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The Rhetoric and Practice of Modernisation: Soviet Social Policy, 1917—1930s

Free education, public health care and social benefits that had been a fact of life for decades in the Soviet Union have now become an object of deep nostalgia for many people, especially the elderly. Social services¹ enveloped Soviet society, controlling the activity and thoughts of people for more than 70 years. These services were distributed not by a single occupational group such as social workers, but by different institutions and organisations in the domains of four ministries—Education, Health Care, Social Provision and Internal Affairs. Social care functions were also taken over by Communist Party organisations, *Comsomol* (Youth Communist Organisation) and trade unions. In early Soviet history, non-government organisations, too, played an active role in providing care for children, youth, women, the war-wounded and other vulnerable groups. Civic participation in community work was also high. Caring for those in need, this network of social services and professionals contributed to the development of a safety net for people, but at the same time, it was a means by which state control policies could be implemented.

The state and its various agents carried out this double-faced task of care and control at all levels of social life, moving gradually from tough and selective schemes of social security and insurance to the “bright future” of a communist welfare state. The development of Soviet social policy followed the ideological formulae common in many industrial countries during the modernisation period. Our aim in this study was not to identify the shortcomings of the Soviet model but, following the idea of Christina Kiaer and Eric Naiman, to use the forms taken by everyday life and the modern subject in the Soviet Union as a way to call into question our own certainty about how these phenomena work (Kiaer/Naiman 2006: 3)

According to Sheila Fitzpatrick, who combined anthropological and historical methods to describe the everyday life of “homo sovieticus”, the USSR was something like school, barracks and charity house rolled into one (Fitzpatrick 1999). Social care and social control practices were carried out by different professional and quasi-professional assistants—educators in youth and children’s cultural centres and clubs, activists in women’s organisations and trade unions, teachers at schools and

¹ We use the term “social services” neutrally. In the first six months of socialism the term “social care” (*sotsialnoe prizrenie*) was used, but as early as April 1918 this was changed to *sotsialnoe obespechenie* (social provision). The term social work was not in use, as the communists denounced any similarity between their social services and “bourgeois” Western welfare.

educators in kindergartens and orphanages, nurses and visiting nurses at polyclinics, and officials of domestic affairs departments.

The population viewed the government and its agents as the source of both well-being and trouble.

This article focuses on social policy during the first decades of the “Republic of Labour” when the ideology of care and control was established in accordance with the demands of industrial growth, formulating particular definitions of normality and deviance (Lebina 1999). In this quest for normality, classifications of worthy and unworthy behaviour and activities were established, and the rhetoric distinguishing “us” and “them” intensified. We show how egalitarian social and democratic principles existed alongside conservative stratification guidelines without contradiction, and how the rhetoric of social care varied dramatically from its practical implementation.

1. From charity to scientific management: utopias and realities of the first stage of social policy (1917–1921)

Vic George and Nick Manning call the first stage of Soviet social policy from 1917 to 1921 *utopian* (George/Manning 1980). During that period, social problems were viewed as the consequences of war and unfair social arrangements under capitalism. Very early, Soviet authorities realised that they needed to encourage rapid social change under discouraging conditions: the basis for economic and social reform was still weak; the population was overwhelmingly illiterate and suffered from epidemics of cholera, typhus and influenza. Mass volunteer movements and new forms of volunteer organisations were mobilised to combat these and other problems but they achieved little and change was slow (Manning/Davidova 2001: 203).

On 30 October 1917, the People’s Labour Commissariat published a declaration establishing the principles of universal insurance, the self-management of workers in insurance bodies and a maximum level of material security for workers and members of their families in all kinds of insurance. These social guarantees for workers were introduced in the context of a reorientation of industrial management, with experiments in strengthening self-management at factories and spreading worker control. It was followed by a number of decrees, including one that provided insurance retroactively in case of unemployment and pregnancy, and illness or injury since December 1917. The compensations were intended for workers and had to be financed by employers.

When the civil war began, this reform strategy gradually gave way to the principles of military communism (from June 1918 to December 1920). The Bolsheviks employed tough sanctions against workers and employees in their efforts to control production and consumption in accordance

with Lenin's ideas about rational state management. In his work *The State and Revolution*, written in September 1917, Lenin described rational state management as a nation-wide syndicate, a technical network consisting of cells with workers accustomed to rationality and discipline (Lenin 1932).

