

Chapter 6

Transculture and Society

Mikhail Epstein

Transsociality

The transcultural project emerged in the society with the highest level of social determinism. The Marxist idea that social existence determines social consciousness and in the final analysis individual consciousness, and Lenin's idea that one cannot live in a society and be free from the society, were the governing assumptions of Soviet ideology. Since Soviet society was so persistently and forcefully homogenized it was impossible for any social group to challenge the foundations of the society or to oppose itself to the society as a whole. As a result, the project of transculture from its conception aimed to activate the transsocial potentials inherent in human individuals rather than those oppositional or revolutionary elements pertaining to specific social groups.

One of the sociological anticipations of the transcultural mode can be seen in the figure of the "stranger" as described in the works of the German philosophers and sociologists Georg Simmel and Alfred Schütz. I shall cite some sociological definitions in order to make clear the specificity of the transcultural experience.

The stranger, like the poor and like sundry 'inner enemies,' is an element of the group itself. His position as a full-fledged member involves both being outside it and confronting it . . . In trade, which alone makes possible unlimited combinations, intelligence always finds expansions and new territories, an achievement which is very difficult to attain for the original producer. . . . The

classical example is the history of European Jews. The stranger is by nature no owner of soil' . . . He is not radically committed to the unique ingredients and peculiar tendencies of the group, and therefore approaches them with the specific attitude of 'objectivity.' But objectivity does not simply involve passivity and detachment; it is a particular structure composed of distance and nearness, indifference and involvement. . . . Objectivity may also be defined as freedom: the objective individual is bound by no commitments which could prejudice his perception, understanding, and evaluation of the given.¹

. . . [T]he cultural pattern of the approached group is to the stranger not a shelter but a field of adventure, not a matter of course but a questionable topic of investigation, not an instrument for disentangling problematic situations but a problematic situation itself and one hard to master.²

Sociologically, the quality of being a stranger belongs to a certain person or a group of persons. Strangeness is a category of group identity, though this group, by its very definition, is dispersed among other groups. From a cultural standpoint, strangers do not constitute a separate group of people, but strangeness is incorporated into the entire cultural structure of society and is characteristic of the majority of individuals. Strangeness is our cultural distancing from that very society in which we are fully legitimate and recognized members. All people have gone through the experience of childhood and adolescence, with their antisocial drives and countercultural sensibility. Similarly, the majority of people have gone through the experiences of loneliness and boredom, sickness and suffering, mad love and mad inspiration that challenge stable social and cultural values. Therefore, temporary, or periodical, or partial "strangement" from the society is inscribed in the very structure of cultural life, as a resource of its permanent innovation, and is not limited to some minorities or marginal groups.

This "majoritarian" strangeness accounts for transcultural activity, as different from multicultural activity, which is based on the self-awareness of minorities. The concept of transculture can serve as a theoretical framework for the long-needed exploration of this strangeness dispersed among cultural majorities. Usually we oppose "minorities" (in the plural) to the "majority" (in the singular), whereas I prefer to speak about variously delineated majorities: the classes of people who have experienced love, suffering, illness, aging, inspiration, and other states "transcending" their identities. What I mean by "majority," therefore, is not any divisive category, like "white heterosexual male," but the dimension of trans-social and transcultural experience that unites the vast majority of people across their ethnic, racial, sexual, and gender boundaries. Whites

and blacks, men and women have the resource of their transcultural activity in their personal experiences of childhood and adolescence, suffering and creativity. These are majoritative transcultural formations, which intersect with minoritarian multicultural formations and need their recognition in the context of global communications.

