

Down to earth

Detemporalization in capitalist Russia

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There is a place in northern Moscow that represents, in a very focused and concentrated way, the tremendous change that has taken place in Russia since the start of market transition. This is VDNKh, the Exhibition of the Achievements of the National Economy. Its current name is different, but everybody stills knows it by its Soviet acronym, which also adorns the nearest Metro station.

Built in 1934–39, the exhibition was intended to symbolize the promise of the new socialist regime. Its numerous halls displayed the best agricultural and industrial produce resulting from the labours of Soviet citizens. Its golden fountains and beautiful pavilions symbolized the splendour and abundance that was to come in a future life under communism. This dream landscape was of course built in a country where the daily reality for most people was characterized by

poverty, queues for scarce goods and, at the height of Stalin's terror, fear of arrest. Nevertheless, the exhibition was an extremely popular place. People from all over the Soviet Union came there to marvel at this vision of an ideal city, a paradise of beauty and plenty.

From 1966 onwards, the centrepiece of the exhibition was the Kosmos (Space) Pavilion. With a huge Vostok space rocket (which replaced the statue of Stalin that originally stood there) guarding the doors, its exhibits included the first spaceships, models of Sputnik satellites, the Lunokhod robot sent to explore the moon, models of the Soviet Soyuz and American Apollo space stations that famously docked in space, and other paraphernalia of the Soviet space programme. Every schoolchild brought to see this pavilion (the authors included) would remember for the



rest of their life the awesome sight of the achievements of the human mind and the sense of wonder at what was yet to come.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union at the beginning of the 1990s, along with the rest of the country VDNKh experienced a rapid market transformation. The Soviet exhibits were disposed of, and the pavilions were eagerly colonized by a myriad small businesses and traders, selling everything from cheap Chinese electronics to Turkish leather bags and bootleg CDs. The 'market' thrives to this day. VDNKh's squares and wide pedestrian paths are now occupied by kebab stalls and kiosks with cheap souvenirs. The Soviet Tupolev TU-154 airliner which used to be the centre-piece of one of the squares was first turned into an electronics shop, and eventually, as the profanation of this erstwhile object of a nation's pride began to grate with the visitors, removed from view entirely. A sculpture of Lenin still stands on another square, but now it seems that even Vladimir Ilich, in his characteristic gesture pulling on the lapels of his jacket, is in fact pointing at his inner pocket – 'I have money too'.

The Space Pavilion is a ruin. The high glass ceiling is leaking. The walls – left unrepaired since the 1980s – are crumbling. Ransacked of its glorious artefacts, the pavilion has literally been brought down to earth. In a bizarre twist of fate, it has been turned into a market for gardening appliances and seeds. The agricultural cycle has replaced the modernist project. Mankind's dream of transcendence, its aspirations to



build a better collective future, have been overtaken by the eternal drudgery of petty accumulation, consumption and waste. Churchill's assertion that Stalin 'came to Russia with a wooden plough and left it in possession of atomic weapons' does not ring true at the Space Pavilion, where history has been reversed and it's back to the plough. While the Moscow authorities keep promising to restore the Space Pavilion and rebuild the exhibition, nobody is willing to invest the necessary money, and there is a glaring absence of the political will needed to break the dense web of corrupt contracts and agreements that allow market traders to continue operating. With moneyed interests given free rein, civilization with its collective dreams and aesthetic excesses is in retreat. It cannot support itself. Left on its own, it collapses, and life reverts to its most elementary forms.

But while the Soviet pavilions are on their last legs, one highly popular new exhibition is thriving. It occupies



what was once VDNKh's flagship central pavilion, a majestic 100-metre-high Stalinist building, whose spire is topped by a golden star and sheaths of wheat. But there is nothing Stalinist about this exhibition. This is the museum of gifts to Leonid Yakubovich, the presenter of a highly popular television programme, *The Field of Fortune*, the format of which is more or less a straight copy of *Wheel of Fortune*. This programme, however, has its own very Russian slant. Participants often bring gifts for Yakubovich, which they give him before they start playing the game. Some of these

gifts are later transferred to the VDNKh museum. They include homemade souvenirs: amateur paintings, models of cars and boats, hunting trophies, and so on. But most gifts represent Yakubovich himself. Bottles of vodka, little wooden figurines, portraits and souvenir plates all carry his image. The pavilion has been transformed into a place of pagan worship, a shrine to the new god of money – money that is not earned, but magically delivered by this deity, inhabiting the new Olympian heights of television.

