Languages of Unity and Diversity in the Teaching of Eurasianism

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In recent years, scholars and politicians alike seem to have resurrected the concept of empire in our public and professional discourses. As some argued, this renewed interest in a concept that designates an archaic and pre-modern polity (and the one that is perceived to be externally aggressive, domestically repressive, and necessarily doomed to collapse and dissolution) is derived from the very experience of globalization under asymmetrical power relations that we are experiencing. These discussions of empires illustrated that although we know enough about empires, their mechanisms of emergence and functioning, we lack concepts to tackle their self-legitimation and self-description, and their encounters with normative visions of political organization of humankind, mediated through the concept of the modern nation-state.¹

One of the most significant problems in dealing with empires is the lack of conceptual apparatus that can help us navigate the world of imperial diversity. Indeed, unlike “state,” “society,” “nation” empires never became foundational blocks of modern humanities and social sciences. In most cases, empires of the modern age tended to describe themselves through the conceptual apparatus of the nation-state, while attempts to uncover some clear and authentic language of imperial self-description in the polyphony of imperial diversities simply fail. In empires – and I first of all mean the Russian empire – various social, political, cultural, ethnic and confessional groups and institutions created a great number of languages to describe the social reality of empire. From bureaucratic benevolent cameralism to ethnic and national demands, from dynastic scenarios of power to pre-national, confessional visions of unity, these languages appear to have never merged into a more or less unambiguous and uncontroversial vision of imperial polity and society anywhere comparable to the monological narrative of the modern nation.

It was only with the dissolution of the Russian Empire in the course of the First World War, the Revolution, and the Civil War – a dissolution that occurred as much along ethnic and national lines as it did along the social ones – that the first attempt to reinvent the Russian Empire as a cultural unity, even a continent, occurred. This attempt, known as Eurasianism, produced an ideology so complex and fascinating that a renowned scholar recently noted that it combined themes as different as the birth of structural linguistics, ethnopsychology, Russian

¹ Editors’ Introduction to Ab Imperio 1 (2006), pp. 11-16.
emigration and a justification of Russian imperialism based on neo-Platonic thought. One can add to this list of peculiar traits of Eurasianism a fervent critique of European colonialism (possibly the first instance of sophisticated critique of cultural colonialism in Europe), and the illiberal juncture of Communism and Fascism in the interbellum Europe. This doctrine was, arguably, the most original product of Russian intellectual history in the 20th century and its impact on scholarship, arts, and literature in interwar Europe goes far beyond the scope of attention that this movement has received from historians.

The founders of the doctrine were four Russian intellectuals, who had barely entered their independent lives on the eve of the Revolution of 1917. These young intellectuals were Prince Nikolai Sergeevich Trubetskoi, eventually a famous linguist and the founder of structuralist phonology, Petr Petrovich Suvchinskii, who on the eve of the Revolution published Russia’s leading musical journal and was a life-long friend of Stravinsky and Prokofiev, Georgii Vasil’evich Florovsky, an Orthodox thinker and Church historian, and Petr Nikolaevich Savitskii, a geographer and economist. Eurasianism, as the movement came to call itself, was founded on a number of dogmas of a historical, ethnographical and political nature. Building upon the tradition of cultural and historical types, the Eurasianists argued that Russia was a world of its own, separate from both Europe and Asia, while Russians, unlike Poles or Czechs, had experienced an intense impact of the “Turanians” (the nomadic peoples of the steppes of Asia). These peoples played an essential role in bringing about the Russian state and culture. The Russian state, in its pre-Petrine form, was the heir to the great nomadic empires of Eurasia, and a natural protector of the specific non-European culture that emerged in Eurasia. The Europeanizing reforms, the Eurasianists believed, violated the organic correspondence between that state and the underlying culture, and created a cleavage between Russia’s Europeanized elite and its Eurasian masses of population. The result was the militaristic rule of the Tsarist regime and the terror of the bureaucracy, which collapsed during the Revolution. The latter, thus, was viewed as not just a social turmoil and a war of classes, but also as an uprising of colonized Eurasians against the alien Europeanized regime.

3 There are very few general works on Eurasianism. In fact, only one monograph was written on Eurasianism before the collapse of the Soviet Union: Otto Böss, Die Lehre der Eurasier. Eine Beiträge zur Russische Ideengeschichte des 20 Jahrhunderts (BIOS: Munich, 1962). Recently, a new work was published: Laruelle, L'idéologie eurasiste... This work concentrates specifically on «discourse analysis» of Eurasianism. In the 1960s-70s several articles were published by N. Riasanovsky, and they remain a valuable source of information: Nicholas Riasanovsky, "Prince N.S. Trubetskoï's 'Europe And Mankind"", in Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas 13 (1964), pp.207-220; idem, "The Emergence Of Eurasianism", in California Slavic Studies 4, (1967), pp. 39-72; idem, "Asia Through Russian Eyes", in Wayne S.Vuchinich (Ed.), Russia And Asia. Essays on Russian Influence Upon Asian Peoples (Hoover Institution Press: Stanford, 1972), pp.3-29.
Remarkably for its time, Eurasianism was not just anti-Western, deploring European civilization as the climax of standardizing modernity, which was a common theme among European conservatives. The Eurasianists drew a sharp border between Europe and Russia-Eurasia and declared the latter to be part (indeed, the potential leader) of the world of colonized peoples. The anti-colonialist rhetoric of the Eurasianists had a distinctly modern sound and in some ways it preceded the post-structuralist critique of colonialism in the second half of the 20th century: Trubetskoi, for example, proclaimed, that all European sciences were in fact a tool of colonial domination and suggested that anthropology, ethnography and other disciplines be purged of judgments about superior and inferior cultures.4

Distancing themselves from those Russian writers who subscribed to the common European “orientalization” of Asian peoples, the Eurasianists insisted on the wholeness of Eurasian civilization, thus salvaging the unity of the Russian Empire from modern nationalism. In order to prove the indivisible nature of Eurasia, they utilized arguments that ranged from theology to modern (and, in fact, advanced) linguistics. Eurasia was a whole as a union of languages (Roman Jakobson and Nikolai Trubetskoï elaborated the concept of the Sprachbund), as an ethnographic mixture of peoples, as a common civilization and as a federation of peoples. Such a federation was re-created by the “state instinct” of the Bolsheviks, whom the Eurasianists welcomed as saviors of the Russian state tradition, attentive to the Asian component of the country, but despised as representatives of European atheist and materialist culture.