The "stranger" as a sociological category is a divisive idealization. Some people are "settlers," other "strangers." People, however, always combine, in a certain proportion, features of "strangeness" and "settleness" in themselves. All of us are "strangers to ourselves," to use the expression of Julia Kristeva, not only because we come to America from Russia or to Russia from Central Asia, but because we come to a given society from our childhood, from our loneliness, from those extracultural and countercultural niches that are common to the majority of people all over the world. There are nonsocial and nonsociable elements within each personality, as well as a certain feeling of cultural anxiety, which accounts for the transcultural activity available to everybody, not only to underprivileged minorities or to those privileged and "romantic" individuals named "strangers."

The Cultural Middle Class

One of the striking peculiarities of American culture as compared with Russian is the absence or scarcity of what can be called a *cultural middle class*. This statement may be seen as absurd or shocking considering the economically prosperous American middle class as compared with the lack of such a social stratum in Russia. All failures of Russian democracy in the twentieth century are often explained by a deficit of the middle class in the structure of Russian society, which traditionally was sharply divided into the poles of the high aristocracy and the bourgeoisie and low-paid workers and peasants (serfs). This antagonism led to the Bolshevik revolution, to civil war, and to the establishment of a totalitarian regime for the larger part of the twentieth century (1917-91). Now in the post-Soviet period the foremost task of the newly born democracy is to develop its social and economic foundation—the middle class of proprietors who are interested in political stability to secure private property.

However, in Russia there did exist a kind of cultural middle class whose task was to mediate between the rulers and the popular masses. In most cases this class is called the intelligentsia. Because of its intermediate position, it was variably defined as the intellectual leader, the

conscience and consciousness of the nation, and also as "the shit of the nation" (Lenin), a servant of the ruling classes. Now the intelligentsia is severely criticized in Russia for its "parasitic" character and for its compliance in the terrors of an ideocratic regime. In the time of ideocracy, the intelligentsia in fact was both the most privileged and the most persecuted of all social strata because its predominant task was the elaboration and propagation of the ideas ruling this society. The current demolition of the ideocratic regime puts into question the very existence of the intelligentsia and allegedly presupposes the formation of the economic middle class on the model of American society.

From an American perspective, the intelligentsia may be viewed as a useful cultural extension of (rather than an alternative to) the American notion of the middle class. American society is so divided culturally and professionally that the absence of mediating values makes more and more urgent the task of forming an American intelligentsia, or what can be called the *cultural middle class*. Today intellectual life is divided among professional circles and ethnic groups, though the sharpness of this division is moderated by the fact that members of the same ethnic circle are professionally diversified and members of the same professional circle may belong to various ethnic groups, in such a way that the two divisions intersect and complement each other.

Nevertheless, American society increasingly finds itself dissociated and dispersed into isolated circles of mutually indifferent or antagonistic groups. The role of mediators is entrusted to politicians and bankers, or to the mainstream media, not to cultural figures. There are practically no bridges between elitist intellectual circles and the general public—the role that in Russia and in the Soviet Union was fulfilled by the intelligentsia. The intelligentsia is the class of intellectual mediators that can incorporate and translate the values of various professions. A mathematician interested in poetry, or an engineer fascinated with abstract painting, or a teacher of physics writing literary essays: This versatility of cultural interests and dispositions constitutes what can be called the cultural middle class. "High" class can be identified with reputable professionals in various fields of creative endeavor, whereas "low" class is represented by people whose profession and mode of existence have nothing to do with cultural values. But values are really human values when they have the widest possible circulation across social and economic strata. Is it a normal condition for a culture when, for example, books on poetry written by university professors are read exclusively by university professors, and therefore poetry becomes a matter of purely professional

"autocommunication," or, in the case of pulp fiction, a matter of mere entertainment? However incompatible the poles of elitist writing and mass entertainment might seem, they have in common the alienated and distanced mode of perception of cultural values, as an object of scholarly investigation or an instrument of passive leisure. Literature becomes divided into literature for research and literature for entertainment, and loses its nerve and hope to be read by a variety of people for whom it is designed and who might be changed and "cultivated" by this reading.

