

## EDITORIAL

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The conference on *Postcommunism: Rethinking the Second World* sponsored by the Center For Cultural Studies at the University of California in Santa Cruz in March 1993, was an unusual event for the Center. Its main activity is in the field of postcolonial studies which emerged as a discipline devoted to the so-called Third World and its complex relationship with the First World or the West. Being neither the West nor the rest, the Soviet Union with its vast territory and sphere of influence east of Vienna remained an anomaly. Since 1989 events of great magnitude, both velvet and violent, have triggered unprecedented and pressing changes that constitute a challenge to the former Soviet bloc as well as to the West, as it attempts to come to grips with the 'new world disorder'.

In his introduction to the conference, the Center's director, James Clifford, noted that this was also a challenge for the western theories of nationalism, postcolonialism, and postmodernism which require modification to accommodate the Second World with its distinct dynamic national histories. For those of us in Slavic Studies the last few years have been breathtaking – this traditionally insular field has had to change considerably to keep up with events. The conference provided a much needed forum for a dialogue between Slavists and scholars from other fields.

The predicament of western and American Slavists is profiled by Michael Holquist in his 'Ten Theses on the Relevance of Cultural Criticism in Russian Studies (History, Myth, Biography)'. Holquist points out how the recent changes affect scholarly discourse, unsettling the traditional disciplinary order led by politics and economics, which viewed literary studies with suspicion. However, as Kremlinology has become obsolete, the study of culture is seen as crucial at this critical juncture, because of its ability to address the urgent question of 'how to interpret the enormity of the disparity between what *was* and now *is*, and the rapidity with which that fissure opened up in history'. Holquist suggests that at this time of Russia's search for a new narrative or biography of nation, students of Russian culture can contribute to the quest for a story 'that contains changes so great and so manifold that they beggar all traditional schemes for investing contingency with an aura of necessity'.

The articles collected in this issue of *New Formations* represent some of the current work being done in this direction. Their focus is primarily on transformations in the cultural sphere, considered in the context of political and economic change. The essays explore how the communist cultural past and its legacy affect the efforts of national and cultural redefinition in the former USSR. Among the issues addressed are the continuities and dislocations in

emerging narratives of cultural, national, and ethnic identity; the effects of the disappearance of the cultural hegemony of the state, its support for culture and its gradual replacement by the cultural marketplace; the emergence of popular culture; the predicament of the intelligentsia; the uses of patterns of past cultural history to imagine the present. Though the essays present different aspects or constitutive parts of the story of Russia's present, in no way do they attempt to assemble a coherent narrative. The process of change is continued and unpredictable. The task now, both for Russian and western scholars, is to find a discourse adequate to the present situation as it unfolds.

Language reflects current social turmoil and is in a state of flux. The use of 'ideology', the most loaded word at this time, had to be suspended. Terms like Marxism, anarchy, colony, empire, political, private property, nationalism, feminism, culture are either mired in old associations or appear ambiguous, either because their currency is tied to the immediate past or because their western counterparts do not apply. The process of conversion of western terms to common usage involves a creation of new vocabulary with cognates or equivalents. This is especially striking in the world of business as Russia, along with the rest of the former Eastern Bloc moves 'from the Berlin wall to the Berlin Mall' in Andrei Codrescu's apt phrase.<sup>1</sup> In a *New York Times Magazine* article (October 18, 1992), Serge Schmemmann quotes a string of new business terms adopted from English: '*menedzhment, brokery, dilery, konvertatsiya, lizing, and holdingovye kompanii.*' Other new words and concepts that are now in limited circulation are: market, mafia, gender, popular culture, postmodern, borders, new age spirituality. In the process of change, old terms require reconceptualization, while new ones are borrowed and adapted.

A lack of a useful term for the social transformation taking place in the former USSR since 1991 is significant. The changes – economic, political, social, and cultural – appear too great to fit under a single, totalizing heading. The name *perestroika*, once so resonant and promising, has passed into history with Gorbachev's political demise. (Note that no new meaningful or catchy name has replaced it, while the current terms, change or transition, are both admittedly vague.) In the article titled 'After Socialism' published in *Literaturnaia Gazeta* (August 2, 1993) Aleksei Kiva offers an ironic answer to the question of what is happening in the country: 'We have refused building communism and are now erecting capitalism.' He also tries the common evasive alternative 'we are in transition', but with a qualification: 'as far as the strategic programme of post-Soviet society is concerned, neither in eighty-five nor later, has anyone come up with slogan "Forward, to the victory of capitalism!"'

