

# The Discipline of Culturology: A New 'Ready-Made Thought' for Russia

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For around ten years now textbooks on 'culturology' (*kul'turologiâ*, or sometimes *kul'turovedenie*) have been pouring onto the shelves of Russian bookshops and are playing an active role in the liberalization of language that is affecting a section of post-soviet societies. Culturology is not only a bookshop hit, it is also an integral part, and quite often a compulsory element, of Russian university courses. In replacing the former chairs in Marxist Leninism or dialectical materialism, this young discipline is displaying its determination to provide a new way of thinking about the world that might come after the classic discourse on bipolarity and to help people understand contemporary developments and Russia's place in them.

I am not concerned here to make a value judgement about current Russian explorations of identity; these are legitimate at a time of rediscovery and when speech has been set free, and they are common for countries whose government needs to construct a unifying national discourse. What is interesting about culturology is rather its scientific claims. Indeed its assumptions imply that the chief goal of the human sciences is to answer society's questions about identity and that these questions form an intellectual – and emotional – baggage that all Russian citizens need to share. Once they are institutionalized as a compulsory subject in a large number of university programmes, culturological concerns are used to classify students, to grant or refuse entry to a higher qualification and so to a profession and social status.

Culturology disturbs the western eye and gives rise to many questions and interpretations: is it perhaps a discourse that helps people to think about the historical failure of a certain Russia, a secularized substitute for a theology of the nation, or the discipline of the 'politically correct' that selects in the name of conformity to a vision of the world, like a kind of Russian version of 'single thought'? Should it be seen as a specifically Russian phenomenon or is it part of the western fashion for culturalism, holding out, as it does in its sometimes extreme aspects, the opportunity to

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think about the latter's principles and the fashionable discourse around civilizations? Analysis of this new post-soviet discipline and its success allows us to explore the roots in former Eastern Europe of the contemporary passion for the idea of nation: its referents are drawn at least as much from official soviet discourse as from 19th-century classics. This conjunction, which may seem contradictory in theory but is in fact common in post-soviet intellectual practice, is at the heart of culturology. Indeed the idea of the nation, which was developed and theorized by the official discourse of soviet science, borrowed many elements of thinking about the national question from the Franco-German opposition, and transposed the model of an abstract citizenship to the area of soviet identity.

This article is based on analysis of a dozen or so books on culturology (one of them from Belarus and one from Kazakhstan, the rest from the Russian Federation): they are all university texts, have the education ministry's official approval and are recommended to students in the context of the classes on culturology offered in the first year at nearly all Russian universities. They invite us to consider the institutionalization of the discipline, its methodological connections with the old Marxist sciences and its relationship with Russian nationalism.

### Institutionalization of the new discipline

Culturology sees itself as an extremely diverse discipline and its 'central core' is difficult to define. It is still a young science with no settled, agreed vision of its goals. Nevertheless it has a prehistory which can be discovered in the discrete attempts, discernible in the 1960s, to rehabilitate the terminology of 'culture' in soviet publications.<sup>1</sup>

Culturology is compulsory in primary and secondary schools<sup>2</sup> and is among the new disciplines institutionalized after the fall of the Soviet Union, at the same time as 'introduction to citizenship' (*graždanovedenie*), a course that is also required from first to eleventh grade. Culturology too is almost unavoidable in the first year of higher education, whether in human sciences, exact and natural sciences, law, economics, medicine or technical courses, of which there are a particularly large number in the former USSR. Culturology is most often taught in the second year in the form of an introduction to philosophy. In many universities, especially in the provinces, teachers of culturology are former teachers of Marxism, dialectical materialism (*diamat*) or occasionally atheism.

The first so-called teachers of culturology made their appearance in Russia in the late 1980s and really came into their own in the following decade. In 1995 for the first time the ministry of education formalized the 'standards' required to obtain a diploma at the end of year five specializing in culturology. It subsequently recognized a doctorate and then in 2000 a post-doctoral qualification in culturology. As set out by the ministry, culturology 'is based on the teaching of a group of socio-economic and human disciplines, disciplines in the exact and natural sciences and a group of specialized disciplines complemented by specialized classes, three written papers, defence of a dissertation and an introduction to teaching practice'.<sup>3</sup> Today the traditional five-year course includes various taught elements, in accordance with

the revised standards introduced in 2000: culturology in its own right, history of religions, national and world history, philosophy, sociology, psychology, history of science, computing, foreign languages, linguistics, semiotics, folklore studies, museum studies, etc., in different combinations which are left to the student's judgement. The specialization in culturology, attained after five years' study, gives the right to teach the subject in primary and secondary schools in the Russian Federation.

All the large Russian universities nowadays have a chair of culturology which is linked to other disciplines according to the original speciality of each of the culturologists appointed to the post: philosophy, cultural theory, pedagogy, history of religions, history of art, foreign languages, oriental studies, etc. The new discipline performs very diverse functions; the most common is to replace the chairs in *diamat* and offer a new vision of what 'general culture' in Russia ought to be. It can also take the form of an applied science: Moscow's Academy of Human and Social Sciences has, for example, a faculty called 'culturology and intercultural communication' that trains students in professions related to tourism; and the Russian Institute of Culturology offers training for conservation, restoration, protection of monuments and museum sciences.

