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The Liberal Gene: Sociobiology as Emancipatory Discourse in the Late Soviet Union

Yvonne Howell

In November 1971, readers of the popular highbrow journal *Novyi mir* were startled to find an article entitled “The Genealogy of Altruism: Ethics from the Perspective of Evolutionary Genetics.”¹ One did not have to read far to see that the article proposed a completely unprecedented answer to the question it posed in the first line about the origin of goodness in human nature: “From time immemorial, thinkers have pondered the problem of how goodness arises in humanity.”² The author’s preemptive dismissal of religion as an explanation for why people are persuaded to act morally was not surprising, nor was it out of line with Soviet ideological norms. However, the article quickly posed a challenge to hegemonic Soviet doctrine about the primacy of social environment and upbringing in shaping the ethical and mental propensities of human beings. The challenge was not subtle. The author asserted upfront that “for a variety of reasons, in our country, the second home of Darwinism and the birthplace of population genetics . . . the human psyche has been examined exclusively as a product of social forces.”³ He anticipated his critics by admitting that “some readers may find this attempt to illuminate the evolutionary-genetic side of our psyche to be an impermissible intrusion of biological laws into the social.”⁴ He boldly proposed that, on the contrary, “advances in evolutionary genetics . . . permit us to conclude that it is part of our innate, adaptive nature to strive toward justice, heroism, and self-sacrifice.”⁵ The publication of “Genealogy of Altruism” went entirely unnoticed in the west, where the decade-long controversy over what was known in the Anglo-American world as sociobiology was just beginning to heat up.

The basic tenet of sociobiology is that the origins of human behavior lie in our adaptive, evolutionary past. Sociobiologists go further by asserting that virtually all manifestations of human nature—including

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1. Vladimir Efroimson, “Rodoslovnaia al'truizma: Etika s pozitsii evoliutsionnoi genetiki cheloveka,” *Novyi mir*, 1971, no. 10: 193–213.

2. *Ibid.*, 193.

3. *Ibid.*, 202.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*, 194.

our moral, aesthetic, and intellectual strivings—should be investigated from the perspective of evolutionary biology. In the west, the acknowledged harbingers of the new discipline were originally obscure articles in specialized journals—William Hamilton's two-part 1964 mathematical analysis vindicating the concept of kin selection, and Robert Trivers's 1971 article asserting the possibility of "reciprocal altruism" among unrelated individuals.⁶ The storm of public controversy broke several years later, when E. O. Wilson published his synthesizing magnum opus on animal social behavior, whose very last chapter suggested a new biological paradigm for studying human social behavior. Wilson's *Sociobiology* incensed a broad spectrum of the liberal American intellectual community, who saw in it a threat to all the hard-won truths advanced by cultural anthropologists after World War II.⁷ In their view, any new "scientific" emphasis on the genetic underpinnings of behavior would lead directly back to regressive ideas about racial, ethnic, and gender inequality. The anthropologist Marshall Sahlins penned a response to sociobiology "with some urgency," making the case that sociobiology has a profound and intrinsic ideological dimension that naturalizes western competitive capitalism.⁸ In a similar vein, Wilson's Harvard colleagues Stephen Jay Gould and Richard Lewontin launched a vehement public campaign to discredit sociobiology, arguing that any paradigm which upholds the possibility of innate, evolutionarily determined cognitive and psychical differences promotes incipient racism and all other forms of biological determinism.

Lewontin's radical rejection of sociobiology in the American context stems paradoxically from his formative intellectual connection with a Russian tradition of biosocial thought. Lewontin's Russian-American mentor was Theodosius Dobzhansky, who received his earliest training in genetics under the tutelage of Nikolai Kol'tsov. Kol'tsov's understanding of the relationship between genetics and social progress can best be described as a form of interwar evolutionary humanism. The intellectual impetus of evolutionary humanism was not sustained in postwar western thought, but it survived in the Soviet Union in nonofficial, subterranean channels. Dobzhansky left the Soviet Union in 1925, imbued with an understanding of science and morality that would find different expression on opposite sides of the Cold War divide. In Kol'tsov's (and Dobzhansky's) view, the discovery of startling genetic variation between individuals *within* a given

6. William Hamilton, "The Genetical Evolution of Social Behavior" I and II, *Journal of Theoretical Biology* 7, no. 1 (1964): 10–16 and 17–32; and Robert Trivers, "The Evolution of Reciprocal Altruism," *Quarterly Review of Biology* 46, no. 1 (March 1971): 35–57. Triver's article extended Hamilton's mathematical conceptualization of kinship selection to the problem of seemingly disadvantageous (but morally "good") reciprocal behavior in humans. It vaulted Trivers to the position of most reviled target of criticism from the academic left (a position enhanced by the irony that Trivers considered himself a crusader for political justice and a close friend of Huey P. Newton, the founder of the Black Panthers). The details of western debates over sociobiology are covered in Ullica Segerstrale, *Defenders of the Truth: The Battle for Science in the Sociology Debate and Beyond* (Oxford, 2000).

7. E. O. Wilson, *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (Cambridge, Mass., 1975).

8. Marshall Sahlins, *The Use and Abuse of Biology: An Anthropological Critique of Sociobiology* (Ann Arbor, 1979), xii.

population should not only undermine all attempts to type people by group averages or populations as a whole; it should also help scientists of the future understand how the genetically determined differences in individual capabilities might be matched to different social needs. As Dobzhansky put it, “A class or caste society leads unavoidably to the misplacement of talents. The biological justification of equality of opportunity is that a society should minimize the loss of valuable human resources, as well as the personal misery resulting from misplaced abilities, and thus enhance its total adaptiveness to variable environments.”⁹ Dobzhansky’s American protégé Lewontin harkened to what he understood as his mentor’s Marxist message about social justice and the repudiation of class, race, or caste prejudices. But he did not see or did not accept the moral vector of Dobzhansky’s population biology, which essentially shored up a classic ideal of western liberalism—equal opportunity for individual merit to realize itself. Instead, Lewontin and many other western liberal intellectuals denounced sociobiology as a dangerous pseudoscience with reactionary implications.

Sociobiology in the Soviet Union followed a very different path. It traced its origins to the speculative, future-oriented culture of the formative revolutionary decades (1900–1930). The peculiar fusion of biology and moral philosophy characteristic of early Soviet genetics was subsequently sustained in underground and gulag intellectual circles as a form of opposition to the determining and disciplining scripts for selfhood imposed by Stalinist culture. The elaboration of sociobiological thought that emerged in the post-Stalin years retained its speculative and moral impulses, but it planted them in a different political and intellectual terrain. In the final Soviet decades, authoritative ideological scripts (narrating one’s belonging to the proletariat, to the future of triumphant communism, to the brotherhood of socialist countries, and so on) were no longer authoritative in any real sense. To put it abstractly, one can say that authoritative forms in late Soviet society were “performed” but not genuinely or creatively embraced.¹⁰ What was genuinely and creatively embraced as the foundation of a “meaningful life” under socialism was different for different people but could draw upon a prolific array of cultural forms that had both official and unofficial facets. Thus, recent scholarship has begun to explore the overlap between a committed Soviet self and an autonomous, agential self made possible through participation in the subcultures of rock music, geology expeditions, semi-official literature, underground art, ornithological studies, eastern philosophy, the cell biology laboratory, and so forth.¹¹ In this surprisingly heterogeneous, yet still externally constricted ideological environment, a new discourse claim-

9. Theodosius Dobzhansky, “On Genetics and Politics,” *Social Education* 32, no. 1 (February 1968): 142–46.

10. This position is elaborated in Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More* (Princeton, 2006).

11. See, for example, A. O. Zalenskii’s depiction of the ethos of the cell biology institute in Leningrad, “Laboratoriia: Vospominaniia aspiranta,” *Tsitologiya* 51, no. 3 (2009): 279–85. A panel at the national convention of the American Association for the Advance-

ing to shed light on the genetic origins of our ethical responses and—by extension—on the genetics of selfhood, would strike a broad spectrum of late Soviet society as potentially liberating and potentially consonant with other rediscovered themes from an earlier, pre-Stalinist intellectual era.