In an attempt to maintain the loyalty and support of the peasantry in the civil war, the state at that time marginally widened its concept of social welfare both in terms of the risks and the population groups it covered, including peasants in the list of beneficiaries. In addition, state insurance covered all types of risk, including unemployment, illness, pregnancy, disability, old age, widowhood and funeral expenses. In reality, however, the priorities of social security lay with the Red Army and the families of those killed at the front (George/Manning 1980: 35–36).

Social inequality was redefined through the formation of new Soviet estates: The *nomenklatura* and a new system of privileges created new Soviet classes despite the regime's rhetoric of universality and equality. Soviet social policy claimed on the one hand to be egalitarian along the lines of social democracy, but on the other hand it actively contributed to a social stratification similar to that of a conservative regime (Jacobson 2006). Stratification occurred through membership in the *nomenklatura* and through government distribution of such benefits as comfortable housing and access to high-quality goods and services. The lower social orders in this period, together with prostitutes and criminals, included a large group of "old" and "alien" elements, meaning elite representatives of the pre-Revolutionary epoch and so-called "enemies of the people". There appeared subtle mechanisms for distinguishing between "ours" and "theirs", and at the same time the groups discriminated against developed various tactics of escape, concealment and mimicry. (Fitzpatrick 1999).

The official Marxist explanation of social problems stressed the role of social disparity, poverty and illiteracy in high infant mortality rate and inequality between men and women. The desired social changes depended on strong involvement of the population in mass campaigns and volunteer mobilisation aimed at solving socially important problems. One of the social engineering projects of the time was "social maternity", i.e. the involvement of the state and society in solving family problems (see e.g., Goldman 1993). Special legislation and institutional infrastructure were created in order to implement the new policy and wide propaganda strategies were used (Gradsкова 2005). Under this legislation, women workers were promised vacations and financial support upon giving birth, child care, the right to obtain alimony through court where fathers refused to "provide material support" for the child, and the right to abortion at will, as well as limits to work that would be detrimental to their health at certain stages of pregnancy.

The modernising ideals and norms of state ideology particularly targeted women and the family as

it penetrated into people's lives. Women workers' and peasants' emancipation, propaganda about private, domestic and public hygiene, collectivisation of child care, cooking and consumption of food were all elements of the new life, of social engineering ideas and practices that could not be imposed upon people from above (Trotsky 1923: 41, 54). This is why the campaign of new ideas and knowledge propaganda had an important role in social maternity policy. Trade unions and workers in women's organisations carried out propaganda among women in the form of lectures, talks and non-party conferences, explaining the new possibilities that Soviet legislation provided: the right to work equally with men, to obtain illness insurance, to earn an equal minimum wage and annual paid holidays. A new image of the Soviet woman and her responsibilities as worker and mother were created.

However, there was a considerable gap between the revolutionary rhetoric of gender equality and its implementation. Shortcomings in the legislation, the persistence of traditional behaviour among the population as well as a lack of state resources made it difficult to release women from "kitchen slavery". Day nurseries and kindergartens opened at trade unions, or as separate institutions, but they could neither accommodate all the children nor provide the desired moral and physical upbringing (Smirnova 2003: 226-246; Hoffman 2000).

In the first half of the 1920s, legal norms concerning the labour protection of pregnant and breast-feeding women were often violated, and working conditions often did not meet sanitary and hygienic standards. Women delegates backed by women's organisations attempted to improve sanitary and hygienic conditions but could not significantly alter the situation. Labour inspectors and trade unions intervened when pregnant women were dismissed from their jobs and tried to restore them to their positions. Another factor of gender inequality in labour relations was that women generally had lower qualifications, so their wages were significantly lower than those paid to qualified (mostly male) workers.

