

Elena Zdravomyslova

Prerequisites of civil society in Soviet Russia: "Saigon" as public sphere

In my paper the idea and plan of the research in process will be discussed. The research project is devoted to the case study of the cafe culture of the 1970s in urban Russia. The name of the cafe is "Saigon", which explains the title of the text. The cafe culture has been considered a form of public space, as an important prerequisite for the development of civil society in Soviet Russia. This study involves 25 in-depth thematic interviews with the habitués of the cafe and members of their families. "Saigon literature" (mainly poetry and memoirs) is being analyzed as are journalistic articles published in commemoration of the cafe when "Saigon" was finally closed in 1991. The reconstruction of the "Saigon culture" will be made on the basis of narratives and life stories. Researchers have identified the following prerequisites of civil society in Soviet Russia on the eve of perestroika: shadow economy, client list groupings and networks, limited labour market, retail marketing, family gardens, certain legal organizations used for illegal purposes, the bard movement, samizdat, and counter-culture, etc. For the most part, these elements of civil society are discussed in the penetrating paper of Risto Alapuro (Alapuro, 1993). I agree with his basic premise that Soviet modernity was a rather specific form of modernity, that germs of civil society in Russia have functioned quite differently from the similar structures in the West.

On the other hand, I would like to elaborate upon the sphere of state-independent collective activities - public sphere - as it functioned in the large Soviet city. A correlate for this term in social science is public sphere. I argue that counter-culture formed a specific public sphere in Soviet Russia in the 1970s. Unlike previous decades in Soviet history, when communication was either officially controlled or took place in the private "kitchen" setting, the "Brezhnev era of stagnation" provided public space - legal settings - for an alternative type of communication.

The object of the empirical study is a city cafe as a counter-cultural setting. The logic employed to integrate such a study in the discussion on civil society in Russia as follows: I argue that Soviet modernity formed a specific type of condition for the development of civil society (and the public sphere) as a realm of initiative collective activities. One of the important prerequisites for the public sphere has been the formation of public space as a setting for social communication. To a large extent the Soviet type of public sphere revealed itself in social gatherings which took place in the realm of the so-called counter-culture (or second culture). The locales of counter-culture were certain city cafes.

Habermas defines culture as the "stock of knowledge from which participants in communication supply themselves with interpretations as they come to an understanding about something in the modern world" (Habermas, 1989, p. 138). If culture is a practical knowledge gained in the course of communication with others in the process of living, then counter-culture is simply practical knowledge which is the result of engagement in alternative forms of communication among actors engaged in the collective pursuit of alternative ways of living (Cushman, 1995, p. 7). Culture is also conceived as the very essence of collective identity, "an externalization of internal feelings, thoughts, and states of consciousness in objective forms which are then shared by other individuals". These objective forms have a degree of facticity which allows us to view them as cultural objects. (Cushman, 1995, p. 90, Berger and Luckman, 1966).

Cultural objects have identities and locales. There were well-known locales (addresses) for the counter-culture in St. Petersburg. These included art exhibitions, literary salons, dissident houses and certain city cafes. These city cafes formed a spatio-temporal context for certain practices which were identified as those, alternative to the dominant culture. Such cafes performed a specific role in public life; they provided social occasions which allowed people to gather - those gravitating to a certain life style, one which was marginal to the Soviet reality. This style created and was created by a milieu (an alternative community) which inherited to certain values, attitudes, beliefs and practices, which -were marginal to those of the dominant society. The marginality of the cafe visitors in its turn expressed itself in their way of life (employment, public activities, family practices, political orientations).

"Saigon" was one such cafe in Leningrad which was known all over the city and beyond its borders. It was the refuge of counter-culture for more than 20 years (1968-fall of 1991). It was named after Saigon, the capital of Indo-China.

The objective of the ongoing study is to explore the collective identity of "Saigon" within the context of socialist urban society. The micro-sociological approach will facilitate exploring the ways in which the activities of each individual, each pursuing his own identity, combined to form a collective identity or a distinct culture - a counter-culture with its own collective identity (Blumer, 1951; Gansori, 1992). The research is focused on those communication practices, those rules and conventions, which constituted the life style of "Saigon" community as a case of counter-culture. Roles, norms, accessories are terms which help to account for the interplay of activities in such a public space. The gender division of roles in public and their encounter with family (private) role division will be analyzed as well.

The construction of collective identity (or the definition of the "Saigon culture") involves two processes: 1) the reconstruction of collective identity in the behavioural, cognitive and symbolic dimensions according to the relation of the latter to formal political and economic structures; and 2) the assignment of an affirmative meaning of belonging to "Saigon".

Let's look upon conventional dimensions of "Saigon collective identity". The behavioural dimension makes us concentrate on the practices performed and reproduced in the setting. The cognitive dimension manifests itself in frames through which interpretations and justifications of the collectivities of the setting are given. The symbolic dimension draws attention to the intensive symbolism sustaining the life of the collective.

