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Authoritarianism and Education in Soviet Schools

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AUTHORITARIANISM AND EDUCATION: THE WOMAN WHO BROUGHT DOWN THE BERLIN WALL

Here is a perfectly plausible theory, even more so as the two last American presidents seemingly supported it. Once upon a time there were two military and ideological blocks: the Western democracies and Communist totalitarianism. They fought the Cold war, which the Western block has won, and the Communist block has lost. Two main strategies greatly contributed to the fall of the Communism: an arms race that exhausted Soviet economic power, and an ideological struggle that weakened the Soviet regime from inside. If this is true, American governments may rightfully claim credit for the victory. Moreover, if this is true, United States should use similar approaches to dismantling other Communist and authoritarian regimes throughout the world. However, this theory has a flaw – it has very little in common with the realities of the Soviet Union I knew.

In fact, the arms race and Cold War have strengthened Communist Party rule by giving an excuse for suppression of freedoms and for keeping living standards low. John Dewey wrote in 1929: “The withdrawal of recognition by Great Britain has done more than any other one thing to stimulate the extremists and fanatics of the Bolshevik faith, and to encourage militarism and hatred of bourgeois nations.”¹ Fifty years later it was still true for the role of United States in its relations with USSR. Dewey is one of the thinkers who have a great deal of fame, but not much of an audience.

I remember people joking about one of the arms race rounds, initiated by the Soviet middle-range missiles modernization: “Well, - they said, - we can tighten our belts and live solely off our potato plots. Let’s see how Americans can do that.” Of course, we had no idea about the size and viability of American economy; neither did we suspect that Americans could live on potatoes, too, if pressed hard. I just want to illustrate the point that majority of Russians probably supported its Communist government on standing up to the West, even if never asked for an opinion. In fact it was almost the only issue where Communists enjoyed strong popular support. Economical concerns of the masses did not jeopardize the Party’s grip to the power. At any rate, Soviet Union was very far from the kind of economic hardship experienced now by both Cuban and North Korean regimes. The living standards of Soviet people in 30-s, 40-s and 50-s were many times lower, than at the end of 80-s, which never seemed to affect the stability of the regime. The Soviet economy was an extremely inefficient one, and the arms race took its heavy toll on it. However, the attempts to explain the collapse of Communism by its economic problems seem to lack any historical justification.

As for Western ideas “softening” Communism from inside, I have my doubts, too. Although there was a tiny group of dissidents, its influence was insignificant. KGB-lead propaganda was extremely successful in planting deep resentment towards Western style political dissidents like Sakharov among the Russian people. Many people I know used to listen to Western radio stations, and all half-suspected that West is engaged in the same type of propaganda as one led by the Soviet authorities. One of my high school teachers kept repeating: listen to them both (Soviet and Western media), the truth is somewhere in

between. Even though Western ideas have found their way into Russian society, the availability of two or more competing ideologies by itself does not mean that people trust either of these ideologies. One should clearly differentiate the ideals of democracy, freedom and civility from Western European cultural forms of these ideals. Historically, Western Europe and North America are most successful in maintaining working models of democratic societies. This in no way implies that the democratic ideals in other countries are entirely borrowed from the Western classical liberal thought. Without trying to sound defensive, I would still give Soviet society a credit for figuring out that the Communist regime they lived with for many years is corrupt and antidemocratic.

Party propaganda never succeeded in containment of a deep suspicion among all Russians that the project of Communist development went terribly wrong. Things looked very crooked from within the country and one did not need “The Voice of America” radio station to realize that. It was a lack of freedom and civility that most of Soviet population resented. Bosses were inaccessible and arrogant, clerks were rude, and official doctrines sounded heavy and dull (perhaps, I should not have used the past tense here). Those were the feelings that drove people first to support Gorbachev’s reforms, and then to face the tanks during the 1991 coup. One has to experience that incredible rise of hopes after Gorbachev’s first hints of change to understand the depth of popular dissatisfaction with the state of affairs.

The reason for the fall of the Communism was that Russians despised it, laughed at it, and became sick of it. It was a spiritual and ideological crisis in the first place, much less an economical or even a political one. The collapse of the Communism was the result of gradual changes in Russian psyche over several decades. It was mainly an internal affair; it would have happened even if the Soviet Union existed in complete isolation, on Mars. It could have happened sooner or later, but by the mid-eighties the need for change was very much in the air.

Yet, if not from abroad, from where else could people take their standards? One should have on one’s mind some *ideal* to compare against the reality. One should have maybe vague, but still an ideal of a free and democratic society to have those feelings and thoughts. And again, I do not really believe those were ideas taken from foreign radio broadcast. Civility cannot be explained by words, no matter how convincing the words are. One learns it by watching, participating, feeling.