As VDNKh went to seed, many visitors (particularly those from the older generation) lamented the leaving of this dream of a better future. Not, however, the new Russian liberal elite. It always considered the place too vulgar and populist, too implicated in Soviet ideology. Many thought that Soviet civilization deserved to collapse, and simply had to give way to a new liberal future. Now at VDNKh we can see what this future has brought – a run-of-the-mill marketplace and naive popular magic. The end of Utopia has meant a rude return to drab earthly concerns.

Twenty years ago, when the ideas of market liberalism first started to take hold in Russia, they did seem to bear the promise of a better society and a better future. Capitalism would unleash huge energies, rejuvenate the stagnant socialist society through economic vitality and individual enterprise. Liberal ideologists forecast that capitalist dynamism, founded on freedom, individualism and hard work, would create wealth and overcome economic and social problems. The prescription was flawless. The only obstacle for the adepts of liberal ideology was the people, with their cultural patterns of behaviour, beliefs and values inherited from the Soviet times. But eventually people would change – if not through the reform of minds, then through demographic replacement. As the 1990s began, a minister of labour confidently and publicly predicted that, with the passing of time, the older generation, stuck in their old ways and waiting for the state to feed them instead of developing their own initiative, would die out and the country would start to flourish.

Millions of people duly did die (in the 1990s Russia experienced a mortality crisis unprecedented in peacetime). It emerged, however, that the new political regime did not really need the remaining population to engage in mass entrepreneurial activities. As predatory new networks positioned themselves neatly to extract resources from the state, the emphasis shifted from support for free enterprise towards the need to strengthen state institutions. In fact, much of the population, entrepreneurial or not, turned out to be of no economic utility whatsoever to the new rulers. As the Russian political commentator Stanislav Belkovsky has pointed out, what the ruling elite needs are people



who service the oil and gas sectors (which, until recently, were the basis of the state's – and its managers' – profits) and banks to transfer money abroad. The rest are redundant. They should be occupied by consumption, television, and, in the absence of any real alternatives to the current regime, ritualistic voting. Individuals 'liberated' from communist constraints by the free market have become apathetic consumers.

Mainstream politicians have long since desisted from serious public discussion of the country's future. The sense of a future has been privatized by the elite. It is they who are involved in the accumulation of resources. It is they who are busy constructing themselves as the new aristocracy, inventing family 'tradition' and preparing their children to be the future masters of the country. Aristocratic societies are booming, genealogies showing noble lineage going back centuries are drawn, lavish charity balls are given, and the kids are shipped off to the best Western schools and universities.

At the same time, the lives of the masses have been detemporalized. They are now supposed to live in a circular time, where there is little change and progress. According to the official line, everyone in Russia's past – the tsars and the Bolsheviks, Ivan the Terrible, Lenin and Stalin – strove to make Russia 'a great country', and we should in turn be proud of all these new state-builders (according to Medvedev's recent directive, any historian who says differently is falsifying Russian history and must be held to account). The present, despite the recent economic crisis (which, as the loyal mass media have explained, is imported from the West), is glorious as well. Little mention is made of the future, other than in the context of the present – assurances that all will remain as it is now. Opinion polls show that over twenty years of market reforms people have lost the idea of the future. People are stuck in a recursive reality in which, as prophesied in the Bible, 'the Earth stands still'.

Opinion polls reveal an apathetic public, alienated from political life, but also demonstrating general contentment with 'stability'. The current financial crisis did produce significant anxiety, and trust in the country's political institutions decreased for a time. But Putin remains a hugely popular leader, and representatives of democratic opposition remain unable to break out from their political ghetto. As elsewhere, a consolidated mass media promote the cult of wealth and omnipresent consumerism, depoliticizing the electorate. Stuck in front of televisions and PCs, or engaging in individualized consumption, consumers, like peasants, are – to paraphrase Marx – isolated from one another instead of coming together in mutual intercourse, and are incapable of truly representing their own class



interests. Like Marx's peasants, these masses are not to be the agents of their own future.

