



## OPENING THE DEBATE

# The Rise and Decline of Soviet Morality: Culture, Ideology, Collective Practices<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

In the article, it is proposed that the collapse of Soviet society was presaged by a growing crisis in late Soviet morality. On the periphery of late Soviet morality, collective cultural practices are seen to have successfully functioned based on a limited ethics of virtue. In the absence of an alternative to Soviet ideology, social regulation started to draw upon values intended for the reproduction of local communities. A growing contradiction between the limited values of the new social class/corporate entities and the need to develop universal values for a *big society* is currently the key ideological legitimization problem facing the Russian political order.

### KEYWORDS

Soviet morality, Soviet culture, *Homo Sovieticus*, big society, commonality, rental society, virtue ethics, utopia, legitimization, social regulation, heterarchy, double standards

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## Introduction

In the present article, we discuss the nature of the post-Soviet moral and social order and consider why such a moral and political scenario transpired. In this context, despite having undergone significant transformations, Soviet morality continues to play an important role in structuring the values that form present Russian society.

In critiques of contemporary Russian society, negative metaphors of quasi-class stratification, neopatrimonialism and neo-feudalism are often deployed to indicate the non-modern, non-market nature of post-Soviet social stratification. A deeper examination of these metaphors may support a relatively consistent elucidation of the source of values inherited from the past, along with a plausible prognostication of the evolutionary vectors of Russian social morality. Ultimately, the origin and transformation of the norms and values pertaining to social classes can be explained partly in terms of the unchanged expectations of the members of these classes, partly in terms of changes in these expectations.

On the other hand, the neo-classist metaphor on the whole reflects aspects of the social reality of modern Russia that only superficially resemble the class – or estates – structure. In any case, this form is quite distinct from the traditional forms of social stratification, if only in terms of the normative content it structures. Indeed, while already in the USSR it was possible to speak of quasi-classes – since these structures could, if desired, reveal intra-class values, norms, codes of honour, etc. – contemporary quasi-classifications resemble them only from the point of view of the administrative hierarchy. Thus, this social stratification can be seen as a purely pragmatic construct, aimed at justifying the existing public resource distribution hierarchy. Since intra-class values can be found only in the higher, governing classes, periodical attempts to formulate codes of honour, e.g. *codes of ethics for officials* etc., can be witnessed in the so-constructed *universum*. While, from the perspective of the hierarchical distribution of resources, the rest of the political elites may be treated as dependent classes, they do not consider themselves to be bound by class codes of honour, but instead can be seen to subscribe to the apparently popular versions of nationalism and patriotism. From a moral point of view, a neo-classist society presents a depressing picture in which, in being openly reduced to the rights of the strong, social relations are simultaneously stripped of their romantic veneer. This represents a version of an atomised society in which the formation of social groups having a distinct collective identity and morality is prevented by the will of the authorities or the repayment of loans acting as a universal regulator of behaviour (see: Dragunsky, 2019).

However, no society or its morality can be objectively described in exclusively negative terms, i.e. in terms of what is not there. Thus, since no society is hell on earth, the same norms and values do not necessarily generate *rogue* or *unmeritorious* institutions and practices. From this follows a basis for possible hope. In the present article, we analyse the cultural and ideological formation process of high, universal Soviet morality, leading to the construction of the *communist personality* along with the destruction of previous class-based values, barriers and practices. In so doing,

we see that the high moral goals set out during the implementation of the Soviet project were only partially achieved as a consequence of many cultural-historical and ontological obstacles encountered along the way. These transformations of Soviet morality, largely taking place as a consequence of the internal evolutionary logic of the Soviet project, resulted in a kind of *moral bear market*, in which the utopian goals of the Communists gradually came to be devalued by the new values of the consumer society. Thus, already by the late Soviet period, the value systems of private and corporate interests had begun to contrast themselves more actively with official morality and public interests, clandestinely preparing the cultural ground for the transition to a new social state.

### ***Homo Sovieticus: Crafty Slave or Victim of Deceit?***

Today we are witnessing the gradual loss of the *Soviet idea* as an independent value through its transformation into symbolic material for present struggles, in which the validity of the Soviet experience is either asserted or denied. Due to the *politics of memory*, completely opposing ideological perspectives of view on the Soviet phenomenon are legitimised: on the one hand, standing for *repressive totalitarianism*; on the other, representing the *avant-garde of humanity*, by which means the global understanding of the situation of the working classes was transformed, resulting in the development of a welfare state in all modern societies. Accordingly, subjects of such retrospective value constructions place their Soviet personal, family and group experiences in fundamentally opposing ideological containers without interference or hesitation, marking all contradictions and objections as insignificant exceptions to this experience. However, the much more subtle, complex, historically variable and contradictory value structures actually existing at all cultural levels and in all communities during Soviet times is not reducible to the official hierarchy of higher values. Consequently, it is not justified to reduce the historical phenomenon of the Soviet project or the value motivation of various social groups within it to ideological caricatures; even less so, to interpret this experience in terms of *deviations* from the universal path of human development as described by mainstream contemporary economic and political discourses.

It is generally understood that a sharp moral transformation occurred within Soviet society during the late 1980s and early 1990s. In any case, it seemed so due to the suddenness of the transition; as Alexei Yurchak laconically put it, “everything was forever, until it was no more” (Yurchak, 2014). Although the transition can hardly be said to have occurred easily, it is not necessarily the case that the social catastrophe was accompanied by a moral catastrophe. Even if they did not find their *market niche* from the outset, the majority of people did not generally have to make a huge effort to get over themselves in order to adapt to a new way of life. Of course, this does not imply that all citizens at once rushed to join the mafia and kill each other; on the other hand, they turned out to be surprisingly tolerant of those who did do this. While such behaviour was not condoned in terms of morality, neither did it necessarily provoke an outspoken rejection; at times, excuses were even made for it.

On the other hand, from the point of view of officially declared values, the difference between the Soviet *before* and the post-Soviet *now* appeared significant. A similar consideration arises when considering relations between people in everyday life: during the 1990s, many suddenly realised that in terms of *human relations*, Soviet life had been quite tolerable. There had been more trust, warmth, mutual assistance, etc. – and where had all this gone?

To the last question, domestic and foreign social scientists gave two main answers, in equal measure ideological and crudely one-dimensional.

