

Epilogue: Russian Reflections

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The series of conferences of which this one, on environmentalism, is the second, was conceived as a dialogical one. It seems to us that, in the light of recent events in the Soviet Union, this dialogical aspect of the project may acquire especial significance. The point is that the issue of joint problem-solving by colleagues from the USSR and the United States, which was formerly viewed as more or less remote, is now likely to become the present-day reality.

Obviously, to achieve any success in joint problem-solving, a certain degree of mutual understanding between the "solvers" is required. It is to be hoped that our "dialogical projects" will become a means for the establishment of such mutual understanding. Therefore, we would like to present a small cross-cultural exploration of two episodes in which, in our opinion, the dialogical aspect of this conference has been most manifest.

The first episode has to do with a "childlike" remark made by a senior participant, Leo Marx, in the closing discussion. "I am surprised," he said, "by the fact that, during this conference, Soviet participants paid so much attention to the issue of specially protected natural territories. And though I sympathize with the idea of establishing such territories, it seems to me that the issue of environmental crisis does not come to the question of the status of specially protected natural territories. More than that: I think that the situation is conceivable, that in a country where an impressive network of specially protected natural territories is established, side by side with this, environmental disaster is nevertheless on hand. And vice versa: One can imagine a country with such territories altogether absent, where environmental problems would be more or less successfully solved."

It should be noted here that the issue of specially protected natural territories was indeed of paramount importance to the

Soviet speakers at the conference. Consider, for example, the paper entitled "Nature Protection as a Moral Duty: The Ethical Trend in the Russian Conservation Movement," presented by Anton Struchkov. In this paper, the author discussed the idea of establishing "absolutely inviolable" reserves (the Russian term for which is "zapovedniki") as an ethical duty based on the Russian religious-philosophical thirst for keeping "the unquenchable hearths of wildness" in the world; an ethical duty aimed, in the deepest sense, at defending ontological freedom, the freedom of Being. Another Soviet speaker, Feliks Shtil'mark, expressed the opinion that the network of *zapovedniki* is the only praiseworthy creation of the Soviet regime. He also suggested that the development of a market economy in our country would inevitably result in the destruction of the *zapovedniki*. Finally, even the paper by the USSR Minister of the Environment, Nikolai Vorontsov, entitled "Nature Protection and Government in the USSR," appeared to be a historical sketch of the cause of *zapovedniki*, as displayed in its social-cultural context.

Now why did Leo Marx's remark arrest our attention? First of all, his words disclosed something really remarkable — namely, the evidence that, in the minds of the Soviet speakers, the issue of nature protection is tightly connected with the matter of specially protected natural territories. (Pressing things a bit further, we would even say that they exhibit a tendency to reduce the former issue to the latter one.) But more than this: owing to Leo Marx's remark, that "given," formerly invisible to the Soviet participants, suddenly was called into question.

For the sake of convenience, we shall separate the "disclosing" and "questioning" aspects, turning first to the former.

It seems to us that the issue of specially protected natural territories has been suddenly disclosed as a peculiar manifestation, as a kind of allegory, of the ancient Russian theme of "The City of Kitezh." Lest this statement be viewed as merely our "pan-Russian" predisposition, we must emphasize that we are speaking of the way in which specially protected natural territories have been (and are being) developed in our country. And the specificity of such territories in our country — as distinct from, say, national parks or "designated wilderness areas" in the United States — consists in the maintaining of the regime of "absolute inviolability" within them, which prohibits not only all sorts of economic activities, but even the admittance of visitors.

To make our statement more precise: The idea of the "absolute inviolability" of *zapovedniki* has been disclosed as an allegory of

the age-old Russian theme of “The City of Kitezh.” According to the ancient Russian legend, when the country had become the Kingdom of Evil and Falsehood embracing both State and Church authorities, the Kingdom of Good and Righteousness — The City of Kitezh — sank to the bottom of a lake. Hence the Russian idea of “The City of Kitezh” is the idea of withdrawal from surrounding vicious life, the idea of wandering elsewhere in search of this “ideal City.”

This idea was particularly influential during difficult periods in Russian history, manifesting itself in numerous schisms which occasionally took the extreme form of *nyetovshchina* (the refusal of the schismatics to obey any orders of either church or state authorities, and their flight into remote areas).

