

# Ecology and the Deep Forces of Perestroika

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An oasis of authorized criticism in the 1960s and the 1970s, and a privileged public arena for 'extreme non-conformist' intellectuals in the same period, ecology was also the matrix for the national movements which precipitated the end of the decaying party-state at the end of the 1980s and which had been in gestation since the late 1960s. Ideal metaphor for the fall of a system emblemized by the catastrophe at Chernobyl (April 1986), the ecological crisis – the crisis in the relationship between nature and urban space – made it possible to understand the full extent of the post-war upheavals that had taken place at the heart of Soviet society.<sup>1</sup> The rapid, huge-scale industrialization and urbanization of the country had produced a new educated middle class of 'specialists' (technicians, engineers, applied research managers, economists and administrators, and so on), which in the early 1960s constituted the hard core of the first generation of Soviets to be a majority of urban-dwellers. If it was not embodied, as in Western countries, in political movements or parties, the ecological cause was no less institutionalized. The horticultural societies (*tovariscestva*) on the edge of towns (*ogorodniki*), the 'nature protection brigades' which organized reforestation campaigns (DOP), the Society for the Protection of Nature (VOOP), or local historical and ethnographical societies (*kraevedenie*) had a considerable number of supporters.<sup>2</sup> It allowed the expression of a very extensive range of individual and collective sentiments, and of reactions both rejecting and adapting to a radically new natural, social and cultural environment – that of the town and a larger community. For a disorientated society, it was a question of re-appropriating its immediate, daily environment, of attempting to impose, individually or collectively, meaning on its existence and its social trajectory. Ecological sentiment was thus intimately bound up with the emergence of an 'urban civilization' in the Soviet Union under Brezhnev.<sup>3</sup>

Soviet literature and cinema of this period demonstrate that it was this new middle class – and no longer the working class mythified in the ideology – which set the tone in a USSR where people were in the process of becoming increasingly bourgeois, where the *nomenklatura* was envied on account of its material privileges, even wooed for its access to rare goods and services and not for fear of the fact of its power arbitrarily to exploit and abuse, a USSR where one henceforth constructed a private realm far from the outworn and ridiculous ideological slogans. Very attentive to shifts in opinion and to the forces at work within society, a section of the party-state élite around the KGB chief, Iouri Andropov, was – well before perestroika – to make ecology a key element in a tactic that aimed at re-energizing an economic and political system whose dead ends they understood all too well. It has been hypothesized that the protection of the environment was perceived as one of the most fertile soils for revitalizing ideology, refining it, and refocusing propaganda onto new objectives (notably for boosting/stimulating technical innovation), remobilizing

executives, and, finally, enhancing the prestige of Communist Soviet ideology by taking up a cause which was the spearhead of important pacifist movements in Western Europe during the European missile crisis (1979–83).<sup>4</sup> It was this strategy of the re-legitimation of authority which lay at the origin of perestroika, the last attempt to renew the legitimacy of Soviet 'ideocracy' and that of its leaders, the final stage of a modernizing venture which went close to its limits. Why, and in what way, did the theme of ecology come to play such a central role in this final attempt to reform the Soviet system?

Since the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU (Communist Party of the Soviet Union) (1956), and the 'thaw' which followed it, the environmental cause gave rise to the mobilization of institutions and persons: scientific, literary or artistic élites, students, members of social organizations and so on. What were the political and institutional mechanisms which underpinned this mobilization? From 1973 onwards, a resurgence of 'ecological' debate was to be seen in the national daily newspapers and the weeklies. Most frequently, these debates – often very lively in tone – accompanied the adoption of what were sometimes very harsh laws on environmental protection (notably in 1974). The presentation was always the same: conflicts took place between the minister responsible for that sector and the scientists whose expert knowledge stressed the need to abandon such-and-such an industrial project that endangered the environment, with the narrow-minded 'administrators' generally being accused of being too short-sighted or of not abiding by the law. The conclusions of academics were sometimes relayed or amplified by the writers or artists who usually had a platform for their views in the press, such as the so-called 'ruralist' writers, Valentin Raspoutine, Vassili Belov, and so on. During the second half of the 1970s, the media aggravated conflicts of interest when they did not actually fabricate them from start to finish. In the absence of in-depth research on the disinformation techniques employed by Soviet journalists of this period, it is still difficult to explain in what way and according to what criteria the 'spin' applied to this material operated. I shall merely observe that, as until at least 1987 the propaganda department of the Central Committee of the CPSU exercised tight control over the dissemination of all information in the USSR at this period, everything leads one to the conclusion that the 'ecological debates' were intended to instruct and not to inform. The ecological arm undoubtedly served to restrict the influence of such-and-such an industrial pressure group within a decision-making body, according to the changing circumstances and political power relations entirely unfamiliar with environmental questions.