The first was that Soviet people themselves were irredeemably duplicitous and hypocritical. Advocates of this point of view were not shy to express themselves; for them, Soviet society comprised a colony of three hundred million slaves for which there were neither moral values, nor religious – only propaganda and ideology constructed on lies and hypocrisy (see: Panfilov, 2016). As A. Yurchak notes, in emphasising the categories of universal duplicity, lies, bribery, denunciation and immorality as basic principles in the relations of Soviet people with the system and each other, the authors construct a new binary model in which the lies and immorality of the “socialist subject” are opposed to the integrity and honesty of some other, unnamed, “normal” subject (obviously a liberal subject) (see Yurchak, 2014, p. 44). In other words, in order to account for what grew out of it, it is necessary only to note that the Soviet moral climate was already sufficiently permeated by evil. Thus, *Homo Sovieticus* can be conveniently described in negative categories: in the first place, he lacks a sense of his own self-worth, which is either substituted either with pusillanimity or arrogance. In yielding to totalitarian oppression, the Soviet people said one thing on the record, but another in private; they swore public allegiance to various values and ideals, while in their hearts they nurtured something quite different. Thus, it was clear that, with the advent of freedom, these slothful servants of the regime quickly showed their true faces and behaved accordingly; the majority of them turning out to be philistine, greedy and self-serving, with only a minority turning out to be simultaneously civilised and liberal. However, such explanations were based on rather simplistic ideas about Soviet realities and human behaviour. In addition, retrospective ideologisation must be taken into account: recalling their lives in Soviet times, those whose standpoint is distanced by hindsight tend to be *unreliable eyewitnesses*, instead ascribing to their past selves the views and motives of the present (see Yurchak, 2005, pp. 42–43).

In other words, the present-day critics of Soviet society did not necessarily perceive their contemporaneous Soviet reality as a totally immoral hell in which they were forced to hide their true faces. Indeed, we can assume that it was exactly this binary narrative featuring *dissembling slothful servants* that was accepted after the fact, when it was necessary to explain and justify how morally decent people seemingly left to their own devices (i.e. not under compulsion), arranged at first *wild capitalism* with *criminal revolution*, followed by an atomised society characterised by a low level of interpersonal and institutional trust. The starting point of the discussion consists in the thesis that, if Soviet society had consisted of *decent and worthy people*, then it could not have reached such a moral nadir in terms of everyday (and political)

life. For this type of detractor, the after-fact of evil always and only grows out of evil. Thus, it was only natural for them to convince themselves that the society to which they had given the best years of their lives was never morally sound, being comprised of individuals and collectives that to some extent resembled moral freaks – with the exception, of course, of the few critics themselves, who were either at that time *not like all the others*, or else came to see the light later, belatedly realising all the immorality of their former existence.

The second simplistic response was based on the idea of a single *value model*, which formed the moral basis of the overwhelming majority of Soviet people, as well as the idea of a highly moral and highly cultured society, which, with the beginning of reforms, was subjected to forced degradation. The reformers lowered the threshold of society's sensitivity to social pathology. Since the 1990s, public immorality has begun to spread in the country; there has been a looting of the state accompanied by a total erosion of culture and morality (see: Simonyan, 2011). And, if moral degradation has not yet swept all before it, this is only because it encounters the resistance of traditional Russian values, which found support and substantial development in the Soviet period of history (see: Rutkevich, 1998, p. 9). Or, as Sergei G. Kara-Murza wrote, since the end of the 1980s, Russia has been carrying out a comprehensive and well-developed relativisation programme, followed by the dismantlement of moral standards and prohibitions and the introduction of radically amoral values (see: Kara-Murza, 2005, p. 546). From this, it followed that Soviet people with high moral virtues had been cynically deceived. Appealing to their moral feelings, as well as partly to ideologies, malefactors from the foreign and domestic elites were able to connect high moral ideals and ideas about a worthy life with an anti-Soviet project, i.e. capitalism. By the time they realised their mistake, it was too late. This answer already looked somewhat more plausible, since it was based on the well-known facts of the manipulation of public consciousness in the era of *perestroika* and Yeltsin's reforms. Nevertheless, it remains difficult to believe that, through manipulation alone, it was possible to turn black into white, to seduce people of a highly moral and highly cultured society, forcing them to exercise comparative tolerance with respect to the moral realities of the *Great Criminal Revolution*. After all, as Abraham Lincoln said, you cannot fool all the people all the time. And, most importantly, why did this period become a moral disaster only for a relatively small number of alarmists, while the majority survived it with relative sanguinity?

It is not difficult to notice that, despite all the differences, both of these answers proceed from the observed fact that, during the 1990s, a *sharp* transition took place from a society that had some moral and cultural values to one having completely different values. Both answers are aimed at trying to explain the high speed of this transition, described in terms of a genuine collapse in moral values. But was it really like that? Having reason to doubt the above answers, we propose to outline the main features of a third. Of course, this alternative response cannot be considered exhaustive either; however, we hope that it avoids the gross oversimplification and limitations of the two already mentioned.

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### A Soviet Upbringing... Based on Non-Soviet Models?

We will proceed from the fact that Soviet morality was not based on a single *basic value model*. At a minimum, it consisted of two-tiers; that is, like the morality of every *big society*, it consisted of universal principles combined with *virtue ethics*.

The highest universal principles of Soviet morality were determined by communist ideology, which in many respects was the continuation of a wider, progressive-humanistic worldview having its roots in liberalism. Looking retrospectively at the evolution of the highest values of the *Soviet political project*, we can confidently say that it was based on the desire to actualise universal left utopias, intended not only for citizens of the USSR, but also for the rest of the world. This utopian ideological programme included the following elements: emancipation of *working people* from the rule of the bourgeois minority; the dismantlement of the estate structure in favour of civil equality; the expansion of social benefits addressed to the majority; egalitarianism; classical liberal ideas of the growth of opportunities for everyone and progress as a form of the unfolding of history; the value of the future; the world revolution as a catalyst for necessary social changes; and hence the original Bolshevik eschatology, later to be replaced by moderate ideas of the evolutionary superiority of socialism followed by peaceful coexistence. Thus, in the dynamics of its core of values, Soviet society appears as a leftist late-liberal revolutionary project that takes the reasons for the failures of the European revolutions of the *first wave* into account, whose political and economic results were largely attributed, on behalf of the *Third Estate*, to the bourgeois elites. While the party vertical of power played a key role in the management of Soviet society, the role of other authorities (the system of councils, the economic and judicial verticals, etc.) only decreased with distance from the revolution (Orekhovsky, 2019, p. 32). Thus, the Communist Party was responsible for the development, dissemination and control of the highest values that integrated Soviet society across all social boundaries and inequalities. At the political level, the values of Soviet society were purposefully inculcated with the help of various mechanisms of institutional implementation, functionally *opening* them for the majority. During the Soviet period, ideological *bullishness* was pushed at all levels of the social system, starting with a single hierarchy of media and ending with the organisation of special forms of collectivism (Party, Komsomol and pioneer meetings, political literacy lessons, meetings of labour collectives, community work days, demonstrations on public holidays calendar etc.), which were formed to support and reproduce the highest Soviet values.

