Statement of research interest

Does Culture Matter in Civil Society?

In the framework of the research project “The Cultural Policy in Civil Society Construction in Russia in the context of Globalization,” the following problem became obvious.

It is commonly believed that one of the major factors of the strength of Civil Society is the increasing level of economic well-being in a given society. Indeed, one of the central tendencies of modernization theory is “that the higher a country’s standard of living, the more vibrant will be its democracy, the more its citizens will participate in civil society organization.”

Does this theory work for the contemporary Russia? Does the economic modernization guarantee the democratic survival or participation in political organizations? Why do many Russians find themselves in the position of the “Other” to their own nation and national culture? Strong doubts such as: “Is it my own culture?” “Is it my society?” “How could it happen in the history of my own country?” are widespread among the young as well as the old people.

In the 1980 and 1990s, many Russian social theorists believed that the new coming global society and the electronic, computer culture would have the positive intellectual and educational use in most national cultures as well as in Russia. They maintained that it would help develop democratic culture, get rid of the bureaucratic system and political corruption, develop rule of law and to provide everyone with the right to express opinion, and to think independently.

This is no longer the case. A large number of studies (Western and Russian) have shown that Postindustrial (or Information) Society can lead to a relative decline of reflexivity as well as human cognitive capabilities, to a broad development of “cheap culture”, to withdrawal from reality, and to a sense of irresponsibility.

In this vein, Hannah Arendt wrote that “the general crisis that has overtaken the modern world everywhere and almost every sphere of life manifests itself differently in each country.”

The crisis comes from the development of mass technological culture and reveals itself in human loneliness which is neither isolation nor solitude; in excitability and lack of standards; in capacity of consumption, accompanied by inability to judge, and above all, in “egocentricity and that fateful alienation from the world which since Rousseau is mistaken for self-alienation.” In the 1950 and 1960s, such philosophers as J. Dewey, E. Fromm, H. Arendt, T. Adorno, J. Ellul predicted this crisis in society and culture and warned against such light-minded trust in the power of technological changes and their potential to solve social and political problems.
noted in *The Human Condition* that the transformation of public culture from producer to consumer undermined the values of human lives. The social life became “wordless and herdlike and who therefore incapable of building or inhabiting a public, worldly realm.”

This gap between the private intimate life and public, procedural, community-based democratic institutions was blamed for undermining the nature of social life by many famous philosophers of the twentieth century, including John Dewey and Jurgen Habermas.

Nowadays, in fact, many individuals (and not only individuals but also the social groups) find themselves in the condition of the “Lost.” It happens not only in Russia. This Identity Crisis consists of the loss of historical continuity, temporal collage, different forms of narcissism and hedonism, existential anxiety and social alienation. Instead of initiatives and the possibility of choice, individuals are restricted to the economic dependence, political blindness and social alienation. More than fifty years ago, John Dewey analyses this condition in his work *The Lost Individual*. He underlines the point that individuals are confused and bewildered, that our epoch is characterised as lacking in solid and assured objects of belief and approved ends of action.

Currently Russians find themselves in such a double crisis: the first one is global, the second one is specific to the Russian context. Firstly, Russians are trying to define their “postcommunist” identity and, secondly, to find organising principles to construct their own world in the global society. Apparently, the downfall of communism has become a strong factor for the development of globalism. The evidence of globalization, its connection with the “powerless state” (see M. Castells) and the coming Information society were accepted in Russian social theory in the early 1990s. However, answers to several questions have not yet been found: “What is the model for Russian integration into the global space?”, “Who are the main subjects of this integration?”, “Do we need a model for the nation state?”, “What are the main foundations for democracy?” and, finally, “Who is the Other: communists, oligarchs, fundamentalists, or somebody else entirely?”

In consequence, uncertainty in the understanding of the future, the development of the “world of nationalisms” with no relevance to the Other, tremendous disappointment with developments, aversion to public activities, and disengagement from the larger society result. As Victoria Bonnell has described it: “The reduction and then the elimination of party controls over information and association have precipitated an explosion of new possibilities for personal and collective identities. The “badges” of identity that for many decades served to place people in an elaborate system of stratification have been rapidly changing in the post-Communist era.”

The process of modernization in contemporary Russia meets many social and cultural challenges. But in their mental life, Russians are not prepared to identify with the statement that
“living well is a challenge.” vii After two decades of transition only the economic system has been adapted to the rapid and sweeping global changes.

The question of the development of civil society in Russia is the most important issue for contemporary Russian social sciences and humanities, not because it is fashionable in developed countries, not only because this theme is in vogue in social and economic theories, and, finally, not only because the development of civil society has proven to be the universal form of social and cultural development in the modernization process.

