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Face to Face with I.P. Pavlov Jerzy Konorski and Orthodox Pavlovianism in Poland

SUMMARY

This text uses the case study of the Polish physiologist Jerzy Konorski (1903–1973), who worked in I.P. Pavlov’s laboratory for two years, to examine the scientific and political disciplining of a researcher whose results contradicted both the reigning scientific paradigm (Pavlov’s teachings about reflexes) and the political regime.

In the case of Konorski we are dealing with research in type II conditional reflexes (“motor conditioning”, as he called it, as opposed to Pavlov’s “classical conditioning”) and his interpretation thereof, with which Pavlov disagreed, and refused to further engage within the 1930s, though a part of it was incorporated into his later works.

After the declaration of orthodox Pavlovianism as the exclusive paradigm of physiology of the Eastern Bloc in 1949, Konorski, as a collaborator of Pavlov’s who was known for his critical approach to Pavlov’s theories, was, under the supervision of Moscow, pushed into isolation by the new Communist regime. Unlike Nazism, the 1950s were not characterized by the physical elimination of scientists but rather their ideological re-education, which shares many features with Foucault’s concept of power and its symbolical implementation.

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