

## Us and Them

During our first American fall in Roanoke, Virginia, we became acquainted with a Russian peasant, a member of a class we never knew of in Russia. According to Marxist terminology, this class of “kulaks” was exterminated in the 1930s. His name was Sergey Naugolnov and we called him “The Cossack.” He was born in a village on the Don river, where free cossaks lived since long ago. During the WWII, still a boy, he was shipped to Germany as a slave laborer. After the war he did not return to his native village, but moved to America. In America he became a wealthy farmer. One fall in 197... we visited his farm. He and his wife received us with all the Russian warmth. Discussing various issues, we praised America and Americans. All of a sudden Sergey unexpectedly asked: “Do you think Americans are same people like us?” His question puzzled us. Knowing not what to say we responded with silence. Then, Sergey Naugolnov, or Cossack, as we were calling him among ourselves, himself responded to his question: “They are not the same people like us. Go and live in America as long as I did, and you’ll learn, those people are not like us.” After living in America almost as long as Cossack lived by the time of our visit, I decided to give some thoughts to (muse about) this topic. And to answer or not to answer to this question: Are Americans like us, or not like us? Are we like them? ...

Well, what can I say after more than twenty years living in America?

To begin with, nobody is an angel, regardless of where they’re born. Even stranger, the rifts or separations within the species, as Teilhard de Chardin wrote, and we know all about these. Therefore, whom shall we compare in these modern multi-layer societies such as Russian and American with all of their hierarchies. All Americans versus all Russians? Politicians? Artists? Intellectuals versus cowboys? Like this into eternity learning nothing. Vertical against horizontal. Apples and oranges. There is no scale or yardstick to measure the distinct differences. Historical, political and social circumstances in both locations, of course, give birth to ethnic and esthetic differences. Who is an example of their culture?

In several varying fragments, across the prisms of geography and without pretending to do a serious analysis, I will attempt to determine if we are “like them or not like them” – an answer to the old Cossack’s warning to me, “Go and live in America and you’ll learn, those people are not like us.”

I compare myself first to my children. My son Daniel, who led my “American” upbringing, the cornerstone of which was founded by the manuscript by my son Ilya: “Mother, behave like a decent person. Don’t drink or smoke. Stop staring at people the way Russians do.” The old babushkas looked everybody up and down. “Don’t give gifts unless the recipient can give you something in return. Don’t speak about people behind their backs.”

Sometimes I looked at myself through my children’s eyes, and more than once was surprised at our differences. Am I like them or not?

One day, Daniel discovered a letter that arrived at our home in the name of his favorite professor, our friend.

“Why did Professor T.’s letter come to us?”

I explained to him that our friend had registered his car to our address in order to save on his insurance money.

“This is against the law. Why would you do this?”

Uncomfortable, I hesitated to explain.

“What is the purpose of our visit to Russia?” Daniel asks while filling out customs forms before landing in St. Petersburg after twenty years away for both of us. Among my many purposes was my intense desire to reacquaint my son with his roots. I wanted him to feel an interest, if not love, for where he came from – the motherland of his parents and ancestors. I wanted him to breathe the imperial St. Petersburg air and feel the spirit of a great people, his own. Maybe then our feelings would coincide.

“Write business” I told him.

“But I’m not here on business.”

“We need to put ‘business’ to register in our hotel.”

“How much money am I carrying?” he asks, reading the form.

“Such and such amount.”

“That’s not what I have.”

“I’ll give it to you.”

He paused. “Mama, why are Russians always lying?”

Indeed, why? Short answer – “We’re not like them.” The Cossack was right. But I kept silent.

How do I explain to an American fellow that a new person is born free from any responsibility. On one hand, we despise any bureaucracy, rebelling against it. On the other hand, we hide behind it whenever necessary. We are ambivalent and not free, soaked with all collective morals and amorality. Living where we lived, we became so used to misleading the state machine; Flanking maneuvers and manipulations, all obvious and understood, and nothing wrong with any of it. For example, giving little “tips” to police to avoid a moving violation fine.

“Americans are law abiding.” Says a Russian reporter, and you hear a hint of derision, as if having in mind that we are better – free. Cossacks. The words “law abiding” are compromised. In English, it sounds completely fine. How does one avoid the lure of seeing others as flawed?

