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**Obshchestvennost: an indigenous concept of civil society?**

A discussion of the problem of civil society or *societe civile* or *burgerliche Gesellschaft* would naturally tend to merge these terms into a unified Western concept of civil society. This is justified because English, French, German and other ideas of civil society have been cross-fertilised in the political thought of the last century and a half. And so were the corresponding practices. After all, one can easily name the major constitutive elements or institutions of civil society common to the Western political history: free associations of citizen, the economic market, and the public sphere. But a great deal of confusion arises when the concept of civil society is projected onto East European and Russian political realm in the hope of discovering similar elements. Even when these are discovered and assembled, they form up an entity whose resemblance of the original is at least doubtful. Consequently, there is no consensus among the scholars of East-European and Russian politics as to the actual existence of civil society in Russia. And this is despite the eager acceptance of the Russian calculus *grazhdanskoe obshchestvo* by the Soviet post-dissident new left groups as well as now by the state authorities.

The problem is that the concept of civil society as *grazhdanskoe obshchestvo* when applied to Russian political context turns near empty and devoid of history behind it. However, I would like to argue that this is not the problem of applicability, but rather that of cross-cultural translation. The conventional procedure of political science would normally, and in many cases unwittingly, use a context-free translation method, applying a formal ready-made model of, say, civil society to a different political culture and searching therein the same elements that constitute the original model. Linguistic translation in this case would be direct and of minor importance, even if the translated term does not match the local tradition of usage. In contrast to that, the interpretative method would first look at the contextual and historical usage of a similar concept in a different culture and then try to estimate the degree of formal correspondence with the original model in question. In this case, what is being compared is not formal models but traditions. To translate a concept across cultural boundaries would require a search for an indigenous concept of equal historical and practical significance. If it cannot be found, then we would perhaps be better off looking for a different area of research.

The point, though, is not about accuracy of linguistic translation. Rather, the question pursued is that of a correspondence of practices formative of institutions in different cultures, the kind of correspondence that an accurate cross-cultural translation of political concepts should highlight. Coming back to the issues of civil society, the Gorbachev-period attempt to borrow the term civil society by talking about *grazhdanskoe obshchestvo* was successful. Alas, the spell was pronounced, but civil society did not materialize. Behind this attempt, I assume, there was an implicit conviction that the borrowing of this concept and giving it a wide circulation would also transplant the corresponding practices that would subsequently crystallise into institutions of civil society. One should be very optimistic to claim that this is what has actually happened.

Should we, then, discard the problematic of civil society altogether? Instead, I would suggest to look at a specific Russian concept of citizenship and public life captured by the term "*obshchestvennost*". Unlike *grazhdanskoe obshchestvo*, *obshchestvennost* is not an empty signifier, for it has a 200-years old conceptual history behind it, a range of familiar usages at the mundane level, and it is possible to point at a set of practices which

render it meaning full. Thus I have attempted to formulate three ontological criteria - which could help to highlight a configuration of practices constitutive of an entity represented in political discourse: First, the term should reveal a conceptual history of its own or a tradition of usage; Second, it has to be part of everyday usage, not only an analytical term of the social science; Third, it has to have a pragmatic content, that is it has to be embedded in a certain form of life. The first two criteria are a reformulation of Alfred Schutzs well known interpretative principle of correspondence between the first-order and second-order concepts. The third criterion is borrowed from post-Wittgensteinian tradition of social analysis, which holds that the meaning of a concept is necessarily public, that is it acquires meaning only against the background of a certain practice or form of life (1).

In Russian, 'obshchestvennost' has two basic connotations: first, with an abstract quality of "sociality" or social solidarity, and, second, with an active social agency, socially-active groups of people, the public. The authorship of this term is generally attributed to N.Karamzin, who introduced the word 'obshchestvennost' in his Letters of A Russian Traveller (the letter of April 6, 1789, first published in 1791) to designate a specific quality of human solidarity, "dukh obshchestvennosti" (or public spirit) (2). Later studies, however, identified the first usage of the word in the writings of Radishchev of 1789 (3).

