

# A discussion on the

**P**aromita Chakrabarti and Yulia Gradszkova discuss the Bakhtin Circle with five experts in the field: Caryl Emerson, university professor emeritus of Slavic languages and literatures, Princeton University; Lakshmi Bandlamudi, professor of psychology at LaGuardia Community College, City University of New York; Ken Hirschkop, professor of English at the University of Waterloo, Ontario; Craig Brandist, professor of cultural theory and intellectual history and director of the Bakhtin Centre, at the University of Sheffield; and Galin Tihanov, the George Steiner professor of comparative literature at Queen Mary University of London.

**In what ways do you think the ideas developed by members of the group known as the Bakhtin Circle could prove useful for theorizing postcolonialism and cultural practices of what might be called ‘postsocialism’?**

**KEN HIRSCHKOP:** “Probably the most immediate and obvious application is the use of Bakhtin’s theory for discussing ‘the language question’ in postcolonial nations. For many countries, there are pressing issues regarding the need for a national language or *lingua franca* and questions about how to deal with the legacy of a colonizer’s language. Bakhtin’s discussions of the ‘unified language’ and his discussions of multilingualness, polyglossia, etc., could be useful.”

**CRAIG BRANDIST:** “First of all, the idea of ‘postsocialism’ suggests that some sort of socialism actually existed in the Stalinist and post-Stalinist states, which is, I think, unsupportable. The fact that the former rulers of these states called them ‘socialist’ did not make them so any more than Cambodia became democratic when the Khmer Rouge renamed it Democratic Kampuchea. Whatever their ideological clothing, those states were organized and operated as single economic units competing militarily with the Western bloc. The economic dynamic was a mere variant of capitalism, as is clear by the way the rulers simply shifted assets from their public to their private ‘pockets’ as the post-Stalinist states transformed themselves from the above in 1989–91. If by ‘postsocialist’ one considers the states of the former USSR which were locked into a Russian-dominated empire from the end of the 1920s, or the East European states that were merely subject to Soviet imperial domination rather than direct colonialism, then it makes more sense to speak about such relationships using the same terms as for any state subject to colonialism and imperialism.

“Certainly the dynamics of semiotic and ideological struggles theorized in Voloshinov’s *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* and in Bakhtin’s works on the novel can serve as good starting points for analyzing the struggle to contest and overcome the continuing effects of cultural domination in the postcolonial world. They have some considerable advantages over some of the politically debilitating approaches based on poststructuralism and post-modern theories, which dissolve agency in a web of signification. They can only be starting points, however, since any adequate consideration of linguistic, ideological, and wider cultural struggles requires a sustained institutional analysis that relates cultural phenomena to their underpinnings in socio-economic structures and dynamics. The works of the Circle do not really help us here, and in some respects the attempts to maintain a strict methodological division between the natural and human sciences, which pervades Bakhtin’s work in particular, makes this task more difficult. Contemporary philosophy of science clearly reveals the conduct of the natural sciences to be based on dialogic interaction as much as the human sciences. We therefore need to be prepared to supplement and revise what are now called ‘Bakhtinian’ ideas if we are to make much headway here, for only this would allow us to build on ideas like dialogism, heteroglossia (*raznorechie*), novelization, and so on, in ways that would lead to an illuminating approach to the cultures of societies and communities that have been, and in many cases continue to be, particularly badly affected by colonialism and imperialism.

“One other issue is the fact that the critique of the entanglement of Western scholarship about the ‘Orient’ which, after a number of metamorphoses, led to postcolonial theory itself, was something that has its roots in the political and intellectual arenas of Russia in what we might call the revolutionary period (1900–1933). Members and

# Bakhtin Circle

by Yulia Gradskova & Paromita Chakrabarti



associates of the ‘Circle’ participated in these arenas: two members or associates of the Circle, Nikolai Konrad and Mikhail Tubianskii, participated in the development of critical scholarship of Asian cultures. If we are to develop ‘Bakhtinian’ ideas in ways that would be enlightening for postcolonial critiques, then we need to consider these dimensions of ‘Bakhtinian’ theory in a rather more sustained way than has been typical until now.”

