

Between Refeudalization and New Cultural Politics: The 300th Anniversary of St. Petersburg

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In this paper, I look at the celebration of the 300th anniversary of St. Petersburg in order to show that certain elements of public memory and cultural politics can be seen as counterbalancing the tendencies of “state image promotion”.¹

Introduction

The dissemination of a positive image of Russia has been implemented both nationally and internationally. The celebration of capital cities that comprises an important part of the Russian political culture has also been involved in the ongoing state image promotion (cf. Boym 2001). With this in mind, I will first trace the continuities between pre-Soviet and post-Soviet cultural practices in the light of Habermasian work on public sphere. Second, I will outline what I believe are the promising approaches and strategies of the new cultural practitioners. Finally, I will touch briefly upon the methodological problems related to a researcher’s wish to retain both the normative and the descriptive dimension of his or her work on a particular case. By applying the notion of “refeudalization” to the discourses and signifying practices through which a number of officials have constructed dominant representations of the city and its inhabitants, I hope to emphasize the complexity of the constellation of historical epochs, temporalities, mythologies, ways to sustain state power, popular participations, and cultural imaginations that historical developments of transition result in. If in their everyday life city inhabitants remain relatively

1 For an extended version of this paper, cf. Trubina 2005.

immune to this complexity, it is the state-organized celebrations that make them reflect on both historical continuity and disjuncture in the relationships of political elites and the general public.²

The ambivalence of imperial heritage

In countries in transition we witness the growing role of cities in the development of capitalism, their function as hubs allowing productive links among the various markets and controlling investment in services, broadcasting, transportation, commodity manufacturing, built form, advertising, department stores, and so forth. The ambitions and spending habits of high earners seem to have been the major driving force in the development of many cities. And it is urban landscapes that give the economic, social, and political tendencies particular configurations when the mindsets and the systems of values of the ruling classes confront particular urban traditions.

The more actively the Russian state reduces and eliminates subsidies, de-regulates prices, and ceases to provide services people had come to expect, the more eagerly it tries to position itself as a basis of social solidarity, as an entity with which people might identify. The capital cities may be counted among the most powerful stately images. In part, their efficiency as vehicles of political power has to do with the narratives they embody or represent. I want to emphasize, however, that urban narratives have not always been successfully appropriated by the state. Sometimes the multilayered story that a city embodies comes into conflict with the state's implementation of particular kinds of politics.

During the three hundred years of St. Petersburg's history, the city has been used for the dissemination of narratives of national identity. They range from those about defeating nature by means of building this most beautiful city on a swamp, over the story of the city as the cradle of the Bolshevik revolution, to its conception as the genuine and the most European city in Russia. Most narratives turn the long process of energetic modernization into romantic myths, with little attention to human costs. The abundance of sites related to the days of the Russian Empire, and the fact that its core was quickly built according to a plan, give the city its formal, strict, elegant, and noble look, and St. Petersburg persists in carrying on its historic role as the site of royalty and aristocratic society. However, the city seems to resist attempts to interpret it simply as a historic citadel of the highborn living in sanctioned aloofness

2 My empirical material consists of four taped semi-structured interviews and field notes of some 10,500 words from numerous informal talks. There are about twenty respondents in the sample that originates from field studies in St. Petersburg in June 2003.

while the silent majority hardly scrapes by. The complex history of the city resulted in the development of a characteristic (and heavily mythologized) mentality of its inhabitants, a combination of self-reliance, bohemian suspicion towards material values, undemonstrative manners, and a sense of belonging to a past that is not rigid and finalized but so vitally connected to the present that it seems to question the present. Today the flats in the old buildings with characteristically “high ceilings” (six meters and higher) are likely to be occupied by both well-off people and those whose families lived here for generations. The striking contrast between what is outside (glorious facades) and what is inside (crumbling stairways, decaying plumbing) is not only often shared by people with totally different levels of income, and has not only come to signify one of the city’s peculiarities, but also has even become a source of local pride. This contributes to a sense of democratic city life that consists of people of nearly all backgrounds sharing a common predicament.

