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Conclusion: Socialist Realism in the Material Culture

The Rise of the Soviet Consumer and the End of Socialism

As I have argued, the overall picture of the Soviet culture of consumption in Stalin's time was not always as grey and dull as is often thought – at least not in Moscow and some other large cities. The creation of a luxury goods economy and its rapid growth bears witness to this. This is not to gloss over the widespread poverty and desperation many in the USSR experienced at this time, but it serves to complicate the picture we have of Soviet society. Many attractive, yet relatively inexpensive, new products were available, at least in principle, to the ordinary consumer. However, Soviet industry and commerce did not strain under a constant pressure to invent and launch new goods on an even larger scale in the same way that the developed capitalist countries of North America and Europe did. One of the merits of the socialist economy was, so the ideology went, that it did not create artificial needs in order to make profit. Neither was there any mechanism of artificial ageing of commodities such as fashion at work in the USSR. The Soviet economy was, after all, a planned economy in which the task of the planning offices and officials was to interpret, predict and try to direct the needs of the population. Despite these acknowledged differences, Soviet factories and shops were made to compete with each other over the rapid introduction of novelties.

In socialism there were no genuine commercial fashion cycles; or at least it is safe to say that fashion did not play as active a role in Soviet society as it did in capitalist societies. Georg Simmel argues that fashion is a phenomenon of modernity par excellence. Since fashion is an ongoing process of social imitation and individual differentiation mutually reinforcing each other, it enables every member of society both to express his or her own style while simultaneously merging with a larger social totality. According to Simmel, fashion provides a provisional solution to one of the most acute problems of our time by mediating between the tendencies of individualization and collectivization, between the one and the whole.[1]

In socialist society, the relationship between the individual and the society is organized in another way. The individual was intended to be firmly embedded into the social collective. However, even in this society there were factors that promoted the emergence of a monetary economy and a commodity culture that allowed gradually more room for the development of individual taste and fashion. To improve taste and to create a new socialist way of life, alternatives and mutually competing objects of choice were required. Soviet leaders were convinced that a totally new and more advanced human civilization was on its way. It was only natural that the majority of commodites of material culture had to be created anew as well.

In his article 'Communism – a post mortem'[2] Zygmunt Bauman argues that the development of consumers' demands and needs was a decisive factor in the dissolution process of socialism. As long as needs remained relatively simple and communal, it was largely possible for the state to satisfy them. The more individualized needs became, the more difficult it was, even in principle, to satisfy them. Consequently, in a socialist state consumers were doomed to eternal dissatisfaction. In a capitalist society the consumer could hardly blame the government if they could not find useful or attractive products on the market. In socialism, they could always blame the state and the Party. This was a chronic tension inherent in the socialist economy, and some contemporaries recognized the problem. Comrade Kasimov, the Party secretary of the Kirovskii district, advised workers during his visit to the Krasnyi Treugol'nik factory in Leningrad 'the consumer does not blame Krasnyi Treugol'nik and [its directors] comrades Vasiliev, Konstantinov and Denisov. Instead he says 'Soviet power'! The power has changed but there are no galoshes! That's how good the Soviet power is!'[3] Workers blamed the state for any failures in the system, including a lack of consumer goods. In turn, the Communist Party blamed 'traitors' for such failures.

Bauman's thesis, however, presumes that a continuous process of individualization took place in socialism. Yet there were strong tendencies working against the individualization of demands in the Soviet Union. The norms of socialist decency, of *kulturnost'*, effectively prevented expressions of individuality. It was not considered good manners to 'show off' or to deviate too much from the common norm. Even while promoting more individualized expressions of taste, the Soviet state only did so in small doses in a highly controlled and centrally administered way.

Under the conditions of a permanent shortage of goods, personal relations become more important than money in getting hold of rare commodities. Due to its pricing policy, the Soviet economy was by definition a deficit economy.[4] Under these circumstances, social networks, based either on familial or collegial ties, are crucial to the redistribution of goods.[5] An unofficial network of reciprocal obligations and duties comes into being out of necessity. (For discussion on the use of

connections, or *blat* relations, see the work of Alena Ledeneva and Markku Lonkila.)[6] The ethics of such a society are the ethics of a clan. In such a system of social relations, the ethical norms applied to the members within a social group differ from those applied to outsiders. Strong feelings of resentment are typical. Others – outsiders – will have succeeded or done better only because they have used some unfair or criminal means or because they have enjoyed some special favours of those in power. This can effectively prevent the emergence of any individualistic ethics. Rewards and benefits are distributed inside the group according to its own specific norms of justice, which can prevent or interfere with their distribution according to one's personal achievements.

