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Casual Wear and Casual Behaviour: 
The Different Fates of Non-conformism in Russia and ‘the West’

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Abstract

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Casual wear and casual behaviour: The different fates of non-conformism in Russia and ‘the West’

In this paper I will critically reflect upon an intercultural experience connected with appearance, dress, and the different mutual perceptions of ‘others’ in public space in current Moscow and Vienna. I will construe this experience as fundamentally different attitudes towards informal behaviour, appearance and gender ambivalence. One of the main causes of this situation I have located in the 1960s, a period of anti-authoritarian subcultural upheaval in the Soviet Union as well as ‘the West’. The very different social, economic and political contexts of their emergence and their further (‘socialist’ vs. capitalist) trajectories are, as I will argue, at the root of the perceptions and connotations of casual wear and behaviour in the public spaces of present-day Moscow and Vienna.

Keywords
Intercultural communication; Russian; Austrian; Soviet Union; Dress; Anti-authoritarian movement; Cultural Studies; Capitalism

Introduction

The Moscow experience

The winter of 2004-05 I spent in Moscow. A grant from the Austrian Research Association (ÖFG) allowed me to collect data on the subject of ‘The Function of Dress in Society.’ For six months, I stayed at the university hostel of RSUH (Russian State University of the Humanities), conducted in-depth interviews with people of various age and social groups on the topic ‘What does fashion mean to me?’, prompting respondents to elaborate on their daily decisions in front of the wardrobe, including their tastes, ethical criteria, and shopping habits with respect to clothes. However, my field-work in Moscow provided me not only with good interview material for further research, but also with a personal experience that triggered the considerations on the Sixties in the Soviet Union and ‘the West’ I will present in this article.

This personal experience consisted of a kind of irritation that – as much of the literature on ‘intercultural communication’ claims – is a very common phenomenon occurring when a person spends a certain span of time in ‘another’ culture. So, for example, I noticed with unease that students, when talking to professors, revealed a habit of speaking as if permanently verbally bowing, to express it figuratively; I was surprised when looking for a table at the internet café that the free tables were ‘for teaching staff’ only and that at the canteen there were two separate halls – one for the students and one ‘Professors’ Hall’. I was positively irritated, furthermore, by the gazes I felt on me in the subway: arrogant, sizing-up gazes from women sitting on the opposite bench, judging me. These gazes ‘scanned’ my winter clothes consisting of a quilted anorak, flat, wide boots and usually jeans or cords and polo-neck sweaters and a rucksack. I was protecting myself from the notorious Russian winter after all. I was annoyed mainly by the judgmental character of these gazes. At university and the hostel I was treated like a student, although I was forty-five at that time. With the passage of time and thanks to my communication with my respondents, I came to understand that the cause of all this was in fact my ‘strange’ – unfeminine, socially ambiguous – appearance. Under the pressure of the female Muscovites gazes – the men, even worse, did not take any notice at all – I decided to buy a nice woollen waisted coat, a woollen jacket, blouses, trousers, and some delicate boots with a little heel, and I started to breathe freely. What had happened?
A few theoretical prerequisites

In search of an answer to this question, back home, I came across the ethno-psychoanalytical theory of the Swiss anthropologist Mario Erdheim, and I began to realise that the Moscow experience had allowed me to understand something important not so much about the Russians, but rather about myself. Erdheim argues as follows: ‘All that one is supposed not to know about in society, as such knowledge would disturb the ones in their ruling over the others, must be made unconscious. […] The production of unconscious contents requires social organization and a site where it can be accomplished – and this is not so much the family, but rather the institutions that administer social life’ (Erdheim 1984, 39). These institutions include the education system, the mass media and other, similarly powerful ideological institutions. Once repressed into the unconscious, such contents can only be retrieved to conscience in the contacts with another ‘culture,’ as Erdheim termed it – I would prefer the term ‘society’ – in which these contents are not repressed to a collective unconscious but manifest themselves openly in people’s everyday practices. Coming into contact with another society, they constitute a ‘mirror’ (M. Bakhtin 2000) in which we can see what has been repressed to the collective unconscious in our own society. To a certain extent, my Moscow experience described above can be understood as a psychoanalytical experience of this kind: a self-analysis. It was only in retrospect that I came to understand the basis of all that fuss about appearance.