The term belongs to the so-called abstract lexicon, and the words of this group designate, by means of adding the suffix -ost' to an adjective, an abstract quality deduced from a concrete attribute expressed by that adjective (e.g. obshchestvennyi - obshchestvennost' = social - sociality). This lexicon, which first entered Slavic languages through translations of Greek literary texts around 863 a.d., was generally used to represent abstract ideas and its growth was especially rapid from the eighteenth century on with the development of science and literature(4).

After its invention in the late-eighteenth century 'obshchestvennost' temporarily fell into oblivion and its usage was not registered until the 1840s, one exception being its employment in the 1817 translation of Adam Fergusons Essays on the History of Civil Society, where it stood for the notion of public spirit (5). More common in those times were obshchestvo (society) and, in some cases, publika (the public). Obshchestvennost' reemerged in the vocabulary of raznochintsy, literary critics and intellectuals of middle-class origin. The term can be found in the writings of Belinsky, Herzen, and Ogarev. In their usage, it denoted the idea of social solidarity, of a specific quality that people develop living in society; the idea of sociality was opposed to the idea of state service. There was also a second meaning. The intelligentsia tended to contrast 'obshchestvennost' with obshchestvo (society) in order to mark itself off from polite society. In terms of this distinction 'obshchestvennost' was seen as a "progressive" part of society, consisting of the people who valued ideas and accomplishments, while obshchestvo related to aristocratic society obsessed with social behaviour ("good" society) (6). This personified meaning of 'obshchestvennost'<sup>1</sup> made the word unique. The term that used to point to an abstract quality ("sociality") was now drawn to identify a group of people, a collective subject, or a social agency akin to a public but with an emphasis on a positive quality of "progressiveness" and "intellectualism". Virtually no other word of the abstract vocabulary in Russian saw such a shift from quality to subject, except for lichnost' (personality). To compare, there is a similar transition from quality to subject in "personal - personality", but no such thing occurred with "social - sociality" as it happened in Russian with obshchestvennyi - obshchestvennost'.

It seems that as the meaning of obshchestvo (society) was moving from a concrete social gathering to an abstract set of rules and institutions uniting the whole population, the term obshchestvennost' (sociality) was moving in the opposite direction - from an abstract quality of "sociality" to a concrete embodiment of this quality in a certain form of life. If obshchestvo was moving from the "who" to the "what", obshchestvennost' -was moving from the "what" to the "who".

Obshchestvennost' became an increasingly popular notion in connection with two new developments in the times of the reforms of Alexander II in the 1860s. The first was the development of independent commercial press, especially mass circulation newspapers (7). This gradually expanded the reading practices and formed the sphere of public debate whereby the educated strata could assemble themselves into an imagined community, the public. Against the background of this development, the term obshchestvennost' became firmly associated with public opinion. And the sphere of public opinion was articulately distinct and largely oppositional to the state politics. To give a brief example, Russia's turn of the century the liberal historian V. Maklakov entitled his book of memoirs "The Power and obshchestvennost' in the Twilight of the Old Russia", by which he sought to give an idea of two competing authorities, the state power and the authority of society. This was, in Russian case, the first major element of civil society - obshchestvennost' as the public sphere. Through public debate and public opinion formation obshchestvennost', which came to embody these practices, was constituted as a diffuse political community separate from the state. This development continued until 1917.

The second major development was connected with the practice of self-government and local constituencies. The reform of local institutions in 1864 stimulated the development of zemstva, the local institutions responsible for general self-government, education, law and public order, as well as for general life-maintenance of the local population, including medical care. Those who were engaged in zemstva activities were also referred to as obshchestvennost'. Created to balance the consequences of the 1861 peasant reform, zemstva enjoyed a fair degree of independence for the central government and capacity to promote collective social life. On the other hand, they were strictly non-political and their involvement in state politics was banned. Through the practice of zemstva obshchestvennost' came to be associated with self-rule. Zemstva accumulated an experience for independent organization of social life, the second key element and practice of civil society. This movement steadily developed for more than thirty years and in 1903-04 turned into a political force in the struggle for constitutional reforms.