At the beginning of the 1980s, there was a turning-point. The government set about making ecology a privileged sphere of the ideological and political apparatus. One of the most clearly visible signs of the government intention to make ecology an instrument of political legitimation was the publication, in late 1982 and throughout 1983, in *Pravda* of articles critical of the 'idealistic and contemplative' position adopted with regard to nature by some intellectuals and writers. The writers' idealism, whose argumentation was structured around the notion of 'heritage', should be replaced with a more technical critique setting out the shortcomings in the economic system. The press no longer imputed the 'ecological crisis' to a lack of respect for heritage or to the 'barbarity of urban society' (Valentin Raspoutine) but to 'very serious administrative flaws', 'negligence by the people in charge', and so on. A balanced expression of views in feature articles gave way to digests of readers' letters; investigative articles denounced specific cases of irresponsibility and, soon afterwards, foresaw problems with entire sectors of production,

implicating the ministers responsible. This change of tone in the press and in official statements, to which we shall return, this new 'economic' and 'pragmatic' discourse on ecology, was inspired by work done on the ground since the mid-1960s by the economists and sociologists of the institutes of economics and sociology in the Siberian section of the Soviet Academy of Science at Akademgorodok. They had placed environmental questions at the heart of research undertaken in urban sociology and developed an economic analysis of the management of natural resources in the (subsequently renowned) periodical, *Eko*,<sup>5</sup> conceived of ecology as an economic and social incentive for improving economic efficiency. They were led to formulate, under the title of the 'Novobirsk Report', the first official global analysis (to borrow the internal usage of the Central Committee of the CPSU) of the Soviet system. Ecology was thus the matrix for the general reform of the Soviet system sketched out in the circles around Iouri Andropov, who became Secretary General of the CPSU on the death of Brezhnev, in 1983.<sup>6</sup>

In the speech he made to the plenary session of the Central Committee of the CPSU in December 1983, Iouri Andropov made explicit reference to the protection of the environment as one of the key instruments for the legitimization of the reforms which he announced:

The present volume and rhythm of our forces of production require a radical change in our relation to issues affecting the environment and the exploitation of natural resources. This task assumes great economic and social importance... Here, as elsewhere, we cannot tolerate a sectorial approach which reduces the efficiency of investments, represents an obstacle to the application of a coherent policy, and ends with the total suspension of responsibility in the agents of the state given the task of executing the measures taken by the Party and the State in the name of the people.<sup>7</sup>

This speech was immediately followed by measures to apply it. On 20 January 1984, the Politburo of the Central Committee of the CPSU requested the 'punishment of the ministers responsible for the intolerable atmospheric pollution at Kemerovo', a situation which had, 'nevertheless, been pointed out on many occasions by the Politburo, but which had never been taken seriously', and called for the ministers responsible to 'take urgent disciplinary measures against the polluting concerns and their officials'.<sup>8</sup> With Andropov, ecology became a supplementary tool for the discipline of the Plan. The reforms envisaged by the Secretary General of the Party followed two main objectives: to stimulate middle-class initiative (to put them back to work) and break the power of the sectorial ministries and the clan-like clientelism which characterized them. Ecology made it possible to impinge on both objectives at once.

The 'environmental' aggiornamento of Soviet power, which saw the full light of day with Gorbachev, thus began in reality in 1982–1983. However, ecology had already entered the official discourse on international relations. The 'environmental crisis', key-concept of the ideological apparatus of perestroika, was a construction whose foundations were laid in the course of the 1970s by diplomatic and foreign affairs professionals, illuminated by researchers specializing in the study of 'bourgeois societies' at the Institute of Social Sciences of the CPSU, the Institute of Social Sciences of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR (INION), or the Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO). In the early 1970s, Soviet social science was faced with the task of reinterpreting the new