“Mama, don’t cry.” Shushes Daniel, as we’re stepping onto Russian soil after so long away. He tries to distract me. “Look at the Customs officer girl. Let’s tell her how beautiful Russian women are!”

I see nothing through my tears. Before we’re able to get out the compliment, she quickly barks, “Don’t you see the sign! One at a time at the desk!” And so on into meaninglessness and a separate story of how the paintings we brought for exhibition were seized by the Russian beauties. And how our Russian “goddesses” looked for every little glitch in our paperwork to take the paintings away, and what would be the bribe, and how nice they were after they received the money. Tears no longer clouded my vision.

Daniel was certain the painting would only be returned to us on our trip home. He didn’t understand the roles we played in the bribery game. I did not wish to teach him these hidden rules of the St. Petersburg “court.”

Nobody in America would think to demand a bribe for something so small as a few paintings. Why would they risk their career for a couple of bucks. If the law says a painting can't be brought in, it can't and that's that. It can be uncomfortable and inconvenient sometimes when there's no leeway; no way to push.

"Mama, why won't the porters take our bags? They won't even take our money."

"Roll it yourself," They say.

It's difficult to get inside their heads to understand what they want. Maybe they realize it's not worthwhile to carry just two suitcases and they're waiting for a larger load. Or maybe it's on purpose just to disregard the rules. To insist on their own will. "We don't want to and that's it."

"But this is their job, how they make money, and they just stand there. Maybe they don't like us or think, 'He's young, he can take it himself'". Even if it isn't in their best interest, my people often insist on their own way and don't look for what's better for them. Their emotions trump their own interests and they revel in the suffering.

In this way, we are distinctly different from more pragmatic western cultures. Maybe this is only in the past and I don't see the way it is now. Life in Russia is getting more complicated and where it will take our people and their will has yet to be determined. I'd like to think that with all the new business attitudes, ethical judgements will not be determined so much by cash alone, like in America. Something must remain of the Russian character famous from the great literature of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

On the road from the airport, everything I see through the window is rural and provincial. The pitiful landscape makes me unpleasantly nervous. What if Daniel decides that the most beautiful city in the world is not here? I made it up. And I worry myself, is it really here? I mumble something about the city still ahead and still beautiful. Our friend and driver, feeling my impatience, was in a hurry and we were stopped for speeding.

The driver quickly jumped out of the car (completely illegal in the States – one must wait at your seat and converse with the policemen only through the window) did something together with policeman, and was back in the car in seconds.

"They wrote out the ticket so quickly! How much was it?"

"No fine at all. I slipped him "one hundred rubles" and everything's taken care of. It's important to always have your bribe ready."

Daniel was awestruck by our friend's answer.

"This is how we do it here – it's accepted, understand?"

"Russian custom," said the Cossack. But in America, you would be immediately arrested for attempting to bribe an officer, especially with the equivalent of one hundred rubles. One look at the cops and you can see it can't be done.

The beautiful city finally came into view, a palace on every corner and gorgeous canals. The fading rose-colored light of "White Nights" illuminated the avenues and the Hermitage. Daniel dove into an unknown world and was enchanted by the mystical city. He wandered the streets day and night, on the banks of the canals and the Nevsky Prospect, palaces and colonnades, all space and proportion in a sorcery of white-night lights.

"Petersburg is not like any city in America, original and unique. I've seen nothing like it." He also noticed the passing girls whose living beauty competed with the still beauty of the city. Sometimes it seemed that their beauty overshadowed the whole vision

of the landscape. “So many beauties everywhere, I could never have imagined,” he enthused.

“The people in the store were so nice and helpful with their suggestions and advice, just like old friends.” While buying pants for Daniel, a crowd had gathered, actively interested in taking part in our purchase. “Don’t take those, you’ll look like a gangster.” “Those look cool with the appropriate stripes.” “Shorten them and make them a bit tighter.” Even our driver takes part asking, “What did you pick up at the tailors?” And so on with suggestions, comments and advice.

“Mama, why are Russians always giving advice and making comments? As I was walking down the street, a man asked, “You’re all dressed up. Planning on going to Hollywood?” Another person told me, “Wear your hat on your head, not in your hand.” An old lady poked me – “Don’t walk with your mouth open. An elephant will enter your mouth.”

