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Basile Kerblay and his scholarship Selected probes

The intention of this sketch is to reflect upon Basile Kerblay's way in scholarship by presenting a selection of themes he handled and how he handled them to be used as probes that may help to bring out the professional profile of this outstanding scholar.

Let us begin by referring first to his monograph on the "*izba paysanne*" – the peasants' hut, a small masterpiece in its own right. It is being done without nails – so the structure is dependent on different parts (beams) – whether of the future foundation, the walls or the roof – is solid enough. This is achieved thanks to the fact that tenons dovetail perfectly the corresponding cavities. Reading it we get ourselves "mobilized" and follow the modest but attractive structure rising from the foundation and ending in the rather more demanding composition of a roof. Basile knows these logs, parts, bits and pieces so well that one wonders whether he didn't actually participate himself in building such an *izba*. In any case he ends up in concentrating our attention on this fine work of "simple complexity" – a hallmark of a rich rural civilization that many wanted to dub "primitive" because its representatives were mostly poor and mostly illiterate. But a country populated predominantly by *krest'iane* – supposed epitome of simplicity (even primitivism) itself – cannot be fathomed without them. All too often though the approach to the task of grasping a country like Russia consists in concentrating, in the first place, on the capitals, the autocracy with its court, administration, army – as a natural and obvious way of handling a country like this "from above."

To make this idea that there is much more to an *izba* than just building it more palpable let us not forget that a) the building of an *izba* for a family attracts the collaboration of many villagers – hence it is an affair of the village community and b) the *izba* contains a kitchen with an oven in it – the proverbial *pech'* – which is the domain of the family's "second in command" – the mother who is, naturally, also the mother-in-law of the young spouses of the sons.

If the father is the head of the family – the "*bol'shak*" – she is the "*bol'shukha*" and although the royal scepter is replaced by the symbol of her power – the *ukhvat* – or the oven fork used to put the pots in or take them out of the very hot oven. Food and meals are life-savers and a social ceremony – as well as a begetter of authority relations: the mother's-in-law *ukhvat* power (as ethnographers call it)

and her domination over the daughters-in-law point to an interesting power game inside the family (normally quite big before the era of large-scale urbanization) and again – the “simplicity” needs subtle scholarship to peep under the roof of the izba (and we leave here out the stable, the cowshed and much more – not to mention the plow-horse-fields complex, the religion, the “superstitions”).

So the fact that Basile took us to the countryside and into its intimacies is explained by the fact that much of the rest is based on it. But this does not make “much of the rest” – the national economy, the complicated political system of autocracy established on the base of the tricky “simplicity,” the culture and society – of secondary importance. These themes are always in his purview and are studied in a stream of articles, statistical computations, and analytical essays.

More rural intricacies

Still, the rural complex is for a time in the center of the scholar’s attention. *Du mir aux agrovilles* lets us into the laboratory where a great variety of problems are tackled, analyzed, solved, by a scholar who was both “literate” and “numerate” – as a certain classification has it – but we insist on a third and crucial quality – a great analytical brain and a real “Stakhanovite.”

Here the peasantry and agriculture appear in a macro-dimension as an economy and a society in a historical perspective and our hinting at “the complexity of simplicity” turns into a firm statement about the multi-dimensional and quite intricate reality shown here in its passage from the tsarist into the Soviet period – with the additional advantage for the reader provided by the fact that Basile mastered the tsarist system and period with the same level of professionalism as he displayed when studying the Soviet period, with its vagaries and transitions.

The respect for the great minds that dealt with the peasantry and agrarian problems in the past and inspired him leads him also to express his admiration for the personality and authority of an agrarian scholar like A. V. Chayanov in whom he sees “a crossroad in the evolution of agrarian thought in Russia from 1908 to 1930.” Here we read an exciting evaluation of Chayanov – the great scholar of the rural economy and society, promoter and theoretician of the rural cooperative movement who often criticized different moves of the Soviet government of his time and did propose an alternative of “cooperation” to the nearing or already unfolding “collectivization.” At the time Basile writes this text Chayanov already passed away, the *kolkhozy* he did not favor became reality – and we read Basile discussing the pros and cons of both sides in this debate as a master who knows the positions of the protagonists involved in this historical dispute and gives us his verdict on the interplay of great scholarship, a resolute authoritarian government and the effects of its so-called collectivization of the peasantry. I admit that having read this text I felt that here was a verdict by somebody really authorized by Clio to represent her. The reason for such an impression is not simply because one should say niceties when writing *in memoriam*. It is Basile’s unbelievable mastery of the

problems in dispute – to the most minute but relevant details – that allows him to place the ideas and the events in question in a broader historical flow.