From my point of view, this issue arises, first of all, in such context: without the development of civic culture, it is difficult to create the necessary conditions for personality formation. I agree with Bellah that “Civic membership points to that critical intersection of personal identity with social identity. If we face a crisis of civic identity, it is not just a social crisis, it is personal crisis as well.” viii

It is obvious that in transition societies such as in Russia the “reserve of previous traditions” is exhausted. That is why it is necessary in modern society to generate the new energies of integration, new communication resources from the “life world” – civil society. The sign of such a crisis of traditions is the crisis of cultural institutions. Many of them are in the transition period from state to commercial. But a broad institutional structure has not been constructed and could not support the social level of development of culture. This social level is the level of the education of citizens: the creation of the system of mutually-adopted social values but not of egoistic preferences; this is the level of the system of social discourse but not of narrow minded talks on how to enlarge mass consumption in economics and culture.

It is evident that in Russia the perspectives of cultural construction are connected with discussions of the problems of civil initiatives, their realization on the social level, the formation of the strategies on the purposeful and stable construction of cultural policy in the different regions of Russia.

A number of researchers in the Western world also speak about the decline of active citizenship and decay of democratic institutions. Clive Barnett names the following reasons: “The Media are charged with the encouraging cognitive dependence, narcosis and attenuation of critical faculties (Zolo, 1992); with eroding the capacity of citizens to trust in public institutions…with undermining the autonomy of science and a robust public culture criticism (Bourdieu 1998); and with encouraging widespread civic disengagement and the withering of social capital” (Putnam 1995). ix

It is possible to add here the factors of the growing influence of global marketplace and shrinking of the middle class (Bellah), the growth of oligarchic power (L. Thurow), and the decline of labour movement.
Therefore, the purpose of this research is to investigate the theoretical and practical aspects of the social interdependence between culture and civic engagement in contemporary society, to find ways of fostering the integration of citizens, to explore national models of active citizenship, and to analyse this practice in Russia, specifically.

The methodology of this research is system analysis and interdisciplinary research.

The crucial questions are raised by declining confidence in government, devolution of authority to state and local institutions, and, at the same time, the growth of non-governmental organizations. The problem of the civic dimension of public policy is currently relevant not only for Western countries, but in Asia, Latin America, Russia as well. (N. Pickus, T. Dostert).

New communications regulation in civil society is based not only on the economic foundations of private property and market economy, and also not only on social roots such as the balance between autonomization and communalism (associationalism), but also on such socio-cultural resources as aspirations to develop reflexive and humane connections in social life, to develop citizens as thinkers and not mute executors, to value human dignity and self-respect.

That is why the soul of civil society must be understood as the cultivation of space for democratic practice, search of the new patterns of mediation, and as the “practice of autonomy, obligation and responsibility.”

The other basic problem discussed in American research literature is the inevitable connection between educational level and social participation and trust - key variables used to measure social capital (R. Putman, R. Bellah, J. Helliwell, M. Flamm, S. Smith, H. Ingram).

To my mind, the intellectual heritage of J. Dewey in this case is very important. Dewey noted that educative growth creates the connection between intelligent action and community. The polemics between Dewey and W. Lippmann on whether to advocate or charge participatory democracy enabled Dewey to formulate the arguments to protect the idea of democracy, which is “idea of community life itself.” Dewey argued that while “we are born organic beings associated with others … we are not born members of community.” That is why the role of cultivation of social responsibility in the system of education is relevant. Cultures reach the certain degree of complexity in various associations. Therefore, Dewey rejected the “political view of human beings.” The art of collective associative life is not only created in the political sphere but mostly in culture. The problematic of modern democracy is fundamentally cultural.

Another scholar, Clive Barnett, mentions that Dewey “understood democracy in a very broad sense, as a mode of associational living shaped by two conditions: shared interests within society, and freedom to develop new interests.” Communication is the establishment of cooperation in an activity in which there are partners, and in which the activity of each is
modified and regulated by partnership. The complexity of social life and pluralisation of public 
challenge the effective communication but it doesn’t mean that it is impossible. 

Therefore, the questions of civic engagement becomes both cultural (identity 
construction, self-consciousness, everyday values), and political (law, policy-making, regulative 
norms, forms of political action). 

Moreover, Robert Bellah in the new preface to Habits of the Heart noted that it is 
necessary to understand the escaping ties to others' orientation as the cultural orientation. xv 

But what is culture? Culture could be understood as the “institutions, symbol systems, 
and forms of regulation and training responsible for forming, maintaining and changing the 
mental and behavioural attributes of population.”xvi That is why culture administers to conduct 
the routinised everyday life. 