Meanwhile, the political project is tightly locked into a seemingly perennial succession of Putin–Medvedev–Putin (Putin has announced recently that he sees no obstacle to becoming president again). In publicity photos this summer, Putin again demonstrated to the country and the world his muscular torso – a promise of the leader's physical potency for many years ahead. Who needs platforms and ideas, when the leader's legitimacy is based on being fitter, stronger, quicker to act than any potential challengers? With this direct

physicality, Putin is the perfect embodiment of the down-to-earth nature of liberal capitalism's instrumentalism. No need for 'superstructures', complex ideas or reflections. His manner is brutal and forthright – perhaps best exemplified by his reply to a foreign journalist's question about the Kursk disaster: 'What happened to the submarine? It sank.' This no-nonsense pragmatism is characteristic of the new Russian elite. Putin and his clan



are taking what they can of Russia's resources here and now. Oil, gas and land are the highest prizes. The nation's intellectual capital is largely ignored. The Russian Academy of Sciences is treated as a useless relic of the Soviet cultural project. Scientists in the country widely believe that constant attempts to deprive the Academy of its freedoms are motivated not so much by the idea of establishing government control, but by the desire of state officials to privatize the prime real estate that the Academy owns.

In the struggles for land, natural resources and real estate, enormous energies are unleashed, from the top to the bottom of Russian society. A huge 'land grab' is going on everywhere. Going to a Moscow cemetery to visit a parental grave, one of the authors noticed that the fence around the grave was broken, and that the neighbouring grave had been 'expanded' into its territory by the construction of a massive new fence of its own. Friends explained that this is not an unusual practice, and the fight for additional square centimetres of land goes on in cemeteries everywhere. Her co-author woke up one morning to the sight and sound of construction machinery digging the ground ten metres away from her windows. The Moscow authorities were turning a blind eye to the construction of a new block of flats in blatant violation of all building regulations. With land in the city centre so expensive, residents are often powerless to prevent such building works. Private interests need to prevail immediately, here and now, with the public sphere constantly under siege.

So who can formulate a vision of a better collective future? In Russia this role has traditionally fallen to the intelligentsia. However, we are also seeing a decline of the radical intelligentsia. By and large it has accepted the inevitability of liberal capitalism – either because any alternative leftist ideology is still firmly associated with the failed Soviet project, or for more pragmatic reasons, as intellectuals, many of whom now manage to carve out a decent living out of the market for their 'expert services', do not want to undermine their acceptance by the political elite. As is evident elsewhere in Eastern Europe, people who question the path of liberal reforms or discuss their social costs are not taken seriously and are dismissed either as communists – and thereby aligned to what is now very much a spent force – or as nationalists.

The eternal sunshine of liberal capitalism casts its shadows, where people do not like to look. In these shadows lurk 'the others' – the poor, the unemployable and the homeless. The last group perhaps best exemplifies the inherent faults of the system. A haunting reminder of the unresolved contradictions in the

collective order, homeless people are a reality that must be suppressed. Even with the ranks of the homeless approaching (by some estimates) 3 million people, public discussion of homelessness is all but absent. To members of the public, they are the messengers of some unspoken disaster. As Merleau-Ponty argued, the terror of the reality that has no means of being understood is resolved only in silences and half-truths. People are sorry for the homeless, yet see them as responsible for their own misfortunes. Confused about the social reality that confronts them in the guise of the homeless, they prefer to look away. Interviews show that people find it difficult to make sense of the social forces that have led to this visible catastrophe. At the same time the 'experts' – academics and social workers – are always ready to present them as pathological individuals. They are assigned physical and mental characteristics that render them unable to function in society. They cannot be credited with full rationality and their behaviour is often explained through a combination of unconscious urges and psychological predispositions. Alternatively, their actions may serve some malicious purpose – to exploit other people; to sponge off the decent public. No system of social re-integration and permanent rehousing exists for them. They are warehoused in dilapidated shelters (normally situated out of sight, at the outskirts of the cities), or dispersed from the streets in periodic 'cleansing' operations, conducted by the police.

Other social problems are not resolved but simply stored up. These include the emergence of new slums in the Russian backwaters where the people, unneeded by global capitalism, are leading a pitiful existence. There is growing racism and xenophobia, exemplified by growing conflicts in schools and on the streets between Russian-speaking young people and the 'blacks' – children of labour migrants from Central Asia and the Caucasus. Like others before him, Slavoj Žižek has recently argued that liberal capitalism allows no universality, just private concerns. It pits the included against the excluded, destroys the 'commons' of a collective intellectual capital and ecological environment. It does not offer a vision of a better collective future. We would add that it also profanes mankind's dreams of transcendence, which end up in naive magic conjured up by market sellers and the high priests of television.

Is there an organizing force that can get Russia off the ground, draw the country out of the new Dark Age with its social fragmentation, predatory individualism, privatization of public goods, and false gods? Twenty years after the end of communism, the question is open.