

TBILISI 1979 YEAR SYMPOSIUM ON THE UNCONSCIOUS – LOOKING BACK

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In 1979 a large international symposium dedicated to the problem of unconscious was held in Tbilisi. More than 150 visitors from 17 foreign countries and about the same member from different scientific centers of the former Soviet Union took part in its work. These ciphers may not sound very impressive now but taking into account the years when the Soviet Union was still separated from outer world by the so called “iron curtain”, the symposium can indeed be considered a grand event. Foreign participants came not only from the countries of “socialist camp”, but also from Western states (Austria, Canada, England, Ireland, Italy, France, USA, Western Germany). One more notable thing is that a lot of researchers working in the sphere of psychoanalysis visited Tbilisi. Remembering the fact that psychoanalysis, even at that period, stayed as the main ideological “scarecrow” for “Soviet psychology”, the symposium seemed really unique and unprecedented.

Before the beginning of the symposium, in 1978, by F. Bassin, A. Sherozia and A. Prangishvili was published a fundamental three-volume collection reflecting its materials (Prangishvili, Sherozia, Bassin, 1978). Later they were chairmen of the symposium. In 1985 IV volume was published. It summarized the materials of previous volumes and presented general impressions made by the symposium on the participants (Prangishvili, Sherozia, & Bassin, 1985). These four volumes hold their scientific value up to now. It is mainly due to the fact that the books reflect nearly all problematic issues connected to the unconscious, from principal theoretical assumptions about the nature of unconscious to general methodology and methods of research. Problems of unconscious are analyzed from many different angles, e.g. neurophysiological mechanisms of the unconscious, its clinical aspects, relation to changed states of consciousness (sleep and dreams, hypnosis), unconscious and personality, unconscious and speech, unconscious and creation, etc. It should be noted that the symposium had strong influence not only on psychological but also on wider scientific society.

Tbilisi symposium was the second international forum after Boston meeting in 1910, where fundamental issues of the unconscious were so deeply analyzed. During the discussions in Boston, a lot of outstanding scientists of that period expressed different views concerning the nature of the unconscious. All of them had one thing in common - they did not accept Freud’s understanding of unconscious (Bassin, 1968). Neither Freud nor his followers participated in Boston meeting. In Tbilisi, on the contrary, the number of representatives of various fields of psychoanalysis was quite impressive. It was direct dialogue and fruitful polemics with them that could be thought as most interesting and important. Uznadze’s theory of set was the main opponent of psychoanalysis. All that time this theoretical system was supposed to be the Soviet alternative of psychoanalysis (Brozek & Slobin, 1972; Graham, 1987). It was the first and main reason why the symposium was

held in Tbilisi. But to achieve proper acknowledgment of Uznadze's conception in the frame of Soviet psychology was the most difficult task.

Before their recognition, Uznadze's psychological school and its basis, theory of set had overcome a number of difficulties. Eventually it filled the gap in Soviet psychology which appeared due to insufficient study of the category of unconscious. Generally, the domain of psychological research is represented by four major categories: behavior, personality, consciousness and unconscious. An accomplished general-psychological conception must include all of them. Main theoretical systems of Soviet psychology were actually limited by the first three categories. As for unconscious psychics, it was either associated with physiological processes or remained on a declarative level without clarifying its nature and functions. Stated briefly, there was no general-psychological conception of unconscious. After elimination of Soviet psychoanalysis, it was only Uznadze and his followers whose works reflected a valid system of assumptions about unconscious taken as the basis of the whole mental life (Angelini, 2008). The first to realize the matter was F. Bassin (Bassin, 1968). So, it is not surprising that he was one of the main initiators of choosing Tbilisi as a host town for holding the symposium on unconscious.

Uznadze started to analyze Freud's views at the very first stage of creating his theoretical system which he continued until his last books were published. This is quite natural since the category of unconscious is a central one for him. Briefly and schematically, this can be presented as follows: Uznadze seeks for the first stage of mental development which precedes and determines the whole activity. Here he means ordinary sensations (mental processes) as well as consciousness. The unconscious, as it is presented by Freud, can be thought as such because it consists of repressed contents forced out of consciousness. These are usual experiences (images, thoughts, feelings, desires, etc.) the existence of which is no longer felt by a person. It actually means to admit that there are feelings that cannot be felt which, in Uznadze's opinion, is nonsense. But the main thing is that unconscious psyche derived from such consciousness, cannot be considered as a prior form of mental life. It also cannot serve as a previous condition of consciousness either logically or factually. Instead of psychoanalytic unconscious, Uznadze introduces the central concept of his theory – the set. It is a specific stage implying the readiness of a subject, taken as a whole, for a particular activity. The set is not an ordinary mental process (sensation) known for us from our inner experience. It is not only unconscious but also non-phenomenal. It represents completely different form of psyche (Uznadze, 1966).

Such discrepancy makes the dialogue between these conceptions rather problematic. After all, nobody expected that Tbilisi forum would resolve the problem of unconscious and the participants would change their principal positions. But most important and useful thing for everybody was discussing different disputable issues of the unconscious which was proved by all the estimations of the symposium. The symposium was a strong stimulus for making unconscious the object of increasing interest in the Soviet Union (Angelini, 2008). Apart from this, Uznadze's theory and school became far more respected.

During the decade following the symposium Georgian psychological school was rather widely presented in international scientific space. Unfortunately, since nineties of the last century, due to political and economic factors, productivity of Georgian psychological school and, consequently, its international acknowledgement sharply declined. Nevertheless, eristic potential of its fundamental theoretical system is far not exhausted and it can serve as a ground for optimistic perspective.

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