While "Saigon" functioned as a coffee shop during the day, in the evenings it served as a space for social gatherings of those on the margins of society. The people who congregated there did not constitute a coherent entity. After 7 p.m. representatives of at least three social groupings met there - bohemians, shadow economy people and dissidents. The locale of the coffee shop at the intersection of two of the central avenues of Leningrad (Nevski and Vladimirski) was especially attractive to all kinds of visitors. However, the culture of "Saigon" was formed by the limited number of its habitués, who introduced a pattern of behaviour, rules acceptable in the space. Several people became the symbols of "Saigon"; among them were a group of poets, two or three shadow businessmen, a local handicapped fool, three or four women. Many people there were referred to by their nicknames; the name of the cafe was also symbolic. It was associated with the Vietnam War

and at the same time with the anti-war campaign as well as the protest movements of the 1960s in the West. "Saigon" can be perceived as a permanent sit-in form of collective action, something which was well-known from the time of student protest in the 1970s.

"Saigon people" lived in a kind of prototypic civil society which they constructed themselves. They pretended that the socialist world did not reign absolutely. They formed their own space within the infrastructure of socialist domination. The practices of the

"Saigon culture" were basically excluded from the realm of hegemonic Soviet culture: "it occurred... outside of Soviet political and economic structures" (Cushman, 1995, p. 92).

A few brief comments on the relationships of "Saigon" to Soviet economic structures are now in order. Employment can be conceived as an important indicator of the status of the members of a community. Involvement in the "Saigon culture" demanded great amounts of time, which was available to either the jobless or to those with flexible working hours as well as to single people. Thus café regulars were mainly people who were not permanently or full-time employed in the Soviet economy and thus were not sufficiently integrated into the major patterns of the Soviet way of life.

It was "a youth café" in terms of the age and social status of the people frequenting it. Respectable Soviet citizens avoided it. Research indicates that general dissatisfaction with their formal status in Soviet society drove "Saigon people" towards an alternative culture which they felt was more rewarding.

Political apathy and its pro-dissent perspective constituted the cognitive dimension of the "Saigon culture". Political information was transmitted through informal networks. Samizdat and magnitizdat were important information resources for the community. However, the "Saigon attitude" to politics was complex. The "personal was political" at that time. The practices of the "Saigon life style" were a challenge to the system. Consequently, the last generation of "Saigon people" called themselves "the system" (sistyema) - it was "another system", an alternative to the Soviet. At that time a simple refusal to recognize the practices asserted by the hegemonic ideology challenged the totalistic aspirations of the state.

In the private sphere "the café people" generally neglected so-called "family duties". While men and women at "Saigon" were busily engaged in this exceptional type of public life, their home domains, if they existed, were occupied exclusively by other members of the families (spouses or parents). Family patterns were different from those of the generation of their parents, which was expressed in the form of a generation conflict. As Cushman puts it: "The pursuit of fundamental truth in the life style was important...because their own lives were decidedly influenced by the institutionalization of lying as an accepted form of communication in Soviet society" (Cushman, 1995, p. 110). "Saigon" is reported to have been the locale for the sexual revolution of the 1970s in Russia. Friendship as well as non-registered partnership was regarded more highly than marriage.

The expressive dimension is characterized by ways of dressing, naming and in specific language codes. The culture of poverty prevailed as the culture of taste at "Saigon". The modest "democratic" way of dressing, the absence of money, were typical of this circle. I do not, however, agree with Thomas Cushman's argument that the very idea of making money was quite foreign to people belonging to the counter-culture (Cushman, 1995, p. 119). If such a view was spread within a certain group of rock musicians, the socially heterogeneous "Saigon community" represented the spectrum of views concerning money,

from the fartsa - the shadow economists for whom money had a genuine value - to those who had little interest in it.

Conclusion

Though the research is still incomplete, it is possible to draw a number of preliminary conclusions on the basis of the available material. The study in process shows that the Soviet type of publicness was a rather specific one. Being partly autonomous and providing its own space (or place), it was quite informal and based on a friendship-type of communication. The basic features of "Saigon communication" are being reproduced in the structures of civil society that are emerging in the period of transformation in Russia.

Literature

Alapuro, R. "Civil Society in Russia?" In Jyrki Livonia (ed.), *The Future of the Nation State in Europe*. Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 1993.

Berger, P. and Luckman, Th. *The Social Construction of Reality. A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966.

Blumer, H. "Social Movements". In A.M. Lee (ed.), *New Outline of the Principles of Sociology*, 1951. p. 199-220.

Butterfield, J., Sedaitis (eds.) *Perestroika from Below. Social Movements in the Soviet Union*. Westview Press, 1991.

Cushman, Th. *Notes from the Underground. Rock Music Counter-culture in Russia*. State University of N.Y. Press, 1995.

Gamson, W. "The Social Psychology of Collective Action". In A. Morris and C. Mueller (eds.), *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992.

Goffman, E. *Behaviour in Public Places: Notes on Social Organization of Gatherings*. London: MacMillan, 1963.

Habermas, Jurgen. *The Structural Transformation of Public Sphere: An Inquiry into Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. by T. Burger. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989.

Kean, J. (ed.) *Civil Society and the State. New European Perspectives*. Verso, 1988.

Shlyapentokh, V. *Public and Private Life of the Soviet People: Changing Values in Post-talin Russia*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989. p. 190-202.

Volkov, V. *The Forms of Public Life: The Public Sphere and the Concepts in Society in Imperial Russia*. Ph.D thesis submitted at Cambridge University, 1995.