Du mir aux agrovilles shows us the toil that goes into grasping no doubt any country – but in particular when it is all about an old, huge, heavily underdeveloped one, especially its countryside and yet in the throws of a process of massive industrialization and urbanization – hence such frequent concatenation of bizarre, incongruous “patches” as our next “probe” will illustrate.

Muddy roads do lead somewhere

One can take the example of the proverbial Russian *bezdorozh'e* (lack of good roads, or simply – no roads at all) in its countryside. The road network is insufficient, sometimes almost absent, often neglected, proverbially muddy, and a source of *unyie* – a deeply Russian mood of despondency inherent in huge territories with poor communications among its dispersed villages and their populations. That it is a problem for local and national administrations is obvious – but what can a scholar do with such a subject? Well, a scholar like Kerblay is not going to miss a subject like that and its effects. He is immediately – so to speak – taking these roads and unravels the bundle of factors involved and headaches they generate. We are offered immediately a plethora of statistical data that helps us fathom the magnitude of the problem. This is followed by an analysis from all kind of aspects – in a huge country like that an adequate road network is a must. But we are studying a situation when these are inadequate – and Kerblay leads us immediately into different types of roads and the means of transportation that circulate on these roads, accompanied by a detailed and excellent statistical coverage.

We are getting comparisons with Canada, followed by the attention to ecological constraints, the five climatic zones of the whole country and their specific problems related to roads. In zone one – our sole example here – the roads are “sandwiched” in the summer between the frozen under-soil, the layer that is defrosted and the weight of the vehicles. The four other zones have their own incongruities – with their specific variations for each of the four seasons – accompanied by a plethora of troubles when these roads have to cross rivers...

The minute study continues through examining the actions of the authorities (tables with statistical details that are always enlightening), activities of the local authorities and of the population, things that do improve and get moving, cases of continuing decline...

As I read this supposedly tedious stuff I felt being dragged into this supposedly banal and “muddy” part of a rural *bezdorozh'e*. But with Kerblay you enter into the economic aspects of the whole problem, followed by numerous sociological effects and concluded by “perspectives” in which the scholar knows everything the state ministries or leaders know or should know: methods of financing, the output capacity of construction materials, a better localization of the centers that collect the agricultural products in order to diminish the costs of transportation, a better

organization of rural transportation, the time needed for the improvements to be implemented (you name it...).

The sociologist in him cannot fail to notice that the car (bus) is the privileged tool of the urbanization of the countryside. Thanks to it, the rural societies that lived so long in isolation, find themselves by now integrated in a technological universe, which is eroding step by step its traditional basis. For the moment cars are owned only by city dwellers who use them to invade villages on week-ends or for vacation purposes and draw disapproving reactions from the peasants against the impossible city bumpkins who do not hesitate a moment to enter a field and trample on its sowings. So – says Basile – one can accuse or defend the road – it does not react, it takes anything that is coming...

All the tools at work

Kerblay is taking on one crucial aspect after another and submits it to a similar scrutiny of a multi-disciplinary approach which combines the view from below by the inhabitants, the view from above by administrations (not to forget the proper historical background offered by the author on each of the floors) – all followed by a string of sociological, political, cultural consequences.

He will study in this manner topics like “Typology of rural markets in the USSR,” “The evolution of rural consumption in Russia during the years 1896-1960” and a masterful “Problems of socialization in the Soviet rural milieu”: in these works all the local institutions are examined in their interplay, including the ideological factor that is summed up by a section called “the divorce between official ideology and Soviet realities” – a phenomenon that can and does appear in any society and could not escape his attention – because here it carried a special weight and needed additional insights. It allowed him to enlarge his conclusions to the entire Soviet experience at the period under consideration. Ideological monopoly, however persistent, does not warrant a proper socialization because individual behavior – here as elsewhere – is determined less by ideas than by objective conditions. This sounds simple – but it is a key idea.

The role of the family is crucial and unpredictable insofar as it remains a privileged locus where the individual can disregard “the double talk” and be just himself. So long as this frontier remains intact it is possible to believe that goodness, compassion, tolerance – those values that grant a society its real human quality – will not get extinguished.