In search of the ‘roots’ of the different Russian and Austrian subject structures – and this is what it all turned out to be about – and upon reflecting upon certain hints in people’s statements I began to suspect that this difference I had been perceiving, and that people who met me obviously had perceived, was rooted in the different relationship we had towards informal behaviour, appearance and gender ambivalence. It was then that I started to understand that I was a child of the 1960s, even though I was not involved in the events of that time, but in its aftermath. In 1968, I was eight years old and growing up in a Catholic family in the Tyrol – i.e., quite far from the main events of that year. But it turned out that the spirit of 1968, in the course of time, transgressed the circle of its immediate protagonists, inspiring ever greater parts of society. Thus, 1968 fundamentally changed the appearance of Austrian schools, though, of course, not in one day. By the early Seventies, the spirit of change had reached schools as provincial as mine. It was at secondary school that I made the acquaintance of the spirit of the Sixties, which had manifested itself in some of my teachers. At the universities, from the middle of the Seventies on, we chose our representatives to university commissions at all levels, starting from the departments via the faculty up to the university administration itself, where students – alongside assistants and professors – decided upon questions of their everyday concern: who was going to be offered a chair, what would the curriculum be, and so on. These times are long past, but this state of affairs, of course, also had a strong effect on the relations between students and professors.

The spirit of 1968 reached my generation also via such channels as pop music. The phrase ‘forever young’ from a Bob Dylan song was perceived by my generation as a silent agreement that we would never get old – that is, never become like our parents: boring, authoritarian, old-fashioned, conservative, grey and lifeless. I understood this in the aftermath of that stay in Moscow. And it was then that I asked myself: just what was going on their then, in the Sixties?

The main theses I am going to develop in the course of this paper will be that the 1960s, in Russia as well as in Western Europe, were a period of social upheaval; moreover, with all the difference, there were peculiar similarities in the perception of life here and there, which I will discuss in more detail below. At the same time, the fundamentally different political and social contexts – and, as a result, the very different trajectories of further development – resulted in what I experienced in Moscow in the winter of 2004-05. Therefore, the next – and main – section of my paper will be dedicated to a comparison of the Soviet and the ‘Western’ Sixties. To be more precise, it will consist of my reading of a book by Petr Vail’ and Aleksandr Genis about this era in the Soviet Union, a collection of essays conveying memories of that time, both those of the authors as well as other famous – and less famous – witnesses. In the course of my reading, I came across some very familiar experiences – although the ‘familiar’ would sometimes turn out to be a ‘false friend’: similar in form, but different in content – along with experiences that seemed very different and strange. My dialogue with Vail’ and Genis will also include the voices of ‘third parties’: Austrians and Russians, some of them also writing about the Sixties from a position of eye-witnesses, others approaching the phenomenon as sociologists or historians.
In the third part of my paper, I will draw conclusions from the various historical experiences and establish connections between them and what I had experienced in Moscow, referring also to statements of my Moscow respondents. Apart from this, I will conclude my considerations with an attempt at a psychoanalytical interpretation.

The Sixties in the Soviet Union and ‘the West’

1968

In ‘the West’, the Sixties approached their culmination at a time when – according to Vail’ and Genis they were coming to an end in the Soviet Union, i.e. in the year 1968. The Soviet maxims of ‘sincerity’, the ‘negation of private property’, ‘collectivism’, and ‘creative labour’ had been quite familiar to the ear of a ‘Western’ representative of the 1968 generation. Admittedly, the impetus for such a perception of the world came from a different direction: in ‘the West’, it was not the promise of communism ‘from above’, propagated by the political elites, but critique ‘from below’, from a minority of students, the offspring of mainly bourgeois families. As everybody knows, the critical mood of the 1960s culminated in such events as those of May 1968 in Paris, when the students’ upheaval, encompassing the ‘occupation’ of Sorbonne and similar actions disrupting normal university life, received support from French workers organized in trade unions who proclaimed a general strike, which all but led to the resignation of president de Gaulle (Gilcher-Holtey 1998, 83). The mood of protest erupted also in events such as the demonstrations against the U.S. war in Vietnam in European capitals – even in Vienna – or in the bomb-planting in various German department stores by activists like Andreas Baader, Gudrun Ensslin and Thorwald Proll, who later on gained debatable fame as the R.A.F. (cf. Becker 1998, 9). ‘“1968” is a myth. An epic poem and a spell aria. But withstanding all that, the revolt was no phantom. It fundamentally changed Western civilization, and, indirectly, also that of Eastern Europe: at first only youth culture, but as a consequence the everyday life of society as a whole’ (Becker 1998, 11).