In this seemingly ambiguous attitude toward the Bolsheviks the Eurasianists were, in fact, quite consistent. The Eurasianists’ own conception of history argued that revolutions were nothing more than the replacement of the “ruling layer [of the population]” with a new class formed by a powerful idea, an interpretation put forward by Lev Platonovich Karsavin, a philosopher who joined the movement in 1925.5 The Bolsheviks, by emancipating Russia from its old elite, cleared the way for this new ruling class. It was this class that was predestined to create a true “ideocratic” state. The conception of the “ideocratic state”, ruled by a single ideology, was elaborated by Nikolai Trubetskoï under the direct influence of Othmar Spann’s theory of Ständestaat: Trubetskoï met Spann in Vienna and discussed Eurasianist ideas with him.6 Such a state would preserve the Soviet demotic nature, yet it would get rid of Marxist theory and replace it with Eurasianism. The Eurasianists’ vision of the ideocratic state and their

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search for the “third way” between socialism and capitalism demonstrate their sensitivity to the intellectual climate of interwar Europe with its predominance of proto-fascist ideologies. The ideology of the third way found a remarkable parallel in the aesthetics of the movement. The author of the Eurasianist aesthetics was Petr Suvchinskii, who corresponded actively not only with representatives of the Russian modernist milieu but also, among others, with Giuseppe Ungaretti. Suvchinskii argued in favor of combining the artistic avant-garde and its formalist experiment with religious, Orthodox foundations and tried to steer the Eurasianist vision of art and creativity onto a path between Russian formalism and Soviet Marxism. In Suvchinskii’s vision, the era that opened with the Russian revolution was the one of the “new Romanitic order.”

Inspired by the Russian fin-de-siecle modernism, Suvchinskii elaborated a complex vision of aesthetics based on the removing the boundary between the domains of everyday life and of religious faith. According to this vision, Russia under the yoke of the Bolsheviks went through a development similar to the cultural processes in the Russian principalities under the Mongols: while accepting the external, partly alien rule, the people’s religious creativity changed that very external power.

The Eurasianists attempted to translate their ideas about the “ideocratic state” into political practice. The four founders of the Eurasianist movement (Trubetskoi, Suvchinskii, Florovsky and Savitskii) were joined in 1922 by a group of young émigrés, monarchist officers, among whom Petr Semenovich Arapov and Baron Aleksandr Vladimirovich Meller-Zakomelsky were prominent. Arapov and Meller brought to Eurasianism a group of former officers active in military organizations of the Russian emigration and closely connected to the organization of General Kutepov. This injection stimulated the proto-Fascist inclinations of the Eurasianists and the movement quickly developed from a purely ideological venture into a clandestine political organization, whose aim was to convert as many people as possible, both in the emigration and in the USSR, to Eurasianism. As the Eurasianists believed, the converted members of the Soviet leadership would help transform the USSR into a true “ideocratic state” based on the principles of Eurasianism. To that end, in late 1923 the Eurasianists established contacts with the underground monarchist organization Trest, set up by the Soviet secret services to infiltrate the émigré community. Agents of the Trest crept into the movement and totally controlled the smuggling of Eurasianist literature and visits by the Eurasianists to the USSR until spring 1927, when the real nature of the Trest became widely known among émigrés. Eurasianism became part of a large network that united the Soviet organized Trest and the Kutepov led military

8 On the Trest see Serge Woiciechowski, Trest. Vospomnania i dokumenty (Zaria: Ontario, 1974). A more recent work that focuses on the impact of the Trest on the émigré press is Lazar Fleishman, V tiskakh provokatsii. Operatsiia 'Trest' i russkaia zarubezhnaia pechat’ (NLO: Moscow, 2003).
counter-revolutionary organization of the Russian émigrés. Even at that point the Eurasianists continued to hold that their teaching had the potential to win converts among the Soviet leadership and refused to give up attempts to propagate their ideas in the USSR. Moreover, the Eurasianist leaders conducted negotiations with representatives of the Soviet Union abroad (such negotiations were conducted, for instance, with G. L. Piatakov, who was the USSR trade representative in Paris in 1927) and cherished hopes of turning their movement into a “laboratory of thought” at the service of the Soviet opposition.⁹

Eurasianism can be seen as a conservative ideology, a part of the grand counter-revolutionary tradition, opposed to the liberal values of West European democracy;¹⁰ as an avant-garde movement that modernized the Romantic discourse and adapted it to contemporary conditions;¹¹ as a fascist ideology that tried to transform politics from procedures into aesthetics;¹² as a movement of representatives of the intellectual elite of a country, where modernization was late and uneven and where, correspondingly, ideas often went ahead of the social and economic developments, thus creating a climate conducive to resentment by the intellectuals (such phenomena we can observe today in many developing societies);¹³ as an advanced scholarly movement, which was formed in the process of re-thinking the legacy of the

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¹⁰ One of the founders of this tradition was Josephe de Maistre, whose name can be often found in Eurasianist texts. On de Maistre, see Richard A. Lebrun (ed.), Joseph de Maistre's Life, Thought and Influence: Selected Studies (Montreal; Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001); see in particular Vera Mylchina’s contribution in this volume “Joseph de Maistre in Russia: A Look at the Reception of his Work”. In Russia, this conservative tradition included diverse individuals, from the intellectual non-entity of Konstantin Pobedonostsev, the éminence grise behind many reactionary moves of the Tsarist regime in the last quarter of the 19th century, to Fedor Dostoevsky.