Finally there is a 'high-level' culturology, which uses the term *theories of culture* more often than *culturology*. This understanding of the new discipline is represented above all by the Institute of European Cultures, which emerged in 1995 from the association between the RGGU (Russian State University in Moscow), the EHESS in Paris and the University of the Ruhr in Bochum, Germany.<sup>4</sup> The Institute offers a qualification after two years' specialization in culturology but in fact runs in parallel with the traditional university system, since it takes in students who have already completed a course of study in a college and admits those studying for doctorate in particular.<sup>5</sup> Specializing in modern and contemporary European cultures, the Institute offers high-quality teaching in art history and the history of thought in the various western countries, a teaching that is very far removed from the content of the majority of culturology texts. Thus it reflects the discipline's original diversity and its possible development into a pluridisciplinary practice in the main human and social sciences such as can be found in many western academic programmes.

We may wonder how far culturology responds to a precise social demand, coming either from students or from former Marxism lecturers who have been forced in the last ten years to recycle themselves. Is it attempting to answer a wider need that exists in Russian society, a secularized interest in spirituality, a desire to open out to other cultures, a yearning for the exotic and displacement in time and space, such as western countries may experience? At all events it is financially profitable for publishers to bring out books on culturology, since they are not only bought by students but reach out to a wider audience. Though the true impact of these texts is difficult to measure, they are all published in print runs of several tens of thousands of copies and there are several dozen titles.

Two possible definitions of culturology are found alongside each other in the textbooks. The first one presents it as a group of disciplines including theories of literature, sociology of culture, religion or philosophy, philosophies of history, political science, aesthetics, semiotics, etc. This first type of culturology claims to be

radically comparative and sees itself as instruction in general culture. And thus many books are anthologies of western or Russian texts. They present a history of world culture divided into traditional 'areas of civilization': ancient cultures, the Middle Ages in the West, the Renaissance and the Reformation, the contemporary period, 'post-modernism', and each is explained through its main cultural, artistic, intellectual and religious trends. Some textbooks offer more theoretical analyses of the word 'culture': a typology of cultures, the relationship between art, religion and science, a classification of mankind's place, way of life, relationship between the sexes, education, etc., according to cultures.<sup>6</sup> In this form culturology means that students and the general public are made aware of art, ideas, religions, philosophical thought, and reflects the general feeling in the former Soviet Union that a truncated or forgotten body of knowledge needs to be re-learned.

The second definition of culturology is noticeably more ideologically committed. The new subject is a meta-system or meta-science, at all events a new philosophy of culture that helps to explicate worldwide developments. The author of the Belarus textbook, I. A. Levâš, distinguishes between the two possible approaches in the following way: 'If the science of culture (*kul'turovedenie*) is that group of disciplines that study the cosmos with no limit as regards cultures, culturology (*kul'turologiâ*) is the law of their world gravitation. It is a philosophy of culture as a totality.'<sup>7</sup> This second view – whether explicit or implied – is put over by the vast majority of textbooks and it is the one that gives rise to most questions since it depends on several philosophical and political assumptions while refusing to unpack them.

Culturology as such is not fashionable in all the post-soviet republics. In Uzbekistan, for instance, the government has replaced courses in Marxist Leninism with a new subject, 'national spirituality' (*milli ma'naviat*), which is also compulsory in all programmes and instrumentalizes Islam for the benefit of the government. However, the functions attributed to culturology and 'national spirituality' allow us to draw a parallel between the two disciplines: all the new post-soviet regimes have tried to re-use to their advantage the institutional space left by former Marxist Leninism.

### **The *episteme* of culturology: rejection or continuation of Marxism?**

Culturology claims to be the precise opposite of what Marxist teaching was in the USSR. Though the latter is used as a counter-example, the relationship between them is in fact far more complex: culturology turns out to be a mirror of soviet Marxism, since it seems to reflect it by reversing its terms. This kinship, which is of course denied, appears quite clearly in the epistemological and methodological area.

### **Intellectual innovation or return to old debates?**

Culturology is playing a double game. It presents itself as a new science in a phase of reconstruction, in accord with the rejections and intentions proclaimed by current Russian society. Paradoxically it also thinks of itself as the heir to a group of older

attitudes. In fact emphasis on these serves to legitimate a discipline that is sorely in need of theoreticians. All the textbooks thus see the most diverse disciplines (sociology, history, psychoanalysis, anthropology, philosophy, etc.) as belonging *by right* to their heritage. Like all Russian discourse around identity that preceded it, culturology attempts to use the West to gain legitimacy: the western writers quoted<sup>8</sup> are paradoxically made to prove the scientific character of culturology, which nevertheless stresses that it wishes to form an independent idea of Russia. But it is never admitted that the subject 'culturology' does not exist in western university programmes and that it has no connection with the content of American 'area studies', even though here and there they share some basic ideas. Among the Russian references a very special interest is focused on 'the Silver Age',<sup>9</sup> early 20th-century religious philosophy and Russian emigration between the two world wars.<sup>10</sup> Thus culturology clearly claims kinship with the great 19th-century Russian thinkers and takes on board the link, characteristic of the turn of the century, between Marxist economics and Orthodox spirituality: the desire, which is quite explicit in the textbooks, to affirm the continuity of Russian identity is also clearly found in these ecumenical intellectual efforts to make economic materialism and spirituality compatible.