To sum up, by the beginning of the twentieth century 'obshchestvennost' was associated with critical public opinion and the groups of people concerned "with public duties or common deeds - respublica, in Russian, delo obshchestvennoe - outside or above their state-service duties. In the same way as bureaucracy, for example, can be seen as personification of the state, 'obshchestvennost' personified the idea of society.

Now it would be logical to turn to the practice of economic exchange, that is the market that unites private property owners, another vital ingredient of a civil society, and see whether one can identify a sphere of independent economic activity with reference to obshchestvennost'. This is problematic in Russian context, because, first, the possibilities of a capitalist market economy were restricted (8), and, second, the incipient stratum of economic bourgeoisie - was reluctant to identify with obshchestvennost' and tended to ally with the state bureaucracy. The market economy can be seen as a non-political foundation of civil society, while self-rule and especially the public sphere belong to the realm of

politics. Thus the development of the public sphere, which, in the West, concluded the formation of civil society by articulating political interests of the latter, in Russia came first; and this inverted order of development of Russian civil society could provide a clue to understanding its inherent instability.

Before moving further in history, let us ask how do we use "obshchestvennost' in ordinary language. Discursively obshchestvennost does not belong to class rhetoric. What it represents may be called diffuse social forms. One will find it difficult to define concrete boundaries of obshchestvennost or its institutional belonging. It exists in two basic forms: either as the discursive referent to point to the carrier of public opinion (obshchestvennoe mnenie or mnenie obshchestvennosti). Or as a projected collective agent of a certain concerted social action or activity, given that such an action is voluntary and beyond peoples professional duties. There are thus two rules describing obshchestvennost as a phenomenon. First, obshchestvennost is always bigger than the empirical number of individuals present in concrete place and time (i.e. it is a virtual or imagined community). Second, it is relational to the action or practice it performs (i.e. it does not have static or objective parameters). Obshchestvennost is constituted as a correlate of communication or concerted action; and an individual can be said to be a member of obshchestvennost if and until he or she takes part in such an action. Membership in obshchestvennost is not formal but either discursive (opinion) or practical (activity).

An attempt to revive obshchestvennost was made in the late 1920-s in connection with the problem of transition from the proletarian dictatorship to the so-called socialist democracy (9). With the need to organise and expand the social base of the new political regime, obshchestvennost became seen as the means of increasing voluntary participation of the lay population in the functioning of the local legislative and executive bodies. The mechanism of the Soviet obshchestvennost was seen as a new form of government that had to gradually supersede proletarian (i.e. class-based) dictatorship (10). The mobilization of obshchestvennost, argued Sofia Smidovitch, was of utter importance for the reformation of everyday life; Nadezhda Krapskaya held similar views, making a rather radical statement that the state will be gradually displaced by the organized obshchestvennost (11). Thus, in the 1920s discourse obshchestvennost was associated with two main roles: it was responsible for the formation of a popular democratic basis for local government, and it had to become the subject of everyday surveillance, monitoring public order and combating deviant behaviour.

In the same time an extensive research on popular readership and public opinion formation was carried out. It was soon discovered that the state did not control public opinion. In 1929 a remarkable book was published - *The Organization of Public Opinion* by N. Kuzmichev. This was the study of public opinion formation based on the then new ideas of Walter Lipman. Kuzmichev concluded that public opinion was formed through a loose multiplicity of local discussion practices and rumors and was not susceptible to the state control. In a sense obshchestvennoe mnenie was independently formed and in many cases politically-oriented. To some extent, it limited and deflected the state power, but because it was not institutionalised, it could not influence it in a positive way.