**CARYL EMERSON:** “I confess that I have never understood what it means to ‘theorize’ something – especially when that thing is another abstraction or -ism – so this question is not easy for me to answer. Bakhtin was an unusual thinker in being completely at home in the terminology and value-systems of abstract German philosophy, from Kant through Schelling to the 20<sup>th</sup>-century phenomenologists, and yet he remained a ‘particularist,’ a personalist who investigated transcendent reality and respected, but did not share, the materialist convictions of his Marxist colleagues. Postcolonialist and postsocialist thought, emerging as both did from global exploitation systems that subsumed the individual, is deeply and properly engaged with the dignity of the human subject. Bakhtin held the human subject to be less an entity with rights than a threshold, a meeting-place of multiple consciousnesses, and an unknowable entity best approached ‘apophatically,’ a being designed not to be fully cognized. These are tricky concepts to politicize, but Bakhtin was not a political thinker. His ideas can, of course, be utilized by those who are!”

**THE BAKHTIN CIRCLE** was a 20<sup>th</sup> century school of Russian thought which centered on the work of Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1895–1975). The circle addressed philosophically the social and cultural issues posed by the Russian Revolution and its degeneration into the Stalin dictatorship. Their work focused on the centrality of significance in social life generally and in artistic creation in particular, examining the way in which language registered the conflicts between social groups. The key views of the circle are that linguistic production is essentially *dialogic*, formed in the process of social interaction, and that this leads to the interaction of different social values being registered in terms of reaccentuation of the speech of others. While the ruling stratum tries to posit a single discourse as exemplary, the subordinate classes are inclined to subvert this *monologic* closure. In the sphere of literature, poetry and epics represent the centripetal forces within the cultural arena, whereas the novel is the structurally elaborated expression of popular *Ideologiekritik*, the radical criticism of society. Members of the circle included Matvei Isaevich Kagan (1889–1937), Pavel Nikolaevich Medvedev (1891–1938); Lev Vasilievich Pumpianskii (1891–1940), Ivan Ivanovich Sollertinskii (1902–1944), Valentin Nikolaevich Voloshinov (1895–1936), and others.

**LAKSHMI BANDLAMUDI:** “I would like to address this question based on the premise that colonial experiences and postcolonial remembrances are as incredibly diverse as any living culture, and any unified sense of ‘ism’ is not necessarily compatible with the Bakhtinian world. Even with my limited knowledge of socialism and postsocialism, I would guess that they never existed in some clearly defined form. Bakhtin’s unorthodox thinking did not exactly entertain any form of unified ‘ism’, instead it concentrated on dialogic encounters between competing ‘isms’. Therefore the key words in your question are *cultural practices* that are bound to be open-ended and ambiguous.

“Ashis Nandy rightly said that the colonized subjects, particularly in the Indian scene, relate to the colonizer as an ‘intimate enemy’ – capturing the mixture of emotions: desire and discord and accommodation and rejection coexist as multi-voiced entities. This heteroglossic nature of reality lends itself well to Bakhtinian interpretation. However, the ideas of the Bakhtin Circle cannot and must not be extended in a mechanical fashion to the post-colonial world. For instance, the epic/novel distinction breaks down in ancient cultures like India, yet at the same time we cannot assume a merger between the epic and the novel either. What we see in the Indian scene is alternating processes of novelization and canonization in interpreting epic texts, because they are living, open-ended texts. Furthermore, multiple temporalities coexist in the culture and the heterochronous reality is captured in the popular expression that epic texts in India are as modern as they are ancient. Time stretches into the ancient as much as it moves into the future, and these interesting chronotopic motifs are demonstrated in my work *Dialogics of Self, the Mahabharata and Culture: The History of Understanding and Understanding of History* (Anthem Press, 2010).

“The analytical tools provided by Bakhtin – genres and chronotopes – are incredibly sharp and have enormous explanatory capability. Surely they must be applied with a great deal of care and caution and sensitivity to the specifics of basic realities of cultural life. Bakhtin himself would have demanded this kind of critical application rather than the mechanical wholesale embrace of his ideas. Such a critical extension of Bakhtinian categories would not only illuminate the complexities of postcolonial experiences, but also show some loopholes to release cultures from the trappings of postcoloniality.”