The answer to this question I propose is this: the KGB overlooked one subversive institution – primary and secondary schools. Instead of harassing Sakharov, they should also have taken a closer look at Dr. Novikova’s laboratory at the Institute of General Issues of Character Education, Academy of Pedagogical Sciences. KGB failed to read Dewey, too.

John Dewey visited Russia in 1928, and discovered that Russian revolution is much larger event than political and economical changes. He complained that in what he read about revolutionary Russia, there was too much about Bolsheviks and Communism, and too little about “more basic fact of revolution.” He suggested that the best picture of what society is at a certain point of time might be best understood through its education. The picture of the country formed in a reflection on its educational development is

“fundamentally truer,” than that based on analysis of economical and political conditions, Dewey thought. This is an interesting proposition, to which I will return.

What Dewey found in Russian schools was a faithful if not further advanced implementation of progressive education ideas. Two of them seem to me of a particular importance. First, it is a dovetailing of school activities into out-of-school social activities.² And I think anyone familiar with Soviet education would agree with the observation. The Russian schools are much more than just schools; they always used to carry out the complex multitude of extracurricular and social activities under an umbrella of *vospitanie*, or what Germans call *die Erziehung*, the concept noticeable lacking in English. Character education is probably the closest translation. The second feature is “auto-organization”, ascending to an idea of self-government. Dewey comes to a paradoxical conclusion: “In view of the prevailing idea of other countries as to the total lack of freedom and total disregard of democratic methods in Bolshevist Russia, it is disconcerting, to say the least, to anyone who has shared in that belief, to find Russian school children much more democratically organized than are our own.”³

These two characteristics of Russian education should be kept in mind, when we come to Dewey’s prediction, or, should I say, his prophecy. “There is, of course, an immense amount of indoctrination and propaganda in the schools. But if the existing tendency develops, it seems fairly safe to predict that in the end this indoctrination will be subordinate to the awakening of initiative and power of independent judgment, while cooperative mentality will be evolved. It seems impossible that an education intellectually free will not militate against a servile acceptance of dogma as dogma.”⁴

Dewey did not know that the way to what he predicted is going to be long and twisted. Even while he was writing the paper quoted above, some radical changes on the Soviet political landscape were under way. The period of temporary liberalization was over, and new waves of political repression began. Next decade left Russia with a lot of Communism, and very little or no revolutionary creative impulses. The educational system practically returned to its pre-Revolutionary state, with progressive experiments uprooted. Here is where Liudmila Novikova, the woman who brought down the Berlin Wall, comes into a play.

The tradition of democratic, civic-minded education was severely suppressed in the late 30-th, but never died out completely. For instance, in 1942 F.Briukhovetsky founded an amazingly free-spirited school in Krasnodar. Briukhovetsky, like many others, was inspired by writings of one of the most important early Soviet educators, Anton Makarenko. The close reading of Makarenko, who wrote in early thirties, will turn up the same ideas of multitude of activities, social engagement and democracy in an educational institution. Those ideas in turn may be traced to progressivism of Dewey and others, although Makarenko was highly critical towards “bourgeois” experiments with self-government, industrial education, etc. Vasily Sukhomlinsky is another famous example of democratic education tradition thanks to his literary talents. Sukhomlinsky, who was a rural school principal in Ukraine, has become one of the most influential educational writers in the 60-s.

At the end of the fifties, the Communards movement in education started, a movement that eventually involved hundreds of thousands of children and educators. This movement is undoubtedly single most significant event in educational history of the Soviet Union of last decades.⁵ In short, the Communards educators combine genuine democracy with wide variety of socially meaningful experiences for children. The method also includes elements of a group therapy, and moral discussions resembling those used in L.Kohlberg's "Just Communities."⁶ There were many other smaller educational experiments going on throughout the country.

Soviet education was slowly returning to its progressive roots in late 50-s and early 60-s. Dr. Novikova was one of the first scholars who analyzed and in many ways helped to promote the democratic education. She worked in the theoretical framework of the *collective upbringing*. Urie Bronfenbrenner caught a part of a long-standing debate in his famous book *Two Worlds of Childhood*. After extensive quotations of Novikova's influential paper, he summarizes: "Soviet upbringing is showing signs of flexibility. In particular, both within and outside of family, there is a shift away from features which foster dependency and conformity, toward new configurations more conducive to the emergence of individuality and independence."⁷ I do not believe though, that changes in Soviet education Bronfenbrenner refers to were simply a shift to greater individuality and independence. This was not a move towards greater individuality, but an attempt to rediscover an alternative form of collectivism.