It is true that, from a certain point of view, there was no Soviet social *morality* as such since, inasmuch as pre-revolutionary Russia did not manage to achieve a moral phenomenon similar to the Western model, the conditions for its formation in Soviet Russia were even less favourable (Gudkov, 2013, pp. 125–126). Adhering to a less radical point of view, some authors consider Soviet morality to be an inferior form of *pseudo-morality* (Zinoviev, 1994, p. 261), taking it as axiomatic that there should no place for ideology in *the normal*, which implies that morality and ideology should be kept separate (Stolyar, 2010, pp. 87–88). These authors assert that it is possible to

distinguish between ideological morality (or pseudo-morality) and personal morality (or actual, proper morality). Here ideological morality is subsumed into ideology, interpreting what a person in a communist society should be like and urging people to follow this model. Although such morality closely resembles real (personal) morality, in reality it only approximates to it to the same extent as communist ideology comprises a new form of religion (see: Zinoviev, 1994, pp. 261).

Here we see the idea of a particular *real* or *personal* morality, which exists separately from ideology or religion. However, if such morality also exists somewhere, then this must consist in the familiar *virtue ethics* that is characteristic of local communities and undoubtedly forms the actual moral horizon for such authors.

Finally, such a distinction between true morality and Soviet *pseudo-morality* can never be made coherently, since the authors accept the need, if not for ideology, then for something analogous (typically religion) in order for the morality of modern society to coalesce into a necessarily complete form (i.e. serving to indicate the proper placement of virtue ethics). In particular, the inconsistencies in this position arise from its advocates' excessive zeal to distinguish between ideology and morality. As Marina Stolyar notes, ultimately, people were interested not in ideology itself, but in its supporting pillars – morality, philosophy, art and especially religion – that allowed Soviet ideology to hold out for such a long time (see: Stolyar, 2010, p. 175). She states that too often in the last decades of its existence, Soviet ideology resorted to borrowing the energy of the “moral factor” for its own support. Here, in accepting that in its fall, the bankrupt system pulled down everything connected with it – so that the socialist moral crisis turned into a devaluation of morality in general. She argues that the opposition of ideology and morality ended in the fall of ideology and the victory of morality; however, it was a Pyrrhic victory (see: Stolyar, 2010, pp. 87–88).

In one sense, it can be agreed that a *victory of morality* really did occur following the collapse of the USSR. However, this should be seen in terms of a victory of *one-half of Soviet morality over the other*, rather than *morality in general over ideology*. In our opinion, such confusion arises from the indistinguishability of universal morality and virtue ethics. To avoid this kind of confusion and inconsistency, we proceed from the realisation that the urge to distinguish between ideology and morality is not as productive as it might once have seemed. In the societies of Modernity, ideologies have long played a similar moral role to that formerly performed by religions; indeed, they are often with some justice referred to as *civil religions* (Fishman, 2014). Therefore, we see no reason not to accord such a full value to Soviet morality.

We consider that other major component of Soviet morality, virtue ethics, to focus on the values of commitment to the local, collective community, i.e. they do not claim universality and do not refer to the transcendent in any form, whether that be religious, ideological or ethical. This explains both the inevitability of virtue ethics and their limitations. Although clearly unsuitable for integrating individuals into a complex *big society*, virtue ethics are indispensable for creating the ties characteristic of a small *community*, without which the functioning of most social institutions remains unthinkable. However, being left to its own devices, a virtue ethics approach is equally (un)suitable for the Communist Party and the Christian



church, as well as for the gang, the mafia, or any of the other communities of *friends* fighting for a place under the sun that may arise during the crises that periodically afflict *big societies*. During the turning point of the 1990s, when the universal principles of Soviet morality crashed, ethics of virtue, suitable for various purposes including any social system, survived and remained popular. It was this that made the *Criminal Revolution* acceptable to the majority.

Secondly, it should be borne in mind that the Soviet project entailed elevating man through culture, proceeding from the fact that it has historically been the case that the poor are poor and the rich are rich, but this must be done away with. The rich must be punished, while the poor must be accustomed to the idea that their poverty will be replaced not with coveted wealth, but by high leisure (see: Cantor, 2011, p. 211). As evidenced by numerous artistic experiments that completely denied the pre-revolutionary achievements of Russian culture, Soviet culture began with a promise to give the people a kind of new heaven on a new earth. However, over time, radical cultural experiments gave way to a more realistic strategy of mastering the cultural heritage of mankind, which turned out to be valuable for the cause of Communism. According to Konstantin Bogdanov, the arguments of Lenin and Trotsky about the world revolution, which justified the heroic attitudes of the cultural elite of the twenties, already looked like an anachronism by the mid-thirties. By the mid-1930s, futurological utopias as represented in literature and art became balanced and gradually replaced by historical retrospection, designed to present the present as a logical outcome of previous history, which, over its entire course, “dialectically” prepared the ground for the flourishing of Stalin’s rule (see: Bogdanov, 2009, pp. 107–108).

As a result, the area of historical dynamics of Soviet morality that interests us has always been heterogeneous enough to allow (and even welcome) a number of ethical, personal and broadly cultural patterns that are not directly related to communist ideology, but borrowed from the area of *universal human values*. Objectively, a major role was played by attempts to integrate pre-revolutionary cultural achievements into the Soviet cultural hierarchy, including folklore (fairy tale, myth), as well as the ancient heroic epic and other elements borrowed from noble or bourgeois culture, not to mention science and technology. The success of the Soviet moral and cultural project depended both on the degree of subordination of *Communist morality* to virtue ethics, as well as on the integration of previous neoclassical and on other cultural paradigms. When this connection turned out to be strong, the values of virtue ethics began to glow with the reflected light of the universal moral values of the communist project – or, in its broader interpretation, the values of humanism, progress, beauty, goodness and truth. Although these values were *kept in their place*, in reality, their carriers tended to overestimate them, considering them to be self-sufficient. Conversely, to the extent that the connection between Communist morality and virtue ethics turned out to be weak and formal, Soviet morality and culture acquired a deep resemblance to other cultures – either *bourgeois*, or *noble* (in its heroic form, closest to virtue ethics), which was unable to effectively resist the *Criminal Revolution*.



Based on the foregoing, it is necessary to acknowledge the content of those cultural strata (primarily literature) in which virtue ethics, heroic values and *bourgeois morality*, being never digested, were waiting in the wings.