The year 1968 unites and separates Soviet and Western European non-conformists in a decisive point: as the year of the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia, 1968 marked ‘the final crash of all hopes’, not only for the Soviet shestdesiatniki, but also for the ‘Western’ leftists, who were deprived of their ‘model’ of a really existing ‘socialism with a human face’, represented by Czechoslovakia in the 1960s. Of course it is not hard to determine whose loss was more traumatic. The journalist Rolf Schneider, born in 1932 in Chemnitz, former GDR, wrote about this experience by the example of the two Germanys: ‘For both German states, 1968 was a fateful date. But the political goals of its protagonists – the movements they had triggered, their hopes and their final defeat notwithstanding all this – were fundamentally different. In both states the movements were leftist, but against the background of their supposed similarity, the differences between them emerged still more clearly’ (Schneider 1998, 99) Taking the perspective of a citizen of the then GDR, Schneider closes his article with the following words: ‘Is it really possible that on the other side of the nearby border with the FRG young people with red rags were demonstrating in the streets, demanding council democracy? We got this information from TV. But the characters on the screen seemed insignificant to the majority of the people of the GDR, like participants in a children’s game, and incredibly far away’ (Schneider 1998, 101).

The anti-authoritarian movement

Reading Vail’’s and Genis’s book, I became acquainted with Soviet sub-cultural manifestations of the 1960s, whose anti-authoritarian gesture felt very familiar, despite how, given the different social contexts, these gestures took different forms from their Western European counterparts. In the aforementioned book, I came across such anti-authoritarian movements as the ‘dissenters’ (inakomysliashchie), the ‘bohemians’ (bogemy) and the ‘Hemingway fans’ (kheminguevcy). The anti-authoritarian gesture was politicized in the case of the former group and rather apolitical in the case of the latter two, but revealing an explicitly apolitical attitude was in itself a political manifestation in the Soviet Union.

In Western Europe, 1968 marked the culmination of the anti-authoritarian decade. Long before the slogan ‘Power to imagination!’, before the demands for extending students’ rights and self-government (auto-
gestion) for workers in France, and before the Europe-wide protest against capitalism and the ‘system of politico-bureaucratic repression, philistine petit-bourgeois everyday culture and personality cult’ (Becker 1998, 10), the 1960s had become the decade of ‘confronting Nazism’ (ibid., 11). The latter had already begun in the late 1950s, when for the first time German public television showed pictures of piles of dead bodies — the bodies of detainees of concentration camps. So it was not by chance that one of the central positions of the 1968 movement in Germany was anti-authoritarianism. It was the authoritarian structure of society that German and Austrian students reading ‘critical theory’ — Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, but also the psychoanalytical works by Wilhelm Reich — considered the breeding ground of Nazi fascism. The unmediated interest of this generation for the possible crimes of their own parents and grandparents, in my opinion, is one of the fundamental differences between the ‘Western’ and Soviet non-conformist movements. For in the Soviet Union an analogous confrontation with Stalinism had never taken place.

In practice, in everyday life, to be ‘anti-authoritarian [for a young German or Austrian] meant the human right to sexuality, the right to party; it meant not to elegantly sidestep the era of fascism, it meant to oppose the arms race, it meant to take part in the demonstrations against the war in Vietnam and to grow one’s hair as long as possible, to draw into doubt traditional forms of communication and to refrain from competing with ones classmates. To be anti-authoritarian meant to critically examine ones consumption habits and commonly accepted and applied criteria for education. In other words, it meant to raise the question of whether they served the repression of human needs or were advancing justice, solidarity and peace in the world’ (Seidel-Pielen 1998, 16).

Style and ideas

In all non-conformist movements in history, the style of dress and behaviour fulfilled the function of a political demonstration. This applies to the sans-culottes (literally ‘without knee breeches’) of the French Revolution, who expressed their republican affiliations by the style of their trousers, and it is so impressively demonstrated by the way Ivan Turgenev resorted to the description of dress to indicate political attitudes in his novel Fathers and Sons (1862). Accordingly, Western European opponents of the Vietnam war adopted the style of the ‘hippie’, in that they demonstrated not only pacifism, but also anti-consumerism, simplicity in everyday life and their protest against the bourgeois ethics of ‘achievement’ and ‘efficiency’ (Leistung) (cf. Lehnert 2000, 59). A decade earlier, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the idols of Western European youth were such figures as James Dean, dressed in drainpipe jeans and plain undershirts. Embodying the image of the ‘soft outsider with an obstinate facial expression’, he became the idol of the German and Austrian Halbstarke sub-culture (cf. Lehner 2000, 51). The Halbstarke, by and large, came from worker families, as did the ‘Teddy Boys’ in Britain and the Stiliagi in the Soviet Union, although the comparison is only partly legitimate, as each of these sub-cultures developed in its own special social conditions, and in reply to these.