Between the categories of culture outlined by William Sewell in his work Logics of 
History. Social Theory and Social Transformation it is possible to choose the following: 
culture as learned behaviour; 
culture as the institutional sphere devoted to making of meanings; 
culture as creativity or agency; 
culture as the system of symbols and meanings; 
culture as practice, shot by willful action, power relations, struggle, contradiction, and 
change.xvii We could choose the understanding of culture as the culture as clusters of institutions 
devoted to specialized activities production, circulation of meanings in art, music, theater, 
fashion, literature, religion, media, education. The main cultural actors, institutions are 
communications media, business corporations, religions, educational establishments, and the 
state. Most of them are historically bound to local or national systems but now they are 
meaningless inside them, without global context. 

It is useful to add also that we are now dealing with complex societies – stratified, and 
highly differential, which is why the issue of integration in culture is urgent, generally speaking 
impossible, but desirable for everybody.xviii 

Apart from the above mentioned, it is useful not to forget the essence of culture that is to 
cultivate, to take care for self-education, self-perfection. 

Therefore, democracy and civic engagement could be understood as cultural practice 
(Dewey, Bellah, Benhabib, Barnett). It presupposes the basic practice of cultivation of spaces, of 
giving reasons and inviting responses; cultivation of democratic space and multiplicity of 
channels of public debates, pluralism of opinions and cultural identities. As Clive Barnett 
stresses: “Political theory revolves around a set of understandings of the autonomous self of 
ethical responsibility and political obligation, bound together with others by social contracts or
communitarian solidarity.” “Democracy is an artful practice - it involves “the cultivation of competencies of judging, reasoning, appreciating, performing and responding.”

This cultivation is possible in public education because “education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume the responsibility for it.” Culture is understood as a connecting to power active, selective and differential development of capacities for self-actualization. But they “are dramatic conversations about things that matter to their participants.”

It is the public space that, as Arendt, Habermas, Benhabib, Barnett affirmed, is a space between actors and not a space of commonality or shared identity. “Solidarities are not pre-formed and discovered, they are formed and transformed through the giving and keeping promises.” The public realm is an artful practice. The media in the public realm is cultivating the conditions for democratic citizenship. Cultural institutions are responsible for the development of capacities for self-actualization (Barnett, Donald).

So, we can argue that the improvement of economic conditions as well as the development of a wealthy business elite necessarily lead to the following steps of civil society construction. What I can agree is that in the contemporary Russian situation state could help to protect the rights of organizations, to develop new tax incentives, to promote new policy formation (to ensure that the state is seen as a cooperative partner and not the enemy), and to research cultural practice. I think that it is impossible to re-invent contemporary Civil society without relevance to culture.

Liberal deployment of culture is related to national programmes of citizenship formation (especially in the process of changing from state to market society).

And still we need to decide some crucial and frustrating questions: how to enforce energy, how to help to encourage citizens to take part in public activities?

Furthermore, we can use the logics of Bellah and Sewell in order to analyze the cultural practice of the main cultural actors – institutions, which are the communications media, educational systems, business corporations, religions, and state.

Literature devoted to the communications media is vast. Ways of expanding social networks are connected with new tools such as the internet. Computer networks, particularly the internet, could reinforce social activity, increasing community involvement. The different examples in this practice are given by M. Castells, C. Barnett, A. Kavanaugh. The examples of postnational democracies in European Union, South Africa (Kavanaugh), South Korea (Castells) demonstrate the new forms of citizenship development and cultural democratisation, changing everyday cultural values and forms of political action.
The sense of connection, shared fate, mutual responsibility, and community is more critical than ever, as Bellah noted. We could only add that these values have been for centuries the crucial cultural values in Russian history. This mutual trust and solidarity helped deal with threats. (In this case we are not speaking about “Russian Idea,” but are merely stating acknowledged patterns of behaviour).

In conclusion, I might state the following task of research: the historical and cultural background in order to understand the meaning of this practice, that is

- comparative research of civic engagement in such institutions as educational establishments, in the USA and EU (including both Western and Eastern Europe);
- historical analysis of the Russian experience of such practice of civic engagement from the 1960s to 1990s: NGOs, cultural associations, that means the revitalizing the pre-existing democratic traditions,
- role of civic education.

To sum up all these ideas let me turn to H. Arendt again. To distinguish the civilised peoples from the barbarian is rather easy – they “living together in polis, conducted their affairs by means of speech, through persuasion, and not by means of violence, through mute coercion.”xxiv Mute consuming leads to destruction of civil society, as well as withering of culture. Culture and civic engagement belong together because they are dealing with judgements and decisions.

Literature:

3 Ibid P. 199.
8 Ibid. P.

xi ibid P. 196-197.


xiii Ibid. P. 48


xix Ibid. P. 170.


References:


