

The Flexible and the Pliant: Disturbed Organisms of Soviet Modernity

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ABSTRACT *In the texts of such prominent Soviet figures as writer Maxim Gorky, the agrobiologist Trofim Lysenko, and the educator Anton Makarenko, the uncertainty of social norms in early Soviet society became equated with an instability of environment in general and nature in particular. A powerful and vivid rhetoric of a “second nature,” to use Gorky’s phrase, overcame the absence of clearly articulated models for subjectivity. A series of disciplining routines and activities capable of producing the new Soviet subject compensated in the 1930s for the dissolution of the daily order of things and all the structuring effects, social networks, and reciprocal obligations that were associated with it. [Russia, technology, biopolitics, subjectivity, everyday life]*

Somewhere out there the winds had their beginning, cold clouds started, all sorts of mosquitoes and sicknesses were breeding, kulaks were thinking their thoughts and backward village ignoramuses were sleeping. And the proletariat lived by itself in this dreary emptiness, and had to think of everything for everybody, and build with its own hands the substance of a long life.

Andrey Platonov, *The Foundation Pit* (1997)

Remember the words of the great gardener, Comrade Stalin: “People should be reared with care and attention as a gardener rears his chosen fruit-tree.” Note the word: fruit.

—Anton Makarenko, *The Collective Family* (1937)

From the idea that the self is not given to us, I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art.

—Michel Foucault, *On the Genealogy of Ethics* (1983)

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Figure 1.
Changing the order of things: electric wires attached to an Orthodox cross
in Karelia (Gorky et al. 1934: n.p.).

In the early 1920s, shortly after the October Revolution of 1917 and the Civil War of 1918–1920, both of which drastically changed Russia’s political, economic, and sociocultural landscape, several Russian ethnographers published a small book with a telling title: *The Order of Things: Old and New (Staryi i novyi byt)*. Based on field research in the Russian North, the scholars tried to document changes that were happening in Russia’s countryside. One article quoted a *chastushka*, a short rhymed verse often performed during social gatherings in Russian villages:

Nothing scares me at all,
 And I value nothing.
 If my head gets chopped off
 I’ll attach another. [Tan 1924:18]

The logic of this rhyme identifies parallel tendencies of change: a loss of norms and values is coupled with a replaceability of the self or, rather, selves. Such a worldview, of course, was by no means specifically confined to peasants. The literature of the period was full of complaints about a lost sense of direction and a lack of clear points of orientation, both personally and socially (See Figure1). For instance, Roman Jakobson, a Russian linguist, observing the situation among

Russian literati in the 1920s recollected: “Things have gone particularly badly for believers in the ‘order of things’ in Russia. One of them complained to me bitterly: ‘What can one write, when there is no “established order of things” left” (Jakobson 1992:334).

The “order of things” in the title of the book mentioned above and in Jakobson’s observation is *byt*, the daily routine, the everyday-ness, the habitus, whose fundamental importance in structuring one’s life becomes especially striking at the moment when it falls apart. It is precisely a lack of an established order in one’s personal life that Jakobson would bitterly single out as the main feature of the early Soviet generation. In 1931 he wrote:

We strained toward the future too impetuously and avidly to leave any past behind us. The connection of one period with another was broken. We lived too much for the future, thought about it, believed in it; the news of the day—sufficient in itself—no longer existed for us. We lost a sense of the present. We were the witnesses of and participants in great social, scientific, and other cataclysms. *Byt* fell behind us. . . . We . . . had only a single-minded, naked hatred for the ever more threadbare, ever more alien rubbish offered by the established order of things. And now the “efforts to organize a personal life are like attempts to heat up ice cream.” [Jakobson 1987:299–300]¹

Taking Jakobson’s idea about the lost present and an unsettled personal life as a starting point, in this article I explore how this “sense of an unstable foundation” (Jakobson 1987:277) was mirrored in the 1930s in various fields of discursive production. By reading texts of such prominent Soviet figures as the writer Maxim Gorky (1868–1936), the agrobiologist Trofim Lysenko (1898–1976), and the educator Anton Makarenko (1888–1939), I show how the uncertainty of *social* norms in the early Soviet society—a feeling of plotless life (*bezszuzhetnaya*) shattered into shards (Shklovskii 1923:188, Shklovskii 2000; see also Kalinin in press)—became equated with an instability of *environment* in general and *nature* in particular.

As I will demonstrate, such an equation produced an interesting discursive and practical shift: an absence of clearly articulated models of subjectivity was overcome (and overshadowed) by a very powerful and vivid rhetoric of various techniques through which a controlled environment of culture—a “second nature” in Gorky’s word—could be created. Using these classical texts of Stalinism as my main source, I explore how persistent attempts to design and implement an endless series of disciplining routines and activities capable of producing a formative outcome compensated in the 1930s for the dissolution of the “stagnating slime” of *byt* (Jakobson 1987:277) and all the structuring effects, social networks, and reciprocal obligations that were associated with it. The early Soviet subject that emerges in these texts, instead of taking “oneself as an object of a complex and difficult elaboration” (Foucault 1997:311), somewhat altered the general trajectory usually prescribed to the modern self. It was industrial production that became a major site of the Soviet subject’s massive personal investment. The discovery and exploration of one’s self, with which modernity is usually associated, were significantly modified here. “Technologies of the self” became equated, to state it simply, with technology itself.²

This usage of the rhetoric of industrial production in order to sustain one's "representative survivals" (Ivy 1998:97), I suggest, could be construed as a mechanism that was employed to balance the limited (and often controlled) scope of practices available for "self-fashioning" and "self-production," to compensate for the very byt that "fell behind" and for the "order of things" that had not yet been established.³ Gorky's persistent calls to fight and tame nature, Lysenko's attempts to train flexible and pliant biological organisms, and Makarenko's use of the militarized organization of labor as a tool of his pedagogical experiments usefully demonstrate how this erasure of the self became a necessary condition for Russia's modernization.

The purpose of this article, however, is not to point once again to the overwhelming role of the early Soviet regime in molding, shaping, and/or eliminating its subjects.⁴ Rather, I suggest that we should perceive this self under erasure—this void subject—as yet another figure of modernity alongside "Marx's 'revolutionary,' Baudelaire's 'dandy,' Nietzsche's 'superman,' Weber's 'social scientist,' Simmel's 'stranger,' Musil's 'man without qualities,' and Benjamin's 'flaneur'" (Gaonkar 2001:3). The void subject of Soviet modernity reveals a process of reducing the complexity of one's identity to "bare life," to the "biopolitical body" (Agamben 1998:171), so that one's dependence on the protective shield of "second nature" becomes all the more crucial.

Certainly, this void Soviet subject was a product of a particular historical development. The high level of migration triggered by World War I and the subsequent Civil War, the devastation of war, the massive redistribution of industrial and private property, and intensive industrial construction—all within a very short period of time—radically altered the social fabric of early Soviet society.⁵ In the span of two decades, certain cities experienced a rapid decline in population followed by substantial growth. For instance, from 1917 to 1920 the population of Petrograd had dropped from 2.3 million to 740 thousand; however, by 1939 the city had grown to 3.4 million inhabitants (Stepanov 1976:9).⁶ The majority of the new city residents were "former" peasants. 62 percent of the new inhabitants arriving in the city between 1926 and 1939 were from the countryside (Izmenenia . . . 1979:192). This wave of urbanization significantly changed the demographics of social groups and institutions. A census conducted in 1926 indicated that almost half of the Soviet Union's working class and half of its ruling elite (*rukovodiachshie rabotniki*) were under 30 years of age (Izmenenia 1979:27, 169).

The demographic characteristics of this generation of "newcomers" were not their most significant feature. Rather it was the cultural predispositions of the "fresh people who just hit the roads of history" (Kozlova 1996:190) that were more important. In her study of letters and diaries written by "ordinary" people in the 1920–1930s, Natalia Kozlova, a Russian anthropologist, convincingly demonstrates that a process of almost universal simplification (*uproshe-nie*) of social norms, patterns of behavior, and grammar constructions was one of the results of such drastic alteration of the social fabric.⁷ Attempts to organize byt (education, economy, and culture) on a more efficient basis often resulted in structures with minimal internal elements and connections (Kozlova 1994:138–146).

The simplifying nature of this building process, however, should not be seen as an indication of the narrow-mindedness or shallowness (*ogranichennost*) of the “fresh people.”⁸ Instead, it could be construed as an example of the tactics described by Michel de Certeau. In the absence of a usual framework or basis, the subject relies on the tactical use of “opportunities” that are not just available but also graspable within an unfamiliar terrain (de Certeau 1984:36–37).⁹ Like the “proletariat” from Platonov’s novel quoted in the epigraph, the “fresh” people were reinventing the world for everybody in order to build the substance of their own life.¹⁰ As Kozlova puts it, the “fresh people” were not “stripped off the cultural (or was it civilizational?) layer, as many thought then; they just did not have time yet to grow it” (Kozlova 1996:70).¹¹ It is precisely the role of this “bare life” (Agamben 1998:171) in the production of a new “cultural layer” that I am interested in exploring in this article. By focusing on the figure of a void subject, a “hollow” man (Eliot 1936), a subject “without representation but with affect” (Green 2001:112), I demonstrate how individual liminality was deployed in a liminal society.

In making this argument, I wish to broaden the geographical scope of current studies of modernity and modernization by drawing attention not only to various aspects of “the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction” but also to the work that mechanical production itself played in shaping configurations of the modern. Also, there is one more and perhaps less obvious reason for my attempt to contextualize the Stalinist classics within the frame of modernity. Several recent studies of changes that have taken place in Russia since 1991 outline features and processes that strikingly resemble the situation of the 1920 and 1930s. The abrupt dismantling of the Soviet order of things has provoked a deep crisis of collective and personal identities, fragmentation of social networks, and the abandonment of social conventions. “The unmaking of Soviet life,” as Caroline Humphrey (2002) called it, often results in various forms of “involution” (Burawoy et al. 2000) that activate simplified and reduced forms of social functioning, interaction, and representation (see, for example, Cherednichenko 1999; Dubin 2001; Ivanova 2002; Ries 1997; Seabright 2000; Wedel 1998). More importantly, however, the current reforms, frequently seen as yet another round of Russia’s modernization (Travin and Simpura 1999; Akhiezer et al. 1994), presuppose the same understanding of a “human nature” whose major task is to exercise once again its flexibility in order to adapt to a constantly changing environment (Na pereput’e 1999; Tolstykh 2001; Yadov 2001).

Being Outside

I begin with a quote from the memoirs of the Soviet dissident Raisa Orlova. Written 30 years later, this recollection of the 1930s allowed the author to see some features of the period, perhaps, more distinctively than she had been able to at the time.

There was an incessant thirst for activity—above all to participate, to participate in everything. Every thing belonged to us, was rooted in my blood. Why, then, think it over? Why doubt? I studied voraciously, I read everything that was required in

the curriculum, I became involved in social activity [*obshestvennaya rabota*] at the Institute [of Philosophy, Literature, and History] and practically in all sports. But this was not enough: my friends and I were going to write a history of the Soviet school system . . . We wrote about the relationships between professors and students. We made trips to our assigned collective farm [*kolkhoz*].

We had to support ourselves, so we compiled a book of statements by Marat, collected quotes for the book *Lenin and Stalin on Technology*, and reviewed poems submitted to magazines by amateur writers. During my third year at the university, I started teaching ninth-graders in a school.

Yet, all that did not seem enough; I needed more, I needed to leave Moscow—the existence there was so ordinary. But we needed something extraordinary—a flight, the North Pole, Komsomolsk.¹² Run, hurry, don't get lost at the rear. There was no time left for questions, for the life of the soul. And who needed this life anyway?

And later:

I was unshakably convinced that what was going on within these old walls [of the Moscow apartment] was merely a preparation for life. The real life would begin in a new and sparkling white house. . . . The majority of my contemporaries. . . all lived the same draft-like, provisional, hasty lives. Faster, faster toward the great goal, and there everything would begin in a genuine sense.

Everything ought and could be changed: the streets, the houses, the cities, the social order, human souls. And it was not at all that difficult: first the unselfish enthusiasts would outline the plan on paper; then they would destroy the old. . . then the ground would be cleared of the rubble and a phalanstery would be erected in the space that had been cleared. . . . Every holiday, in the shop windows on Gorky street, new plans of Moscow city were exhibited. Right before our eyes, these plans transformed into new buildings. [Orlova 1993:22; 37–38]¹³

Orlova's condensed recollection usefully points to a combination of several corresponding dynamics through which the early Soviet subject constructed herself. First, subjectivity here emerges as an outcome of "taking part," of becoming "involved" in something located outside the "old walls." However, this desire to *ground* oneself in a certain form of activity results only in a sliding chain of obsessive enactments, punctuating a transition from one object of attachment to another. And yet it is precisely this possibility of purposeful sliding from one "cataclysm" to another—a never-ending series of activities aimed at replacing the old walls, which were used to frame one's existence, with the "new and sparkling" ones—that helped to ward off potential questions about the purpose of this "provisional" life, "life on a temporary lease" (Jakobson 1987:299).¹⁴

Orlova's memoirs reveal yet another important feature. To become invested with a narrative and identificatory power, the "mnemonic sites,"¹⁵ those phalansteries that she lists, had to be literally constructed first: memorialization and identity here are a byproduct of material production, of a personal involvement in a process of self-equipping (*protsess samooborudovania*) (Makarenko 1989:67) with "things not coming from nature" (Agamben 1999:60). How are we to understand this striving to objectify one's self in an external action, this desire to find an exterior frame-*work* to insert oneself within, this attempt to confirm one's "blood relationship" with "every thing?" What could this passionate search for the perfect

object to merge with tell us about the early Soviet subject in particular and the modern subject in general?

In his essays written in the early 1920s, Mikhail Bakhtin suggested an answer. Conceiving of the outside as a site from which to locate oneself, Bakhtin proposed a notion of *outsidedness* (*vnenakhodimost*), in which the external location (*vne*) becomes a precondition and a context of finding and grasping oneself (*nakhodimost*). As Bakhtin put it:

It is not in the axiological context of my own life that my act of experiencing . . . acquires its validity. In my own life my experiencing is not present for me. What is necessary is an essential point of support in meaning *outside* the context of my own life. . . in order to be able to remove the act of experiencing from the unitary and unique event of my own life and to apprehend its present-on-hand determinateness as a characteristic. . . as a lineament of my inner countenance. [Bakhtin 1990:113]

In a similar vein, Alexandre Kojève (Kojevnikov), yet another thinker from Russia, pointed in the 1930s to the very core of this obsessive preoccupation with the symbolic effect of objectification by linking it with the notion of recognition. In his seminar on Hegel, Kojève argued that the human being is shaped first of all by the “anthropogenetic Desire” to be recognized by others, that is, by constant attempts to find yet another confirmation for “‘the subjective certainty’ of being a man” (Kojève 1969:11). As Kojève explains it, in order not to be illusory,

The value that [man] attributes to himself . . . must reveal an objective reality—i.e., an entity that is valid and exists not only for itself, but also for realities other than itself. . . . He must transform the (natural and human) world in which he is not recognized into a world in which this recognition takes place. This transformation of the world that is hostile to a human project into a world in harmony with this project is called ‘action’, ‘activity’. [Kojève 1969:11]

The production of the objects-substitutes able to reveal one’s value is, therefore, an attempt to overcome and circumscribe the original lack of recognition or lack of the self. As a result, being “outside of himself,” as Kojève called it, becomes a primary condition and form of the modern man’s existence (Kojève 1969:13).¹⁶ Obsessive and fetishist strategies of serial identification, in other words, could be seen as a manifestation of a tacit awareness that “one’s self and identity are being authored elsewhere.” Therefore, a “thoroughly performative, sensorial, and unself-conscious response to the social conditions that define one’s selfhood” (Marcus 1998:171) might be the only option available to the modern self. Perhaps, it is not an accident that, depending on the context, Bakhtin’s *vnenakhodimost* (outsidedness) could mean a *being-located-from-outside* as well as a *being-beyond-locatedness*. Let me show how this elusive interplay of external conditions and the internal self was articulated in Gorky’s work.

In 1933, after several years of living in Europe Maxim Gorky, perhaps the most officially acclaimed Soviet writer despite his not being himself a Bolshevik, finally returned to the Soviet Union. For many years Gorky had maintained uneasy relations with Marxists in general and the Bolsheviks in particular. His stories and plays depicting lives of working people, together with his critique of the czarist regime, established him as one of the major cultural figures on the left. But his

attempts in the 1900s to envision Marxism as a new scientific and godless religion (*bogostroitel'svo*) and his publication of *Untimely Thoughts* (1995 [1917–1918]), a series of critical essays on the October Revolution, provoked angry responses from the Bolshevik leadership. However, Lenin himself insisted in 1921 that Gorky leave for Europe to treat his tuberculosis. In 1928 and 1929, before his final return, Gorky made several highly publicized “triumphal” trips to the Soviet Union, becoming a major cultural icon of the Soviet regime. From the late 1920s, Gorky, who became the founder and the main theorist of the artistic method of socialist realism, published a stream of short articles, letters, and addresses in which he expressed his views on what seemed to be the most important issues of the time. Gorky’s literary activity was accompanied by a series of publishing and organizational projects, the most important of which, perhaps, was the creation of the Union of the Soviet Writers in 1934.¹⁷ Gorky’s unique cultural and political position resulted in his virtual canonization after his death in 1936.

For the purpose of this article, I rely primarily on Gorky’s journalistic work. Many of the articles and addresses discussed below were simultaneously published by *Pravda* and *Izvestia*, the two major official newspapers in Soviet Russia, and thus can be seen as representing the dominant—or at least official—perception of Russia’s social transformation. Certainly, one should not reduce all the complexity of Gorky’s position to the views expressed in these journalistic essays, yet I believe, they should not be considered as purely propaganda but as representative of his thinking at the time.

