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Expressions of Enthusiasm and Emotional Coding in Dictatorships – the Stalinist Soviet Union¹

by

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We all know the propaganda pictures of joyous mass gatherings on Soviet celebrations and we are familiar with the enthusiastic rhetoric of the 1930s. But what kind of emotional coding do these crowd choreographies represent? And which concepts of rulership are engraved in such public staging of enthusiasm? Did anything like *Rausch* exist in the Stalinist Soviet Union?

These are key issues of this paper. First, I want to explore some of the semantics of *Rausch* in the Russian/Soviet context. This is crucial as we deal with emotion talk that is coded by the language that the subjects use. An inquiry of emotional states must in the first place a reflexion on the linguistic tools that are at hand in a given context.

The concept of *Rausch* neither exists in Russian nor in English – the semantic field is split up into a wide range of vocabulary. In Russian we find a very negatively connoted word for the state of drunkenness and alcoholic intoxication – *op'janenie*. On the other hand *vostorg* means some kind of extraordinary joy and happiness. This semantic – just as *ekstaz*, that is: ecstasy - does also carry a quality of “being-on-the edge” or “crossing borders”, like *Rausch* does. *Prichodit' v ekstaz* – becoming ecstatic about something – implies the notion of “being beside oneself” and – to some extent – of “going wild”.

But this is not the predominant vocabulary of the 1930s. The proper terminology that can be found in different sources is *entuziazm*. Enthusiasm is the adequate vocabulary of that time to publicly describe one's state of mind when it came to mass festivals or collective work task. It was the language to deploy if one wanted to write a public letter. But it was also the word people used when they “worked on themselves” and strove for becoming a better Soviet subject with and within their diaries. Enthusiasm was the terminology of public communication of the 1930s; the regime's policy of emotional coding highly privileged the state of enthusiasm over other forms of emotion talk. If we are interested in the question what emotional language was conceivable and employable in the Stalinist regime, we should take the code of enthusiasm serious.

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What kind of an emotional state did the Soviet enthusiasm imply? It definitely was a form of *Rausch*: a moment when a person sensed the unusual, a kind of moratorium of the everyday, a state of mind when someone would cross limits. It also carries a collective underpin and a strong sense of a borderless voluntarism. In the collective state of enthusiasm all constraints of time and space could be left behind and the unbelievable became possible - or, to put it in the metaphors of the time, the fairy tale was made real. Valentin Kataev's novel *Vremia vpered!* - *Time, forward!* - presents this notion of enthusiasm in an ideal-typical way - the collective enthusiastic work force makes production-records manageable that by rational calculation of resources had seemed impossible before. It is this liminal quality - to use Victor Turner's phrase - of enthusiasm that brings it close to the state of *Rausch* as we find it in the Nazi case.

But Russian/Soviet *entuziazms* much more circumscribed than *Rausch* can ever be. Enthusiasm never only aims at crossing borders and unleashing the wild within the human being - it carries much more the paradox notion of the unleashed being controlled. In the Soviet case, exceeding limits is not a goal in itself, but a tool to reach some form of telos. In the production campaigns it was a very concrete aim of a new record-breaking output. But enthusiasm in Soviet *new speak* does always have a very teleological optic - it is channelled and goal-oriented towards the so-called "building of Socialism in one country" as an abstract project or towards the leaders as the personalized representations of this project. It is a sort of "feeling towards the leaders" that is imprinted in the emotional coding of enthusiasm in the Soviet Union of the 1930s.

Enthusiasm therefore never ends in a loss of control - crossing the borders does not lead to losing all limits. Rather, such a mental and physical condition is widely identified with an excessive use of alcoholic beverages - *op'janenie*, the state of being drunken that was highly stigmatised and persecuted during the Stalinist years. In a way the two conditions were portrayed as binary role models: a drunken total loss of control on the one hand and an enthusiastic pushing towards the edge on the other.

This notion of a circumscribed liminal state of enthusiasm is manifested in the mass choreographies I cited before. What do Soviet crowd gatherings look like in their own representation? The "enthusiastic" mass is a very disciplined one, it hails the leaders and sings songs, but it never reaches a state of frenzy, as it did in Nazi self-representations. No hysteric crowd of women losing consciousness but the well-ordered sport parade of cheerleaders was emblematic for the Stalinist regime.

