

Identifying the Russian Cultural Constitution

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Abstract

Just as a country's constitution is its most fundamental law, each country also has a fundamental set of beliefs and values. This set of beliefs, values, and traditions can be called the country's "cultural constitution." We identify some basic features of the cultural constitution of Russia and contrast these with beliefs and values in Europe, the U.S., and Asia. Knowledge of a country's cultural constitution is particularly important during periods of rapid social change and when attempting to implement reforms.

1 The Idea of a Cultural Constitution

The term "culture" represents a very complex phenomenon embracing all parts of society. The term has somewhat different connotations in different countries. In Russia it is most frequently associated with art, science, music, and literature. In the U.S. it is frequently used to refer to basic beliefs, values and traditions. This paper is primarily concerned with the second meaning. A culture can be separated into parts only as an abstraction, but analysis can be useful as an aid to understanding. With this aim we would like to introduce the idea of a "cultural constitution" which seems to us to be productive in analyzing a cultural system.

The idea arises by analogy to legal systems. In the U.S. The Constitution of the United States is the most important legal document in the country. All other laws, whether passed by The Congress or by states or localities, must be consistent with the Constitution. In times of change the Constitution is the document one turns to in order to decide what is legally possible. However, during periods of great political change, even the legal system of a country can change and, in the case of the former Soviet

Union, even the boundaries of the country can change. When the legal and political systems of a country are changing, what remains the same? What is the collection of beliefs, values, and customs upon which the new society will be built? We have chosen the name "cultural constitution" for this system of beliefs which the people in a country share and upon which they build the new social order.

The term "constitution" is derived from the Latin word "constitutio" which means composition or construction. It is used in several ways: as a synonym to the notion of structure, to designate a set of political principles, and to denote the general state of someone's health [Cambridge International Dictionary of English, 1995]. In Russian it is also used to designate the complex of morphological and functional (physical and psychological) peculiarities of a human or animal organism, necessitated by heredity and environment [Contemporary Dictionary of Foreign Words, 1993]. Thus, in both languages the concept of constitution denotes a set of qualities characteristic to a certain entity and is similar to the notion of a system -- a collection of interrelated parts denoted by an observer for a particular purpose.

The "cultural constitution" refers to the basic features of a culture -- its content, structure and pattern of evolution. The elements of a cultural constitution are many and interrelated. However, to define it, a detailed list of elements and relations is not as important as identifying what the most important beliefs and values are, particularly as these are different from other societies [Umpleby, 1990].

People and groups who aspire to reform their society need to be aware of the cultural forces which could facilitate or hinder their efforts at social transformation. Reformers will be successful to the extent that they can operate within the cultural framework or devise a strategy for changing some elements of it. It is especially critical to understand the cultural constitution during periods of radical social change, such as Russia is experiencing now.

2 A Social Role for Art

Although it is a complex phenomenon, a culture is not a chaotic, mixed entity but rather a systemic one. It has a

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stable set of elements -- values, rules, traditions, beliefs, orientations, etc. These elements are both similar and distinct in different cultures. For example, art as a specific kind of human activity and a part of culture exists in every society and has its own laws and regularities which permit researchers to identify art in different countries. But its content, form, social role and significance vary from country to country, and its particular character reflects and promotes the cultural features of the country in which it originates.

Europe, the U.S., and Japan have their own art, but how different their arts are! Russia is also famous for its art, but it differs from that of all these countries. Russian art was formed under the influence of European art, and that is why during the 19th century it was highly professionalized and specialized and had the same styles, and rendered the same ideas as in Europe. But nonetheless it was quite different. In the middle of the 19th century in Europe realism as a style prevailed and often led to naturalism. In Russia this trend was given the name of "critical realism," since Russian authors tried not simply to depict reality as it was but to condemn its ugly and unjust manifestations and to improve society through its critique.

Russian aesthetic thought of the 19th century is very different from European aesthetic thought, where the theory of pure art, or art for art's sake, prevailed. European artists considered serving social and ethical objectives, even if they were the most noble and sublime, to be humiliating for artists and for art in general. They saw their aim as the perfection of the artist's tools and methods [Ortega y Gasset, 1985]. Russian artists, on the other hand, used their creations to serve urgent social needs and suffused their works with social and philosophical meanings and ideas. This social orientation gave to Russian art an additional attraction and an innovative content for which it is still famous.