The main preoccupation of Gorky’s journalism during this period is typical of a romantic socialist realist vision of a liberating social process that would be able to “bring to life” those who had been oppressed and the humiliated.¹⁸ Regardless of the topic at hand, Gorky would often end up writing about the ability and necessity of man to overcome the already existing order of things. For example, in his 1932 essay “The Old Man and the New,” he wrote about the Soviet workers and peasants as follows:

The aim they have set themselves is a perfectly clear one, namely, to create for each of the units [individuals] in the multinational population of 160 million people, conditions that will favor the growth of [the people’s] talents and faculties. In other words, [the aim is] to set this vast quantity of potential and passive neurocerebral energy into active motion, to awaken its creative facilities. [1939:168]

Gorky’s fascination with motion is hardly an accident here. Four years earlier, speaking about the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution, Gorky clarified his point about awakening the creative facilities of the “passive neurocerebral energy” of units (i.e., individuals). He maintained that the foundation of the new world that was being laid in the Soviet Union was “the liberation of the once-fettered will to live. . . the will to act, for life is action” (1939:17). It is precisely this performative perception of life, this metaphorical equation of life with movement toward a goal that is yet to be determined, that allowed Gorky to shift the focus of attention from the usual discussion about a new “meaning of life” in Soviet Russia to debates about the “speed” and “direction” of actions.

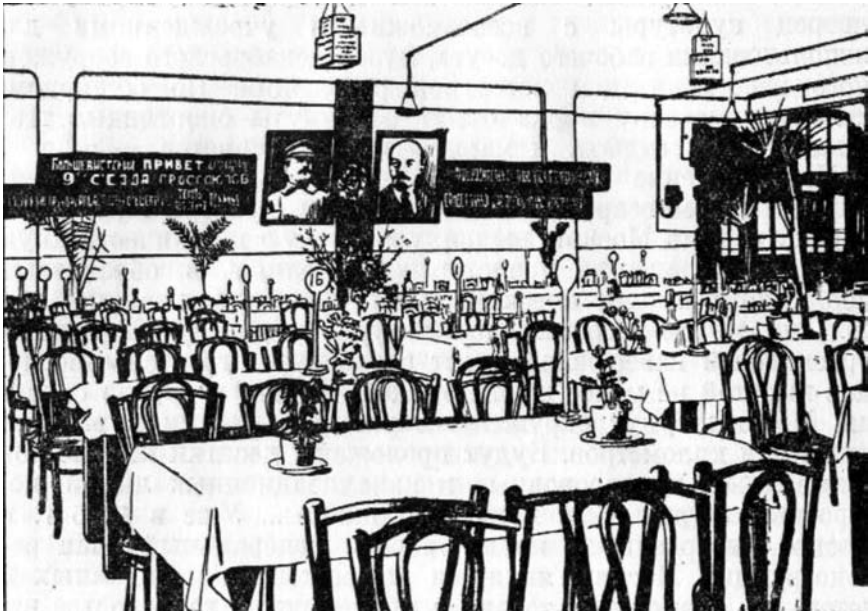


Figure 2.

Organizing a new *byt* at the Trekhgornaya weaving-mill factory. Left: the factory's theater named after V. Lenin. Right: the factory's new canteen (Lapitskaya 1935:167, 170).

Another important moment in the quote has to do with the objects to which these active motions were to be applied. As Gorky suggests, the main objects of this changing activity are the *conditions* that are necessary to keep the “active motion” going, to ensure the “will to life,” not living itself. The logic here no doubt recalls the circular logic already outlined in Orlova’s recollection: life itself makes sense as long as it is aimed at changing the frames of existence. Or in Gorky’s words: “We must, in the shortest possible time, destroy the whole past and create completely new conditions of life, conditions which exist nowhere else” (1939:129, 130). It seems that, as a consequence of this *active* understanding of life, there is a special attention to the backdrop against which the act of performance is played out, the materiality of the “stage” that makes the action distinctive and outside of which the action is hardly graspable. In other words, there is a profound and incessant preoccupation with external conditions: it is through redefining the existing parameters, through modifying (“altering”) them, that the empty signifier of a new life is capable of revealing its meaning. It is not at all surprising that multiple books about a new *byt* published in this period are often accompanied by pictures of rooms in which tables, desks, and chairs are arranged in an orderly manner but in which people are conspicuously absent (See Figure 2).

Gorky’s idea of the awakened self that makes itself known by creating conditions for its own existence was based on yet another premise. The impossible task of uniting the vision of the “new world” under construction with a stable position

for the subject—one who would be able not only to create but also to reflect upon the establishing of a new “order of things”—resulted in a constitutive split, what Katerina Clark called a “modal schizophrenia” of the early Soviet rhetoric that constantly oscillated between “what is” and “what ought to be” (Clark 2000:36–38). A failure to successfully bring together the normative (“what ought to be”) with the performative (“what is”), I suggest, was mitigated in Gorky’s work by an active deployment of different modifications of the same basic opposition. A “will to life,” equated with the organized and organizing activity of the human intellect, was called upon to challenge various “elemental forces of nature,” usually presented as “chaos.” For instance, in his 1929 essay “On the “Good Life,” Gorky wrote:

It is time we admitted that the only intellectual force that exists in the world is the human mind, that our mundane world and all our ideas about the universe have been organized, and are organized, only by our intellect. Outside its influence there are the movements of glaciers, hurricanes, earthquakes, droughts, impassable swamps, thick forests, sterile deserts, wild animals, snakes, parasites. All that exists outside of man is chaos and an infinite void filled with a chaos of stars, a chaos into which the mind of man, his instinct of knowledge, has introduced and is introducing harmonious order. [1939:77]

Of course, the opposition between rational man and irrational nature is not a new one; what I do find somewhat unusual, however, is Gorky’s tendency not just to limit his rhetoric by traditional metaphorical comparisons and juxtapositions but also to come up with an extensive list of practical things that needed to be corrected and improved, a set of rituals, a set of disciplining actions able to introduce a new and desired order of things.

Julia Kristeva has pointed out an important aspect of this activity-driven self. As Kristeva suggests, “a privileging of *doing* over *saying*” (i.e., “if A, then do B,” rather than “A means B”), to a large extent, stems from a shortage of signs: one’s inability to produce oneself discursively has to be substituted by an elaborated activity aimed at compensating for the signs that could not be uttered (Kristeva 1995:46). “The declarative” becomes superseded by “the procedural” (Kristeva 1995:46) and articulation in speech is replaced by endless articles and items.

There is yet another important dimension of this will to act. Attempts to order and discipline oneself by ordering and disciplining other things and people are based, as is any projection, on the mechanism that Kristeva defines as “abjection,” that is, a conscious and unconscious process of hostile demarcation of the objects that lie “outside, beyond the set” (Kristeva 1982:2). For Kristeva, it is the very operation of a projective “mapping out” of the *outside* reality through which the defining and describing of the self becomes possible.¹⁹ The purpose of abjection, in other words, is to perform a practice of differentiation by designating a space of *not*-belonging, thereby creating not only a context for one’s self but also a constitutive “dependency on negative categories” against which one can define the self (Anagnost 1994:247) (See Figure 3).

The dual process of creating the self through making an inventory of abjected objects is presented in Gorky’s texts as a two-stage discursive development: nature first became anthropomorphized and then vilified. As Gorky put it, by “making



Figure 3.

Defining the space of non-belonging. A photo from *Bolshevtsy*, a book about the labor commune for young ex-prisoners, published in the series *A History of Factories*, initiated by M. Gorky. The original caption reads: “She won’t go back to the bordello. On the shop floor of a weaving factory, next to the weaving-machine” (Bolshevtsy 1935: n.p.).

the toil of millions of people fruitless, nature acts as our enemy, and we should unanimously start fighting nature as our enemy” (1953a:151). What should battles against nature look like? What forms might the aspiration to produce a “harmonious order” take? In an essay with a telling title, “On Fighting Nature,” Gorky writes:

Our earth is littered with innumerable useless and harmful plants that parasitically exhaust the vital juices of earth. These plants should be destroyed. Spontaneous forces of nature produce masses of parasites and our rational will should not put up with this; because of rats, mice, ground-squirrels we lose, perhaps, hundred of millions of rubles. It is unacceptable and ridiculous when people’s energy is spent on rats. Eliminated two-leg human-like parasites are not to be replaced by bugs feeding themselves on the workers’ blood. A blind desire of nature to multiply totally useless or definitely harmful litter must be stopped, must be eliminated from our life. [1953a:197]

Symptomatically, the “organized will” of the human intellect is aimed here not so much at rearranging or *correcting* the configurations of already existing



Figure 4.

A photo from a collection of essays about the White Sea Canal built by prisoners. It was accompanied by a quote from a local *chastushka*: “We’ll get our freedom when nature learns its lesson from us” (*Prirodu nauchim–svobodu poluchim*) (Gorky et al. 1934: n.p.).

hierarchies and structures, nor is its goal to devise new locations for certain subversive elements by, for example, restricting or changing the circulation of these elements. Instead, the word “ordering” in this context—as with Orlova’s memoirs—is often synonymous with eliminating, with clearing out the available space for yet another “new wall” to give a temporary shape to the self.²⁰ There is no permanent investment in a particular sign or element; instead, through a constant moving *along* the signifying chain (that is, a constant revealing of spaces and absences between signs), the void Soviet subject should be capable of exercising a historically available form of agency (See Figure 4).

