

Resistance to Theory: Notes From the Underground

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Abstract

While in the West theory was celebrating its triumph throughout the late 1960s and in 1970s, in Soviet Russia the 1970s were already seeing theory fatigue, or even, as I will try to demonstrate, an active resistance to theory. The political context should not be missed here. Literary theory, not just as a field, but as a university discipline based on textbooks and requiring the rituals of examinations, was first institutionalised precisely in Soviet Russia, beginning in the decade between the mid-1930s and the mid-1940s. Later, however, in the mid-1970s, Russian Formalism was canonised by and amongst those seeking to eschew Marxism. It is against this background that I here discuss some examples of resistance by Soviet non-Marxist thinkers to Russian Formalism and Soviet Structuralism, despite their significance for those dissenting from official dogma. Ultimately, the question is why and how is non-Marxist theory resisted by non-Marxists in a totalitarian society, and what larger lessons for the status of theory today are bound to emerge from this.

Keywords: Literary Theory; Russian Formalism; Structuralism; Semiotics; Viktor Krivulin; Boris Groys

The reason I evoke *Notes from the Underground* in the title of this article is seemingly a simple one: all of the action that my essay refers to unfolds, just as in Dostoevskij's piece, in St Petersburg, or Leningrad in the cases of Soviet resistance to theory. Of course, there is also another reason: "underground" captures the location of this particular protest: away from the mainstream, scattered in the pages of samizdat type-written magazines, in articles some of which have never been republished, that is, they have never left the dark room of subterranean critique to break into the light of day. And for a third reason perhaps. When Friedrich Nietzsche, in the winter of 1886/87, encountered Dostoevskij's novella, in Nice, in a French translation titled *L'esprit souterrain*, he felt propelled by Dostoevskij's text into further reflection on the premises of his own philosophy (as he was,

to an extent, through his encounter with Stendhal's writing). Marking out the instances of Soviet resistance to theory might also, let us hope, occasion some rethinking of the status of theory and its fortunes in the past century, and today. Ultimately, the three brief case studies I undertake here are meant to deliver a lesson about the rather different rationale and dynamics of the resistance to theory in a totalitarian society. The real question is why and how is non-Marxist theory resisted by non-Marxists in a totalitarian society in which non-Marxist thought ought to be considered an ally of those opposing mainstream discourse and official dogma.

¹Let me begin with what I believe might be a much-needed differentiation between two fundamentally different meanings the word 'theory' has acquired over the last half a century or so. The first one (one can visualize the word 'theory' being written with an initial capital 't' here) is reserved for theory conceived of as an important but somewhat loosely defined body of thought that gravitates towards a substantial (if not full) overlap with continental philosophy. There are two versions of this understanding of theory (with a capital 't') that are worth pointing to, each represented by a seminal recent work. One is the equation of Theory with French post-structuralism; in this version, Theory unfolded in France in the second half of the 1960s and migrated to the United States in the 1970s. François Cusset, who has studied the process of this migration, has written persuasively about "French Theory" (to quote the title of his book published in France in 2003, in which the words "French Theory," in English in the French original, drive home his point about the transformative—and global—power of Theory). Cusset produces an excellent argument about the possible reasons for this equation, or substitution. On reaching the shores of America, dominated as it was (and still is) by the traditions of analytic philosophy, French post-structuralist philosophy (foremost Deconstruction) was appropriated not as philosophy per se but as a powerful method of analysing (and putting in question) narratives: literary, religious, and legal. Theory, in Cusset's words, became

1 This means that here I will not be discussing instances of resistance to non-Marxist theory, notably Russian Formalism, by non-Marxist thinkers who were writing in non-totalitarian contexts; a classic example would be Khodasevich's and Georgii Adamovich's rejection of Russian Formalism in interwar Paris (see Tihanov 2019: 158, as well as Malmstad's well-known article on Khodsevich and Russian Formalism referred to footnote n. 28 in *ibid.*: 211). The current text is a slightly expanded and revised version of an article appearing in a 2024 volume on the political uses of literature edited by Benjamin Kohlmann and Ivana Perica.

