

Commentary

Yves Hamant

I should like to consider both the relationship between the authorities and society in the theme of ecology, and its chronology.

As far as chronology is concerned, it seems to me that concern for the environment started to emerge in the USSR, at least on a large scale, mainly during the Brezhnev years (1964–1982).

The period before that (1953–1964), when Krushchev was in power, had been characterized by both destalinization and the revival of the communist project. It was precisely when Krushchev was at the head of the Communist Party that projects for enormous works of 'planetary surgery' intended to 'correct the imperfections of nature', to use the expressions of the time, were launched. The famous project to divert the rivers of the North had been announced in the Party programme adopted at the 12th congress in 1961:

'Soviet man will be able to achieve the bold plan of modifying the course of some rivers in the North and of regulating the flow of their waters in order to use their powerful hydraulic resources to irrigate areas of drought.'

The scientific journal for the general public, Nauka i jizn (Science and Life) proudly bore the headline: The Pechora will flow into the Caspian.¹

The entire geography of Northern Russia was to be modified, but it does not seem that any fears were expressed at that time. Soviet hydrotechnicians 'at the forefront of the struggle for restructuring (perestroika!) the Earth' were able to dream:

'The largest rivers of the European part of our country will obey the will of a single dispatcher who, just by pressing a button, will order the Pechora, the Dvina, the Onega and the Mezen to send their millions of cubic metres of water now to the Dnieper or the Don, now to their own lower basin.'

This faith in technology goes back even further, beyond Marxism, to Russian populism (in the original Russian sense of the term narodnichestvo) and to the 'Crystal Palace' half seen in a dream by the heroine of Chernyshevsky's novel What is to be done? (1863) and symbolizing, precisely, the triumph technology would achieve.

The subsequent development of ecological sensitivity seems to me to belong to a more or less secret evolution of attitudes which I would venture to describe, according to Inglehart's expressions, but without necessarily seeking to include Soviet society in his analysis, as 'silent revolution' and 'culture shift'.² Post-Communist values (of which some come close to Inglehart's post-materialist values, but are, however, distinct) have emerged from official ideology: the rehabilitation of the past and of peasant civilization, the return of religion, and the rise of individualism.

Although the theme of ecology has been widely popularized by 'writers of the countryside' (who, in the 1970s, were practically the only writers of any talent authorized to write by the censors), they have given it a certain moral dimension. Some of their works, such as Viktor Astafyev's The Fish-Tsar (1976) and Valentin Rasputin's Farewell to Matyora (1976), have often been included

in the lists of ecological novels, but that is to give them a reductionist reading. Their attacks on the environment are included less for their consequences than as a symptom of the atrophy of the moral sense, of man's loss of his human face. When man disfigures nature, he is himself disfigured: 'man forgets that he is a man', according to Astafyev. The man who does not respect nature, does not respect his neighbours, his family or his relatives. Nature is not an enormous construction site, said Rasputin, but a homeland.³

In his *Remarks on Russianness*, Likhachev, an academician specializing in Old Russian literature, has pointed out that in Russian the words meaning 'nature' (*priroda*), 'homeland' (*rodina*) and 'people' (*narod*) are all derived from the same root⁴ (*rod*), (with meanings identical to those of the Greek *genos*, *genea*). Likhachev stressed nature's role in 'Russianness', and the harmony between man and nature.

The desire to return to nature which has been one of the sources of the ecological movement in the West, as a reaction against the consumer society and the excesses of urbanization, would not have been found in Russia. City-dwellers in Russia have kept in much closer contact with nature. Many of them often endure uncertain conditions in order to be able to spend some time in the countryside each year, growing a few vegetables on a small plot of land and collecting mushrooms and berries; these activities are an addition to their domestic economy.