The obvious gap in iconography between Stalinist and Nazi mass staging sheds light on the nature of the Soviet notion of rulership and on the relationship between the crowd and their leaders. What concept of a well-ordered state and society was at the basis of Soviet public emotional choreographies? *entuziazm* in the 1930s was less conceived as something already existing that just needed to be unleashed; but it was the output of an intensive paternalistic care. Enthusiasm was the aim of the Party-State's didactic project to inspire the masses and to guide and tutor them at the same time. To discipline, to enlighten and to forge the body of the masses was part of this paternalistic concept of rulership – just as it was to inspire them emotionally. Crossing and destroying all constraints of a bourgeois world was not at the core of this undertaking. The Stalinist value system rather introduced new limits and norms of behaviour and emotional coding. This was hardly a “great retreat” (as Nicholas Timasheff believed it to be) as it didn't retreat anywhere but set new standards – however, that is a different discussion. What interests us here is the fact that the public emotional coding of enthusiasm demonstrates the Stalinist concept of a paternalistic rule, in which one's crossing the borders should always be part of the greater endeavour of building socialism. Individual enthusiasm was supposed to be permanently linked to the collective cause. It needed be purposeful and goal-orientated. Every other *vostorg* was harmful and demanded harsh persecution.

But what does all this tell us about the feelings people “really” had? I have said something about official public standards of emotional coding so far and the Stalinist notion of rule that underlies them. What we have here are basic assumptions of an emotion-policy of the regime, but, as it seems, hardly an expression of the sensitive universes of the regime's subjects. In the following I want to argue against such a seemingly convincing binary model that contrast the official regulations of emotions and the “real life” of people's privacy.

First, we have to deal with a source problem when it comes to “real feelings”. In a dictatorship like the Stalinist one private communication was largely entangled with public one. Diaries, letters and other “private” sources were perceived as public affairs even by the authors who employed the official standards of emotion talk in these forms of communication. This is not to say, that there weren't any networks of communication that drew heavily on non-soviet, that is, for example, religious or ethnic resources of emotional coding. But these mainly oral networks hardly left any traces in the sources we got.

Also, when it comes to public celebrations, I do not doubt that people waiting for hours in long festive lines on a cold November day did possibly sense something else than fiery enthusiasm– they may have felt frightened, indifferent or just bored. But we have no means

to look into the brains of those who participated in a Soviet holiday parade. What “really” they felt while marching past the reviewing stand will remain a mystery.

But my argument does not only concern the issue of sources. The dichotomy of official emotion talk and “real feelings” neither holds in a conceptual sense. This binary model reproduces the linguistic logic of the so-called “private sphere” that is mainly constituted by proclaiming its “real”, “deep” and “inner” feelings. This is a semantic tool to privilege the “private” as the intimate expression of oneself and to stigmatise the “public” as an outer world of “false” and “disguise”.

However, it would be naive to reproduce this hierarchy in our interpretation. Private *and* public codes of emotions all belong to the emotional universe of a person. They constitute a set of different emotional communities. A person changes his or her emotional community regularly. Dependant on the context of social and cultural interaction, he or she moves from one emotion talk to another. In this perspective, any attempt to construe a hierarchy of more or less “real” emotional communities seems arbitrary. We should rather focus on the diversity of emotional coding that was at hand for the historical subjects than to judge what was more “real” and what was just “fake”.

Soviet official emotion talk constituted one emotional community that was relevant for communication in the 1930s. It delivered a set of regulation for affective expressions a person needed to observe if it wanted to communicate publicly – and communication in the Stalinist Soviet Union was almost always public. The regimes emotion-policy set the linguistic and habitual standards for expressions of one’s own feelings. And enthusiasm was at the core of Stalinist emotion talk. Whoever wanted to participate in any form of public communication needed to follow the lines of the official emotional coding and deploy its rhetoric. This normative power of the regime’s emotional coding was very “real”. Further research should – rather than denouncing the code as “false propaganda” – take a closer look at the process in which these emotional norms became people’s normality of expressing feelings. It was surely a development in which different emotional communities competed and conflicted with each other – emotion talk was a contested issue in the 1930s. But the regimes regulative setting of how to properly express one’s senses had a strong and growing influence on people’s public-private communication of their feelings. To sum up: The regime’s power was not only based on its ability to make people “speak Bolshevik” but to make them “feel Soviet”.