Even in the Soviet Union, however, elements of an individualistic culture of consumption gradually emerged despite the existence of strong counter-tendencies. The emerging culture was still, at the same time, characterized by a great degree of conformity. It was also constantly centrally monitored and regulated. As we have seen, Stalin and other leaders took a strong personal interest in developing the taste and etiquette of the common people. As a consequence, Soviet material culture offered many – smaller and bigger – delights and pleasures to its consumers – but only in strictly controlled ways. As such it was reminiscent of a culture of estates with strictly determined and separate lifestyles and tastes. In this sense, the government liked to compare the situation of the Soviet worker to an aristocrat living under the tsarist times – even though the luxuries available in the socialist society were certainly far less luxurious or even simply cheap imitations and kitsch. The rules of Soviet decency united, however, all the growing masses of more affluent workers and experts.

Soviet Middle-class Decency and the Concept of *Kulturnost*

The new Soviet way of life was characterized by *kulturnost*, a special cultural consciousness.[7] Lynne Attwood has succinctly described *kulturnost:* 'though the concept was never clearly defined, [it] included behaving in a well-mannered way, having appreciation of music, theatre and literature, taking an interest in one's appearance and displaying "good taste" in clothes'.[8] To become 'cultured' was to become cultivated in a similar rather ephemeral way as it was understood in many Western guidebooks of good behaviour and etiquette. It was more a question of an internalized unconscious disposition than any explicit formal rules of good behaviour.

It was good to display and make use of one's prosperity – otherwise material stimuli would have been of no use – but it would have been indecent to 'show off.' In discussing the characteristics of female fashion in post-war Soviet Union, Olga Vainshtein comments on how 'modesty' was encouraged in the framework of an

Figure 22 *'Life has become more joyous, comrades.' I.V. Stalin, A.I. Mikoyan, V.I. Chubar and V.M. Molotov at a reception of Armenian female workers at the Kremlin, December 1935.(Source: RGAKFD)*

ideology of collectivism – discipline demanded that one did not stand out from the masses.[9] On the other hand, as Vainshtein also observes, a 'style of excess' giving an impression of abundant luxury was equally typical of women's dress in the Soviet Union. Ordinary office clerks with their excessive make-up and style of dresses often looked in the eyes of an outsider as if they were going out to a night club. Vainshtein concludes that this style of excess or desire to dress up in the middle of 'puritan modesty' cannot be explained only as some kind of a compensatory mechanism – it was an act of subversion against the prevalent principles of ascetic modesty to show off one's individual taste. The psychological genesis of such a style of excess is more complex: 'these clothes, after all, parade not so much wealth per se as "a condensed image" of wealth'.[10] Such a duality, as hopefully this book demonstrates, was characteristic of the relation of Soviet culture to material goods and wealth: sudden outbursts or occasional expressions of not so much individuality, but images of wealth or a common popular luxury, amongst the general standardization and greyness.

A large part of the privileges and signs of such well-being often came in the form of gifts from the government or the Party and not in cash. *Udarniki* were given the right to order overcoats, cultured dresses, suits and chrome boots from the tailors

and shoemakers. When invited to the meetings of the Stakhanovites or other such conferences in Moscow, workers and *kolkhozniks* were expected to be well dressed and therefore such an invitation often almost automatically was accompanied by a coupon allowing the right to make orders from special shops. Holiday trips to health spas, summer houses, private family houses or apartments, cars or motorcycles were signs of belonging to the *nomenklatura*, the Party or industrial elite.