All the authors mentioned are summarized in a few lines around certain key words attributed to each one, and the historical context for their writing is never presented. They are all quoted without any distinction between style, academic area or period: so Hegel may without any explanation precede the esoteric thinker René Guénon,<sup>11</sup> and the founder of anthroposophy Rudolf Steiner may follow Karl Jaspers in a section about Christianity.<sup>12</sup> The very frequent quotations are not referenced, and the textbooks generally do not have footnotes. It seems fairly obvious, given the low level of analysis, that the original texts are not familiar to culturologists and that they work with translations at best but more probably with secondary sources. Culturology's western and Russian references seem therefore to be treated in the same way as Marx, Engels and Lenin used to be in Soviet academic books: their thought is limited to series of quotations wrenched out of their context, which are malleable and appear in many forms, making up a kind of breviary or little ABC of references that everyone is invited to manipulate according to circumstances.

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### **Rejection of politics in general and the soviet period in particular**

Culturology thinks about the world in terms of civilizations. It insists on the relevance of this perspective and repeatedly draws its inspiration from the work of Spengler and Toynbee, in that it classifies the world into great civilizations and religious regions. Though these writers are very frequently quoted, culturologists never indicate what they have to say about Russia and restrict themselves to setting out the main lines of theories of world history. Among contemporary figures Samuel Huntington, the famous American political pundit and author of *The Clash of Civilizations*, is also granted favourable treatment and features among culturology's

prime group of references. Although the textbooks' authors do not necessarily share Huntington's vision of world development as one of conflict, all of them identify with the idea that the post cold war world can be explained only in terms of the 'civilizationist' map: the western or 'Atlanticist' cultural region as against the 'Slav-Orthodox' space, while the 'Muslim world' will have to choose between an alliance with the West or Russia.

This emphasis on the idea of civilization entails a number of consequences, such as the erasure of traditional political periodization: the *'longue durée'* is more significant than political events.<sup>13</sup> However, this 'long term' is not conceived of in the context of its economic and social developments, in accordance with the famous model set out by Fernand Braudel, but solely in relation to its permanent national and religious aspects: studies encompass a country's religion, folklore, artistic and intellectual production, sometimes way of life, but never its political institutions or legal traditions. What is true for the West is equally applicable to Russia. Thus there is no textbook that raises questions about the political workings of the tsarist or soviet regimes, no chapter that deals with Russians' relationship with their empire and the 'allogenes' who are part of it, just as indeed none of the chapters about the West shows any interest in the problem of colonization–decolonization.

Culturologists very frequently express their feeling that the cultural sphere was neglected throughout the soviet period and they keep reminding their readers that the subject was frowned on in the USSR because it was considered a bourgeois pseudo-science. They say that, through its current official recognition, culture, as well as economics, is capable of transforming the world, and they repeat what was at the very root of dissident thinking: the utopia of culture as a response to communism. In all its textbooks culturology thus calls for the creation of a new humanism and the humanization of the sciences (*gumanizaciâ nauk*) as a reaction to 'dry' soviet thought. And so any sociological or economic approach is rejected because of its proximity to Marxist discourse. However, neither does culturology envisage problems from the perspective of a more theoretical analysis of politics. This rejection of a socio-economic explanation as well as the deliberate depoliticization mean that it turns to solely culturalist and essentialist explanations that reify rather than 'humanize' the problems at issue.

Culturology's relationship with communism is fairly uniform: Marxist thought in all its diversity is almost completely missing from the historical impressions offered. Populist, anarchist and socialist writers from the 19th century are mentioned only rarely. The soviet system is unanimously but always briefly condemned in association with the concept of totalitarianism, which is explained by references to western thinkers such as Hannah Arendt or Raymond Aron. Paradoxically this damning of communism is not supported by any reference to soviet or central European dissidence, whose intellectual legacy does not appear to interest the culturologists. Only Solzhenitsyn is occasionally quoted, and far more than Sakharov. In fact the soviet period is seen as a parenthesis which only needs to be closed. And hence this idea of an intellectual discontinuity prevents dissidence from being included since the last 70 years are presented solely as 'Marxist-Leninist'.

The obvious lack of interest with which culturology views the soviet period, even when it is criticizing it, in a way reflects the general situation in Russia. Indeed the

subject follows the conciliatory vision that Russian government and society seem to offer of the period: communist ideology and a few great figures holding power are decried, while individuals' daily experience and life under soviet communism lurk in a sort of shadowy area of thought, characterized by nostalgia for the Brezhnev years.

### **Desire for a holistic knowledge and the influence of the exact sciences**

Rejection of the old official ideology cannot fail to create a number of problems: thus culturology links traditional references from 19th-century Russian thought with methods and ideas directly borrowed from soviet science. For example, it stresses the importance of a unified knowledge, a 'meta-science', that would include within it all other disciplines. According to the culturologists, their subject does not study cultures separately but their universal characteristics and attempts to understand culture as 'a system that is richer than the sum of its parts'.<sup>14</sup> It tends to move the discourse on to the general level and rejects what it sees as the 'relativism' of western sciences, which are said not to be concerned with the problem of truth. This aspiration towards the unity of academic knowledge, taken up *diamat*, was one of the constants of 19th-century Russian academic culture, which was influenced by the holistic tradition of *Naturphilosophie*.<sup>15</sup>