“I understand she wants me to be careful but why the elephant?”

“You see now Daniel how they’re concerned with you?”

On one hand, their concern is attractive. It seems the feelings are compassionate. On the other hand, the invasion of privacy can stifle. What to wear? What and when to say?

“I like the participation, that’s interesting to me.” Daniel concludes, his interest purely anthropological. He is a tourist, a foreigner studying our sociology. I know that if he lived in Russia for a while his interest would subside, everyone in other people’s business, all the nosyness and scrutiny with no place to hide.

We were growing up in the atmosphere of the “collective”. Everything is ours. We build it all. There can be no secrets. The moral superiority of our society is beat into your head. “Know that we are better and smarter than all others.” All propaganda, journalists “taught” what’s right and what’s wrong. Literature also supported this official point of view and took the role of teacher and mentor. Whatever is truly right and wrong became lost. And the people, following this “avant-garde,” soaked up this “knowledge” and everyone knew “the right way,” how it should be and that we are smarter than the rest. Those more recently born won’t hear this propaganda of simple truths from all sides. How will they know how to feel?

Behind the lush façade of the former empire city, another side of Russian life emerges. The peeling paint, walls falling apart, broken plaster, dirty entryways (Hard to resist the comparison to the Russian beauties - pretty on the outside - absolutely lovely until they open their mouths). Enter a courtyard and risk breaking your neck. Fall in love with a beauty and you’ll soon marvel at what lies within...

Elevators in the city are decrepit and loudly tremble ready to fall at any time. It takes courage to even enter these “monsters” and inevitably, we became stuck.

“You don’t know how to use this elevator.” The mechanic told us when he finally arrived to let us out. He went on and on about how we needed to pull this rope or that one.

“Why did he say this?” asks Daniel, his often repeated and, by now, banal question.

“Because of an inherent reluctance to accept responsibility. Remember how you wanted a cat when you were younger? You said you wanted the cat but you did not want the responsibility for the cat. Russians are not used to voicing this sentiment. We know

no personal responsibility for all responsibility for us was taken by that mythic Soviet power – the state.

Despite the Russian inconsistencies and idiosyncrasies, Daniel brought with him from his trip to Russia a special understanding; A new feeling for the culture of his homeland. He couldn't absorb everything of the language and literature, but he still felt pride in this unusual country of his birth, her people and her beauties.

“Everything turned out to be better than I imagined, more interesting, especially the girls. I like looking at them. The only shame is that sometimes they speak. Better if they were mutes, only smiling like some of their American counterparts.”

If we are discussing everyday human politeness, then we Easterners are truly savages. My American co-worker Ann, whom I asked to correct my English errors (a request Americans seem uncomfortable with as if they derive no joy from correcting errors of pronunciation unlike us Russians who revel in it) told me at the gas station, “You did not say please to the attendant.” Pause. I looked at her with surprise, “When asking for gas, one should say, ‘regular, please.’ You only said, ‘regular.’”

“Why are Russians so impolite?” I answered that I did not like this particular attendant but if I had, I would have said please and given him a tip. To an American it makes no difference whether they like the attendant or not. They do not inject their emotions into the most simple social transactions. Does it show compassion for our fellow human being? Is it an exhibit of participation? This is a lie – in reality I have no interest in him and he none in me. I realize later how wrong it seems to try to express my emotions and become heated with someone I won't ever see again.

What is the purpose of all this? I will always remember how an American journalist, upon meeting Russian immigrants for the first time, each out-screaming each other, exclaimed, “Russians will never have democracy – they don't respect each other.” The heightened heated tone of public debates in Eastern cultures is foreign to the English-speaking public. Americans can tolerate each other, even when they hate each other (Clinton and Bush travelling and eating together).

Pushkin warned, “Learn to rule yourselves!” and I'm learning from those that are not like us. I'm receiving fewer “F's”. I always try to say “please” to everyone. “Go away, please.” Or “Go to hell, please.” When I reach my motherland however, this politeness disappears almost completely. When I breathe my native air, I also breathe in the attitude. Already in the customs booth, my arsenal of answers become exclamations and I ready myself for the onslaught. Why? This place must act upon my subconscious mind.

