

1 Ideology, metanarrative and myth

When the Soviet regime came to power in 1917, its revolutionary nature was soon recognised, both inside the country and out. This was reflected most clearly in the fundamental transformation the regime sought in all of the major sectors of public life – political, social, economic and cultural. In all of these sectors, traditional structures, patterns and processes were thoroughly reworked, and although some continuities remained from the tsarist through to the Soviet period, the magnitude of the changes that flowed from 1917 clearly marked the regime off as revolutionary in nature. Indeed, this was its avowed purpose: the revolutionary transformation of tsarist society. Of the four sectors that were transformed, the most important for the current study was the cultural.

Any truly revolutionary change will involve the substantial reworking of the cultural sphere. This sort of cultural revolution is what marked the three great revolutions of modern times, the French of 1789, the Russian of 1917, and the Chinese of 1949. A cultural revolution represents the reworking of the whole public sphere of life. The norms whereby public life is structured and the values which underpin these new patterns of action are transformed as those which formerly had dominated in the public sphere are replaced by new principles representing the brave new world that the revolution represents. The new structures of power that these norms represent become embedded in the patterns of action and the webs of relationships that develop in the society,¹ and they are reinforced by the daily interactions which are structured by these norms and which give concrete realisation to their essence. It is this restructuring of the bases of social life through the reworking of the public sphere that is the truly revolutionary process in social change. This is the means whereby new patterns of social life are created and societies are transformed. And it is a process in which societies themselves are intimately involved. The new values and patterns of action are not simply mandated from above, even though central direction may be crucial in the process of the emergence of new sets of social relations, but are reworked and shaped through constant iteration by members of the society going about their

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daily business. In the Soviet case, this process has been discussed in terms of the creation of a new civilisation.

This so-called ‘Stalinist civilisation’² has been seen as emanating from the dramatic social changes imposed upon Soviet society from the end of the 1920s with the introduction of rapid industrialisation and forced-pace agricultural collectivisation, although both were contingent on the change of regime in 1917. In this view,³ the regime sought ‘discursive domination’, principally through the involvement of the population in a process of ‘participatory totalitarianism’. In this process, there was no distinction between active believers and passive victims of the ideology, which, rather than being external to the people, so permeated the language and organisation of the society that it was inescapable.⁴ The regime sought to change not just people’s behaviour, but their whole way of thinking. Publicly justified in terms of building the communist future and creating an alternative and superior modernity to that prevailing in the capitalist West, Stalinism was presented as a new form of civilisation.

This notion of civilisation may be seen in terms of three levels: ideology, metanarrative and myth. Central to the regime’s revolutionary quality was its ideocratic nature. This means that a central part in the regime’s life was played by a formal, codified ideology. Known for most of its life as Marxism-Leninism, this ideology was based principally upon the writings of Marx, Engels and Lenin, and was codified in reproductions of those writings and in the large number of exegetical texts produced during the life of the regime for the propounding of that ideology. There has been much debate about the role of ideology in Soviet society – as a guide to decision-making, a form of legitimation, a form of power, or a rationalisation for control – but few deny that it was an important feature of Soviet rule.

An ideology is a coherent body of values, assumptions, principles and arguments which contains a view about the way in which historical development takes place, and includes both an assessment of the deficiencies of the past (and possibly the present) plus some guidance about what needs to be done in order to reach a more desirable state of affairs. Ideology thus involves both a philosophy of history and usually some sense of teleology, an assumption that history is working towards a certain goal or in a certain direction. In this sense the ideology is an action programme, a doctrine which both elucidates the way history unfolds and thereby provides guidance about how people should act. The ideology is complex and ontological, explaining in philosophical terms the nature of society and its location in the sweep of historical development. It constitutes the basic philosophical foundation for the regime, the intellectual basis upon which it rests and the means for the development of a sense of legitimation

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around existing social forms, including the political authority structure. In the USSR it provided a basic rationalisation for the Soviet project plus direction on how that project could be realised. As such it was the intellectual bedrock upon which Soviet public discussion proceeded.