Like its Marxist forerunner, culturology envisages itself as a new philosophy of history, a future 'organic, complete body of knowledge',<sup>16</sup> making sense of the world on the basis of empirical materials. This kind of statement, typical of ideologies, quite clearly places culturology as related to Marxism: the implicit preservation of the notion of totality, forced abstract features, rejection of an empirical, partial, pragmatic knowledge. Thus culturology explains understanding as a process carried on by an individual determined by an existing objective reality outside the understanding subject. And it does not conceal its disciplinary imperialism: as the final stage in the history of the human sciences, it would have the role of synthesizing them and determining the general direction to be taken by all spheres of knowledge.<sup>17</sup> The state university of Nijni-Novgorod presents culturology as follows, in a style close to Marxist dialectic: 'it is not satisfied with the situation and results of other sciences in an eclectic manner but allows us to rethink on a new level the main questions of being by reconciling and harmonizing existing contradictions in a new vision of the world'.<sup>18</sup>

A sometimes paradoxical corollary to this desire to be a philosophical meta-science is the search for a high degree of scientific pedigree which is at the heart of culturology's aspirations. The expectation of being able to formulate human sciences on the model of the exact sciences has its roots in soviet teaching traditions, which were themselves inspired by 19th-century positivism.<sup>19</sup> So culturology tends to reduce science to an asocial phenomenon that can be analysed by means of statistical and mathematical models. Whereas the 19th-century model for the human sciences was biology, in the 20th century this role was filled by mathematics, which is especially favoured by culturologists because 'it comprises a new understanding of the behavioural possibilities of complex organisms (culture among them) and of

the different possible means of handling them'.<sup>20</sup> This reference to mathematical models was a constant not only of Marxism as such but also of certain disciplines such as dialectical materialism, which presented human history and its diversity schematically as a succession of class–power relations. Admiration for the exact sciences is inseparable from the dream of being able to forecast cultural developments and therefore of serving the government, becoming a state science, which was already an avowed aim of soviet ethnology.<sup>21</sup> Thus culturology's purpose is thought to be to construct 'a genetics of culture which would not only explain the historico-cultural process but be able to forecast it and with this in mind correct it'.<sup>22</sup>

And so culturology attempts to classify and draw up typologies; it suggests a great variety of tables and schemas and sets out theories which it claims flow from the 'laws' or 'regularities' (*zakonomernost'*, on the German model of *Gesetzmässigkeit*) of history. It is fond of statistical elaboration and finds that it explains the reality of the world. A. A. Gorelov's textbook, for instance, presents a graphic vision of the development of human culture from prehistory and analyses the history of humanity as official Marxism does, by dividing it into progressive stages of evolution: after Neanderthal man, the period of 'thinking humans' is divided into three stages (the savages, the barbarians, civilization) and comes before the long-awaited arrival of what the author calls '*homo spiritus*' (*Duhovnyj čelovek*).<sup>23</sup> The repeated determination to use tables and graphics is common in the post-soviet human sciences, especially in the area of political science, which is desperately searching for an overall synthesizing approach to the diversity of the world.

### A discourse of truth

Culturology's attraction to the exact sciences helps to broaden what was originally inherited from *diamat*, the idea of teaching as a truth discourse. In his thoughts on soviet science Alessandro Mongili already referred to the 'difficulty of accepting the reality principle being transcended. In the constructivist tradition the real nature of the object is a secondary characteristic, it is socially constructed and its relationship with the concrete object is unstable. In the theories of knowledge developed in Russia there is reality of the object'.<sup>24</sup> Thus it is never suggested in the textbooks that consider the multiplicity of viewpoints, and hence of truths, on the encounter between subjectivities. The culturologists are essentialists who are trying to answer the why and not the how of things and do not offer any consideration of the interaction between the researcher and his object. So knowledge of reality is stressed at the expense of the instruments for knowing that reality.

Most textbooks are put together on the same model: a lesson taking up a few pages is followed by a QCM-type questionnaire, the answers to which are supplied at the back of the book.<sup>25</sup> At the end of each chapter a section entitled 'conclusions' summarizes the main topics in a few points and in the form of short maxims, without problematizing them. This type of response and analysis asks very little of the student in the way of reflection and critical attitude. The schematic and essentialist approach rules out the possibility of presenting a text or fact in all its complexity, since the researcher is a prisoner of the reductive method and the resultant sacro-



sanct nature of the object. The QCM principle, whose essentialism came from *diamat*, is also justified by the widespread use by Russian universities of the American 'test' method: nowadays tests validate many end-of-year assessments and in many human science disciplines they have replaced the more traditional essay.

The most diverse ideas belonging to all fields of thought and all periods are roped in without being defined. And so textbooks describe 'Russia's' place between 'West' and 'East', the opposition between 'archaic times' and 'civilization', 'national mentalities' or 'post-modernism', etc., without ever raising questions about the relevance of these ideas. Thus culturology very often seems to be a collection of statements that are not conscious of forming a discourse and imply a tacit consensus about things. In addition it is noteworthy that contemporary Russian intellectual circles do not feel much need to define concepts used, maybe in part because the regime itself changed the definition of words as it evolved politically and by its linguistic excesses created the impression that words were interchangeable according to requirements.

### **'The Russian idea' turned into a discipline?**

Culturology presents itself as a form of opening to the world but also sees itself as an eminently national science, with a mission to give a new historicity and meaning to the process of Russian intellectuals thinking about themselves. Very often it offers no more than a course in value judgements cloaked in a collection of pseudo-scientific formulations. Even the highly serious St Petersburg State University describes its chair of eastern philosophy and culturology, inaugurated in 1998, as a creation that 'means truly transcending east-centrism and at the same time expresses a recognition of Euro-Asian culture, the spiritual life of our society and Russia's geopolitical status'.<sup>26</sup> The eternal question as to Russia's relationship with the West thus seems to be foregrounded as the matrix of culturology, even though that pre-eminence is seldom recognized. Indeed the culturology books set out to be manuals of the 'Russian idea': they do not restrict themselves to presenting as a historical object the thinking evolved in the 19th century on the question of the national identity, but see it as a contemporary reality that still has meaning for today's Russia.