“mysteriously intransitive”: no longer a theory of something, but “above all a discourse on itself” (Cusset 2008: 99). The second version is the equation of Theory with the dialectical method, honed by G. W. F. Hegel but detectable before him, right down to medieval philosophy and letters (in Andrew Cole’s broad—perhaps a touch too broad—reconstruction). Theory, in this second version, allows one to perform a move within philosophy away from philosophy, as Andrew Cole would have it when he associates the birth of Theory with Hegel (Cole 2014; Habib 2019). Again, the ensuing claim is all-encompassing: “theory historicizes thought, studying its materialization across disparate forms of human expression—music, literature, art, architecture, religion, philosophy—either in a diachronic or synchronic analysis—or, aspirationally, both at once” (Cole 2015).

There is also, however, another understanding of theory (we could visualize the word as being written with a small ‘t’ here); it focuses on a particular time-limited episteme and on a much more well-defined area, that of literature or the other arts: music, architecture, theatre, film, and so on. The episteme I am referring to must be time-limited, for it is itself the product of a time-limited regime of relevance that bestows on literature (or these other arts) a sense of autonomy and self-sufficiency without which the semblance of timelessness constituted in the act of theoretical reflection—with its uncovering of seemingly universal principles (or even immutable rules)—would not be possible.

The meaning I invest in the term ‘regime of relevance’ harks back to Foucault, but here it has a more specific semantic compass: it refers to a historically available constellation of social and cultural parameters that shape the predominant understanding and *use* of literature for the duration of that particular constellation. I submit that literary theory is the product of one specific phase in the evolution of one particular regime of relevance. Methodical reflection on literature, known to have existed in the Western tradition at least since Plato, should not be confused with literary theory. Literary theory is only a particular shade of that phenomenon; disciplined, rational thinking about literature does not come to an end with the demise of literary theory as a unique and time-limited episode in that disciplined, rational reflection. What makes this episode both characteristic and important is that it unfolds within the bedrock of a distinct, equally unique and time-limited, regime of relevance that posits and circumscribes literature’s significance. To put it briefly, this specific

regime of relevance sees literature as an autonomous discourse that tends to differ—in various ways and to a varying degree—from other discourses: journalistic, philosophical, quotidian, and so forth. This regime of relevance commences with the wider discursive formation we still refer to as Romanticism. But literary theory, I contend, was born later. Romanticism channels the notion of the autonomous worth of literature autonomy almost exclusively through the figure of the writer. With his doctrine of the literary field, Bourdieu has memorably rearticulated a long Romantic tradition of positioning literature as beneficially marginal, the product of writers who are both extraordinarily talented and unmistakably relegated to the periphery of society: prophets, madmen, and outcasts. Literary theory, however, emerges at a later stage in the lifespan of this particular regime of relevance that defines literature and its significance with reference to its autonomy. What is so distinct about literary theory is that it contemplates this autonomy (and the resulting uniqueness of literature as a discourse) not through the figure of the writer *per se*, but through language. This, in a sense, is the great breakthrough of the Russian Formalists around World War I: literature presents a specific and autonomous discourse, not because of the exceptionality of the writer who writes it, but because of the specific way in which language functions in it. Of course, after Jacques Derrida, we know that this is a claim that is not always possible to uphold: not because language in literature is not metaphoric or figurative, but because it is so not only in literature. Yet what the Formalists did amounted nonetheless to a veritable revolution: the writer was taken out of the equation; for the first time what really mattered was the text and its language.

This regime of relevance, in which literature is valued for its autonomy and uniqueness as a discourse that is unlike other discourses, breaks with previous regimes of relevance in which literature's significance is linked to its capacity to convey ideas, emotions, or knowledge of the world, or to instigate socially and politically oriented actions. Those previous regimes of relevance foreground forms of writing that still preserve the links of literature to an earlier state of symbiosis with philosophical, historiographical, pedagogical, and political discourses. This new regime of relevance, with its insistence on grounding literature's significance in the autonomy it derives from the special way in which language is used in it, sustained literary theory's dominant position among other modes of reflecting on literature into the early 1980s, when it gradually became untenable because the very way in which one conceives of literature's

relevance was itself changing by then. The patrimony of literary theory is currently active within a regime of relevance that thinks literature through its market and entertainment value, with only residual recall of its previously highly treasured autonomy. The enduring legacy of literary theory is present in a spectral way: instead of assuming a reliably material form, it is available solely relationally; it disintegrates every time one forgets that it is the volatile product of a past regime of relevance still at work within a new regime vis-à-vis which it is no longer dominant².