However, the complexity and philosophical nature of the ideology mean that, while it underpins the dominant conceptions of social reality in society, in its full-blown form it is not particularly suited to the daily tasks of communication between government and governed. Questions of, for example, the dialectic or of the materialist basis of history do not normally have a place in the discussion of policy alternatives. But the discussion of policy and the interaction between regime and society must be structured in terms consistent with the ideology. This means that there emerges a metanarrative, a body of discourse which presents a simplified form of the ideology and which is the vehicle of communication between the regime and those who live under it; it is the principal form of cultural mediation between regime and people. The focus of the metanarrative is the symbolic construction of the society and the projection of a conception of society that explains both current reality and future trajectory. The metanarrative focuses on the nature of the society and where it is going, stripping the ideology down to its essentials and largely simply assuming the philosophical underpinnings of the ideology upon which the regime rests. The metanarrative normalises and stabilises the meanings of some concepts while marginalising and excluding others. It is the meanings contained in the discourse of the metanarrative that give substance to the regime's rituals. Thus the metanarrative defines the community and what it stands for. As such, the metanarrative is both narrower than the ideology but also for the people much more connected with their lives.

While the focus of the metanarrative is the symbolic construction of society, that metanarrative is constituted by myth. The notion of myth was for some time thought to be associated only with 'primitive' societies which operated on the basis of non-rational assumptions about magic and the actions of gods. And it is certainly true that a lot of work on myth has been undertaken by anthropologists. But myth can also function as a potent force in highly developed industrial societies. In anthropological terms, the essence of myth is that it provides a narrative structure and a coherence to the history of the community; it is a shared narrative that gives meaning.⁵ For Malinowski, myth is a 'narrative resurrection of a primeval reality'.⁶ What myth presents is a symbolic reconstruction of the community's formation. This reconstruction may be based on real events, like the representations created in the US of the events of the war of independence, or on phenomena which have no existence independent of the myth itself, like the theories of the ancient Greeks about the role of the gods in

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the creation and functioning of human society. Myth is therefore foundational for the community in the sense that it provides the basic rationale for the community, a sense of its meaning and purpose as well as how it came about. What is important is less the empirical basis of the myth than that the myth is accepted and believed in. Clearly these two things may be linked, but it is the belief that is all-important. To cite Murray Edelman, myth is 'a belief held in common by a large group of people that gives events and actions a particular meaning; it is typically socially cued rather than empirically based'.⁷ Myth is therefore socially constructed and is a means of both defining and explaining reality for those who believe in it. While this definition of reality will differ from community to community, because the mythical underpinnings themselves will differ, anthropologists have argued that myths throughout the world have had three themes of particular importance:⁸ the existence of an evil conspiracy against the community, the presence of a saviour who can release the community from this threat, and the coming of a golden age. The nature of the conspiracy, the saviour and the golden age will differ from community to community and myth to myth, but clearly these three elements are linked. They provide major structuring devices for the community's myths, with other components of those myths locking in with these themes. It is these themes which provide the main sustenance for the community's myths.

This notion of myth is very useful because of the way it emphasises the role myth plays in constructing a community's perception of its identity, rationale and purpose. While retaining this perception of the role myth plays, this study will conceive of myth in somewhat narrower terms than has been the case in many anthropological studies. Rather than a single foundation myth which explains the community's origins, there are a whole series of myths which, individually, explain particular aspects of the way in which a community has developed, and together constitute an explanation of the community's foundation, growth and development. Myths inscribe understanding on events and define appropriate behaviour in terms of that understanding. Myths are thus the basic building blocks of the metanarrative, providing the structures of which that metanarrative overwhelmingly consists. In the Soviet case, six myths emerged concerning:

- the foundation of the regime, focusing principally on the October Revolution;
- the building of socialism, involving the broad course of development, how it was to come about and the forces contributing to it, and the nature of society both now and in the future;
- the nature of leadership, principally in terms of the qualifications to lead society to the communist future;
- internal opposition to the course the party was pursuing;

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- external opposition to the party's course;
- victory in the war.

While analytically distinct, these myths were in practice interlinking and interwoven.

