



From Social to Anthropological Discourse in Gorky: Hypotheses and Rebuttals

Tatiana S. Zlotnikova & Tatiana I. Erokhina

To cite this article: Tatiana S. Zlotnikova & Tatiana I. Erokhina (2019) From Social to Anthropological Discourse in Gorky: Hypotheses and Rebuttals, *Russian Studies in Philosophy*, 57:5, 468-476, DOI: [10.1080/10611967.2019.1670546](https://doi.org/10.1080/10611967.2019.1670546)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10611967.2019.1670546>



Published online: 18 Dec 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



TATIANA S. ZLOTNIKOVA AND TATIANA I. EROKHINA

From Social to Anthropological Discourse in Gorky: Hypotheses and Rebuttals

The authors of this article propose and defend the hypothesis that the provincial-born Maxim Gorky, when illustrating his worldview in his polemical and artistic works, served as the bearer of mental characteristics and complexes inherent only and exclusively to the Russian people. The hypothesis in question serves as the basis for a rebuttal to the traditional understanding of Gorky's social engagement as a writer, including his work as a playwright. Gorky's anthropology, as a set of sociopsychological and moral personality traits, gender and mental characteristics, as well as a corpus of many dozens of human characters, represents a powerful stratum of national traditions and cultural experience. However, in their cultural–anthropological detailing, these properties are familiar and understood around the world: fear of the lack of love, the need for understanding, acute female–male conflicts. The writer's lively voice rectifies otherwise banal and oversimplified concepts about man.

Keywords: Maxim Gorky, social and anthropological discourse, dramaturgy, theater, worldview, mental and gender characteristics

English translation © 2019 Taylor & Francis Group, LLC, from the Russian text, “Ot sotsial'nogo k antropologicheskomu diskursu Gor'kogo: Dogadki i oproverzheniia.” This is an original article; published with the author's permission.

Notes have been renumbered for this edition.—Ed.

Tatiana Semyonovna Zlotnikova, a doctor of the arts, is a professor at Yaroslavl State Pedagogical University. E-mail: cij_yar@mail.ru.

Tatiana Iosifovna Erokhina, a doctor of cultural studies, is a professor and the department chair at Yaroslavl State Pedagogical University. E-mail: tatyanaer@yandex.ru

Translated by Brad Damaré.

1. A view of the world

Alexei Maximovich Gorky is traditionally considered a revolutionary writer. However, this point of view is refuted by his actual texts, including some of his most famous ones. On the one hand, we cannot ignore the romantic intentions typical for Gorky's early work (here it is worth noting the absurdity of discussions about which word to stress in the famous line from "Song of the Stormy Petrel"—"let the storm break in all its fury" — as each option is possible here). The paradoxical nature of Gorky's text, not in its social being but in its aesthetics, is already present in the fact that someone can call a storm a source of major change while also demanding a particular scale of it. On the other hand, we would draw attention to the atmosphere of inescapability in which spontaneous revolutionary "emissions" are born (this, in particular, applies to the novel *Mother*), and to the obviously absurd fact that the majority of Gorky's characters, otherwise predisposed to revolutionary declarations but not actions, are people fairly limited both intellectually and psycho-emotionally: the engine driver Nil (*The Philistines*) who plans to change "the train schedule"; the "under-educated" Vlas (*Summerfolk*), able only to parody other people's verses; not to mention Klim Samgin, who ends up in the revolutionary current by chance. We believe that by intuitively foreseeing the tragedy of the revolution as it was ripening and occurring in the country, and by calling for mercy through his offering of modest, though specific, examples (*The Lower Depths*, *Counterfeit Coin*), Gorky position himself, if not as the main "counterrevolutionary" in Russian cultural practice, then at least as second only to Pushkin in terms of activity.

The shouts and melodic declamations, drunken croaks and powerless whispers of Gorky's stage characters, whether they come from the engine driver's assistant Nil, the "night lodger" Satine, the dying "last" nobleman Yakov Kolomiitsev, the unbridled "capitalist" Egor Bulychov, or a multitude of other characters, form the mosaic of everyday speech and human manifestations that constitute Gorky's aesthetic power as a dramatist. The view of the world he developed included concepts of life, faith and soul, the meaning of life and betrayal, love, mercy and duty, truth and lies, disillusionment, destruction, and death. These grew not from the text of the plays, but from the human destinies that have frequently been embodied on stage.

