

**Interview: Craig Brandist (Bakhtin Centre) / Entrevista: Craig Brandist (Bakhtin Centre)**

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Craig Brandist (The University of Sheffield, UK), professor of Cultural Theory and Cultural History, is well known to us, Brazilians.<sup>1</sup> He began working with the theory of culture during his undergraduate program in the late 1980s. After completing his Ph.D., he spent a long time in Russia, and his study was one of the earliest attempts to systematize the sources about “the Bakhtin Circle,” whose early meetings date back to the early twentieth century. According to him, Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) was one of the many participants in the Circle, formed by different intellectuals in the 1920s, but not necessarily their leader, as the nomination of the group could suggest.

It is worth remembering that, for many years, the access to the documents from the Circle’s archives was restricted. It is also worth noting that, in 1950, there was the

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<sup>1</sup> Editors’ Note: Craig Brandist was in Brazil as a visiting professor by the invitation of LAEL-PUC-SP in August 2012, with FAPESP’s financial support. At the time, from *Language and intellectual history: approximations among theoretical currents* he carried out several activities with research and work groups specialized in Bakhtin and the Circle. His visit was arranged in collaboration with several universities, namely USP, UNB, UFRGS, UFSCAR / São Carlos, UNESP / Araraquara, and UNICSUL.

strong intervention of Josef V. Stalin (1878-1953) in the studies of linguistics, in the so-called Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). With the USSR dissolution in December of 1991, Russian archives were gradually made available to foreign researchers. Brandist was one of the first scholars to participate in the research and readings of the Russian archives when they were made available to the public.

Currently Craig Brandist works in the Department of Russian and Slav Studies and is also the director of the Bakhtin Center, one of the main references of the studies of the Russian philosopher and thinker in Europe. Among his main works and numerous articles, we highlight: *The Bakhtin Circle: Philosophy, Culture and Politics* (2002);<sup>2</sup> *Politics and theory of language in the USSR 1917-1998* (2010), in co-authorship with Katya Chown);<sup>3</sup> *The dimensions of hegemony* (2015);<sup>4</sup> and *Bakhtin's Historical Turn and its Soviet Antecedents* (2016).<sup>5</sup> Lately he has been developing a research project with Prof. Dr. Peter Thomas, from the University of Brunel (UK), regarding the passage of Gramsci in Russia. As we can see, Brandist's studies have contributed greatly to the dissemination of Circle's thinking as well as to the understanding of the intellectual history in Russia and the USSR, especially after the Revolution.

The purpose of this interview, held on April 12th, 2017, via e-mail, is to contribute to the dissemination of the Bakhtinian thought that in Brazil, since the 1970s, has prompted many studies, individual and institutional research projects and works of specialists from different parts of the country. Names such as Boris Schnaiderman, Carlos Alberto Faraco, Beth Brait, Irene Machado, Paulo Bezerra, Sheila Grillo, and many others have played and still play a fundamental role in the studies, dissemination, expansion and movement of the Circle's ideas. Some translators of Russian, such as Paulo Bezerra and Sheila Grillo, through archival research, have contributed to a deeper understanding of the Circle, their historical and cultural specificity, their members, their forms of existence and actions.

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<sup>2</sup> BRANDIST, C. *The Bakhtin Circle: Philosophy, Culture and Politics*. London: Pluto Press, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> BRANDIST, C.; CHOWN, K. (Eds.). *Politics and the Theory of Language in the USSR 1917-1998: the Birth of Sociological Linguistics*. London: Anthem Press, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> BRANDIST, C. *The Dimensions of Hegemony: Language, Culture and Politics in Revolutionary Russia*. Londres: Haymarket, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> BRANDIST, C. Bakhtin's Historical Turn and its Soviet Antecedents. *Bakhtiniana*. Revista de Estudos do Discurso, v. 11, iss. 1, pp.17-38, 2016. Available at: [<https://revistas.pucsp.br/index.php/bakhtiniana/article/view/24626/18205>].

In this panorama, Craig Brandist's research allows reflections on the interaction between Marxism, phenomenology, Gestalt theory and the various forms of linguistic and cultural theory within the specific context of the first years in the Soviet Union. In the interview, the British researcher, through his critical look, writes about the work of the Circle and its sources based on his latest research. Therefore, the Brazilian reader will have access to his most recent reflections on the theory of culture and the intellectual history of the so-called "Bakhtin Circle."