In the following analysis, we will find that Soviet sociobiology did not develop incrementally out of daring interdisciplinary probes; rather, it seemed to spring forth fully formulated in the comprehensive *Novyi mir* article. Moreover, already in 1971, several years before Wilson's book established its controversial eponymous discipline in the United States, the biosocial paradigm was framed by its earliest Soviet proponents as a scientific vindication for diversity, pluralism, individual difference, heterogeneity, human rights, and ultimately, individual responsibility for one's own actions. In short, the same scientific discipline that in the west was associated with racism, reductionism, and social determinism developed in the USSR as a kind of code for alternative, socially progressive political views.

The author of "Genealogy of Altruism" was the geneticist Vladimir Pavlovich Efroimson (1908–1989). When Efroimson's article appeared in 1971, it offered the liberally minded, skeptical, and informed readers of *Novyi mir* an entirely new angle on the ethical dilemmas that preoccupied Brezhnev-era Soviet society. He systematically built a case for an innate, evolutionarily adaptive bundle of ethical emotions and moral capacities that are passed from generation to generation *under normal conditions*. Although still extant, these qualities are repressed in extreme and abnormal conditions, which arise when another complex of innate human tendencies—those favoring aggression, dominance, greed, and acquisitiveness—are allowed to flourish in an atmosphere of unchecked power.

One conclusion that can be drawn from biologizing cooperative and even heroic behavior is that such behaviors are the normal, necessary, adaptive functions of a highly communicative social species. This idea was not original but belonged to Efroimson's acknowledged predecessor, Prince Piotr Kropotkin. In his book *Mutual Aid*, Kropotkin lay down the challenge to turn-of-the-century interpretations of the Darwinian world as a relentless battle for supremacy.¹² Kropotkin's emphasis on the natural selection of altruism and cooperation among higher species was intended

ment of Slavic Studies ("Countercultures vs. Subcultures: Then and Now") in Philadelphia, 20–23 November 2008 included new research on literary and rock music subcultures.

12. Piotr Kropotkin (1842–1921) was born into the Russian nobility. His exploratory travels in the Siberian Far East led to valuable geographical contributions and fueled his later ideas on natural history and evolution. His book *Mutual Aid* (New York, 1916) emphasized the importance of cooperation for the survival of individuals and whole populations. Matt Ridley uses Kropotkin's story to introduce his popular account of late twentieth-century evolutionary psychology. Ridley, *The Origins of Virtue* (New York, 1996). A more revealing portrait of Kropotkin's unorthodox views on society and nature can be found in the collection of his letters to fellow anarchist Marie Goldsmith in *Anarchistes en exil: Correspondance inédite de Pierre Kropotkine a Marie Goldsmith 1897–1917*, ed. Michael Confino (Paris, 1995).

as a scientific and ideological rebuttal to Social Darwinism. Efrogimson, on the other hand, seems hardly concerned with the need to rebut the contemporary versions of Social Darwinism that are the focus of “leftist” concern in the west. In fact, he dismisses the problem in a few sentences castigating western right-wing theories:

The destruction of millions of lives on the front and in the camps during two world wars, widespread bombing of civilian populations, spectacular genocides and unpunished crimes against humanity . . . have led many foreign scientists to the conclusion that aggression, egoism, and predation are natural, irrevocable qualities of humanity in general. [Western] society, aided by its writers, artists, filmmakers, and mass media, has come to this conclusion without much help from scientists. The ideology of imperialism (not at all without motive) facilitates the dissemination of such views, because it finds in them a reliable way of discouraging people from uniting in a common cause to defend their collective interest.¹³

This statement is not a cynically calculated gesture toward the censors. Rather, it reflects both a genuine criticism of western ideology *and* an understanding of the (Soviet) reader’s antipathy to “tooth and claw” models of society. The problem, as Efrogimson sees it, is not that disaffected Soviet citizens long for the competitive marketplace of American capitalism and the native Darwinian arguments that seek to justify economic individualism. The problem, in his view, is that discredited Soviet dogma has led to a widespread belief that all ethical principles are dispensable and negotiable. Efrogimson needed to establish a biological basis for the capacity to apprehend and desire justice in order to rescue the “oft-ridiculed” qualities of human nobility, self-sacrifice, and heroism from the clutches of Marxist-Leninist ideology. “Evolutionary and genetic analysis shows that the very ethical norms and altruism that have been trampled by philosophical sophists turn out to have firm biological foundations, erected by the long and stubborn processes of individual and group selection.”¹⁴ In other words, it is in your genes to act decently. Efrogimson understands exactly what hinders people from following the genetic imperative to act ethically, and in a sentence that seems to trample over both political and stylistic editing, he calls it the “administrative-surveillance-police-military apparatus” (*chinovnich’e-shpionsko-politseisko-voennyi apparat*): “The course of history shows that any ideology in conflict with human conscience requires a powerful administrative-surveillance-police-military apparatus of disinformation and repression to be sustained. Under these circumstances, it is nearly impossible to maintain the kind of collective free thinking that is vital for self-perpetuating progress.”¹⁵ In hindsight, the decade of the 1970s would be dubbed the era of stagnation. Efrogimson represents the

13. Efrogimson, “Rodoslovnaia al’truizma,” 194.

14. *Ibid.*, 213.