¹¹ A German scholar offered a very insightful comparison of the Konservative Revolution in Germany and Eurasianism: Leonid Luks, „Die Ideologie der Eurasier im zeitgeschichtlichen Zusammenhang“, in Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas, 34 (1986), pp. 374-95; see also a seminal work by Jeffrey Herf, Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), which offers a perspective on how Romantic thought was modernized in Germany of the 1920s.

¹² This approach to fascism as a “generic” term that designates ideologies that demanded renovation and celebrated will to power is most articulatedly represented by George L. Mosse, “Toward a General Theory of Fascism”, in George L. Mosse (Ed.), International Fascism: New Thoughts and New Approaches (London: Sage Publications, 1979), pp. 1-45.

imperial state and took part in the crystallization of the structuralist paradigm; finally, as a variation on the theme of Russian nationalism and imperialism. If we draw lines from each of these topics, they will most probably cross on the problem of the relationship between modern Russian nationalism and the reality of the imperial state and society. Eurasianism was, after all, an extremely complex and sophisticated attempt to reconcile modernity - to be more precise, the illiberal juncture of modernity in the interwar years – with the historical legacy of the imperial state and society.

At the center of the Eurasianist considerations was the historical Romantic dilemma: Romantic thought is fundamentally contradictory as far as it concerns the relationship between totality and diversity.¹⁴ The Romantic tradition presupposes a search for collective virtues, for the wholeness of societal life, for the entirety of human experiences. Romantics spoke of national cultures, of civilizations, and of deep cultural traditions that transcend the limits of individual experiences of people. On the other hand, the Romantic thought celebrated the uniqueness of each particular tradition, and insists that it cannot be reduced to a mere variation of some general and universal principle. According to the Romantics, cultures are deeply rooted in history and Volksgeist. The Romantic dilemma consists of the problem of reconciling difference with totality, and this problem was conveniently resolved by the modern nationalist myth, which presented the social world in the “modiglianesque” mode: nations were envisioned as homogeneous totalities and the world was viewed as comprised of diverse nations. Nationalism

assumed internal homogeneity and external difference of the nation, thus combining totality and diversity in one, extremely powerful vision of the social world.\textsuperscript{15}

Eurasianism, too, was a doctrine inspired by nationalism. As Nikolai Trubetskoï explained to Roman Jakobson, he saw in “true nationalism” a solution to those problems of modernity that were caused by the standardizing impact of civilization.\textsuperscript{16} However, the Eurasianists developed their doctrine in the aftermath of events that revealed that Russia was far from being a homogeneous entity. Moreover, they personally witnessed how the Russian empire, continental, contiguous, and lacking clear borders between the metropole and the colonies, collapsed along ethnic and national lines, and the Eurasianist doctrine had to reflect this historical condition by reconstructing the imperial cultural and political space, as well as by inventing its cultural and physical homogeneity. Hence, paradoxically, Eurasianism sought to be a nationalist ideology opposed to nationalism, since the latter, the product of the despised European modernity, would undermine the integrity of imperial space. Thus, the Eurasianists invented a new civilization, Eurasia, which subsumed a great variety of cultural traditions and coincided with the borders of the former Russian empire. Russian nationalism according to the Eurasianists had to be “Eurasian” in order to avoid challenging the Empire’s indivisibility.

Within this new totality, differences between nations and languages had to be reduced and annihilated – a challenging task for a space inhabited by peoples of several linguistic families and religious confessions, and, moreover, divided by the geographical convention between two continents and by the historical convention between two civilizations. Eurasianism had to explain away differences between the Orthodox Slavs, Muslim Tatars, or Buddhist Kalmyks. It had to show similarities between Turkic languages of the steppe nomads and Slavic languages of the forest zone agriculturalists. At the same time, it had to establish firm and impenetrable borders between the Catholic and the Orthodox Slavs – for example, the Czechs and the Russians – thus parting with the pan-Slavic cherished unity of Slavdom. It needed to revamp the historical narrative that was built around Russia’s defense of Europe from the

\textsuperscript{15} Theorists of nationalism are split as they discuss the causes of the emergence of modern nationalism, with the most influential thinkers, such as Ernst Gellner and Benedict Anderson, firmly assigning nationalism to the era that opened with the French and the Industrial Revolutions. Both see nationalism as a product of social and economic transformations related to the emergence of capitalist and industrial societies. A more conservative view, represented first of all by John Armstrong, sees modern nationalism as determined by medieval and early modern institutions of kingship and territoriality. In a recent work that revisited theories of nationalism, Rogers Brubaker suggested, following Pierre Bourdieu, that nationalism can be studied without reference to nations. For Brubaker, nationalism is first of all a cognitive frame, a specific vision of the world. The term “modiglianesque” was used by Gellner to describe the modern nationalist worldview. See John A. Armstrong, \textit{Nations Before Nationalism} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982); Ernest Gellner, \textit{Nations and Nationalism} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983); also Benedict Anderson, \textit{Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism} (London: Verso, 1983); Rogers Brubaker, \textit{Myths and Misconceptions in the Study of Nationalism}, in John Hall (Ed.), \textit{The State of the Nation. Ernest Gellner and the Theory of Nationalism} (Cambridge, UK: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 272-306; Pierre Bourdieu, “L'identité et la représentation. Éléments pour une réflexion critique sur l'idée de region”, in \textit{Actes de la Recherche en sciences sociales} 35 (1980), pp. 64-72.

nomadic invaders and to present the Mongols – to this day often seen as the barbaric menace to Russia’s “European” development – as the creative and positive force in Russian history. Nationalism itself had to be discredited as an invention of the European colonialist power, for nationalism threatened the indivisible Eurasian space. Most importantly, Eurasianism had to approach the most significant problem, the generally assumed civilizational divide between Europe and Asia, between progress and stagnation, for the “European” Russians had to have everything in common with “Asian” Turanians within the common space of Eurasia, whereas European affinities had to disappear. It was at this juncture that Eurasianism produced the most unusual for its time critique of colonialism and linked the latter with European sciences, which, the Eurasianists charged, were built upon wrong premises of value judgment and prejudicially assumed Europe’s superiority.

