, Hegel was the highest authority, and they hoped to build the methodology of materialist dialectics based on his logic. Asmus was skeptical and defended the dialectical method of thinking, clearly showing in his research that only the dialectic of thought and ideas was possible.

In 1938, Asmus published another article dedicated to Nicolas of Cusa in the journal *Front nauki i tehniki*, simultaneously with his other article about this philosopher in the journal *Pod znamenem marksizma* (Asmus 1938a, 1938b, pp. 28–34). In it, Asmus paid considerable attention to the concept of the scientist's ignorance. Asmus shared the idea of Nicolas of Cusa that our finite mind cannot exactly comprehend the truth of things. Even Berdyaev, in his review of Asmus' book, noted the similarity of approaches between the two and advised Asmus to study the works of Nicolas of Cusa. Indeed, in his article, Asmus noted the depth of Nicolas of Cusa's idea that truth lies in something indivisible and, except for the truth itself, nothing can be accurately measured.

In essence, Asmus' articles were the response to the ideological totalitarianism of the 1930s wrapped in the language of philosophy. On December 9, 1930, Stalin met with members of the Bureau of the All-Union Communist Party of the Institute of the Red Professors, and had a conversation about the situation in the philosophical domain and the task to develop Lenin's theoretical heritage. The state intended to

³Probably, Asmus turned to the ideas of Nicholas of Cusa after the review of Nikolai Berdyaev on the book *Essays on the History of Dialectics in New Philosophy* (1929) written in 1931. In his review, Berdyaev noted that Asmus gave the impression of an accidental person in communism; he loved philosophy and developed his dialectical principle but not in a materialistic direction. Berdyaev also noted that Asmus could develop his ideas by referring to the works of Nicholas of Cusa.

demonstrate that Lenin's ideas were the direct elaboration of Marx's philosophy. In this matter, Asmus was ideologically close to Deborin, who believed that Lenin was a politician, not a philosopher. As a result, Deborin and his entourage were labeled as Menshevik Idealists by the Party. Stalin, when introducing this term, wanted to emphasize that Deborin's ideas divorced theory from practice. In addition, as Kusenko noted "it was argued that the Deborinists were neither Marxists nor materialists, and that they held a neutral position towards idealists (e.g., Aleksey Losev), and were, therefore, themselves idealists" (Kusenko 2019). A militant campaign against Deborin's circle began and, as a result, Deborin was removed from his post as the executive editor of the journal *Pod znamenem marksizma*. Many Deborinists "were arrested in the early 1930s and the majority died in the Gulag" (Kusenko 2019). Due to his collaboration with the Deborinists, Asmus was also in an adverse situation and had to adjust to the new rhetoric. Asmus' compromise is evident in the article "Tommaso Campanella" (1939). It included a significant number of references to Lenin. Asmus moved away from his key principle about the essence of dialectical principle and focused on the analysis of Campanella's social utopia, calling it a communist utopia. Asmus' philosophy noted that Campanella was materialist in terms of his philosophical thinking (Asmus 1939, pp. 76–104).

Closing remarks

Certainly, Asmus' articles published in the journal *Pod znamenem marksizma* in the 1920s–1930s were only a small part of his brilliant historical and philosophical research on both Russian and Western European philosophical thought. Some works were included in the collection published after the philosopher's death under the title *Historical and Philosophical Etudes* in 1984. Most of Asmus' former students, currently all well-known historians of philosophy, logicians, and philosophers of science, speak highly of his lectures. This is largely evidenced by the selection of names for his historical and philosophical studies, including Bergson and Nicholas of Cusa, Spinoza, and, of course, Kant. The articles in the journal *Pod znamenem marksizma* were essentially sketches of Asmus' fundamental historical and philosophical research, but they also revealed his philosophical views. Despite the ideological framework in which he was forced to work, he managed to defend the primacy of philosophical research over ideology.

David Bakhurst wrote about Asmus that he had managed to escape state persecution despite many political hurdles and continued to publish prolifically, albeit being confined to the USSR with no prospect to travel abroad. Asmus' indispensable contribution is not only in his intellectual heritage, but also in his timeless efforts to preserve "philosophical culture" during the totalitarian period of the 1930s" (Bakhurst 1998). Asmus developed his own method of historical and philosophical research, which helped him maintain freedom of thought and, at the same time, minimize the intellectual isolation of Soviet Russia from the world's philosophical tradition. Thanks to his works, albeit often critical, the key names of world philosophical thought were not forgotten in the USSR.

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