By the end of 60-s there were two rival schools of thought in the theory of collective education. One, lead by Boris T. Likhachev treated the children's collective as an organizational device of behavioral control. He came up with idea of "unity of expectations," meaning that if everyone around, from teachers to parents, will demand same things from children, they have no other choice but to comply. His theory reminds me this talk about consistence of expectation that some American educators are so eager to restore.⁸ This was a theory of social control in its purest sense. Schools were supposed to produce obedient individuals, and the collective was supposed to be an effective tool for that purpose.

Novikova's group was trying to understand the nature of the collectives that constitute best Soviet schools. The group members never defined what constitutes an effective school, but they quite consciously used their intuition to select schools where both children and adults felt at home and lead interesting lives. Among other things they claimed that the effective educational collective might be described both as an organization and as a community.⁹ Neither of the two descriptions can be reduced to the other. And in reality each collective leads two intermingled and intimately interdependent, but still distinctive lives. A school functions as a school, with its policies, schedules, rules and roles; at the same time some subtle network of interpersonal relations strives, constituting very elusive, but real phenomena.

Another discovery was that successful collectives were not monoliths, but rather loose conglomerates of differentiated smaller groups with intersecting memberships. These "best schools" invariably provided the students with a broad variety of organized and spontaneous activities, which constantly shifted and reshaped the organizational and communal structures. It seemed the very variety of personal involvement guarded the

collective from becoming too rigid and authoritarian. It is interesting to mention that Robert Putnam in his recent book on civil society reports: “strong” personal ties (like kinship and intimate friendship) are less important than “weak ties” (like acquaintanceship and shared membership in secondary associations) in sustaining community cohesion and collective action.¹⁰

Soviet schools and other educational establishments of 60-s and 70-s were incredibly ambivalent institutions. On one hand, “enormous amount of propaganda,” mentioned by Dewey, never went away, and eventually became more and more subtle and sophisticated. To call a typical Soviet school a democratic institution would be an oxymoron. And yet they also included elements of democratic decision making and social activism. For instance, Young Pioneer groups were run according to democratic procedures, with elected and regularly changed officials, one person-one vote principle, etc. Children were constantly challenged to organize themselves, to go out into larger world and make a difference. In some cases all of this was a pretense, but it surely contained an implicit idea about how democracy should work. In most schools the democracy and authoritarianism coexisted, despite widely held belief, that it is impossible.

On the final account, the extent of democracy and civic life in education was many times larger than in the rest of the society. The political democracy in the Soviet Union was a complete fraud, which even party officials did not bother to deny. This was not the case with educational institutions as well as some other local establishments, like cooperatives, etc. If an average Soviet person had had an experience electing an official, participating in a discussion, sitting in a committee, voting, writing in a newspaper, speaking in public, etc., such an experience would most likely happen in his or her school. Most of ideas about democracy, social engagement, and civic norms came to most of the people from schools, summer camps and Pioneer Palaces.

What Dr. Novikova’s group did was finding the seeds of civility in the best schools and spreading them around through various channels, including those of official educational policies. The best Soviet schools were fully developed democratic communities. More important, however, is that the main stream Soviet school was exposed to weakened bacteria of democratic civility over the last thirty years. Communist officials perhaps thought of it as an inoculation. It turned out to be enough to catch the fever.

With the beginning of Gorbachev’s reforms education has become one of the most politically dynamic sphere of social life. A group of reformers around V.Matveyev, E.Dneprov, and S.Soloveichik through popular *Uchitelskaya Gazeta* attacked Soviet educational system for the lack of respect for the needs of an individual, for its rigidity, and lack of creativity. This is a separate story, told in English by S.Kerr¹¹ and other authors¹². This initial criticism, while in many respects justified at the moment, nonetheless went way over board. If the old Communist education was such a total disaster, how come the most valuable resource of modern Russia is agreed to be its highly educated population? All of the latest reformers grew up in the Soviet Union, went to a Soviet school, became independently minded individuals, and somehow acquired right ideas about democracy and freedom. Would it not be reasonable to suggest that many of their classmates were capable of the same mental process? It is funny how we sometimes

attribute our best qualities to our own work and talent and ignore any impact we might have from education.

Latest school reform is in many respects uses the early Soviet educational language: self-government, variety of choices for students, critical thinking, respectful treatment of students, learning by doing, etc. – all of these are certainly within the limits of Progressive paradigm. On the other hand, the reform leadership invented and actively used an image of democratic Western school, which resembles the reality in a very distant way.