These ideas were shared by the most outstanding Russian critics and artists [Belinsky, *et al.*, 1962; Tolstoy, 1962]. In trying to realize them, many Russian artists of the past and the present have participated actively in social and political life, which is not a wide-spread phenomenon among artists in Europe or in other parts of the world. The general outcome of this historical development and cultural tradition was that in Russia art became the most influential and popular part of culture in comparison with other parts of culture like science or religion. This conception of art also explains the almost complete absence of entertainment art or art for leisure. Such art, except for a few examples, was and still is of low quality in Russia, because outstanding artists considered participation in such fictions to be unworthy of their efforts and beneath their dignity as artists and citizens. There were more important -- socially meaningful, prestigious, and financially rewarded -- commissions.

In the U.S. the absence of state support for art and the dominance of Protestant religions in spiritual life were not favorable for the development of art. Some research-

ers say there is an artlessness to American culture [Luedtke, 1992]. Art in the U.S. became predominantly a means of entertainment. Not by chance, one of the American genres of art is the musical. Commercial art and popular culture became more advanced than high art. Private business played its part too. Economic competition demanded very influential advertisements and, for the sake of commercial success, entrepreneurs tried to attract the most talented and skillful artists for this job. As a rule careers in advertising and commercial art were much more well paid than in high art. Consequently many outstanding artists in the U.S. preferred to work on commercial art, contributing with their talents to its high professional status (Badaracco, 1992).

In the U.S. social reform was often initiated through literature, but it was carried out through legal reform.

3 A Religious Orientation in Philosophy

The clearest expression of cultural differences appears in philosophy. Hegel called philosophy a quintessential of culture. The dominant type of philosophizing expresses the dominant way of thinking, as well as the way of life and behavior in general. The popular attitude toward philosophy and philosophers also demonstrates clearly the values of a culture and its type of rationality. In Europe philosophy used to be the most appreciated of the sciences. From ancient times philosophers were very popular public figures. They gave advice to kings and emperors and were memorialized through monuments, etc. They were rulers over the minds of people. Philosophy was considered to be the science of sciences or the mother of sciences. All other sciences arose from philosophy. The recognition of this high social status of philosophy still exists in the name of the highest degree for any scientific dissertation. "Ph.D." means doctor of philosophy even if the degree is in any other science. Europe has created the most well-developed philosophical systems, consisting of many trends and styles of thinking. But after the Middle Ages, the dominant philosophical tradition was rationalism.

The U.S. is famous for its own original philosophical system -- pragmatism -- which summarizes the American way of living and thinking. The applied philosophy of science and technology is most highly regarded because of its direct links with production and gaining profits. In spite of the fact that many external signs of high appreciation of philosophy have been inherited from Europe and preserved, intellectuals do not have as high a social status in the U.S. as in Europe. This permits some researchers to refer to the anti-intellectualism of American life in general [Hofstadter, 1970]. The absence of a tradition of high-level philosophizing has led to a situation where people in general are not accustomed to thinking about abstract, theoretical, or metaphysical questions, as people in Europe and in Russia are accustomed to doing.

Russia has the other extreme in philosophy. It is not

possible to say that philosophy was highly regarded there at all. Rather it was neglected as a result of general underestimation, underdevelopment and underuse of science. Until the beginning of the 20th century philosophy in Russia had a profoundly religious character and was uniquely non-academic and non-institutional [Eddie, *et al.*, 1969]. This type of philosophizing, which had been dominant during previous periods of historical development, put its imprint on the general way of thinking and is partly responsible for a lack of rationalism in the Russian mentality. Instead there is an inclination toward irrationalism and mysticism.

The East presents completely different examples both of types of philosophical ideas and philosophizing styles. All famous Eastern philosophical systems -- Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and their derivatives -- represent not only philosophy but religion as well. They also include, as a very essential part, special ways of living, acting and thinking. They are very syncretical entities, which, on the one hand, raises questions about their dominant substance (whether it is a religion or a philosophy) and, on the other hand, serves as a demonstration of the syncretical, non-specialized character of Eastern culture on the whole.

4 The Changing Structure of a Culture

Thus, we can see that every country is distinct in its cultural parts. Moreover, in a particular country, during different periods of its history, different parts of culture tend to dominate its cultural life. For example, during the Middle Ages the cultural constitution of Europe was most strongly influenced by religion, during the Renaissance by art, and in the Enlightenment and subsequently by science.