Today, we must recognize that Maxim Gorky, who has long ceased to be perceived *only* or *generally* as the "stormy petrel of revolution," who was a polemicist and disturber of the *aesthetic* peace, can and should be studied as an indicator of the moral and psychological issues of the era.

Hence, there is the opportunity to use his both his well-known and less popular works to find and examine issues related to being human: *the search for and expectation of understanding and sympathy, the decline of social and gender status, and a general perplexity in the face of life.*

At the center of Gorky's worldview, as it has appeared on stage over the last fifty years, was not a society shaken by conflict and ready for a destruction that might be followed by creation ("we will burn it to the ground, and then ..."), but man. Good or bad, smart or stupid, kind or cruel, gifted or talentless: all these are to a certain extent a consequence of environment, but they nevertheless define a specific, individual persona. Since this "private" persona is what suffers during any social cataclysm, the attitude toward cataclysms themselves also changes. Gorky neither called for them nor, perhaps, welcomed them at all (recall the grotesque, apocalyptic sounds of the trumpet that the dying Egor Bulychov blows in the play of that name, or the horrors at Khodynka, which *The Life of Klim Samgin* treats not as a revolution, but as the meaningless outburst of an unruly crowd), but frankly feared them.

Despite the fact that Gorky has long been considered a revolutionary writer,¹ it has been largely authors and commentators rather than literary historians (P. Basinskii,² D. Bykov³) who, in the twenty-first century, have made attempts to expand our ideas about Gorky as a contradictory, strange, and misunderstood person. One characteristic trend has been the debunking of ideologically deterministic myths, especially biographical ones.⁴ However, unlike in theater, where there are occasional "bursts" of interest in particular works of Gorky, scholarly interest in his work as an author has been very limited in Russia and practically absent abroad. The last fifty years has seen an almost complete lack of research on the creative work (either individual works or as a corpus) of the greatest twentieth-century Russian author, while the main interest abroad has concerned context and biography, not artistic anthropology, which is so central to our point of view.

His worldview appears most complete when we use his most popular play in terms of theatrical interpretation and perhaps one of the most controversial in terms of the author's attitude toward it, *The Lower Depths* (1902), for contextual understanding of his other dramatic (*The Last Ones*, 1907; *Counterfeit Coin*, 1913), polemical (the articles "On Cynicism," "Destruction of the Personality"), and epistolary texts, which allow us to expand our conception of his canonically well-known works. We see contextuality as a basic condition for identifying the features of Gorky's worldview.

2. A shift in discourse, from the social to the anthropological

Judging from the texts of his plays and his polemical commentaries, Gorky was concerned with the issue of finitude not only in terms of man's physical existence, but also of his sociocultural functions. The philosophical and psychological aspects involved in creating and destroying a personality constitute the basis of conflict in Gorky's play *The Last Ones*, as staged by Oleg Yefremov (Moscow Art Theatre, 1971). In his article "On Cynicism," written at almost the same time as *The Last Ones*, Gorky wrote,

I am not claiming that meshchanstvo dirties life on purpose; the debauchery of a sick mind and an exhausted body is, on the one hand, the result of a degeneration stemming from overindulgence in life's blessings, and on the other, an expression of the terrible despair caused by the proximity of social catastrophe.⁵

In performances where a character emerges (both literally and figuratively) on the stage, not understanding the nature of his suffering, but suffering and eager for understanding (a Chekhov motif), gifted in his own way, but unable to apply his talents and languishing in his lack of opportunity (an Ostrovsky motif), ridiculous but somehow even touching (a Gogol motif) ... in these performances no one could hear revolutionary motifs, nor calls for destruction and upheaval. Nor did these motifs resound in Yuri Lyubimov's⁶ staging of *Mother*, where a gray line of soldiers is lined up against the red-brick wall, soldiers who do not need to restrain but need only be present in order to suppress the downtrodden people, and the docile corridor of prison visitors through which the fragile Nilova passes. Lonely, suffering man, not a struggle for abstract goals, was the dominant feature of Gorky's worldview as it appeared on the stage in the second half of the twentieth century.