Referencing the British sub-culture researcher and theorist Dick Hebdige, two Austrian representatives of Cultural Studies, Roman Horak and Siegfried Mattl (1998), characterized the Austrian sub-cultures of the late 1960s through the 1990s as challenges to the hegemonic ideologies of their respective time, the structural antagonisms which they could, of course, not overcome. Thus, Horak and Mattl characterize the sub-cultural styles of these years as ‘imaginary and magic attempts at solving material and structural problems’ of their respective time and society (Horak & Mattl 1998, 242) According to the authors, it is in styles of dress and behaviour that approaches to sexuality, gender relations, social hierarchies and power relations ‘materialize’.

The Western European sub-cultures of the late Fifties and early Sixties choose as models for their looks such figures as super-erotic Marlon Brando, who – dressed in leather jackets and Levi’s jeans – was seen as the embodiment of a new sexuality and masculinity (cf. Schober 2001, 212); Jimi Hendrix expressing his anti-military position in his parodies of historical military uniforms (Lehnert 2000, 60); Bob Dylan, Arlo Guthrie or Joan Baez in jeans and parkas (ibid.). Young women were fascinated by such symbols of a liberated female sexuality as Marilyn Monroe or Brigitte Bardot; others by such models of a female hippie-look as that of Janis Joplin or the aforementioned Joan Baez. The strand of the Sixties youth cultures represented by the latter two tended towards a congruence of women’s and men’s appearances — the former cut their hair short, the latter grew it, and both sexes wore jeans and leather jackets or parkas. The Austrian historian Anna Schober points to the fact that given the correspondence of ‘female’ and ‘male’ looks, the model for ‘both sexes’ was still ‘male’ (cf. Schober 2001, 212).
The relative porosity of the borders during the short Khrushchev ‘thaw’ era – between 1956 and 1964 – allowed for the seeping into the U.S.S.R. of American pop music – Rock’n’Roll, the same music that was popular among Western European youths as well. It made festivals of Italian and French cinema possible, the heroes of which turned into models for whole generations of young Soviet people. The fashion for Sartre, Salinger and Hemingway in ‘the West’ as well as the ‘East’ – all this inevitably resulted in similarities of styles and ideas among the young generation. There were ‘Monroes’ and ‘Sofia Loren’ in the streets of both ‘Europees’, but just as well others shared a striving for simplicity and plainness, wore ‘internationalist’ jeans – if they could get hold of any – T-shirts, hand-knitted woollen polo-necks à la Hemingway and sneakers. ‘All in life is mutually connected, and dragging a felled statue to the river is more comfortable in a cowboy shirt and sneakers than than a cheviot suit. The style of the era required lightness, mobility, openness,’ according to Vail and Genis (2001, 126).

But appearance was not all there was to it; there were also certain manners of behaviour and leisure activities that Western and Eastern Europeans had in common. The ‘dissenters’ in the description by Vail and Genis did not differ dramatically from their ‘Western’ non-conformist colleagues: in the first years of their existence, before they were going to be termed ‘dissidents,’ with all implications of this very grave term, their activities were restricted to ‘[local acts] of some individual personalities, when the most developed form of organization consisted in cheerful companies inseparably singing songs to the guitar, drinking, reading poems and formulating letters of protest. These cheerful companies changed the social climate in the country’ (Vail and Genis 2001, 181).

Another group of Soviet non-conformists depicted by Vail and Genis were the informal artists (khudozhestvennykh), who – as everybody knows – refused to represent the world according to the maxims of socialist realism. Such people were officially considered ‘useless members of society’ who ‘pretended to be useful – artists, writers and poets’. They were accused of ‘not fulfilling the “most important duty of honest work for the good of the country and their own prosperity”’ (Vail and Genis 2001, 192). In addition, the ‘bohemian’ was not interested in politics, pushing their indifference to the brink of cynicism. [...] The catacomb, underground, non-conformist culture professed its own aesthetics. It was impossible for them not to consider the Soviet (anti-Soviet) point of view, for they needed something from which to push themselves off’ (Vai and Genis 2001, 194). As Vail and Genis argue, ‘Soviet society offered the bohemian an excellent background from which to stand out, to look down upon. Extravagant behaviour in Russia is a creative act in its own right. Everyday life was the main genre of non-conformist art’ (ibid., 199). In the case of the Soviet bohemian, lifestyle itself was a political act in its broader sense.

The forms of communication and provocation of a non-conformist behaviour and appearance described by Vail and Genis – as well as the monopoly of the social background against which it was easy to stand out – find their analogue in the ‘Western’ societies of the late Fifties and the Sixties. It will suffice to remember the Wiener Aktionismus and its protagonists, one of the most notable being Guenther Brus and his body actions – painful and shocking manipulations on his own body (cf. Loeschnigg 1998, 93-94). By the way, in Austria, too, a ‘bohemian’ lifestyle was being associated by the ‘petit bourgeois’ with ‘parasitism’, with ‘indifference’, with the decisive difference, however, that one was not sent to jail for it, as was the case in the U.S.S.R.

