

Soviet Union and religion: an analysis of the Sovietologist discourse.

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Abstract. Marxist thought reached its most relevant position as a "policy tool" in a State in the Soviet Union (USSR). Inasmuch as Marx considered religion "the opium of the people", it is not surprising that it was a sensitive topic to the Union. In this context, several Sovietologists (scholars of the Soviet Union) focused on how the Soviet Union dealt with the issue. The present research intends to open up a new venue for understanding the Cold War by analyzing how the Sovietologist discourse approached religion by conferring natural predicates to the USSR. The main hypothesis is that the Sovietologist discourse constructed the subjectivity of the USSR from conditions of possibility that characterized it as inferior, expansionist, and contradictory. Following Foucault, the archeological method was deployed in order to understand how utterances on religion took place under the conditions of possibility of the Sovietologist discourse. In practical terms, the analysis considered several papers on religion that were published in the journal "Soviet Studies", one of the most important in the field of Sovietology. After the reading of eight articles, it was possible to infer that: 1) contradictoriness is, in fact, the basis of the discourse of Sovietologists; 2) expansiveness and inferiority are present characteristics, but not necessarily central; 3) characteristics such as combativeness to religion and the Soviet inability to deal with religious issues are pivotal in the discourse.

Keywords. Sovietology, Sovietologist Discourse, Religion, USSR, Discourse.

1. Introduction

After the end of World War II, two countries arose as the great powers of the international system. Viewed from the power perspective, the United States (US) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) were by far the most relevant units of the international system. Moreover, they also represented two different ideologies and forms of government. Being that so, to understand and explain the world in the period of bipolarity, and even after that, it is important to understand the constitution of both the US and the USSR as international subjects. When it comes to the USSR, the subarea of political science and IR that dealt with this problem was known as "Sovietology".

Considering a Foucauldian post-structuralist approach, it is of extreme importance to realize how the understanding of the USSR was constructed by western scholars. In that sense, it is possible to talk about a "Sovietologist Discourse", as pointed out by Mielniczuk, and to work with archeological and/or genealogical methods to explicit its rules of emergence, which operate in order to maintain the

recurrence of statements that construct USSR as a political subject in international relations [1].

Although Mileniczuk laid the groundwork for the analysis of the sovietologist discourse, he did not focus, his work on specific parts of this discourse, doing extensive and generalist work on the theme. Considering that, it is attractive to elaborate research on specific topics of Sovietologist discourse to understand and investigate the rules of formation of the discourse on the USSR. One part of the Soviet subject that has great importance and made the sovietologist pay attention to it is related to the religious life of the soviet subject.

With the establishment of the USSR in 1922, Marxist thought reached its point of greatest relevance in the governance of a particular state. Considering that, according to Marx, religion is the opium of the people, which stuns and calms, alienating them, henceforth, it is not surprising that the USSR had state atheism as a policy. As in its territory, there were groups that professed various religious faiths, the state's atheism needed political actions to be implemented. For that reason, religion in Soviet society, anti-religious and atheistic propaganda and

policies, and the relationship between the state and religious entities interested scholars who studied the USSR, as part of a sovietologist discourse responsible for the construction of the USSR subject.

The present research aims to analyze how the Sovietologist discourse, when approached from the religious perspective, defined characteristics that would be “natural” to USSR. The main hypothesis, here put at test — derived from the work of Mielniczuk — is that the Sovietologist discourse constructed the subjectivity of the USSR from conditions of possibility that characterized it as inferior, expansionist, and contradictory [1]. In that matter, in the research, the “religious question” was considered in a wide range, taking into account various religious creeds and even the opposition to religion, like in atheistic propaganda.

Methodologically, Foucault’s elaboration on archeology was considered. The main purpose of using such methodology is that it enables the highlighting of the conditions of possibility of the sovietologist discourse, which delimit what can or cannot be said about the USSR [2].

Aiming to present the research and introduce its primary results, the rest of this paper is organized as follows. In the second section, I present the methodological base for the research, considering the literature specialized in Foucauldian methodologies, and the process of this research. In the third section, I will make a synthesized explanation of the role of Sovietology in the Cold War period and the conception of Sovietologist discourse. Then, in the fourth section, I will present the results of the research, which will be analyzed in the fifth and last section, presenting relevant conclusions from this article to the field of knowledge and for future research.