The ethics of virtue is primarily associated with all kinds of literature that describe the acts of heroes. In the Soviet context, these heroes initially consisted of prominent actors of the revolution and subsequent civil war. This can be seen as indicative of an attempt to *tame* the heroic problematic. Thus, already by the 1920s–1930s it was being acknowledged that the cult of heroes was not in itself something fundamentally socialist. To some extent, this cult was not very desirable, since, in its orthodox historical and materialistic interpretation, Marxism did not accord the same importance to the *role of personality in history* as *bourgeois, feudal* and even utopian-socialist. Soviet writers emphasised that the main basis of our heroism is a correct understanding of the consciousness of class duty and, at the same time, overcoming the fear of death, which leads the hero to victory, which should be shown by us as a natural embodiment of class duty as correctly understood (see: Bogdanov, 2009, p. 176). Therefore, in particular, a hero of the Civil War had to be a collective type of hero; although it was not necessary to *pull out* the hero from the mass, at the same time the mass should not be faceless. Here, it was necessary to show that the heroes were driven by class duty; the hero himself had to be of a proletarian background, not a *fellow traveller*, etc. (ibid., p. 177).

Whatever else might have been the case with the characters in Soviet literature, archetypes produced within the genre were insufficient on their own to form a basis for upbringing and education. Thus, the country of victorious socialism could not limit itself to educating its citizens solely on the example of heroic proletarians. The reason was banal: neither world nor domestic culture had in its repertoire enough sufficiently attractive and holistic samples of a *harmoniously developed personality* drawn entirely from the oppressed classes. However, these samples were abundant among the ruling classes, i.e. the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie, which historically had sufficient leisure time for personal self-improvement.

Despite Russian literature becoming highly critical of the nobility from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, increasingly describing them as a decadent, parasitic class, along with the aristocracy in general, they had already established patterns of a harmoniously developed individual, including personality and patriotism. Just as, at one time, such heroes were the subject of imitation by the bourgeoisie in Europe, they were to also become the model for emulation by *Homo Sovieticus*. An educated nobleman of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was characterised by such as definitions as “nobleness”, “service”, “honour”. Nobleness and honour were understood in terms of a person’s characteristics, the basis on which his reputation is earned. Service was understood as love for the Fatherland, duty and readiness for self-sacrifice. But wasn’t that also what was required from *Homo Sovieticus*? Thus, there was no essential contradiction between the figure of an ideal nobleman and the ideal of patriotic Soviet citizen.

Returning to the cultural meaning of the Soviet project, we once again note that it can be seen as largely consisting in equating citizens with the nobility on a moral level. Of course, this cultural transformation also implied the exclusion of all sorts of

material excesses and material inequality as a potential factor in personal and moral degradation. It is no coincidence, for example, that Soviet science fiction emphasised the asceticism of the people of the future, who understand that the endless expansion of material needs is meaningless, especially when it becomes an end in itself (Efremov, 1957/2020). A specific cultural problem relating to the Soviet period concerned the definition of a *sufficiently deserving* level of needs, based on a kind of public consensus. In a certain sense, the Soviet cultural and educational project comprised a project to inculcate victorious workers into a high noble culture: according to Galina Ivankina, many people love the USSR for the aristocracy of its culture, its literacy and breadth. For those same Krapivin boys who turned out to be the refined heirs of the offspring of nobility with the same heightened sense of justice (see: Ivankina, 2015).

The bourgeois cultural influence on Soviet people was perhaps less noticeable due to the fact that Russian pre-revolutionary history did not allow the Russian bourgeoisie to survive the great and heroic times. Consequently, Russian culture lacks a holistic, heroic or positive personality model of bourgeois culture. However, the objective needs of modernisation resulted in the need to learn from the champions of such culture, i.e. Western capitalists.

Marxism recognised the great historical role of the bourgeoisie, which did not immediately become reactionary and corrupted. Therefore, at least in the early years of Soviet power, the Bolsheviks did not hesitate to openly take lessons from the bourgeoisie – not only technically, but also culturally in the broad sense of the word. It was not only Lenin or Gorky who called for this engagement, but also other Bolshevik leaders and cultural figures of a lower rank. Accordingly, it was not only their material and scientific achievements that should be borrowed from the capitalists, but also those character traits that contributed to the emergence of these achievements. Based on these borrowings, an extensive subculture arose to encompass those Soviet social strata that participated in military-political, cultural and economic competition with the West (Karacharovsky, Shkaratan, Yastrebov, 2015, pp. 86–87).

Paradoxically, in the field of upbringing and culture for bourgeois cultural discourse, things were not so bad in the USSR. Many of the foreign classics available to the Soviet reader contained images of bourgeois heroes, which, in the Soviet interpretation, were often served as *of the people*. Often these comprised images of heroic bourgeois – participants in revolutionary and liberation struggles (Till Eulenspiegel, The Gadfly, heroes in the works of Victor Hugo, etc.). The bourgeois was attractive not only as a revolutionary, but also as an active, purposeful entrepreneur and *hero of labour* – and even more so, as an adventurer, a gentleman of fortune. Although bourgeois economic science was condemned by Soviet ideological workers for being addicted to *robinsonades*, fictional characters like Robinson Crusoe himself or those inhabiting Jules Verne's "Mysterious Island" were represented to enthusiastic young Soviet readers as *heroes of labour*. In authors such as Balzac, we encounter bourgeois characters like Gobseck, who, if not morally flawless, were at least colourful and not inferior to aristocrats in terms of the nobility and beauty of their souls. In general, the classical foreign literature of the 19<sup>th</sup> century often portrayed attractive patterns of interference of bourgeois and noble personality patterns (see: Ossovskaya, 1987,

pp. 427–460). In such cases, the Soviet reader could recognise in the bourgeois a social type who, like himself, strove for the sublime, as well as possessing attractive complexity and depth of personality. Even negative bourgeois characters like the *Renaissance man* archetype had *bright personalities*, which were welcomed by the intelligent reader, their transgressions instinctively forgiven.

In this connection, we cannot fail to note that all the above-described processes took place in the USSR against the background of the formation of an actual *personality cult*, which was initially formed in a framework bounded by ideological contingencies. However, towards the end of the Soviet era, the practice of forming a personality by imitating heroes had mostly been left behind; moreover, it was not necessarily officially sanctioned (Kharkhordin, 2002, pp. 463–472). One of the characteristic symptoms of this process was a change in the teaching of literature at school, which is described as a process of liberation from the ideological standards of the interpretation of literary works. In this endeavour, more and more attention was paid to the inculcation of pure *morality*. As Evgeny Ponomarev states, more and more often teachers transfer morality to the everyday level, saving it from a loop of abstract ideologies. Thus, the history of Russian literature turned into a textbook of practical morality. This trend had existed before, but never taking such a complete and explicit form (see: Ponomarev, 2017, p. 133).

In many respects, Soviet upbringing and education can be seen as having cultivated in a person either altogether *bourgeois* qualities or those attributable to the ethics of virtue, being independent of high communist ideals.