These two meanings—and manifestations—of theory (both with a capital and with a small ‘t’) have over the last fifty years or so functioned not in isolation from one another, but in constant imbrication and overlap. Let me adduce an illustration of this complexity drawn from the scene of theory in Germany of the 1960s. In mid-1960s Germany, these two meanings—and projects—of theory intersect in a way that is indicative of, and marked by, earlier developments in the German humanities. The version of theory that tends to extend to a full overlap with dialectics is very much alive in the legacy of what we still refer to as ‘critical theory,’ an intellectual project that commenced in the 1920s and was already influential by the late 1950s. In the 1960s, this project revives Walter Benjamin’s work which the ’68-ers rediscover; it also formulates what Theodor Adorno would call ‘negative dialectics’: reversing Hegel’s postulate that ‘the whole is the true’ but remaining dialectical nonetheless, albeit ‘negatively’ so. This extended understanding of Theory as coextensive with dialectics (almost exclusively of German provenance) is not the only one on offer in Germany during the 1960s. A competing version of Theory seeks inspiration in hermeneutics, and thus also largely in the domestic intellectual tradition. To some extent, of course, in the version practiced by Hans-Georg Gadamer hermeneutics meets the dialectical method; Hegel is undoubtedly important (including on the level of vocabulary) for the subtle moves of mediation that are on display in *Truth and Method*, Gadamer’s opus magnum published in 1960.³

On the other hand, literary theory as such (the second project of theory, ‘theory’ with a small ‘t’) is barely present in Germany until the mid-1960s. If anything, a great deal of what constitutes literary theory arrives initially as an export from France, in the guise of structuralist semiotics. Roland

2 Here I elaborate on arguments advanced in my recent book Tihanov 2019, see especially the Prologue.

3 This part of my essay expands and refines arguments made in Tihanov 2021.

Barthes' *Mythologies*, in a severely abridged translation (Brühmann 2014: 30), becomes the first harbinger of this particular project of theory in Germany. As Horst Brühmann notes, Barthes' *Mythologies* appeared in Germany (as *Mythen des Alltags*) at a time when not a single book was available in German by Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, or even the members of the Tel Quel Group; Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques* had been translated into German in 1960, but without the theoretical passages (Brühmann 2014: 32). Thus, at least initially, French literary theory arrives in Germany without the supporting frame of French Theory. In both France and Germany, what anchors and advances structuralist literary theory is the parallel revival, for the first time in Europe since the 1930s, of Russian Formalism; in retrospect this could be seen as a self-reflexive gesture, by some of the structuralists, of establishing intellectual provenance for their own work. This process begins precisely in the mid-1960s. In 1964, a German translation of Victor Erlich's 1955 monograph on Russian Formalism is published in Munich; the next year, the first books of works by Russian Formalists appear in France and Germany: in France, the famous anthology edited in Paris by Tzvetan Todorov, with a preface by Roman Jakobson, and in Germany, a selection of Boris Ėjchenbaum's writings brought out by Suhrkamp. To complicate matters, some of the essays included in Todorov's anthology of Russian Formalist literary theory (by Viktor Šklovskij and Ėjchenbaum) are carefully read and referred to a few years later by Herbert Marcuse, the indisputable intellectual guru of the 1968 protests, thus staging a consequential meeting between theory and Theory (Tihanov 2005: 689-90).

But while in the West the explosive mixture of theory (both with a capital and with a small 't') was celebrating its triumph throughout the late 1960s and 1970s, in Soviet Russia the 1970s were already seeing theory fatigue, or even, as I will try to demonstrate briefly in this second part of my article, an active resistance to theory. The political context should not be overlooked here. Literary theory, not just as a field, but as a university discipline based on textbooks and requiring the rituals of examinations, was first institutionalised precisely in Soviet Russia, beginning in the decade between the mid-1930s and the mid-1940s. But this institutionalisation took place along strict Marxist lines, impoverishing Karl Marx's intellectual legacy and largely destroying the foundations of literary theory laid by the Russian Formalists (as in Boris Tomaševskij's early, non-Marxist but

equally textbook-like summation, *Teorija literatury: Poëtika*, 1925). This is particularly true of the version of literary theory devised by Gennady Pospelov (1940), and less so of that cultivated by the more talented but only slightly less orthodox Leonid Timofeev (1934; then 1935 as an introduction to literary theory for fledgling writers with the title “Verse and Prose”; then 1945, as a university textbook).⁴ The result of all this was that Russian Formalism, chastised so much and berated for so long, gradually acquired an aura of dissident aversion to dogma. The representative volume of Iurii Tynjanov’s writings on literary theory and poetics published in Moscow in 1977 (Tynjanov 1977) was the work of scholars who were not prepared to talk, or walk, with the regime. Russian Formalism had become a byword for opposition to narrowly conceived Marxist theory.