The intellectual problems and challenges facing Eurasianist thinkers – in particular Trubetskoi, Savitskii, and Roman Jakobson, who had briefly cooperated with the movement in the late 1920s – early 1930s – were undoubtedly profound and had to be resolved through scholarly techniques and methods that involved innovation, abstraction, even a revolution. What follows is a brief discussion of one particular area of Eurasianist languages of unity and diversity: the story of the emergence of “structuralist” rhetoric among the Eurasianists. Rooted in the tradition of Russian Naturphilosophie and holistic vision of the universe and of society, this rhetoric nevertheless produced remarkable encounters and contributed to the change of intellectual paradigms in humanities and social sciences in inter-war Europe.

The history of Eurasianism was interwoven with the history of structuralist thought. Two participants of the Eurasianist project – Trubetskoi and Jakobson – played a crucial role in the emergence and development of the Prague Linguistic Circle, whereas Savitskii was an important participant of the Circle’s deliberations, and inspired a growing interest in connections between geography and linguistics.\(^\text{17}\) The question thus rises what was the specific relationship between the emerging structuralist paradigm and the Eurasianist complex of ideas? Was Eurasianism just a benefactor of the new language and methodology of structuralism, or, alternatively, was it a

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donor that supplied interwar structuralism with its Romantic and holistic ideas? How aware were the Eurasianists themselves of the ties between their scholarly and ideological projects? Finally, which specifically Eurasianist ideas had an impact on the development of structuralist thought in the 20th century? Obviously, the limits of this work will not allow exploring any systematic correspondences between specifically Eurasianist ideas on the one hand, and a variety of interpretations of structuralism, on the other. However, we can single out the most important ideological assumptions of Eurasianism which had an impact on the scholarly projects of Trubetskoi, Savitskii, and Jakobson, as well as consider which of these assumptions had an impact on further development of structuralism.

Undoubtedly, the Eurasianist thinkers employed rhetoric that presumed a generational break and innovation of their own work. Savitskii’s methodological “system,” which assumed the existence of a deep structure underlying the visible surface of “atomistic” facts and governing the configuration of territoriality was seen by both Trubetskoi and Jakobson as a sign of a new structuralist scientific outlook. Jakobson recalled Savitskii as an “ingenious scholar” and a “pioneer of structuralist geography”.18 When Savitskii’s work on the geographical specificity of Russia-Eurasia was published in 1927, Trubetskoi wrote to Roman Jakobson: “Savitskii’s Geographical Specifics [of Russia] have been published. Do read it. It’s interesting. It’s the first attempt to bring structure to a field that has traditionally been marred by chaos…”.19 On another instance, responding to Savitskii’s complains about critical reactions to his work on depression in pre-capitalist societies, Trubetskoi insisted that

Beletsky and Shepovalov are incorrect in their judgments of your recent historical article. The problem is that until now history has been a very atomistic discipline and it taught all historians its atomistic approach. Your attempt to apply structuralist (struktural’nyi) approach to historical facts therefore remains unappreciated by “professional” historians.20

The Eurasianists opposed this new method to the “atomistic” and positivist science of the 19th century. In their view, the old science was predestined to disappear under the attack of the structuralist paradigm. In a letter to Vera Guchkova-Suvchinskaia, who had begun studying linguistics under Antoine Meillet and sought Trubetskoi’s advice on the teacher, Trubetskoi

wrote: “Meillet indeed quite deserves this respect that you pay him. He is the best linguist of our time. Of course, he represents a certain epoch in the history of linguistics, an era that maybe will have to end soon and to be replaced by another one…”

For all Eurasianist thinkers this new scientific era was connected with a method that was rooted in the Russian intellectual tradition. Reflecting the new intellectual mood of the 1920s that stressed national scholarly traditions, they spoke of the specific “Russian science” which differed from its West European counterpart by preferences in the object of study and a specific method. That method – “systemic” or “structuralist” – was opposed to the “atomistic” science of the 19th century. “Russian science” was teleological, and it embraced the entirety of facts and attempted to find regularities that governed the ocean of data. The Eurasianists, at least in the period of 1920 – 1930, offered an unprecedented attempt to translate the ideological doctrine of Russia’s “special path” into a conception (a range of conceptions, to be precise) of a “Russian science” as the source of a new scholarly paradigm.

For Petr Savitskii, his own geographical method was derived from the Russian tradition of Naturphilosophie and Russian geographical science, of which Dokuchaev’s systemic study of soils was the best example. Savitskii argued that Dokuchaev’s approach was a result of the “place-development” of Russian geographic science. Savitskii believed that Russian geography was a special science, whose specificity is defined by the very specificity of its object. In European geography there exists a geomorphologic focus defined by Europe’s intense geomorphologic structure, whereas in the Russian geography the emphasis is upon geobiology and the study of soils. The lack of significant mountain ranges that could have changed the climatic conditions across the country as well as Russia’s vast expanses made it possible to observe the zonal structure of soils and flora (the structure dependent on the South-North direction of climatic change) at is clearest in Russia. That is why, Savitskii believed, the study of forests became so prominent here, and that is why the science of soil conditions was born. Savitskii even asserted that it was possible to speak of two different worlds of geographies, the Russian and the European, each with its specific poetics and language. Was it not true that Russians borrowed from the Germans most of the terms used in geomorphology, whereas

21 N. S. Trubetskoi to V. A. Guchkova-Suvchinskaiia (later Traill), not dated (before 1926). BNF. DdM. Not catalogued. Antoine Meillet (1866 - 1936), a student of F. de Saussure and an outstanding linguist, was often seen by the Eurasianists as their opponent. It is remarkable that both Trubetskoi and Jakobson paid respects to Meillet publicly, while in private correspondence they often pointed out backwardness and outdated views of the student of de Saussure and the main representative of the neo-grammarians, whom they considered incapable of grasping new ideas in scholarship.