15. This passage did not appear in the original 1971 publication. Variations of this passage show up in other drafts and posthumously published manuscripts. It appears as quoted above in the 1998 publication of “Rodoslovnaia al’truizma,” reprinted in full in V. P. Efrogimson, *Genial’nost i genetika*, ed. D. I. Dubovsky and E. A. Keshman (Moscow, 1998), 465.

frustration of many thinkers during this period by considering the palpable feeling of “stagnation” from the perspective of ultimate evolutionary challenges. From this perspective, once human beings evolved the capacity to think creatively and ethically, only extreme social pressures could suppress this capacity, and only at great cost to the individual and the collective health of society. What is “naturalized” in this account is an imperative to develop one’s spiritual and intellectual resources. In the article’s concluding paragraph, evolutionary theory is made to uphold one of the pillars of traditional Russian intelligentsia thought, which is that human beings are guided, not by material gain, but by the tremors of a spiritual compass. Efroimson assures readers that the “vague stirrings of conscience” that we are urged to ignore “in the name of worldly success” find their source in the self-regulating laws of nature.¹⁶ “Genealogy of Altruism” ends with an uncompromising insistence that individuals are ultimately responsible for their own ethical decisions. “Billions [of evolutionary dead-ends] were lost in the costly process of natural selection that led to humanity’s capacity for thought and ability to distinguish between good and evil. Each of us must always be the judge of our own actions, acknowledging that for our deeds, we alone can answer.”¹⁷ This formulation, which vindicates a belief in individual moral agency by grounding it in the evolutionary history of the species, was one of Efroimson’s favorites. It reappears in drafts and unpublished manuscripts that were not published until after his death (in 1989) and the collapse of the Soviet censorship.¹⁸

Efroimson was well known in Soviet scientific circles for both his academic publications and his unusual personal and intellectual qualities. His polyglot erudition was legendary (raised bilingual in Russian and German, he quickly mastered English, French, Italian, and Polish and had an extraordinary knowledge of world history). In 1925, Efroimson was just short of seventeen years old when he enrolled at Moscow University as a student in the Zoology Department chaired by Nikolai Kol’tsov. “Experimental biology was one thing I could not learn on my own in the Lenin Library,” he later said of his decision to study biology.¹⁹ Within two years, he had found his lifelong calling: “I fell irrevocably into genetics and never looked back.”²⁰ His primary mentor was Sergei Chetverikov, a close associate of Kol’tsov’s and one of the founders of population genetics.²¹

16. Efroimson, “Rodoslovnaia al’truizma,” 213.

17. *Ibid.*

18. During his lifetime, but in the post-Lysenko years, Efroimson published several specialized scientific articles and two seminal Soviet textbooks, *Introduction to Medical Genetics* (Moscow, 1964, 1968) and *Immunogenetics* (Moscow, 1971). His books on sociobiology, intended for a wider audience, were finally published posthumously, in repeated editions: *Genial’nost i genetika* (Moscow, 1998, 2002), *Genetika etiki i estetiki* (Moscow, 2004, 2008).

19. Elena Keshman, “Interview with V. P. Efroimson (October 1988),” in Efroimson, *Genial’nost i genetika*, 469.

20. *Ibid.*, 507.

21. See Mark B. Adams, “The Founding of Population Genetics: Contributions of the Chetverikov School, 1924–1934,” *Journal of the History of Biology* 1, no. 1 (March 1968): 23–39.

Efroimson was expelled from the university in 1929 for his vocal defense of Chetverikov, who was being persecuted for his political views. Without completing his first degree, but with Kol'tsov's weighty recommendation, Efroimson dove straight into the world of research science, doing experiments on mutation rates in *drosophila* at Moscow's Institute of Radiation. His already promising career was cut short for the first time in 1932, when he was arrested and sentenced to three years of hard labor. When he resumed civilian life in 1937, he completed a 600-page dissertation on the effects of correlated trait inheritance (based on extensive experiments with domestic silk worms) and launched into further work, which was cut short by the onset of World War II. Efroimson served on the front lines of the war until its end. In 1949, he was sentenced to a second term of hard labor, on a trumped up case of "slandering the Soviet army."²²

By the time Efroimson returned from the camps to Moscow in 1956, he was already something of a dinosaur: one of the prewar generation of geneticists who still spoke in the language of Kol'tsov's evolutionary humanism.²³ Here the term *evolutionary humanism* describes the overarching belief that a biologically informed view of human nature can and should vindicate socially progressive ideals; for example, renouncing racism in all its manifestations, establishing a firm basis of equal opportunity for all, and reaffirming the potential of human creativity. Kol'tsov and his cohort of researchers contributed their world-class discoveries to population and medical genetics in the name of what they called eugenics (*evgenetika*). They published articles on musical talent (inherited or no?), sex education (recommended as good policy), and heritable defects (in malnourished populations of the new USSR) in their journal *Russian Eugenics Society*. By the early 1930s, however, the approach they pioneered was no longer possible. As Diane Paul and others have argued, neither Kol'tsov's school, nor the evolutionary humanism championed by biologists such as Ernst Mayr and Dobzhansky in the United States, could survive the twin pressures of Nazism and Lysenkoism in the 1940s.²⁴ The atrocities committed in the name of Nazi "race hygiene" discredited all forms of biological

22. What could be a chapter in a novel deserves at least a footnote: The official pretext for the second arrest was Efroimson's 1945 protest against the rape of German women by the victorious Red Army troops marching toward Berlin. Efroimson was aware that his protest on behalf of German civilians took his Russian superiors by surprise, since "with my unmistakably Jewish nose, why would I bother to stick out my Jewish neck as well?" he joked. He insisted that the underlying cause for his arrest was his vehement opposition to Lysenko. The sentence was harsh: ten years in the Dzhzhkazgan labor camp (commuted in 1955).

23. Efroimson was a dinosaur in exactly the same sense that Nikolai Timofeev-Ressovskii was called a "buffalo" in Daniil Granin's famous novel *Zubr* (Moscow, 1988). Granin recounts the life of Efroimson's friend and colleague Timofeev-Ressovskii, a towering figure in Soviet biogenetics who had spent the interwar years in Germany. Granin equates Timofeev-Ressovskii's difficult return and final years in the post-Stalinist Soviet Union with the fate of the European buffalo—a seemingly prehistoric beast that now survives only in nature reserves but once thundered freely across Eurasia.

24. For Diane Paul's analysis of western biosocial thought, see *The Politics of Heredity: Essays on Eugenics, Biomedicine, and the Nature-Nurture Debate* (Albany, 1998). In Paul's analysis, the rise of radical environmentalism (Lysenkoism) and radical determinism (fascism)

thinking about society, especially in regard to race. Meanwhile, the Soviet agronomist Trofim Lysenko was able to position his faulty pseudo-theory of genetics to dovetail with Iosif Stalin's pressing political agenda in the area of agriculture and industrialization. As a result, Mendelian genetics was effectively banned in the USSR from 1948 until 1964, when Lysenko was definitively discredited. The Lysenko episode was well publicized in the west, and it gave a bad name to the overt use of any scientific theory to support a social or ideological agenda. On its own turf, however, Lysenkism had a different effect: it destroyed or derailed the careers of geneticists who refused to compromise their scientific integrity. In so doing, it created a peculiar topography of scientific insiders and outsiders, players within the system, on the margins of the system, and players in exile.²⁵ In this context, Efroimson's discourse of evolutionary altruism could have the moral cachet of a voice of truth returning from exile. In an interview conducted a year before his death, Efroimson's literal memory of hardship can also be read as a characteristic statement of his lifelong *idée fixe*: "1933. Three years [of hard labor] in Gornaia Shora [Altai Mountains]. The first two months of cold, chronic starvation, mounds of clay to be dragged in wheelbarrows . . . this was enough to turn a high-flying specialist in genetics, one who knew 4000 pages (for some reason I had once calculated the total) of verse by heart in German, Russian, and English . . . into an animal that thinks of nothing but food."²⁶ His point in this interview and in all other statements is *how much the mind, unfettered, can achieve*, and, on the contrary, *how much human potential has been wasted*. Throughout his life, his scientific views would conflate a belief in the adaptive, bio-

in the 1940s made it impossible to hold the "precarious middle ground," which "simply collapsed" (29).

