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**B. F. PORSHNEV**  
**AND THE APORIA OF HIS EARLY PHILOSOPHICAL CREATION\***

*SUMMARY. This article is devoted to the early philosophical research of B.F. Porshnev, whose academic interests lay in the field of cognition.*

*KEY WORDS. Boris Porshnev, philosophy, missing link, theory of knowledge, Bacon, Kant.*

Boris Fyodorovich Porshnev (1905-1972) lived a long and wonderful life. His academic merits were honored with the Stalin Prize, his works were translated into many European languages; he was awarded the title of Professor Emeritus of the University of Clermont-Ferrand.

Among his scientific interests that have not yet become objects of study, philosophy occupies the most important place. Not coincidentally, in 1966 he managed to defend his monography "Feudalism and the Masses" (1964) as a doctorate thesis in philosophy [1; 17-18]. A.V. Gordon, a follower of B.F. Porshnev, emphasizes the tendency of his research advisor to philosophical generalizations: "Porshnev stays 'a systematist' per se, a finished, classical expression of that type of scientists whose practice was aimed at the development and up-building of a definite cognitive system. He was 'a Hegelian' in the most common and best sense of the word" [2; 46].

It is known that the scientist started his academic career as a historian. However, the education he received at the department of Social Science of the 1<sup>st</sup> Moscow State University was more focused on mastering various constructs, predominantly Marxist, than the skills of the profession of historian. In this respect, there is the evidence of B.F. Porshnev himself dated 1926: "The principal subject of University studies was Marxist theory (Historical Materialism and Political Economy), general courses of Modern History and the History of Socialism" [3; 211]. The recollections of a Saratov scientist, L.A. Debrov, who entered the University of Leningrad, may help to understand what and how future historians were taught in those days. "The lion's share was given to 'propaganda', teaching of 'socio-political disciplines' — the History of the Party, Political Economy, Dialectical and Historical Materialism, Leninism, the USSR State Structure etc.", he writes [4; 119]. B.F. Porshnev's

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introduction to philosophy continued after his entering a PhD programme of the Institute of History of the Russian Association of Research Institutes of Social Sciences (RARISS) (1926-1930), where he specialized in the Modern Russian History section and worked on a thesis (never written) on the history of social thinking in Russia in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century [5; 141-157]. The process of study at the university was organized in the way that all graduate students permanently worked on various reports. Among the works written by the future famous specialist in French studies, the works that can be considered philosophical, we need to mention "M. Weber's Methodology and Marxism", "The Main Features of Slavophilism", "The Social Ideas of Rousseau", noting that B.F. Porshnev, judging from reviews, read Weber and Rousseau in the original text. It is also curious that the reviewers of the report on Rousseau, among whom was the future academician V.P. Volgin, mentioned the disposition of B.F. Porshnev to speculative constructions and synthetic building [5; 141-157].

It is considered that B.F. Porshnev never left philosophical studies when he worked at the Lenin Library (1932-1935), the Moscow branch of the State Academy of Material Culture (1934-1937), the Moscow Institute of Philosophy, Literature and History (1937-1939), the Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR (after 1938).

Chapters in two early volumes of the famous "History of Philosophy" became his first published works, under the editorship of G.F. Aleksandrov, B.E. Byhovskiy, M.B. Mitin and P.F. Yudin. A chapter "Historical Background of Medieval Philosophy Development" in the first volume belongs to B.F. Porshnev, also he wrote the introduction "Historical Background of the Bourgeois Philosophy" for the second volume. It should be noted that the name of B.F. Porshnev is in the list of the authors only in the second volume. On the other hand, in the list of works by the historian published in his lifetime and which was undoubtedly verified by him, both of the studies are indicated as not signed [6; 379].