Vail and Genis introduce still another group of non-conformists: the Hemingway fans. ‘The copying of Hemingway started from appearance. One can say that the Sixties began with questions of fashion. The Stiliagi were the first elementary non-conformists. [...] The fashion for Hemingway was the next step. It was not restricted to a list of accessories – the coarse woollen sweater, the pipe, the beard. All this was desirable, but not obligatory; what was more important was an emphatic negligence towards dress. The refusal to wear the standard suit marked this negligence towards a varnished appearance. The Hemingway system of values excluded a solemn relationship to life. Negligence is easier to live in a sweater than in a suit’ (Vail and Genis 2001, 65). In addition, what was central was a certain ‘experience of life’ à la Hemingway, a ‘new attitude towards the material world’ (ibid., 66), finding expression in statements ‘uttered through the teeth’ like: ‘I like it if there is an olive in the cocktail’ (ibid., 74). For too long a time, ‘Soviet people had lived amongst ideas rather than things’ (ibid., 66). Thus a negligent attitude towards ‘erudition’, which served as a mark of distinction among the Soviet/Russian intelligentsia, the ‘cult of communication’ that ‘grasped all structures of society’ (ibid., 69), the institution of collective drinking – all this brought forth an atmosphere of an accelerating feast. [...] Life evolved according to the logic of carnival,’ as Vail and Genis interpreted the situation (2001, 70).

These characteristics of Soviet youth culture – the ‘negligence towards a varnished appearance’, the
demonstrative hedonism as expressed in the statement about the ‘olive in the cocktail’ – in my opinion are gestures uniting the Soviet kheminguevtsy and ‘Western’ representatives of the Sixties. The latter emphasized their disgust at the ‘materialism’ and ‘petit bourgeoisie’ habits of their parents’ generation, on the one hand, and their ascetic working ethics of the post-war era, on the other. The difference was that they did not drink cocktails – which were a symbol of their parents’ ‘petit bourgeoisie’ lifestyle – but rather tea self-imported from a recent trip to India (cf. Orban 1998, 33). And, of course, they smoked marijuana (ibid., 35).

Collisions with the ‘petit bourgeois’ and the state authorities

Collisions of the non-conformists with ‘ordinary’ citizens are found in texts about the Soviet as well as the ‘Western’ Sixties. Here and there, the indignation of ‘ordinary’ citizens was being instrumentalised by the power elites. A quite important role in this process in both the U.S.S.R. and ‘the West’ was played by the press. A ‘Western’ example of this is the fate of Rudi Dutschke, an activist of the German students’ movement, who was hurt on 11 April 1968 by a shot from the gun of a worker who – for the purpose of assaulting Dutschke – had come from Munich to Berlin. Dutschke died years later from the late consequences of this assault. ‘The responsibility for what had happened, according to many companions of Dutschke, was with the state authorities as a whole and the publishing house of Axel Springer in particular, who by means of his “yellow-press” paper roused the “wrath of the people” against the extra-parliamentary opposition [as one faction of the students’ movement called itself] and its “long-haired” protagonists,’ as the situation was depicted by Becker (1998, 9).

Regarding collisions between youth activists and the authorities at such a secondary site of events as Vienna, the above-cited Orban wrote that ‘fearing for the public order and the state as a whole, political police observed sub-cultural events and sites, and their spies, camouflaged as hippies, even infiltrated the so-called “communes”’. There – according to Orban – politically radical activists mixed with more or less apolitical representatives of sub-cultural movements, which confused the police and sometimes lead to paranoid behaviour on their part (cf. Orban 1998, 34). Ordinary citizens often reacted to the mere appearance of ‘such individuals’ with indignation, and one could even hear such comments as ‘Hitler would have done away with this’, which is one of my own childhood memories.

In the U.S.S.R., however, clashes between non-conformists and the state authorities and their helpers were much more serious. According to Kristin Roth-Ey, notwithstanding the fact that ‘Stiliazhestvo [being a Stiliaga] was not stated in the criminal law and tended to be considered as “anti-social manifestation in everyday life”, […] nevertheless those contemptuously called Stiliagi often were dragged before the Komsomol committee or to the police station, their heads shaved against their will, deprived of their clothes – or their clothes were spoilt – and photographed for crushing articles in the press and stands saying “They bring shame on our town”’ (Roth-Ey 2004, 3) Roth-Ey also mentions the institution of the druzhinniki: civilians who were authorized by the militia to keep an eye on potential ‘violators of public order’ – and who tended to take the law into their own hands, for example by beating up Stiliagi or poets who read their poems in public without official permission. This was a common practice at the Maiakovskii memorial in the centre of Moscow.