**GALIN TIHANOV:** “Bakhtin’s work has developed powerful tools that allow us to address cultural hybridity and to cast the history of marginal genres and cultural forms as evolving towards domination: the story of the novel itself is a story of reversal; it is the story of a genre that ascends from being an underdog of cultural history to a ‘colonizer’ of literature, as Bakhtin puts it (interesting that he should be speaking in those terms), a genre that takes over and permeates all other literary genres. Bakhtin arrived at this idea not without help from the Russian Formalists, notably Shklovsky and Tynianov. Bakhtin’s work thus holds significant potential to invigorate debates in postcolonialism, even now as postcolonial theory moves to a phase where it is more interested in postcolonial ecology, cultural transfers, and other ‘softer’ issues. As for postsocialism, I am less confident that Bakhtin has much to contribute here. The Rabelais book is, of course, full of suggestions as to the power of the masses to question and subvert official ideology; but the Rabelais book is also a celebration of a quasitotalitarian collective body, which I believe is an idea that is difficult to defend in the present climate, in which postsocialist theory and practice still remember the lessons of poststructuralism.”

**How can Bakhtinian ideas expand and enrich our understanding and analyses of contemporary political movements and social transformations? Please also consider the discourse about immigration in Europe and the US.**

**KEN HIRSCHKOP:** “Bakhtin argues that a modern form of writing and prose can ‘represent’ the discourses it portrays in a distinctively historical way: one that ironizes their claims, contextualizes their use, and endows them with a kind of force they might otherwise not have. This should alert us to the importance of irony and parody in our political discourse and the dangers of certain kinds of moralizing and ‘proclamatory’ discourse. There is a lesson here for the Left, which often regards irony and ‘contextualized’ discourse as a sign of weakness or political backsliding.

“It’s usually impossible to simply line up a style of discourse, with a political position, but in the case of anti-immigrant discourse we might have an exception. Can hostility to immigrants be ironic or ‘dialogic’? I don’t think so.”

**CRAIG BRANDIST:** “If we consider the work of the Circle as a whole then it seems to me that we are provided with some very useful approaches to how the ruling ideology functions in trying to close down alternative understandings of socio-political categories and the ways in which this can be resisted and ultimately overcome. Of course contested categories like ‘development’, ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy’ are central to this type of analysis. I also think that the centrality of the utterance rather than the sign allows us to understand the role of the social agent in socio-political life in ways that the poststructuralist approach fails to do so. I also think it allows us to analyze how ideological forms emerge in social interaction and conflict rather better than the Foucauldian notions of governance and

discourse do. But, once again, we come up against the lack of a developed political theory in Bakhtinian thought, and the way in which institutional questions are relegated in importance behind rather abstract ethical principles. In this sense, there is a lot of work to do to supplement and revise Bakhtinian categories to make them effective in these kinds of analyses. Also, we need to ensure that questions of economic structures and forces play a full role in our analyses, for they are largely missing from Bakhtinian analysis. Without this, it is difficult to see how questions of immigration can properly be addressed, but once they do appear, then questions of authoritative conceptions about ‘alien’ social groups and how they might be challenged may be aided by employing certain Bakhtinian categories.”

**CARYL EMERSON:** “In the most personalist (that is, not institutionalized) ways. Bakhtin would counsel us to find ethnic and cultural difference interesting and self-enriching, not alienating or threatening. Through his cluster of values and images known as the carnivalesque, he would urge us not to be selfish repositories of material goods or even of fixed ideas but rather to be ‘transit points’ open to all manner of change—and yet never to shirk committing to a position and accepting the consequences. On the current refugee and immigration crises, the best Bakhtinian ideas to keep in mind are his mature writings on the humanities, a true refuge of comparative studies, which by their very nature require a constant infusion of difference.”

**LAKSHMI BANDLAMUDI:** “Bakhtin had very little to say about social and political movements and did not necessarily embark on a journey to rid the world of exploitation. For him, jumping onto the bandwagon of social movements and shouting political slogans was the easy part, but to cede your territory and make room for the different other as an equal partner in a dialogue requires humility, patience, and respect, and this was Bakhtin’s main concern. He discovered the potential for liberation, self-discovery, and dignity, not in mass social movements (not that he said anything overtly against them), but in the *I am not like you, but I like you* approach to human interactions.

“Therefore encounters with different others was a necessary condition for a deeper understanding of self and other. When a culture encounters other cultures, many hidden aspects of each culture are revealed and that creates an opportunity for creative/dialogic understanding of self/culture and history. The exposure of the cultural codes is bound to generate some anxiety and instead of responding dialogically to this unsettling feeling, what we often witness with respect to immigration is the dominance of monologic impulses. The long-term residents want to return to presumed notions of ‘nativism’ and ‘original son of the soil,’ while the new immigrants resort to fantasies of ‘imaginary homelands’ and ‘romantic pasts’ and both groups fail to respond to the dialogic potential. Sadly we have been witnessing this trend across Europe and the USA, and other parts of the world.