25. Trofim Lysenko (1898–1976) was an uneducated Soviet agronomist whose unscientific (and ultimately very damaging) ideas about crop selection and improvement found favor in the atmosphere of Stalinist politics in the 1930s. With his campaign for a "socialist" agriculture, Lysenko was able to present himself as a true "man of the people" with practical ideas for the rapid amelioration of a desperate agricultural situation. Despite the principled opposition of the country's leading biologists and plant geneticists, Lysenko rose to a position of extraordinary academic and political power, effectively isolating the Soviet Union from international developments in practical agriculture as well as theoretical genetics. The Lysenko episode has been extensively analyzed by Zhores Medvedev, *The Rise and Fall of T. D. Lysenko* (New York, 1969); Loren R. Graham, *Science in Russia and the Soviet Union: A Short History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993); Kirill O. Rossianov, "Editing Nature: Joseph Stalin and the New Soviet Biology," *Isis* 84, no. 4 (December 1993): 728–45; Nikolai Kremmentsov, *Stalinist Science* (Princeton, 1997); Alexei Kojevnikov, "Rituals of Stalinist Culture at Work: Science and the Games of Intraparty Democracy circa 1948," *Russian Review* 57, no. 1 (January 1998): 25–52; Nils Roll-Hansen, "Wishful Science: The Persistence of Lysenko's Agrobiolgy in the Politics of Science," *Osiris* 23, no. 1 (2008): 166–88; and most recently Ethan Pollack, "From *Partiinost'* to *Nauchnost'* and Not Quite Back Again: Revisiting the Lysenko Affair," *Slavic Review* 68, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 95–115.

Of these interpreters, of course, only Medvedev had his own sleeping bunk in a closet refitted for overnight guests in the Efroimsons' small Moscow apartment. In other words, intellectual circles were small: a truism that fueled Efroimson's notion that the decimation (or emigration, or exile) of a whole circle could have a lasting impact on society.

26. Letter to T. L. Ferri, 2 November 1988. Private collection of Elena Keshman, Moscow.

logical underpinnings of moral and intellectual striving with a critique of any social system that stifles these strivings. In “Genealogy of Altruism,” he insists that human beings are not easily reduced to unthinking beasts. On the contrary, eons of natural selection have endowed us with instincts of cooperation, altruism, and self-sacrifice that cannot be repressed for long, and only by dint of extraordinary social manipulation and repression.

This was not the first time the Soviet Union’s leading intellectual and literary journal had startled the reading public with politically volatile material: in 1962, *Novyi mir* had published Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s groundbreaking expose of gulag life, *Odin den’ Ivana Denisovicha* (One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich).²⁷ Throughout the 1960s, the journal was known for its astute selection and encouragement of works that seemed to push the boundaries of “openness” about the Stalinist past, about artistic freedom, and about the need for reforms. But none of this kind of “liberalism” prepared readers for their first encounter with an entirely new way of understanding the foundation of behaviors usually attributed to powerful forms of moral and social suasion. One senior researcher who recalled reading the article in 1971 described his impression of the general reaction: “People were in shock. In shock, of course, but also delighted.”²⁸ Part of the shock value, especially for fellow scientists, was the fact that something unapologetic about human evolutionary genetics had been allowed in print. Another eyewitness clarified, “Efroimson’s article was a shock! What a breakthrough! It turns out one *can* talk about biology!”²⁹ Yet another respondent, a biologist who was only a young child at the time, has grown up to understand these past events in the same way: “Certainly many scientists at that time had at least thought about the instincts underlying social behavior, but given the pressures of ‘natural selection’ at work in our society, only a very few of them would leave a written trace of their thoughts.”³⁰ How did it come to pass that “Genealogy of Altruism” was accepted in *Novyi mir*, even though the editor was later forced to mitigate the impact of the article by publishing stern rebuttals by party functionaries?

The outgoing editor, Aleksandr Tvardovskii, had led the journal to the limits of what the regime would tolerate. Under his watch, the journal had gained a reputation for publishing sharp, innovative, culturally resonant works of prose and poetry. Viktor Kosolapov succeeded Tvardovskii as the editor of *Novyi mir* in 1971. By that time, the political climate had become more conservative, alienating the most liberal avatars of the human rights movement and further constricting the forums of individual expression. Kosolapov was not a reactionary but a player determined to preserve the quality of publications for which *Novyi mir* was famous. He

27. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, “Odin den’ Ivana Denisovicha,” *Novyi mir*, 1962, no. 11: 8–71.

28. Vasilii Babkov, personal communication, Moscow, 12 January 2006.

29. Elena Gaginskaia, director of Cytology Division, Petersburg Academy of Sciences, personal communication, Petersburg, 19 January 2006.

30. Olga Bondarenko, director of openscience.ru, personal e-mail correspondence, 8 February 2006.

also understood that the journal could not take a stance of overt opposition to the regime.³¹ Still, in its choice of material, it could position itself in competition with much more conservative cultural-literary journals like *Oktiabr'* and *Molodaia gvardiia*. Kosolapov published Efroimson's article because he correctly perceived that it would strike a chord in his readership. Moreover, since he was not a man of scientific training, he sought and received the imprimatur of one of the USSR's most decorated biologists, Academician Boris Astaurov. Astaurov spoke in the highest terms of Efroimson's scientific qualifications and willingly added his own short article of introduction to the *Novyi mir* publication. Astaurov's introduction affirms that contemporary science finds ample evidence of the adaptive origins of behavior, but it does not ask the reader to go further and connect evolutionary explanations to their lived experience of loyalty and betrayal, altruism and terror, everyday decency and everyday selfishness.

Efroimson chose an epigraph from *Taras Bulba*, Nikolai Gogol's classic story of warring Ukrainian Cossacks, in order to connect the problem of evolutionary altruism to deeply held beliefs about the bonds of friendship and loyalty to non-kin. This is in keeping with his fundamental project of presenting the problem of altruism as both a scientific conundrum and a falsely portrayed theme of Soviet collective life. His readers would have been familiar with the allusion to Gogol's story: "Nothing is more sacred than friendship! The father loves his child, the mother loves her child, the father loves the mother. But that's nothing! Animals also love their children. To form a bond with your soul mate, not just with blood relatives, only Man can do that!"³²

The problem of altruism was the stumbling block in evolutionary theory that forced researchers to reopen the question of how seemingly disadvantageous (to the individual) behaviors can nevertheless persist and replicate themselves in successive generations. Efroimson evokes the principle of correlated traits to show that the evolution of a larger primate brain could not proceed without the corresponding evolution of instincts and emotions oriented toward the swift and instinctive protection of one's young, and not only one's own, but all the clan's infants, children, and pregnant and nursing females. At a certain point, the evolution of our species proceeded very rapidly along a dominant channel of selection for a larger and larger brain size. The large-headed infant can only pass through the narrow birth canal of biped females (erect posture narrows the width of the pelvis) while the brain is still relatively soft and the nervous system immature. Thus, human infants are born almost completely helpless, and they require years of care and protection until they are ready to survive on their own. A string of correlated traits—larger brain size, a prolonged and vulnerable juvenile period, the year-round fertility of females—meant that at any given time our ancestral clans harbored several nursing or

31. Aleksandr Ianov explains Kosolapov's editorial approach in this way. Ianov was also seeking to place his work in *Novyi mir* at that time. Ianov, personal communication, Moscow, 14 October 2007.