We thus find it noteworthy that the idea of absolute inviolability of *zapovedniki* received wide circulation in our country during the 1920s — that is, when the malicious and unjust temper of the new, postrevolutionary regime had become utterly clear. Dramatic discussions of the fate of *zapovedniki* that took place in the Soviet Union in the late 1920s and early 1930s are attracting the attention of present-day students of Russian conservation — particularly for the disparity that they reveal between the rather weak “scientific” arguments for absolute inviolability, on the one hand, and the inspiration with which this idea was defended, on the other hand. The common “scientific” argumentation in favor of absolute inviolability was as follows: *Zapovedniki* should be maintained in a state of absolute inviolability in order to serve as baseline areas embodying virgin natural communities typical of the surrounding region. *Zapovedniki* were conceived, thus, as models of “healthy nature.” And though the comparative study of the “healthy nature” within *zapovedniki* and the “pathological nature” (that is, economically exploited nature) around them, biologists would be able to propose a treatment for “sick nature” based on what they deduced about “healthy nature.”

Yet, with the deepest respect for the efforts, of the “defenders,” one may raise a question here. Compare the entire area covered by *zapovedniki* (which approaches, at best, 1 percent of the territory of the USSR) with the scope of this scientific claim. Would this claim, then, of restoring the health of nature at large, on the basis of research pursued within the *zapovedniki*, appear, to any degree, as realistic? This is a question that has led one of us (A. Struchkov) to study the personal archives of conservationists. As these studies show, the defenders of the idea of absolute inviolability were actually inspired by motives that lie

beyond the realm of scientific discourse. As described earlier, they were defending absolutely inviolable *zapovedniki* as, so to speak, the unquenchable hearths of the freedom of Being.

Let us turn now to the “questioning” aspect of Leo Marx’s remark: Is it possible that in a country, side by side with an established impressive network of specially protected natural territories, there could be a situation of environmental disaster? And how does this relate to the idea of “The City of Kitezh”?

First, the image of “The City of Kitezh” is to be viewed, not as exclusively internal narrative isolated from the ambient world, but rather as corresponding to the hard living conditions of the Russian people. Second, it must be emphasized that the most striking peculiarity of this “ideal City” is precisely its unattainability, unattainability in principle (“The City of Kitezh” is to be found at the bottom of a lake!).

Now, if we put these two points together, we see them as indicating an extreme polarization of the “sacred” and “profane” realms. And it is precisely our Russian everyday life, our nearest surroundings, our “here and now,” that turn out to be hopelessly profane. In contrast, the sacred realm appears as bypassing the sphere of “here and now” altogether: in space, it abides “at the bottom of a lake”; in time, it is associated with either some utterly-out-of-time past or the “apocalyptically remote” future.

The idea of “absolutely inviolable *zapovedniki*” can also be viewed as an example of transcending the sphere of “here and now.” Remember that this idea was the subject of heated discussions in the late 1920s and early 1930s, when the Soviet government was advancing the (infamous) slogan of “the great transformation of nature in the interest of socialist construction. “While, according to this ideology, the whole country was to become a kind of gigantic “workshop” (intended for overcoming the humaneness of humans, as well as the wildness of nature), *zapovedniki* remained peculiar “temples” of genuine beauty. (It seems worth noting here that the views of those who supported the idea of absolute inviolability exhibit similarities to the religious ideas of such Russian thinkers as Vladimir Soloviev and Fedor Dostoyevsky. By “similarities” we mean here their shared belief in the transfiguring power of the beauty of nature, participation in which gives rise to the feelings of peace and forgiveness, as well as the eschatological hope of the triumph of the world of love.)

The antinomy of “temple” vs. “workshop” echoes the polarization of the sacred and profane realms. More than that: in the case of *zapovedniki*, this polarization seems to us particularly striking. The point is that *zapovedniki* represent the sort of temples that

(as conceived by their originators) are closed to visitors. Undoubtedly, the idea of “absolute inviolability” thus realizes the “sacred” realm in ideal purity: it is impossible to tread on, and trample *zapovedniki* — just as it is impossible to tread on the (underwater) “City of Kitezh.” However, is it not so that, being confident that there is something in the world that in principle cannot be trampled on and defiled, we may allow ourselves to tread on, and defile, everything else with more indifference and carelessness? This is the question to which we are finally brought by Leo Marx’s remark.