“While there is no distinct political theory in Bakhtinian thought, the analytical categories he suggests to make sense of a dynamic pluralistic world aid us in challenging notions of what constitutes ‘original’, ‘alien’, ‘ancient’, and ‘modern’. The monologic worldview conveniently freezes these fluid concepts simply to exert control, and Bakhtinian categories enable us to expose the built-in rigidity in single-voiced authoritarian worldviews.”



**MIKHAIL BAKHTIN** (1895–1975) was a Russian philosopher and literary critic. Although he was active in literary and aesthetic debates of the 1920s in the Soviet Union, he was long unknown in Russia and was first “rediscovered” by Western scholars in the 1960s. Indeed, in December 1929, Bakhtin was arrested for “anti-Soviet activity”, and escaped being sent to the Gulag only thanks to friends’ support. Bakhtin spent the years 1928–1934 in exile in Kazakhstan and taught in Saransk University in Russia from 1936 to the early 1960s. He also worked as a school-teacher for a time.

In his research on Fyodor Dostoevsky’s works (1929), Bakhtin developed the ideas of dialogue as an immanent form of speaking, writing, and self-perception. Bakhtin was also one of the first to

explore the impossibility of neutrality of language by drawing attention to the importance of context. But Bakhtin’s most famous work is probably his study of the 16<sup>th</sup>-century French writer François Rabelais (*Rabelais and Folk Culture of the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, finished in 1940, but published only in 1965). In this study Bakhtin explored specifics of Renaissance literature and focused on laughter as a specific form of the perception of the world (*mirosozertsanie*), a form of truth about history and about humans. It was in the work on Rabelais that Bakhtin also explored the special role of the carnival as a social institution. This study Bakhtin defended 1946 as his doctoral dissertation in the Institute of World Literature, Moscow.

**GALIN TIHANOV:** “Especially in his early work, Bakhtin is marvelously seminal on the question of otherness, and what it actually means to accept the Other. We need to remember, perhaps, that he begins as a thinker motivated by problems of ethics: What is at stake in the process of creative writing? What does ‘ethical’ creative writing entail? How can the writer shape his/her hero (the Other), without intrusion and without depriving the Other of otherness? The whole notion of dialogue in the Dostoevsky book comes as a response to this earlier set of questions which Bakhtin asks in his long essay ‘Author and Hero’. Equally, the early Bakhtin is vividly interested in the idea of boundaries; he sees them as porous and yet not entirely fluid. Bakhtin’s work could help us rethink Derrida’s notion of hospitality and, indeed, most of the literature that has appeared in the wake of the revival of cosmopolitanism in the last 15 years or so, and with this also the problems of exile and migration (his brother, Nikolai, was himself an exile in France, later an émigré in England). As for social and political movements, we have to be cautious not to uproot Bakhtin too much from his own intellectual home: after all, he was writing as a thinker who was pondering questions of ethics and cultural theory, not of political philosophy per se. The early Bakhtin is, of course, an inspiration for democrats (dialogue; polyphony), but the later Bakhtin, particularly with the Rabelais book, retreats into a corporative vision of solidarity without an underlying liberal belief in the autonomy of the individual, without a dialogue with, or respect for the private world of, the individual.”

**Bakhtin’s work deals almost exclusively with European literary forms. Do you think it would be fair to regard Bakhtin as a Eurocentric thinker?**

**KEN HIRSCHKOP:** “Matters are more complicated than the question implies; plenty of Russians did not think of themselves as, in the first instance, European. Furthermore, there is a very substantial difference between Russian literary forms and those contemporary with them in, say, France or England. So I think ‘Eurocentric’ implies something more cohesive than is the case with Bakhtin. That said, his reference points, intellectually, lie almost exclusively in Germany and Russia. Perhaps more significantly, his historical sense depends entirely on a very classical version of European history: ancient Greece and Rome, Middle Ages, Renaissance, modernity. That is a serious problem, in my view, for Europeans as well as non-Europeans.”

**CRAIG BRANDIST:** “There are at least two ways in which a thinker might be considered Eurocentric. One might be to say a thinker is rooted in, and most familiar with, European culture and so approaches another culture from that position; another is to treat European culture as a standard against which to judge the other culture. Only the second version is a significant problem. The first version, if properly understood and acknowledged, may facilitate valuable research and analyses. Bakhtin is a Eurocentric thinker only in the first sense: his published works are rooted in European philosophy and focused upon European culture, with few excursions into non-European cultures. He was, however, professor of world literature in Saransk, and so discussed non-European literature as part of a program of pedagogy. He does not appear to have felt confident to publish in the area.