## **Interview**

*Your research interests cover the main interactions between Marxism, phenomenology, Gestalt theory and various forms of linguistic and cultural theory within the specific context of early-Soviet Russia. How do you see the interactions among these different areas? Is the interdisciplinary approach a guiding principle in your academic career?*

I wouldn't say my research is interdisciplinary as such, since I challenge the validity of strict disciplinary boundaries. Being interdisciplinary requires one to accept the validity of disciplines that are then brought into interaction, but all our disciplines are contingent and have emerged from particular institutional configurations rather than having any direct dependence on the phenomena being studied. Disciplines themselves are historical phenomena that cannot simply be accepted as unproblematic, especially when we are dealing with social phenomena. There are political, ideological and institutional reasons why mainstream economics, for instance, has become a quasiautonomous sphere completely divorced from how well or badly most people actually live, while other social sciences often avoid economic considerations. Patterns of funding reinforce this compartmentalization, and it is necessary to ask in whose interests this system actually functions. The disciplines that predominate now are recent phenomena and, as Max Horkheimer recognized in the 1930s, reproduce the capitalist division of labour rather than the fundamental levels of reality.

In early Soviet Russia these divisions were, for a time, challenged in a systemic fashion, and this facilitated a range of important works rethinking fundamental aspects of the social sciences, which were broadly considered to encompass all phenomena of the human world. Marxism was obviously a driving force here, but it was quite different from

the closed, dogmatic and narrow approach masquerading as Marxism that constituted official Soviet ideology from the end of the 1920s. Marxism itself was open to, stimulated and was stimulated by other ideas and trends. Antagonism toward reductionism was fundamental to Marxism, and I have always thought Marx's metaphor of base and superstructure, which appears only once in his work, was the first attempt to articulate a theory of emergent structure; that is, a structure dependent on lower-level or fundamental structures, and then integrated at a molecular level, though not reducible to these structures. Gestalt theory was similarly an anti-reductionist philosophical orientation that worked at the level of perception and cognition, differentiating parts and wholes as qualitatively distinct phenomena while being ontologically consistent. This was a particular development of phenomenology that avoided some of the more idealist temptations that some phenomenologists were prone to. In language studies it also had real importance in understanding the way in which speech acts are complex wholes and relational configurations, and that the sense of a word in use depends on the foregrounding of some potential linguistic meanings and moving others into the background. These features were developed especially by Karl Bühler, who was widely read during the early USSR and influenced both Vygotskii and members of the Bakhtin Circle.

So for me the attempt to move beyond disciplinary compartmentalization was an important dimension of the revolutionary changes in Russia. Those changes did not survive blockade and encirclement, and by the end of the 1920s they were in precipitous decline. The intellectual consequences were complex and multiform, and need seriously to be studied as resources for the development of critical perspectives today. Similarly, incipient alternatives to today's dismal neoliberal, capitalist reality can be glimpsed in the revolutionary movements of the early 20th century, and for all their conspicuous failings they remain crucial in conceptualizing how society may be moved onto an alternative trajectory.

*In recent years, there has been great discussion about the influence of Marxist currents in the study of Bakhtin and the Circle. Could you explain why some argue that Bakhtin was a Marxist and what supports this idea?*

I think it is quite clear that Bakhtin was not a Marxist. Voloshinov and Medvedev probably were Marxists in the second half of the 1920s, and there are various modalities

of engagement with Marxism among other members of the Circle. To ask if someone was a Marxist in Russia at the time was not like asking someone if they were a Christian or a Muslim. It was not some sort of article of faith or badge of identity (though to some extent it became so in Stalin's period), but a question of general sociopolitical orientation, principles of analysis and worldview. This was a complex phenomenon with many different aspects, and it is clear that many if not most intellectuals working at the time imbibed important features of the Marxist worldview. Some clearly employed Marxist concepts to address scientific questions, but often what resulted were eclectic hybrid forms of analysis or a misrecognition of ideas that sounded similar to Marxism. Marxism became an important element in a complex and vibrant dialogic environment in which the members of the Bakhtin Circle were immersed and to which they contributed. Things look quite different in this perspective, and it becomes clear that the ideas of the Circle, those of Bakhtin included, would have been unthinkable without the historical and conceptual specificities of Marxism. This is actually to subject Bakhtin to Bakhtin's own ideas.