Central to the functioning of all three levels of discourse – ideology, metanarrative and myth – were symbols. Symbols are important principally because of what they represent. They constitute representations of more complex ideas, a means of simplifying (either visually or linguistically) an idea which can then exist in the public arena as a representation of that more complex reality. In this sense, symbols are a form of language, expressing, often in vivid form, principles, assumptions, conceptions and ideas which are quite complex and politically significant. This was especially so in an ideocratic society like the Soviet Union where the metanarrative was a reflection of the underlying ideology, and where the terms used in the metanarrative gained their particular meaning from the ideology. For example, the image projected of the proletarian in early political posters was of a brawny individual in work clothes, holding tools and usually gazing fixedly into the future, but associated with this was the ideological meaning of the proletariat as the midwife of the future. As means of giving meaning to and simplifying complex ideas or concepts, symbol could be a potent means both of generating and projecting a new cultural message. This was particularly the case where the culture was revolutionary in nature and sought to distinguish itself from that which had gone before, and therefore where significant sections of the target audiences could be assumed to lack the politico-ideological education or sophistication to appreciate not just the nuances of what was being presented, but sometimes even the main themes of the message. Image and allegory can embed an idea in people's consciousness far more easily and more effectively than hours of political education, and although only through the latter could full understanding come about, the forms projected through symbols could remain a potent force for ideological commitment and consciousness. In this sense, symbolism can be seen as a kind of shorthand means of expressing the programme of change, a means of both keeping that programme at the forefront of people's consciousness and advancing it by embedding it as the normal intellectual context within which reality is perceived. As Murray Edelman wrote in an early study of symbolic politics, man (sic) 'reconstructs his past, perceives his present condition, and anticipates his future through symbols that abstract, screen, condense, distort, displace, and even create what the senses bring to his attention.'⁹ Symbols are a means of understanding the world, and it was principally through the evocation of symbols that myth and thereby metanarrative were expressed.

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The role played by symbols in the metanarrative means that they are also important for defining group identity both internally for the group and externally in relation to other groups. The key here is the response to the symbols. People who respond positively to the same symbols gain a sense of belonging and membership, of being part of the same community which is bound together by the symbols and what they represent. Adherence to a common symbolic system provides a basis whereby people with little in common can feel as though they share a common identity. Alternatively, those who do not share such an attachment to that symbolic system lack a feeling of identification with that group.

The metanarrative and the myths of which it consists are thus expressed through symbols related to one another in various meaningful ways, and it is this which a new revolutionary regime seeks to embed in the society over which it rules. The metanarrative is the backbone of the reconstruction of culture that revolutionary regimes seek to bring about. In the Soviet case, there were four major types of symbols central to the metanarrative.

(1) Language. This was the most important vehicle of symbolic representation of all because it was the principal form whereby ideas and concepts were projected into the political arena and more widely in the public realm, and it was the explicit representation of the ideology. In both its aural and written forms, language was the main medium of communication and therefore the principal means for the introduction of new ideas and concepts by a political leadership which sought to drive change throughout society. Furthermore, and especially at the elite level, this was the principal medium through which ideas and concepts were worked out in the course of debate and argument within leading political circles. Here symbols were shaped and honed while their meaning was debated, often explicitly but more often implicitly in debates over policy. During such debates, symbols were used as shorthand for the more substantial conceptual concerns that comprised the Bolshevik world outlook. Terms like socialism, communism, proletariat, peasantry and bourgeoisie were not simply common nouns, but emotive concepts carrying a wide range of differences of nuance and meaning, and it was often these differences that were at the heart of elite disagreement, ostensibly over policy but as well over these symbols and their meaning, at different times during the Soviet period. Symbols projected through language were therefore major elements in elite politics, including in the assertion of authority in political debate.