Note also that until the dissolution of the Soviet Union no one referred to Russia as a 'colonial' state, certainly the Russians themselves least of all. But now that the former empire has entered the postcolonial stage, the phrase 'near abroad' was coined to describe Russia's uneasy relations with the former republics. There are signs that the army, having gained influence since the bloody events of October 1993, hopes to re-establish definite presence and reassert control on some of its borders.<sup>2</sup> There is also a strong Eurasian

1. Andrei Codrescu, *The Disappearance of the Outside: A Manifesto for Escape*, Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., New York, 1990.

2. Robert Cullen, 'Nationalism Explodes: Russia Confronts Its "Near Abroad"', *The Nation*, 20 September 1993, pp274-6.

movement as outlined by the well-known film director, Nikita Mikhalkov, who invokes Russia's 'natural' ties with Asia in his article, provocatively titled 'Nous les Eurasiens' that appeared in a Parisian journal *Lettre Internationale* in Spring 1993. Using formulas that play on the Petrine idea of building St Petersburg as a 'window to Europe', Mikhalkov claims that Russia is tired of being the 'backyard' of Europe and wants to 'open the door' to Asia instead. An absurd gesture in this direction was made in a glossy magazine, *VIP International Magazine About and For the Decision Makers* (no. 7, 1992), where Alexei Malashenko insisted that Russia has much more in common with Arab states than it does with Europe. These ideas harken back to the post-revolutionary Scythian movement headed by some of the best of the Russian intelligentsia at the time, such as the great Symbolist poet Aleksandr Blok. In his 1918 poem 'The Scythians' he identifies Russia with Asia – 'we are multitudes' – and reminds Europe that while Russia constitutes its only protection from Asia, it can also turn against it if provoked.

Traditional Russian ambivalence vis-à-vis the West has surfaced anew as encounters between East and West remain charged with Russia's acute sense of economic inferiority. One example from a recent article in a Moscow newspaper *Independent Newspaper (Nezavisimaia Gazeta)*, entitled 'The New Russians: Coming Out in High Society', referred to a meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos that included Russian participants for the first time. There were fifty of them and they paid an admission price of \$10,000! These new Russian millionaires affirm without false modesty that *they*, and not the president or the government, hold the keys to Russia. They also hold the keys to postcommunist culture.

The Russian intelligentsia, the traditional guardian of the country's narrative of national identity and high culture, has suffered a loss of status and can no longer maintain its leadership position. A recent article in *Literaturnaia Gazeta* claims that writers are now 'used as toothpicks' and everyone is mad: 'the writer at literature, because it is not a textbook of human life, and the "engineers of the human soul" because they were called that.'<sup>3</sup> The situation was confirmed by Yeltsin himself when he met with a group of writers and intellectuals invited to his residence about a month before the October 1993 uprising in Moscow: 'We meet but rarely and the state experiences a lack (*defitsit*) of culture, while at the same time you are feeling an under-utilization of possibilities of the creative intelligentsia.'<sup>4</sup> At this meeting, this group of progressive intelligentsia urged Yeltsin to dissolve the old Parliament dominated by the conservatives. Katerina Clark examines the crisis of the intelligentsia and its various adjustments to the present conditions in her essay. The intellectuals hastened to distinguish 'who among them stands under the banner of Sakharov, and who under the banner of Solzhenitsyn', in the effort to function in a situation of 'defamiliarisation' from the established institutional and linguistic structures that are in the process of transformation or disappearance.

Some key concepts have proven useful in mapping out the cultural processes in the emergent postcommunist culture. It is a time of *reinventing culture and*

3. *Literaturnaia Gazeta*,  
4 August 1993, n.31, p.3.

4. *Literaturnaia Gazeta*,  
2 September 1993,  
n.38.

nation. The most striking icons of the dissolution of the Soviet state have reached us through the successive images of its monuments being toppled off pedestals and sold or destroyed. The legacy of the Soviet system remains most visible in monumental propaganda, with its greatest symbol the Lenin mausoleum. Vitaly Komar and Alex Melamid express serious concern about the preservation of monuments and offer a call for creative ideas from artists that 'will transform their meaning and possibly salvage them from destruction'. One of the two documents from their project 'What Is To Be Done with Monumental Propaganda' is a letter to President Yeltsin where they propose 'to create temporary artistic installations around the totalitarian monuments that have remained intact, to make a kind of "Mardi Gras Carnival of Monuments".'