“The main issue is perhaps methodological – does Bakhtin seek to judge the novel, for instance, as the achievement of a specifically European social process or culture? It would appear not. It is treated as a form that arises in human culture at a specific point, related to the rise of national languages, or the expression of permanent critical and decentralizing forces in culture more generally. The works in which he does venture into non-European areas suggest he viewed this process as applicable to all cultures, and there is no clear indication that he tried to erect any hierarchy of cultures. Genres and ‘chronotopes’ appear to correspond to modes of human thinking that flourish in certain, poorly defined, historical conditions. This is probably due to the influence of contemporary forms of Soviet cultural theory that were critical of Eurocentric (in the second sense) approaches to language and culture.”

**CARYL EMERSON:** “This is a poorly-posed question, in my view, especially since ‘Eurocentric’ is often perceived to be a term of abuse. Bakhtin (much like Yuri Lotman and his Tartu School semioticians a generation later) thought with the material accessible to the intellectual pool of their eras. Not every mind can embrace every culture knowledgeably, nor from its native point of view. Bakhtin, like many Russian and German thinkers (including Hegel, Freud, Leo Tolstoy and Lotman) tended to be a ‘universalizer,’ that is, he assumed that what occurred to his body and mind was applicable to most other bodies and minds. But, at base the ideas of dialogue and heteroglossia are pluralizing ideas, centrifugal in spirit rather than centralizing. So no, he is not blindly or dogmatically Eurocentric. Of course he is not to blame for having been born in Europe (or at the Eastern fringe of it)! It is the task of thinkers from other cultures to cosmopolitanize when applying his thought.”

“Especially in his early work, Bakhtin is marvelously seminal on the question of otherness, and what it actually means to accept the Other.”



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**KEN HIRSCHKOP** is associate professor of English language and literature, University of Waterloo, Canada. He was born in New York and wrote his doctoral dissertation on theory of language by Mikhail Bakhtin at the University of Southampton. Professor Hirschkop published widely on cultural and literary theory and modern philosophy of language. Among his publications are the books *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory* (co-edited with David Shepherd: Manchester University Press, 1989) and *Mikhail Bakhtin: An Aesthetic for Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 1999).



**CRAIG BRANDIST** is professor of cultural theory and intellectual history and the director of the Bakhtin Centre. He has published widely on Russian literature, intellectual history, and critical thought, including *Carnival Culture and the Soviet Modernist Novel* (1996), *The Bakhtin Circle: Philosophy, Culture and Politics* (2002), *The Dimensions of Hegemony: Language, Culture and Politics in Revolutionary Russia* (2016; ed. with David Shepherd and Galin Tihanov), *The Bakhtin Circle: In the Master's Absence* (2004), and *Politics and the Theory of Language in the USSR 1917–1938* (ed. with Katya Chown; 2010). He is currently working on a book about Antonio Gramsci's time in the USSR (1922–1925), and on a new monograph about the critique of Indo-European philology in Revolutionary Russia.



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**LAKSHMI BANDLAMUDI:** “Bakhtin’s ideas are certainly rooted in European philosophy and literary works, but that does not make him a Eurocentric thinker in a pejorative sense. Using one particular philosophy, or text or cultural practice as a measuring rod to assess other philosophies, texts or cultural practices, was antithetical to Bakhtinian thought. He insisted on dialogicality between competing ideas and ideals. Any thinker is grounded in the cultural ethos of their times, but that does not mean their ideas cannot have a broader appeal. Tagore, Aurobindo and other Indian intellectuals were grounded in the Indian intellectual traditions, and yet we cannot characterize them as Indo-centric as their works also have a universal appeal. Unlike Aurobindo, who had immense familiarity with Western philosophies and mythologies, and hence was able to engage in comparative analysis, Bakhtin does not appear to be familiar with non-Western literature in a deep sense and hence we do not see any references to them in his works. The content of Bakhtin’s works clearly show the European imprint, but the categories of thought and analysis cross cultural and disciplinary boundaries. Since he never engaged in the exercise of ranking cultures, we could say that he is a de-centered thinker and therefore it would be unfair to brand him as a Eurocentric thinker.”