St. Petersburg has a long history of public celebrations, which played a mediating role between its collective urban memory and the nationalist politics of history. Starting from the royal entry (already by 1712 St. Petersburg was the official capital of the Russian Empire) to the Soviet celebrations of May Day, to celebrations of cosmos exploits, of endless centennials and bicentennials of Russian writers, the festivals and celebrations encompass an important way of memorializing significant events. Although Soviet public celebrations were, as a rule, initiated by authorities, they have made their way into people’s memories and managed to generate quite powerful public emotions. They also had to do with the authorities’ desire to mobilize people emotionally and to educate them. Similarly, the celebrations in cities that originated in pre-Revolutionary times were an efficient way to fuse local and regional identities with national identity. As a result, the festivals have definitely become a part of national culture. What differentiates St. Petersburg’s recent anniversary is that it signifies a development of the city festival from being part of national and city culture to being a constructed event designed not only to attract tourists but to turn the city into a presidential capital.

A few cities have celebrated their anniversaries during the past few years (the 400th anniversary of Smolensk in 2002, the 400th anniversary of Tomsk in 2003, etc.). But in striking contrast to St. Petersburg, the amount of their funding by the federal government was negligible. The degree of importance presently being attached to everything related to “Pieter”—this is what St. Petersburg/Petrograd/Leningrad/St. Petersburg is called by its inhabitants in local parlance—can be quite easily explained. The Russian president, Vladimir Putin, had been a member of the city administration for some time, and, as president, he repeatedly expressed his concern for his home town. Thus the 300th anniversary of St. Petersburg (celebrated in 2003 at the end of May)

came in handy both for the city's authorities and for the so-called "pieterskie"—those working in the Kremlin administration who came from this city (Putin has a record of appointing his former colleagues to key government positions). There is a sense in which the way the celebration was designed and executed betrays the real attitude of authorities towards perspectives of democracy in Russia.

While being exposed for months to all sorts of inconveniences related to the major face-lift their city was given prior the celebration, the city inhabitants were not shy to point out that this event was not actually "for them." As one of my interlocutors put it, "For some it is a good chance to make a fortune while for the others it all is about politics." He said that the city celebration concerns all its inhabitants, but when asked how he thought it would be possible to make the celebration "for all," he had difficulty answering. It seems that the post-Soviet public's image of itself remains vague and elusive. Indeed, what establishes the public presence of "simple people" when it comes to national celebrations? The collisions between ongoing politicization of urban and national memory and city publics take place along the evolution of the Russian political regime from representative democracy through a "managed" one to bureaucratic authoritarianism. With the celebration, an ambiguous attempt was made to promote an image of Russia as a country that was undergoing democratic reforms (in his speeches Putin repeatedly pledged allegiance to democracy) while emphasizing those components of the city heritage that are related to the fact that St. Petersburg was a capital of imperial Russia. It did reveal both the intriguing play of patterns of the past and the hybridity of Russian political culture. What I mean is that for the Russian Federation, as one of so-called new independent states, it was necessary to construct a national identity, to strengthen national traditions and values, and to amplify understanding of a historical continuity in people's minds. On the other hand, economic globalization and transnational political interaction caused rapid change of people's identities. Against this background, the traditional national rhetoric implying loyalty to the roots, patriotism, etc. is losing its effectiveness and needs to be re-invented in order to be effective.