Russian words that designate soils and natural zones, such as “chernozem”, gained currency abroad? Savitskii firmly believed that Russian geographical science was not only a “place-development”: it also promoted a synthetic method of studying natural and social phenomena.\(^{24}\)

In the Russian geographic tradition Savitskii saw the tendency of Russian geography not to limit itself to descriptions of “atomized objects” but to engage in a systemic exploration of interrelationships between different forms of organic and non-organic nature on the given territory, including humans and their societies. In his 1927 work on Russia’s geographic specifics Savitskii quoted Dokuchaev’s work “On the Teaching of Natural Zones”, in which the latter comes very close to formulating what appears as a structuralist approach that focuses on the relationship between elements in the system:

> It cannot be doubted that the knowledge of nature – of its forces, its elements, its phenomena and its physical bodies – has made such gigantic steps in the course of the 19\(^{th}\) century that the century itself is often called the age of natural sciences and natural scientists. However, it was mostly separate bodies that were studied, such as minerals, rocks, plants and animals, and separate phenomena, separate elements, such as fire (volcanism), water, earth, air. We shall repeat that in that science may have reached astounding results. But it did not study their interrelationships, this genetic, eternal and always regular (zakonomeniyi, Gesetzmaessig) connection that exists between forces, bodies and phenomena, between organic and non-organic nature, between the realms of plants, animals and minerals on the one hand, and the man, his life, and even his spiritual world, on the other. Yet, it is these interrelationships, these regular mutual interactions that form the essence of our cognition of nature, the kernel of true Naturphilosophie, the best and highest charm of natural sciences!\(^{25}\)

For Roman Jakobson, Russian Slavic studies represented the field that promised innovation in scholarly research. In the first, programmatic article that he published in the *Slavische Rundschau* in 1929 (the article was originally solicited from Trubetskoi, who did not live up to the promise and to deliver the text), Jakobson outlined his vision of the Russian Slavic studies as a locomotive of structuralism.\(^{26}\) According to Jakobson, “Studies of Russia (Russlandkunde) witness the fact that in an entire range of disciplines, for example, in literary


\(^{25}\) Quoted in P. Savitskii, *Geograficheskie osobennosti….*, p. 28.

studies, art history, linguistics, very heated discussions are taking place on crucial theoretical issues…”, and, correspondingly, “one senses an uplifting and a teleological movement of Russian studies to their future significance”. Jakobson noted – in a clear reference to Eurasianist preferences – that in Russian scholarship, exploration of Romano-Germanic studies was in disarray compared to the very developed Oriental studies.

The most important, indeed crucial, feature of modern Russian studies was for Jakobson that “Russia was explored as a structured whole”. Any province tends to become autarkic within its territory, Jakobson admitted, “but in the Russian scientific thought the desire to embrace the entire Russian world and to view its temporary and spatial representations from the point of view of the whole was prevalent”. Thus, Jakobson made clear that in his view the new epistemological approach – structuralism – was intrinsically linked to the conception of Russia as a whole. To make his preferences and sources clear, he immediately listed examples of these new structuralist studies: Savitskii’s conception of Russia as a “special geographic world” and Trubetskoii’s works that revealed “the unity of the Eurasian cultural circle” (*Eurasische Kulturzyklus*). Jakobson also noted, in a reference to his own work, that an exploration of the “structural unity of Eurasian languages originally not tied by genetic bonds was being prepared”.

For Jakobson this remarkable openness of Russian science to structuralism was a result of the specific national epistemological tradition, which was characterized by animosity to positivism expressed by thinkers as different as Danilevsky, Dostoevsky, Fedorov, Leont’ev, or Solov’yev. Following Trubetskoii, Jakobson argued that the Russians preferred the question “what for?” to the question “why?”. He quoted the anti-Darwinist sequence of Karl von Baer, Danilevsky, Strakhov, Vavilov and, finally, Lev Semenovich Berg as one of the illustrations of the teleological inclinations of the Russian tradition. The fact that in his 1929 article Jakobson inserted those very lines of Dokuchaev that had been quoted by Savitskii in his 1927 book on the geographic characteristics of Russia in order to illustrate the holistic and all-embracing nature of the Russian scholarly tradition, point to the fact that Jakobson’s thought was under the direct influence of the “systemic” science promoted by Savitskii. If the latter believed that Russian science was focused on the unity of the universe, Jakobson argued that “for the fundamental and deeply original line of development of contemporary Russian science the following is characteristic: the correlation (Korrelativität) of separate rows of facts is not viewed in terms of

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29 Apart from Savitskii, Jakobson listed the geographer Tanfil’ev, the ethnographer Zelenin, and the linguists Bubrikh, Selishchev, and Georgievsky. All these scholars he will quote in his work on the Eurasian union of languages. *Ibid*, p. 23.
31 *Ibid*. 
causal dependence…the main concept with which [Russian] science operates is a system of correlating rows of facts, a structure immanent for the observer, and subjected to its own internal laws”.