Science like other parts of culture, such as politics, morals, sports, etc., varied in its subject content. The structure of academic disciplines varied from country to country. For example, initially in Europe the natural sciences prevailed, and the social sciences and humanities began to develop and to influence society only in the 19th century. Asian scholars, in India and China, mainly paid homage to the humanities.

So every culture has its own content. The importance of its parts vary in time. Some elements have a longer, others a shorter, existence. Some values are more influential than others. The analysis of the "content" or the substance of a culture is the essential part of the process of defining the cultural constitution of any society. The task is to identify the basic, long-lasting, and most characteristic elements and features of a culture.

Both stable and changing elements, which constitute the content of a culture, vary in scale and significance for a society. The result is, first, that there is a certain hierarchy among the elements of culture, and, second, there are certain types of relationships among them. That is, there is a certain structure -- a set of links, rules and relations --

which connects all these elements into a whole. The existence of this complex, many layered structure, is the result of long historical development. What we would like to highlight is the importance of this structure for the specific pattern of a culture.

In chemistry there are elements which are called isomers. They are different materials (e.g., diamond, graphite and coal). But they are made of the same element -- carbon -- and their difference is only in structure -- the types of links which connect the atoms with each other. The same is true for cultural systems. They differ from each other not only in the content of social institutions and values, but in relations between them. A structure represents the "form" of a culture, the second important element of a cultural constitution. The direction and intensity of interrelationships between the same elements in different cultures can vary, too. For example, in the U.S. the government often tries to influence social activities indirectly, through tax policies, thereby changing the structure of incentives. In Russia the state has been accustomed to interfere directly, sometimes through crude coercion, into the internal affairs of any organization or the lives of private persons.

Another example is religious activity. In Europe and the U.S. the Church used to conduct very active and intensive missionary work among all strata of a society in order to bring about the moral improvement of human activities. In Russia the official Orthodox Church was rather passive and was mainly interested in serving the state's interests. How the socio-political system can influence the same cultural inheritance is shown by the example of the two Koreas. Until 1945 Korea was a single country with the main cultural traditions being Confucianism and Ch'an/Zen-Buddhism. But the two parts took opposite paths when the country was divided after the Korean War and different political systems were created. East and West Germany after the World War II provide a similar example.

Social systems have a very complicated structure, because they are not homogeneous and represent a hierarchy of different systems with complex and diverse links both inside systems and between them. The properties of such rule-bound systems can be studied only by learning the rules which govern them [Ballonoff, 1994] and, consequently, by learning the rules which regulate relations among the parts of a society (e.g., between politics and religion, between state and culture, and so forth).

Some links are more stable, others are more flexible and movable. Some are really active and important, others are rather mythical. Some rules regulate vast cultural areas, some regulate only limited ones. Some are officially recognized and propagated, the others exist at the level of public opinion or lie in the social subconscious. All of them are interwoven and intermingled.

Knowledge of the existing cultural infrastructure and previous domestic and foreign experiences permit reformers to foresee what parts of culture can lead a country in a destructive direction and what parts can be em-

ployed to bring pressure to change the destructive parts of the culture and, what is very important as well, to activate the positive parts.

5 Some Persistent Cultural Patterns

Culture is a dynamic system, and every dynamic system has, first, its own pattern of actions aiming at preserving its identity, and, second, its own tradition for making changes aiming at the adaptation to a new environment. In spite of the fact that these cultural patterns are of a dynamic character and they were formed under specific historical circumstances, people often cling to their cultural customs long after they have outlived their usefulness [Ferguson, 1936]. That is why in a changed socio-political environment they can produce the opposite effect from what is intended. For example, one of the reasons for the failure of Egor Gydar's reforms was that he did not take into account the methods of economic behavior which were formed during the previous periods of development in Russia and which were in line with common patterns of action.

As many Russian and foreign historians and public figures have pointed out, Russians have certain ways of acting in order to gain their goals:

- 1) They prefer extensive, quantitative methods instead of intensive, qualitative ones.
- 2) They do not think much before acting and often make unanalyzed decisions.
- 3) They count on immediate success and are not accustomed to wait long for results.
- 4) They prefer to pay attention to big, global problems, not to the small, insignificant in their view, questions.
- 5) In implementing their decisions they often tend to go to one extreme, and when this approach fails, to go to the opposite extreme.
- 6) They tend to communicate with a small circle of people.