The question of 'salvage' in the ecological theme of the political powers under perestroika relates back to the dialectic of the relationship between Soviet power and society, a subject which it would be appropriate to return to elsewhere at some length. It could be shown that this relationship was not one-sided, with the authorities dominating society, but that a kind of interaction existed between them. Although at the beginning of perestroika, the leaders took up the ecological theme in their concern to remobilize society, it was because they were aware that it would find an echo in public opinion without being too dangerous for the regime.

The project to divert the rivers of the North obviously played a decisive role. Although it was announced in 1961, the start of the first phase of the work was not written into the Five Year Plan until 1981. Several texts denouncing the operation were then circulated through the *samizdat*.

After Gorbachev was appointed leader of the Party, Sergei Zalygin, a writer from the country and a former hydraulics engineer, attacked the project. Although he held an official position, he was still a respected writer who had distinguished himself particularly in the past with a true account of collectivization. Even before Gorbachev's administration had begun to implement the policies of perestroika and *glasnost*, and while its economic objectives were still summed up by the words 'acceleration' and 'intensification', later to be abandoned, Zalygin had denounced the project in *Communist*, the Central Committee journal, in September 1985. Later, he seized every opportunity he could to return to this question.

In August 1986 the Politburo announced that it was abandoning the project and stopping work on it. Zalygin concluded that the State had bowed to public opinion. Indeed, this decision was felt by some to be the first victory for public opinion in the USSR. But was this victory a smokescreen? Was it not just a carefully stage-managed performance by those who were now responsible for ideology and who had undertaken to create from nothing a 'public opinion' completely at the discretion of the team in power? That Gorbachev's team had counted on masterminding *glasnost* is not in doubt. However, it seems to me that on this occasion they had sought to win over a certain number of intellectuals by supporting a subject which they knew a large part of the population was sensitive about and that it was not too wide of the mark to say that, in a certain way, power had turned towards society. At the same time, after the Chernobyl catastrophe, they must have understood the necessity of making a gesture which would avoid focusing the ecological

question on the subject of the functioning of nuclear power stations, with all the economic consequences that that entailed.

Of course one should draw a distinction between the different Soviet republics. Although one could consider that in Russia ecological concerns as a whole had a general and rather abstract character, elsewhere they had been able to translate themselves into more concrete demands, as in the case of the Baltic states.

When glasnost reached its peak, revelations of ecological damage occupied an important position in the media, and amongst the 'informal' movements, that is to say the various associations which appeared without first obtaining official status and of which some, it is true, had been inspired by the authorities, the majority of them were centred on ecology. In the period which followed the collapse of the USSR, politicians often played the ecological card in their electoral campaigns, especially at local level.

However, afterwards, the population's interest in ecological problems receded. The economic difficulties of daily life gained the upper hand. The population only mobilizes itself promptly and locally, indeed often on the initiative of a local ecological association, when faced with a direct ecological threat. It should not be surprising that a real 'Green Party' has not emerged, for, in general, few real political parties have managed to become established in Russia and the consensus which formed around Putin during the last legislative and presidential elections is less favourable to this question than ever. In addition, the existing ecological associations are of very different orientations. Is the campaign aimed at holding the referendum likely to encourage them to form a coalition?

It should also be noted that, once the Russian leaders had toyed for a moment with the idea of developing a new official ideology and had, with that end in mind, launched a competition on the theme 'An idea for Russia' in 1996, they did not include ecology in any way. Similarly, one finds very few references to ecology in Putin's speeches. The present authorities, though they have to take into account the fact that the present state of the economy does not allow them to make substantial financial provision for the defence of the environment, are also wary of an independent ecological movement.

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Translated from the French by Rosemary Dear

Notes

1. No. 5, 1965.
2. Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural transition in advanced industrial societies*, Economica 1993.
3. V. Rasputin, 'Byt' samim soboj' [Being oneself]. *Voprosy literatury*, 1976, No. 5, p. 150.
4. D. Likhachev, *Zametki o russkom* [Remarks on Russianness], Moscow, 'Sovetskaia Rossiia', 1981, p. 7.