

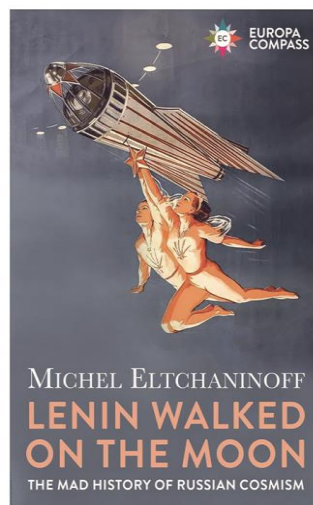
Michel Eltchaninoff:

***Lenin Walked on the Moon*, trans. by Tina Kover**

London: Europa Editions, 2023, pp. 256.

In *Lenin Walked on the Moon*, Michel Eltchaninoff argues that Russian cosmism, with its beliefs that death can be overcome and that we should continue humanity's journey in outer space, still resonates in Silicon Valley's transhumanism, which also dreams of immortality and prepares for colonizing space. While according to the author it is no accident that cosmism originated in Russia with its 'cosmic' (p. 209) geography, Orthodox Christian eschatological heritage, free spirits (if not mad ones, to borrow a term from the book's subtitle) with a taste for radical or at least unusual thought, and people that are always ready to 'embrace extremes,' (p. 213), the book shows that the history of cosmism is far from over.

Eltchaninoff shows how cosmism has roots in the 19th century and continued to influence 20th century Soviet culture, in spite of its marginalization and oppression by the communist leadership. His short history of cosmist ideas includes Vladimir Solovyov's attempt to combine science and religion in his metaphysics (here framed as a response to Dostoyevski), Nikolai Fyodorov's view that our task is to resurrect our ancestors, biocosmist fantasies about resurrection and rejuvenation, Andrei Platonov's vision of the integration of humans into machines and the future of their descendants in the cosmos, Konstantin Tsiolkovsky's plans for space exploration but also his eugenicism and his view that death is the "mere" dissolution of atoms that will be recombined, Vladimir Vernadsky's ideas about the noosphere and the situation that humankind now affects the geology of the earth and becomes a totality (an idea that reminds us of today's Anthropocene concept), which he believed offers fantastic possibilities for the future, and mixtures of cosmism and



transhumanism in today's Russia, often (but not necessarily or at least not always explicitly) involving new combinations of science and religion.

The book thus offers a kaleidoscope of speculative and crazy ideas, but also at the same time interesting ways in which some Russian thinkers have tried to respond to the intellectual, religious, and political problems that confronted them. The book is not just about ideas and intellectual challenges. Eltchaninoff also tells stories about people: stories of success and influence, but more often stories of marginalization, prosecution, imprisonment, and execution. The political context is never far away. And at the very end of the book the author is explicitly critical of cosmism, at least of its yearning for immortality.

In a much shorter part of the book (in the introduction and the last chapter), Eltchaninoff addresses the commonalities with, and potential influences on, transhumanism in the West, in particular transhumanism in California. He points to the continuation of the two key cosmist projects by today's transhumanist entrepreneurs and investors: their efforts to fight aging and death, for example by Russian-born Sergey Brin (one of the founders of Google) and by Peter Thiel, who believe that death can be overcome, and their interests in space conquest. Elon Musk, who has quoted Tsiolkovsky, is presented as heir of the cosmists in his plans for space exploration and his experiments in the context of Neuralink, aiming to directly connect human brains with AI. Eltchaninoff also points to the Russian origin of Robert Ettinger, father of cryogenics (which freezes dead people in the hope of resurrecting them later), the interactions between the American and Russian New Age movements (for instance in the context of the Esalen Institute), references to cosmism in Max More's and Ray Kurzweil's work, and open acknowledgements of the cosmists' influence by Giulio Prisco's (founder of the Turing Church) and other contemporary transhumanists.

Eltchaninoff is at his best when he talks about Dostoyevsky's work and the religious atmosphere of his time, and the book gives the reader plenty of insights in cosmism's complex relation to Bolshevik and Soviet culture and politics. As I interpret some of these passages, the author shows how *The Brothers Karamazov* sets the stage for key, related philosophical and religious challenges for the 19th century mind, challenges that – in my view – are not just restricted to the Russian context and reverberate until today: what is the relation between science and religion, do we have to choose between earthly materiality with heavenly spirituality (and if not what would a combination of those look like), and what should be the balance between contemplation and action when it comes to our relation to the world? The latter theme continues

in the chapters that deal with the 20th century, where action takes the form of both political revolution and the cosmist desire to transform everything, even the human condition and eventually the cosmos. It also resurges in the final reflections of the author about technology, inspired by Hannah Arendt: it is true that we always wanted to transcend our condition, we are Promethean beings after all, but our tools are very different than those of our ancient ancestors: the power and potential of modern technology is different than that of any technology before. How should we respond to this power and this alienation, with its totalitarian dangers (p. 218)? This remains an important question in today's thinking about technology, one that takes us far beyond issues regarding cosmism and its context but that – so this book suggests at least – can be helpfully informed by paying attention to cosmism.

The part on contemporary Western transhumanism, by comparison, remains underdeveloped in the book: it is confined to one chapter. Yet examining the links between Russian cosmism and Western transhumanism is interesting and important for understanding transhumanism, and, by extension, contemporary technological culture as it is flourishing in Silicon Valley and influencing the rest of the world. While that movement and culture often (but not always) present themselves as secular and non-metaphysical, the parallels with key visions of Russian cosmism suggest that there is a religious and metaphysical spirit that drives these projects. It is a spirit that not only gets people like Elon Musk out of bed in the morning, but that – through the influences of Silicon Valley's technologies and the visions they embody – also has potential consequences for all of us. After reading this book, it becomes clear that to better understand these visions and their risks, and indeed to better understand our contemporary Anthropocenic situation including its environmental and political dimensions, a careful study of Russian cosmism is recommended.

Yet while this detour through cosmism can help us to develop a critical and more informed relation to transhumanism and contemporary technologies – in particular, in my view, through a more systematic *criticism* of cosmism that then feeds into a criticism of transhumanism and contemporary technological culture – there might be also some lessons to learn from it. For example, when Nikolai Berdyaev wrote about a century ago that we have replaced philosophers and poets by managers and business men, and that when we are caught up in business, we are 'blind to nature, to the sky and its stars,' (p. 211) this is not only a protest against the bourgeois ideology of the West, as Eltchaninoff puts it, but also an invitation to more independent and creative thinking and to looking beyond the human – to nature, to the cosmos – when we try to give

meaning to our existence and to the world. Cosmism might have been, and in its new transhumanist cloths certainly *is*, one of humanity's most weird, narcissistic, colonial, and *hubris*-inducing projects. But it also invites us to think more freely, more crazy, and more risky, and in its best moments it encourages an openness to, and a sensitivity for, the ways in which we are inevitably linked to that what surpasses us.

Mark Coeckelbergh

Mark Coeckelbergh
Department of Philosophy
University of Vienna
Universitätsstraße 7
A-1010 Vienna
Austria
e-mail: mark.coeckelbergh@univie.ac.at
ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9576-1002>