For Gorky, and for his theatrical interpreters in the second half of the twentieth century, the destruction of the nobility as a social class is represented through the destruction of the personality. Today, the parallel between Gorky's theater and Mikhail Artsybashev's novel *Sanin* (1907, "the same age" as *The Last Ones*) seems obvious. In one of the 1908 reviews critiquing Artsybashev's novel, we find the following argument: "All the déclassé, immoral degenerates think and act like Sanin."⁷

"Woman" was losing her eternally beautiful features that, according to some, were natural even in the most vicious manifestations, and in the opinion of others, vicious even at their most natural. She then began to occupy a larger place on the theatrical stage and in books in the early twentieth century, when "passionate" women with "mysterious" complexes and vices in plays like I.

Potapenko's *Redemption* or *Higher Education* replaced the gracefully broken heroines of I. Shpazhinskii, M. Chaikovskii, and other "second-tier" playwrights.

In an article with the symptomatic title "Destruction of the Personality," Gorky referenced the numerous, outstanding qualities of the folktale heroine Vasilisa the Wise, writing that the good genius of the country had given way to the appearance of "mares," as they were called in "recent journals and newspapers," endowed with a "tireless thirst for an exclusively sexual life and various perversions in the sexual sphere." His socially deterministic and anthropologically wide-ranging play *The Last Ones* represents a unique document of these times.

The clearly didactic selection of names for the heroines of his plays thus becomes clear: the foolish and desecrated (raped) Vera ("Faith"); the disfigured (hunchbacked, because her father dropped her on suspicion of his wife's infidelity), depraved, and insolent Nadezhda ("Hope"); three sisters with a mother in no way wise, the bewildered Sofia ("Wisdom"). This is Gorky's bitter (*gor'kii*) irony.

Oleg Yefremov's production featured a "tragic carnival" (which is what Gorky himself called the life of one the characters in *The Last Ones*) with Ivan Kolomiitsev, the failed actor, father, and human being performing at its center. The destruction of the personality entails the destruction of the home, logically followed by the destruction of the very lives of the characters, in a broader social sense.

3. Anthropological discourse

In a tiny little town (*Barbarians*), one person is loading up pillars stuck in the middle of the road as a barrier, while another is writing his "Discourse on Words, Composed by an Unselfish Lover of Truth to Expose Lies." Not by chance did critics perceive the flow of life in Georgy Tovstonogov's production (Bolshoi Drama Theatre, 1959) in the contrast between the sharp rhythms of tragicomedy and slowly, even "painfully" developed episodes.⁸ Monakhov, with his morbidly sharp profile, his jealous and keen eyes, and his constant hints that he possesses knowledge inaccessible to others, is like a quasi-Mephistopheles. There is something in him that really does allow us to call him a provincial devil.

In the version by director Georgy Tovstonogov and actor Yevgeni Lebedev (*The Philistines*, 1967), their second production together, Bessemenov seems like "the last of the Mohicans," the last true-believing preacher, albeit one whose flock has abandoned him. Today it

no longer seems like an extravagance on the part of the director to foreground, in place of the vigorous but egotistical and narrow-minded Nil, the truly significant figure of Bessemenov, who suffers from the destruction of life's foundations: "For some reason, Bessemenov was never centered in the performance, though there is both a social and a human basis for this in the play."⁹ It is in Tovstonogov's production that Nil raises doubts about his "revolutionary" future for the first time. Bessemenov's deeply suffering faith in the rightness and truth of his home, his subjective truth, is in heartbreaking opposition to the objective truth of a changing life, of its social conditions.