### **A thinking focused on the nation**

Culturology is a thought that focuses on the idea of nation: cultures, religions and sciences are above all national and must be studied from that angle. This is why, paradoxically, the difference between the terms 'culture' and 'civilization' is always unclear. Although the opposition and interaction between them occupied the whole of the 19th century, culturology almost ignores those debates and uses the terms in their most common sense: civilization is material, culture is more spiritual; the first is presented as being universal or at least regional, whereas the second is synonymous with nation. National cultures – and the adjective is seen as more relevant than the noun – are in fact the true object of culturological study.

With this obsession with the nation, culturology takes its place in its own times

and among the most current fashions in the post-soviet space. Indeed it is attempting to channel, classify and 'make scientific' contemporary concerns about identity. Far from presenting the nation as an intellectual, political construct, arising along with others from the profound social upheaval brought about by economic modernity, culturology is elaborating a 'primordialist' discourse around community. This reification of the object is visible in the use of the terms 'people', 'ethnos', 'nation' or 'mentality', all of them interchangeable. The Kazakh culturology textbook, for example, does not conceal its aims and bears the revealing sub-title 'world ethnosophy'.<sup>27</sup> Thus it appears that culturology's real object is the 'ethnos' or 'nation' and not 'culture': it starts from the idea that there is an inherent overlap between ideas of culture and the cultural idea of the nation.

### An applied science? Russia at the heart of culturology

Culturology claims not to be interested in Russian history alone but world history, and this presumption of universality is accompanied by a rejection of western universalism, which is alleged to crush or deny nations. In fact culturology's universality remains very limited, since the chapters devoted to non-European worlds are almost, and in some textbooks totally, non-existent: it appears that only Russia is challenging the West's claim to universality. This culturology seems trapped in the traditional Slav dichotomy between Russia and the West and cannot bring into focus other 'regional civilizations', such as Asia or Africa, to counteract what it understands as Europe's identity imperialism. All the textbooks give special emphasis to Russia, which takes up between one-third and two-thirds of the text. Russian specificity is also present in the themes: for instance it does not share the same divisions into periods as western countries and has chapters to itself. Thus the different national histories are superimposed one upon another and never intersect: for example, there is no parallel drawn between the Middle Ages in the West and the Moscow region under the Mongols, or between the different political regimes in 20th-century Europe. This compartmentalization blocks any application of the comparative principle which culturology nevertheless implies in the introductions.

In all the textbooks Russia is portrayed as a world apart. The classic notion, in 19th-century Russian thought, of the bridge or crossroads between 'East' and 'West' always takes up at least one chapter. The clichés wheeled on are the most traditional ones, which repeat old Slav assumptions: whereas the West is historical and characterized by individualist and materialist values, the east is ahistorical and is distinguished by its collectivism and spirituality. Backed up by the early 20th-century rehabilitation of religious philosophy and by inter-war isolation, culturology clings to the terminology of 'individuality' (*ličnosť*, in a version close to 'personalism'), a central idea for thinkers such as Bulgakov or Berdiayev, whom the textbooks associate somewhat crudely with the Russians' supposed sense of community, the Orthodox concept of conciliarity (*sobornost'*) and the tradition of the Slav peasant community (*mir* or *obščina*). Some authors do not hesitate either to give definitions of the too often celebrated 'Russian soul': it is seen as 'the central idea of the Russian mentality which expresses the people's specific spiritual identity' and whose quali-

ties are 'attraction for unlimited freedom, great tolerance, a hunger for justice . . . faith in absolute good without evil'.<sup>28</sup>

The textbooks thus claim quite openly to represent a certain Russian nationalism whose erasure under the soviet regime they lament. G. V. Drač, for instance, states that there is a 'Russian cultural archetype', which he defines by its permanent, unchanging nature, a form of collective unconscious affecting all spheres of life.<sup>29</sup> He devotes two chapters to analysing 'how to interpret, in a Russian cultural archetype, values such as conscience, responsibility, liberty, justice', then 'power, order, authority, work',<sup>30</sup> before concluding that political autocracy and authoritarianism are natural national phenomena. Indeed the textbooks repeat the most classic nationalist ideas, present Russia as regenerating the whole of humanity and make many allusions to the movement known as 'cosmism'. Started in the late 19th century, it called for reconciliation between human beings and nature and the universe, linked futurist thought with environmentalist themes and made eschatological statements about the end of one world and the birth of a new one characterized by spirituality and asceticism. Thus Gorelov's book defines Russia and the USA as 'cosmic civilizations', ambiguous terminology in Russian thought: the two superpowers have indeed conquered space but in Russian the cosmos is also 'the order and harmony of the heavenly spheres'.<sup>31</sup>

The theme of geopolitics is ubiquitous. It is presented as an objective science analysing the place Russia *ought* to have (for culturology sees itself in terms of what *ought to be*) in the world. For example, the cultures analysed in A. A. Gorelov's book are defined using a geopolitical terminology that is never explained: Egypt is presented as the model for 'river civilizations', Greece as a 'maritime civilization', the West as an 'ocean civilization', etc. Each analysis is based exclusively on a national model: if different geopolitics clash, it is because they belong to different countries, each of which can have only one geopolitics since it is an objective discipline. This belief in a science of geopolitics raises a number of questions about the culturologists' theoretical and political informational background. The Belarus textbook quotes the theoretician of European national-communism Jean Thiriart, presenting him simply as a 'French politics expert',<sup>32</sup> and seems unable or unwilling to specify his position on the political spectrum, a position that in fact is an extreme one.