Here is an alternative, totally implausible theory: the Soviet education was a major tool of Communist Party rule, and at the same time it led to the downfall of the Party rule. One cannot really make two mutually exclusive claims about the same thing. Yet this theory may prove to be valid. The schools gradually taught Soviet people to despise totalitarianism, which was a cause of Communism breakdown. Now, when I speculate that it was Dr. Novikova's efforts that brought down Berlin Wall, I exaggerate. There were many more researchers, teachers and administrators involved. Factors other than education contributed to the process of power erosion. And yet my exaggeration is nowhere near those made by Mr. Bush and Mr. Clinton, when they state: "We won the Cold War." Communism shot itself in the foot, when it incorporated progressive educational ideas in its ideological arsenal in the 20-s. It killed itself when allowed mass schools to toy with Novikova's and other ideas about collective education. A historical curiosity: one of the founders of Soviet educational system, influenced by progressivism, was another woman, Nadezhda Krupskaya, Lenin's wife and party comrade, and a student of American progressivism.

What does this story tell us? Education is capable of changing a society. Perhaps, it is not in a sense envisioned by Dewey; the progressive education does not become a vehicle of progressive social change. But an education with even rudimental elements of civility may actually be the only reliable agent to free a society from totalitarian nightmare. The nature of modern education has irreversibly changed. It includes practically all children for a long period of time. Even small portions of freedom, civility, and critical thinking, if become available to all people, are better for democracy than full knowledge of democratic values, available to the elite. American founders of a common school in the 18th and 19th centuries understood this very well. American common school concept was established specifically to promote democratic values, and not to boost nation's achievement in math and sciences.¹³ Unfortunately, this became less and less obvious as American schools shied away from the character and value education.

Now, let us return to Dewey's suggestion that one understandings of a society is "truer" if based on analysis of its educational system rather than on political and economical analysis. From this perspective American society does not look as democratic and as civil, it presents itself as more authoritarian and individualistic in contrast to the "adult" world. American schools today do teach democratic ideals, but do not live by them. Kids in this country do not learn democracy and civic engagement in school, and I am still to find any arguments that could refute this claim. Children learn it on the streets, from their parents, in neighborhood organizations, baseball camps and community centers. American schools more and more set themselves apart from the civic culture, when they

limit student activities and interactions in the name of safety, or when they choose to operate on policies rather than normal democratic participation. If today's education in US remains void of democratic values, disengaged from social reality, it poses a serious threat to American democracy.

Let me make clear, that the civic culture of American society, although on relative decline, is still powerful enough to support democratic upbringing of the younger generation. The civic culture is sorely lacking in today's Russia. These two countries are in very different weight categories in respect to civility and democratic development. Soviet schools were powerful enough to ruin Communism, but not to create a civic society. I suspect that in general, the "negative power" of educational system over the whole of society is much greater than its "positive" power. An educational system, if does not befit society cannot really improve, but can destroy the latter. In some cases, it is a welcome outcome, like destruction of Communism. In a strange way same story may be repeated in America, this time with less desirable results.

¹ John Dewey, *Impressions of Soviet Russia and the Revolutionary World* (New York: New Republic, 1929), 132.

² Dewey, *Impressions of Soviet Russia and the Revolutionary World*, 85.

³ Dewey, *Impressions of Soviet Russia and the Revolutionary World*, 106.

⁴ Dewey, *Impressions of Soviet Russia and the Revolutionary World*, 129.

⁵ Alexander Sidorkin, "The Communard Movement in Russia," *East-West Education*, 16 (Fall 1995) Number 2: 148-59.

⁶ F. Clark Power, Ann Higgins, Lawrence Kohlberg, *Lawrence Kohlberg's Approach to Moral Education* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

⁷ Urie Bronfenbrenner, *Two Worlds of Childhood: U.S. and USSR*. (New York: Russel Sage Foundation, 1970), 89.

⁸ William Damon, *Greater Expectations: Overcoming the Culture of Indulgence in America's Homes and Schools* (New York: Free Press, 1995).

⁹ The notion actually used was "socio-psychological unity," which does not sound right being literally translated. Frankly, it does not sound right even in Russian. I rename it, hoping to save the content.

¹⁰ Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 175.

¹¹ Stephen T. Kerr, "Will glasnost lead to perestroika? Directions of educational reform in the USSR," *Educational researcher*, (1990): 19(7), 26-31.

¹² J.D.Chapman, I.D.Froumin, D.N.Aspin, Eds. *Creating and managing the Democratic Schools* (London: The Palmer Press, 1995).

¹³ Carl Kaestle, *Pillar of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1790-1860* (NY: Hill and Wang, 1983).