2. Norms and anomalies of social life: the second period of Soviet social policy, 1921-1927

In the so-called *urban* period of social policy (1921-1927) during the New Economic Policy, there were signs of a return to more realistic social policies. As economic conditions improved, the practices of social protection increasingly corresponded to doctrine, at least concerning industrial workers. Gradually, the scope of insurance widened, partly as a result of legislation and partly because of an increase in the number of workers (George/Manning 1980: 38). From the 1920s to the mid 1930s, a conflict in values concerning certain social problems was apparent. There was a clear shift from the struggle against objective conditions (civil war) to the struggle against a stigmatised, problematic group (eg. *kulaks*, rich peasants). The notion of problematic groups justified the use of

violence, since enlightenment could not bring about the necessary changes at the desired speed (Manning/Davidova 2001: 204).

The policy that categorised workers as more or less worthy reflected the demands of the labour market at the time. If under the 1918 legislation unemployment benefits were available for all unemployed, after the decree of 1921 they were granted only to qualified workers who had no other means of subsistence and to non-qualified workers with three years job experience. The latter requirement excluded a great many unemployed people from the list of beneficiaries. Those with temporary medical problems enjoyed somewhat more favourable conditions than unemployed or disabled people. In the period 1924—28, monthly pensions paid between 31 and 36 per cent of the average wage, while temporary disability benefits reached 95 per cent of the average wage (George/Manning 1980: 35).

3. “Warmed by Stalin’s sun”. Toughening of social policy in the 1930s

The New Economic Policy was followed by a Five-year plan with its traumatic turn to industrialisation and collectivisation of agriculture. From the start of the first Five-year plan and throughout the Stalin era, or the *industrial* period (1927—1953), social policy was subordinated to rapid industrial growth designed to increase the regime’s industrial and military power. Social policy conformed to the policy of stimulating labour activity, and played an important role in improving labour discipline and productivity.

Less care more control

Benefit payments were still defined by precise employment conditions. Children were a priority group as were workers, especially those working in key sectors of economy, those with long experience and the “most efficient workers” (*peredoviki proizvodstva*). It was necessary constantly to increase the labour force in order to ensure rapid industrial growth. This was done first by cancelling unemployment benefits in 1930. In 1938, maternity leave allowed women to keep part of their pension, and all their pension benefits in addition to their wages (however, the pensions were greatly reduced by the effects of inflation).

The labour resources that were not employed at that moment were a potentially active labour force of the future, including the unemployed, young people, women, people with disabilities, criminal offenders whose position was anomalous but could be corrected. These groups formed a “labour army in reserve”, their status being defined not by what they were but what they might become (Bauman 2001). And though “reservists” could not be properly fed, they got crumbs of social care

according to their category.

As state social policy endeavoured to solve some problems, it exacerbated others. Thus, social expulsion was one method used to deal with unemployment (see for example Caroli 2003). From the beginning, the Bolshevik's claim to provide universal well-being dove-tailed with the labour movement's demand to improve social insurance. But soon after the socialist revolution, the interests of the political establishment, which were to put an end to dissidence, provide constant growth of labour resources and keep them at the ready, became dominant (see for example Koenker 2005).

The allegiance of the trade union movement changed very quickly. In the beginning it tried to balance the interests of workers and production, but as early as the 1920s it merged with management. Receiving no response to their demands, those who were left without care found alternative means to express their feelings and to satisfy their needs.

Inertia, slowdowns, and other traditional mechanisms greeted unpopular directives at the point of production, while in workers' lives the promotion of Soviet culture foundered on issues that ranged from preferences for drinking and dancing above more "proletarian" pursuits, avoidance of workers' clubs as dens of youthful "hooligans", and non-attendance at factory meetings (Husband 2007: 796).

In response, the state imposed tough sanctions. All kinds of "parasitism and freeloading" (*tuneiadstvo*) were to be eradicated and any one who left the assembly line was to be returned to work.

This approach applied to people with disabilities as well. In 1931 the state defined the degree of disability according to one's ability or inability to perform one's duties in the production process. The primary social security bodies were to promote rationally grounded employment by training and retraining people with disabilities; a system of categorising people and placing them in different institutions was developed. This work was carried out via specialised *artels* (workshops) and cooperatives that appeared in the 1920s, the activity of special commissions for employment of people with disabilities in regions, areas and cities, and the assigning of a certain proportion of job vacancies to people with disabilities. These vacancies were mainly occupied by civil war veterans with mild disabilities. The class approach was used while working with these groups of people, too:

We can not employ and train people with disabilities who belong to socially alien elements. These include disabled veterans of the White guard, *kulak*, ex-fabricants, landed gentry, gendarmes, etc. (Verzhbilovskij, 1934: 359; authors' translation).

