

Then we do a lot of things for people, make people's hair,
put makeup on them.



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The Power of the Future and Childhood's Negation of It

Today, the rhetoric of the “future” has become a kind of lingua franca for the financial and political elite (from the G8 and Davos forums to the BRICS meeting and the current agenda of the Russian government). This “future” begins to determine and manage the present, which has to be “flexible”, open to rapid changes and finally dissolve itself in potential reality. This neoliberal Cassandra-type message is widely known: we have to be prepared that our workplaces, our education and our present way of life will necessarily disappear. That is why, today, we should already be transforming ourselves into “minutemen” who can instantly refuse our social role and adopt a new one. Our knowledge and skills could at any moment become obsolete in the marketplace and useless. All our perspectives and plans based on the experience of today have no relation to the future, which is unknown and unpredictable. Only the financiers and experts have a detailed vision of the brave new world. That is the basis of their power: the future is not subject to democratic participation, where it could be determined by the limited and profane interests of the present society. On the contrary – this society should break with its illusions, cast off its fears and hopes, and accept the future as destiny.

The enlightened owners of the future have also become moral teachers who create the new general consensus for the masses. The first lesson of this consensus: “Love your problems” – don’t complain or look back, be severe, performative and strong in the face of competitive struggle. This maxim could be compared with the way of the lonely nomadic warrior, one who has no home and no past. He must be open only to the endless horizon of expectations and place himself completely at the mercy of luck. This relation between neoliberal “flexibility” and militaristic virtue appears to be more and more organic nowadays. In contrast to the traditional understanding of the free market as a means to the rational minimization of violence, the spirit of modern capitalism revives the credo of the warrior. The triumph of innovative economy combined with growing military costs and global expansion is more and more often taking the form of “national interest”.

In this respect, nowadays, Putin’s Russia, which tries to present itself as an opponent of the “global order” in the name of “traditional values”, stays at the vanguard of this mix of neoliberalism and militarization. Unlike the Soviet Union, where the very idea of the state included the possibility of a universalist alternative, contemporary Russia constantly undermines any humanitarian rhetoric as a hypocrisy that merely acts as a cover for the eternal competitive fight between countries for influence and resources. Culture and religion in this interpretation are merely weapons in the global competition between the

states and civilizations. In order to keep national sovereignty, they could be more or less effective. The “traditional values” don’t confront capitalist logic, but quite the opposite – they become equivalent to market value. In school programs, mass media and huge didactic museum exhibitions, a thousand years of Russian history, from the acceptance of Christianity in the 10th century to the Second World War, is presented as a success story. The current sovereignty of the country is proof of the correct management strategy that was adopted centuries ago.

One of the leading figures of this ideological turn, the Russian Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinsky, comes across as an engaged historian attacking “myths about Russia.” According to Medinsky’s point of view, throughout its history, Russia has been continually subjected not only to open attempts by Western countries to subordinate it and deprive it of its independence, but to a hidden ‘information war’ as well. The history of the formation of the national state turned out to only be possible thanks to the intense opposition of professional enemy propaganda. “Without using PR-technology, there would have been no unification, no victorious wars, no transfer of the capital city to Moscow, nor the repulsion of the Mongol invasion.”¹ Thus, Russia’s historical choices always not only corresponded to truth, but also turned out to be the result of completely rational decisions. This fact, that Russia was able to withstand the pressure of a multitude of enemies, is linked with the high competitiveness and effectiveness of her particular cultural and moral values. History and culture in this concept represent a place of conflict between the technology of ‘myth’ creation, with some myths working for the destruction of the state, and others, by contrast, strengthening it. These technologies of ‘useful myths’, like various other useful tools, must be continually perfected.

Such a view on history makes clear the parallel between competition among individuals and the struggle for dominance among nations. Conservative hegemony inside the country became nothing more than a necessary advantage in the modern world’s ruthless struggle for recognition and dominance. The conjunction of militarism and neoliberalism, conservative values and market rationality has proven itself as the new “spirit” of the Russian capitalist model. In this model, the state does not serve the common interest of present society, but teaches it (with examples from its great past) how to take on the challenges of the future.

This role of the state could be compared with the modern neoliberal concept of the school that has to provide not general knowledge but the “emotional education” teaching the practical skills of “leadership” and the manipulation of others in your own self-interest. This idea of “practical” education, which combines elements of competition, training the student’s willpower and ideological indoctrination, in Russian conditions, has been perfectly realized in the form of “military-patriotic” education. This form of education develops outside the school and competes with it in two ways: in the formation of the “citizen,” and in the preparation of the individual for “real life”. It describes the “minutemen” exactly in terms of both meanings: the conservative (who is always ready became a soldier and die for the existence of his country) and the neoliberal (who is always ready to fight for his own existence).

Culture and history in the “military-patriotic” framework transform from the spheres of peaceful life to the weapons of the hidden struggle with external opponents. As perfectly pointed out by Medinsky,

¹ V. Medinsky. *Особенности национального PR. Правдивая история Руси от Рюрика до Петра* [The Peculiarities of National PR]. OLMA, Moscow, 2011, p. 19.

“if you don’t feed your own culture, you’ll be feeding someone else’s army.” Following this credo, the “Russian military-historical society”² was established a few years ago as a joint project of the Ministries of Culture and Defense. This collaboration was also supported by a number of private sponsors (so, even as a form as well, “society” is a great example of the neoliberal model of “state-private partnership”).