32. Quoted as a section epigraph in Efroimson, "Rodoslovnaia al'truizma," 198.

pregnant females and small children, all vulnerable to attack by predators who were faster, stronger, and sharper in tooth and claw.

Under these conditions, selection for a unique set of defense mechanisms—namely wits, communication, and cooperation proceeded rapidly, and in tight correlation. As the brain grew larger, so did its reserves of memory. As the brain grew larger, so did the necessity for powerful, instinctive, and instantaneous reactions to protect and nurture vulnerable members of the clan. Memory and the impulses of altruism, yoked together by the blind forces of natural selection, “inevitably and rapidly grew into a system of instincts and emotions, upon which our conscience rests.”³³ Efroimson was not the first to describe the evolution of altruism as a process driven by prehistoric conditions in which powerful instincts of mutual aid were necessary for the survival of a uniquely vulnerable species. What is new in his presentation of evolutionary altruism is the importance accorded to correlated trait development, a phenomenon that is still not fully understood but that lies at the nexus between gene-driven models of evolution and models that take into account the side effects of natural selection and the constraints of development.³⁴ For our purposes, what is also new is the intrusion of evolutionary discourse into postwar concerns about the bonds of friendship, which had been tested, strained, broken, and betrayed under the weight of Stalin’s terror.

The early Bolshevik ideologues had worked strenuously to replace traditional notions of altruism, self-sacrifice, and loyalty with a communist ethics that demanded ultimate commitment to something larger than family and clan, yet not inclusive of all of humanity. With “enlightenment” and “consciousness” came loyalty and sacrifice in the name of the proletariat.³⁵ “Genealogy of Altruism” would have us believe instead that our ethical impulses are firmly grounded in our paleolithic past: “In the long paleolithic and neolithic period . . . only consistent conditions of intra-tribe cooperation, self-sacrifice, camaraderie, honesty, and pity for the helpless would enable offspring to live. In the course of three or four generations, if even half of these offspring survived and reproduced, the effect would be an explosive proliferation of tribes dominated by ‘altruists’ and by instincts that we would later describe as feelings of good will, faithfulness, and friendship.”³⁶ It appears that behaving decently toward one’s comrades and sacrificing your own best interests for those to whom you are not related is wired into our genome, so why not take the high road when duty calls? Efroimson preempts the question by providing the answer, which is once again an indictment of those social institutions that

33. Ibid., 199.

34. An influential argument for new directions in genetic-epigenetic research is made by Eva Jablonka and Marion J. Lamb, *Evolution in Four Dimensions: Genetic, Epigenetic, Behavioral, and Symbolic Variation in the History of Life* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005).

35. This interpretation has been elaborated in many places, e.g., Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia* (Ithaca, 1992), and Igal Halfin, *From Darkness to Light: Class, Consciousness, and Salvation in Revolutionary Russia* (Pittsburgh, 2000).

36. Efroimson, “Rodoslovnaia al’truzma,” 199.

do not allow our “natural altruism” to express itself. “Although our natural essence arose through hereditary biological mechanisms, it expresses itself in a qualitatively different realm—the social. One social structure can facilitate [its] expression, and another can, on the contrary, hinder and pervert its expression.”³⁷ In the 1971 “Genealogy of Altruism” article, Efroimson omitted the analysis of how certain social structures destroy the more positive manifestations of human nature. The full manuscript of *The Genetics of Ethics and Aesthetics* (written in the mid-1970s, published in 2004) contains an extended analysis of the kind of “social selection” that brought twentieth-century tyrants and their sycophants to power.

Confronted with treacherous leaders, but believing in the false, illusory ideals propagated by these leaders, the masses exchange their normal ethical criteria for those that have been inculcated from above, because only with this set of criteria (justified by the highest of goals!) will it be possible to survive. Furthermore, in order to survive under the tyrant’s rule, it is not enough to give the appearance of reverence and submission; any internal antipathy is quickly discerned. One has to eliminate the antipathy and impress upon self, family, and close friends a genuine love for the repressor. It is for this reason that no ruler who simply inherited the throne, and no democratically elected president, has ever commanded even a fraction of the fanatic and nearly universal love that the masses accord their cruelest tyrants.³⁸

Efroimson’s experience in the gulag consolidated the basic biosocial orientation he had already acquired as one of Kol’tsov’s students. During his time in the Dzhezkazgan camp (1951–55), he began to connect his ideas about innate biological diversity with the rationale for political safeguards for individual freedom of thought. From 1951 until his release from the Dzhezkazgan camp in 1955, Efroimson worked as both a physical laborer and a medical technician in the prison camp clinic. He evidently had two things on his mind. One of them was the evolution of immune systems: “In 1951 I left Moscow for the gulag with no idea how plants inherit immunity to all kinds of fungal diseases according to simple Mendelian laws. I remember precisely how the answer came to me while I was dragging a wheelbarrow to the mortar station.”³⁹ The genetics behind antibody formation and immune response was an urgent area of research that would provide clues about the mechanisms of inheritance in general and bring enormous therapeutic advances to medicine and epidemiology in the postwar Soviet Union.

Efroimson also seems to have been increasingly obsessed by another phenomenon: the astounding diversity of individual responses to one and the same environment or external stimulus. The extreme conditions of war and camp life threw the psychic and temperamental differences among inmates and wardens into sharp relief. In a letter to his wife (one

37. Ibid.

38. Efroimson, *Genetika etiki i estetiki*, 26. Russian ethologists have described this model of “submitting to the tyrant” in primate groups as well. See Viktor Dol’nik, *Neposhlushnoe ditia prirody* (St. Petersburg, 2004), 105.

39. Keshman, “Interview with V. P. Efroimson,” 473–74.

of two per year the prisoners were allowed to send), Efroimson describes his state of mind as “upbeat” and exclaims over “the kaleidoscope of humanity here with biographies that could fill two or three adventure novels—the [kaleidoscope] is unlimited.”⁴⁰ In the camp population he saw limitless individual difference in psychic reaction, response, and adaptation to physical and social pressures. These concerns—the complexity of inherited immune systems and the diversity of human psychological profiles—came together in an interpretation of evolutionary theory to which he could attribute significant social implications.

In “Genealogy of Altruism,” the evolution of all higher life is closely tied to a single momentous principle of immunology: without the virtually infinite genetic and biochemical diversity that characterizes the genome of all mammalian (and even reptile or insect) species, the biosphere’s hordes of nimble bacteria, viruses, and other pathogens would have long since devoured us all. “One of the constant features of all species of higher organisms is their infinite hereditary biochemical diversity. This is not just a matter of constantly erupting mutations. Surrounded by countless bacteria, viruses, and fungal parasites that can easily invade the organism’s skin, blood, digestive tract, lymph nodes, and cells, all animals developed universal systems of defense, the most fundamental of which is genetic heterogeneity.”⁴¹

A classic example of how selective pressure to increase immunity results in a more heterogeneous genome is the case of human resistance to malaria. Any variation that is deleterious to the parasite, even one that is harmful to the host (for example, sickle-cell anemia), will be captured in the selection process and maintained in the genome of populations within the malarial zone. There are thousands of other examples of hereditary variation within populations that allow complex organisms to evade complete decimation by rapidly multiplying pathogens. In fact, the mechanisms of the human immune response today serve as a textbook example of the enormous complexity of gene-environment interactions.