Given this militarist discourse about the “elimination of spontaneity,” the “second nature” that was called upon to replace a “first nature” is represented in Gorky’s addresses as an “invincible fortress of the proletariat” (1953b:162).

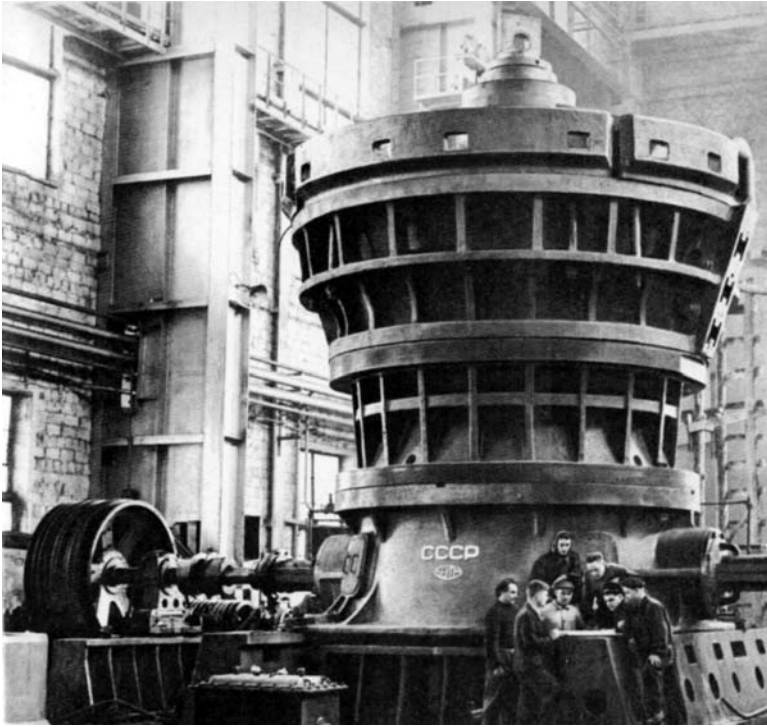


Figure 5.

Raising the father of factories and plants. The Urals machine building plant (*Uralmash*) (Sverdlovsk 1965: n.p.).

Moreover, it was to be found, no less, in the model of the new Soviet factory. In 1933, in a letter to the workers of one of these “industrial fortresses” built in the Ural mountains (1953a:128), Gorky summed up the workers’ activity in the following way: “Yet again the proletariat–dictator created one more mighty fortress, built one more construction that will become the father of many other factories and plants” (1953b:53) (See Figure 5).

In another letter the metaphoric transformation of a factory into a living being became even more vivid. In 1933, while celebrating the inaugural volume of the series *A History of Factories* that had been initiated by himself, Gorky addressed the plant’s workers who had authored *The People of the Stalingrad Tractor Factory*, an edited collection of stories about their life and work: “Expressions of affection [*priviazannost’*] for the factory, a feeling of love [*vluibliennost’*] for the factory, for this most vivid and powerful realization of the energy of young people, for this monument created by the youth for its own commemoration—this love is natural for the authors and, possibly, for hundreds of their fellow workers” (1953b:56).

This perception of the factory that acts simultaneously as a site of one’s own imaginary emotional attachment and as one’s “monumental” trace symbolically aimed at others, evokes the dynamic of the mirror stage outlined by Jacques Lacan (1977). More importantly, it reminds us once again that the modern self “*is a*

representational economy,” a “reification” achieved by subjects through exploring “the social possibilities of attaching and detaching material self-objectifications” (Battaglia 1995:2, 3). What I have tried to suggest is that, at the core of this desire to reify one’s voided self, there is a split, a realized impossibility to ground the self in this or that signifier. As a result, the acting self that emerges in the process of this monument-building is far from being a coherent identity; rather it is a sequence of identifications, a series of attempts to use the stability of external objects—one “mighty fortress” after another—as a launching ground for the next move.

It is hardly an accident, then, that this dependence on the “transitional object” of identification²¹ in Gorky’s work is rarely associated with practices that could be directly linked with the self. Knowing the conditions of one’s existence—a “capacity for orientation” (*sposobnost’ k orientirovke*), as Makarenko called it (1989:263)—becomes more fundamental than knowing one’s self. For example, proposing to start a campaign of writing and publishing books about Soviet factories, Gorky wrote in 1931:

It is necessary for us to study our reality in all its expanse, we must know face-to-face all our factories and plants, all the enterprises, all the work being done on building our state. . . We should know the role of each most typical plant in every area of production [for] the plant is a promoter of industry; it is a school of technicians and a school of revolutionaries, it is an educator of the class and revolutionary consciousness of the workers; it is an organizer of, and a participant in, the civil war. We should know the plant in its contemporary role as an organizer of the socialist consciousness and socialist production. [1953a:143] (See cover image)

What I find striking is not only Gorky’s equation of “our reality” with “our factories and plants” but the very function of this “created reality.” The productive capacity of a particular factory is overshadowed by its power to shape consciousness and exert a formative effect on the people who have in fact constructed it. This “monument to oneself” acts not only as a memorial, but also (as the title of the book, “The People of the Stalingrad Tractor Factory, suggests”) it gives this group of people a proper name, a mark of belonging, if not a mark of origin. This coalescence of the material and symbolic, of the monumental and the identificatory, is symptomatic. As Pierre Nora (1996:8) reminds us, a passion for monuments, so vividly demonstrated in Gorky’s texts and activity, indicates a peculiar status of memory in modern society: the production of memory sites becomes all the more important when memory fails to provide a necessary support for one’s existence. In turn, attempts to immortalize the histories of newly built and reconstructed factories and plants supply a necessary narrative logic, a plot that is able to bring together the fragmented pieces of one’s experience.

Most vividly, the transformative power of collective activity or, perhaps more correctly, its ability to transform a hostile world into a world in harmony with the human project, was demonstrated for Gorky in the labor camps. It is here, within a real and not simply metaphorical fortress, in a situation of almost total control, that the formative power of the Soviet “second nature” reached its full potential in producing recognizable subjects: “Our camps educated thousands of hydraulic technicians, a whole army of people for whom participation in grand

projects of beautification of our huge country, in channeling its numberless rivers, in ameliorating its steppes, etc., is secured for a long time” (Gorky 1953b:507). More importantly, labor camps were pivotal in “reeducating the people who are ‘socially dangerous’ into people who are socially useful. The internal and profound value of this experience is intensified by the fact that this experience is conducted with spoiled material that has been totally disintegrated by the conditions of capitalist society” (1953a:232).²²

There is an important rhetorical shift in these quotes. Once he has discursively established the new social conditions—be it a factory-fortress or a labor camp—Gorky continues his rhetorical abjection of nature. The spatial dimensions of the biopolitical opposition between nature and culture, however, now become reversed. Nature is no longer a threatening environment located *outside*, but it now becomes rather an expression of the “forces of spontaneity. . . in man [which] is nothing more nor less than the instinctive anarchy of the individual which has become ingrained in the course of ages through oppression by the class state” (1939:108). I will discuss at length different versions of reeducation and retraining of this “ingrained spontaneity” in the next two sections of this article. However, here I want to emphasize the fact that people’s inability and/or unwillingness to meet the newly established social *conditions* is expressed in Gorky’s texts through the vocabulary of the abjection of nature (i.e., the initial classification of people as “socially dangerous” results in a subsequent “recycling” move that turns them into a “spoiled material” that needs to be and can be utilized in a productive manner).

I think that this rhetorical strategy of naturalizing the internal/external “enemy” is a sign of the symbolic instability of the social order in the Soviet Russia of 1930s. The massive transformation of social conditions had not yet produced a discursive basis on which the regime could build itself symbolically, and the voided self of the early Soviet subject functioned as a placeholder in the absence of a clear model of subjectivity. As a result, the emphasis in Gorky’s discourse on the new Soviet man shifted from the normative to the performative and procedural: the new Soviet man was seen first of all as an *acting* man, capable of producing enough objective evidence so that he might be recognized. Similarly, the “units” that did not fit new conditions were dismissed as manifestations of nature, whether this nature was construed as “capitalist society” or as an “elemental force.”

Shattering Heredity

The peculiar status of this internal/external nature (“enemy”) problematized in Gorky’s journalistic texts, as well as his idea about the pivotal role of created conditions in shaping human “material,” was echoed in the biological debates about heredity that started in the Soviet Union at the end of the 1920s and reached a climax at the 1948 special session of the Lenin Academy of Agricultural Sciences. The debates were predominantly associated with the name Trofim Lysenko, a Ukrainian biologist who in his speeches and publications repeatedly undermined the basic presumptions of classical genetics.²³ In 1938, Lysenko became president of the Lenin Academy of Agricultural Sciences, and in 1940 he was made director of the Institute of Genetics of the Academy of Sciences. For some time, he was a vice

president of the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union, the main legislative body of the country. Given his administrative positions, access to material resources, and power, Lysenko quickly managed to transform the theoretical frames of Soviet biology.