Of course, American smiles, aimed at no one, are more welcome, even if empty and dim. And what illusions are created by all this politeness? It seems they are admiring, happy with your presence, “Everything is good.” And suddenly, you end up on the street, fired or reprimanded but always with a smile. One time a co-worker of mine, a chemist from Odessa, was invited by an American professor to lunch in appreciation for her work. Upon their return to the lab, full of food and smiles, my friend found on her desk a copy of a formal complaint sent to the dean's office. The complaint stated that she had incorrectly and improperly prepared a chemical compound signed by the very same professor with whom she had just dined. To understand what is behind American politeness and smiles, we used to openness and transparency need special skills. Truth, to us, is a four-letter word. It demands a change in custom. In this culture of calmness,

hidden meanings, distance, formality, a person brought up on colorfulness of speech, passion and emotion is lost.

“Everything is good. I like it.” Concludes Daniel after reading a translation of my book. And I am lost. Does he mean it? Who can tell.

Our culture is too emotional, while theirs is too formal. Is sincerity possible together with smiles and politeness. Will an original species of people appear that can combine American pragmatism with Russian emotional spirit?

“You should not tell such a story in the presence of American women.” Calling aside the storyteller, said my American friend to a fellow professor. What story? A joke about Eskimos, - A man wakes up next to an Eskimo woman and asks her, ‘how old are you?’ She says, ‘How old do you think I am?’ He replies, “People don’t live that long.’

“Americans think Russians are savages already,” she added.

From the other hand, there is a lot we allow ourselves and our Russian politicians, writers and journalists can truly aggravate. Extreme impoliteness, ridiculing ethnicities, the aged, women. And of course, similar discrimination can’t be imagined in serious American press. The political career of former president Nemtsov, would have ended immediately in America upon appearing on television (I saw it with my own eyes) saying, “Communist conduct during elections is like a woman during climax, every time wondering, ‘Is this the last time?’”

My beloved friend, the writer Joseph Brodsky, in his essay about his travels in Brazil, omitted much from the English translation, neutralizing statements and even changing the meaning. In another essay he explains, “My attitude to people also smells Eastern to me in it’s own turn, after all, where did I come from?”

It’s true, we *are* from the east and many times I was uncomfortable in front of my children with these “eastern” jokes and anecdotes. Many of which aren’t that scary but I have no way to convey the meaning, the Soviet Russian notions to a foreigner. Try to translate in American reality the uniqueness of our experiences. Communal apartments, despotic dictators, jokes about propaganda, and if these Russian jokes seem a bit savage and not at all funny to Americans, it doesn’t mean they have no sense of humor. Just a different orientation. Not the same to us as it sounds to them.

“If we had *their* freedom, we would have fed Africa,” said the Cossack. Time moves here and there. Communism fell apart and we were “given” freedom. But real freedom doesn’t land in your hands like a ball and having it is not so simple. Like the legend of the Great Inquisitor, The Cardinal asks Christ, “Why did you give them the hard load of freedom? People cannot accept freedom.” And this difficulty fell on the Russian head. What became? Everywhere turmoil, looting and upheaval, even to the language. Freedom created an inflation of words and language immediately reacted to freedom and adapted to the new situation. Of course, the Russian language outlived Soviet pressures, and will outlive “democratic encroachment” because it’s both mighty and powerful and “time worships language.”

In addition to successfully muddying language. Business fantasies “nouveux riches” expanded full strength. Privatization turned out to be robbery. Everything taken away before it’s fully grown. And Africans received nothing from us either. In America, at the beginning of the last century, it was similar. Gangs in Chicago, robberies on the

railroads, but still it was somehow different. In changing situations, it's hard to say: how to tell "these" from "those"? Are our gangs more eastern?

The Cossack had become rich in America. Upon arrival, immigrants feel democracy and its advantages more sharply than the native born. Here, no one tries to keep you from getting rich. There is a lawful tradition of sharing and Americans more than 200 years orbit in this freedom.

People's behavior is old fashioned. Even with rockets, automobiles, and computers yet they stubbornly hold onto their own. And will try to take everything. How can we not admire Confucious, who 500 years before Christ taught that always, everywhere, the administrators steal, own, take everything but must give a little 'something to the people.' Although people ought to learn moral imperatives from novels and not legal charters or criminal codes. They read garbage so it's good they believe in laws. And in societies order, to know right from wrong, good and bad, what is or is not allowed. (Again my eastern preaching here.)