The second episode at the conference that we would like to discuss is Douglas Weiner’s presentation, “Demythologizing Environmentalism.” In providing the examples of environmentalist ideologies from England, Germany, Russia, the Soviet Union, and the United States, Weiner intended to show their common trait — namely the pretension “to represent an absolute ‘good’ validated by an absolute authority.” On this basis, the advocates of environmentalist ideologies asserted their privileged status, and started to force their views on other people. Professor Weiner pointed out the “inescapably arbitrary (in the sense of unprovable) nature of the epistemological assumptions that undergird those visions.” That is why the idea of privileged knowledge is nothing but a myth. Worse yet, a rather dangerous myth.

Weiner’s telling conclusion is worth quoting at length:

“We know what is *really* best for you, what will cure you,” . . . assert [the advocates of privileged knowledge]. They alone know the distinction between natural harmony and disorder, social health and corruption, pollution and purity, alienation and unity. They do not recognize the social construction of their ethical beliefs and political visions; they absolutize their individual truths. They may be right, but what if they are not . . . ?

It is therefore all the more important for those of us who wish to preserve a maximum of biotic and human diversity for ourselves and for future humans (and nonhumans), to be explicit about the moral and political agendas we embrace. The soundest way for us to prevail is to persuade our neighbors on this planet that our visions have something of value for them, too. We must keep in mind the fact that in a world where there exists more than one fanaticism, peaceful coexistence is in principle impossible.

And if fanaticisms, including ecological ones, are the pro-

ducts of the fear or the fact of material, cultural, or spiritual dispossession, then we must work harder to make a world in which each of us and our interests are treated with equal respect. We cannot get there through the tainted means of absolutizing individual truths.

And further:

It is my belief that myths are often more dangerous than the situations they seek to remedy. We need to cultivate a taste of demythologizing, of making our lives more self-aware. We need to become aware of our needs and our values preferences and to take responsibility for them as *individual* preferences. Then we will be in a good position indeed to respect and compromise with the preferences of our neighbors all around this planet, just as we would have them respect and compromise with ours.

Weiner's paper called forth a very lively discussion during which the Soviet and American participants behaved in rather different ways. The focus of the American participants was the way in which Douglas Weiner had arrived at his conclusion. They discussed the epistemological premises underlying his paper, finding those premises to be not very well grounded. Their common claim was that Douglas Weiner, in his efforts to demythologize (and dismantle) environmentalist ideologies, had made unfounded generalizations. Consider, for instance, the following remark of Kenneth Keniston (MIT): "Is it really possible to draw any sound conclusion about close linkages between nature protection and chauvinism in Germany from, say, the speaker's claim that six of fourteen prominent German conservationists eventually became Nazi party members?" Another American participant, Mark Adams (University of Pennsylvania), also referring to Weiner's overgeneralization, even claimed (in a lobby interview) that "Douglas Weiner has given birth to his own myth — the one of demythologization."

In contrast, the Soviet participants gave consideration only to that which would "follow" from Weiner's conclusion — the supposed practical steps, and the moral evaluation of those steps. We would like to note that Weiner himself did not suggest any practical steps, beyond his call for listening to and negotiating with one another. Nevertheless, several Soviet participants took this call as threatening their own views — just those views pre-

tending to represent an absolute “good.” They already had prepared answers to questions that Weiner proposed for considerate negotiating.

It is interesting to note that each of the three most active Soviet commentators argued the necessity of a single “salvational project” for everyone. None of them seemed to hear what the speaker was saying in his discussion of “‘natural’ park ideology” — that totalizing “salvation projects,” while pretending to assert something fundamentally “good” for all people, actually express the opinion of rather limited groups of people: “One society’s (or one class’s) natural paradise may well be another’s weed overgrown garden; one’s wilderness, another’s home; one’s Manifest Destiny, another’s oppression” (a quotation from the Olwigs’ article, “Underdevelopment and the Development of ‘Natural’ Park Ideology,” cited in Weiner’s paper).

Even more interesting is the fact that all three Soviet commentators, advocating the necessity of a single “salvational project,” were referring to V. I. Vernadskii’s conception of noosphere as “the scientific foundation” for the rescue of humankind and nature. Again, it seemed as if they simply had not heard Weiner’s explicit opinion of this conception as “utopian and essentially scientifically unsupported idea”! We suspect that Weiner’s call for listening to other points of view was perceived by them as a threat that their voices would not be heard, and that consequently their views would not be given consideration. Hence their unanimous “reference to an absolute, validating authority” — in this case, to Vernadskii’s noosphere.

The Soviet commentators did not accept Weiner’s relativism — but not because they had discovered theoretical contradictions in his epistemological premises. They did not even discuss these premises. Rather, they rejected Weiner’s call on the basis of ethical motives: they viewed the supposed ethical effect as unacceptable, since this effect would deprive them of their right to “privileged knowledge.”