Evolutionary processes have their own regularities and patterns of changes as well. Some of them grow in an accumulative way -- through small, partial and consistent reforms. Others change through quick leaps from one state to another. These types of development can be called evolutionary and catastrophic. Unfortunately, the Russian way of making changes has much more in common with catastrophic change. This approach to change was shaped by Russian czars who used their authority to force changes abruptly and in a very cruel way. An example was Peter the Great who introduced innovations by force and compulsion. He introduced new clothes, behavior, and new modes of production. The landlords, or merchants, were forced to build plants under the threat of severe punishments. The serfs were assigned to these plants without changing their social status.

Types of social changes are closely related to past experience and cultural heritage. Indian and Chinese cultures are famous for their careful attitude toward the past.

Europe and Japan are more focused on the present, but they keep in mind their past and future as well. The U.S. and Russia are the most future-oriented cultures. Among all of them Russian culture has the most negative and radical attitude toward the past. It would be a mistake to think that this attitude was created by the Bolsheviks. As was mentioned above, it was Peter the Great at the beginning of the 18th century who first cruelly prohibited many old Russian traditions and customs. For example, he cut the beards of the noblemen with an ax with his own hands. Another czarist predecessor, Ivan the Terrible, destroyed the most famous and powerful noble families of his time during the so-called Oprichnina in the middle of the 16th century. Such policies aroused strong resistance, even though some innovations were truly useful. There were revolts over Peter the Great's introduction of potatoes, which became the main national Russian food. After his death many of his reforms were forgotten and not continued, since reforms depended on his insistence.

6 How Culture Influences How a Society Changes

After the October revolution the same treatment of the past occurred. The Bolsheviks destroyed almost all pre-Revolutionary traditions, both positive and negative, and the people who carried on these traditions were either killed or exiled. It was said that the new Soviet culture had to begin with a blank sheet. More recently perestroika followed the same model of making changes. Instead of building the new social and economic structure alongside the old one, as has been done in China, the "New Democrats", in the same brutal manner, destroyed the former economy to its very foundations, without having a clear plan for building the new economy. The whole society collapsed and is now in a state of chaos.

Historically, the characteristic features of how changes are made in Russia are the following:

- 1) They are initiated from above, not from below.
- 2) They are born by the demands of military industries, not by civilian industries. When new modes of production appeared independently of the state and expressed the desire of the civilian population, they were suppressed and prohibited. The innovators were prosecuted, because their initiatives broke the state monopoly on conducting business.
- 3) Since they were initiated from above with the aim of supporting the military ambitions of the state, the new policies were unrelated to the lives of the majority of the population, and, as such, they were not understood by a significant part of the population. There was strong psychological resistance to the changes.

In the beginning of the Soviet period the Bolsheviks had a utopian vision, which was very attractive for the masses -- an ideological, socialistic program. But con-

temporary Russian leaders have no clear or positive program, with the possible exception of imitating the success of Western Europe, the U.S., and Japan. Current Russian leaders have thrown away all the Soviet ideological and cultural heritage, destroyed the economic basis, and created a wild capitalism similar to the middle of the 19th century. Such a social and economic system is not attractive to any civilized country in the world today. Moreover, during the Soviet period, all the spiritual values and social realities related to capitalism, such as private property, money, individual initiative, independence, frugality, etc. were discredited to a great extent. As a result Russian society turned out to be totally unprepared culturally for the new economic policy of private enterprise that the "New Democrats" tried to establish in Russia.

Part of the intelligentsia, supporting the government, advocated turning back to the old pre-Revolutionary culture, with its spiritual values. But they did not take into account two things. First, this culture was not favorable for the development of private enterprise in Russia before the revolutions at the beginning of the 20th century. Second, this culture led to the October Revolution and to what happened in Russia afterwards. Now they try to re-establish the same ideological paradigm of the old Russia without deliberating on it or selecting what is suitable and what is not for the current situation in the country. These examples illustrate that even today Russian intellectuals unconsciously act in keeping with the patterns of action and change which belong to the cultural constitution shaped far in the past.

One trait of any evolving system is its velocity of movement. Some systems develop faster, others more slowly. Russia has been famous for the speed of its development. Many of its missteps have occurred for this reason. But not all the ingredients of a cultural system significant for the cultural constitution are developed simultaneously. Some of them are still the same, but some have acquired a new quality.