Immunity has usually been theorized as a form of exemption (from disease), defense (against disease), and protection (from disease). Even the briefest overview of its metaphorical uses will serve to remind us of how human societies have defined their relationship to the gods and to nature in terms of what constitutes “disease” and “immunity.” The Latin words *immunitas* and *immunis* originally had to do with the legal idea of exemption. In the Christian Middle Ages, disease was punishment for sin; immunity was the sign of virtuous and pure living.⁴² Not until the second half of the nineteenth century did scientists develop a modern understanding of the etiology of infectious diseases (for example, bacteria) and some of the biological mechanisms the body might use in its defense (for

40. Efroimson, letter to Mariia Grigorievna Tsubina, 8 February 1951. Private collection of Elena Keshman, Moscow.

41. Efroimson, “Rodoslovnaia al'truizma,” 208.

42. Interpretations of immunity as virtue are discussed in Arthur Silverstein, *A History of Immunology* (San Diego, 1989).

example, phagocytes, antibodies).⁴³ In 1971, Efroimson wanted to decouple the notion of immunity from the idea of exemption and defense, in order to link it emphatically with the idea of diversity and heterogeneity. In "Genealogy of Altruism" and all of his subsequent (posthumously published) writings on sociobiology, immunity is a product of biochemical heterogeneity, and biochemical heterogeneity arose out of the selective advantage conferred upon those with at least partial immunity. Immunity is tied to diversity. Without one, we do not have the other. "The recombination of genetic material ensures that any two people, even the most closely related, will differ from each other in thousands of biochemical attributes."⁴⁴

By framing the issue of individual difference in the language of science, the science itself tacks in a different direction; namely toward a genetics of moral and intellectual behaviors. The next step is very important, because it links inherited genetic and biochemical difference to inherited temperamental and psychological difference. It has been suggested that our infinitely complicated immune response mechanisms allow each individual to encounter a virus with a different arsenal of protective specificities (thus, as a population, we stay one step ahead of the rapidly mutating virus). What if similar micro-variations in the way each individual's nervous and brain system function allow us to encounter any given external stimulus with a different arsenal of protective (or evasive, or welcoming) responses than those of our neighbor, close relative, or distant fellow countrymen? Each of the incremental variations that distinguishes one person's genome from the next person's ensures that no two people have the same neurochemistry or the same biochemistry, and therefore slight, virtually untraceable and unpredictable differences in temperamental predisposition and mental aptitude always exist. Not only do they exist, Efroimson reasoned, but even small differences in innate psychological capacity and receptivity can be magnified in a kind of chain reaction when one responds to external stimuli. The point of Efroimson's argument is to counter the idea that human nature is infinitely malleable and can be remolded to fit into an ideal society. In any denial of the biological, Efroimson saw the violent suppression of individual difference. In Efroimson's view, a society that denies the biological basis of individual difference reduces its immunity (now understood metaphorically) to the social diseases of tyranny, conformity, and stagnation. Thus, in "Genealogy of Altruism" biological immunity is unmoored from the rhetoric of defense and tied instead to a larger claim about human diversity and intellectual pluralism. From this claim, it follows that we are all inevitably unique and therefore responsible for our particular selves, "acknowledging that for our deeds, we alone can answer," as Efroimson writes at the end of "Genealogy of Altruism."

To move from the genetics of behavior to an ethical stance that embraces individual responsibility for one's actions may seem surprising or even contradictory. In the west, phrases that invoke a connection between

43. *Ibid.*, 1.

44. Efroimson, "Rodoslovnaia al'truizma," 208.

genes and inclination (“it’s hard-wired,” “it must be genetic”) function rhetorically as a disavowal of personal agency. How could the discourse of behavioral and evolutionary genetics be used instead to naturalize a notion of the autonomous liberal self, answerable ultimately to its own conscience? In order to answer this question, we have to briefly outline historical shifts in the perceived balance between “unity” and “diversity” that characterized Soviet notions of social harmony.

Efroimsom came of age in an era when the emphasis on innate diversity often seemed out of step with the times—not just academically, but by life itself. Out of what fragments of origins and allegiance could one build one’s own, autonomous, freely chosen identity after the revolution and civil war violently shattered all cultural landmarks and traditions? Serguei Oushakine reminds us that in the first postrevolutionary years, people faced an almost complete “dissolution of the daily order of things”—and of all the values and relationships associated with previous structures.⁴⁵ The uncertainty of *social* norms, Oushakine claims, became equated in discursive practice with “an instability of environment in general and nature in particular.”⁴⁶ Therefore, a powerful rhetoric of controlling and stabilizing the cultural environment in which people develop (a kind of “second nature,” according to Maksim Gor’kii) dominated attempts to create the “new Soviet self” in the 1930s. In this view, the “corrective” labor camps provided a means of refashioning the Soviet subject who had gone awry—human material was infinitely malleable and could be reshaped according to various disciplining scripts. Oushakine’s study focuses specifically on Gor’kii’s exhortations for Man to remake (tame) Nature, Lysenko’s efforts to train malleable biological organisms, and Anton Makarenko’s pedagogical practice of bodily and social discipline. These texts demonstrate the degree to which Stalinist practices responded to a need to externally define and discipline the self, to give it a kind of stable identity and ready-made heredity (for example, working class), when all internal anchors of social stability and heredity had been lost.

At this juncture, we can see that the counterpoint to early Soviet drives to shape, bolster, and scaffold the identity of disoriented but (presumably) flexible subjects could only be an insistence on some much more elusive certainty that one’s own self-production has a reliable basis in something larger than and/or beyond the ever-changing social environment. Where the thinkers of the 1920s tried to articulate a realm of human experience beyond the disciplining cultural scripts described by Oushakine—in other words, where they tried to find a reliable basis for fashioning one’s individual “I” with *internal* resources—the overlap between the sciences and the humanities was already prefigured. Mikhail Bakhtin, in his essays of the 1920s, seems to be mostly concerned with establishing the responsibility of the “uniquely-obligated self” to itself,

45. Serguei Oushakine, “The Flexible and the Pliant: Disturbed Organisms of Soviet Modernity,” *Cultural Anthropology* 19, no. 3 (August 2004): 392.