It is against this background of canonizing Russian Formalism by, and amongst, those seeking to eschew the imposed ideological mainstream (*inakomyšliaščie*, in Russian) that I wish to discuss now a stark example of resistance not to Marxist literary theory, but precisely to Russian Formalism, the guiding star—along with semiotics, on which a few words later—of those dissenting from official dogma. Not surprisingly, this voice against Russian Formalism comes from, as it were, a *practicing* dissident, the poet and journalist Viktor Krivulin (1944–2001). In the Leningrad samizdat magazine *37* (1976–1981; 21 issues in total, which he edited with Tat’jana Goričeva, his wife until her emigration in 1980), Krivulin published a long review article on the above-mentioned 1977 representative collection of Tynjanov’s works. The title of Krivulin’s contribution, which translates as “Notes on the Margins of an Untimely Book”, takes the reader back to Nietzsche and Maksim Gor’kij.⁵ Krivulin attacks, to begin with, the

4 Timofeev, it has to be noted, was one of Michail Bakhtin’s guarding angels in the very early 1940s, thanks to whom Bakhtin got to present his paper “Epic and Novel” at the Gor’kij Institute of World Literature.

5 See Krivulin’s Russian article Krivulin 1977 (typescript, not republished since its appearance in the samizdat magazine). All quotations are from the online text provided by the samizdat collections of the University of Toronto Libraries: https://samizdatcollections.library.utoronto.ca/islandora/object/samizdat%3A37_10/datastream/PDF/view (last consulted in August 2022); the translations are all mine. The table of contents for all issues of *37* can be found in von Zitzewitz 2015. In the growing literature on the Leningrad samizdat magazines, there are still very few mentions of Krivulin’s article; an exception is Timur Chairulin’s PhD dissertation (Chairulin 2021: 188), where the author briefly refers to some of the objections raised by Krivulin; see also p. 183 for a mention of Krivulin’s dissatisfaction, in the same article, of the structuralists’ and semioticians’ lack of genuine interest in contemporary Russian literature.

principles of selection; he seems to be suggesting that after the republication of Tynjanov's articles on verse theory in 1965 (Tynjanov 1965), the 1977 edition is an unnecessary monument to artificially arranged unity and cohesion. Yet the crux of his criticism is in his profound disagreement with the technically-pragmatic, ultimately 'cynical,' as he calls it, approach to literature introduced by the Formalists. This cynicism, Krivulin charged, was epitomised by Šklovskij's cold analysis of literature as the application of particular 'devices'; deprived of attention to content and ideas, this approach allowed Šklovskij to evade political commitment after the 1920s, turning his coat on occasion and adopting the position of a trickster interested in his own survival above all else. The same technical adroitness and pragmatism marked Tynjanov's approach to literature, according to Krivulin. In the end, the deeper problem here is that Tynjanov, along with his fellow-Formalists, was practicing an approach to literature that Krivulin found too secular, and in that sense too narrow. In a powerful passage in the last part of his long text, Krivulin concludes that Tynjanov was eager to understand how literature behaves at "the lower limit of language," that which places language in contact with the everyday (*byt*). Alas, Tynjanov had no sense at all for the importance of understanding how literature positions itself at what Krivulin calls "the upper limit of language," the contact zone in which literature faces metaphysics and religion (Krivulin 1977: 245). For Tynjanov, the "junior sister" of literature, in Krivulin's remarkable paraphrasing of Tynjanov's term "junior genres," is the anecdote, the rumor, and other forms of everyday discourse—but literature's "senior sisters" are the Bible, the Koran, and the Vedas, which Tynjanov does not know and does want to know (Krivulin 1977: 246).⁶

My second example is Boris Groys's early piece "Istoki i smysl" russkogo strukturalizma" (The Origins and Meaning of Russian Structuralism), published under the pseudonym 'Igor' Suicidov,⁷ just before Groys's emigration to West Germany in 1981; in the same issue, under his real name,

6 For an analysis of a much earlier instance of non-Marxist objections to Russian Formalism, raised by a young Orientalist at Leningrad and highlighting as early as 1930 the fact that the literary texts discussed by the Formalists were almost all Western (which did not deter them from claiming universal validity for their literary theory), see Tihanov 2017.