This initiative, which has gained huge financial and administrative capacity, focuses on a few lines of activity: new monumentalizing propaganda (dozens of statues of Russian war heroes from all eras erected across the country), a huge program of educational tours for children to sites of military glory, the creation of patriotic “amusement” parks where kids can enjoy real tanks and military missile systems, and institutional support for a “historical reconstruction” movement. The latter represents large-scale war games with thousands of young people dressed in uniforms of the past and armed with faux swords and guns. Taken all together, these activities of a “military-historical society”, which involve in various ways up to millions of children and teenagers, are based on the invention of the past as originating in its competitive, “actual” and “practical” side. In this ideological constellation, the future legitimizes itself through the consistent, homogenous past and triumphs over the weak-willed present that lacks the heroic experience of war. This is the unity of mythical ancestors and today’s children that is confronting the boring peaceful reality of adults.

In fact, this regime of temporality based on the coalition between an aggressive neoliberal “future” and a conservative interpretation of the “past” has become a new way of ruling that is not exclusive to Russia. This is a new consensus that provides absolute control by the elite over oppressed and voiceless present. The virtues of cooperation, non-dominance and non-violence now look hopelessly outdated.

So, what should other types of relations between past, present and future be? What relation could bring any alternative – even utopian – could throw doubt on today’s hegemony of the aggressive rule of the competitive fight?

Some decades ago, in the times of the Cold War, when the possibility of global extermination was even more possible than today, the movement for nuclear disarmament often referred to the figure of the innocent child, the inhabitant of the future. It was always stressed in the USSR-influenced anti-war propaganda that the passions and particular interests of the present could destroy even the possibility of a future. The capitalist world that is filled by greed and the reckless struggle for power increases the danger of war. The aggressive individualist present (which is trying to reproduce itself through the permanent arms race) remains blind towards any future for coming generations.

Even if the Soviet pacifism during the Cold War period was hypocritical and partly covered its own role in the arms race and its aggressive imperialist policy, from Czechoslovakia in 1968 to Afghanistan in 1979, it also had a positive effect. The education of the time was based on the very simplistic idea that war feeds only the interests of the bankers and hawks of the West, when the vast majority in the globe just needs peace. The masters of the present are ready to sacrifice the future in order to preserve their dominant position. This crazy irrational world of adults is ruled only by the unconscious power of self-

² More information on the programme of activities of the Military-Historical Society can be found here: <http://rvio.histrf.ru/activities/>

destruction and it is only the children who can save it from itself. They appear as “noble savages”, the common sense from the outside, who intervene in this doomed world and speak up as loud as they can: “Enough is enough, we don’t want your wars anymore.” In this model, the “future” raises its voice not to reproduce and intensify the conflicts of the present but to overcome them. The past here exists not as source of inspiration for coming battles but as a collection of tragic mistakes and meaningless victims. According to this “children’s pacifism”, the future could be better, or even possible, only when it breaks with the very order of things of today and presents something fundamentally different from it. Children are emerging as ambassadors from the future to the miserable planet of the present in order to build their utopian self-governed community that has nothing in common with the vicious world of adults. This community is equal and global: it provides a future without borders, racial prejudices or national provincialities.

One of the greatest examples of this “children pacifism” can be found in the novel by the Italian communist Gianni Rodari titled *Pie From the Sky*.³ In this tale, written in 1964, in the middle of the Cold War period, Rodari presents a clear conflict between these two opposite logics: the militarist present and the pacifist future. An unknown object falls from the sky into the suburbs of Rome – and, of course, is immediately recognized by the authorities and army chiefs as a potential danger. Most of the population, influenced by paranoid propaganda, are sitting at home and ready to follow each and every decision of the military. When the leaders of this frightened world of adults rapidly start to mobilize troops and implement a state of emergency, two brave kids secretly decide to investigate the object and upon reaching it discover a gigantic pie that consists of all possible ingredients: chocolate, marzipan, fruit, nuts, etc. The kids travel for hours towards the heart of the pie and finally meet its creator, an old professor who is seriously worried about his tragicomic position: he had planned to build the worlds’ biggest nuclear bomb and become a Cold War hero, but because of a mistake, he has merely ended up with a gigantic pie. Then, however, the intelligent kids explain to the scientist that his mistake is in fact the greatest of fortunes – instead of death and misery, it has brought pleasure and unity for all children and adults. The end of the story is optimistic and utopian: the adults break with their own fears and follow the children in having a great party on the ruins of the gigantic pie. This moment is crucial: kids and parents, students and teachers, masters and subordinates are all exchanging places. This means the principal revaluation of all previous values and opens the perspective for a new democratic and equal society. In *Pie from the Sky*, Gianni Rodari perfectly reveals the emancipatory potential of “children’s pacifism”. This potential, totally forgotten in our days, touches the key element of the dominant ideology – the power over the future.

I believe that Dejan Kaludjerović’s *Conversations* reflects this important controversial position surrounding childhood in the modern world: as a reproduction of the current order, or the overcoming of it. Childhood in this project could be understood as not just a pure continuation of the dominant ideology, based on identities and inequality, but as a source of negation of the current order of things. Kaludjerović’s *Conversations* is a part of this discursive battle for the very notion of the future – and without a doubt, this battle is one of the most important of our times.

³ Gianni Rodari. *Pie from the Sky*. J. M. Dent & Sons, 1971.