When the Bolsheviks came to power, their vision of the future, and therefore of the ultimate ends for which they had seized power, remained inchoate and relatively unformed. While in exile and opposition, little time had been spent on working out either a clearly defined conception of

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what the future socialist society might look like or the necessary political forms and problems that might confront them the day after they had acceded to power. Most of the energies of the leading figures in the Bolshevik movement had been spent on questions of political strategy and tactics, on the issue of the struggle for power rather than the forms it would take once it had been achieved. This does not mean that, in power, they started from a blank sheet of paper. Their conception, both of the tasks that confronted them and the broader situation in which they were located, was shaped by the intellectual legacy they brought with them, the ideology which underpinned the party's world view. Embedded within this world view was a panoply of concepts and images which were reflected in the terminology that was used in the course of party debate. Many of the terms had meanings specific to Marxism, thereby in effect transforming normal everyday terms into a more technical language; class is a good example of this, with Marxists using the term very differently from those not espousing the doctrine. Furthermore the meaning attached to such terms, through their embeddedness in Marxist theories of social change, implied a range of assumptions about political reality and change which were simply absent from a non-Marxist approach. To take class again as an example: for the Marxist this was a driver of social change with the conflict between classes central to and inherent in that process of change, while for the non-Marxist there was no such necessary association between class, conflict and historical progression. As a result, much of the terminology used by the Bolsheviks evoked images that stemmed from and were specific to the Marxist frame of analysis; it was, in effect, a shorthand means of conveying often complex assumptions and understandings through the use of signifier terms that all of those who were ideologically literate could understand. In this sense, Bolshevik discourse was conducted largely through symbols.

This language of discourse stemmed from the history of the socialist movement broadly conceived, but more especially from the history of the party following its foundation in 1898. This pre-revolutionary period was characterised by two linked processes which contributed to the generation of this symbolic language, continuing leadership conflict and the drive to attract and maintain a committed membership. Both of these processes encouraged the manipulation of the theory guiding revolutionary practice and its presentation through particular signifiers as a means of both attacking one's opponents and consolidating one's support. They were also instrumental in consolidating the meanings and implications of various terms used by the protagonists. As a result, when the Bolsheviks came to power, they brought with them a symbolic language already formed but one which needed both elaboration and specification to make it suitable

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for the new conditions of ruling Russia. The principal form this elaboration and specification took was argument and debate over policy, a process which of necessity reshaped and refined the symbolic world of Bolshevik thought.

In their quest to transform society, the Bolsheviks had a major impact on the Russian language. This involved the introduction of new words and concepts, the transformation of the meaning of old words, and the generation of a mode of discourse and a patois that was alien to the language prior to the twentieth century. In part linguistic development was inevitable; industrial development and the associated changes in society were bound to lead to linguistic changes. But what was important here was the Bolshevik political project which sought to shape that social development in certain ways. The result, linguistically, was a language that became redolent of Bolshevik conceptions and values; for example, the use of the term comrade (*tovarishch*) as a form of address implied a whole different set of social relationships to the terms it replaced, like Mister, Mrs and Sir (*gospodin*, *gospozha* and *barin*).¹⁰ And by ensuring that this language became the dominant form of discourse in the society, at least in its public arenas, the regime ensured that the populace was encapsulated within the logic of its concepts, values and symbols.¹¹ Language was a key means of propagating Soviet power.

The symbolism of language was especially important for the officials who staffed the regime's institutions at lower levels because it was the main medium whereby they received their instructions from above. This could occur at official meetings, where leading figures gave speeches designed in part to provide guidance to those on lower administrative levels; party congresses and conferences were important instances of this, but similar gatherings were held at regular intervals at lower levels of the politico-administrative structure. Also important for lower-level officials was their reliance upon the written word for guidance. Especially during the early decades of Soviet rule, the vast distances and poor communications infrastructure increased their reliance on the written word as the main form of the transmission of guidance from above.¹² As well as internal party documents – decisions, instructions, advice, exhortations – the official press was important as the bearer of the metanarrative, and in particular official decisions of the party-state and the speeches of political leaders.¹³ Language was clearly crucial to the officials' fulfilment of their duties, and was therefore a potent source of symbolic representation and projection.