realities of the capitalist world. It was a case of seriously refurbishing Marxist-Leninist dogma on the question of the relations between man and the environment. In the wake of May 1968, the energy crisis and the publication of the report by the signatories to the Treaty of Rome in 1971, the relations between man and the environment lay at the intersection of various areas of knowledge and of ideas. In the Western countries, social and political thought set about seeking remedies for these planetary ills – overpopulation, pollution, underdevelopment, urban crisis – which were, rather, indices of the bankruptcy of productivism and suggested a ‘change of ethos’ and a radical redefinition of man’s needs. Environmentalism was born. We should note that, in their analysis, the Western researchers insisted on the universality and the globalism of economic and social phenomena, all interconnected and explicable by the transcendent ‘ecological crisis’. Soviet social science then endeavoured to produce its own counter-analysis of the structure and the meaning of this ecological crisis, whose global character it denied. Before perestroika, the environmental crisis was an aspect of the bankruptcy of the capitalist system alone. Brought about by the capitalist mode of collectivization of natural resources, there were no solutions to the environmental crisis, except, of course, the establishment of the socialist system. Until the Nineteenth Conference of the CPUS (June 1988), dogma held to the simplistic formula according to which collective ownership of natural resources guaranteed the permanent protection of the latter. The publication of works concerned with the capitalist environmental crisis reached its peak between 1981 and 1984. International relations were then dominated by the question of the deployment of American Pershing missiles in Western Europe. The emergence of environmental movements in Western Europe, and especially in the German Federal Republic, was of interest to the USSR on strategic grounds. At the end of the 1970s, the West German ecologico-pacifist movement, *Die Grünen*, formed the spearhead of the opposition to the deployment of these missiles – think of their famous slogan, *Lieber rot als tot* (‘Better red than dead’). Soviet diplomacy therefore sought to ally itself with the West-German adherents of ‘alternative ecological socialism’, warmly received at the World Festival of Youth organized by Komsomol at Moscow in 1984. Soviet social science had then to deliver a verdict and deliver a critical analysis of the ideology of these ideologies. Although ‘the environmental movement in the FRG is an important element in the class struggle in capitalist countries’, it was none the less observed that

the environmental movements were not equipped with a general concept of the history of conflicts within society. They are happy to criticize the industrial society and the rise of technocracy. Ecological socialism belongs to the family of utopian socialism. It denies the objective of growth and criticizes the functioning of the capitalist system without challenging its foundations.<sup>9</sup>

We should observe that this literature on the ecological crisis should not be reduced to the single functional dimension of propaganda. Its strategic importance should be stressed. The task of doing research on this theme made it possible for some specialists to familiarize themselves with Western sociological literature of the 1970s and do research more freely into late nineteenth-century Russian philosophy. For instance, under cover of undertaking an analysis ‘of the whole of the bourgeois conceptions of the relations between society and nature since the end of the eighteenth century’, Iouri Chkolenko,<sup>10</sup> in a very

well-documented thesis, examines the whole of Western literature published on the theories of the European Commission members, on 'postmaterialism', and on 'global ecology'. Moreover, the majority of publications on this theme came from researchers who were to constitute the élite of Soviet social science with perestroika and, as such, were to play a role of cardinal importance in the focus of the argumentation of official policy after 1985.

Argumentation concerning the environmental crisis constituted one of the most important areas of an ideological struggle lead by official propaganda against the influence, deemed pernicious, of 'convergence theory', developed by some Western sociologists (and sovietologists). The adherents of this theory (Jacques Ellul, Alvin Toffler, Erich Fromm, and Marshall Goldman) saw industrialization, urbanization and the universal development of global telecommunications networks as the prelude to an imminent 'globalization' of world problems and to an 'inevitable' convergence of the socialist and capitalist systems, a convergence through the identical challenges with which they were faced. In the West, moreover, this theory's anchor-points are to be found in the idea, then very widespread, that the convergence between the two great systems was not only socio-economic, but also political and diplomatic. This idea sustained the 'Helsinki process' and the SALT agreements. It was undoubtedly why Soviet ideology then reacted against the convergence theory, its concept of globalism, and against one aspect of it, 'post-industrialism', for which the Soviet dictionary still gave the following definition in 1989:

Concept widely disseminated in bourgeois theories according to which the motor force of the development of contemporary societies is no longer material production but science, in other words, the production, exchange, and diffusion of a totality of information, which represents an ideology of the weakening of the role of revolutions and conflicts within society.