Marxism

Although in ‘the West’, young non-conformists shared an interest with their Soviet peers in Sartre, Salinger and Hemingway – to name the most prominent examples – “Western” anti-authoritarian movements chose as their idols Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, Mao or Ho Chi Minh; i.e., figures who in the Soviet Union constituted the list of ‘official’ communist leaders and were naturally unsuitable for the demonstration of non-conformism. It was these communist leaders that ‘Western’ non-conformist fashions of the Sixties owed their militaristic elements. So, while in the U.S.S.R. Marxism-Leninism was the official ideology, various versions of Marxism constituted the basis of non-conformist ideologies in a ‘Western’ leftist, politicized, students’ avant-garde in search of a theoretical basis for revolution. The activists of the students’ revolt in ‘the West’ believed in something that – according to Vail and Genis – nobody in the Soviet Union apart from Khrushchev himself really believed: communism for today’s generation.

‘On an international level, possible allies were seen [by “Western” representatives of the Sixties] in the socialist liberation movements and not yet discredited revolutions (such as the one in Cuba); in Eastern Europe the anti-bureaucratic-reformist communist movement (first and foremost the ‘Prague Spring’); in capitalist Europe independent socialist groups and parties developing independently of the official social-
democratic and European Stalinist communist parties (such as the French PSU and Ligue communiste, the Italian Il Manifesto, the Spanish Workers’ Commissions, etc.)’ (Dahmer 1998, 26). Dahmer claims that the ‘Soviet myth’ after the XX congress of the Communist Party and the Hungarian Revolt of 1956, after the Soviet-Chinese conflict of 1962 and the downfall of Khrushchev in 1964 stopped playing an important part in the students’ movement’ (ibid.). Judging from conversations I have had with former ‘Western’ participants in the 1968 movement, I can add that – despite all the shortcomings of ‘really existing socialism’ – the Soviet Union remained the embodiment of a social utopia even after the aforementioned events. For them the collapse of the Soviet state also meant the collapse of their hopes for another society, an alternative to capitalism.

Feminism

Soviet non-conformists, as it seems, did not care too much about gender questions and, in Vail’s and Genis’s book, sometimes even appear as real machos. In contrast, the ‘Western’ non-conformists of the Sixties strove to overcome not only authoritarian social structures, but also gender and even generational hierarchies. Thus, in communes, experiments of new forms of relationships between women and men, and between children and parents, were taking place,’ (cf. Dahmer 1998, 32). It should, however, be added, that these new approaches were not initiated by anti-authoritarian gender sensitive men, but under the pressure of the feminist women among the ‘communitarians’ and ‘revolutionaries’: activists of the so-called ‘second wave’ feminism. While in the Soviet Union the ‘women’s question’ was declared as resolved once and for all from ‘above’ and did not really bother young Soviet non-conformists, gender questions caused lots of endless discussions among their ‘Western’ peers and found expression in uncounted actions. I only mention an example recalled by the German sociologist Treusch-Dieter, who recalls when, in 1968, feminists showered the leader of the Socialist German Students’ Union (SDS) with tomatoes, with this gesture returning to him the fruit of Eve symbolizing the ‘reproductive function’ of women (cf. Treusch-Dieter 1998, 39). Though these experiments by and large had a liberating effect in a society of authoritarian Catholicism, as Austrian society was during the 1950s, at times they ended up in weird excesses that came close to sexual abuse of women as well as children, as turned out in the case of the Muehl commune. In 1991 the artist Otto Muehl was sentenced to seven years’ imprisonment by an Austrian court for ‘rape of under-age persons, coercion to abort and use of drugs’ (Danneberg 1998, 277).

Returning now to the analogies between Soviet and ‘Western’ non-conformist movements and drawing first conclusions, I contend that, despite all the stylistic and also ideological analogies, one of the most important differences was the latter’s explicit and emphatic orientation towards Marxism and feminism.

Different trajectories

Even more important for the current situation, described in the introduction of this paper as the ‘Moscow experience’, were the different historical fates of the non-conformist movements, which had fundamentally changed the societal climate in their respective countries in the 1960s.

The Soviet and the ‘Western’ non-conformist movements had emerged from different political, economic and social conditions. The economic conditions from which the Soviet Sixties had emerged were characterized by Lebina & Chistikov (2003) as follows: the second half of the 1950s and the first half of the 1960s in the U.S.S.R. were the period of Khrushchev’s turbulent reforms, which did not always have the desired effect. But the overall goal of ‘building communism within twenty years’ in the U.S.S.R. was the organizing principle, to which ‘many innovations of the second half of the 1950s were subdued, in particular the raise in wages and pensions, the shortening of the working week and the reduction of the working age’ (Lebina & Chistikov 2003, 151). Cities grew rapidly during the ‘Khrushchev decade’ – i.e. between the ‘Thaw’ and Khrushchev’s downfall in 1964. Leningrad, for example, doubled its territory in this period. Thus, the Soviet Sixties were shaped in an atmosphere of material and mental expansion; an atmosphere of hopes and expectations. Contemporaries perceived this era as one of fundamental change.