### **Informal Late Soviet Cultural Practices: From the Renewal of Communism to Instrumental Ethics**

It was not only in culture and in art that the highest form of communist morality in the Soviet project was undergoing rapid historical evolution. A variety of informal movements was also making a significant contribution to a critical rethinking and consequent weakening of official morality. Even more intensely, than in the small dissident groups that directly opposed the Soviet political system; these movements were involved in re-evaluating official Soviet morality, albeit without significant social support. Although not explicitly contradicting official ideology and morality, these informal cultural movements, which aimed at inculcating children and youth with cultural values according to various alternative canons, were engaged in stress testing the highest form of Soviet morality at the level of experimental cultural practices. These movements (Communard youth organisations, student song clubs, travel clubs, etc.) were quite numerous. In the USSR the amateur bard song movement alone had around 5 million members. There is reason to believe that the general vectors of the moral evolution of the participants in these movements were approximately equivalent – if only because they were presented with a similar range of choices in the directions of moral evolution, arising as responses to similar challenges and determined by similar constraints. From the point of view of ideology and morality, the informal social minority hardly differed in practical terms from the majority that did not

participate in such activities. Therefore, informal activities consisted in such a type of deviation from the ideological and moral *norm* (wider, from the norm of *practical reason*) that, at least in part, anticipated the moral transformation of the majority in the process of large-scale changes.

The status of informal movements in Soviet life remained uncertain. On the one hand, they were not illegal or oppositional in the literal sense of the word; therefore, participating in them cannot be attributed to the phenomenon of *internal emigration*. At various times, to a greater or lesser extent, they enjoyed the patronage of official structures. Conversely, ever-changing limits to their adoption were frequently imposed by Soviet officialdom.

What, for example, was the source of the increase in mutual alienation between Soviet officialdom and the Communards and other related movements? Alexander Shubin explains this in terms of the contradiction between the needs of industrial society, which was satisfied by the Soviet school, and the humanistic traditions of Russian culture, which developed under the slogan of the formation of the *diverse personality*: how many workers can be churned out – but society also needs a creative personality! (see: Shubin, 2008). It is difficult to give a comprehensive answer: individual fates, along with cultural, demographic, economic and other social transformations, were intertwined too closely at different stages of the history of the USSR, from which a different understanding of the essence of the social order, which was satisfied by the appearance of such movements, ensued. Informal movements were the result, on the one hand, of a recognition of the formalism and insufficiency of the Soviet education system, while on the other hand, they consisted in the objective result obtained within the Soviet educational paradigm when attempts were made to overcome its insufficiency. The Communard and related movements initially appeared in view of the need to provide a more solidly founded inculcation, a greater degree of consciousness than was objectively achieved within the framework of official education institutions. However, a greater degree of consciousness implied a significant degree of individual independence, which in many respects predetermined the logic of the evolution of the Communard and related associations. Regardless of the subjective wishes of their founders, these movements objectively responded to an *already manifested* need on the part of a significant number of individuals for a self-realisation and personal growth space, which was not being provided by officially sanctioned spaces.

The principal social paradox, which became apparent at the early stage of such movements, was that ideological involvement could only be successfully achieved within the framework of smaller social groups. This was due to their being fused with a virtue- or heroic ethic to a greater extent than could be achieved or afforded by the official *system* or indeed any *big society*. The key problem here was that the didactic techniques for cultivating virtues began to assume a greater significance than the two-tier ethical paradigm implied. Over time, it became increasingly difficult in practice to combine such inculcated virtues with the high ideals of communism and humanism. In any case, the educators themselves did not find this necessary, instead, simply paying tribute to the formalities. For such educators, what became necessary – and, most importantly, comprehensible – was the *education of creative personalities*,

which at the same time cohered with emerging corporate structures and networks. This inevitably led to an increase in the role played by personality patterns alien to the Soviet state, both in the sense of class ideology and the techniques used to cultivate them. As a result, various kinds of moral collisions arose that were not objectively inculcated in the people of the *communist future*, but in some others committed to *instrumental values*, which later came to predetermine their comparatively conflict-free entry into the *era of markets and democracy*.

It should be admitted here that socialism comprised a largely *artificial system*, which could retain its specificity only under the conditions of political, ideological and moral leadership of the ruling party. Socialism was impossible without the constant and relentless correction of the grey realities of everyday life by the efforts of ideology and culture, concentrated in the ideal. According to Evgeny Dobrenko, if we try to mentally subtract socialist realism from the picture of “socialism” – novels about enthusiasm in production, poems about joyful work, films about a happy life, songs and paintings about the wealth of the Soviet country, etc. – we will have nothing left that could be called socialism itself. There will be grey everyday life, routine daily work, an unsettled and difficult existence. In other words, since such a reality can be attributed to any other economic system, nothing remains of socialism in the sediment. We can therefore conclude that socialist realism produced the symbolic values of socialism rather than the reality of socialism (see: Dobrenko, 2007).

Consequently, the goal of communist education and the morality of lofty ideals resulting from it should have been closely intertwined from the outset with the cultivation of virtue- and heroic ethics required here and now, which typically became the moral limit of the education programmes carried out within the framework of socialist institutions and collectives. The secret lurking at the heart of socialism, therefore, consisted in the fact that no specific dominant socialist *consciousness* could exist in its presence: upon closer examination, such consciousness is decomposed into the moral equivalents of phenomena that occur in all class societies. At the same time, in order to avoid them conflicting with the same objective social development needs as understood by communism, a person had to achieve a high degree of understanding of his objective needs and desires.

However, in the collective practices of informal movements, relatively stable results in communist mass education were achieved not on the path of high *consciousness* gained by mastering Marxist-Leninist theory, but rather by applying well-known educational methods taking the form of not allowing free time, setting new goals and objectives, as well as involving participants in collective activities, etc. The turbulent history of the first half of the twentieth century itself contributed to such an educational approach. The result was a person brought up with a clear bias towards heroic and virtue ethics, in which such heroism and virtue were associated with the high ideals of communism and humanism by *knowing their place* rather than presenting themselves as intrinsically valuable. However, when the enthusiasts of the late 1950s, noticing the clear moral exhaustion of Soviet society, set out to achieve similar moral results to those obtained during the early Soviet period, they needed a form of organisation with an even greater degree of artificiality (since the heroic age

of the Soviet system had already passed): this form of organisation was the *commune* and its various analogues. The bias towards early Soviet practices was one of the reasons why the Soviet officialdom took a dual position in relation to communardism. In such communes, one could see a hidden reference to the days of Stalinist rule with their moral rigour and the potentially dangerous enthusiasm of indoctrinated adherents. Nevertheless, under the new conditions, the Stalinist methods increasingly objectively served not socialist goals, but rather to educate in the spirit of *abstract humanism*, resulting in the emergence of an almost openly bourgeois *creative personality*, albeit one hiding behind the fig leaf of Soviet ideology.