Americans inherit freedom but Russians are to create freedom from thin air, only in their first decades of the "bid." People are not ready for such sudden change of flow falling into extremes, hysterics, depression, and of course they continue to deceive the state apparatus considering it their eternal enemy. They say that in childhood, people steal from insufficient love and this is how Russians should be understood. Can this love appear between people and government to not steal from it too bad? Nobody knows. Maybe we could become law-abiding citizens and "unlike us."

In extreme or borderline situations, individuals cannot remain alone or silent. Such was I when coming to America, wishing to dissolve, forget myself among people in our way (like us), communally, "without fences." Life under communist regime created community, a kind of cozy comfort, an illusion of unity. Only slaves on gallows ships truly know one another, said Torquato Tasso. My own internal state: fears of the unknown, anxiety and homesick uncertainty of myself, lack of confidence, not knowing the language, no job. I projected outside myself there, where most people search for reasons for their sadness, discomfort, dissatisfaction. And here now, the reason for my sorrow; America and Americans.

Because the previous life (old way) psychologically, was more easy and comfortable than the newly acquired. It seems like it was filtered details, only remember the good scenes, events. And the Cossack remembers his youth, holds onto what's dear, and identifies himself with the good that occurred then. And it seems to him that people were different then, unlike now, us unlike Americans. Not separate autonomous individualists, but ideal, friendly and interesting. I don't know what he would say about them if he had stayed among his friends. Surroundings grow unfriendly and harsh the longer you remain, and everything can turn around in an instant. If you look at our immigrants, you can clearly see that they tire of each other and eventually "we politely don't recognize each other and hope they don't recognize us." From afar, you don't even need a fence. Longer and far away fuse into one word. Old friends far away are just where we want them, distant.

After coming over, through adaptation one achieves euphoria, pain, enchantment, disenchantment, I separate myself from my communal attachment and it seems I come to understand the meaning of the poems of Robert Frost. "Good fences make good neighbors." If a fence is good, for a long time it keeps good relations. And this is a good

separation distance-fences between people. Now, this doesn't feel as terrifying as it did the first time, this American behavior. I almost share it now, although not without regrets over losses and of illusory "welcome in if you see a light on."

Among "ours" as well as "theirs," same and not-same there is a fatal rift between ideals and deeds, between facades and courtyards. It is possible that an American person, for his own benefit, grabs a less wide circle of ideas and builds bigger fences in his consciousness. (Around their houses, fences don't exist, but there are exact boundaries. Russians don't understand these boundaries, only fences.) Everyone knows world order is in conflict with the individual, but this alienation in American society – is it more or less than in other societies – remains under question. In the end, we all must choose aloneness, isolation, solitude. As far as the individual consciousness, it is as much in want in America as elsewhere and very few can boast independent solutions, decisions, self-determined opinions that are original.

Still, people everywhere are people; "us" in Russia and "not us" in America. In the background of poverty, doing nothingness, irresponsibility is "us" "ours" "we" demanding last answers and last questions. But in the blessed country of America, "not us" is "them," aliens foreign theirs, without demanding to penetrate beneath the surface of things. There is some kind of mysterious impenetrable mystery between feelings and reason. And this chasm, a fatal line I do not wish to cross (I couldn't find it anyway) so I duck away from the answer. Are Americans like us? Counterposition contrary extremes, contradicting lead us to stereotypical and banal judgements. That's the way it is; The wholesale values are cheap and better to duck from generalities. Labels and stamps born in general categories often miss much and always prove themselves at the expense of others.

I remain at the horizon line and do not look beyond. It doesn't truly exist anyway, horizon lines only exist in our imagination – an idea, a fiction, a lie. Dreams and comparisons almost have no relationship with reality. And you cannot stand on what doesn't exist. But there is good and evil; try to draw a line between them. Each person must draw it where they want by their vision and experience and also in their own interest.

What kind of line then, must be drawn? Straight or fuzzy? Parallel or crossing? Sliding, laser, curved, winding, fractal, infinitely curved in time and space, ever-changing and sometimes just hanging, floating in the air. They all exist, your own as well. Is it the "same" or "different" from others?

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