When a once-great power loses its political and economic dominance and rapidly moves to the periphery of international politics, imperialistic nostalgia enables the nation to retain a certain dignity. St. Petersburg is considered by many to be the most European of all Russian cities, but this is not what captures the imagination of the Russian political elite. According to one observation, "Along with the rest of society, the elite consider the Russian Federation as a successor not only of the Soviet Union but, even to a greater extent, of the Russian Empire. Subconsciously, Russian elite [...] aimed to come back to pre-Communist past" (Trenin 2004: 10). Numerous palaces, buildings, and museums were renovated as the celebration approached. For one, the Kon-

stantinovsky Palace, a former tsarist residence on the outskirts of St. Petersburg, was renovated because Putin supposedly needed a “sea residence.” Today this site has a double name: it figures both as a presidential residence and as the state complex Palace of Congresses.³ The most contemporary artistic forms were mobilized for the celebration. Niro Yamagata’s laser show took place. The lavish water festival on the Neva River, organized by a French company, *Aquatique Show International*, which specializes in organizing large-scale water spectacles around the world, was surely impressive, and, incidentally, it consisted of two separate water shows—one for the political leaders and other VIPs, the other for the general public. City residents, during the week-long celebration, were “recommended” to postpone visiting renovated city-centre sites and attending festivals. The concentration of police per square meter beat all records. Pulkovo, the city airport, was closed on celebration days. There was a sense in which it was not the leader and the masses who were supposed to unite during the celebration but the president and those European leaders with whom he declared to have a “special relationship.”

In a sense, the present St. Petersburg authorities followed two paths. The first was that of eighteenth-century authorities who used to close public celebrations and public places to people. The second was that elaborated by Soviet-era authorities who, as a rule, “cleared” the capital of all undesirable elements during major events (e.g. the 1980 Olympiad). Surely, some of these unpopular measures had to do with security concerns that are at their height everywhere. But if one is allowed to be, so to speak, historically contemplative, the underestimated potential of the older political systems comes to mind. While some researchers emphasize the effectiveness of monarchy in terms of maintaining security (cf. Ankersmit 2002), the symbolic and ceremonial potential of feudalism and absolutism should also be remembered.

Refeudalization of the public sphere and “feudal” tendencies in the cities

It was Jürgen Habermas who was most succinct in expressing the common intellectual’s suspicion towards a society of spectacle and turning politics into performance and show. This attitude has to do with the realization that whatever is rendered as spectacle is deprived of the critical potential for imagining a different organization of society. The strong distinction between private and public domains that he draws allows Habermas to picture the genuine, ideal public sphere for which uncoerced deliberation is characteristic (cf. Villa

3 Cf. for instance the following Internet site: http://www.konstantinpalace.com/en_kd.php.

1992). Contemplating the predicament of the mass democracies of advanced or “late” capitalist society, Habermas sees the return of “representative publicity” characteristic of the Middle Ages and of absolutist society, with the organization of society as a social hierarchy of orders or estates and the king at the top. Thus the metaphor he uses for the contemporary erosion of the spaces of participatory democracy and the disintegration of the public sphere is “refeudalization.” Describing how a “culture-debating public” irretrievably turns into a “culture-consuming public,” Habermas argues that this leads to the transformation of publicity from a critical to a staged one. Tracing the development of the public sphere in Europe from 1640 to 1960, Habermas speaks of its “refeudalization,” which occurs when the illusions of the public sphere are maintained only to give sanction to the decisions of leaders (Habermas 1989: 164, 195, 206).

Having read this sketch today, one can’t help thinking that however relevant this model is from the point of view of critical theory, it seems to be very much at odds with the present moment when nearly everything in politics tends to be connected to performance or spectacle. It is not by chance that much of the criticism directed against the notion of the public sphere and its subsequent refeudalization comes both from urbanists and media scholars. They emphasize that the spread of mass media has radically changed the functioning of the public sphere, rendering Habermas’ model “both backward looking and too literally spatial” (Donald 2003: 51). Rather than feeling deprived of their share in the process of political deliberation by all sorts of imaginers, rather than mourning over face-to-face interactions in specifically designed public places, citizens seem happily to embrace the opportunities that television, the Internet, and shopping malls offer. Yet I believe that it is exactly in the field of political culture that Habermas’s concept possesses a sufficient theoretical interest and may result in creative interpretations of the current Russian transformations.