So culturology sets itself up as an institutionalization of the debates about 'the Russian idea'. It presents itself both as teaching this thought and as continuing it after what is seen as the soviet hiatus. It does not stop at turning the most diverse ideas into a unified discipline but considers itself to be an integral part of this discourse, invites students to continue it and sees it as entirely legitimate for post-soviet Russia.<sup>33</sup>

### **An anti-westernism promoted to the status of a scientific doctrine**

Like most identity discourses culturology finds many of its intellectual props in what Marc Angenot has called 'ideologies of resentment'.<sup>34</sup> Indeed Russia's feeling of inferiority towards Europe encourages a transmutation of values: the superiority acquired by the West in the empirical world is in fact proof of an inner inferiority

compared with Russia, which is a victim of its great soul. So the subject of cultur-ology does not hide its conservative tendencies, which often run alongside rejection of the West: here the idea of progress is assimilated to the state excesses of the soviet 20th century, while the idea of preservation is synonymous with respect for national specificities. Progressive values are decried since they are alleged to lead to a general deterioration in the social body. This rejection of the West is not seen as a political choice but as an almost biological necessity because the 20th century is thought to have proved that 'transplanting, mechanically borrowing cultural elements cannot have positive results'.<sup>35</sup>

Heavily committed to the country's future, the culturologists seldom conceal their choices, which are presented as the unavoidable and logical conclusion to be drawn from their analysis of the nation's essence. Though they are validated by the education ministry, the textbooks do not hesitate to display their authors' political ideas. Thus, in I. A. Levâš's glossary, so-called authoritarian democracy explicitly wins the author's approval since it is thought to be 'the objective trend to forming a strong Russian state system (*gosudarstvennost'*), able to neutralize the extremes of totalitarian and liberal models, and create the conditions for successfully transforming society'.<sup>36</sup> And so the West is continually denigrated without the details of this criticism being clearly defined: selfish individualism, consumer society, rationalism, cult of material well-being and technology, mass culture, etc.

Culturology is very critical of the 'crisis' situation that Russia is passing through – a common theme in the introductions to the textbooks or some of their chapters – and expects to contribute directly to emergence from it: the discipline does not hide its wish to be a forward-looking, applied science and hopes to have a moral and immediately practical aim in helping students to 'think Russia'. For instance the Belarus author says in the introduction that he is 'sure that 21st-century civilization will be saved only by a cultural renewal capable of moving on from an abstract to a practical humanism',<sup>37</sup> that is to say, from Marxism to culturology. Thus the latter must not only help people to understand but teach and educate young minds by showing how 'to behave in life'.<sup>38</sup> So textbooks may include chapters devoted to matters of good education and etiquette. The Kazakh textbook, for example, gives up its first chapter to good conduct in different cultures, while A. B. Esin's book, which is extremely critical of contemporary social developments, devotes a chapter to bringing up children and another to relations between men and women.<sup>39</sup>

This dissemination of personal opinions in the guise of a scientific discourse is to be found most particularly in religious questions. Indeed culturology textbooks, which are determined to define civilizations above all by their religions, are full of the extremely positive view enjoyed in the former USSR by the idea of faith as such rather than religious institutions or hierarchies. So the bonds between culture and religion are always overestimated and never counterbalanced by a reference to the secularizing evolution of societies. Atheism is very violently attacked and quite frequently presented only in terms of soviet repression. As for the notion of agnosticism, it is completely ignored. In some textbooks religions are classified according to their 'degree of tolerance' and the two main western confessions are regarded with suspicion. Furthermore faith is apprehended as a collective phenomenon which involves the nation, and not as an individual choice that belongs to the private

sphere: the link between Russia and the Orthodox Church is thus presented as a self-evident fact that no good citizen can evade.<sup>40</sup>

The chapters explaining differences between cultures very often put across, in a supposedly scientific form, nothing other than a series of national clichés that come close to xenophobia. For instance, ‘Russians lean towards attaining truth and justice . . . while Americans lean towards personal success’.<sup>41</sup> The Belarus culturologist implicitly criticizes ‘cosmopolitanism’ under the cover of a condemnation of the early Bolsheviks’ internationalism.<sup>42</sup> And U. V. Roždestvensky’s textbook presents a table of the six great world religions (Hinduism, Confucianism, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism) that classifies their differing reception according to certain feelings: thus we learn that Jews have neither self-esteem nor a feeling of debt to others, that Hindus and Buddhists do not like work, etc.<sup>43</sup> Whereas Islam and Buddhism are often favoured with a more or less positive view, Judaism is mentioned only seldom and the Jewish world is not considered as a ‘civilization’ with the right to a chapter to itself.

The scientific character that culturology tries to assume can only provoke to scepticism. Through its textbooks the discipline seems to have managed, via crude information on western countries and Russia, to accumulate nothing but a collection of nationalist and politically biased clichés. Though these cannot be criticized as such, they create a problem in that they are presented as self-evident scientific facts and are used to validate the award of a national qualification.