2. Theoretical Approach and Methodology of Research

On the matter of “theory”, Foucault’s elaboration on archeology was considered: an approach in which utterances are analyzed based on their discursive conditions of possibility; in this case, conditions of possibility of the Sovietologist discourse, which delimit what can or cannot be said about the USSR. Aiming at a more concise and systematically presented methodology, authors focused on the method behind Foucault will be used as references.

2.1 Discourse analysis

On the Foucauldian conception of “power”, it is a productive force that spreads all over the social relations. Being that so, the concept of “power-knowledge discourse” shows that the discourses are structures traversed by power and, for that reason, also constituted with a productive capacity: the capacity of producing subjectivities about what it describes [1]. The discursive

formation isn’t however one and indivisible structure, but it is composed by the “statements”, that are organized by the “rules of formation” of the specific discourse [3].

The statements within its rules of formation are the elementary unit of analysis of Foucauldian archeology. Through this methodology, the rules of formation of a given discourse are meant to be brought to light. That way the conditions of possibility are exposed, showing what can or cannot be said about the object of the discourse [2].

Even on the scientific ground, and maybe, especially on the scientific ground, the archeological analysis is important, because it is common to think that scientists work with “the real world”, while they also work with representations of this real world [4]. In this paper, I considered the scientific area of studies of Sovietology, which work with the representation of the Soviet Union. But, as Mielniczuk points out, the sovietologist didn’t just consider a representation, they created one, they established, through their discourse and its conditions of possibility and rules of formation, the subjectivity of the Soviet Union [1].

2.2 Research process

Kendall e Wickham point out the importance of the “archive”, the system of formation and transformation of statements in a discourse [4]. But, as it is impossible to consider all the production about religion in the Soviet Union made in the context of Sovietology, it was necessary to delimit the archive to be analyzed. So, in this primary research, I chose to work with more than 40 issues in the Soviet Studies journal, one of the most relevant ones discussing the USSR [1].

Having all the issues of the journal in the Zotero software, I started to refine the archive through the search engines: using words related to the object of study, like “religion”, “atheistic”, “muslim” and “orthodox”, I came to found 129 texts. The next step of refinement was based on two criteria: considering just original papers and selecting just the ones that had the searched words in their titles.

That way, eight articles, published from 1953 to 1991, were analyzed in this primary research [5-12]. These papers cover a vast array of topics related to religion and a vast amount of time of the USSR’s existence, as it is easy to see by the colorful bars above and under the timeline related to each paper presented by the name of its author and the year of publication in *Fig. 1* below.

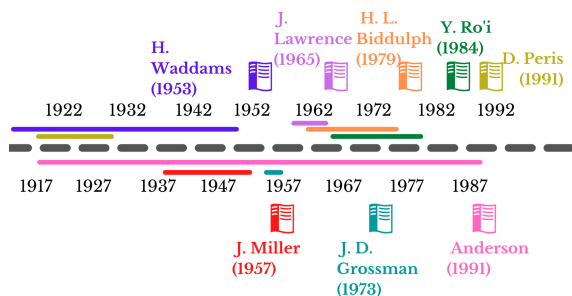


Fig. 1 - Selected articles.

For the analyses of the papers, I transferred them to the software of qualitative analysis, MAXQDA 2020, in which the texts were read and codified, intending to find the rules of formation that were intrinsic to the statements in them. Three codes were considered *a priori*, “inferior”, “expansive” and “contradictory”, the three rules of formation, or conditions of possibility, pointed out by Mielniczuk [1]. While analyzing the papers, other codes were inserted in the software, possibilizing a wider spatial understanding of the Sovietologist discourse, better presented in the next section.

3. Sovietology and Sovietologist Discourse

The topic of religious matters in the USSR was of interest mainly to “Sovietology”, a multidisciplinary area of studies focused on the various aspects (political, economic, social) of the Soviet Union, especially during the Cold War period [13]. The academic production of Sovietologists, in short, forms the “Sovietologist discourse”, a discursive structure with specific conditions of possibility for the statements that refer to the USSR, and that, in this way, builds the subjectivity of this political entity, characterizing it as a subject [1].

Citing Neumann [14], Mielniczuk points out that the knowledge that gave the based for the scientific orientation of Sovietology can be traced to past encounters between the West and Russia [1]. However, the turning point in knowledge production was World War II. Engerman, in an impressive work (“Know your enemy: the rise and fall of America’s Soviet experts”), states that by the end of the conflict the United States wasn’t prepared for a new conflict, now with the USSR, because they didn’t have specialists on it or in Central and Eastern Europe. The American government needed these specialists to formulate a foreign policy to relate to the Kremlin [13].

The Sovietologists, as “professor-consultant”, had an important influence on the policy, receiving attention and resources, making the area grow impressively in the 1950s and 1960s. Many academics considered the Cold War with the USSR as the social scientists’ war [13].

The academic production of the Sovietologists, as a

whole, makes up the archive of the sovietologist discourse, a discursive structure with conditions of possibility of the soviet subjectivity [1]. As Kennedy points out, many histories are possible, but not all histories are possible [3] and in the context of the Soviet Union in general (and relations with religion in specific) the sovietologist discourse is responsible for the delimitation of what histories were/are possible.

In the opaque intertextual space of the sovietologist discourse, the subjectivities of the USSR are produced, constituting it as a subject of international policy. This subject is, according to Mielniczuk, expansionist by nature, inferior to the West, and intrinsically contradictory [1].

4. Results

Considering the theoretical approach of Foucaudian archeology and the contextual presentation of Sovietology, the analysis’ result is better exposed in Fig. 2. The codes represent the meaning of the statements present in the eight papers analyzed.

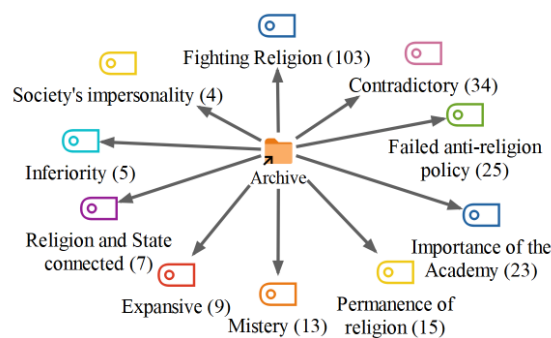


Fig. 2 - Primary Analysis: Code Distribution.

The numbers in brackets show the number of times that the codes were utilized in the whole archive, eight papers. In this regard, “Fighting Religion” was the most utilized one, presenting the combative character of the Soviet subject. As Waddams states in “The Church in Soviet Russia”, the communist governments were “frankly hostile to religion” [5 pp.8], or as Biddulph writes in “Religious participation of the youth in the USSR”, they wanted to “liquidate this ‘survival of the past’ completely”, that survival being religion [9 pp.417].

Another meaning present in a great part of the papers was the failed aspect of this anti-religion policy. “[D]uring the early years of the Soviet regime seem to indicate a failed effort at achieving a smooth and uniform separation of church and state”, Peris argues in “The 1929 congress of the Godless” [12 pp.712]. Ro’i, in his turn, considers that the atheistic propaganda lacked “drive and specificity” [10 pp.31].

Now, on the matter of the conditions of existence of the Soviet subject that were highlighted by Mielniczuk, the one that appeared with great relevance was the contradictory aspect of the soviet subject and its actions. Peris writes about the “contradictory legacy of 12 years of anti-religious experience” [12 pp.714]. Lawrence states that while the government carried

“vicious propaganda against the Baptists” it also encouraged “members of the sects to join the Baptist Church” [6 pp280]. The inferior and expansive characteristics of the soviet subject were less present in the papers here analyzed. However, they can be considered, for example when Biddulph considers the incapacity of the soviet sociologists to understand religious issues in their society, while he is doing that (showing that the Soviets had to be inferior) [9] or when Lawrence writes about the struggle of the communist government to take control of the life of individuals, having an expansionist drive not to the exterior borders, but to the interior border that divided the State and the citizens [6].

5. Conclusion

Showing its value in the increase of the understanding of the Cold War period, by analyzing the formation of the discourse about the USSR, that while describing it, constructed it as a subject of international politics, this present research reached three main conclusions, considering the initial purpose and hypothesis:

- 1) contradiction appears as the basis of the discourse of the Sovietologists;
- 2) expansiveness and inferiority are present but not necessarily central characteristics;
- 3) other characteristics such as combativeness to religion and the Soviet inability to deal with religious issues are pivotal in the discourse.

It is important to consider, however, that this is a primary analysis of research in its process of production. There are methodological precisions to be made, analysis revisions to be made and bibliographic productions to be read and considered.

In conclusion, the conditions of existence pointed out by Mielniczuk were partially present in the archive here analyzed, being the contradictory characteristic one of the most important meanings of the papers considered.

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