It is true that there was a significant difference between Trubetskoi and Savitskii on the one hand and Jakobson on the other: the former two saw the European civilization as the major source of the revolution to which they were opposed, while the latter considered bourgeois Europe as the major obstacle on the path of the revolutionary innovation.33 Still, all three Eurasianist thinkers subscribed to a vision of Eurasia as a holistic unity that can and should be described as a “structure”. This vision, however, implied a dramatic epistemological revolution: instead of a national unit to be described in genetic terms of common descent – a common trop of the 19th century organicist thought – they embarked upon the path of exploring and describing the unity of an empire, whose diversity (as Roman Jakobson would put it, “multiplicity of forms”) did not allow the use of the concept of a cultural “type”. The Eurasianist “structure” provided the means to describe the unity of the imperial space of Russia in a scientistic manner.

In order to accomplish this revolution, the Eurasianists had to part with the organicist idea of genetic ties and to offer a conception of acquired characteristics developed by diverse peoples of Eurasia in the course of their common history. In doing so, however, they relied, as Jakobson quite accurately pointed out, upon the Russian anti-Darwinist tradition, thus replacing one organicist model with another. It was not a coincidence that one of the intellectual predecessors of the Eurasianists – Nikolai Danilevsky – was also a student and collaborator of Karl von Baer, who produced one of the first critical reactions to Darwin’s theory. Danilevsky himself was the author of perhaps the most extensive critique of Darwinism.34 For Danilevsky, Darwin’s biological theory not only implied that external factors can determine the outcome of evolution, which he saw mainly as a teleological and internal transformation; it was also a threat to his vision of the world as constituted by different and mutually impenetrable cultural units. External influences on these units were minimal according to Danilevsky, for they developed according to their own laws of transformation and according to their own life periods. This idea was conducive to holistic thought and for Savitskii and Trubetskoi it was a source of inspiration that led them to explore the “system” of Eurasia in isolation from external influences.

32 Ibid, p. 24 – 25. It should be noted that in the article Jakobson also wrote about the formalists as representatives of the new structuralist paradigm that privileges acquired characteristics over the genetic ones. He also demanded that Slavic cultures be studied in the light of the new paradigm focusing on their convergence and divergence and not on their genetic affinities. On Jakobson’s article in the context of different scholarly and ideological contexts see N. S. Avtonomova, M. L. Gasparov, “Jakobson, Slavistics and the Eurasian movement: Two Moments of Opportunity, 1929 - 1953”, in Roman Jakobson, Teksty, dokumenty, issledovania (Moscow: RGGU, 1999), pp. 334 – 340.
In the 1920s Danilevsky’s critique of Darwinism was supplanted by the work of Lev Semenovich Berg, a scholar of broad interests. Berg was a student of the Academician Anuchin, the founder of Russian anthropology. Berg not only wrote important works on the history of Russian geography, and continued Dokuchaev’s work by establishing the “natural zones of the Soviet Union”, which became the foundation of Soviet geographic textbooks in the 20th century.\footnote{L. S. Berg, Ocherki po istorii russkikh geograficheskikh otkryii (Moskva, Izd-vo Akademii nauk SSSR, 1946); Idem, Natural regions of the U. S. S. R (New York: Macmillan, 1950).} He also developed his own theory of evolution as a teleological process of transformation and convergence of species. As Berg pointed out in the introduction to his key work on evolution, “teleology (Russian term “tselesoobraznost”’ has no equivalent in English. It was a calk from the German Zielstriebigkeit, one of the favorite terms of Jakobson) is the main characteristic of all living beings”.\footnote{L. S. Berg, “Nomogenez, ili Evoliutsia na osnove zakonomernostei”, in L. S. Berg, Trudy po teroi evoliutsii, 1922 – 1930 (Leningrad, 1977), p. 99. Berg’s work was first published as Nomogenez, ili Evoliutsia na osnove zakonomernostei. Trudy Geograficheskogo Instituta. Vol. I (Petrograd, 1922). Remarkably, in 1926 an English edition was published: Leo S. Berg, Nomogenesis or Evolution Determined by Law (London: Constable, 1926).} According to Berg, the development of species occurs due to the law determined process of transformation (“nomogenesis”), which results from convergence of different species.

Although the Eurasianists were not aware of Berg’s work until 1926, they certainly reflected an intellectual project that was close to Berg’s. In a letter to Suvchinskii dated by March 5, 1926, Trubetskoï wrote:

> [Savitskii] told me of two interesting books that were published in Russia... The first is “Nomogenesis” by Berg ... It is especially interesting because Berg proclaims himself as a follower of Danilevsky and in his theses he develops propositions that are close to ours (in particular to my ideas developed in Europe and Mankind and The Tower of Babel)…\footnote{N. S. Trubetskoï to P. P. Suvchinskii. 5 March, 1926. BNF. DdM. Not catalogued.}

The Eurasianist thinkers themselves employed the theory of convergence to explore and describe the cultural and linguistic unity of Russia-Eurasia. In his 1923 article “The Tower of Babel and the Mixing of Languages” Trubetskoï not only attacked the possible monolingual international culture as a sin against the God given diversity of tongues and cultures, a guarantee of the spiritual richness of humanity. He also suggested a new linguistic concept that spelled out a break with the linguistic tradition of the 19th century which insisted on analyzing languages according to the “genetic tree”:

Apart from the genetic grouping, the geographically close languages often can be grouped independently of their origins. It happens that several languages of one geographic and cultural-historical region reveal features of particular similarity despite...
the fact that these similarities are not conditioned by common descent but only by prolonged spatial proximity and parallel development. For such groups based not on the genetic principle we propose the term of “language unions”.\textsuperscript{38} Such language unions exist not only between single languages but also between language families, that is, it happens that several linguistic families, which are not genetically related to each other but which occupy one geographic and cultural-historical zone, are united into a union of linguistic families by a range of common features…\textsuperscript{39}