The cultural middle class is not simply a distributor of values from professionals to the ignorant—this was perhaps the fatal error of the Russian intelligentsia, to regard itself as only a servant of the toiling people or to function only as a servant of the ruling ideologies. The middle class is exactly this site where cultural values find their ultimate destination and designation. This class has the potential to gradually assimilate other layers of society, both "highbrows" and "rednecks" who, through research or entertainment, could be involved in the process of making values available to everybody and sharing them with the creators.

There is no necessary opposition or mutual exclusion between the economic and cultural categories of the middle class. The general purpose may be viewed as twofold: to instantiate the Russian intelligentsia as an economic entity, and to instantiate the American middle class as a cultural entity. Thus the American dream can acquire still another dimension, the class of proprietors becoming also the class of intellectuals.

The Advantages of Commodification

Among left Western intellectuals, commodification is often regarded as the greatest danger for the survival of culture in the age of mass production and mass consumption. This typical view is expounded by Fredric Jameson, who explains the entire phenomenon of postmodernism as the successful completion of the capitalist commodification of culture: "What has happened is that aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally. . . . [L]ate or multinational or consumer capitalism . . . constitutes . . . a prodigious expansion of capital into hitherto uncommodified areas."³ That is why the only way to dynamize culture and protect it from the leveling of mass consumption is thought to be countercultural movements, which are intended to be opposite to what the term indicates, not countercultural but pro-cultural, directed against the instrumentalized and massified exploitation of culture. The traditional duty of left intellectuals is to position "the

cultural act outside the massive Being of capital, from which to assault this last."⁴

Commodification, as a clearly negative term, signifies in the Marxist tradition an alienated state of a cultural product. However alienation as such is not an adversary to culture. Any cultural product is the result of alienation: In producing a work we exteriorize what had been deeply hidden within our mind and soul, to use a romantic figure. Indeed, many artists confess that the transformation of their internal vision into a product—a manuscript, a painting, a musical composition—makes them feel psychologically abused, tormented, and self-alienated. As Kafka put it, he writes differently from what he speaks, speaks differently from what he thinks, thinks differently from what he is, and so forth, to the darkest depth of selfness. It is impossible to precisely fix the border where the self ends and alienation begins; and if we nonetheless try, the demarcation line would not be essentially between the artistic production of the work and its market circulation but between the living of one's life and the production of the work. Creativity is a more self-alienating process than the book trade or artistic market.

Contrary to his own prolific writing, Plato, as is well known, condemned writing as the silliest occupation in the world because the written word does not belong anymore to the author, as distinct from the oral utterance, whose addressee can be chosen. The book most frequently is consumed by people with whom the author would never wish to speak. Since our culture is based on writing, should one be surprised or indignant at the subsequent commodification of the product that from the very beginning was designed to circulate among people? Thus, commodification seems to be built into the very enterprise of culture as one of its (self-)transcending dimensions. Thought transcends itself in the writing about this thought; writing transcends itself in the reading of this writing; reading transcends itself in a spatial object—the book—designed for market circulation. Thus commodification is a name for only one latest stage of this continuous exteriorization of culture whose destiny is to transcend its own origin.

In principle, culture is able to absorb and assimilate all revolutionary challenges to this mechanism of commodification, as can be seen in the countercultural activity of Western marginalized intellectual groups or, more impressively, in the endeavors of an ideocratic state, such as the Soviet Union, to establish a global site of noncommercialized cultural activity. These two challenges to the commodification of culture are to a certain degree opposite to each other. Counterculture is a gesture of in-

riorization that can mean many different things, for example, limitation of the audience to the circle of close friends and acquaintances of the artist; elimination of the stage and the curtain between the performer and the audience; deverbilization of the cultural product and emphasis on irrational or illogical, purely sensory components of art; choice of noncultural and even nonartistic ways of spiritual contemplation, such as hallucinations induced by narcotics, or a peaceful retreat into nature. Finally it may turn out that merely silence or an attempt at nonwriting nonspeaking, and even nonthinking is the most radical challenge to exteriorization with its commodifying tendencies and temptations.