The meschanstvo problem served as a kind of pendulum, swinging from its acute social connotations to its original moral and especially anthropological understanding. The chorus of objections that met Gorky's first dramatic work, a play with the dry and short title *Philistines* (*Meshchane*), included the voice of Dmitry Merezhkovsky, who considered "idyllic well-being" the source of meshchnastvo, but also expanded meshchanstvo to include anyone outside the elite.¹⁰ As we know, Gorky "studied" not only the meshchanstvo marked by traditionally understood, outward signs, a meshchanstvo overt and aggressive in its own way, but also a concealed spiritual meshchanstvo, a meshchanstvo of the intelligentsia, so to speak, as we see in the slightly later play *Summerfolk*.¹¹ Among the chorus of objections aimed at Gorky, Nikolai Berdyaev called meshchanstvo "those who are building a Tower of Babel with no room for religious life."¹² For Gorky, the author of these early plays (and only here), religion was a modified refuge of meshchanstvo, as in an exclamation heard in *The Lower Depths*: "Lies are the religion of slaves." However, Gorky's understanding of meshchanstvo was more multifaceted and complex.

In his first play, Gorky was interested in the new features of life, so he had to foreground the figure of Nil (Chekhov considered Nil "a self-intelligentsiaized worker" and therefore "the main, heroic role, entirely thanks to Konstantin Stanislavski's talent"¹³). Thirty years after Gorky's death, the meshchanstvo was no longer perceived as a class phenomenon but as a kind of religion, dogmatic and even cruel. The new theatrical version of meshchanstvo had its own prophets, martyrs, and prodigal sons, and at its center was its vessel, its philosopher, and simultaneously its victim, Bessemenov (Yevgeni Lebedev), nearly equal in range to Shakespeare's King Lear: the world has collapsed, dragging the main pillar into its ruins.

The figurative structure of Tovstonogov's production concentrated on the incessant and senseless whirl of people who seem to be in a play "called *Neither Here nor There*" (as the cruelly ironic Nil says). Tovstonogov formulated the metaphorical geometry of his philosophy thus: "People inherently create these vicious circles and then thrash about senselessly in them."¹⁴

The most mysterious, however (in terms of provoking a particularly heated controversy and the largest number of stage productions), was *The Lower Depths*. Could romantic heroes, as they stepped forth on the playwright's hundredth birthday (1968), really stumble, drinking vodka during their pained monologues? Could they be bald or just ugly? The rags that these "depths" dwellers wear are their ordinary clothes: they have no other. The vodka, cards, mud, and darkness are their cross to bear, not some "expressive means" of shocking the audience. These features, far from a superficial "romantic" image of tramps, acquired a more relevant meaning. By freeing Gorky's characters from what had become their traditional buskins, director Galina Volchek¹⁵ thus brought interest in "man alone" into naked light. By the late 1960s, what Gorky once considered the important conflict between ostracized pariahs and well-to-do bourgeois, the conflict that filled his play with its explosive power, had become a thing of the past, the domain of literature textbooks. It had been replaced by a seemingly philosophical dispute over man and the love of man, formerly personified in the antagonists Satine and Luka. Galina Volchek's staging (Sovremennik Theatre, 1968) found in Luka a solution to the problem of its attitude toward man. Gorky's struggle with himself, which had become clear at the same time, seemed paradoxical, since the author considered Luka a harmful comforter of others. He was upset when he saw how reviewers at the first Art Theatre performance "reinterpreted" the play, believing that they "did not want to understand it." He considered either the talent of Ivan Moskvina (Luka) or his own shortcomings as an author to be responsible for that misunderstanding. In his subsequent article "On Plays," he derives a kind of typology of "comforters," those who are genuinely interested, those who are self-serving, and those who amuse themselves with the sufferings of others. Gorky considered the most harmful, which would include Luka, those who comfort others only to avoid being bothered by complaints, only so that their cold souls remain peacefully undisturbed. In the Sovremennik production, it becomes clear that Luka (Igor Kvasha) is the only person among the inattentive and irritated people in the coarse, clamorous life of the night shelter who knows how not to interfere during conversations. In the logic once

outlined by Yuri Yuzovskii,¹⁶ Luka's position in life (which he sometimes but inaccurately calls a life philosophy) in the *Sovremennik* production coincides with his moral and philosophical sense-making, which is close to a thought expressed by Gorky after Chekhov's death: "*We all hunger for the love of man, but when you're hungry, even poorly baked bread is sweet nourishment.*"¹⁷

In Konstantin Stanislavski's production (as old as the play itself), he consistently included these characters into the general flow of life,¹⁸ that is, he attached them to something taking place outside the night shelter. Volchek emphasized their position in the "depths": the people there had ultimately been rejected from the external and the present, and only the past remained. The tragedy of a life that had ceased to be life had become commonplace for them. With that sense, any hint of the insolent masquerade so typical of many productions of *The Lower Depths* was removed from the costumes, activities, speeches, and habits.