46. *Ibid.*, 394.

as well as to culture.⁴⁷ His emphasis is on the irreducibility of individual experience, which ensures that no two perspectives can (or should) completely coincide. For Bakhtin, each individual's unique perspective is also the guarantee of our interdependence: I cannot be me without your (differing) gaze, and vice versa. Bakhtin's final writings (1970–71) return to this theme, providing a further elaboration of the idea(s) developed in the 1920s; namely, that personal identity is no more and no less than the sum total of one's personally acknowledged, individually calibrated responses to every moment in life. Bakhtin calls this one's "signature," and "since the real world is a source of infinite surprise, fragmentation, and one-time-only events, only my personal signature, affixed over and over again, makes possible an even provisional unity for my personality."⁴⁸ In the realm of human biology, Kol'tsov and his colleagues had placed the same emphasis on individual uniqueness, and they came to the same ecological conclusions about our interdependence: without the infinite variety of individual genetic blueprints, there can be no selection, no adaptation, and neither you nor I will survive (in the long run) in changing conditions. Thus, the interpretive strain of the 1920s that insists on individual difference as the foundation of true community reappeared in the late Soviet decades as both a humanistic and a scientific proposition. In Efromson's conclusion—gleaned from the data of immunology!—an evolutionary insistence on infinite genetic heterogeneity ensures that no two people react in the same way, which in turn mandates one's unique, personal responsibility for one's actions. There is a striking resonance between Bakhtin's notion of "signature" and the biological interpretation of behavior Efromson presents in "Genealogy."

When Efromson returned from the camps in the late 1950s, he was determined to resurrect the Kol'tsovian tradition that explicitly opposed Lysenkoism and implicitly linked biological diversity with an ethical mandate for free and open social structures. By 1971, this argument was augmented and updated with original theoretical material drawn from his research in immunology and genetics. Moreover, it now encountered a social milieu that had moved past the Stalinist scripts for identity. The culture of the thaw era and beyond was actively seeking new ways to talk about morality, individual agency, and the parameters of what might be a more "humane" socialist society. Solzhenitsyn had spent time in the camps at the same time as Efromson, and in the 1960s he also explored, albeit in literary form, the origins of altruism—why, indeed, would one prisoner give his last crust of bread to another, receiving nothing in return? Why would some do this, but not others? Thaw writers in general were interested in what makes people react *differently*, not in what socialist attributes make them the same. So, in the late USSR, Efromson's explorations of

47. The key discussion here can be found in Caryl Emerson, "Keeping the Self Intact during the Culture Wars: A Centennial Essay for Mikhail Bakhtin," *New Literary History* 27, no. 1 (Winter 1996): 107–26.

48. *Ibid.*, 117. This quote is actually Emerson's formulation of Bakhtin's notion of autonomous agency as a "signature."

sociobiology struck a chord along a wide intellectual spectrum—artists, writers, pedagogues, as well as animal behaviorists (the new generation of ethologists) were all interested in the origins of moral agency and individual difference.

When “Genealogy of Altruism” unexpectedly appeared in 1971, it clearly renewed a dialog about genetics and society that had been abruptly and artificially cut short in the interwar period. In fact, two currents of thought that questioned the assumption of our exemption from biology in these matters had been circulating among Soviet scientists and intellectuals since the early 1960s in the guise of unofficial, “kitchen table” discussions among like-minded colleagues. A few scientists like Efroimson who had been part of the wave of research in population and medical genetics before the Stalinist purges had survived to tell the tale—and reanimate the knowledge contained in these fields. Not only geneticists, but Soviet ethologists (ornithologists in particular) were also actively developing their studies of animal behavior in the late 1960s, especially social behavior in birds. It began to occur to many of them that some of the same principles that described evolutionary behavior in birds might also provide insight into complicated human behaviors.⁴⁹ It turns out that the subterranean trends in both molecular genetics and animal ethology were leading toward a new paradigm, one in which the Darwinian laws of adaptive evolution might be extended to include aspects of higher human consciousness. Clearly, in the late Soviet Union, Efroimson’s “sociobiology” drew on positive cultural capital—its association with ideas belonging to the creative elite of the 1920s that had been prematurely extinguished. Like Bakhtin’s work and other rediscovered philosophical movements from the past, the new sociobiology had the quality of stunning prescience. It was also taken up by a new generation of writers and scientists who used it to address contemporary concerns.

At first glance, the familiarity of Efroimson’s terms (for example, a striving toward “justice, heroism, and self-sacrifice”) tempts us to place him in the role of a creative reinterpreter of official Soviet ideals. But a responsible reading of “Genealogy of Altruism” reveals that this is not at all what he was doing. Certainly Efroimson could invoke the rhetoric of altruism, heroism, and so forth without punishment—but to ask people to take these principles seriously, *with the mandate of contemporary evolutionary genetics standing behind them*—was another matter. “Genealogy of Altru-

49. The study of animal behavior in an evolutionary and ecological context (ethology) also follows a pattern of vigorous early development in Russia, followed by decades of isolation and repression. An intriguing preliminary overview of pre-1930 developments in Russian ethology is contained in the articles compiled for a special edition of the *International Journal of Comparative Psychology* 6, no. 1 (1992). From about 1965 on, Russian animal psychologists and ornithologists began to enthusiastically reinvent and reinvigorate ethological studies, but their contributions remain mostly unknown in the west. In other words, the history of late Soviet studies of the neurophysiological basis of animal and human psychology (prefiguring the contemporary rage for “evolutionary psychology”) has not yet been written. For a comprehensive history of ethology in the west, see Richard Burkhardt, *Patterns of Behavior: Konrad Lorenz, Niko Tinbergen, and the Founding of Ethology* (Chicago, 2005).

ism” is a strange piece of Aesopian prose: it uses the language of biology to reaffirm “socialist” values; then it tells its readers that their most cherished values have nothing to do with socialism at all. The impact of “Genealogy of Altruism” resides in its complete relocation of epistemological premises. Efrogimson locates the origin of goodness in the biological, adaptive evolution of our species. Once you remove the source of “goodness” and “altruism” and so forth from ideological considerations, these qualities stand outside any socially constructed belief system. In other words, people do not become altruists because Marxism, or Christianity, or any other ideological structure inspires them to be kind to others. The capacity for altruism, self-sacrifice, cooperation, and forgiveness precedes ideological frameworks. If the capacity for altruism is innate and universal, then its source is not dependent on how you are brought up, whether you live under capitalism or communism, and whether you adhere to a given religion or not. Efrogimson’s article locates the phenomenon of altruism outside ideological parameters and reestablishes it firmly as a trait that developed through the blind process of natural selection.

Educated readers of all political stripes responded to the deeper implications of this argument. The historian Aleksandr Ianov, who in the early 1970s also sought to publish his increasingly unorthodox views in *Novyi mir*, affirms that “Genealogy of Altruism” provided nonscientists with an entirely new perspective. Now in his seventies, Ianov at first joked about his failing memory, and then asserted, “Efrogimson’s article in 1971? Of course I remember *that* with complete clarity. Who would have thought that biology could have anything to do with goodness? With giving to other people or living your life honestly? Of course we all talked about it.”⁵⁰ The philosopher D. I. Dubrovskii described the article as having an “unprecedented resonance in the minds of scientists, literary types, and the general educated public.” In his memoirs, Dubrovskii clearly articulates Efrogimson’s challenge to the system: “If you consider the elementary facts of genetics, it is clear that every human being is born as a unique individual, thus there is something in everyone that escapes the hegemonic socialization willed by the party, and this fact threatens the whole system. Therefore, the system was completely intolerant of any deviation from the strictest understanding of social constructionism.”⁵¹