**GALIN TIHANOV:** “This is an excellent question. The short answer is, actually, no. Yes, Bakhtin appears to be relying on a Western canon to validate his theses; the Rabelais book begins with a comparison of Rabelais with Voltaire, Shakespeare, Cervantes, etc. But, in truth, Bakhtin is more interested in the literature and culture of premoder-

nity, the time when Europe is not yet a dominant force, before the continent begins to see itself as the center of the world. Bakhtin is thus actually a thinker much more fascinated by the subterranean cultural deposits of folklore, of minor discourses, of ancient genres, of anonymous verbal masses – all of which long predates European culture of the age of modernity (beginning roughly with the Renaissance), which is the only dominant European culture we know. Even Rabelais' s novel interests him for its more traditional, pre-modern, folklore-based layers. Bakhtin is a flight away from Eurocentrism, not by writing on non-European cultures, but by writing on pre-European cultures, on cultures that occupy the old shared territory of folklore, rites, and epic narratives, before Europe even begins to emerge as an entity on the cultural and political map of the world: his is an anti-Eurocentric journey not in space, but in time. His contemporary, Nikolai Marr, of whom Bakhtin thought highly, did something similar in his work on semantic paleontology.”

**Critics have noted that categories such as dialogism and carnival are often employed in a mechanical fashion or too loosely. How can this problem be avoided by scholars coming from outside Europe?**

**KEN HIRSCHKOP:** “I’m not sure what one can do besides read the texts carefully and note their ambiguities. Always bear in mind that ‘dialogism’ is found in novels, not in everyday dialogue – don’t equate the two.”

**CRAIG BRANDIST:** “I think the main thing is to be historically rigorous when seeking to apply categories and concepts to specific cultural phenomena. One of the things that tempts researchers to apply the categories too loosely is that Bakhtin developed his concepts in analyses of cultural forms with too little attention to the institutional structures into which those forms were integrated at a ‘molecular’ level, as it were. An assessment of the validity of such concepts requires an assessment of the institutional foundations of the European phenomenon Bakhtin was seeking to address, and that of the non-European phenomenon to be considered. The other side of historical rigor is to have an awareness of the historical background of Bakhtinian ideas themselves, how they have developed from specific ways of understanding the world and the assumptions on which they are based. This enables one better to understand their potential and limitations in application as well as their capacities for combination with other ideas that might lead to analytical tools becoming better adapted to their objects. So it is not simply about adopting and applying ideas and analytical categories, but their customization to suit the historically determinate nature of the object of analysis.”

**CARYL EMERSON:** “A good but difficult question. Be more precise in the use of concepts. Every time people converse is not an instance of dialogue; every time a rogue, fool, or clown commits a prank on the public square he is not enacting a culture of laughter. Dialogue begins as a listening practice and carnival begins with absence of fear of death. For Bakhtin, both dialogue and carnival were technical terms relating both to social practices and to spiritual attitudes. My experience has been that ancient non-Western cultures, especially those that have not undergone rigorous skeptical enlightenments or forced atheistic ideologies, are wonderfully situated to grasp the essentials of Bakhtin, whereas materialist cultures are somewhat handicapped.”

**LAKSHMI BANDLAMUDI:** “Dialogue and carnival are deep-rooted philosophical concepts. A simple conversation is not a dialogue and language filled with profanities and grotesque body images does not constitute carnival. Dialogue is grounded in ontological realities and epistemological necessities and it is also a call for fulfilling ethical obligations with emotional sensitivity towards the other. Often, scholars engage more with Bakhtin’s later works that are relatively more accessible, without a deeper engagement with his early works that are philosophically deep and dense, and that leads to mechanical application.

“Carnival is an essential part of the dialogic world, for it catalyzes new beginnings and keeps the system open-ended. If outsidersness is an essential part of aesthetic consciousness, a periodic merger into the collective is an essential part of carnivalized consciousness, and together they keep the dialogue alive. Ancient cultures like India that has a rich carnivalesque tradition (for example *Ninda Stuti* – accusatory praises), are well suited to bring greater clarity and add a new dimension to the Bakhtin/Rabelaisian world, and I am eagerly looking forward to such contributions. Carnival is both physical and metaphysical and ignoring either element results in loose application.”

**GALIN TIHANOV:** “This is also a problem for scholars from Europe; they often tend to work with these concepts as if they were monoliths whose validity accrues independently of a particular historical and cultural context. It seems to me that the best way to resist this is to always ask oneself the question about the limits of Bakhtinian theory, the limits of its applicability: try to contextualize his categories and see how much a different cultural context would allow them to do; try to confront his theory with your own cultural history and your own aesthetic formations, and see how far it goes before it needs reworking, supplementing, qualifying.”

