

Statement of research interest
Does Culture Matter in Civil Society?

In the frames 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 society. 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.”¹

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 80-90s of the XXth century many among 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 of the national cultures as well as in Russia. They proved that it would help to develop the democratic culture, to get rid of the bureaucratic system and political corruption, to develop the Rule of law and to provide everybody with the rights to express opinion, 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”; withdrawal from the reality and a sense of irresponsibility.

In this connection Hannah Arendt wrote: “The general crisis that has overtaken the modern world everywhere and almost every sphere of life manifests itself differently in each country.”² The crisis comes from the development of mass technological culture and reveals 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.”³ In 50-60s such philosophers as J. Dewey, E. Fromm, H. Arendt, T. Adorno, J. Ellul predicted the crisis in society and culture and warned against such light-minded trust in the power of

technological changes, their possibilities to solve the social and political problems. Arendt 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." ⁴.

This gap between the private intimate life and public, procedural, community-based democratic institutions was blamed to undermine the nature of social life by many famous philosophers of the XXth century: John Dewey, Jurgen Habermas.

In fact, nowadays 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 in: 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 the individuals are restricted to the economic dependence, political blindness and social alienation. More than 50 years ago John Dewey analyses this condition in his work *"The Lost Individual."* He underlines that individuals are confused and bewildered, that our epoch is characterised as lacking in solid and assured objects of belief and approved ends of action⁵.

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 globalizm. The evidence of globalization, its connection with the "powerless state" (see M. Castells) and the coming Information society were accepted in the Russian social theory at the beginning of the 90s. However, answers to several questions have not been found yet: "What is the model of Russian integration to the global space?", "Who are the main subjects of this integration?", "Do we need a model of the nation state?", "What are the main foundations for democracy?" and, finally, "Who is the Other: communists, oligarchs, fundamentalists or somebody else?"

In consequence, uncertainty in the understanding of the future, the development of the "world of nationalisms" with no relevance to the Other, the tremendous disappointments with developments, aversion to public activities, disengage from the larger society. 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." ⁶

Modernization process in contemporary Russia meets social and cultural challenges. But in their mental life Russians are not prepared to the statement that "living well is a challenge."⁷

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 the contemporary Russian social and human sciences, not because it is fashionable in the developed countries, not only because this theme is the up to date problem in the social and economic theories, and, at last, not only because this is proved to be the universal form of social and cultural development in modernization process.

From my point of view, this question arises, first of all, in such context: without 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.”⁸

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

It is evident that in Russia the perspectives of cultural construction are connected with the discussions of the problems of civil initiatives, their realization on the social level, 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).⁹

It is possible to add: with growing influence of global marketplace and shrinking of middle class (Bellah), with the growing oligarchic power (L. Thurow), 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 the contemporary society, to find the ways of creating integration of citizens, the national models of the active citizenship, to analyse this practice in Russia.

Methodology of research is the system analysis and interdisciplinary research.

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

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

That is why the soul of Civil society must be understood as Cultivation of space for democratic practice, search of the new patterns of mediation, “practice of autonomy, obligation and responsibility.”¹⁰

The other basic problem discussed in the research literature in the USA is the inevitable connection between the educational levels and the 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 whether to advocate or charge the 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.”¹¹ That is why the role of cultivation of social responsibility in the system of education is up to date. Cultures reach the certain degree of complexity in various associations. Therefore, Dewey rejected the “politically view of human beings.”¹² 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.¹³

The other researcher 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.”¹⁴ 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 became 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.¹⁵

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."¹⁶ 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 the 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.¹⁷ 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 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 the complex societies – stratified, highly differential that is why the issue of integration in culture is urgent, generally speaking impossible, but desirable for everybody.¹⁸

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.”¹⁹

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.”²⁰ Culture is understood as a connecting to power active, selective and differential development of capacities for self-actualisation. But they “are dramatic conversations about things that matter to their participants.”²¹

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.”²² Public realm is an artful practice. Media in public realm are cultivating the conditions of democratic citizenship. Cultural institutions are responsible for development of capacities for self-actualisation (Barnett, Donald).

So, we can argue that improving of economic conditions as well as development of 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 making to persuade that state is a cooperative partner not the enemy, and to research on cultural practice. I think that it is impossible to re-invent the 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 the crucial and frustrating questions: how to enforce energy, how to help to encourage citizens to take part in public activities?

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

Literature devoted to communications media is vast. Ways of expanding social networks are connected with the new tools – 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.²³ 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, community is more critical than ever, as Bellah noted. We could only add that these values had been for centuries the crucial cultural values in Russian history. This mutual trust, solidarity helped to deal with threats. (In this case we are not speaking about “Russian Idea”, we are stating the 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, state in the USA, EU (Western Europe and Eastern Europe);

- historical analysis of Russian experience of such practice of the period of 60-90-s in civic engagement: NGO, cultural associations, that means the re-vitalizing 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.”²⁴ 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:

¹ Howard, Marc Morje. 2003. *The Weakness of Civil Society in Post-Communist Europe*. Cambridge University Press.