A typical Marxist schematic interpretation of material and spiritual life in the Middle Ages and the early modern period is presented in both essays. The picture is the following: the Middle Ages cover a period from the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> Century to the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, i.e. the upper chronological "stem" was still based on the French Revolution, not on the English one (the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century), where it would be directly replaced later. In the framework of this chronological period, feudalism went through three stages: appearance (5<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> Centuries), rise (11<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> Centuries) and disintegration followed by the ripening of the seedlings of capitalism. The "progressiveness" of feudalism is always emphasized in comparison with slavery. In the spirit of the then Stalinist "discoveries" in the field of social science, the transition from slavery took place due to the synchronic coincidence of two factors: "the revolution of slaves" and the invasion of the barbarians. The economic decline at the turn from antiquity to the Middle Ages was only a prerequisite for its development. Moreover, Western Europe was growing in a more rapid and different way than the Byzantine Empire and the Arabs. Any cognitive transformations are exceptionally treated as derivatives of changes in material, economical and social lives.

The presented scheme introduces feudal land ownership, the noneconomic enforcement of the peasants and the class struggle, which in B.F. Porshnev's opinion,

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was following the whole Middle Ages history and makes the basic feature of the feudal system.

Catholicism is known as the ideology that sanctified feudalism and had a heavy incidence on the consciousness of the masses. Christianity cemented and united the West in the face of the foreign enemy. The Church had long been struggling with any knowledge. "Folk art" was the antithesis to the spiritual monopoly of the Church. B.F. Porshnev gives a purely materialistic, not mental explanation of the crusades. He considers that by means of the crusades movement, European feudalism tried to expand to the East and at the same time to provide stability to the feudal West. Feudalism was being destabilized by commodity-money relations, the appearance and growth of towns, an extending division of labor. As far as the penetration of new relations, royal power revealed its growth that defeated feudal separatism, and its release from the domination of the papacy. The formation of nation-states began. Strengthening of statehood and consolidation of the feudal class (14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> Centuries) resulted in increased exploitation and intensification of the class struggle. The opposition to feudalism did not only take the form of peasant and urban revolts, but also the form of heresy. "Heresy, he writes, formation of secular knowledge (not mentioning universities herewith), literature, art and folk art—all of that disturbed the church monopoly on spiritual life" [7; 399-410].

According to the Marxist scheme of five formations, capitalism replaces feudalism. Capitalism is also a form of exploitation, writes the historian, but contrary to feudalism it is based on economic coercion, as a worker lacking the means of production sells his labor to a capitalist. B.F. Porshnev sequentially characterizes the transition from crafts to manufacture and then to the factory, from "merchant" and "usurious" to production capital. The two first easily coexisted with and fitted into feudalism.

B.F. Porshnev directly connects the formation of capitalism and the break-up of feudalism with the development of world trade, geographical discoveries, primary accumulation of capital that deprived peasants of the land. The mentioned social and economic phenomena in the sphere of state building were attended with the establishment of absolutism, credited by merchant and usury capital that in turn grew rich.

However, in the 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> Centuries, the worsening antagonism between the "economic" bourgeoisie and the "feudal-absolutist system" begins, between absolutism and the masses. Besides, if the masses expressed their interest in mutinies, the bourgeoisie did it in the "new culture" and ideology. Although, sometimes this culture that firstly denied feudalism, afterwards agreed to and even served it. In the historian's opinion, this happened to humanism and the culture of the Renaissance. Due to the uncertainty of the bourgeoisie, the feudals managed to adapt the reformation movement for their own interests.

Hereinafter feudalism and absolutism were to fail in the Netherlands and Great Britain, where the bourgeoisie used reformation ideas, and also in France. The English revolution achieved its success due to the bourgeoisie that broke out in coalition with the part of the bourgeoisified gentry. In his view, the bourgeoisie could have achieved the same success in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century in France, at the time of the Fronde, but this never happened because of its fear and uncertainty [8: 3-19].

It is obviously hard to refer these two essays to the sphere of the history of philosophy. They are more a typically Marxist sociology of history. However, together with the creation of boring Marxist clichés, B.F. Porshnev was seriously occupied with the study of philosophy. In his personal files some writing and exercise books remained, where by his hand was written "History and Philosophy" (drafts and variants to the book). The first notes date back to 1938, the second to 1939, the third to 1941, the fourth to 1941, the fifth to 1943-1945. All the pages in the writing books were covered with tiny handwriting, moreover in pencil, which extremely complicates reading and understanding.