In 'Reimagining Central Asia', Theodore Levin explores the transformation and possible uses of cultural vestiges of the Soviet era in the former republic of Uzbekistan, located in the area which 'lies geographically and conceptually in a dimension somewhere between the second and third worlds'. He argues that neither 'second world' nor 'postcolonial' are helpful terms for describing the situation. He reports how Uzbekistan attempts to constitute itself as a nation through the use of forgotten and reimagined native tradition, but with the help of available Soviet patterns as a resource. Along with the national self-fashioning, the new possibilities of restoring ethnic identity have affected the still sizeable Jewish population in Russia. In 'Sight-Reading St Petersburg: A Musical View of October '93', Mark Slobin observes a 'renewal of subcultural dreams' in the Jewish population of St Petersburg through musical expression that includes 'high-culture, middle-of-the-road and roots approaches'.

The meaning of the word 'culture' itself has been destabilized, since during the Soviet period it denoted primarily high culture. However, 'official' popular sponsored by the state and 'unofficial' popular culture existed side by side. How recent political changes affect popular culture is a key to post-Soviet cultural politics. In his essay, Mark Slobin notes both innovations and continuities. His example is the televised youth music contests where the influence of American pop style is particularly evident. At the same time 'the songs themselves, the voice qualities, manner of delivery, and costumes seem more continuous than disjunctive'. He concludes that the youth shows serve as a commercial opportunity for 'future audiences and markets for tape decks, CD players, and recording companies ...' Svetlana Boym finds a surprising relationship between the Beatles and Russian rock as a purveyor of popular culture in her essay 'From Russia a Song: From "Back to the USSR" to "Bye-Bye Amerika".' Boym argues that songs served as a barometer of political and social change during the different periods of the cold war to the present, and that the 'focus on "official" and "unofficial" songs from the former Soviet Union helps to remap the "second world" and understand Soviet humour and fantasies ...'

Mikhail Yampolsky's contribution focuses on the high culture that lives on in the work of a prominent Russian filmmaker, Vladimir Sokurov. In his recent film, *Stone*, the director uses Russia's cultural icon, Anton Chekhov, for an

exploration of the national obsession with the past at this time of erosion of social and cultural values not only of Soviet, but also of nineteenth-century, Russia. Yampolsky analyses the cultural significance of the concepts of repetition or recollection which have now 'acquired a particular importance in Russia because of the unparalleled attempt of the country to restore its past.'

It is a time of *selling culture* – the Soviet state specialized in the export both of high culture (the Bolshoi and the Kirov) and of official pop culture (the Moiseev dancers, the Piatnitsky Chorus). But the disappearance of state hegemony, censorship and support has had a profound effect on culture. In their comprehensive study of the fundamental changes in cultural production 'Pair-a-dice Lost: the Socialist Gamble, Market Determinism, and Compulsory Postmodernism', Nancy Condee and Vladimir Padunov analyze the process of commercialization of culture in Russia in the early 1990s. In all its spheres, including literature, music, theatre, and film, they note major changes in cultural consumption, marked by the 'dislocation between cultural and consumer myths' as 'cultural literacy' has been displaced by the need for 'consumer literacy'. New possibilities of circulation of artists and their work between East and West result in the emergence of migrant culture. This is reflected both in narrative structure and in style of contemporary fiction, marked by linguistic border crossings and hybridity in genre. Condee and Padunov argue that although western postmodernism is not applicable, 'it has a familiar ring in Russian' where a native brand of the postmodern condition is alluded to in a series of euphemisms.

In his introduction to *The Predicament of Culture* James Clifford notes that 'It is easier to register the loss of traditional orders of difference than perceive the emergence of new ones'. His 'primary goal' is 'to open space for cultural futures, for the recognition of emergence'. Michael Holquist considers recent attempts to turn to the past not only as a conservative move, but as a desperate attempt to ease the pain of transition in search of a new national narrative that would be inclusive and also provide some continuity. While the situation in Russia remains unstable, the new patterns of cultural transformation observed in the essays collected here attest to possibilities in future development.

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