However, with all the reservations and doubts that come to one’s mind about the extent to which the conclusions and qualifications that Habermas drew from his normative consideration of late capitalist societies are applicable to Russia, at least stylistic affinities between his description of refeudalization and present day commemorative practices are obvious. The pompous ceremonies of celebration marked the point in contemporary Russian history when even the rhetorical endorsement of democratic values has stopped being necessary and when personified power has come to the fore. Refeudalization of the public sphere thus coincides with the ongoing re-centralization of power. The self-reproducing body of high ranking officials, by cleverly channeling generous federal donations and by managing the public during the celebration, has impressively shown its growing independence from, and indifference toward, society.

Although Habermas does not concern himself with the connections between the practices of commemoration and contemporary publicity, his description of refeudalization nevertheless raises fundamental questions about the functioning of “image-making” in the contemporary politics of memory. Are we to assume that most contemporary national commemorative celebrations are supposed to be spectacles designed to impress rather than events to take part in? Cultural memory is undoubtedly prone to manipulations. The point to emphasize here is that politically informed, instrumental ways of “image-making” penetrate the private realms of residential architecture and interior decoration. The restored sites of imperial splendor that are imposed on people by the present authorities seem to be enthusiastically imitated, albeit on a smaller scale, by well-off people in their apartments and mansions. Red wood and golden ornaments, intricate parquet work, fine vases, and other cultural objects of recognized material value that are predominant in carefully created interiors not only signify changes in spending patterns but also betray the owners’ sense of the epoch they want to relate to.

It is only when cultural, social, and economic processes are seen as mutually essential that it is possible to render the complex and interwoven tendencies of urban living. The cultural logic of late capitalism (to borrow the title of Frederic Jameson’s book) presupposes that it is the capitalist economy that is in the center of urban development. And in post-Soviet cities one can see many corporate buildings, commercial centers, and shopping plazas signalling the accumulation of capital. On the other hand, the irrational, pompous lavishness of these centers and plazas, and a great deal of conspicuous consumption, makes one think of a totally different cultural logic, namely a feudal one (cf. O’Connor 1995). It is not the accumulation of capital but a status differentiation that finds its expression in closed enclaves and ever-present surveillance, innumerable borders and walls, both physical and virtual, that were erected during the last decade in cities, from face control in expensive nightclubs, to “fortress” buildings and villages, from the frequency with which the word “exclusive” is used in real estate and services ads, to the growing sense in which it is the urban elite that builds new parts of the city for itself.

There is one more striking similarity to the feudal structuring of court and society in general that can be traced in the present-day workings of power, namely, the growing importance of one’s loyalty to the president, a regional governor, a mayor, or the head of a corporation, and one’s astute sense of subordination and expectations to receive compensation in return for being loyal. In a sense, “gated communities,” themselves reminiscent of feudal cities, which are becoming plentiful in Russia, can be seen as the most tangible embodiment of one’s loyalties. The meaning of refeudalization can thus be expanded. It can serve as an indication of a number of social and cultural trends that might not necessarily originate in “feudalism” historically but may

be perceived as similar to “feudal” by contemporary standards. What I imply is that the growing importance of one’s status, which is so characteristic of post-Soviet urbanity and the obvious sophistication of the imaginers in organizing events in which even the symbolic participation of the public has stopped being necessary, is perceived by some parts of the public as the closure of the narrative of liberation under the spell of which many have lived during the last couple of decades. The teleological promise that this narrative contained (a blessed capitalist freedom to pursue one’s self-interest) has led to nothing, the hopes proven lost. In this vein, speaking of the East European countries and Russia, one can easily recall how the revolutionary energy of the big cities’s populations became thwarted during the last decade. Today, pragmatic urbanites are rather politically disenchanted. Busily pursuing their individual interests, they recall their romantic expectations and democratic aspirations of the late 1980s with a touch of irony. Squares—the former meeting places of the perestroika years—are now deserted, while department stores are crowded in the cities that are undergoing free-market reforms.