### How might Bakhtinian ideas be developed or revised better to suit analyses of non-Western cultures?

**KEN HIRSCHKOP:** “Bakhtin’s tools are fairly flexible: I’m not sure they need much rejigging to be useful in the analysis of materials outside Europe and North America. Both ‘narrative’ and ‘dialogue’ are universal in their scope. But though the analytical categories are universal, in Bakhtin’s work each analytical category has a normative sense built into it (there are more and less dialogic forms of dialogue, more and less chronotopic forms of narrative) and these could be limiting. Not every society will place the same value on parody and irony that Bakhtin does and not every society will think that the historical chronotope as Bakhtin describes it is the proper way to represent change and development. What will be interesting is to see how a different sense of what a chronotope ought to be affects the core of the analytical category itself.”

**CRAIG BRANDIST:** “Again, I think that historical and institutional specificity is important here. Countries like India with a range of literary languages clearly do not fit easily into Bakhtin’s model of the novel as being linked to the rise of a unitary language that becomes socially stratified. Whether varieties of literary narrative in non-Western traditions can really be assumed to fit Bakhtin’s characterization of the epic and the novel is surely open to serious question. That does not exclude the probability that one may find a significant number of areas where the analysis does indeed fit. Perhaps it is more productive to regard Bakhtin’s work as raising questions and opening avenues of research rather than providing some definitive set of categories that can be applied unproblematically. There are good reasons why the categories of analysis of literary texts vary across cultures, and one needs to take proper account of this in evaluating the usefulness of Bakhtinian categories. It may well be that considering the approaches together and scrutinizing their philosophical bases will allow the development of more adequate categories for analyzing literary phenomena.”

**CARYL EMERSON:** “Such adaptation is already being done very successfully. Lakshmi Bandlamudi’s 2015 book from Routledge, *Difference, Dialogue and Development: A Bakhtinian World* is one illuminating example, as was the recent International Bakhtin Symposium in India.”

**LAKSHMI BANDLAMUDI:** “Bakhtin’s ideas have already traveled far and wide and the very fact that international Bakhtin conferences have been held in so many parts of the world is proof of the wide appeal. Convening the Bakhtin Conference in India in 2013 was my attempt to initiate Bakhtin Studies in India, and I sincerely believe, given the cultural composition and intellectual traditions in India, that the country has the potential to contribute immensely to dialogic studies.

“In addition to my work on *The Mahabharata*, I have been engaged in comparative analysis between Bakhtin and the Sanskrit grammarian Bhartrhari, and I find their dialogic encounters, even after crossing cultural spaces and historical times, to be incredibly valuable and exciting. Theoretical concepts are not some templates to be applied mechanically; they need to be deployed with great consideration to basic realities.”

**GALIN TIHANOV:** “I think this question is partly answered in my response to the previous question. But there is also the whole issue of how one can develop Bakhtinian theory. In a sense, by staging the encounters I outlined when answering the previous question; but also by developing a conceptual apparatus that responds to new global developments. I recently had a doctoral student from São Paulo who was examining Bakhtin’s theory of discursive genres, and what happens to it in Brazil in the age of Facebook, Twitter, and other social media. Or think of India and its powerful ancient literary tradition. Bakhtin’s major opposition, between novel and epic – which to him is also an opposition between the dialogical and the monological – would not quite work to explain the repertoire of genres in the literature written in Sanskrit. It is only through productive confrontations with other cultural constellations that a theory can be tested, modified, and developed. The impulse emanating from Bakhtin’s conceptual framework may be carried forward in these encounters, but only as an impulse.”

### What do you think about the development of Bakhtin’s ideas and research about Bakhtin in Russia today?

**KEN HIRSCHKOP:** “The most important development is the publication of the Bakhtin *Sobranie sochinenie* [Collected works], which means we finally have a reliable and fairly comprehensive edition of Bakhtin’s texts. There has been some excellent philological commentary on Bakhtin’s work as a direct consequence. I still find that much Russian commentary is mortgaged to an unsustainable vision of Bakhtin as a religious philosopher forced off his chosen path. But younger Russian commentators are also taking a role, and their view tends to be quite different.”