In the 1920s there was no consensus in values but there was an effort to identify and stigmatise

problematic groups. In the 1930s, under Stalin, a consensus of values appeared: “parasites”, different kinds of labour discipline violators and “enemies of the people” were identified as undesirable. (Manning/Davidova 2001: 208). Supply and discipline of the labour force was the state’s main problem and everything that hindered its solution was considered damaging. In order to prevent resistance, new labour patterns were developed, such as highly disciplined work habits, workers being organised into collectives, the social organisation of bodies working on an assembly line, driven by so-called “socialist competition” and embodied in Stakhanov’s achievements², backed by differentiated remuneration of types of work and social guarantees. From 1927, absence from the working place without reasonable excuse (illness had to be verified by a medical note) could lead to dismissal, eviction from housing provided by the collective and loss of other privileges.

The rules under which a worker could claim social security and payments for sick leave became tougher and tougher. In 1938, workers received work-books that tracked their work experience and places of employment. Social insurance contributed to this policy: benefits differed according to work experience and in some cases uninterrupted employment at one and the same institution was an important criterion. By the end of the 1930s, uninterrupted employment became the main factor determining the size of a worker’s insurance in some institutions. “Drifters and shirkers” were “not only to be punished in court but also to be expelled from the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks) or from the All-Union Lenin Young Communist League as persistent violators of state and party discipline”. Directors of institutions and heads of companies “tolerating shirkers and protecting them under different pretexts from court” were also punished. These tough controls peaked in 1940, when a worker leaving his or her place of work without permission could be put on trial and sent to prison (Central Committee 1940; author’s’ translation).

Both criminal liability and social insurance in the 1930s were organised in accordance with state economic priorities.

Anti-social policy

People working in industrial production, the central plank of the Five-year plan, or in high-risk work, could earn higher wages, but in any case, those with uninterrupted work experience for a certain length of time, trade union members and workers adhering to tough labour discipline had priority rights for sick leave, child care leave, and benefits and pensions. However, these benefits covered neither specialists, engineers and scientists working in prisons from the mid-1920s whose

² Alexey Stakhanov was a miner who became a celebrity through his multiple surpassing of set production targets in 1935. The Stakhanov movement was intended to increase workers’ productivity and demonstrate the superiority of the socialist economic system. Its followers were called “Stakhanovites”.

work was used in special scientific research institutes and construction departments behind barbed wire (Directive 1930), nor geologists exploring the subsurface while confined in the many Gulags. In the 1930s, peasants were not even considered worthy as labour reservists. A memorandum of Gulag management of 3 July 1933 to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolshevik) (CCCPSU-B) and Workers' and Peasants' Inspection noted that due to failures to meet production quotas by forced settlers in the north western part of the USSR, Siberia (*spetspereselentsy*) and the Ural and northern regions, there were cases of people eating inedible substances, cats, dogs and animal carcasses; the sickness rate increased by 50 per cent, and the death rate increased too; a number of suicides took place and crime increased. Famished *spetspereselentsy*

are unable to fulfil the production quotas and hence get fewer foodstuffs and become completely disabled. There are cases of *spetspereselentsy* dying of starvation at work and at home upon returning from work (Zemskov 1991: 11; authors' translation).

Frost, disease, famine, unsettled living conditions, and lack of means of subsistence caused the deaths of hundreds of people, including women and children who under different circumstances would have qualified for state care. But in this case there was a different logic: the harsher the fate of "alien elements" and outcasts, the better the conditions of the others (Bauman 2001).