Outside the regime's institutions too, among the mass of the population, language was an important form of symbolism. Initially an important role was played here by the agitprop worker and the propaganda work

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undertaken by party members and officials. Popular harangues and exhortations, attempts at education and persuasion, were constant parts of the public responsibilities of officials and party members, especially during the early years of the regime's life. The communal reading of newspapers, where a literate person read aloud from the newspaper to a group of probably illiterate listeners, was also common. But as functional literacy spread and the media and communications network expanded, reliance upon the written word, including importantly in the form of slogans, for this group increased.

The question that this creates is what language actually constituted the Soviet metanarrative. Not everything that was said in the public sphere can usefully be seen as part of the metanarrative. As a symbolic presentation of the community's origins, purpose, current state and future, the metanarrative was an authoritative statement about the essence of the community. As such, all members of the community were likely to have views relating to this and therefore in theory could contribute to the development of that metanarrative. While there was some involvement in the shaping of that metanarrative by lower-level officials and by the population at large (see below), the main role in doing this was played by the political elite. This situation applies in most societies, but what made it especially the case in the Soviet Union were three things: the systematic suppression of opposing political forces, the absence of channels of the media independent of the regime, and the pressures for unanimity within the regime itself. But even given the primacy of the political elite in this process, ambiguity remains about what constitutes the metanarrative and what does not. This is clearly a matter of judgement, but one which is probably easier to make in hindsight than it would have been at the time. The chief sources of the metanarrative were essentially twofold: the major statements and speeches of leading political figures, and authoritative decisions made by leading political bodies, including most importantly the regime's programmatic documents.¹⁴ It is from among these that the linguistic aspect of the metanarrative can be constructed, and it is on this basis that much of the subsequent analysis rests.¹⁵

(2) Visual arts. The representation of meaning through artwork has a long and well-acknowledged historical pedigree. Art has been a major means of representation of the vast array of emotions and feelings experienced in human life. In all societies, art has played this role, sometimes at the service of political authorities and at other times more spontaneously reflecting the perceptions, prejudices and values of the individual artists. Given the individualistic, decentralised nature of much artistic work, it is very difficult for political authorities to control what is actually produced in the studio. They can have some influence over this, through such things

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as encouragement of the production of certain types of art through the provision of incentives (such as retainers or commissions) or the application of penalties, and the laying down of guidelines about the form and content of art (e.g. socialist realism; see below). They can have a more significant, even determining, influence over what sort of artwork is publicly shown through control over access to sites of display, such as galleries. In pre-Soviet Russia, a major role in shaping the artistic landscape was played by the Church. The production of religious art, especially icons, was a major component of Russian artistic endeavour, while religious themes and imagery were also frequently present in art that was not specifically religious in intent. Secular art also had a long tradition in Russia, with, as elsewhere, portrait painting and landscapes featuring prominently in that tradition. But in the early part of the twentieth century the ferment that was shaking the art world took a particularly potent form in Russia. Modernism was reshaping art, with Russian artists in the vanguard of this change. The artistic experimentation of the avant-garde within Russia was accelerated and amplified by the revolution, with many painters rejoicing in the increased freedom and stimulation this seemed to promise; many turned to the themes of revolution and the building of the new society. So when the Bolsheviks came to power there was a vigorous art world in existence which, like much of the rest of society, was divided among those who supported and those who opposed the revolution, those excited by the prospects the revolution seemed to open up and those afraid for the future, and those who simply did not care about politics and wished it would go away.

The new leadership was anxious to use visual forms of representation as a means of projecting their message because of the high levels of illiteracy that were present in society prior to the expansion of education in the 1930s. Furthermore, the disruption to printing brought on by the revolution and civil war posed a barrier to the production of printed materials in large runs, thereby adding to the value of those sorts of productions like posters that could address a large audience simply through their placement on a wall. Within this context, visual propaganda was crucial to the Bolsheviks' need to project over society a new metanarrative that would accustom the populace to the new rulers and what they stood for. The revolution not only brought to power a new group of rulers in the country, but a new set of categories whereby the world was to be explained and understood, and a new take on historical events and the course history was taking. Visual propaganda was a potentially potent means of projecting this message, but only if the forms in which this message was expressed were broadly consistent. It took some time for such consistency to develop. It was not until the early 1930s, with the unification of the