For six months after the publication of Efrogimson’s article, there was no further mention of the provocative topic on the pages of *Novyi mir*. Then, in the May 1972 issue of the journal, the editor included a note to readers introducing two response articles. The response articles were both penned by party ideologues with no biological training. Both articles praised Efrogimson’s article for “raising important questions” and then dismissed its basic presuppositions as ideologically false, effectively shutting down further discussion by taking issue with specific details and invoking stock phrases of authoritative discourse. It was as if the editors had realized that the lid of Pandora’s box must be closed quietly and firmly. In

50. Aleksandr Ianov, personal communication, Moscow, 14 October 2007.

51. D. I. Dubrovskii, *Vospominaniia* (Moscow, 2000), 251.

official publications, the response was different. Efrogimson was castigated in articles and books released in enormous runs by the party presses. In particular, Nikolai Dubinin defended the orthodox view of human genetics in language that sought (sometimes illogically) to affirm the international scientific consensus that all human beings are the product of a unique reshuffling of their parents' DNA, while also insisting the biology is irrelevant in discussions of human society.⁵² Dubinin's straw man in all of these writings is the geneticist Efrogimson, who is obliquely referred to as a "contemporary proponent of eugenics" and as someone "who avoids scientific publications [in order to] bring his sociobiology directly to the public in [a] popular journal."⁵³

In a recent critique of the history of the dissident movement in the USSR, Benjamin Nathans points out that the rights-based notion of human rights ("right to privacy," "right to uniqueness," "right to think/speak/create freely") developed distinctive features on Soviet soil. Nathans correctly ascertains that countervailing loyalties to utopian ideas of social reform were strong in Russian intellectual culture. Soviet human rights activists in the late Soviet period cannot necessarily be cast as "surrogate soldiers of western liberalism."⁵⁴ It is indeed hard to characterize Efrogimson as a soldier of western liberalism, if we understand that term to embrace a bundle of cultural liberalisms that he would have found unworthy of serious attention. As late as 1987, Efrogimson articulated the task of genetics in a global context as ultimately having to do with the spiritual health of all societies. In a glasnost era roundtable devoted to science and literature, he quoted Antoine de Saint-Exupéry to make the point that "the specific type of government is not important. What is important is the kind of people who rise to power under the ethical tone established by a given government system."⁵⁵ Thus, his arguments against the failures of the Soviet regime are apocalyptic in tone: "any social order that destroys freedom of thought is doomed to material and spiritual collapse."⁵⁶ Nevertheless, Efrogimson countered apocalyptic threats with an enduring optimism based on the very same set of principles; namely, in any truly liberal society the best minds and the most creative talents will find their way to expression. In times of crisis, the expression of humanity's latent genius will save us from our own destruction: "Ultimately, from the long perspective of history, there have always been enough fighters [for justice] and martyrs to save humanity from the abyss towards which it periodically hurls itself."⁵⁷

52. Nikolai Dubinin, "Sotsial'noe i biologicheskoe v sovremennoi probleme cheloveka," *Voprosy filosofii*, 1972, no. 11: 21–29; Dubinin, "Biologicheskie i sotsial'nie faktory v razvitií cheloveka," *Voprosy filosofii*, 1977, no. 2: 46–57; Dubinin, "Aktual'nie filosofskometodologicheskie problemy sovremennoi biologii," *Voprosy filosofii*, 1978, no. 7: 46–56.

53. Dubinin, "Biologicheskie i sotsial'nie faktory," 56; and Dubinin, "Sotsial'noe i biologicheskoe," 28.

54. Benjamin Nathans, "The Dictatorship of Reason: Aleksandr Vol'pin and the Idea of Rights under 'Developed Socialism,'" *Slavic Review* 66, no. 4 (Winter 2007): 633.

55. Vladimir Efrogimson quoted in *Stenograma kruglogo stola v tsentral'nom dome literatury* (Moscow, 3 July 1987), 92.

56. Efrogimson, *Genetika etiki i estetiki*, 249.

57. Keshman, "Interview with V. P. Efrogimson," 493.

Efroimson's sociobiology reinforced the premise that science (not religion) can point the way toward social progress; and it reaffirmed the biological innateness of cooperative instincts within the collective. Most important, it made the point that "decency" (*poriadochnost'*) as well as "diversity" are wired into the human genome across ethnic and class boundaries. The politically and morally significant category is therefore the individual human being. The "liberal gene" of my title is not an oxymoron. On the contrary, the theory that Efroimson presents in "Genealogy" and other writings makes the goal of all emancipatory action (*liberté*) that of supporting a liberal social order. By liberal social order he meant a society based on the principles of freedom of thought and speech, with limitations on the power of government, where all citizens have equal rights by law.⁵⁸ His focus always remained on one thing only: the need for more knowledge, accumulated across disciplines, to free up the latent potential of humanity's best minds. Without the freedom of critical thought guaranteed by a liberal society, crucial advancements in our understanding of human nature would be forfeited.

Efroimson was heir to a school of liberal Russian thought whose overarching premise had global significance in the minds of its proponents. For them, a government that stands in the way of progressive science contributes to the vulnerability of the entire species. This idea has renewed resonance in the intellectual circles of post-Soviet Russia, where concerns about environmental and demographic trends are compounded by the current government's increasingly conservative stance. Where anthropologists have begun to study developments in post-Soviet society, they have tended to emphasize the crisis of identity that accompanies a general loss of cultural and historical certainties. Oushakine cites recent Russian anthropological studies that attest to "a deep crisis of collective and personal identities"—a void that may once again be scaffolded by external narratives of belonging (for example, nationalism, ethnicity, class) and control.⁵⁹ Therefore, it is striking to find Efroimson's article evoked once again by public intellectuals in the increasingly limited forums of open debate over Russia's democratic prospects. In September 2007, the internationally renowned semiotician Viacheslav Ivanov presented a keynote lecture titled "Zadachi i perspektivy nauk o cheloveke" (The Sciences of the Human: Challenges and Perspectives). In this lecture, he elaborated on the theme that scientific discovery and humanitarian progress are powerfully linked. Ivanov concludes, "in this regard, I think we should turn our attention to the works of the geneticist Efroimson, author of that *Novyi mir* article, notorious at the time, but now a topic much discussed in the west."⁶⁰ Thus,

58. Efroimson seldom addressed the specific issues of private property or free markets, even in private. According to his biographer, Keshman, he read through the daily papers in Russian, English, and Italian each morning when he arrived at the Lenin Library but found explicit comparison of American and European governmental styles to be beside the point ("So far nobody has gotten it quite right"). Keshman, personal communication, Moscow, 22 November 2008.

59. Oushakine, "The Flexible and the Pliant," 392–428.

60. The complete text of Ivanov's speech can be found at www.polit.ru/lectures/2007/09/17/ivanov.html (last accessed 1 March 2010).

in a forum of western-leaning intellectuals who are wary, to say the least, of Vladimir Putin's new authoritarianism, Efroimson's article is invoked to show that good governance must take into account sociobiological theories of human nature. One of Efroimson's admirers told me, "for us, *Homo sovieticus*, Efroimson's article introduced a completely new, not at all trivial worldview."⁶¹ Amid growing fears that in Russia's current political climate "*Homo sovieticus*" will once again have an inglorious adaptive advantage over free thinkers, the worldview affirmed in a 1971 manifesto of sociobiology still functions as emancipatory discourse.

61. Anonymous, personal communication, 12 January 2006.