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**“In Russia as in other parts of the world, Bakhtin is now a classic, enjoying the status of someone people quote without necessarily having read him.”**

**CRAIG BRANDIST:** “Now all the volumes of Bakhtin’s *Collected Works* have been published, one hopes there will be a rather more rigorous approach to Bakhtin’s ideas in Russia than was typical in the preceding period. The haphazard way in which Bakhtin’s works were published, along with their selective adoption for ideological employment, did not make a relatively dispassionate approach to the ideas easy in Russia. There are people from specific disciplines who have been interested in Bakhtinian ideas, have made creative use of them, and have produced valuable work. Unfortunately, however, with some significant exceptions, much of what became known as *Bakhtinologiia* led to readings that were skewed by extrinsic agendas. Unfortunately the *Collected Works* were not entirely free of this, and the lengthy, detailed and in many respects valuable commentaries tend to read Bakhtin’s work into a preconceived narrative framework. In some cases they also divide Bakhtin’s works into ‘canonical’ and ‘deuterocanonical’ texts, which allows the interpreter to disregard inconvenient textual evidence by consigning that evidence to the latter. I was relieved that the so-called ‘disputed texts’ were not included in Bakhtin’s *Collected Works*, for I believe publication of the works of the ‘Circle’ is a quite different project.

“Much of the ‘Bakhtinological’ reception has also tended to reduce the dialogues and exchanges within the ‘Circle’ to a pedagogical relationship in which Bakhtin enlightened his followers, or argued with those who did not accept his wisdom. I have always found this monological arrangement not only to be unlikely, but also fundamentally incompatible with Bakhtin’s own philosophical outlook. The result is that the contributions of many participants remain either undeveloped or developed with little reference to the Circle. Thus work on Konrad and Tubianskii has tended to be carried out by historians of Oriental Studies and they have been left largely untouched by those focused on Bakhtinian ideas. Similarly, where Voloshinov and Medvedev were not simply treated as Bakhtin’s ventriloquist dummies, their works have rarely been related to the other circles of intellectuals to which they belonged and their distinct perspectives thereby inadequately discerned. Given the access Russian scholars have to archival materials, it is disappointing this research has largely been left to foreign researchers. Fortunately, as the ideological battles of the 1990s fade and younger Russian scholars come onto the scene, there have been signs of differently focused studies appearing.

“As far as Bakhtin’s own work is concerned, however, I do not think the situation will change fundamentally until Bakhtin’s archive has been systematically catalogued and made available to all researchers. One hopes this is not a too distant prospect. It is a pity that the personal archive of Voloshinov appears to have been lost, while those of Medvedev and Tubianskii disappeared when they were each arrested and shot during the Stalinist repressions of the late 1930s. Fortunately there are some holdings in institutional archives that give us some information about these significant scholars. I look forward to seeing how the field will develop.”

**CARYL EMERSON:** “The completion of the *Collected Works* in 2014 was an important event, since the Bakhtinian corpus emerged in a random, piecemeal way (the translations too). Very good work is being done in Russia, most of it applied or syncretic. But Bakhtin, post-boom and post-fad, is now a *classic*. His theories can be criticized and re-integrated into a tradition in a cooler, more scholarly fashion, without awe but with attention to his sources of inspiration. Such a maturation of the field,

which sees Bakhtin the Thinker as a product of his own time, happened to Russian Formalism and is beginning to happen with the Lotman School. This is welcome news.”

**GALIN TIHANOV:** “Russia has seen all the ebbs and flows of the Bakhtin industry over the last quarter of a century – and not just seen but also played a part in shaping them, at first in a rather reluctant dialogue with the West, later on in ways that have been much more open and constructive. In Russia, as in other parts of the world, Bakhtin is now a classic, enjoying the status of someone people quote without necessarily having read him. A classic in the sense that the terminology, the categories, are by now deeply engrained in the vocabulary of literary scholarship, to the extent that the name of their author is no longer even worth mentioning. (Very few thinkers enjoy such status; in philosophy and the social sciences, and in cultural theory, Marx, Nietzsche, Foucault, and Derrida come to mind.) This is, of course, a double-edged sword, for a theory only lives as long as it is in motion and changes in the hands of its practitioners. It is in this context that we should also see the invaluable edition of Bakhtin’s *Collected Works*, which was completed a few years ago in Moscow. This edition is a veritable monument of scholarship, something generations of Bakhtin scholars will benefit from.” x

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NOTE: The questions were sent to the interviewer by e-mail during the autumn 2016 and collected and edited thereafter.