Trubetskoj’s ideas on the language union were later developed by Roman Jakobson in his work “On the Characteristics of the Eurasian Language Union”.\textsuperscript{40} For Jakobson, the very approach of the Eurasianists, which shifted attention from genetic and inherited characteristics to those historically acquired, was related to a grandiose change in the scholarly paradigm. Jakobson saw clear examples of this change in the prevalence of “class” over “cast” and of the principle of self-determination over the genetically defined “nationalities” in the social and political sciences. Jakobson celebrated what he called “constructivism”, which underscored the irrelevance of genetic characteristics in linguistic analysis. The philosophical foundation for the change of orientation and for the transition from the genetic to the “functional” model was the concept of goal and teleology. The main question in contemporary science was “where to?”, which replaced the traditional 19\textsuperscript{th} century question “where from?” “The goal”, wrote Jakobson, “this Cinderella of the ideology of the recent past, is being rehabilitated everywhere”. The teleological principle implied for Jakobson the necessity of synthesis and of viewing separate elements in a single whole: in order to grasp the problems of the language union, one had to use the “method of coordination” and to “understand the correlation of different phenomena”.\textsuperscript{41} This synthetic method of correlating data derived from various branches of knowledge and superimposing maps drawn on the basis of this data to discover the true borders of the geographic region was the main invention of Petr Savitskii’s geography.

Jakobson used new phonological methods developed by him and Trubetskoj to describe the Eurasian language union. According to Jakobson, despite the fact that the languages of Eurasia belong to different families, they share certain principles, such as the absence of politony and the phonological correlation of consonants (“palatalized – nonpalatalized”), which are absent

\textsuperscript{38} Trubetskoj’s footnote: “A clear example of a language union in Europe is presented by the Balkan languages, such as Bulgarian, Romanian, Albanian, and the modern Greek: although they belong to completely different branches of the Indo-European family, they nevertheless are united with each other by an entire range of common features and detailed coincidences in the sphere of grammatic construction”.

\textsuperscript{39} N. S. Trubetskoj, “Vavilonskaia Bashnia i smeshenie iazykov”, in Evraziiskii Vremennik III (1923), pp. 116-117.

\textsuperscript{40} Roman Jakobson, K kharakteristike evraziiskogo iazykovogo soiuza (Prague: Evraziiskoe kbigoizdatel’stvo, 1931).

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid, pp. 3-5.
Beyond the borders of Eurasia. These characteristics were the result of these languages developing within the special geographical world of Eurasia, discovered, as Jakobson pointed out, by Savitskii. The history of the emergence of the linguistic border was exemplified by Jakobson, characteristically, by a reference to the Czech case, where the correlation of “soft-hard” consonants disappeared, allegedly, under the impact of the German language. Reflecting the Eurasianist anti-European inclinations, Jakobson wrote about Jan Hus (the favorite of the Russian Slavophiles), who reproached his compatriots for Germanizing and the loss of the soft “l” in the Czech language.

Let us note that Jakobson’s exploration of the phonological characteristics of the Eurasian language union was related to the work of the Soviet linguists, who pursued the policies of creating and developing alphabets for the Soviet nationalities. Jakobson relied on data, such as maticization of minority languages or adaptation of the Russian Siberian dialects to local non-Slavic tongues. Jakobson extensively used Soviet linguistic literature, for instance, works by D. V. Bubrikh, a specialist on Ugro-Finnic languages and one of the authorities on the creation of Karelian, Komi, and Udmurt languages in the USSR. Jakobson also utilized research by A. S. Selishchev, A. P. Georgievsky, V. N. Baushev, and the Soviet ethnographer D. K. Zelenin, who according to Jakobson “established the common Eurasian features of attitude of the speakers to the word” in his work on the speech taboo. In a reference to the work of W. Schmidt, the author of the Kulturkreise ethnographic theory, Jakobson reproached the Austrian scholar for his Eurocentrism: for Jakobson, Schmidt failed to avoid value judgement present in his attempt to explain specific language characteristics by the “poverty” of a given culture.

In his Dialogues with Krystyna Pomorska Jakobson explained that in the 1930s he “published a number of studies proving the existence of a vast “Eurasian linguistic alliance”, which encompassed Russian, the other languages of Eastern Europe, and the majority of the Uralic and Altaic languages, all of which make use of the phonemic opposition of palatalized and nonpalatalized consonants”. Jakobson stressed that these ideas were parallel to the work of Franz Boas, “who revealed the existence of phonic and grammatical phenomena common to the Amerindian languages and encompassing large zones of these languages without regard to origin….” In a sweep characteristic of Jakobson’s thought, he related the problem of the language union and the resulting issue of acquired characteristics to a range of topics, such as bilingualism or aphasia. Jakobson argued that “with every step, one finds in the ever growing number of these secondary linguistic affinities (Wahlverwandschaften) an entire series of problems which have yet to be resolved. In much that at one time appeared to be a mosaic of

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42 Jakobson, Pomorska, Dialogues…, p. 85.
43 Ibid, p. 84.
chance events we now perceive geo-linguistic regularities awaiting explanation”.\textsuperscript{44} He added, in a reference to Savitskii’s method, that “only the creation of atlases will oblige linguists to reflect in a consistent manner upon such isoglosses as the boundary line between the West European mass of languages with articles and the East European languages without articles…”\textsuperscript{45}

Jakobson insisted that linguistic boundaries determined by acquired characteristics do often coincide with, although not necessarily depend upon, the sphere of particular language domination, or with a socio-cultural zone as such: “We should also point out that these widespread isoglosses generally coincide with other puzzling lines encountered in the geographical distribution of anthropological traits. These often unexpected connections require a many-sided analysis in accordance with the methodological theses advanced by the ingenious scholar Petr Nikolaevich Savitskii, the precursor of structural geography”\textsuperscript{46}