The communard experiment, as its enthusiasts intended, was originally aimed at educating a person in a communist society. Although it never sat very well with official communist values, in terms of inculcating the virtues necessary to achieve more modest intermediate goals it was much more successful. Here we touch on the other side of the moral problematic of the communard movement. Since communardism initially arose as a reaction to the incompleteness and inconsistency of communist education, it had to be guided by high values and goals. This implied a fairly serious tension in the disparity between the actual and the due. Nevertheless, simply in terms of ideology and other *consciousness*, the communardist education project did not imply anything specifically communist. The *self-confidence* – nowadays being taught on a large scale by coaches of various kinds – involved in the *inculcation of a creative person* and imposing a gratingly banal *love for the people* has a common place in a number of religious and moral teachings.

Thus, inculcation in the ethics of virtue quickly came up against its natural limits. While neither heroic ethics nor the aim to achieve personal realisation contradicted official ideology, nevertheless the communard educators rebelled against the inconsistency of real-life practices with declared ideals – above all, ideals that implied a high degree of heroism and altruism. In fact, the official Soviet upbringing inculcated children with that which they could hardly apply in reality: specifically, the foundations of heroic ethics at a time when the possibility of carrying out any truly heroic deeds was almost completely absent. Although the communist education system tried to break this deadlock, objectively it created only palliative organisational structures along with correspondingly dubious educational practices. As a result of such an upbringing, people grew up with a vague longing for *heroism*, a desire to be members of a community welded together by strong friendly relations, as well as a desire to do at least something useful for others, in order to bring joy to themselves. Did this make them immune to the blandishments of a *bourgeois lifestyle*? Hardly.

This small shift in emphasis was enough to begin to educate people who were notably able to fight for their *private interests*. On closer examination, such attitudes quite closely resemble the contemporary revelations of *successful people*. Counterintuitively, such people are also *creative personalities*, who enthusiastically *create* and – quite in the spirit of the arguments of the apologists for capitalism – assert that they work not for themselves, but for the benefit to others.

Thus, the paradoxicality of the phenomenon of communardism and similar movements consisted in the following: the ideological substantiation of the need

for communardistic experiments appealed to high humanistic and communist ideals that required the cultivation of a *versatile personality* – not just on the scale of narrow social and professional groups, but on the scale of society as a whole. Nevertheless, the communard movement led to the formation of communities quite far from the high goals articulated from the top floor of the Soviet ethical pyramid. It can be seen that, neither in the Soviet Union, nor in the capitalist societies of the West, has industrial society matured such as to permit all citizens to become creative individuals. Consequently, the Communard experiment was doomed – both by the nature of society itself and by the sabotage and opposition of official authorities – to break into many local groups formed around individual pedagogical successes, leading to the formation of communities welded together almost exclusively by virtue ethics. After all, this was more intelligible and comfortable for the participants of such groups, who had apparently not seriously considered any values and goals other than those corresponding to the interests of local communities or individual creative development, who did not strive for anything other than their emotional comfort and that of their associates. This paradox was resolved by the gradual reduction of communardism to purely pedagogical experiments, which lacked an orientation towards changing social reality itself.

Thus, the communard movement was for the most part transformed into a set of pedagogical techniques equally appropriate for participants in business trainings and totalitarian sects. The overstated self-esteem of these innovators, who only felt like something more than business trainers when they were dominated by a formal – but ideologically determined – system of values, is even more revealing. This self-esteem disappeared when the Communards gradually realised that they were merely the owners of a certain *pedagogical technology*: the “centennial communardist cycle” has closed, and on a new spiral, we can again see the “original” attempt to create the same “new school” that Lev Tolstoy and Stanislav Shatsky also tried to create (see: Sokolov, n.d.).

Ultimately, the general vector of the Communard educational experiments boiled down to the cultivation of a kind of alternative to official Soviet quasi-class stratification. More precisely, it consisted of splitting society into small groups with their own locally applicable codes of honour, in which priority was given to the education of the *creative person* and development of *personality*. The result was a person whose moral coordinates were no longer determined either by the moral norms of Soviet quasi-class stratification or by the high ideals of communism. Nevertheless, while such a person might fervently adhere to the internal norms of such small groups for a while, an eventual parting of ways was almost inevitable due to a growing unwillingness to obey the leader, whose moral authority inevitably eroded over time. However, since inculcation was carried out with the aim of forming *personality*, such a result was considered to be a pedagogical success. Perhaps this was indeed so. However, the question then arises as to the capabilities of such a person in the context of high Soviet morality. He or she was naturally inclined toward a naive struggle for his or her own comfort (see: Dragunsky, 2019). The horizon of this person’s ability to create social institutions (if we understand the latter as a symbiosis of norms and structures)



consisted in the tendency to unite into common interest groups. On the one hand, such a person could not become a committed citizen of a modern society, since *already* or *still* lacking a conscious commitment to any universal value system. On the other hand, he or she could only be involved in the emerging post-Soviet social stratification according to his or her outward position in the evolving hierarchy of social groups that did not yet have their own corporate codes.

### 1990s: Moral Non-Catastrophe

Although the abrupt change in the social order resulted in a restructuring of priorities, this did not imply a complete moral collapse. Was socialism replaced by capitalism? Even if it was not, in many ways, Soviet society had become more bourgeois than socialist. Although under the conditions of the Soviet period, bourgeois values did not manifest themselves, so to speak, in their purest forms – and while Soviet ideology and socialist phraseology condemned and inhibited bourgeois or philistine motivations in official life – in real life these latter, of course, dominated (see: Voeikov, 2015, p. 134). As the significance of the upper stratum of Soviet values decreased, consumer discourses strengthened along with a painful sensitivity to the material dimension of life, inequalities of consumption and lack of access to scarce goods. Meanwhile, a reverse movement was taking place from universal quasi-aristocracy, not even to bourgeois values and behaviour, but into new proto-class stratification on the basis of professional, corporate and administrative access to resources. Over time, the official Soviet project began to lose its ability to coherently define and defend the public/state interest, which was increasingly being eroded by private, group, corporate, regional, sectoral, republican, and other non-universal interests (Glinchikova, 2011, p. 157). Strictly speaking, the expansion and institutionalisation of shadow schemes for the exchange of these resources among the *nomenklatura* and *resource crafts* classes (farmers, speculators, cultural figures, managers of shops and consumer goods bases) created those active minorities that later became the fertile soil for the emergence of post-Soviet elites.

Of course, various structural changes simultaneously taking place in the background played a key role in influencing the transformation of Soviet morality and ideology over the 70 years of its existence. The constant complication, individualisation and rationalisation of everyday life, especially in cities, increasingly reduced the effectiveness of moral regulators of the pseudo-collective type. Along with an expansion of the space of differentiated regulation for different spheres of life and creeping de-ideologisation, the everyday practices of citizens gradually started to lose their connection with the sphere of higher values.