7 The Utility of Analyzing Russian Culture

Russian intellectuals and politicians need to think about the Russian cultural heritage and the quality of its parts. Russia has a great culture. And, as all great spiritual cultures, Russian culture is very rich in its manifestations and has positive and negative aspects. Some of its facets are more favorable for the new socioeconomic realities than others. The task of Russian intellectuals is to analyze and reinterpret its cultural heritage, including finding the means to block those features of the Russian national culture which prevent the development of productive activity. They also need to find such traits of Russian character and culture which would suit the new socioeconomic environment and promote the formation of civil society. One can teach what is needed, but it must be

done in a way that is acceptable.

In order to do this, it is necessary to study the constituents of the Russian cultural constitution we described above. Unfortunately, Russian culture has not yet had its own profound philosophers of culture like Alexis de Tocqueville, or Claude Levi-Strauss, or Michel Foucault, who created brilliant scientific analyses either of their own or other cultures. The first and the last attempt to give an objective survey of Russian culture was made by P.Ia. Chaadaev in his Philosophical Letters [Chaadaev, 1969]. But after doing so, he was declared mentally ill by the czarist authorities. The Soviet government also did not like objective information about itself and preferred to indoctrinate ideological and mythological views into people's minds.

The results of work on Russian culture could be very fruitful and useful, because Russian culture has many attractive features which are workable and useful in the modern situation. As a first step we shall point out some of these traits. One is collective labor. According to all contemporary economists and sociologists, team-work is one of the essential prerequisites for successful development within the new global work culture. Russians have long traditions of working in collectives. So for them it would be natural to use these habits for increasing their own productivity and trade throughout the world. Habits of cooperation now are of great importance as well for establishing closer and more effective relations with people in other cultures. For Russians to act this way would be much easier than for some other nationalities, for example Americans with their culture of individualism and self-fulfillment.

8 The Contribution of Reason to Development

The other important task of intellectuals in Russia is to raise the authority of reason, or rational thinking. Many Russian philosophers, in spite of the fact that according to their professional occupation they should praise reason and its advantages in comparison with irrational human action, instead do the opposite. Many of them have blamed reason for all the deficiencies of Russian character and the misfortunes of Russian history. In part the reason is the influence of Orthodox religious philosophy, which was never separated from sacred philosophy. Consequently philosophy on the whole in Russia has acquired a theological character. Famous Russian philosophers, such as V.I. Solovyev and P. Florensky, never loved Aristotle, but admired very much Plato and St. Augustin. They almost all gave their preferences to faith and emphasized the sensual side of human nature, such as emotions, intuition, etc., and never admired the common sense or reason of the ordinary man.

They made only one exception for World Reason, the Absolute Idea in a Hegelian sense, which was very close to Divine Reason in their interpretation. Russian artists did the same in different genres of art, giving their prefer-

ences to the heart, not to reason and were preoccupied with the emotional side of life.

As a result, science -- as a realm of reason -- never had much authority at all levels of the society. At the upper levels society was led by ideological priorities in making any decision. At the lower levels people were ruled by orders from above, by someone's opinion (friends, neighbors, colleagues, etc.), or by prejudices or customs. The current decline of cultural and educational institutions in Russia is a clear manifestation of what significance they have in the minds of people in general.

The other very important consequence of neglecting science is the general lack of professionalism in all spheres of business activity, because during the last two centuries science has become the main force and resource of professional development in any part of the world that experienced the industrial revolution.

Political regimes in Russia have not been in favor of the development of science, especially social science. But, to a certain extent, this policy has turned into a cultural tradition, which becomes absolutely unbearable in the current situation. Nevertheless there is a lack of understanding of this cultural orientation among scientists in the country. There is no evidence of any special desire to change the situation even among scientists themselves, which is reflected in the mass media and in public opinion.

The rise of reason and of science would be both profitable for society in general and for intellectuals in particular as it will give them professional authority, social prestige and put them on a higher rung of the social ladder. But this could happen only if they become true adherents to scientific knowledge, not servants of the upper classes or the media.

But, everything has "pros" and "cons". In the age of information, computer technology, and mass media much more knowledge and experience is available for latecomers, and this can permit them to skip some stages if cultural change and imitation work well [Mulej, 1994]. One of the important tasks for Russian intellectuals is to study not only their own cultural constitution but foreign ones as well and to apply foreign experience to life in Russia in the most effective way.

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