Even skimming the materials reveals that already at the end of the 1930s / early 1940s B.F. Porshnev is involved in problems of perception and cognitive practice. Primarily he tries to imagine retrospectively the formation of philosophy as a series of causes-and-effects, starting from the appearance of abstract notions and continuing with philosophical systems as such, moreover the scientist refused to think in a flat field of the theory of reflection. He meant that thinking does not only reflect existence, but to a certain degree withstands it, as consciousness is able to construct imagery and notions, that don't exist in the real world [9; 1-4].

Continuing his cognitive contemplations, B.F. Porshnev remarks: "It is impossible even to set up a problem of human history in its entirety without setting up an epistemological problem — at least because studying human history has the task of self-cognition of mankind, and self-cognition is inconceivable without studying the properties and problems of cognition itself" [10; 2]. In these circumstances, the author considers making a study of a person not in connection with the rest of the world, but in opposition to it. Besides, here he speaks about the problems of missing elements in history and evolution that can be logically and retrospectively reconstructed. Epistemology, to B.F. Porshnev's mind, "arbitrarily cuts the course of things" which somehow aligns it with experimental activity, and in the course of these cuts, epistemology finds out those missing elements. He agrees to the fact that the external world affects a person, but a word (an idea) created by a person affects him not less and even determines his behaviour. For this reason, genuine science is destined to link external impacts and influences on a person himself, overcoming by that the opposition of subject and object [10; 4-10]. Almost in the spirit of Foucault who came later, he writes: "First of all, we need to analyse words as symbols of things" [10; 10]. Furthermore, so goes a passage that seems to be totally unpredictable for the above quoted author of "History of Philosophy": "The absurd result of epistemologist-solipsist thought appears to be more valuable than such a healthy rebuttal, if only to regard the first as the beginning of an enquiry, not the end. In the conditions of this experiment it is even better that the result is absurd. That is why subjective idealism, to one extent or another attracted to this absurd, always solves the epistemological problem more adequately and because of that is more valuable than materialism. Materialism itself, if not resolving into the simple denial of idealism, which is too easy and too honourless, is obliged to move in the circle of the same notions and contradictions as idealism, and to be twice contradictory as a result" [10; 13-14].

Comparing Francis Bacon, "the father of materialism" in the new philosophy, to Immanuel Kant, the father of subjective idealism, and the way how they solved the problem of idea versus thing, he prefers Kant, mentioning Husserl rapidly. Bacon

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considered the mind in itself to be a reflective, slightly darkened (from superstitions and chimaeras) mirror, and Kant regarded experience as not only cleared reflection, but a property of possibilities of the mind. "We should confess the dispute between idealism and materialism as unresolved, if only it is in the sphere of epistemology, not ontology. Concerning any act of knowledge, any notion or judgement, a materialist will ask: where from, if not from things, should its specific content reveal, the content which is impossible to deductively align with the properties of mind? And this argument is practically unchallengeable. However, an idealist will ask in return: where from, if not from the mind, the generality that exists in each logical judgement, where from is its grammatical form, the absence of which makes no sense, no observations align all this from things. And this argument is equally unchallengeable", summarizes in between B.F. Porshnev [10; 19-21]. He supposes afterwards that further comprehension of the problem of mind should be connected with anthropology, the human being and the history of cognition, but not with epistemology.

Cognition for him is not a linear process of receiving empirical knowledge, but the emersion of notions describing reality, notional constructions, concepts, systems, or, in modern language, discourses with the help of apprehension and thought-forces. "Both historians and philosophers always depicted the history of knowledge and thought as a one-sided process of accumulation, starting from point zero and extending to infinity, while it should be presented also as a simultaneous process of the disparition of something, not only as a progress, but also as a counter regression. If philosophers saw the positive object of their research in non-acquaintance, they would not look for the solution to the epistemological problem in one-sided intaking of the mind by things, or of the things by the mind, but they could easily state the absolute antithesis of the nature of things and the nature of mind, each of them could have been regarded as non-acquaintance or as knowledge of one another [10; 31-33].

To B.F. Porshnev, as he appears in his works, cognition is largely comparable to historical practices slowly unfolding in time and never reconstructable till the end (not enough sources) and logically reconstructable discursive practices.