During the period of Stalin's rule, various critical problems associated with the survival and modernisation of Soviet society were being tackled, requiring the exertion of all available forces and resources. Due to the existential nature of this effort, it was not compatible with dissent or competition between groups of political elites. However, by the second half of the 1950s, having succeeded in becoming a world superpower, Soviet society began to allow much more freedom, competition, difference of opinion –

and even dissent – in the process of expanding the individual freedoms of citizens. According to Alexander Shubin, the Soviet social dress of the 1960s and 1970s only “didn’t fit too tightly” due to the extreme constrictiveness of the pre-war version. In moving into separate apartments, former residents of communal apartments experienced a great surge of freedom. In familiarising themselves with the secrets of the Stalinist era (albeit only to a limited degree), intellectuals were practically choking on freedom. By the 1970s, people were already growing out of such “suits”, and while a lack of freedom was being felt more acutely, as we will see, the sphere of freedom was actually expanding – it’s just that was expanding more slowly than the need for self-expression and results of intellectual questing. Having “dispersed” the growth of needs, Soviet society now failed to keep pace with them (see: Shubin, 2008, pp. 8–9).

The most important factor in the devaluation of the highest Soviet values was the gradual suspension of the revolutionary impulse underlying them. The evolution of the value core of the Soviet project demonstrates a transition from the revolutionary phase, in which images were strongly associated with control of the future, to a more conservative cultural logic, involving a revision of the position of the Soviet project in the value hierarchy of world culture. The sacral centre of the Soviet project was under increasing pressure of depoliticisation and profanisation, as a consequence of which higher symbols and ideological systems were transformed into material for low literary genres, anecdotes and *urban legends* (Arkhipova & Kirzyuk, 2020). For the Soviet political order, the semiotisation of the communist cultural space brings about the failure of the legitimising function.

The desacralisation of the highest Soviet values was the result of losing the utopian dimension associated with the revolutionary transformation of the world, along with the capability to offer hope. In particular, A. Yurchak interprets the *performative shift* taking place in the official Soviet culture of the 1970s–1980s as a sign of growing stagnation and crisis. This is a shift from meaningful production and discussion of ideological facts and meanings to the reproduction of ritual actions and formal linguistic usages, aimed only at confirming the subject’s external loyalty to the moral standards/values adopted by the Soviet society. As a result, the living language of party disputes and discussions gradually turns into a *wooden language*, a frozen, constantly repeating and awkwardly complex linguistic form (see: Yurchak, 2014, pp. 72–75). Analogous processes of ossification and formalisation occur in diverse areas of culture and art, as well as in the collective practices of social and everyday life.

Meanwhile, a decline in the powerful value impulse of communist ideology was also occurring due to a proportion of the tasks set by the revolution in late Soviet society having been successfully implemented in the social state, transforming utopia into part of everyday life, which was supposed to remain *the eternal* achievement of the working people. However, the implementation of these values – for example, in the form of the Soviet social state – simultaneously became their profanation, since they became part of everyday Soviet life, which, since apparently established forever, no longer needed any additional value justification. At the same time, another of the highest axiological components of the Soviet project, which related to the global

expansion of socialism as the more progressive and humane social system, failed to receive historical confirmation and began to be emasculated in the form of pedestrian plans by Nikita Khrushchev to catch up with the United States in the *per capita* production of meat, milk, pig iron and various other goods.

As a result, late Soviet society gradually began to transform into a *society without utopias*, in which the hopes, aims and opportunities of citizens began to find their ideological justification at the lower levels of the value hierarchy. The ideas of revolution, cosmopolitanism, the class struggle and transformation of mankind finally gave way to various ethics of virtue under the conditions of developed socialism, which naturally began to fall into a state of *stagnation*. It is evident that the expanding autonomy of lower-level values led to a strengthening of corresponding shadow networks and institutions for the distribution of public resources. Thus, the logical next step was that they would start to present a challenge to the highest ideological values and institutions. As a result, *perestroika*, although aimed at reviving the highest Soviet political values (democratisation, transparency, acceleration, self-government), turned into a final defeat of these values, due to the gaining confidence of *non-Soviet* social groups interested in changing the entire political economic order and its moral foundations.

What actually happened in the 1990s? It is appropriate to consider the situation in the field of public morality of the 1990s as resulting from the extemporary dominance of the ethics of virtue, as a result of the re-actualisation of those values, virtues and personality patterns that had hitherto played a subordinate role in the integral structure of Soviet morality. Nevertheless, it was the presence of such values, on the one hand, that prevented the moral catastrophe from being as total as it appeared to many during the 1990s, and, on the other, ensured moral continuity between the past and the future. For the later Soviet generations, the morality formed by the October Revolution and Great Patriotic War, which “would live a native country, and there are no other worries”, was already being gradually superseded by the ethical priorities of *concern for oneself and the environment*. Following the collapse of the USSR, this long-term trend of moral de-universalisation would continue, albeit in a more consistent and legitimate form. Moreover, the active value transformation in the post-Soviet period was carried out mainly in private life, with surprisingly little effect on the public sphere as an area of common life, now freed from the highest *communist* values of the Soviet project: the growth of diversity and individualism primarily characterises the private sphere, consumption and everyday practices, while the symbolic sphere remains as if frozen (see: Volkenstein, 2018). This trend is also confirmed by the strengthening of symbolic policies aimed at appropriating the highest achievements of the USSR, since current Russian politics, being saturated with virtue ethics, are not capable of providing consolidating moral models at this level.

Although, during the reform process, society turned out to have disintegrated, with Soviet collectives disbanding and the level of mutual trust and trust in state and social institutions having significantly decreased (Martianov, 2017), nevertheless this disintegration still had not reached the stage of complete *atomisation* or *individualisation*. People remained *friends* and *classmates*, colleagues and allies in *shared struggles*,

as well as continuing to be part of families and other small communities. The latter were held together by bonds of mutual fidelity, comprising the main elements of virtue ethics, which, in appealing to the best aspects of human nature represented by heroic values, justified the struggle for *their own*. Ultimately, it appears as if the presence of high moral values inherited from the Soviet era not only failed, in some cases, to prevent people from participating in the *Great Criminal Revolution*, but can even to seem to have prompted it. Participation in various criminal or quasi-criminal groups, in essence, required the same moral qualities as those pertaining to the idols of millions of Soviet boys, those musketeers, pirates, noble robbers, adventurers, rebels, revolutionaries and other similar heroes who populated classic literature, folklore and cinema. Finally, it should be emphasised that the criminal culture of the 1990s did not appear from scratch, but continued the rich traditions of Soviet criminal subculture, whose actual dimensions were concealed for ideological purposes along with the increasing late Soviet statistics on crime and suicide (Rakitin, 2016).