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Can Russian culturology be seen as an epiphenomenon of a more general trend that arose in the West with the end of the cold war, the supposed death of ideologies and the disappearance of the opposition between communism and capitalism? Indeed western countries have also witnessed the re-emergence of (geo)cultural or civilizational explanatory modes: the division of Yugoslavia, for example, has been presented as the resurgence of the historical and religious line that separates the old Hapsburg Balkan lands under Ottoman domination, while economic difficulties meaning that richer countries or regions no longer wish to subsidize poorer ones have received less emphasis. François Thual’s series of books on the geopolitics of religions, the success of Samuel Huntington’s *Clash of Civilizations* and the return of geopolitical discourse, especially in the USA, are only the tip of the iceberg: with the intellectual retreat of Marxism socio-economic explanations appear to be fading at the expense of the idea that only analysis of national identities, cultures and religions gives us the explanation of today’s world.

The new ‘science’ of culturology attempts to legitimate its political and philosophical assumptions under cover of a recognized institutional discourse and the right for new disciplines to emerge. Its wish to present as scientific ideas that are personal or more or less generally accepted may be surprising. Is it merely a transitory phenomenon that is quite understandable, given the upheaval Russia has experienced, or is it putting down roots in an ambiguous space between science and ideology? Will the initial diversity of the views it puts forward become increasingly limited to national, or even nationalist, stereotypes? The mass of ideas related to

identity and on the other hand the accumulation of the most diverse references may be understood as the wish, on the part of some Russian academics, to 'rediscover' what used to be prohibited, even authors on the extreme right and fashionable spirit and occult groups. What in fact poses a problem is not these ideas and discoveries per se but their institutionalization: mastering culturological discourse leads to a qualification, just as knowledge of the Marxist-Leninist bible used to do. So is it destined to become the new 'ready-made' thinking of Russian elites? How far is the administrative apparatus in control of the discourse disseminated via the textbooks? Does the support the government seems to be giving to the discipline prefigure the emergence of a new state ideology, a new 'politically and nationally correct' line for the country?

Even though culturology sees itself as a rehabilitation of the Russian intellectual tradition of debate about national identity, it cannot be understood without the reference to soviet Marxism, of which it is in many ways the continuation: its desire for a total explanation of the world, its aspiration towards a scientific status inspired by the exact sciences, its relationship with truth appear to be borrowed straight from soviet science. And so it combines a nationalist discourse with classic ideas similar to Slavophile tendencies (condemning western universalism, insisting on Russia's messianic destiny) and scientific stereotypes inherited from *diamat*. Its thematic and emotional core remains the difficult relationship between 'Russia' and 'the West'. Being essentialist, culturology is more interested in studying nation than culture and therefore is in fact a covert form of 'natiology'. Thus the discipline is attempting to revive a tradition which has been deeply embedded for nearly two centuries and which sees Russia as a world apart, from the viewpoint of identity criteria, scientific work or political ideas.

It also illustrates Russian intellectuals' need to reappropriate totalizing explanatory ideas, to find theoretical keys to explaining, making acceptable and integrating the rapid changes they have been experiencing in the last fifteen years. It shows that national themes were abandoned by so-called 'liberal' or 'democratic' intellectual movements after *perestroika*, despite the fact that the national idea had succeeded in bringing liberals and conservatives together in the context of dissidence. Culturology holds out a promise of a reassuring intellectual environment: it presents itself as scientifically attested, it has its roots in the classics of 19th-century Russia, is backed up by undisputed western authors and offers a simplistic reading of the world and of Russia. With its insistence on the assumed historical permanence represented by the national religion and mentality, it allows people to brush aside questions about the soviet regime, the political and social breaks in 20th-century Russian history. Above all it assumes that any collective work of remembering is pointless for post-soviet societies. And finally it shows how hard it is to escape from an ideology as schematic as the one that held sway in the USSR, and to change not only the *content* but the *container* itself of the discourse on the self and the world.