Thus our scholar-friend who asked us to study the subject *sine ira et studio* does not mean by this to close our eyes to the reality, namely the serious gap between the official talk and the real historical flow as well the consequences of such a gap.

And now – the system at large

Having accumulated an enormous experience of the system from all the relevant critical aspects and notably of its historical rural base, Basile turned to the systemic entity in his masterful *La société soviétique contemporaine* (Armand Colin, 1977) with an English edition *Modern Soviet society* by Pantheon books, 1983. The text on the cover of the US edition underlines – and rightly so – that “this comprehensive study of Soviet society begins by exploring its physical environment and population trends, then moves on to the analysis of social and family structures, the political system, and finally Soviet cultural values, encompassing such diverse matters as social mobility, village life, delinquency and political dissidence. Kerblay places the Soviet Union astutely in an international context through comparisons with other industrial countries – notably with France, US and Japan.” So much from what the publishers did choose to say.

Let us read what Kerblay himself wants to convey to the reader in his own preface: a society – he argues – is always in a state of constant change, the aim therefore is not to draw up an inventory of this society “which must of necessity be immediately obsolete but with spotlighting the signs of its future development.” He knows that this is a break with educational tradition that stresses the past, is ready to say something about “the present” without paying attention to the future.

We will see how he assessed the perspectives (the future) but let us note that this short statement does contain in a nutshell the mainspring of the profession as he was practicing it.

Past – present – future

In my personal terms – argued a short time ago in Moscow (not necessarily to everyone’s taste) – the division of a society’s existence into a past-present-future is not expressing reality of life. If we think of it, the three dimensions coexist at any moment through the simultaneous presence in its midst of older, middling and younger generations – each of them carrying “a chunk” of this scale. The youngest without knowing it are already carrying a future. This is why Kerblay’s statement I just cited gave me a feel for the type of scholarship he professed and did practice – he was studying social systems – in this case the Russian-Soviet one. To this end he uses history and a welter of social sciences to grasp it in its movement and sense its direction. No wonder he also preaches comparison as an indispensable method – implying that entirely unique social systems do not exist. Moreover he also lists the topics that need to be dealt with: territory comprising a multi-ethnic population, town and country, families and enterprises (micro-sociology), gradually accumulating necessary factual data and moving to the structure of the social and political system (macro-sociology). He states quite clearly that he wishes to avoid prejudging the character of the Soviet social system by dressing it up in an ideological straightjacket. Even Marxist critics – he notes – are not of one mind on

these problems. And next comes a challenge to the readers (although the answer is shrewdly implied in the question): let the readers decide for themselves whether the Soviet system is socialist or the product of a specific national tradition and of its remnants, the role of urbanization and industrialization, of modern technology. He does not propose any prevailing theory – he intends to offer readers a travel guide allowing them to explore the contemporary Soviet world, equip them with an investigative method – and wish them the best of luck in the field.

The book is in fact still unsurpassed. His conclusion is titled “Past and Future” – as we would expect from him by now. Writing in the seventies he did not bother to play the prophet and did not make clear predictions. History depends on choices made by people – and in this case (though not just in the USSR) a tiny minority of people forces the human spirit to be walled up in a single moment of history or to identify culture with the narrow world of ready-made ideas. Humanity – according to Kerblay – cannot be prevented from looking also beyond rational explanations in search of a meaning to existence, for science is not capable of producing a model ideal human being. “It is in the struggle of the intellect, between ideology and utopia in this unceasing quest of the will between the real world and the ideal, that the fate of society lies.”

The end to the “enigma”

I selected a few statements from his introduction and the conclusion to his book. Between the two lies a masterful picture of the USSR – a very complex “creature” – loaded with an enormous amount of data that cannot be tedious or bore anyone because they do end up producing a fascinating picture and invalidate the famous saying by Churchill that “Russia is a riddle wrapped up in a mystery inside an enigma.”

It turns out that this quip was just an escape hatch for people who did not have what it takes to face a novelty wrapped up partly in old attire, partly in the humdrum of its everyday business as usual anywhere, partly in “futuristic” ideological and mythological props – that did have a past, a present and not really much of a future.

Basile Kerblay left us great memories of his personality and of his creative talent evoking deep reverence in anyone who got in touch with him. We will be reading his books and articles for years to come – I didn’t yet see one piece that is obsolete – because it always raised and solved a real problem.

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