7 Published in 37, 1980–1981, no. 21 (the last issue before the magazine ceased publication). In 1976, very soon after 37 had been founded, Krivulin and Groys were engaged in its pages in a polemic on the limits of comprehension with reference to contemporary art and literature, see Žitenev 2012.

Groys published an article on Kazimir Malevič and Martin Heidegger. The title, of course, is meant to reconnect the Russian reader with Nikolai Berdjaev and his book *The Origins and Meaning of Russian Communism* (English ed. 1937; first Russian ed. Paris 1955). Groys contends that in Soviet Russia, Structuralism had become just another ideology, rivaling in intelligentsia circles the official ideology of Marxism. In the absence of a philosophical tradition, in the absence, ultimately, of metaphysics (recall also Krivulin's critique of Tynjanov), Soviet Structuralism put on the mantle of metaphysics. In Groys's account, it became nothing more than a "'conservative' version of the left materialist wing of the humanities": Soviet Structuralism succeeded Marxism in this role during the 1960s and 1970s.⁸ Furthermore, Groys charges Soviet Structuralism with harboring the ambition of becoming an instrument of power and a tool of governance: "Structuralism insisted on becoming the ideology of the intelligentsia that was supposedly ready to begin to govern a society, in which all actions have only a systemic sense and which has lost intuition of its own historicity" (Groys 2017: 257). Yet Groys is under no illusion when it comes to the real potency of Structuralism to rival Marxism: "the [type of] rationality Structuralism [offered] turned out to be weaker than that of Marxism." (Groys 2017: 258) Those longing for taking the fight into the open, beyond the conference halls or beyond their kitchens, were bound to end up frustrated; in the cold light of day, Groys recognized that, "removed from participation in the institutions of power, the intelligentsia was able to deploy Structuralism in its capacity as metaphysics solely for the purpose of self-consolation" (Groys 2017: 258). Soviet Structuralism was no doubt often attacked by Soviet orthodoxy, but this only underlined the former's own growing monopoly on the humanities. It had thus become the new orthodoxy—even as some of its most talented practitioners, such as Jurij Lotman and Sergej Averincev, delivered truly inspiring examples of literary analysis (both Lotman and Averincev are mentioned by Groys, the latter somewhat more ambivalently; in contradistinction, Vjačeslav Ivanov's theory of the two hemispheres of the brain is ruthlessly ridiculed

8 A brief summary of Groys's text, from a different perspective, can be found in Žitenev 2012: 119-20. It is important to note that Groys's criticism of Soviet Structuralism as complicit with the totalitarian nature of intellectual life in the Soviet Union parallels his earlier, and well-known, misgivings regarding the Soviet avant-garde as implicitly totalitarian, see Groys 2011.

by Groys, as is Vladimir Toporov's attempt at a structuralist-semantic reconstruction of 'wisdom' (Sophia) (Groys 2017: 258).

A third and final example. Itself a relatively small group of academics brought together by admiration for Nikolaj Marr's 'new theory of language' and his methodology of cultural analysis, 'semantic paleontology' (*semantičeskaja paleontologija*) was a current in cultural and literary theory that had a considerable impact on some of its contemporaries (notably Bachtin) and wider resonance beyond the 1930s. A major exponent of semantic paleontology, Olga Frejdenberg (still best known in the West as Boris Pasternak's cousin), was at pains to negotiate the boundaries between her own para-Marxist cultural theory and orthodox sociology. She was to face, much later, criticism from some of her own pupils, more often than not for methodological reasons. In an article surveying the history of the 'genetic method,' written decades after semantic paleontology had left the stage of Soviet literary theory, Sof'ja Poljakova charged Marr's followers with reducing cultural history to a 'gigantic tautology' (*gigantskiju tautologiju*). While in hot pursuit of primeval clusters of meaning, Poljakova maintained, Frejdenberg produced a semantic universe in which everything resembled and echoed everything else: "We are thus in the kingdom of sameness clad in difference" (Poljakova 1977: 370)⁹ In 1979–1980, Frejdenberg once again became the target of criticism, this time by a group of young classicists at Leningrad University who believed her work to be lacking in methodological rigor and philological exactitude. Frejdenberg was aligned with Lotman, Toporov, Averintsev, and Aleksej Losev, who were all thought by these budding scholars to be representatives of a new—structuralist—orthodoxy in philology, which,