In this section I demonstrate how Lysenko managed to further expand the protective cover of “second nature” by problematizing in his research articles and speeches the relation between the “external conditions” and “internal qualities” of an organism. In discussing Lysenko’s work, I am less concerned with its political and scientific implications; rather I am interested in seeing how Lysenko’s ideas could be located vis-à-vis other technologies of signification and self that appeared at the same time in the Soviet Union.

The starting point of Lysenko’s assault on genetics had to do with the relation between change and stability in living organisms and with man’s ability to influence the process of evolution. By advancing the concept of “the law” that governs “the hereditary determination of characters,” genetics, as Lysenko maintained in his very first book, has “unbiologized itself, has divorced itself from the Darwinian biological study of the hereditary ‘factors’” (1954:64–65). Genetics, in Lysenko’s view, advocated “a theory of the simple transmission, combination, and segregation of the rudiments of characters” and was unable to recognize the fact that the development of organisms is “concrete and full of contradiction.” Because of this predominant concentration on the *internal* “rudiments of characters” at the expense of studying the role of external conditions, genetics became “largely formal” and failed “to be for plant breeding what it necessary *must* be—the theoretical basis of a *guide to action*” (1954:66) that could alter “the nature of plants in the direction we desire” (1954:166).

For Lysenko, the social uselessness of “formal genetics” was rooted in its basic view of a living organism as consisting of two major parts—“the ordinary body (the soma), which is dependent upon the conditions of life” and “some other substance,” which is taken to be the “heredity substance” and “is independent of the conditions of life” (1954:355). Such a division, Lysenko pointed out, allowed the practitioners of formal genetics to maintain that since “bodily changes do not influence changes in the breed,” the characters “acquired” by the organism “in the process of its development. . . are not transmitted hereditarily” (1954:356).²⁴

Against these “neo-Darwinian” attempts (Lysenko 1954:15), Lysenko juxtaposed what later was called “the Soviet school of creative Darwinism” (The Situation 1949:78), in which the structuralist split of the living organism into the somatic signifier and the hereditary signified was completely rejected. It was suggested instead that behind the characteristics manifested by the body, there are no other internal factors able to influence this performance (Lysenko 1954:284). Unable and unwilling to appeal to the unknown activity of “hidden forces” that determine one’s heredity, Lysenko focused on exploring the formative conditions that shape and define embodied characteristics.²⁵ In *Heredity and Its Variability*, published in 1943, Lysenko wrote:

By heredity we mean *the property of a living body to require definite conditions for its life and development and to respond in a definite way to various conditions*. . . . A

knowledge of the natural requirements and relation of an organism to environmental conditions makes it possible to govern the life and development of this organism. More knowledge may serve as the basis for changing the heredity of organism in a definite direction. [1954:391–392]

The logic, in other words, acquires an already familiar pattern: living is construed as a response to external conditions or, more precisely, as an ability to *require* certain conditions. In turn, the organism's nature is shaped by the context and the conditions in which it is located. Thus, control over conditions ("second nature") ensures the specific characteristics of the organism. In other words, the key for linking identity with the body was found not in heredity (that is, in the *past*) but outside in a carefully managed environment.²⁶

An obvious question follows upon this emphasis on there being a direct correlation between one's heredity and one's conditions of living. Namely, if the correlation is indeed that direct, why does the variety of living organisms remain so stable? Lysenko resolves the problem in this way:

The conservatism of heredity [that] expresses itself in the fact that if the conditions which the nature of the organism demands do not exist, the organism will not accept [the] conditions that do not agree with its heredity, its genotype. It frequently happens that an organism does not find conditions suitable to its heredity, and since it will not assimilate the existing conditions, which are different and unsuitable, it perishes. [1954:310]

Can attachment to the past (i.e., can this conservative dependence on "adequate" conditions which are not available anymore) be influenced or mitigated? For Lysenko, this is hardly a question; but what does deserve special attention is exploring *when* exactly this conservative attachment to the conditions of the past should be challenged and *how* this should be done. By developing his idea of "destabilized heredity," Lysenko seemed to be able to find at least a temporary solution. I explore this concept below by discussing two major practical methods developed by Lysenko: vernalization and mentoring.

In his earlier work, Lysenko had already drawn attention to the fact that a living organism goes through several stages in its development. In other words, development is a "phasic" process.

The organism has no concretely given character, nor does it undergo arbitrary changes of form. . . It is precisely because phases of development constitute general biological stages in the individual development of the hereditary foundation itself that these phases constitute the *basis* of development of each of the plant's characters. Spring habit, winter habit, frost resistance, drought hardiness, pest resistance, length of vegetative period, tillering, etc. cannot be studied apart from the general phases of development, because the formation of all these characters will vary if the course of this or that phase varies (owing to differences in external conditions). [1954:12]

This procedural or phasic view of heredity combined the notion of the unevenness of individual development with the emphasis on external conditions that could be changed in order to achieve a necessary development. Such a combination allowed Lysenko to bring together the diachronic development of a living being with the synchronic changes of the system in which this living being was located.

Development in time and space were collapsed. As with Gorky, this collapse of “what is” with “what ought to be” was achieved by establishing control over the material conditions of existence.

In order to produce a qualitatively different pattern of growth, Lysenko “treated” seeds and plants during a “qualitative turning point” in their development when their resistance to this kind of treatment was minimal or nonexistent (1954:35). He did this by subjecting seeds to vernalization, that is, to different temperature and moisture regimes which could not only alter the speed of the living organism’s development but also its ability to reproduce a changed pattern of development in the subsequent generations.²⁷ As Lysenko explained, “the more radically the plant was altered in the vernalization phase, the more disturbed was the harmony of the organism’s further development” (1954:180). The major significance of this disturbed harmony was a particular receptivity to changes acquired by the organisms with destabilized heredity. That is, it was an acquired ability of “disturbed” organisms to “serve as excellent plastic material for creating forms of plants with the needed hereditary properties” (1954:299).

One example suffices to illustrate how this “disturbed harmony” was achieved. As a result of the “presowing treatment,” Lysenko maintained, winter wheat, which was normally sown in the fall so that it could germinate before cold weather starts and resume its growth when winter was over, now could be sown in spring and produce grain. In practical terms, such alteration of the plant’s “winter habit” could help avoid serious risks, when, for instance, due to little snow and severe frost, the crop might be killed.²⁸ What again is crucial for Lysenko’s version of “creative Darwinism” is that heredity is construed here within a language of habits and predispositions that are acquired in a particular environment and that can be corrected if necessary. Based on his vernalization experiments, Lysenko concluded again and again that the “suitable training” of plants (1954:181) is a key element in enhancing particular “habits” from generation to generation in the organism with “a destabilized, unestablished heredity” (1954:370).

We have now gained knowledge of methods of changing breeds more rapidly, by means of training. When you know at what moment in the development of an organism it must not be humored but, on the contrary, be given conditions alien to its nature, the old hereditary properties may be shattered. Sometimes they are wholly eliminated. The organism will no longer possess the hereditary properties it formally possessed. The heredity established in the preceding generations will be destroyed. The further task will then arise of selecting the conditions of training, thereby causing the plant to deviate more and more in the direction intended and thus inducing new requirements, a new heredity, in a few generations. [1954:368]

The perception of heredity as fundamentally fluid led Lysenko to modify the basic conclusion of Darwinism: “It is not the struggle for existence that underlies natural selection. Natural selection is based on alteration of metabolism, on the process of adaptation” (1954:351). Struggle *among* living organisms becomes less important for survival than the organisms’ abilities to modify themselves in accordance with the ever changing external conditions of their existence. The paradigm of “the strongest and fittest” was replaced by that of the flexible and the pliant. A concern with one’s “naturally occurring” internal characteristics was

replaced by a concern with one's ability to incorporate external conditions, to see them as a part of one's self.

This new version of the survival struggle—or, rather, survival adaptation—was perhaps best explicated by Lysenko in a discussion of mentoring. Proposed initially by the Russian horticulturist Ivan Michurin in 1916, the method was revitalized by Lysenko in the 1930s.²⁹ Somewhat simplifying Michurin's ideas, Lysenko (1954:234) adapted them to answer his own questions about heredity, namely: Why is a good hybrid incapable of producing similarly good offspring? Why do seeds obtained from cultivated apple or pear trees by natural pollination of flowers or by artificial hybridization produce a high percentage of trees with fruit with wild qualities?

The question, in other words, was about the cause of a process in which the heredity of the new organism was influenced by a factor that could not be straightforwardly classified as a "living condition" of the organism. At the core of the problem was a cross-generational influence between the old wild stock, the cultivated tree grafted onto this stock, and finally, a cutting or a seed which was taken from the grafted tree for further cultivation.

Following Michurin, Lysenko identified the main cause of bad heredity in the qualities of the wild stock that was used as a basis for grafting (1954:234). General ability of the older stock to dramatically alter the nature of a younger generation of the plant was perceived by Lysenko as a convincing alternative to crossbreeding, a traditional method of sexual reproduction in which a hybrid would be the product of "the sexual union of the organisms of two breeds" (1954:415). Acquired "by a means of training," that is, by means of generational influence, the "vegetative hybrids" were seen as being not "fundamentally different from hybrids obtained sexually" (1954:235, 237).