The ‘Western’ Sixties movement also unfolded in an era of post-war prosperity or the so-called Wirtschaftswunder and reached its peak at a time when first signs of a crisis emerged. ‘A long period of economic growth stimulated by the war, reconstruction and the arms race, which provided a number of highly-developed ‘Western’ industrial states with workplaces and growing wealth for everybody, was coming to an end; recession and crisis began to show’ (Dahmer 1998, 23). At the same time, under the conditions of competition between the ‘systems’ and the nascent third technological revolution, the number of pupils and
students getting higher education increased. Millions of young intellectuals not traumatized by war, dictatorship and poverty, in the ‘refuge’ of schools and universities, out of their parents’ control but not yet subject to the working life of the factory or office, constituted an excellent resonator of international and domestic politics in the specific situation of the 1960’s (Dahmer 1998, 23-24). In other words, for the ‘Western’ Sixties, the shaping force was not so much optimism, but a feeling of a forthcoming crisis, nurtured by the consciousness of a vicious not-too-distant past, a loss of belief in the meaning of human existence and the resulting widespread fashion for existentialist philosophy à la Sartre and Camus, a growing scepticism towards the unrestrained materialism of the post-war generation of ‘reconstruction’ and a heightened awareness of world politics, which had become possible through the new post-war types of press such as the German journal Der Spiegel and rapidly expanding television. In short, the premises of the non-conformist movements were as different as were their further developments.

Commenting on the CPSU programme of 1961, Vail’ and Genis point out its stylistic closeness to ‘the rigor of old testamentary commandments. Among the 12 theses of the Moral Code, two times the term “in-tolerance” and two times the term “irreconcilability” are found. […] Sincerity had to be aggressive, negating the principle of non-intrusion – which is only logical considering the overall character of the programme and of life as a whole’ (Vail’ and Genis 2001, 14-15). The cold wind of aggressive sincerity, irreconcilability and intolerance toward all deviations from what is commonly taken for granted is still blowing harshly into visitors’ faces in Russia in 2005. And not only those of visitors. One 20-year-old student of economics – specializing in marketing – told me in the course of an interview in winter 2005: ‘Nowadays everybody is very moderate with respect to dress, although some progress can be observed, thanks to Europe, thanks to Moscow, which, after all, is a megapolis with a great flow of information, we see all kinds of things and fashions, and people … well they have stopped to be afraid of looking different, more or less, with time passing. […] But some years ago they were very much afraid. [I: So this has changed.] Yes, it is changing now. I think in five years or so. I recently saw a boy with angels’ wings fixed to his back […] made of feathers, and black sunglasses. And I thought, well, that’s great. But if he were not in Moscow, but somewhere twenty kilometres out of Moscow, they would bang-bang-bang, they would hit him, just for nothing. Just for not looking the same as they do.’

In the Soviet Union, according to Vail’ and Genis, from the middle of the 1960s on, after the downfall of the ‘Westerniser’ and reformer Khrushchev, ‘the cultural climate in the country gradually changed, from the cosmopolitanism of the early Sixties toward “the Russian people on Russian soil”’ (Vail’ and Genis 2001, 240). ‘Internationalism’ step by step gave way to ‘imperialism’. The ‘Russian past’ gained in popularity, newspaper covers now showed monasteries, newspapers published articles on ginger cakes and spinning wheels, according to Vail’ and Genis. ‘Step by step, the cultural code of society was being replaced. If starting with the “Thaw” period “sincerity”, “personality”, “truth” had become cultural keywords, so now they were being replaced by “motherland”, “nature”, “the people”’ (Vail’ and Genis 2001, 237). But the final blow the utopia, on which the ideals of the Sixties generation were based, came – according to the authors – from the new edition of the CPSU programme of 1969, from which ‘any hints towards the Khrushchev prophecies of “communism for today’s generation” had disappeared’ (Vail’ and Genis 2001, 285).