9 "Takim obrazom, my v tsarstve tozhdestv, oblechennykh v otlichiiakh": the quotation is from Poljakova's article Poljakova 1994. Poljakova contrasts in her article Frejdenberg and Izrail Frank-Kameneckij; the latter is declared a true scholar and thinker, whereas Frejdenberg is apportioned the dubious honor of a helpless and methodologically perplexed follower of Marr and Frank-Kameneckij. This assessment is historically inaccurate and unfounded. Suffice it to point to Frank-Kameneckij's unequivocal praise of Frejdenberg's pioneering role in the mythological interpretation of the Greek novel, which overturned Erwin Rohde's false assumption of the importance of invention and foreshadowed "by three years" Karl Kerényi's 1927 study *Die griechisch-orientalische Romanliteratur in religionsgeschichtlicher Beleuchtung* (which, according to Frank-Kameneckij, was, compared to Frejdenberg's, rather narrow in scope, limiting itself to an examination of the Egyptian myth of Osiris and its impact on the Greek novel); see Frank-Kameneckij 187.

because it was perceived by many as a form of opposition to the regime, was felt to be beyond criticism (the proximity of this argument to Groys's critique of Soviet Structuralism is unmistakable). Seeking to rectify this undemocratic situation, the students organized small workshops in which they questioned the methodological untouchability of Structuralism and semiotics (of which Frejdenberg was considered a predecessor *sui generis*, by Toporov and to some extent by Lotman, whose notion of "explosion" [*vzryv*] as a mechanism of cultural and historical change undoubtedly drew on her idea of the fitful birth of qualitatively new cultural formations) (Lotman 2009: 140; Lotman 1976: 3-11; Frank, Ruhe and Schmitz 2010: 227-59). The discussions (except for the one on Averintsev, which had not been recorded) were later published in the samizdat journal *Metrodor* (Zmud' 1998: 204-9; Levinton: 2002: 14-17).¹⁰ Many of these discussions, I should add, were jocular and playful in style, thus deliberately challenging the position of authority Soviet Structuralism and semiotics had assumed.

In conclusion, I should like to make three brief points. First, there was no hiding place for theory in the Soviet Union. Often itself beginning as a form of resistance to Marxism, theory's own symbiosis with power and authority would be readily detectable and assailable. Second, and this is a really novel and important point, critique of Russian Formalism and Soviet Structuralism came not just from within Soviet Marxism, as is still generally assumed today, but also from the opposite end of the ideological spectrum, with arguments that were no less forceful, and certainly often more valid. Third, my reflections here capture, ultimately, some of the inherent strains between theory and ideology, or, if you will, between theory with a small and a capital 't'. Here are the two faces of this intrinsic tension: Krivulin, who found Tynjanov's take on literature wanting, because he pined for theory with a capital 't' that would grow into an engagement with metaphysics and religion—and, on the opposite side, Leonid Zmud' (the Ukrainian-born Soviet and Russian scholar of Ancient Greek philosophy and science who, while still a PhD student in Leningrad, would organize critical public discussions of Frejdenberg's and the Soviet Structuralists' work), and even more so Groys, who were uncomfortable with Soviet Structuralism's having turned into an ideology in its own right and sought to scale it back to a stricter and more specific method, a theory with a small 't'. The lesson that emerges, I suppose, is that the "resistance to theory," again to borrow

10 The ten issues of *Metrodor* were published between 1978 and 1982.

the title of Paul de Man's 1982 eponymous essay, was not confined to the West and to the intrinsic exhaustion of the trust in language to secure access to truth; this resistance had its own rationale and subtle dynamic in the Soviet Union, a society in which theoretical innovation could and did at times display unexpected complicities with the ideological mainstream. These complicities were diagnosed, in the case of both Russian Formalism and Soviet Structuralism, once the two previously undogmatic currents of thought had gradually assumed a position of authority in intellectual circles. The most compelling resistance to them would come from outside of Marxism, in fact often from thinkers steeped in conservative and/or religious thought (e. g. in Heidegger) rather than in radical intellectual traditions, and this non-Marxist critique would be much more difficult to address and ward off than the staple accusations leveled by the Soviet regime. All this means that the Soviet resistance to theory holds lessons for our somewhat self-obsessed Western debates on theory: we have to recognize that theory, even when it emits its own impulses of critique vis-à-vis the status quo, is not immune to complicity in the re-articulation of authoritarian claims to truth.

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