Thus, we have discovered the “American” and the “Russian” approaches to Weiner’s paper to be rather different. (Of course, this statement is an oversimplification, since both “sides” actually had their “outsiders.”) The “American” approach can be characterized, on the whole, as the analysis of the epistemological premise underlying the presented statement, and the determination of one’s attitude toward this statement in accordance with that analysis. The “Russian” (or should we say, the “Soviet”?) approach can be characterized as the immediate drawing of

ethical conclusions based on the imagined situation of the presented statement's having already been realized, and the evaluation of the supposed effect of these conclusions.

It seems, thus, that Americans stop their discussions at the point where Russians start theirs. We shall now try to suggest an explanation for this divergence in approaches.

The Soviet commentators seemed to reason in the following manner: "Douglas Weiner is thinking this way. What if all of us thought like Douglas Weiner?" As shown earlier, the results, as perceived by the Soviet commentators, turned out to be unacceptable. For the American participants, however, such a mode of reasoning appears impossible. First, their societal mentality seems to be one in which the sphere of theoretical analysis is separated from the sphere of practical decision-making; one rarely finds the two together in one person. Second, it is evidently difficult for Americans to imagine everyone suddenly transforming their views and starting to act in accordance with a single dictum — even Weiner's dictum of relativism. In Russia, by contrast, a kind of "pseudo-state" mentality has been long cultivated in the people. The hard living conditions of the people were claimed to be justified by the necessity of pursuing tasks of the state, for the sake of "common worth." As a result, the present-day Soviet citizen exhibits a tendency to perceive himself as a politician engaged in making decisions for "everyone." This is a pseudo-state mentality, since the making of such decisions is actually beyond his possibilities.

We are inclined to conclude that the dichotomy between the "American" and the "Soviet" (or, as our previous remarks suggest, between the "epistemological" and the "ethical") approaches is deeper than merely a difference in the manner of discussion. We seem to face two significantly different modes of reasoning, each of them being part and parcel of the people's mentality.

The "epistemological" mode of reasoning consists in examining the theoretical foundations of a thought (idea, conception), and in calling these foundations into question. The "epistemological" mode does not reach the discussed thought itself. Thus, the "epistemological" critique of some advocates of "salvation projects" may be epitomized by Weiner's words: "They may be right, but what if they are not . . .?"

As for the "ethical" mode of reasoning, it immediately transforms thought into action and evaluates the ethical effect of this action, and then transfers this evaluation onto the thought itself. In this regard we wish to briefly mention here a conversation with one of the Soviet participants, Daniil Aleksandrov (of the St.

Petersburg branch of the Institute of the History of Science and Technology). After the closing discussion, we were talking with him about environmentalist “salvation projects.” He said: “I believe that the advocates of “salvation projects” may be right. I believe that their projects, if put into practice, may prove to be a quick, albeit short-term, remedy for environmental disaster. Still, however tempting the declared perspective of salvation may seem, I nevertheless have no wish to participate in pursuing these projects.” “Why so?” we asked him. “Because I have no wish to pursue violence in the name of salvation,” was the immediate answer.

Cryptic as this answer may seem, it sheds some light on the nature of “ethical” critique. We may interpret it as follows: Let the advocates of “salvational projects” be right in their privileged (theoretical) knowledge. But what will happen when their right, guaranteeing, claims encounter real life — the real life where nothing can be secured with guarantees? Will they then give up their privileged status? No! Most probably, they will instead start seeking out (read: creating images of) those who presumably prevent the pursuance of their “curing” projects. Thus the struggle to rescue the whole of humanity turns into a struggle against part of it.

Two things here seem worthy of attention: (1) The position just stated appears as more or less typical of the “younger generation” of Soviet participants. (2) Despite the fact that this position is in fact contrary to the one advocated by the majority of “elder” Soviet participants, it nevertheless shares with its “adversary” an important trait — namely, the “ethical” mode of reasoning.

“Well,” one might say. “You have provided some examples of two rather different approaches, two modes of reasoning, or whatever you may call it. Be that as it may, now I would like you to explore the possibility of reconciling these approaches. Is there any way of reconciling them?”

“But which way would you prefer?” we may only respond. “The ‘epistemological’ reconciliation, or the ‘ethical’ one?”

The former dichotomy is thus reproduced on a new level. Does this not prove that it is fundamental?