Production and reproduction: Women as a new Soviet labour force

Emphasis on rapid industrialisation meant intensification in the growth of the labour force, the need for which was satisfied at the expense of women and peasants. This inexperienced, untrained and undisciplined work force took part in expanded industrial production. Soviet power needed to eradicate illiteracy, spread occupational skills among large groups of villagers and to teach them the norms of industrial culture. Social insurance was used as a weapon against "disorganisers" and as an educational measure to attract workers to their collectives, and especially to turn peasants accused of "proprietary attitudes" who demanded high wages, supplies of goods and decent housing, into workers. They were to be reoriented to understand the necessity for productivity increases, the creation of key industrial branches and relatedly, for joining their collectives.

"Equality" between women and men was constantly reinterpreted to meet economic policy needs, while the rhetoric often differed radically from the practice. The November 1928 Plenary session of the CCCPSU-B, while debating the first results of the introduction of the seven-hour working day, offered the People's Labour Committee, the Supreme Council of National Economy and the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions the right to enforce the resolution to excuse pregnant and

breast-feeding women from working night shifts at factories that had already introduced or were going to introduce the seven-hour working day. Equality, necessary to provide workers for the industrialisation program, was to be achieved via advanced training and the use of female labour in non-traditional spheres such as the majority of heavy industry branches.

Broad involvement of female labour in industrial production began after the issuance of the People's Commissar Council of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) resolution "On using female labour in production, in state and cooperative organisations" of 19 May 1931. In 1932, the People's Labour Committee developed new labour protection legislation, according to which the number of "non-female professions" was decreased. Discussions about links between the involvement of women in industrial production and deterioration of their health were called "opportunistic theory" (Morozova 2005).

In the 1930s, millions of women became part of the industrialisation drive's labour reserve—the increase in female labour outpaced male labour increases, partly as a result of political repression, of which men were the principle target. As a result, women not only gained access to the professions, but were also eagerly accepted into positions and industries that had traditionally been male, gained opportunities for rapid career advancement and filled the growing number of vacant positions in both towns and countryside. However, to cite Buckley's metaphor, the ideological torch cast light on their collective achievements but not on the problems they faced (Buckley 1989: 113).

The unequal position of women in industrial production remained. Women fell under a double standard: on the one hand it was announced that female involvement in production was necessary, but on the other hand it turned out that women could get only hard and unskilled work. The People's Labour Committee of RSFSR studies that were widely publicised claimed that under equal conditions female labour productivity is sometimes even higher than male productivity. This helped overcome suspicions about women workers and their involvement in industrial production. Soon a woman at a machine became "normal". Women became engineers, technicians, foremen, but the qualifications of most workers, especially women, were still quite low. The female Stakhanovite's wage was higher than a regular worker's but inflation and payment delays consumed much of this growth, and women workers' living standards in the 1930s were very poor.

A deficiency of consumer products, low quality social services and the preservation of traditional gender roles led to increased labour pressure on the female population (Morozova 2005). Constant calls to improve consumer services for working women, the wide use of workers' initiatives in building children's institutions, diners and laundries, as well as resolutions of the CCCPSU-B and All-Russian meetings in the late 1920s and early 1930s concerning the organisation of mass day nursery services, indicate the acuteness of this problem and the lack of solutions to it.

The state's need for women to produce and reproduce, as well as their role in maintaining certain social and material conditions (at a time of millions of homeless children, poorly-financed orphanages, a growth in the teenage crime rate and a wide-spread irresponsibility among fathers), encouraged a policy to restore a more traditional family and maternity model (see Goldman 1993). In the 1920-1930s, almost all the developed industrial countries of Europe and America strengthened an ideology

according to which maternity was the highest mission of every woman and her national duty... The uniqueness of the Soviet variant was that... needing women at production as never before, the state at the same time could not afford to decrease women's role in the reproduction sphere (Chernyaeva 2004: 134; authors' translation).

Pregnancy and maternity at that period were treated like a production activity along with other kinds of work.

This policy had its scientific rationale. In 1934, the Soviet government initiated wide-scale demographic research which revealed a sharp decrease in the birth rate linked with urbanisation and female involvement in production work force—tendencies which were to continue in the course of industrialisation (Strumilin 1957). Moreover, the research showed that social groups with higher wages had lower birth rates. These findings contradicted earlier presuppositions that the birth rate would rise with an improvement in living conditions. The conclusion was that low birth rates were due to women choosing to have abortions—women who could afford children but who, according to officials, decided not to have children for personal, selfish ideas (see Hoffmann, 2000). Calling birth a highly natural process, the authorities exploited female reproductivity without compensation and without decreasing pressure on women in the industrial production sphere (Chernyaeva 2004: 135).