4. Conclusion

Despite his own youthful attitudes, Gorky had a (sometimes) delicate understanding of the personal principle, as it was oppressed, disfigured, and sacrificed to social habits or chimeras. This principle was revealed in its full diversity and dramatized in such a way that it has retained its meaning over all these years. Gorky's anthropology, both as a set of sociopsychological and moral personality traits and gender and mental characteristics and as a corpus of many dozens of characters (from engineer intelligentsia to lumpen night-lodgers, from talented "businessmen" to drunken artisans), represents a powerful stratum of national traditions and cultural experience. The writer's lively voice rectifies otherwise banal and oversimplified two-dimensional concepts about man. Today we have recalled and emphasized Gorky's forgotten but significant work, but this represents only a small tribute to the man who, along with Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Anton Chekhov (the nominative series of most popular Russian writers in the world), brought Russia glory as a source of innovative artistic ideas and solutions.

Thus, the voice of Gorky the classic writer, as it has been heard by modern readers and scholars, directors, actors, and managers of theater, cinema, and television, should prompt a selection of skillful and undeservedly forgotten works for study and staging. This voice can and should, however, warn representatives in the spheres of politics and media away from categorical statements and morally unjust decisions. This voice can

appeal to mercy and understanding, can prompt us to remember, to make us learn the words that fill these classical texts and that mass consciousness has forgotten.

Notes

1. B.A. Bialik, *Sud'ba Maksima Gor'kogo* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1986).
2. P.V. Basinskii, *Gor'kii* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 2005).
3. D.L. Bykov, *Byl li Gor'kii?* (Moscow: AST Astrel', 2012).
4. L.A. Spiridonova, *Nastoiashchii Gor'kii: mify i real'nost'* (Moscow: IMLI RAN, 2013).
5. On the meaning and scope of *meshchanstvo*, see Sizemskaya, in this issue.—Trans.
6. One of the leading names in the Russian theatre world, Yuri Lyubimov (1913–2014) was a director of the internationally renowned Moscow Taganka Theatre, which he found in 1964.—Ed.
7. A.P. Omel'chenko, *Geroi nezdorovogo tvorchestva* (St. Petersburg: Knigoizdatel'stvo "Posev," 1908).
8. B.I. Zingerman, "Varvary," *Teatr*, 1960, no. 1.
9. G.A. Tovstonogov, *O professii rezhissera* (Moscow: VTO, 1967), p. 128.
10. D. Merezhkovsky, "Meshchanstvo i russkaia intelligentsia," *Poliarnaia zvezda*, 1905, no. 1.
11. D. Filosofov, *Slova i zhizn'* (St. Petersburg: Tipografiia Atks. Obshch. Tip Dela, 1909).
12. N. Berdyaev, "Revoliutsiia i kul'tura," *Poliarnaia zvezda*, 1905, no. 2.
13. A. Chekhov, *Sobranie sochinenii v 12 t.* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1957), vol. 12, pp. 474, 471.
14. Tovstonogov, *O professii rezhissera*, p. 124.
15. Galina Volchek (b. 1933) is a co-founder and since 1972 the chief director and later the artistic director of the Sovremennik Theatre in Moscow.—Ed.
16. Yu. Yuzovskii, *Sovetskie aktery v gor'kovskikh roliakh* (Moscow: VTO, 1964), p. 18.
17. M. Gor'kii [Gorky], "A.P. Chekhov," in *Sobranie sochinenii v 30 t.* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1953), vol. 4, p. 435.
18. Yuzovskii, *Sovetskie aktery*, pp. 8–9.