The examples that he used testify to this fact. Turning to mathematics, he writes: "The history of mathematics is a history of overcoming some uncheerful, undefined concept". In his opinion, the most common mathematical notions "identity", "integral", "perpetuity" are far-removed from any experience and are even contrary to it.

"First of all, experience doesn't bring anything singular which would not have analogy; secondly, it brings nothing selfsame; thirdly, nothing perfectly separate from anything else; fourthly, nothing that could have only property. Consequently, the notion of "identity" in itself doesn't respond to any type of reality and contradicts any possible reality.

The history of mathematics is a scale of approaching the world of things from this absurd nature-of-things-point-of-view. In order to reveal any match between one and the other, identity should have been revolutionized at first into two identities and the notion of two, then into several identities. The possibility of counting and measuring connected identity and things by a sort of bridge, but initial polarity continued to affect every step: whole numbers contradicted reality insomuch that

a new revolution was needed — transition to fractions, but that was again inadequate, it may be said that the more mathematics achieved correspondence to things, the more noticeable the discrepancy became. Anyway, it was a continual intrusion of things into identity, and, if you will, the intrusion of identity into the world of things. Furthermore, the transition to infinitesimal calculus and the theory of sets. It is an endless process of the more perfect and objectively precise cognition of things, although for the example we have chosen such a specific field of study, where cognition is expressed only in perfecting the instrument of cognition. Cognition stands before us as a progressive process of interpenetration of opposites: identity has formed and modified so, that it seems to be right up to the tiniest coarseness of things; it evolved to measure immensely with things, it reflects their properties, as a plaster mask reflects face features; but the fact that it did not merge together with the things is obvious out of the fact that to the extent to which identity has materialized becoming mathematics, the things so to say on the contrary made a junction in mathematics and lost their real properties” [10; 34-36].

The next example concerns the idea of God.

“The notion of God, especially in its deistic comprehension, is the most general among all these notions, i.e. the most abstracted from things and constructed by applying all their properties. The absolute opposition of God to things is so far expressed in his definition as the creator of all things. His qualities are omnipresence, omnipotence, eternity — they exclude the properties of things in absolutely the same way as we have shown in the example of identity. The first step of the history of cognition from this absurd notion should be in its segmentation, i.e. in the appearance of other notions, almost the same, but not able to be so opposite to things, just because they are two, and two different notions cannot be opposite to the third, so each of them should be a sort of reconciliation with the things, a sort of approximation to them. It is absolutely essential that this transition should take place by means of bifurcation, as the polarity of the initial notion and thing is so complete, that it does not leave place for something else, but the initial notion itself can easily bifurcate, generate two polar notions, as it is inwardly contradictory, as it is absolutely unfamiliar to the world of things (the world as unity) and contains it in the form of negation. Yet, after the first bifurcation, especially on the lower steps, there open those two ways for appearance of new notions descending to things, that we have found in mathematics: through the contradiction between things and notions and through the contradiction among notions or within notions. The history of human thought is full of either struggle, or interaction of those two ways, science and scholasticism.

Those two notions, that are the next thing after understanding God, can be named variously: in fact, later processes of thinking have the reverse effect on initial notions, making endless changes, just as the notion of God, though the word is one, practically can be infinitely diverse in different situations. One of these two notions could be called “I”, a subject, a soul, a substance etc., the other — nature, the world, the universe, everything. Both these two notions completely exclude the properties of things, as does the notion of God, but they are still the bridge to the things. In what sense do they exclude the properties of things? Not being absolutely empty, the denial of all possible properties, all possible things can be only in the notion of unity” [10; 43-46].

In summary, the manuscript heritage of B.F. Porshnev reveals that already in the late 1930s he thought in terms of synthetic study, which would be able to cover the problem if not of the origin of the human being, then of historical epistemology. He was interested in the mechanism of the appearance of speech constructions, describing reality. He already had a good comprehension that fixation of things was not a simple property or pattern of things. This fixation in the form of words and discourses becomes actually a new reality, rather tentatively related to the world of things, as notions in themselves are either some alternative reality, or the way to make things systematic.

It is evident that B.F. Porshnev was familiar with contemporary philosophy and in his manuscript heritage he appears as an indigenuous, original author, in marked contrast to a plain creator of the Marxist theory of philosophy.

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