The weak point of this radical challenge to the world of commodities is that it is easily commodified in turn. The counterculture of the 1960s was not defeated in a trivial sense of this word; it was not banished, oppressed, or eliminated, but it was eroded by its acceptance and the commercial use of the same songs, melodies, modes of contemplation and meditation that were intended as an opposition to the culture of commodities. This was a decisive test for the comparative strengths of the commodity and its countercultural denial: The denial itself turned into the act of commodification.

This story would be too sad if we did not try to consider the other side of this problem. If challenge is transformed into a commodity, cannot a commodity itself be regarded as a challenge, perhaps the greatest challenge of all that culture can offer? Challenge to what? The answer comes from the history of another anticommercial experiment, the Soviet civilization in which decommodification led culture into the trap of ideologization. Culture stopped being what people want to read, view, and listen to, and for which they are ready to pay. It became what people are obliged to read, view, and listen to in order to think and feel in the way that the state wants them to. The Soviet system struggled with the exteriorization of the internal life, the process that at a certain point generates art as commodity. What the Soviet system required was, on the contrary, the interiorization of social life, of the officially approved artistic works, mythological schemes, philosophical concepts, and political imperatives that the state imposed on people.

Such is the decisive difference between culture, which is the voluntary exteriorization of the internal, and ideology, which is the forcible interiorization of the external. In this opposition between culture and ideology, commodification certainly works in support of culture. Consequently, a commodity can be regarded as a grass-roots challenge to all kinds of totalitarian uses and abuses of culture. Insofar as culture is sold and bought,

it still reflects the needs of some people and the abilities of other people to satisfy these needs. The status of the commodity secures freedom in the relationship between those who produce and those who consume. As soon as culture is decommodified it becomes subject to exploitation by the power that is indifferent to what people want to receive and are able to produce. Totalitarian culture, if this combination of words is meaningful at all, is a pseudo-community devoid of any talent and taste for creative communication, since ungifted producers offer unwanted products to uninterested consumers.

Western society has become too accustomed to the material condition of commodification to appreciate its cultural depth, in particular, the cultural challenge that people from the Eastern bloc assigned to the glossy designs and labels of those goods that sometimes reached them behind the iron curtain. From the Western perspective, this expansion of commodities was the degradation and profanation of culture, while for many people from the East it was their first encounter with genuine culture, the culture of the free world. Of course they had the possibility to read Pushkin and Tolstoy, or to listen to Mozart and Tchaikovsky, or to look at the paintings of great Renaissance masters, but strange as it may seem, this great culture of the past, which was permitted and even supported in a totalitarian state, acquired a compromised quality of "being permitted," "being official." "Permission" meant serving the state in its unchallenged supremacy in such a way that even Tolstoy was utilized to teach readers how to sacrifice their lives for the sake of the Motherland, and Pushkin was perceived as the great fighter against autocracy and forerunner of the happy Soviet present. Foreign labels, these marks of commodification, served as signs of liberation for Soviet people, and also as signs of culture because culture is everything that is beyond permission, that transcends the boundaries of the allowable. What was cultural about these trivial imports was that they were designed to meet people's desires and expectations; they were not indifferent and not arrogant toward people's needs but in a friendly manner asked for interest and participation.

Totalitarian society is responsible for this unbelievable paradox: Jeans with a fashionable label were in a certain respect more representative of culture than Tolstoy with all his works of genius. This is not Tolstoy's guilt and not Levi-Strauss's accomplishment; it was the anticultural stance of totalitarianism that reversed and perverted aesthetic values. Even Tolstoy, when ideologized, proved to be less a cultural phenomenon than a trivial commodity when freely produced, freely circulated, and

freely consumed. Culture is everything that is done freely by people and that further expands and nourishes their freedom. This explains a great deal about the comparative cultural values of commodity and ideology. The status of a commodity transforms even a trivial object into a cultural phenomenon, though minimally cultural, whereas the ideological function transforms even the greatest genius into a noncultural entity, a tool of moral and political enslavement.