But the intelligentsia, the new Soviet middle class also appreciated cosiness and a homely atmosphere, which it could design and create itself according its own taste. The literary historian Vera Dunham characterized this atmosphere by quoting Gauser's popular novel from 1947: 'tea was served under an orange lampshade in red, polka-dotted cups. In this small, gay and bright paradise, everybody was pleased with life and discussed how good it was that work in the [cultural] club was becoming so well organized. . .'[11] Together with fresh underwear, clean shaven faces and other similar signs of personal hygiene, window curtains, lampshades and snow-white tablecloths became essential symbols of a cultivated household in the Soviet Union.[12] To this list one could add the appreciation of good food, chocolate included, and finer drinks like champagne and cognac.

As the historian Richard Stites has demonstrated[13] these newcomers appreciated privileges. They were also expected to develop decent manners and good taste, to act in a cultured way: 'The newcomers were invested with privilege and expected to develop respectable habits and tastes. . . They thirsted for old high culture as a badge of distinction; for entertainment they enjoyed sentimentalism, fun, uplift, and an affirmation of their values.'[14] Accordingly Stalin bought the loyalty of the new middle class with 'trinkets' but also with real privileges and access to traditional 'high culture' thereby allowing for widening status differences. These newcomers adopted light classical art as their status symbol, together with an eclectic collection of symbols of middle-class normality, such as happy and harmonious family life, and they invested in the future of their children and their education. The personal – even the relations between a man and a woman – was no longer in contradiction with the happiness of the state (see in particular the sentimental and extremely popular wartime songs 'Dark night' and 'In the dugout').

The educated people were at the avant-garde of taste and consumption too. They set the example for others to follow. They served as a model for the uneducated masses to respect and admire until that time came when such culture and material prosperity would be available for everyone.[15] They showed the way to the bright future. In the 1930s, the authorities made many concessions to popular taste and adopted a more permissive attitude toward consumption. At the same time, they actively worked on moulding the popular taste better to fit their ideals. In any case, the new consumerism was more effective and left more permanent, deeper marks in society than the earlier more direct attempts at social engineering and political agitation of the Cultural Revolution.

Socialist Realism as a Soviet Mentality

The problems of decorating and furnishing a family apartment with lampshades or new curtains, buying a nice set of silverware or organizing the work at the cultural club were hardly problems with which most Soviet people, in reality, were struggling daily in the 1930s or the 1950s. Such luxuries were clearly out of reach for most ordinary peasants or workers living with their families in one room in *kommunalki*, sharing a barrack with a dozen other comrades or living in country shacks or dugouts without any modern conveniences. They were only ideals or part of the dream worlds of popular literature or culture. But these dreams were encouraged by the authorities and shared by millions of fellow citizens. They represented ideals of socialist realism in the sphere of material culture.

Socialist realism was not realism of any kind. It was the direct opposite. It presented 'reality' in an idealized and beautified way. It was not meant to be a 'reflection' of reality with all its problems and contradictions. It was, in fact, a highly abstract art form, which 'abstracted' from reality only some selected features, which it then presented with full force. In his study *The End of Utopia* Morozov[16] argued that, contrary to popular belief, the only real challenge to socialist realism in art was not the various artistic vanguard movements that had flourished in the Soviet Union in the early 1920s but, in fact, classical realism.

The task of the Soviet artist following the principles of socialist realism was to reveal the tendencies often barely visible in the present socialist society. This explains also the high esteem accorded to artistic creativity and originality.[17] The task of the Soviet artist – or of the Soviet engineer – was to paint – or design – the picture of the society as it would be in the future once the 'positive' tendencies had all been realized and the negative, contradictory ones swept away. This also explains the quest for novelties in the sphere of material culture. This was to be a picture of a new abundant country and its strong and happily smiling inhabitants. The new society was waiting just around the corner – but it was still difficult to see to many a common eye since the clear vision was hindered or blurred by many remnants of the old class society. Therefore, one could not rely solely on the ability of individual people or individual artists to see the future as it inevitably would turn out to be. Only the Party could interpret future tendencies in a reliable manner and distinguish the genuinely socialist tendencies leading to communism from other, often threatening, ones. Therefore, the principle of *partiinost'*, loyalty to the principles of the Party, was to become the highest principle of socialist realism in art.

The Moscow metro served as one of the most visible symbols of the new spirit of the 1930s. Like the building of the White Sea canal (which is still commemorated daily by thousands of smokers of the *papirosy* Belomorkanal) or the power plant of Dneprostroi, the metro was one of the most ambitious socialist construction projects of the 1930s. As Morozov[18] has shown, the Moscow metro, with its

highly decorated underground stations, became a popular part of Soviet myth building. It was a concrete material symbol of the almost unnatural capacity of the working man of New Russia to conquer the earth. It symbolized the almost unlimited possibility of the purposeful transformation of the world, inside the earth.