Somewhat reversing the initial (negative) direction of the process, Lysenko proposed to use plant training for achieving positive results. As a base for his hybrid experiments Lysenko used now a void subject of sorts, a "young variety" of plants whose own properties had not yet been fully developed; in turn, the grafted twigs were obtained from older fruit trees (1954:416). The age, or the phase of the mentored organism's development, is crucial here, for "the younger the plant whose characters it is desired to change the more successful the experiment will be. On the other hand, the plant from which it is desired to obtain a particular property or character should be older" (Lysenko 1954:418). Living conditions then became a learning environment, in which development of the unestablished heredity of a young organism is controlled by an older mentor.

By bringing together Gorky's rhetoric on the outsideness of the early Soviet self and Lysenko's sociobiological practice of "shattering" heredity by changing external conditions, I highlight the similarities between the externally oriented logic of the two arguments as well as between the two perceptions of nature, which was portrayed not only as something malleable but also as something replaceable. It is important that both strategies of fighting nature are similarly structured around a negative dependency on the past. Building a new world and obtaining new qualities in living organisms are preceded by shattering received heredity.

Both discourses, I suggest, had their roots in the same modernist attempt to question what Lysenko calls a “historically-built system of adaptability” in order to produce a new order of things and living organisms (1954:303). Lysenko’s vision of “plastic substances” (1954:418) able to adopt and, more significantly, to reproduce desired characteristics could be read as an example of a powerful rhetoric in which self-making becomes equated with appropriating a preferred heredity—a set of survival skills acceptable and available under current conditions. In the next section, I show how a similar technology of appropriating the self was translated into pedagogical practice.

Mentoring Heredity

In the fall of 1920 in the Ukrainian town of Poltava, a teacher named Anton Makarenko was put in charge of a colony for “juvenile delinquents” or “moral defectives,” as Makarenko himself defined them (1951:28, 56). From 1920 to 1928, through a meticulous organization of labor discipline in the Maxim Gorky Labor Colony, Makarenko managed to create what was later transformed into the dominant model for the Soviet pedagogical establishment. During the period 1928–1932, he repeated his pedagogical success in Kharkov as head of Dzerzhinsky Labor Commune for homeless children and adolescents (see Makarenko 1989:40). Despite controversy about his methods, Makarenko’s experience was highly acclaimed and publicly praised by the Soviet regime.³⁰ Maxim Gorky, having visited Makarenko in 1928, maintained an active correspondence with him, attributing “worldwide significance” to his “revolutionary and astonishingly successful pedagogical experiment” (Makarenko n.d.:31) and endorsing his literary work.

Makarenko’s popularity acquired a new dimension with the publication of his novels *The Road to Life: An Epic of Education* (1935) and *Learning to Live: Flags on the Battlements* (1938), in which he presented somewhat fictionalized accounts of his educational work.³¹ From 1935 to 1939, Makarenko focused completely on writing and by the time of his sudden death in 1939, his pedagogical fiction along with his many articles, talks, and essays on educational issues had established him as one of the leading authorities of Soviet pedagogy.

In 1937, when asked to summarize his experience for Soviet parents, Makarenko (who had no children of his own) published *The Collective Family: A Handbook for Russian Parents*, a small collection of advice perceived by at least one Western scholar (Bronfenbrenner 1967:ix) as the “closest counterpart” to Benjamin Spock’s *Baby and Child Care*. Outlining his approach, Makarenko stated in the chapter “The Parent as Upbringer”:

In our days it has been said that children are “flowers of life.” . . . The “flowers of life” should not be imagined as a “luxury” bouquet in a Chinese vase on your table . . . No, our children are not flowers of that kind at all. Our children blossom on the living trunk of our life; they are not a bouquet, they are a wonderful apple orchard. And this orchard is ours. . . . It is hard, of course, not to admire such an orchard, not to rejoice over it, but it is even harder not to work in it. Be so kind as to take on this job: dig, water, get rid of the caterpillars, prune out the dead branches. . . . Man learned long ago to approach nature cautiously and tenderly. Now he has learned to transform nature,

to create new natural forms, to apply his powerful corrective to the life of nature. And we should remember that we Soviet educationalists also are no longer “servants of nature,” but her masters. Our education is a similar corrective. And only on these lines is education possible. [1967:11, 12, 13]

Just as with Gorky’s attempts to displace the normative discussion of the new Soviet self by various depictions of the Soviet practices of self-objectification and Lysenko’s striving to construe a living organism as a “plastic substance” that adapts its heredity to the external influence, Makarenko devised a system of “pedagogical industry” (*pedagogicheskoe proizvodstvo*) able to “design a personality” (*proektirovat’ lichnost*) (Makarenko 1989:43). The “savage beings who might not otherwise be seen as hopeful material for the fulfillment of the social-educational ideal” (Makarenko 1951:51) could be successfully transformed through a meticulously implemented series of actions. What makes Makarenko’s work especially interesting is his bringing together the theoretical preoccupation with the *outsiderness* of the self, typical for the 1930s, with specific practices through which the voided self could be shaped. As I shall show, however, this technology was conceived within the same logic that we have already seen at work in the texts of Gorky and Lysenko. The question about transforming the *subject* was displaced onto a question about changing the *context* within which the subject was situated. External conditions again were seen not only as formative but also as determining and defining.

In *Learning to Live*, a novel based on Makarenko’s own experience, Zakharov, the main protagonist (and Makarenko’s alter ego), contemplates the several years he spent working in the First of May Colony:

The years went by and the new made its appearance in many ways that were well worth thinking about. The colony gained ideas, requirements, standards of measurements from all sides, from everything that happened in the land. . . . Yet everything had to be given a different name and redefined. Tens and hundreds of boys and girls ceased to be wild little brutes or mere biological specimens. Zakharov now knew their strength and was able to confront them fearlessly with the great political demand summed up in the words: “Be real people!” [1953:198]

Absolutely confident in his ability to control this transformation of “mere biological specimens” into “real people,” Zakharov conducted a social experiment by bringing 50 homeless newcomers to the already established collective.

The newcomers were classical figures in outsize coats, all, as it seemed, of darkish complexion and emitting all varieties of the odor of “social decay.”. . . What happens next Zakharov called “the explosion method.”. . . The colony had met the newcomers on the station square in the midst of thousands of onlookers. A brilliant parade was mounted, with straight ranks in extended file, rustling banner and a roar of greeting for the “new comrades.” Vaguely pleased and shy, and gripping their helplessly hanging coat-tails with their hands, the newcomers took the place that had been assigned to them between the third and fourth detachments.

The colony marched through the town. The contrast between the familiar background of the First of May colonists and the new arrivals made a deep impression both on themselves and on everybody around. Women and journalists watched them from the pavements with tears in their eyes.

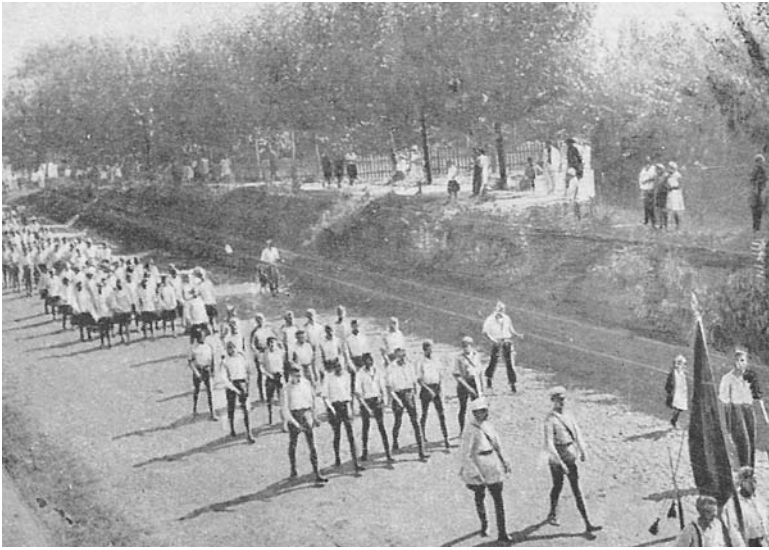


Figure 6.
Disciplining detachments. Colonists in 1931 (Makarenko 1950:2:n.p.).

Once home, after they had been bathed, had their heads cropped and been put into uniform, the new boys, their cheeks aflame with the embarrassment that all this attention and exaggeratedly nagging discipline stirred in the depths of their young souls, were subjected to yet another “explosion.” On the asphalted strip among the flowers all their “traveling suits” were heaped into a big pile. Paraffin was poured over it and the rags became a raging smoky bonfire to which [the older colonist] Misha Gontar was to come later with a broom and bucket to dispose of the oily shaggy-looking ashes. “There go all your autobiographies!” he said to the nearest boy with a sly wink. [1953:199–200] [See Figure 6]

Several moments are important in this description of a technology of “dislocating localization” (Agamben 1998:175). First of all, it appears that the effectiveness of the “method of explosion,” transforming “newcomers” into “new boys,” is rooted in a scrupulously maintained basic opposition of appearances (brilliant parade versus social decay, straight file versus helpless newcomers, and so forth). Second, the identificatory dynamic between the newcomers and the model is displaced. The transformation of relations between people is presented as a transformation of clothing. First, the outsized coats are juxtaposed to the colonists’ uniforms, then they are exchanged for these uniforms and finally, the coats are burned, thus completing a cycle of the universal replaceability of values and selves already spelled out in the rhymed verse (*chastushka*) quoted earlier. The “shattering” of one’s identity, of one’s sense of belonging, in other words, becomes a function of metonymy, the change of clothes stands in for a possibility of new selves.