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## Notes

1. On the subject of the origins of this culturological fashion and its current development, see the more detailed study by Scherrer, J. (2003) *Kulturologie. Russland auf der Suche nach einer zivilisatorischen Identität*, Göttingen, Wallstein Verlag.
2. In schools culturology is less ideologically committed than in the universities and is thought of mainly as a subject to do with general culture. It is taught at least once a week and personalized by teachers, who may interpret in their own way the idea of 'culturology'. Themes are adapted to the audience's age: for instance, in primary schools the material is often a story from folklore and 'national traditions'.
3. Ministry of education standard for the specialization '020600 – culturology', accessible on the internet.
4. This international collaboration has been set up in the context of the European Union programme for the reform of higher education in Russia. Researchers from the EHESS and Bochum cooperate in developing the Institute's courses. Western lecturers teach short modules there and Russian students can gain credits for studying in the two partner institutions.
5. It comprises five taught modules: general human sciences, natural and exact sciences, specialized subjects (literature, art history, musicology, semiotics, science of religions, etc.), stand-alone classes (communication or study of sources), seminars in professional specialization.
6. Some gaps may be surprising: for example the nature–culture relationship, which is normal in French teaching of philosophy, is missing from nearly all culturological thinking. Though it often has an ecological gloss, in that it condemns the industrial world as polluting and driven by consumerism, the relationship between humans and the animal world, and as a corollary the question of the origin of language, are more often than not completely ignored.
7. Levâš, I. A. (2001), *Kul'turologiâ. Učebnoe posobie dlâ studentov VUZov* [Culturology. Textbook for students in higher education establishments], Minsk, Tetrasystem, p. 1.
8. I could mention at random Montesquieu, Rousseau, Freud, Jung, Nietzsche, Weber, Spengler, Toynbee, Cassirer, Jaspers, Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, Braudel, Foucault, Derrida, Ortega y Gasset, Aron, etc.
9. The label given to the period from the 1880s to the first decade of the 20th century, during which there flourished in Russia various modernist trends in religious philosophy, poetry, painting, etc. This period followed the one known as the 'golden age' of Russian literature with the appearance of the great novels (Gogol, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy . . .).
10. The most quoted authors are the pan-Slav conservatives N. Danilevski and K. Leontev, philosophers V. Soloviev, N. F. Fiodorov, N. Berdiaev and S. Bulgakov, but also scientists such as V. I. Vernadsky, and finally more contemporary figures such as Bakhtin and Lossev.
11. Drač, G. V. (ed.), *Vvedenie v kul'turovedenie* [Introduction to culturology], Rostov on the Don, Feniks, 1998, p. 132.
12. Gorelov, A. A. (2001), *Kul'turologiâ. Učebnoe posobie* [Culturology: A manual], Moscow, Urajt, p. 209.
13. So a number of textbooks contain chapters on the history of the West in which it is studied as a timeless whole, without major political discontinuities: the disappearance of the Roman empire, the rise of medieval states, the wars of religion, the revolutions of modern times, the transition to a republic or parliamentary system, are ignored. As regards the chapters devoted to Russia, there too the great breaks in Russian history, particularly those of the contemporary period (Alexander II's reforms, the 1905 and 1917 revolutions, Stalinism, destalinization, etc.) are missing from all analyses because they are thought irrelevant to expression of the 'essence' of national identity.
14. Esin, A. B., *Vvedenie v kul'turologiâ*, p. 6.
15. On this topic see Seriot, P. (1999), *Structure et totalité. Les origines intellectuelles du structuralisme en Europe centrale et orientale*, Paris, PUF.
16. Bagdasar'ân, N. G. (ed.) (1998), *Kul'turologiâ v voprosah i v otvetah* [Culturology: questions and answers], Moscow, Modek, p. 30.
17. Šišova, N. V. (ed.) (2001), *Kul'turologiâ: èksamenacionnye otvety* [Culturology: examination answers], Rostov on Don, Feniks, p. 14.

18. Website of the state university of Nijnii-Novgorod.
19. On this topic see Mongili, A. (1998), *La Chute de l'URSS et la recherche scientifique*, Paris, L'Harmattan.
20. Bagdasar'ân, N. G. (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 119.
21. Particularly in the work of L. N. Gumilev (1912–92), who did not hesitate to compare ethnology with statistics or meteorology and their assumed objectivity. He did not hide how much his interest in history was due to contemporary events and his wish to forestall ethnic conflicts, and he more or less explicitly invited the government to take a look at his theories, which were destined to become an 'applied' science at the state's service. See Laruelle, M. (2000), 'Lev N. Gumilev (1912–1992): biogisme et eurasiisme en Russie', *Revue des études slaves*, Paris, Institut d'Études Slaves, no. 1–2, pp. 163–90.
22. Drač, D. V. (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 15.
23. Gorelov, A. A., *op. cit.*, p. 351.
24. Mongili, A., *op. cit.*, p. 206.
25. The questionnaires are often perplexing, as only one answer may be given. For instance, for the question 'what is the purpose of culturology?' students have to choose between 'a. understanding one's own and other people's culture, b. the unity and systematic nature of the approach to the study of culture, c. the empirical study of culture'. For the question 'what are the characteristics of artistic thought?' again there is a choice between 'a. sensitivity, b. diversity, c. inspiration, d. intuition'.
26. St Petersburg State University website.
27. Timošinov, B. (2001), *Kul'turologiâ. Kazakhstan, Evraziâ, Vostok, Zapad. Mirovââ ètnosofiâ* [Culturology. Kazakhstan, Eurasia, the East, the West. A world ethnosophy], Almaty.
28. Levâš, I. A., *op. cit.*, p. 145.
29. Drač, G. V. (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 245.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 274.
31. Gorelov, A. A., *op. cit.*, p. 298.
32. Levâš, I. A., *op. cit.*, p. 118.
33. Culturologists have trouble differentiating between the discipline itself and the object studied. Thus N. V. Šišova states that the aim of her textbook is to 'study the different strands and schools of culturology', by which she means the authors who are the object of her discourse, from Plato to Derrida, and not her current colleagues. See Šišova, N. V. (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 3.
34. Angenot, M. (1997), *Les Idéologies du ressentiment*, Montreal, XYZ.
35. Šišova, N. V. (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 96–7.
36. Levâš, I. A., *op. cit.*, p. 207.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
38. Drač, G. V. (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 18.
39. 'Nature or God has created men and women different, adapted to carry out different functions . . . However, feminists do not understand this and say they are oppressed . . . Now, either openly or in private, many women are sorry that they have achieved emancipation and that they made it a principle of the social relationship between the sexes' Esin, A. B., *op. cit.*, p. 144.
40. 'The bonds of Russian civilization's historical tradition with Orthodoxy are so deep and close that we are right to speak of "Holy Russia" ', Drač, G. V. (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 136.
41. Bagdasar'ân, N. G. (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 152.
42. Levâš, I. A., *op. cit.*, pp. 124–5.
43. Roždestvensky, U. V., *op. cit.*, p. 205.