Timothy Colton, in his history of the city of Moscow, described the meaning of the Moscow metro as follows: 'Finally, glamorous projects made sense as a source of vicarious satisfaction for the population, a first instalment of the good life to come. They would, as Lazar Kaganovich put it, refute the falsehood "that socialism is a barracks" peopled by look-alikes.'[19] Kaganovich, who was the party leader of Moscow at that time, formulated this principle in a condensed manner: 'When our worker takes the subway, he should be cheerful and joyous' feeling as if in 'a palace shining with the light of advancing, all victorious socialism.'[20]

The luxurious palace-like stations of the newly opened metro line in Moscow were thus intended to be palaces for the people, not only in the same way as former palaces of the Tsar or the Russian nobility had been turned either into museums, sanatoriums or clubs open to common people on special occasions.[21] The new palaces of metro stations were to become even more concretely part of everyday socialist life. Every Moscow inhabitant or visitor to the capital would pass through them on his or her way to work or on other daily errands. In doing so, he or she was not only reminded of the glorious future soon to come but could, in fact, enjoy a foretaste of it in practice by admiring the impressive stations.

Many advancements in the fields of material culture, other than architecture or city planning, can equally be understood as concrete tokens in miniature of the rapidly approaching bright socialist future. Whether a new perfume in a crystal bottle, a box of chocolates or a bottle of champagne given as a present on one's birthday or some public celebration or a new 'fashionable' pair of leather shoes or a winter coat, they all can equally be seen as if 'shining with the light of the advancing, all victorious socialism'. Much of the development of the Soviet material culture in the 1930s is evidence of such an attitude, either emphasizing the new cultured standard of Soviet life like champagne and perfumes or bearing witness to the victories of Soviet engineering like gramophones or motorbikes.

As Fitzpatrick has emphasized, 'Socialist realism was a Stalinist mentality, not just an artistic style. Ordinary citizens also developed the ability to see things as they were becoming and ought to be, rather than as they were.'[22] In the Soviet Union, everyone's eyes were turned towards the future. The past served only as a contrast to the new bright new future to come. The press photographs of the Soviet cameramen of the 1920s and the 1930s also bear witness to such an attitude. They often portray young men and women with bright, open, almost naïve-looking faces from an angle below, looking into the distant horizon.[23] The new vanguard was young – most Stakhanovites were in their early twenties. This was a youthful culture idealizing the youth – or a culture living for the sake of the future:

> It emphasised the youth, and the country, in fact, felt young and lived in the hopes for the future, in dynamic rhythm full of the powers of a young human being. . . Part of this worldview was shared by the older and middle aged generations. For the sake of the future people were ready to offer anything, to close their eyes for injustice and to justify any wrongdoing. . . . In addition, in their heads a thought dominated, a thought that to communism only a short distance remained to be covered. For the sake of this, they endured.'[24]

It is impossible to ignore the obvious contradiction between what was promised and what existed in practice. Immediately after the rationing of the most elementary commodities was abandoned, the authorities declared that a new era of general happiness had arrived. This was promulgated in the press, on the radio and in the movies, and the authorities took substantial measures to realize these promises. Big projects, demanding huge amounts of resources, both human and material, began and were followed up by big publicity campaigns. In a country of well over 150 million inhabitants starting at the production point of zero, one would have needed hundreds of millions of bottles of champagne or perfume or boxes of chocolate or thousands of new fashionable food stores in order to boast, even in principle, of having sufficient supply for the majority of citizens.

The average Soviet citizen certainly noticed the gap between theory and practice. After suffering the deprivations of the 1920s, people were eager to believe the talk about the good life. Yet they also knew from experience not to take such rhetoric at face value. Most Soviets were neither naive communist believers nor cynical citizens who either blindly believed everything that was said or had totally lost their faith in all the promises of the authorities. They willingly enjoyed the delights offered to them in their daily lives and endured the hardships in an expectation of a better future to come – or in the absence of any alternatives.