Here in the United States, I still feel a spark of inspiration coming from those innumerable shining commodities that surround me everywhere. I do not like them; I am tired of them; I hate to make the decision of which to choose. But at the very core of their loud existence I still perceive the defiance that they address to my past, to the regime of power that attempted to reduce me to functioning as a model citizen in a model state. I believe that this challenge to the structures of power is what the greatest creations of art share with the most trivial products of commodity culture.

The Need for Ordinarity

Transcultural experience is deeply connected with everyday life. It is the ordinary that is probably in the shortest supply in Western civilization, and it was the ordinary whose value I reassessed most of all after my move to the United States from Russia. Life in the West is so rigorously categorized that the dispersion of signs and vagueness of meanings are regarded as anomalies and disturbances and tend to be eliminated as soon as possible. The ordinary can be defined as something undefinable that exists in the gap, in the pause, in between cultural categories. In Russia, there are huge semi-developed territories where culture and nature are so confused and diffused in each other that one feels this inordinate place is the true place of the ordinary.

For example, in American national parks or wilderness areas the boundary between culture and nature is drawn very strictly with an exactitude of several centimeters. There are special trails that delineate the route of penetration of culture into the domain of nature. But neither the cultural nor natural areas in themselves create the feeling of ordinarity that is the erasure of structural oppositions, the zone of semiotic silence or rustle or whisper where the flow of information is interrupted and suspended by a natural noise. "Natural" not in a sense that nature is opposed to culture but natural in the sense of ignoring or transcending this opposition.

In Russia, the insufficiency of mapping, of cultural demarcations, makes life more dangerous and uncomfortable than it is in the West. You do not know where you are, on the edge of a forest or on the site of a future building: Nature is polluted and culture is diffused due to neglect and devastation. But this is what creates ordinarity; Russia is perhaps the largest ordinary place in the world. When you go through a meadow you always find several narrow paths that were not designed by the developers of this territory but spontaneously created by people who need to make a shortcut from one village to another. While walking these paths you feel the blessed meaning of the ordinary that does not belong to any category, which spontaneously emerges and remains arbitrary, escaping any order.

Usually we believe that spontaneity can be found only in nature while human activity is conscious, structured, and subordinated to a plan, a rational design. What makes the ordinary so precious is the spontaneity of human actions, the growth of the natural out of the cultural. In the West even islands of spontaneity, such as natural parks and preserves, are carefully demarcated; their very naturalness is the object of cultivation. Russia is the land of boredom, carelessness, and wasting of time whereas in the West even wasting time is usually framed as a form of relaxation or entertainment. Hence the feeling of reality is lost in the West, which is one of the main points of postmodern theory: Everything is culturally produced, semiotically constructed.⁷ Reality evaporates with the excess of rationality, which makes life easier and work more effective, and with the complete semiotization of the environment so that even nature is reduced to the sign of nature ("wildlife refuge"). What constitutes reality, however, is the resistance of things to signs, to the categories of cultural classification. The ordinary is that aspect of reality that most thoroughly challenges our semiotic capacity. By walking long distances we feel the reality of the space and of the earth, their dull extension; by driving a car, we substitute the system of signs—road signs, lights, signals, inscriptions—for this experience of the ordinary.

The most exemplary mode of the ordinary in Russia is the queues that arise spontaneously and lead to an enormous waste of time. Standing in long queues you can feel life so ordinary, so slow and empty that reality reveals its authentic substance and duration, something that cannot be rationalized and categorized. Not enjoyment of signs and simulations but a bare courage and patience to be. I do not mean to suggest that the Western world should borrow from Russia this experience of wastefulness, but one can imagine that as Russia needs more structure in its enor-