Whether the rendering of the current tendencies as feudal has to do with a particular appeal of egalitarian ideas that many have successfully absorbed (and thus it is especially worrying for them to contemplate the return of a social hierarchy reminiscent of the Soviet-era party-state) or with a failure of “monarchic” sentiment mobilized by those who want to give dignity to their positions and property by constantly evoking well-worn narratives, this needs to be further investigated. What is clear, though, is that the ongoing conversion of the “seats” in the present hierarchy of governmental power into enviable pieces of real estate that are camouflaged from time to time by pompous nationalistic spectacles should be viewed as something very different from the capitalist culture of spectacle.

Sand sculpture festival: persistence of vernacular

In the Peter and Paul Fortress (*The State Museum of the History of St. Petersburg*) the 3rd international sand sculpture festival took place. It managed to alter the content and the image of the sight and attracted a considerable audience. The fortress was erected by Peter the Great to protect St Petersburg, but, almost immediately after its inception it started to be used as a prison, where, for one, Peter the Great’s son was imprisoned and died. In the nineteenth century many political prisoners were imprisoned in the Trubetskoy Bastion, now the Prison Museum. The fortress’ granite-covered bastions, located on an island, are surrounded by the strip of sand shore. Inside the fortress, various buildings have been converted into museums. Outside, there is a sand beach that served as ground for the festival. Inside the cathedral are the tombs of

Romanov emperors and empresses, including Peter the Great and Catherine the Great. In a small room to the left of the entrance are the tombs of the last tsar, Tsar Nicholas II, and his family.

Because it is located on the island, the site has been somewhat separated from everyday city life and thus meets the definition of a tourist site as “predicated in a binary opposition between ordinary/everyday and extraordinary” (Urry 1990: 11). The sand sculptures festival was, I thought, a nice mixture of ordinary and extraordinary. As a rule, it is the public monuments that, by virtue of their durability, comprise an eternal part of city landscape that we tend not to pay much attention to. Impermanent sculptures seem to arouse more fascination: they are expected to disappear because of wind and rain; hence one must hurry to see them. Besides, they are not overloaded with heavy historical meanings, their similarity and seriality is fun to watch. The important part of the process of visual consumption that the sculptures prompted was that the site of the exhibition remained crowded almost all the time that the show was on (about one month). The sand sculptures’ appeal to the visual fascination of an audience was enhanced not only by the popularity of the event but also for one more reason. People sensed that these ephemeral sculptures, although undoubtedly devoted to the 300th anniversary (just like everything else last summer in this city) had something to do with subverting the conventions of the monument. As one of my interlocutors put it: “Here you don’t feel oppressed, you don’t feel that you’re supposed to pay respect to somebody noble and famous, you can just stroll by and compare, which is also very important—to ask myself which one I like better.”

It seems that it is a sense of being free from imposed cultural and national values as well as of being free to choose between similar, yet nevertheless different, objects is what gave people a peculiar pleasure. Some of the sculptures clearly had ideological content (e.g. a concern with the environmental situation on the Baltic Sea), while others conveyed the sculptors’ familiarity with the latest trend in the monumental aesthetic, namely, minimalism. Most of all, they succeeded in creating something like an informal public place where people obviously found it very enjoyable to be surrounded by other spectators. This sort of art produces social processes rather than objects. It is in this context that the organization of the sand sculpture festival can be seen as a significant act of counterbalancing a pompous spectacle of the 300th celebration with community-oriented art. The festival was a vehicle for capturing locally relevant imagery in a deliberately “low-key” way. Many interlocutors also recalled their fond experiences at the ice festival that took place in winter, while others asserted that the event was “entertaining,” “funny,” and had “a sense of competition”. One woman in her late forties put it in typical terms:

I guess living in this historical city we all are a bit tired of now predominant ambition to build 'for ages' and of related irony that not everything that is supposedly built for ages lasts long enough. So when you see these things, it gives you a totally different perspective: they are here for months, then the material they are made from returns to where it belongs. Nothing is taken from anybody. Nothing is going to turn into an eyesore that is going to stay there forever.