Is it any wonder that people of the sufficiently numerous *subculture of traders* not only responded tolerantly to the *criminal revolution* of the 1990s, but even took to it like a fish to water? However, as we can see, this new way life was not so very far from the old, being similarly regulated by various codes and rules of the criminal world. Therefore, it would be an exaggeration to state that the loss of universal moral values led to total moral relativism, which is determined by a situation where people are primarily guided by internal corporate standards. It is the clear correspondence of such norms with the equivalent norms of other corporations in a classless society (Fishman & Martianov, 2016) that allows both moral communication and the existence of something like a *social contract*.

In the late USSR, the flip side of Soviet values was a generalised image of the *West* taking the form of a consumer paradise, all the power of its advertising being used to destroy the habitual Soviet asceticism, which had failed to take account of everyday life, the comfort and amenities of the private life world against the background of the movement towards communism in the discourse of the total liberation of mankind. Thus, the *Great Criminal Revolution* was fed by the energy of the destruction of the Soviet value core. It was widely believed that its collapse would in itself lead to the triumph of universal values that had already taken place in the imaginary West. However, no *natural* value transition occurred; instead, the 1990s came to function as a magical negative mirror used by the political regime of 2000s–2010s to obtain legitimacy from its *converse*. Thus, the political elites are effectively *selling a bear market* by presenting extremely mundane, pragmatic and contradictory values to form a populist *patchwork quilt* (Martianov, 2007). However, they did not propose a new stable value hierarchy, structuring ideas of the common good and taking a form capable of supporting a *big society*. As a result, the symbolic transition from liberal-market to sovereign-patriotic rhetoric only strengthened the corporate, rentier social structure, in which all the basic characteristics of neo-patrimonial political elites, including management methods and opaque regimes of ownership, have yet to undergo qualitative axiological and ontological transformations over the course of post-Soviet history.

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## Conclusion

The prospects for further moral transformation seem limited and ambiguous. On the one hand, collective disappointment in the once-idealised West is growing inexorably. On the other hand, the Russian political order has not been able to offer a strong institutional and axiological framework for the just and universal integration of values. In the absence of a common system of higher values, the radical individualism of the majority of Russian citizens prevents them from creating effective structures of collective action capable of supporting a *big society*. There is a poorly-reflected public demand for a change in the subjects of collective value-institutional regulation when, in the place of their *big hierarchy* there were only strong grassroots social connections (family, work collective, neighbours, etc.). In such a situation, the observed growth of individualism turns out to be in many respects an inductive mechanism revealing the impossibility of institutional trust and reliance on stable collective structures – including the state, which has ceased to guarantee fundamental ideological constants that structure the common existence of its citizens. An increase in the diversity of behavioural patterns, social norms and identities, as well as types of interaction and practices, does not lead to an expansion of available opportunities, but rather appears as a necessary means of adapting individual citizens to the new social order. As a result, local values derived from virtue ethics continue to prevail in the form of competitive individualism, as implemented within corporate-class communities. Accordingly, social innovations often conceal the archaic survival practices of various *itinerant workers* and *migrants*, placed in an updated technological setting. The lack of universal values confirms the specific rentier character of modern Russian society, which is yet to develop a moral alternative to the interests of key social groups that came to power during the *Criminal Revolution* (Fishman, Martianov, & Davydov, 2019). In universal public spaces supported by the state and having common goals defined by official discourses, social groups cease to interact with each other. The collapse of Soviet society resulted in the possibility for other groups, classes and corporations to become effectively invisible, even when occupying the same urban space. Delimited by a variety of local rules and social codes, such collective entities construct their communications topologically as disjoint or extremely mediated. Due to being limited by self-sufficient corporate interests in the new space of rentier hierarchy and intergroup differentiation, society acquires more and more *blind spots*, preventing the emergence of a general relevant picture from any one collective position.

In fact, in the 1990s and partly in the 2000s, the majority did not experience *catastrophic moral discomfort* concerning the lack of universally valid values that went beyond the ethics of virtue. Following the collapse of the two-level Soviet morality, society switched to an emergency mode of regulation by peripheral and auxiliary values, which became established as the new *working norm*. At first, the authorities felt some discomfort in this connection, since *from the top down* there were notions to formulate something like a *national idea* or nationwide value system that should appear organically. In any case, the *national idea* was considered as a domestic

invariant of the liberal, democratic, Western idea – in a word, *universal*. However, over time, in view of the objectively evolving realities of a neo-classist society, its essential axiological banality and class-corporate boundedness at the ideological level led to the effective rejection of this claim. Thus, the political order prevailing in the decade 2000–2010 was forced to distance itself from the liberal universalist principles and foundations proclaimed during the 1990s.

It became evident that the search by the new elites for a system of common values combining alternative-liberal ideas with a Soviet heritage came to a standstill, becoming an *extracurricular activity* or *traditional national entertainment* in the expression of Vladimir Putin. Even when the need to consolidate society around common values is actualised for some reason, it is still necessary to try to satisfy it by issuing universal versions of various local values: whether structured by Orthodox Christianity (to the extent that it is identified with *culture* and *tradition*) or located directly in *family-* or *traditional values* and *patriotism*. Consecutive attempts by political elites to simulate the *higher echelons* of post-Soviet morality, imitating the form of the *external* moral discourse on behalf of the Russian Orthodox Church, have not met with any obvious success. The latter is seen as too biased in the public space, raising many questions regarding the application of *double standards* in moral assessments of contemporary realities of political life. Thus, religious institutions and major Russian denominations are used in a technical sense by the Kremlin to legitimise the political regime albeit, but without significant institutional and moral autonomy (Stepanova, 2019).

Against this background, insistent attempts *to legitimise the new Russian elites in terms of the Soviet project* are turning into a symbolic appropriation of the highest achievements of the USSR, accompanied by a careful removal and suppression of the ideological values that underlie these achievements. The latter is not surprising, since Soviet *big society* values directly contradict the currently dominant rentier model. The formation of truly new *big society* values, on the other hand, implies serious social transformations, suggesting a critical reflection on the rentier and corporate values and practices of Russian political elites. However, the political discourses circulating in public space are unable to solve the principal problems associated with a genuine *understanding of the society in which we live*; all the more so when it comes to providing a justification of the highest values for this society. Therefore, even if the need to seek an axiological alternative to the Big Soviet Society is proclaimed, this quest inevitably becomes frozen halfway. It boils down, in essence, to a *single protracted attempt to reformulate a class ethic of virtue in such a way that it becomes suitable for the moral nurturing of a big society*. How productive such a strategy could be and how soon it would cease to satisfy both the *top* and *bottom* social echelons is a question that deserves a separate study.

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