² Arendt, Hannah. 1993. *Between Past and Future. Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. Penguin Books. N.Y. P. 173.

³ Ibid P. 199.

⁴ Arendt, Hannah. 1958. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: Un. of Chicago Press. P. 160.

⁵ Dewey, John. “The Lost Individual.” *Individualism, Old and New: The Later Works, 1925-1953*, Vol. 5 Ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois Un. Press, 1984). P. 66-76.

⁶ Bonnell, Victoria. 1996. *Identities in Transition: Eastern Europe and Russia after Collapse of Communism*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: Un. of California Press. P. VII.

⁷ Bellah, Robert, et al. 2008. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. With a New Preface. Un. of California Press. P. 3.

⁸ Ibid. P.

-
- ⁹ Barnett, Clive. 2003. *Culture and Democracy. Media, Space, and Representation*. The Un. of Alabama Press. P.1.
- ¹⁰ *ibid* P. 196-197.
- ¹¹ Flamm, Matthew C. *The Demanding Community. Politization of the Individual after Dewey*. // Education and Culture. 22(1). 2006. P. 35-54. P. 47.
- ¹² *Ibid*. P. 48
- ¹³ West, C. 1989. *The American Evasion of Philosophy*. London: Macmillan. P. 105.
- ¹⁴ Barnett, Clive. 2003. *Culture and Democracy. Media, Space, and Representation*. The Un. of Alabama Press. P.35.
- ¹⁵ Bellah, Robert, et al. 2008. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. With a New Preface. Un. of California Press. P. XIV.
- ¹⁶ Bennett, T. 1998. *Culture*, London: Sage. P.10.
- ¹⁷ William H. Sewell Jr. 2005. *Logics of History. Social Theory and Social Transformation*. The Un. of Chicago Press. P. 156-158.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid*. P. 170 .
- ¹⁹ Barnett, Clive. 2003. *Culture and Democracy. Media, Space, and Representation*. The Un. of Alabama Press. P.199.
- ²⁰ Arendt, Hannah. 1993. *Between Past and Future. Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. Penguin Books. N.Y. P. 196.
- ²¹ Bellah, Robert, et al. 2008. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. With a New Preface. Un. of California Press. P. 27.
- ²² Barnett, Clive. 2003. *Culture and Democracy. Media, Space, and Representation*. The Un. of Alabama Press. P.64.
- ²³ Castells, Manuel. *The Power of Identity. The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*. Vol. 2. Blackwell Publishers, 1997.
- ²⁴ Arendt, Hannah. 1993. *Between Past and Future. Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. Penguin Books. N.Y. P. 173. P. 23.

References:

1. Arendt, Hannah. 1993. *Between Past and Future. Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. Penguin Books. N.Y.
2. Almond, Gabriel A. and Sidney Verba. 1989. *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*.
3. Bellah, Robert, et al. 1985. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*.
4. Bellah, Robert, et al. *The Good Society*.

-
5. Bellah, Robert. 2006. *The Robert Bellah Reader*.
 6. Castells, Manuel. *The Power of Identity. The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*. Vol. 2. Blackwell Publishers, 1997.
 7. Cohen, Jean and Arato, Andrew. 1994. *Civil Society and Political Theory*.
 8. Giddens, Anthony. 1985. *The Nation-state and Violence*. Berkley: Un. of California Press.
 9. Dahl, R. 1989. *Democracy and its Critics*. New Haven, CT: Yale Un. Press.
 10. Dewey, John. 1969-1991. *The Collected Works of John Dewey*. 37 vol. Jo Ann Boydston. (ed.) Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois Un. Press.
 11. Habermas, Jurgen. 1996. *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*. Cambridge. Ma: MIT Press.
 12. Eberly, Don. 2002. *The Soul of Civil Society: Voluntary Associations and the Public Value of Moral Habits*.
 13. Lippmann, Walter. 1922. *Public Opinion*. N.Y.: Harcourt Brace and Company.
David L. Weimer. *Enriching Public Discourse: Policy Analysis in Democracies*.
// The Good Society. Vol. 11. N 1. 2002.
 14. Putnam, Robert D. 1999. *Education and Social Capital*.
 15. Putnam, Robert. 2000. *Bowling Alone: Civic Disengagement in America and What to Do About It*.
 16. Pickus, N., Dostert, T. *Ethics, Civic Life and Education Policy Makers*. // The Good Society. Vol. 11. N 1. 2002.
 17. S. Rathger Smith and Ingram, Helen. *Rethinking Policy Analysis. Citizens, Community and Re-Structuring of Public Services*. // The Good Society. Vol. 11. N 1. 2002.
 18. Sthur, J. John. *Genealogical Pragmatism. Philosophy, Experience and Community*. SUNY Press. 1997. P. 231-261.
 19. Zolo, D. 1992. *Democracy and Complexity*, Cambridge: Polity Press.