I personally liked most a "politically correct" replica of Michail Schemyakin's monument to Peter the Great in which Peter had distinctly Yakutian features. The author, coming from Yakutia, not only claimed his people's—who live deep in Siberia—right to the national holiday, but also, by re-appropriating the problematic Schemyakin's monument, managed to suspend the authoritativeness of it. The festival also gave reasons to think that there is an important link between reception of public art objects and photography. Photographing themselves with the sculptures in the background was what the visitors to the festival mostly did. One is tempted to recall here what Susan Sontag says with regard to the reassuring effect of photography: "The very activity of taking pictures is soothing, and assuages general feelings of disorientation. Unsure of other responses, they take a picture" (Sontag 1977: 10). In the context of an open-air exhibition, these photographic rituals, again, served as a way to connect people's experience of public place with their everyday activities, with sharing their leisure time with friends and families. In a sense, what those sculptures were depicting was not important since people seemed to take their viewing of the sculptures as part of the overall weekend experience.

Interestingly enough, in some of the regular St. Petersburg courtyards that are slightly embellished in the tradition of trash art, we can see even more vernacular versions of the celebration. The pieces installed are made from the relics of Soviet times: vinyl discs, old radios, tires, children's clothing, etc. These courtyards, however gloomy, unpolished, and sometimes plain crumbling they might seem to a stranger, are something that the locals cherish and are not always ashamed of. As the process of globalization extends, the language and rhetoric of advertising becomes more and more universal. It sets, as Malcolm Miles is certainly right to assert, "a conceptual as well as technical standard against which public art is not always successful in competing" (1997: 25). The circulation of video clips and desires, the traffic of people and signs, the world bazaar of commodities—all this seems to render local peculiarities and struggles obsolete. Nevertheless, under these circumstances it is getting even more important to look for the ways in which the now predominant ideas of globalization are taken with a grain of salt. They are not resisted since, in fact, there is nothing to resist: the practices of transnational corporations are increasingly obtaining a force comparable with that of the laws of nature. They are either simply ignored or rearticulated within what might be called counter-narratives or countersites in which both the oddness and sheer familiarity of traditional local life, with its outdated artifacts and useless items, is preserved.

If St. Petersburg authorities tend to exploit once-held stereotypes of their city and its “cultural treasures,” other agents of cultural industry look for different ways to enhance the residents’ sensibilities and provide them with new ways and spaces to experience the city.

Conclusion

The challenge one faces in describing politics of memory is to keep an eye both on macrosocial structures and microsocial behaviors, both on “hard” facts related to finances and politics and imaginative investments in cultures past and present, both on iconological data and the impressions of the passers-by. What I’ve tried to do is exactly that, a sort of juxtaposition of meanings that can be excavated from, on the one hand, an officially arranged and officially celebrated St. Petersburg anniversary, and, on the other, its vernacular forms. I have suggested that spatial, memorial, and artistic practices employed by the authorities betray a growing traditionalism of the Russian political regime. The post-modern eclecticism the celebration embodied seemed quite compatible with strategies of managing the public by the authoritarian leader and his bureaucratic environment. On the other hand, in spite of the growing authoritarianism and hierarchy in social and political relations that enact distorted, negative publicities (rendered by Jürgen Habermas as “representative ones”), other lines of influences and modes of interactions with the past could be discerned in the context of celebration. “Low-key” art forms that were introduced by several groups of city artists and curators may be seen as defying both appropriation of urban and national past by the state and cultural elitism. Thus this kind of public art figures as genuine urban practice capable of producing an engaging, informal, even witty response to the concrete event. It remains to be seen whether future political developments will allow the combination of state-imposed national narratives with other stories, and whether submerged memories will be able to continue rising to the surface of public interest.

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