The Circle members' argument of "Marxism" has generally not been posed in this way, but rather as an unproductive attempt to prove or disprove Marxist credentials one way or another. In these sophisticated texts, however, one can find elements that clearly derive from Marxism and other elements that come from elsewhere – sometimes these are compatible and sometimes not, sometimes there is a successful synthesis, but often an awkwardly syncretic combination arises. A critical engagement with Bakhtinian ideas requires us to interrogate these problems rather than trying to negotiate them. My feeling is that the dominance of philosophical idealism in Bakhtin's work is such that he cannot really be considered a Marxist in any substantial sense. But this does not mean he does not borrow significantly from Marxist thinkers – he clearly does. And by idealism, as I have argued elsewhere, I do not mean some metaphysical claim that empirical reality does not exist, but the contention that any such reality is, in principle, unknowable. Bakhtin never completely moves beyond this fundamental principle of neo-Kantianism, though his work cannot simply be regarded as neo-Kantianism.

*At present there are different researchers of the Bakhtinian philosophy in different parts of the world, such as Craig Brandist (England), Jayne White (New Zealand), Mikhail Gradovski (Norway), Beth Brait (Brazil), among others. Years after Mikhail Bakhtin's death, do you believe the lines of research developed in these parts of the world are in dialogue and interact with each other?*

To some significant extent. Certainly I have engaged in dialogue with all these people and participated in colloquia and conferences with them. They are all people I respect and have learned from, and I hope that experience has been mutual. However, we are dealing with some quite different areas of work here, not least because those working with the practice of teaching in schools who draw upon Bakhtinian ideas to reflect on and guide this practice have quite a different focus to myself as I work on intellectual history. It is all quite proper that our circles of concern intersect but do not completely coincide, and it is here we can learn from each other. It is probably the source of many good disagreements too, but these are no less instructive than where we agree. What I am perhaps sceptical about is the extent to which we can really talk about “Bakhtinian philosophy” as a field where we all intersect. We all have an interest in Bakhtin to be sure, and we all find things of enduring value, but I would certainly not consider myself a partisan or advocate of “Bakhtinian philosophy”. Bakhtinian ideas are a resource to which I relate critically and that I have spent a considerable amount of time studying in one way or another, but my intellectual formation and orientation is much broader, and that is how it should be. After all, didn’t Bakhtin himself regard noncoincidence and “outsideness” as a crucial source of productive engagement with “the other”?

*Do you consider that language and culture are subject to power relations and society’s hierarchy? If so, how were language and culture understood by Soviet thinkers in the early 20th century?*

This is a big question. I think that here I can only say that it was really quite varied, but the importance of the relationship between social structures and communicative practice was especially prominent. The study of language was affected and facilitated by political concerns related to the ways of enabling the masses to find their public voices in conditions of pervasive illiteracy; uneven levels of social and economic development; the heritage of imperial domination of subjected peoples; the coexistence of a wide variety of interacting cultures and languages, many of which had no standardized forms or institutional presence; and the international struggles in which the nascent USSR was engaged. It is impossible to really understand the work of early Soviet linguists and intellectuals more generally without taking this configuration of concerns and institutional

support into consideration. Then one needs to consider the intellectual sources like the emergence of Saussurean linguistics, cognitive psychology, philosophy, social theory and the like, and how they were resources for addressing the social concerns of the day.

*After the opening of the archives of the Soviet Union and the recent historiographical studies on Mikhail Bakhtin's life and work, how do you view Bakhtin: a philosopher, a thinker, a linguist?*

A thinker. I'm not sure how productive it is to narrow it down much more than that since one can always find parts of Bakhtin's work that might not fit there.

*In several texts, you argue that there were several theorists in the Circle and the role that Bakhtin played in the group was not central. Based on which readings, data and historical circumstances do you support such a claim?*