That Soviet emotional coding was very successful in becoming the predominant affective community in public discourse is also manifested by the use of an enthusiasm-discourse that

was employed in retrospective on the Stalin period. It is interesting to note – and here we have a striking parallel to the German case after 1945 – that in the Soviet Union the emotional coding of enthusiasm outlived the year 1953. It is exactly the language of *entuziazm* that people drew on when memorizing the 1930s with all their hardships. The so called “prekrasnye trudnye gody” – the “wonderful/wonderfully hard years” – this is how memoirs were often entitled – were full of enthusiastic young activists that build up a new country and – as the telos of this narrative – thus make the victory over fascism possible. Enthusiasm as an emotional resource, as we see, lingered on even in less enthusiastic times.

One more question should be raised for discussion. What does an inquiry into the emotional coding of the Stalinist regime and its consequences for people’s communication tell us about the specific nature of this totalitarian dictatorship? Are there any common characteristics we find in all regimes that are discussed in our workshop or do we see differences more clearly in such a comparative perspective?

The focus on emotional coding in general and discourses of *Rausch* respectively *entuziazm* in specific sheds some light on the diverting concepts of rulership we find in the different regimes. Besides all parallels and transfer concerning the propaganda tools – we might think of the seemingly iconographic similarities of mass parades (even though we can spot some important differences here) – a specific notion of “the masses” predominated in the Soviet Union. In a Soviet concept of Party-State paternalism, the people needed to be enlightened just as they needed to be emotionally forged. It was a didactic project that did not want to unleash instincts, but on the contrary wanted to constraint the forces of *stichinost’* – the spontaneous and uncontrolled wild. It attempted to set new emotional standards of a channelled enthusiasm. Emotion-policy in Stalin’s Soviet Union was a formative project – it wanted to create something that didn’t exist. It did not build on an imagination of ready-made affective resources that just needed to be unbound.

If we contrast the concepts of *Rausch* and *entuziazm* the regime’s specific notion of how the well-ordered state and society should look like become clearer than any comparison of the iconographic surface of propaganda choreographies would have suggested. The rather distinct nature of Stalinist dictatorship is manifested in its specific concept of ecstasy - *entuziazm*.

Concluding, I want to summarize some common issues of all four papers presented at this workshop and draw the attention to some of the basic assumptions and some of the shared findings of our very different inquiries into the topic of *Rausch*.

First, emotion-policy and ecstatic emotional coding can be useful tools to highlight the notion of rulership we find in each regime and bring out the contrasts of these concepts more clearly. In this, they are arrays of interpretation.

But emotion-policy itself was part and parcel of the regime's strategies to enact a model of the political that had little to do with the traditionally institutionalised politics of a parliamentary democracy. And it was a political tool to create a new community of affectively bound subjects. As such – that is emotion-policy as part of the regime's notion of the political – we should take it more serious as a research object.

We then need to trace the emotional codes and discourses back in an intellectual history that does not portray the rational and the emotional as opposite realms. They are entangled dimensions of human's making sense of the world. We should rather take a closer look at the process of filiations in which emotional communities, their vocabulary and regulations were passed on through time and how they provided a framework for the regimes emotion-policy.

And last, if ecstatic expressions of feeling were a norm valued and promoted by the regimes in question further research will find out more about the way people adopted these standards in different contexts and co-opted it by fusing these norms with other sets of emotional expressiveness. A complex picture will emerge where different and partly conflicting emotional communities existed that allowed people to activate different emotional talks when they expressed their feelings. The role official linguistic and habitual standards played in this interaction of emotional communities must be discussed. This also includes the metaphorical use of a terminology of *Rausch* and *entuziazmin* retrospective.

For the Soviet case, this perspective will explain to a much greater degree the formative power of the Stalinist dictatorship than a focus on ideology (in a narrow sense) or on the political apparatus does. Emotional codes set the framework in which people perceived institutions and in which they communicated ideology. Therefore they deserve further research and discussion.