The act of “burning autobiographies”—recalled later by many colonists (e.g., *Udivitel’nyi chelovetchishe. Vospominania ob A. S. Makarenko. 1959:14*)—had yet another controlling function. Elsewhere, Makarenko specifically pointed out that the active silencing of the past and a learned “forgetting” were necessary for

the production of a new “colonial” identity. “In our commune nobody ever recalls his past. . . . We consciously refused to account and register criminal elements of the past, and thanks to this we have completely destroyed the past. It just does not exist. Our communards literally do not spend a minute of their life on their past. And I am proud of this” (1960:427). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, this “redefinition” (to use Makarenko’s word) of identity is described (and realized) as a deliberately staged act, the apparent purpose of which is to be watched by the outsiders (“women and journalists”).

Yet something else is happening as well. One of the primary functions of the staged performance was to incorporate the newcomers by making them a part of the *picture*, by assigning them an appropriate place, by literally *inserting* them “between the third and fourth detachments.” It is through the lens of this “enframing,” (Mitchell 1991:44),³² through this conflation of the subject with an allocated subject position, that the subsequent procedures of transformative mimicry (bathing, hair cropping, and putting on uniforms) should be seen. It is a mimicry whose significance, as Jacques Lacan aptly pointed out, is not “a question of harmonizing with the background but, against a mottled background, of becoming mottled” (Lacan 1981:99). That is to say, what is at stake here does not have so much to do with issues of adaptation as such; rather, by growing a “cultural layer,” by actively “becoming mottled,” by acquiring some “color,” one can assume a certain subject position within the historically available “color scheme.”³³ Let me show in more detail how a voided Soviet self was “becoming mottled.”

Recollecting his pedagogical experience in the Gorky Colony, Makarenko mentions that “any improvement in [the] situation came from a purely external form of discipline” (1951:115), with the teacher as the main agent of imposing disciplinary practices. Describing his own version of mentoring collectives with “unestablished heredity,” Makarenko states that “so long as the collective, and the organs of the collective, had not been formed, the teacher was entitled—nay, was bound!—to use compulsion” (1951:241). One of Makarenko’s colonists described a newly emerging “system of adaptability” (to use Lysenko’s language) in the following way:

Makarenko demanded cleanliness and a high standard of social manners. . . . I must say that the parquet floor in the Commune shone like a mirror and everything was spick and span. When Makarenko made his inspection round together with the “man on duty” he always carried a snow-white cambric handkerchief and a thin stick. With the handkerchief he verified the presence of dust and with the stick the cleanliness of the blankets. This control made us keep things clean and orderly, and cleanliness became a necessity and a habit with us. [Roitenberg n.d.:91]

Apart from cleanliness and a high standard of social manners, what was the context that was supposed to deliver a desired type of subjectivity? Makarenko, “enraged by the disgracefully low level of [his] pedagogical technique and [his] own lack of technical skills” taken together with a discovered methodological uselessness of the “science of pedagogics,”³⁴ found a solution in practices and language which are normally used to maintain a “battle order in a company” (Makarenko 1951:342). The normative vacuum resulted in a multiplicity of precisely staged



Figure 7.

Orienting one's self. Makarenko's colonists. Photo ca. 1925; taken by A. Makarenko (Makarenko 1950:1:n.p.).

rituals. Occasional gymnastics and military drills in the colony were expanded and became regular. Soon after this decision, the first signs of “becoming mottled” became visible. As Makarenko observed:

The first thing I noticed was the good influence of a proper military bearing. The whole outward appearance of the colonist changed—he became slender and graceful, stopped slouching against table or wall, [he] could hold himself erect with ease and freedom, without feeling the need of props of any sort. By now it was easy to distinguish new boys from the old-timers. The gait of the boys became more confident and springy, they began to hold their heads higher, they lost the habit of thrusting their hands into their pockets. . . . It was just at this time that the rule was introduced into the colony: to reply to every order, in token of confirmation and consent, with the words “very good!” accompanying this splendid reply with the flourish of the Pioneer salute. It was at this time, too, that bugles were introduced into the colony. [1951:343–344]

This normalization of bodies, of making them distinguishable and countable, of making them manageable, led to another logical move—using these bodies for constructing a “bigger picture” by imposing on them a social structure. Each colonist was assigned to a “permanent detachment, with its own permanent commander, its own place in the system of workshops, in the dormitory, and in the dining room” (Makarenko 1953:377).

The variety of controlled social locations in turn determined yet another quality of the colonial identity: an ability to orient one's self (*sposobnost orientirovat'sia*), an ability to “almost unconsciously” feel what is happening around one, “to sense in which position [*mesto*] of the collective you are [at the moment] and what duties follow from this position for you” (Makarenko 1989:263) (See Figure 7).

Remarkably, this regulated “pedagogical industry” is seen as consisting “above all, in the collective body” (Makarenko 1953:245), albeit “a rationally

organized and effective” one (1953:246). A collective body here simultaneously acts as an external context and as an internally motivated force, a social hybrid achieved by a means of mentored training. And, as with any training, the issue of discipline becomes of key importance here: “Discipline is the face of [the] collective, its voice, its beauty, its mobility, its conviction. Everything in the collective body ultimately assumes the form of discipline” (Makarenko 1953:255). While brought about to introduce order, discipline remained in constant need of reproducing the object to which it could be applied, that is, a potentially disorganized body, be it collective or individual. It is as if, once again, in order to make itself apparent, the rationality of human mind must constantly locate itself against the backdrop of the abjected “elemental forces of nature.”

Makarenko’s texts help to bring together the points I have been trying to make throughout this article. The acting Soviet subject that constantly tries to merge with produced objects in order to reify itself in disciplining procedures or to become localized in new conditions was a subject that emerged, to a large extent, as a reaction to a lack of normative models and habitual practices, as a reaction to “bare life” devoid of the usual structuring and anchoring effect of the established order of things. Unlike Gorky’s attempts to replace the existing environment and Lysenko’s experiments with creating disturbing conditions, Makarenko had to produce living and educational settings for people who were already uprooted, displaced, and disoriented. However in doing so, he reproduced a very similar logic. The successful development of an organism was considered to be a result of a double operation: severing the organism’s attachment with the past was compensated by the organism’s full and controlled immersion within newly created conditions. Devoid of all previous attachments, the early subject of Soviet modernity—not unlike its current, post-Soviet counterpart—was capable of rendering him- or herself recognizable only through a constant managing of the *outside*, through an incessant replacing of the “lost” social space by creating and recreating meaningful locations and positions—a stable place in a detachment, in a workshop, or in a factory.³⁵ Unable to use history or biography as a source of a stable identity in a new environment, it is through becoming “mottled”—that is, through the inexhaustible incorporation of constantly changing life conditions—that the Soviet subject secured a place within a social field that was still under construction.

Rather than construing this voided (Soviet) subject as a manifestation of a deficient or otherwise inadequate (Soviet) modernity, I propose to see it as yet another focal point that helps illuminate “the ambivalences, the contradictions, the use of force, and the tragedies and the ironies” which are normally kept outside of the “primary habitus of the modern” (Chakrabarty 2000:43). The extreme radicalism of early Soviet transformations became possible in part as a product of a historically specific dialogue. A typically modern preoccupation with the materiality and objectivity of the external world was merged here with the persistent striving of a new historical subject for its recognition and localization. Technology became a way of forging and reforging an environment that could eventually have a place for the self-in-formation. While being perhaps less aesthetically refined, the picture of modernity that emerged in the process of this production nonetheless reveals the

theme common for “modernity at large” (Appadurai 1996): an unsettling sense of the present, its disturbing and disturbed harmony.

As I have argued, the various configurations of a “second nature”—Gorky’s new factory-fortress, Lysenko’s controlled environment, and Makarenko’s disciplining detachment—can be construed as attempts to frame a new social and personal experience, to give it a stabilizing structure and a graspable meaning. The “will to norm” experienced by the people (Kozlova 1999:198) whose personal liminality coincided with the liminal stage of early Soviet society found an outlet in strict procedures of industrial production, while failed attempts to organize their everyday life resulted in a proliferation of rituals of public involvement and presentation. It is in the process of this shift from elusive meaning of social changes to graspable materiality of objects and conditions that the “units of the neurocerebral energy” acquired a shape of the Soviet self: a “plastic substance” with a destabilized heredity and an autobiography reduced to ashes.