During this period, as distinct from the period of military communism when the Soviet government had promised the people much more than it could give, the authorities managed to provide the population with some of the promised benefits (Madison 1968). The successful completion of the first Five-year plan meant that the number of people eligible for insurance increased from 10.8 million in 1928 to 25.6 million in 1936, and 31.2 million in 1940 (George/Manning 1980: 41). However, such benefits mainly accrued to the urban population and were much more restricted for the more numerous rural population, and collective farmers still relied on *artel* and self-help societies.

As for the urban population, the aim of production discipline justified the tough measures of the state modernisation policy. New disciplinary forms were introduced, demanding internalisation of fixed standards of hygiene, physical exercise and diet (Damkjaer 1998: 119–120). The “moral

order” system was part of a management strategy that contributed to labour productivity increases.

Conclusions

In the 1920 and 1930s, Soviet social policy developed according to a scenario quite typical of capitalism in that epoch, wherein many industrially developed countries engaged in significant state intervention in the economy. However, in contrast to the capitalist character of the means used in those countries, state and bureaucratic modernisation in the USSR provided economic growth against the background of socialist rhetoric and in conditions of complete nationalisation of production and distribution.

The advantage of the new power was legitimacy of the activity *ex adverso*—all problems were attributed to the remnants of tsarism and capitalism, the difficult heritage of the past, and the only way to overcome these problems was to alter property relations (“to free up labour”) and (re)train people, to manage the masses and to form a new collective ethos. The Bolshevik state tried to rewrite the history of humankind from scratch, laying all responsibility for all problems including social ones—famine, unemployment, prostitution, orphanhood, disability and disparity—at the feet of the old tsarist regime and relieving itself of all responsibility.

Although in the course of the first decade of Soviet power the aims of social policy were guided by an egalitarian ideology, in reality this universal policy was hard to implement because of the lack of resources. Besides, equality of rights was accessible only to workers, i.e. the proletariat and employees of companies. The majority of the population—craftsmen and peasants—could join self-help societies that were supplemented by various and inadequate means including self-paid contributions. For economic and ideological reasons, payment of benefits to working people was differentiated, leading to new forms of social disparity particularly at the beginning of the 1920s when unemployment was especially high.

Because of the lack of adequate resources to solve a wide range of social problems, the government concentrated its efforts on focussing the population’s attention on this or that important task.

Working day, meals and leisure regimes, reproductive behaviour and sexual life—all were submitted to the economic and ideological demands of a precise period in Soviet state development.

The ideology of modernisation penetrates into the social and political rhetoric of that time. The Marxist understanding of social problems was rooted in social disparity, as well as in the idea that the masses could overcome the difficulties via public resources mobilisation (concepts of social motherhood, community, collectivist upbringing, useful community work and voluntary work). These concepts were expanded with the ideology of scientific, rational management of society and

the individual, hence the development of social hygiene and social engineering paradigms that seized the imagination of Party management and intellectuals. These paradigms were embodied in the thoughts and everyday practices of ordinary people, whose lives had to be built around the so-called “conscious cultural axis.”

There was a wide gap between the socialist rhetoric of emancipation, equality and public democracy on the one hand, and the practical implementation of these principles on the other. Ideas about social norms and so-called “social illnesses”, pathologies and anomalies, at the beginning of the period in question were the subject of conflicts over values, debated and re-defined, and during “the great retreat”³ they were brought to a relative consensus. Social protection priorities were defined according to the strategic aims of economy, hence individual rights to welfare and services were influenced by labour records and political opinions. At the same time, labour discipline and employment intensification in industry affected both family and the educational system. Pursuit of the quickest route to increased industrialisation led to alterations not only in labour relations but also in family relations. Social policy turned more and more towards control, dictation and even terror.

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³ One of the names for Stalin's politics in the period of 1934—1941, which were a repudiation of many of the aspirations of the Russian Revolution; the same period is also known as the “Great Terror”.

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