My argument is that a "Bakhtin Circle" as such never actually existed. There was a relatively fluid group of thinkers who met together and discussed philosophical and philological problems in the 1920s and Bakhtin participated in them all. Members of the group participated in many intellectual circles of various sorts, some in the institutions in which they worked for a living, and we cannot be sure that the one they shared with Bakhtin at any point was necessarily the one they regarded as most important. In Leningrad, Bakhtin did not manage to hold down a regular job, largely due to his fragile health at the time, and so for him the Circle was perhaps the central point for his engagement with the scholarly world (though of course he participated in the *Voskresen'e* group too). Only in retrospective accounts does Bakhtin appear as a central figure. There is simply no evidence to support the idea that there was a "Bakhtin Circle" in which Bakhtin was some kind of leader rather than simply one of a number of prominent participants. Now what we call, for want of a better term the "Bakhtin Circle", is interesting as a point where various "circles" intersected, bringing together people who worked in a range of areas and facilitating productive dialogues between them. Bakhtin undoubtedly played an important and respected role here as a philosopher. His ideas were simultaneously formed in the group exchanges and his contribution was a crucial component of those exchanges. The Circle was a *Gestalt*, irreducible to any one of its component parts, and its parts were affected by being part of that relational configuration.

Now, this is quite different to the image of a group of disciples gathered around some sort of “guru” that one finds in some later accounts. Early Soviet intellectual life functioned differently, and the participants were all significant figures in their respective fields, not students. I always found it quite easy to understand how the late Iurii Medvedev viewed what I have called the “guru” model of the Circle as being one that denigrated the contribution of his father, Pavel. The odd thing is how this image has persisted in some quarters despite the ample archival evidence that has shown the significant and independent work of members of the Circle, the complete absence of evidence to the contrary and the fact that the monological account of the guru model conflicts badly with Bakhtin’s own philosophy. There’s a set of questionable ideological assumptions at work here.

*When you were working with the Soviet archives, how did your scientific career help you reconstruct the history and theory of the Bakhtin Circle? During this process, what problems arose?*

In actual fact my archival work has not been carried out with the express purpose of reconstructing “the history and theory of the Bakhtin Circle”. I was looking into the work of institutions dealing with language and culture in the USSR in the 1920s and members of the Circle featured in these institutions. Coming at the work from this broader perspective allowed me to see wider connections rather than remaining fixated on a narrower set of relations, but this narrower set appeared differently as a result. Now anyone working in the archives to “reconstruct the history and theory of the Bakhtin Circle” is going to face obstacles, not least the fact that Bakhtin’s personal archive remains uncatalogued and has only recently been placed in a public institution. The only thing we can be confident about is not that this archive is documentary proof of Bakhtin’s alleged authorship of the works published in the names of Voloshinov and Medvedev, since the former custodians of the archive had a direct interest in publishing such documents. The materials of Voloshinov and Medvedev found in institutional archives make this even more unlikely. The personal archives of Voloshinov and Medvedev appear to have been lost, in the latter case as a result of his arrest in 1938, and important materials of other significant figures such as Mikhail Tubianskii were also lost as a result of specific historical circumstances. The available materials are thus fragmentary and scattered,



though some material has been quite important, not least of which the archival material relating to Voloshinov's work in Leningrad.

*Currently, the texts of the Bakhtin Circle are adopted in various teaching and learning methodologies. In Brazil, this has been a growing phenomenon since 1980. What are the reasons why Bakhtin's philosophy is widespread and applied in the field of education?*

Perhaps because there was a generally implicit but sometimes explicit educational agenda at work in many texts of the Bakhtin Circle. There is a clear relationship between Bakhtin's account of literary history and the German philosophy of *Bildung* (corresponding to the Russian *obrazovanie* and *vospitanie*), which may be translated as "a process of the education and formation of humanity". What has perhaps proven more directly applicable to concrete forms of educational research has been the notion of "speech genres," which has facilitated the analysis of classroom interaction. What makes the ideas attractive is undoubtedly the general orientation towards democratizing the culture at work in these texts. Nevertheless, one should also perhaps be on guard against a paternalism that is implicit in some of Bakhtin's work, with the intellectual bestowing form and evaluation on the voices of the "people", although there is a much weaker sense of the intellectual learning from the masses. So the voices of the carnival square become historically effective when taken up and processed by the novelist, but the masses themselves otherwise remain alternating between their parallel spheres of the official and festive worlds with no progression. In Bakhtin's only direct essay on classroom teaching the students are led to a conclusion that the pedagogue has been determined in advance. The educator, as Marx reminded us long ago, also needs to be educated.

*The reading of philosophers and theorists of the Circle is quite arduous, because it requires other readings of theorists with whom Bakhtin dialogued. During the dissemination of the results of your research, what were the difficulties in understanding the concepts and principles of Bakhtin's philosophy?*

Learning the ideas of those whom Bakhtin drew on was not easy and finding my way through the terminology to identify these philosophical currents was a challenge. Bakhtin's lack of footnote references was not helpful either. These could be overcome, though the main problems were elsewhere.

At the time I began this work many of the commentaries that existed were more of a hindrance than helpful, since many people were trying to recruit Bakhtin for their own ideological purposes rather than to explore where the ideas came from and how they were developed. The cult status Bakhtin attained among some people was also completely unhelpful since defending Bakhtin against all criticism became invested with personal allegiances that obscured the real issues in question. The issue of Bakhtin's alleged authorship of the texts published in the names of Voloshinov and Medvedev was a case in point – the lack of any documentary evidence to support these claims became irrelevant as we were dealing with matters of faith. This was a strange situation indeed, and certainly one that has no place in critical, intellectual life. The same goes for the very odd arrangement that persisted with Bakhtin's personal archive, and the arbitrary restrictions that were placed on access to documents.

*Were there similarities and differences between the linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure and Mikhail Bakhtin?*

This is another big question needing at least a full-length article. Perhaps it is best here simply to say Saussure was trying to outline the object domain of linguistics as a discipline, and Bakhtin an account of how the novel models and reprocesses language in the 1930s, as well as a theory of speech acts in the 1950s. Voloshinov objected to Saussure's *Cours*<sup>6</sup> in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*<sup>7</sup> largely because he understood Saussure to be arguing that language *is* a synchronic system, whereas in actuality he was arguing this in order to conduct certain kinds of analysis. Especially with regards to systematic phonetics, language must be viewed *as* a synchronic system. There's a parallel with the Russian formalists here. They argued literary studies does not study literature but "literariness" (*literaturnost*), that is, the quality that makes a literary work different from any other work. For Saussure, linguistics does not study language but *langue*, language viewed as a synchronic system. At one point he explicitly notes, in a neo-Kantian vein, that point of view determines the object of knowledge. No one single approach can study language in all its variety. Bakhtin's approach to language was

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<sup>6</sup> SAUSSURE, F de. *Course in General Linguistics*. Translated by Wade Baskin. New York; Toronto; London: Ms Graw-Hill Book Company, 1986.

<sup>7</sup> VOLOŠINOV, V. N. *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. Translated by Ladislav Mastejka and I. R. Titunik. New York; London: Seminar Press, 1973.

actually a way of studying speech acts or speech events, as in the essay on speech genres or, as in the essays on the novel, language as employed by the novelist, which he or she (the novelist) approaches as a system of socially differentiated modes of speech. Bakhtin argues that his approach is one characteristic of the human sciences (a “dialogic methodology”), while Saussurean linguistics has an approach typical of the natural sciences (a “monologic methodology”). The problem for Bakhtin is when these two approaches are applied inappropriately – using a natural scientific method for studying literature, for example.

Personally, I am sceptical about the wisdom of trying to differentiate the methodologies of human and natural sciences on the grounds of rigor, or at least in the same way as Bakhtin wishes. Apart from anything else it deprives literary studies of a number of important considerations, not least the economics of publishing, distribution and readership, and it caricatures natural sciences, which proceed according to competing paradigms, not mechanical verification. That’s another question, however.

*Considering your personal experiences at universities in different countries, what is the future for studies on the Bakhtin Circle? What are the lines of research that will gain momentum in the coming years? And what will be your next research project?*

These days I only work on Bakhtin when it comes into the frame of the things I am working on. I’m not planning more sustained research on Bakhtin unless I see an urgent need to do so when some new information or work comes to light. While I’ve been working on the history of early Soviet ideas about language or the development of early Soviet oriental studies, then members of the Bakhtin Circle have come into view and I have connected my current work to my earlier work on Bakhtin. Thus, I have recently written about Mikhail Tubianskii, the Bakhtin Circle indologist, and for my paper at the next international Bakhtin conference I’m planning to speak on how certain suitably revised and supplemented Bakhtinian ideas can contribute to an understanding of the post-colonial experience, which may avoid some of the problems that plague contemporary postcolonial studies. Sometimes a restricted focus obscures more than it illuminates, and in any case Bakhtin is best viewed as a contributor to a wider and more significant dialogue.

*We would like to thank you for such a pleasant interview.*

It was a pleasure!

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