Notes

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1. Compare this with an excerpt from a speech on “Leninism and the Problem of Cultural Revolution” that Nikolai Bukharin, a prominent leader of the Soviet government, gave in the Bolshoi Theater during the 1928 commemoration of the fourth anniversary of Lenin’s death:

We . . . destroyed the narrow-minded bourgeois moral [*burzhuazsno-meshanskaya moral*], we took all its bones out and now it is completely decomposed in our hands. But we cannot yet say that we have built our *own* norms of behavior, the ones that meet our tasks. Many people treat the old moral with disdain (and this is good), but with no norms of their own, they hang out unleashed (*bez uzdy*) in an airless environment. And this is very bad, we suffer a lot from this. [Bukharin 1993:134]

2. For different aspects of modernity and identity, see Berman 1982; Bauman 1992; Butler 1997; Chakrabarty 2000; Foucault 1988, 1990, 1997; Harootunian 2000; Ivy 1995; Lefebvre 1984; Rabinow 1996; Siegel 1997; and Taylor 2001. On modernity, technology, and production, see Appadurai 1996; Frank 1998; Goux 1990; Kittler 1990, 1999; Kotkin 1995; and Weber 1996.

3. For more on byt in the 1920–1930s, see Buchli 1999, Fitzpatrick 1999, Leбина 1999, and Vihavainen 2000.

4. For various interpretations of early Soviet modes of subjectification, see Halfin 2000, 2001 and Hellbeck 1996, 2001 and a useful discussion of their work in Ab Imperio 2002; for a somewhat different approaches, see Brockdorff 1998 and Kharkhordin 1999.

5. For example, the urban population of the USSR increased by 1.6 million annually from 1929 to 1931; from 1931 to 1933 the number of people living in cities increased from 33.6 to 39.7 million; and from 1933 to 1939 the growth was even greater—2.34 million people annually, so that by 1939 the urban population had reached a total of 56.1 million (Izmenenia 1979:193).

6. The number of workers in the city increased from 71,000 in 1922 to 532,000 in 1931 (Vitukhnovskay 2000:104–105).

7. Demanding a reform of the Russian orthography, one publication in 1930 stated: “Learning the orthography that was left behind for the Russian proletariat by its class opponents . . . costs very dearly to the proletarian state, depriving the working people of billions of hours which must be spent on the meaningless labor of spell-checking [*pravopisanie*]” (Kozlova 1995). On language reforms after the revolution, see Gorham 2003 and Yurchak 2003.

8. On simplicity as a main feature of the Soviet identity, see Levada 1993.

9. For a discussion of “tactics” in a late Soviet context, see Oushakine 2003.

10. See Hoffman 1994 and Steinberg 2002 for a discussion of a new proletarian culture.

11. To a large extent, it was precisely this group of people who became a main target of political and cultural campaigns organized by the Soviet government from 1928–1935 under the name of “cultural revolution.” On different aspects of the Cultural Revolution, see Averbakh 1929a, 1929b; Bukharin 1993; and Fitzpatrick 1992.

12. Komsomolsk was a new town in the Far East that was being built in the 1930s.

13. For a discussion of Orlova’s memoirs, see Fitzpatrick 1999:69. On the role of the gleaming phalanster in the Russian modernist imagination, see Berman 1982:236–237. In a history of weavers from the Volga region, published in 1935 as a part of the series *A History of Factories*, the word *phalansterniki* was used to refer to a commune of workers who built their own housing (Fedorovich 1935:352).

14. On the rhetoric and practices of replacement in the Soviet Russia, see Argenbright 1999.

15. On “mnemonic sites” see Anagnost 1994:223, 250; on memory sites see Nora (1996).

16. For a discussion of Kojève’s ideas, see Butler 1997:63–100 and Roth 1985.

17. For a detailed discussion of Gorky’s cooperation with the Soviet authorities, see, Spiridonova 1994.

18. On Socialist realism, see Chegodaeva (2003), Clark 2000, Dobrenko 2001, Lahusen 1997 and Lahusen and Dobrenko 1997.

19. I discuss the role of projection in the process of identification in Oushakine 2001a.

20. The early Soviet obsession with construction and building produced an interesting reaction. In 1920s, Alexander Chaianov, a writer and an expert on agriculture, wrote a utopic vision in which the proletariat regime in Russia was replaced by a government of peasants. One of the major innovations of the new regime was a “great decree about eliminating cities.” In the process of this deurbanization, Moscow was completely changed: “Disappeared are the stone rocks that used to hide the horizon: whole architectural complexes are gone . . . Instead, everything was now buried in verdure” (Chaianov 1989:72; see also Kozlova 1994:123). Despite its oppositional message, this vision was built around exactly the same obsession with eliminating the “old walls” that was so typical of Gorky and Orlova. Chaianov was arrested in 1930 and executed in 1937 as an “enemy of the people.”

21. I discuss the role of transitional object in post-Soviet context in: Oushakine 2000; see also Winnicott 1971:1–26.

22. For an account of this reeducation process, see Gorky at al. 1934, a collected volume of essays written in 1933 by a group of Soviet writers (Gorky included) after their tour of the White Sea Canal, which had been built by prisoners. The book was also published as a part of the series *A History of Factories*, initiated by Gorky. See also Litovskaya 1998 for a discussion of the book.

23. While Lysenko's attempt to practice the Lamarckian theory of heritability of acquired characteristics was the major part of these debates, the academic aspect of the affair was not the most prominent one. The Lysenko affair is usually associated with the agrobiologist's tendency to rely on active use of political power in academic debates. Personally supported by Stalin, in a very short time Lysenko managed to get rid of his opponents and establish a full (political) control over biology in the Soviet Union. Lysenko's major critic, the Soviet geneticist Nikolai Vavilov was arrested in 1940 and killed in 1943. For a review, see Dubinin 1992, Hudson and Richens 1946, Joravsky 1970, Levina 1995, Z. Medvedev 1969, and Soyfer 1994; for a somewhat different perspective on Lysenko's affair and legacy, see Roll-Hansen 1985 and Schneider 1986.

24. Later in this article, Lysenko put it even more strongly:

What every living body and every particle of it does possess is breed, heredity. The chromosomes are not special heredity substance but ordinary body, part of the cell, performing some biological function but, of course, not the function of an organ of heredity. An organism can and does have various organs, including organs of reproduction, but it cannot and does not have an organ of heredity. To look for an organ of heredity in an organism is tantamount to looking in it for an organ of life. [Lysenko 1954:362]

See also Blacher 1982.

25. Boris Gasparov convincingly showed that Lysenko's critique of formalism in genetics was paralleled by similarly structured debates between Bakhtin's circle and Russian formalists. The formalists' analysis of the structural elements of the literary text was perceived by Bakhtin's group as a somewhat "mechanistic manipulation of universal elements," which, in turn, was rooted in a premise that literary production and literature itself are devoid of any "creative" energy (Gasparov 1996:138). See also Bukharin's (1925) essay "On formal method in art," in which the formalists' accent on form as a primary device (*priyom*) of artistic production is treated as a "metaphysics" that denies the social origin of artistic forms and art in general (Bukharin 1993:89–99). For a discussion of the formalists' methods, see, Dmitriev and Levchenko 2001, Jameson 1972, P. Medvedev 1978, Steiner 1984, and Ustinov 2001.

26. This is perhaps one of the most important ways in which the Soviet preoccupation with heredity radically differs from the biopolitics of National Socialism, which insisted that biological heredity is indeed a destiny (see Agamben 1998:148).

27. As Lysenko explains elsewhere, "The term *vernalization* appeared in the middle of 1929, when for the first time in the history of agricultural science the winter wheat Ukrainka, following suitable treatment of the sowing material, eared fully and uniformly after being sown in the spring under practical farming conditions. . . . The spring-sown plants, which by their nature have always been winter varieties in our districts, but which behaved like spring varieties (eared), came to be called *vernalized* plants by the Soviet public. . . . The method of treating the seeds of winter varieties for spring sowing was called *vernalization*" (Lysenko 1954:16). In turn, according to *Webster's Dictionary*, "to vernalize" means "to stimulate the growth of (a plant) by artificially hastening the dormant period, as by subjecting the seed to low temperatures away from light" (Webster 1983:2031).

28. To understand the scope of Lysenko's activity and his administrative success, suffice it to mention that in 1932, when Lysenko started actively introducing *vernalization*, treated seeds were used only on 40 000 hectares, in 1937 there were 10 million hectares involved in vernalization experiments (Dubinin 1992:41). For more on *vernalization*, see Soyfer 1994:16.

29. See Michurin 1949. On Michurin's role in Soviet and pre-Soviet biology, see Weiner 1985; on Lysenko's usage of Michurin's ideas, see Kremontsov 2000.

30. For more on relations between the Soviet government and Makarenko, see, for instance, Hillig 1992.

31. For an analysis of Makarenko's literary work see Getmanez 1978.

32. Mitchell defines enframing as a "method of dividing up and containing . . . a neutral surface or volume called 'space'" (Mitchell 1991:44).

33. I discuss mimetic reproduction of the dominant symbolic order as a form of subversive subjectification in Oushakine 2001b.

34. As Makarenko puts it: "How many thousands of years has it been in existence? . . . What names—what brilliant ideas—Pestalozzi, Rousseau, Natorp, Blonsky! How many volumes, what reams of paper, how many reputations. And at the same time—a void. It all amounts to nothing, and no one can tell me how to deal with one young hooligan. There is no method, no means, no logic—nothing. Nothing but a lot of claptrap!" (Makarenko 1951:201).

35. On "lost" social space as a typical feature of the post-Soviet condition see Dubin 2001.

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