The crisis of this 'struggle against the dangerous ideas disseminated by the bourgeois theorists of post-industrialism and the claimed convergence between capitalist and socialist societies' was reached in the years 1979–1984. Thus, the weekly, *Ekonomiceskaja Gazeta* (1979, issue 36), published an article developing an analysis *in extenso* of the theory of convergence, whose sole objective was to weaken the credibility of the socialist system by means other than direct ideological confrontation. However, in the course of one sentence, the author opened a very unobtrusive door to the application of these theories to the Soviet case. When he wrote: 'Let us not forget that the problem of safeguarding the environment of the individual depends above all on changing the objective of production', his subtext was that, in the Soviet system, the objective of production could be – in other words, in coded language – should be changed. This covert sign makes it possible to understand how the analysis of the ecological crisis of the Western world was to be transposed to diagnose the Soviet reality and to assist in the construction of an analogical bond between this reality and ecological problems of a worldwide magnitude. During perestroika the Soviet authorities took over the theory of convergence for their own situation by turning it round in order to construct the 'new thinking' in foreign policy. Apparently revolutionary, this ideological shift was in reality latent.

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In search of a re-legitimation of the political and economic system, Soviet authority made use of the theme of the environment as an ideological and strategic tool marked out for



general condemnation, the 'sectorial ministries' were accused by the writers, with less and less restraint, of ransacking the country and pillaging its resources. These accusations, published in the media, made it possible to initiate limited and tightly controlled dialogue with society in which room for manoeuvre was admittedly narrow but none the less real: witness the nature protection 'movements' in universities and the genuine mobilization of opinion in the letter columns of the major newspapers. The theme of the environment enabled the government to construct a new theoretical basis for the validity of collectivism. It was then that the notion of 'ecological crisis' was sketched out, the origins of which should be sought in the ideological discourse about international relations and the 'general crisis of capitalism'. Ecological concerns revealed more general disfunctioning within Soviet society: here they linked up with Tatiana Zaslavskaja's analysis of the need for reintegrating the 'human factor' in the administration of the economy. Through the close multiple links which it sustained in Soviet economic and political thought in the early 1980s, the notion of 'ecological crisis' was now and henceforth at the heart of the challenge to the Soviet system which arose in a more open manner from 1985 onwards.

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Translated from the French by Juliet Vale

## Notes

1. Jean-Robert Raviot (1995) *Écologie et pouvoir en URSS: le rapport à la nature et à l'espace, une source de légitimité politique dans le processus de désoviétisation*, doctoral thesis, IEP de Paris, chap. 2.
2. See the standard work: Douglas Weiner (1999) *A Little Corner of Freedom. Russian Nature Protection from Stalin to Gorbachev* (?), University of California Press).
3. Anatoli Vichnievski (2000) *La faucille et le rouble: la modernisation conservatrice en URSS* (Paris, Gallimard) [orig. edn (1998) *Serp i rubl': konservacionaja modernizacija v SSSR*, Moscow, OGI, French translation by Marine Vichnievskaja].
4. For this episode, see the archivally based work, Vladimir Boukovsky (1995) *Jugement à Moscou* (Paris, Robert Laffont), chap. 21, *Les fusées et la lutte pour la paix*.
5. Marie-Hélène Mandrillon (1985) *Une revue Viviane: Eko*, *Annals ESC*, July-August, 829–831.
6. Juarès Medvedev (1983) *Andropov au pouvoir* (Paris, Flammarion), p. 254.
7. Extracts from Andropov's speech to the plenary session of the Central Committee of the CPSU in December 1983: *Pravda* (27 December 1983).
8. See TASS despatch of 20 January 1984 cited by Johannes Grotzky, *Umweltschäden in der jüngsten sowjetischen Diskussion*, *Osteuropa-Archiv* 7 (1984), 513.
9. Irina Razumova (1986) *Ekosocializm: ekologičeskaja 'alternativnogo' dvizenija v stranah Zapadnoj Evropy* (Moscow, INION).
10. Jurij Skolenko (1982) *Kritičeskij analiz buržuaznyh koncepcij vzajmodejstvija obscestva i parody*, *kandidatskaja* (doctoral thesis) (Moscow, Institut filosofi AN SSSR), p. 345.