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On Russian metaphysics of communication

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FORUM

On Russian metaphysics of communication

(1) The postmodern challenge and our answer to it

Contemporary society is experiencing a need for metaphysics. The immanent nature of the mass consumption society has made this need particularly acute. This need is the very essence of a literal realization of Enlightenment humanism's great project, along with its slogans: 'All in the name of the person! All for the good of man! Man is the measure of all things!' In this society, any need can be realized, if it is effectively articulated by someone. As a result, all values (including transcendental values) are leveled by the common denominator of marketization. However, this total consumption of values has no meaning in and of itself. Meaning always involves context. Postmodernism is a liminal episode, a point of transition to a new re-aggregation. As it is commonly agreed upon, every cultural development as a process of transition involves two stages: the first stage deals with liminality – going beyond the usual boundaries and generating new meanings; and the second stage deals with re-aggregation, or aligning meanings of a new system of comprehension. According to the Russian formalists, such as Viktor Shklovsky and Yuri Tynyanov, creativity also includes two stages: (1) the estrangement of usual senses and (2) the new montage, the installation of a new semantic structure. Modern man, when seen in this transitional light, is now experiencing an intense desire for transcendental experience and metaphysics as a means of knowing the world.

Russian postmodernism is not an oxymoron. Both Russian and Soviet cultures have commonly been both imperial and eclectic in nature. We should indeed distinguish between two levels of Russian culture: the first, or grassroots culture, contains at least 10–12 Russian ethnic groups, with substantial differences between each group; and the second, upper, level of elite culture (the city of culture) includes a French classical ballet, Italian opera, Viennese operetta, and so on. This second culture developed primarily as a response to, and reception of, European cultures: in this sense, this second group can be considered the most postmodern.

(2) Roots of metaphysics

I agree with Dr Schrag: St Petersburg is the key to understanding Russian metaphysics. Firstly, urbanization plays a crucial role in the formation of a national consciousness. Secondly, St Petersburg embodies the reforms of Peter the Great, the personification of the *eidōs* of the European-style capital. Thirdly and finally, St Petersburg is an extremely semiotic city, as is shown in Vladimir Toporov's and Dmitriy Likhachev's studies, (Likhachev, 2006; Toporov, 1995) and in my work as well. (Tulchinsky, 2004, 2007) St Petersburg is a city-brand: it is the promise of realizing the dream of a rational life in Russia.

However, as we talk about the metaphysics of a Russian city, we should also speak about Russian countryside. G. Gachev's works provide rich material for understanding rural metaphysics. He examines a system of mythopoetical images gleaned from Russian literature: the metaphysics of light, water, land and rural roads. (Gachev, 1995)

(3) Looking for/into the soul of Russia

Dostoevsky and Tolstoy both can be seen as forerunners of the failed Reformation orthodoxy, in existential terms. Both Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoyevsky wrote about large-scale problems of human existence while writing about their relationships to God. In their own way, each opened a depth of self-awareness that made sense of the ideas of philosophers, and helped to integrate philosophical thought into the public consciousness. However, other Russian writers, in their works, helped manifest the very Russian soul itself. Alexander Pushkin and Ivan Goncharov showed the soul of aristocratic intellectuals, while Maxim Gorky presented the soul of Russian *lumpens*. The essence of Soviet mentality is represented in the texts of Andrei Platonov, Arkady Gaidar, Vladimir Makanin and Victor Pelevin. Andrei Platonov, for instance, created a whole new mythology, based on a synthesis of Marxist ideas and the ideas of the Russian cosmism. Arkady Gaidar, Vladimir Makanin and Victor Pelevin described the phenomenology of the Soviet consciousness of the 1930s, 1980s and 1990s, respectively.

(4) Minimalist metaphysics

Minimalist metaphysics is a very worthy idea. The writings of Martin Buber, Emile Levinas and Mikhail Bakhtin provided a basis for such a metaphysics. Mikhail Bakhtin's model seems deeper and more exact: the metaphysics of responsibility, of thinking as participation in being. Bakhtin, thus, opens the foundation and examines the core of a minimalist metaphysics, which Dr Schrag seeks.

Russian philosophy has promising conceptual resources for the development of metaphysics: not only in cosmism but also in *imeslavie* (nameworship),¹ which has had a significant influence on philosophy (Sergij Bulgakov, Pavel Florensky and Alexej Losev), poetry (Osip Mandelstam and Anna Akhmatova) and mathematics (Dmitrij Egorov and Nikolaj Luzin). (Graham & Kantor, 2009)

(5) A metaphysics to live by

These ideas are valuable and relevant. They are connected with the finitude of human existence. The sense we make of the universe we live in is the result of attempts of a finite something (us, human beings) to comprehend the infinite nature of the world. Each person perceives infinity through his or her own point of view.

(6) A personal identity

Dr Schrag considers a notion of personal identity as being crucial to minimalist metaphysics. That is a correct assertion, but, at the same time, it is not. An individual in the world today is a realization of many identities, such as ethnicity, citizenship, status and role. Moreover, one's personal identity is a group project, a social construction. However, one's main identity, conversely, is also a 'man without qualities'², a kind of assemblage point of freedom and responsibility.

(7) The future of metaphysics

Metaphysics is eternal while humans are alive. Human understanding is a search for context that defines its own meaning. Understanding involves going into outside ourselves, and the Ultimate 'Outside Ourselves', so to speak, is God. Therefore, the practices of transcending are essentially communicative. Mikhail Bakhtin spoke about dialog as a fundamental characteristic of being

human. Understanding can be either identification with others, of finding another in them or of finding themselves in me. However, the general case (as a synthesis of all these variants) is an intersection of dialog and an interaction between semantic (sense) structures. As the human body is formed within the mother's body, so the soul is formed in the 'bosom' of communication with others: the human soul is the result of a spirit bonded with others. There is no consciousness without communication.

Notes

1. This refers to the doctrine proclaiming that merely speaking the name of God carries sacred significance. This doctrine was rejected by the Russian Orthodox Church in 1913. However, it left a deep imprint on the Russian culture.
2. The expression goes back to the title of the famous novel by Robert Musil.

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