These ideas were not put into practice in the times of Stalin (perhaps the only example being the movement of obshchestvennitsy). The concept of obshchestvennost, however, saw a powerful resurrection in the late 1950s-early 1960s. It was associated (in the way similar to the late 1920s case; doctrinal borrowings are possible but supportive evidence is lacking at the moment) with the transition from the state government to

obshchestvennyi (public) self-government and from the state regulation of public order to control by obshchestvennost. The need to develop the institutions of self-government and to pass some of the state functions of maintaining public order down to obshchestvennost and kollektivy was stressed by Khrushchev at the XXI congress of the CPSU; and this idea was subsequently included in the new Program of the Party. A special Postanovlenie of 2 March, 1959 "On the participation of the working population in the protection of public order" (okhrana obshchestvennogo poriadka) provided the legal basis for the creation of a variety of self-organized social forms associated with different aspects of the maintenance of the public order and self-government (such as voluntary "police dobrovolnaya narodnaya družhina", the comrades courts = tovarishcheskie sudy, public control committees of various sorts, etc.). Obshchestvennost figured prominently in those reforms, as the embodiment of society's self-government and as an agent of public order and organization of common life of citizens. Significantly, what was at issue in these reforms was the division of labour between the state and society and the creation of public organizations which could take over a number of functions earlier performed by the state. It rested on the popular doctrine that as the Soviet system evolved towards the communist phase, the role of the state would diminish in as much as the self-governing obshchestvennost would expand and mature(12).

The movement was never officially banned, although some of its most fervent advocates were subjected to criticism after the removal of Khrushchev. Rather, the significance of obshchestvennost gradually declined because of its internal bureaucratization and the loss of any independence from the local party committees. Its real impact remains to be estimated. The point was that by looking at these developments in ideology and practice one could reconstruct a historically rooted concept resembling that of civil society.

This movement of the 1960s was non-political. The public sphere that saw a revival in the same years was much more concerned with ethics than politics. Political discussions proceeded in the private sphere and therefore we do not need to address them here. So far we have considered two main dimensions of obshchestvennost corresponding to two elements generic to civil society: self-rule and public opinion. The third one, which after Hegel became dominant in the Western concept of civil society, the economic market uniting private property owners, was obviously missing in Russia historically. Instead, in the Soviet Union there were elaborate networks of interpersonal relations organized around distribution and consumption. This was not obshchestvennost; we called it blat, friendship, acquaintance. An elaborate system of non-state private quasi-economic exchange ranging in its ethical content from friendship to bribery and corruption. These relations held society together beyond the reach of the state, forming a paradoxical sphere that was common but private. For this reason it could influence the state negatively - undermining or privatising it - but this sphere could not exercise any positive influence in terms of defining or correcting the rules of legal economic activity. Thus it did not contribute to the formation of civil society but rather tended to undermine it by substituting private consumption for common public action. What happens next - whether the economic market will be integrated into the remaining structures of civil society or, conversely, the overblown sphere of uncivilised business will finally destroy the remnants of obshchestvennost - remains to be seen.

### Notes

1. See works by P. Winch, H. Dreyfus, C. Taylor, W. Quine, J. Searle.
2. Ya. Grot. Filologicheskie razyskaniya, St. Petersburg, 1899, p. 83-84.

3. Uchenye zapiski Ryazanskogo pedagogicheskogo instituta, No 8, 1949, p. 147.
4. N. Shansky. "O proiskhozhdenii i produktivnosti suffiksa -ost' v russkom yazyke", In: Voprosy istorii russkogo yazyka, Moscow University, Moscow, 1959, pp. 117-118.
5. A. Ferguson. Opyt istorii grazhdanskogo obshchestva, Vol. 3, Trans, by I. Timkovsky, p. 223. For this finding I am thankful to Oleg Kharkhordin.
6. For an account of the sociogenesis of this distinction see N. Elias. The Civilizing Process, Vol. 1, Oxford, 1978, p. 4.
7. See L. McReynolds. News under Russias Old Regime: The Development of a Mass Circulation Press, Princeton, 1991.
8. See A. Rieber Merchants and Entrepreneurs in Imperial Russia, Chapel Hill, 1982.
9. Sovetskaya demokratiya. Ed. by Yu. Steklov, Moscow, 1929.
10. Ibid., p. 15-19.
11. S. Smidovitch. O kulture i byte, Moscow, 1930, p. 21; N. Krupskaya. O bytovykh voprosakh, Moscow, 1930, p. 22.
12. See Yu. Volkov. Tak rozhdaetsia kommunisticheskoe samoupravlenie, Moscow, 1965; Obshchestvennost v borbe s pravonarusheniyami, Irkutsk, 1963.