It appears, thus, that Trubetskoi, Savitskii and Jakobson developed a scholarly vision that utilized the concepts of “structure” and “system” to first of all describe the holistic unity of Eurasia. As Boris Gasparov noted, the Saussurian linguistic structuralism implied two slightly different ideas. The first, which Gasparov termed “the systemic principle”, “emphasized the interconnectedness of all the elements within a system and the impossibility of defining the features of any element without considering its relation to other elements and its position in the system as a whole”.\textsuperscript{47} The second, “the constructive principle, noted diverse phenomena of human communication in their elusive multiplicity through a surface, empirical examination, and it then proceeds to pick out the key features of internal structure, the study of which is the specific matter and prerogative of linguistics and semiotics…”\textsuperscript{48} The implications of the two approaches are slightly different, too: the systemic approach leads to emphasis on each cultural system’s uniqueness, whereas the constructive approach, through the discovery of analogy and the similarity of structures underlying the visible surfaces, has the potential to move to universal rules governing diverse semiotic phenomena. It would not be mistaken to argue that in the case of the specifically Eurasianist structuralist project the stress has been on the systemic principle which allowed discovering and confirming the cultural uniqueness and the indivisible unity of Eurasia.

For Gasparov, the two approaches inherent in structuralist thought were “superimposed on two powerful cultural traditions which defined practically the entire system of Russian intellectual life for almost the entire century: a teleological native-philosophical worldview and a universal (usually pro-Western) dialectics”. Two different paths of structuralism resulted from

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\textsuperscript{44} Ibid, p. 88.  \\
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid, p. 88.  \\
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid, p. 89.  \\
\textsuperscript{47} Gasparov, \textit{The Ideological Principles}…, p. 72.  \\
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid, p. 72. 
\end{flushright}
this superimposition: the teleological logic of systemic development (read “Eurasianism”, SG), and the process of “linking the constructive approach to the dialectical principles of “defamiliarization” and the contrasting existence of competing phenomena” (apparent in the non-Eurasianist work by Jakobson and the formalist school). According to Gasparov, it was the constructive principle in structuralism that provided for the “widespread dissemination of structuralist poetics and semiotics” after World War II, whereas the “systemic branch of structuralism receded in the past and could be perceived as its prehistory, a preliminary and insufficiently focused stepping-stone to what later became the dominant theme of linguistic and semiotic structuralism”.

Gasparov’s profound analysis, which remains the best treatment of the ideology of the Prague school of linguists, was recently supplanted by the path-breaking work of Patrick Seriot, who convincingly argued that the Eurasianist thinkers differed fundamentally from Saussure in their epistemological premises. For Saussure, “structure” was a mental construct created for analytical purposes. For the Eurasianists, “structure” – in this case the unity of Eurasia to be uncovered and described – was a really existing entity, whose existence need not to be proven. Thus, Seriot spoke of “ontological” structuralism of the Eurasianists.

It appears that our understanding of the emergence of Eurasianism as a particular, even if deviant, stage in the history of structuralist thought will be enriched if we take into account the specific form of modernization of Romantic ideas, in which Eurasianism was rooted. Boris Gasparov’s interpretative model, which focused on the combination and mutual superimposition of trajectories immanent in structuralism and in the Russian intellectual tradition, has to be supplanted with yet another important element. The Eurasianist ideology attempted to create a nationalist vision for the imperial state and society. It faced the problem of adjusting the Romantic, nationalist, and holistic tradition of Russian thought to the diversity of empire that was pulled apart by the centrifugal forces of modern nationalism during the Revolution and the Civil War. The re-constitution of the multinational state under the Bolshevik rule paid the price of enormous concessions to these modern nationalisms of diverse peoples of the “Russian world”, and the Eurasianist doctrine attempted to create an intellectual construct that would minimize and undo the role of these nationalisms in Eurasia. In doing so, the Eurasianist thinkers developed and enriched the structuralist approach in geography and linguistics, although their approach was only a stage, or even a branch, of 20th century structuralism.

49 Ibid, p. 74.
50 Ibid, p. 75.
As the group of the Eurasianist thinkers dissolved in the late 1930s, Roman Jakobson’s emigration to the United States proved crucial in spreading the structuralist paradigm. The key event in this process of expansion was the fruitful contact between Jakobson and Claude Lévi-Strauss in *Ecole Libre des Hautes Etudes de New York*, the idea for which was provided by another Russian émigré, Boris Mirkine-Guetzevitch. Alexandre Koyré, a younger Russian émigré naturalized in France, introduced Claude Lévi-Strauss to Jakobson. Answering the question if this encounter was decisive for his intellectual biography, Lévi-Strauss exclaimed: “And how much! I was at the time a kind of a naïve structuralist. I did structuralism without knowing it. Jakobson opened for me the doctrine already constituted in a discipline: it was linguistics, which I never practiced. For me, it was a revelation.” Lévi-Strauss also told the story of Jakobson’s contacts with Jacques Lacan, who was already influenced by another former Eurasianist, Alexandre Kojeve, whose lectures on Hegel Lacan had attended. The most important fact, however, was that it was Jakobson who inspired Lévi-Strauss to write “The Elementary Structures of Kinship”, the work that revolutionized anthropology by moving it from genetic analyses of ethnic cultures to the study of structures of culture and of acquired characteristics.

The ideology of Eurasianism with its stress on holistic and systemic analysis and on the importance of acquired characteristics played an important role in the intellectual experimentation that helped crystallize the structuralist paradigm. Yet, most histories of structuralism not focused on the Prague Circle of Linguists fail to mention that role. For instance, the standard *History of Structuralism* by Dosset, although it tells the story of Jakobson’s impact on Levi-Strauss, fails to explore Jakobson’s own formative years spent in interaction with the Eurasianists. After World War II structuralism became one of the dominant modes of scholarly thought in humanities and social sciences, and the role of Eurasianism – decisive, deviant, or passing - with its defense of the unity of the Russian imperial space in the history of structuralism should be present in accounts of structuralism’s history.

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