The reader of these disappointed lines by Vail’ and Genis comes to the conclusion that at that moment ‘intolerance’ and ‘irreconcilability’ had won the decisive battle. The consequences of this development are reflected, I think, in the following statement of a 26-year-old male Russian psychologist: ‘When I returned from England, that was somewhere in the nineties, ninety-seven or so, I was simply depressed by this for some time. Everybody looked the same. I had decided to go by train [to the village outside Moscow where his parents lived]. […] I looked around, one man in a brown camisole, the other in a black one, one like the other. Pockets, one here, one there, all the same. And peaked caps. As if they had dressed especially for me, changed to clones, kind of, I feel, I think, uh! Like in a fantasy film, for which the director told everybody to dress the same in order to produce a certain mood, kind of an alien … environment.’

In the West, the evolution of non-conformism had a somewhat different character, which, in my opinion, is related to the specific functioning of capitalism. In 1999, Luc Boltanski – a student of Pierre Bourdieu – together with Eve Chiapello published a book titled The New Spirit of Capitalism (English translation 2007). In this book, the authors analyse the development of those ideologies that enabled capitalism to survive the approximately two hundred years of its existence. In so doing, they point out one decisive mechanism of capitalism: that capitalism has successfully integrated the critiques formulated against it at various times into its own ideological system – though of course not without distorting them beyond recognisability. In this way, capitalism at all stages of its existence has managed to motivate people to act according to its goals.
Motivation, however, has never been as central to the functioning of capitalism as it is at its present stage. Never before has capitalism depended on the engagement and cooperation of the working people to the extent it does today. Up to the 1950s, capitalism functioned largely by monitoring and controlling the workers at the conveyor belts. The ‘new spirit of capitalism’, however, which is tightly connected to the rise of the service sector, relies heavily on the employees’ technological competence and on such personal merits as appearance, bodily characteristics, voice, and emotional engagement. Given this situation, monitoring and control are no longer appropriate instruments. Today, capitalism is striving to achieve a high degree of employees’ identification with the companies’ goals. The current type of capitalism relies on employees’ self-control. What has remained unchanged over time is the fundamental principle of capitalism – maximization of profit. What has changed has been the legitimizing strategies for maximizing profit and accumulation.

According to Boltanski & Chiapello (2007), one decisive step in the development of today’s ‘new spirit’ of capitalism was the integration of the critique of the 1968 generation into its ideological system. This way, the demand for workers’ emancipation from the authoritarian structures of the post-war factory, in the course of the past decades, was reformulated into the slogan of ‘self-responsibility’, liberating the entrepreneur of his social responsibilities. The protest against monotonous work at the conveyor belt was turned into a demand for ‘flexibility’ and ‘creativity’, now formulated by the entrepreneurs and addressed to the workforce; thus also people’s creativity had been turned into a commodity, which they were admonished to offer in the market. Authority – according to the ‘new spirit’ – is based no longer on family ties with the entrepreneur, as had been the case in the older (pre-war and early post-war) type of capitalism, but on ‘competence’, ‘achievement’ and ‘engagement’. If in earlier days the worker sold his work-power from 8 to 6 and went home, nowadays s/he is required to invest herself as a whole. Even on weekend trips to the countryside or in bed, employees are expected not to switch off their mobile phones; this then is called ‘engagement’.

This is how the Sixties’ generation’s anti-authoritarian impulse and striving for authenticity, formulated as a critique of contemporary capitalism – informal styles and behaviour included – turned into a component of the latter and became common places of hegemonic social discourse and practice within the past thirty or forty years, although not in the sense of those who initially formulated their critique had intended.

Conclusions

It is time now to return to my initial theoretical considerations of retrieving ‘knowledge’ repressed into consciousness of oneself or one’s society in communication with ‘others’ in all kinds of senses of the word; a process theorized by the aforementioned Erdheim, but also – decidedly without psychoanalytical terminology for political reasons – by the Russian cultural and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (2000). Proceeding from their approaches, I will formulate the following theses: the ideology of anti-authoritarianism repressed the reality of hierarchical power structures to the collective unconscious of ‘Western’ societies. But as a matter of fact, these structures did not disappear in real everyday life. We just learned to pretend that they are not there: in our everyday behaviour, dress and social institutions. At the same time, hierarchical power structures are to a great extent unveiled in Russia; people tend to show and live them much more explicitly – at times even demonstratively. People taking high social positions have no problem in expressing this by dress, cars, visits to restaurants with so-called ‘face control’ at the entrance. One young female manager of a tourist agency explained to me in an interview that she could pick any foreigner from the crowd, whom she claims to recognize by their ‘comfortable clothes, jeans, comfortable trousers, comfortable shoes, boots. […] Outside Russia, people strive for practical clothes. In Russia they strive for showing themselves. […] That is, in Moscow everybody is trying to demonstrate her or his social position.’

This is a shard of the mirror into which I was gazing in Moscow, discovering on myself the clear imprint of the 1960s.

References


Notes

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