

# **Drink and Leisure: The Semiotic Significance of Two New Enterprises on a Former Collective Farm in Estonia**

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## **Introduction: Semiology and Space**

The concept of a science of signs is linked to the notion of an underlying social or linguistic logic, which the signs simultaneously function to reveal and to hide. The dominant concept behind Saussure's semiology, splitting the sign (the word) into the signifier (the acoustic image) and the signified (the connotation or denotation of the word), was that a structuralist analysis involves looking behind the obvious; not at facts but at the meaning behind facts, or facts as 'tokens of something else' (Barthes 1993:111). The signs are organized according to the social order of the bourgeoisie, which is 'naturalized' with the help of myths, the constantly changing and invented narratives which function to cover up the economic structures of power within capitalism. According to Barthes, the myths of the bourgeoisie, with their hidden powers of signification, support the Gramscian hegemony of this particular economic and social order: a social order which is both a function of history and, as a system of power and distinction, constitutive of history (Barthes 1993: 110).

Looking at semiology in the context of the Soviet Union, and of the post-Soviet states, presents, however, a different problem from the context of the West. The particularity of state socialism was that the state created its own comprehensive language of signs, open rather than hidden significations formed by the ruling ideology. All public manifestations referred to, and were contained by, the state ideology. The state-produced myths, lacking any ambivalence or mystery, became themselves de-mystified, repetitive and transparent narratives of propaganda towards which some degree of allegiance was demanded.

Let us take an architectural example of a sign: a Soviet block of flats. The straight, modernist, lines of the building signify progress, the similarity between the flats equality, the reproducibility of the block the Soviet model way of living. All these elements deliberately reflected the ruling ideology: the blocks of flats were built not only to provide housing, but also to stand as visible symbols of Soviet ideology. Ideology, then, was not 'naturalized', in Barthes' sense of the term, where (bourgeois) ideology is hidden by constructed notions of the natural and obvious; 'the way things have always been done' (Barthes 1993:121). In the Soviet socialist context, the signified, rather than being obscured but implied by the sign, is dominant and

encompassing. The relationship, then, between the sign and the signified is transparent rather than opaque. Going back to Barthes again, it is of course the process of mystification in bourgeois societies which produce the mythical narratives, and, conversely, the deliberate clarity (between sign and signified) in socialist societies which led to the poverty of myths described above.

It is probably worth emphasizing that, in relation to the West, this constitutes a rather different relationship between the building (the sign), ideology, and the state. In the UK, for example, a more or less identical block of flats would signal similar notions of modernity, but the progressive message would be tempered by conflicting ideologies concerned with individualism and the virtues of home ownership. In contrast, in the Soviet context, the denoted (the form) had an open and deliberate relationship to the connoted (the ideology), forming a coherent narrative. To some extent, then, the sign and the signified merged, in the sense that the ideology of the signified/ connoted determined the form of the signifier, moving away from the linguistic analogy and Saussure's and Levi-Strauss' emphasis on the essentially arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified (Tilley 1990: 6). A block of flats, then, would be built to simultaneously aesthetically and symbolically embody 'socialism' - progress, modernity, equality - and to reify it in the form of providing standardized housing.

The current aesthetic transformation of the landscape and the cities constitutes one of the most important changes within the post-Soviet state. Below I will focus on a number of signs of the changes, beginning with a discussion of actual signs, the new street signs which point the way to shops or restaurants. This section, based mainly on material from outside the collective farm, will be followed by a discussion of the local signs of de-collectivization. The analysis will be primarily structuralist, focusing on the inversion of the previous ideology symbolized by two private enterprises, located in the culture house and the old workshop respectively. The one situated in the culture house, a private bar, represents exactly that which the cultural program was designed to oppose, encouraging a form of socializing which has no progressive intent, and which is centered primarily around drinking. The second enterprise is a small scale production of garden pavilions, objects denoting both leisure, i.e. private time, and private space, thus contradicting the ideology incorporated in both the architecture and the function of the workshop itself. The main objective of this analysis is not primarily to reveal a binary predilection, but

rather to illustrate the current transition through an analysis of the range of the transitory values and ideologies encompassed in the various buildings in the area.

In 1993 to -94, the time of my fieldwork, the Estonian ruling Isamaa ('Fatherland') coalition was firmly monetarist and pro-market. The ideology of the party partially and uneasily extended to the ideology of the country, and the ideological fusion between the new and the old was expressed in the often stated aim to 'build capitalism'. The free market was promoted and symbolized by a number of new signs. These tended to be part advertising and part sign-posts, showing the way to various shops, bars or little hotels. The signs were 'Western' in style; big colorful letters, the shape sometimes pointing in the direction of the signified shop, Western, mostly Swedish, advertising posters sometimes forming part of them. The relationship, however, between the signs and the shops tended to be tenuous. Imposing and well-made signs, often part of a succession of signs leading on towards the goal, might take you to seasoned little shops which had been there for years, and which definitely did not live up to the promise of the signs. For example, in Haapsalu, there were 3 big signs showing the way to an electrical shop, the last one incorporating a colorful Swedish poster promising, 'All you need for the heating systems of your home'. The shop itself consisted of a small room, with a few big and clumsy obsolete-looking electrical instruments arranged on dusty shelves, a toilet bowl on the floor, and a small desk at the end, where a very old man sat writing.

On my field site on the collective farm there were two new signs, one indicating the new shop, and the other the private bar. Both signs functioned partly as arrows, with red text on white wood: 'Bar Gorbiland', and 'Cafe and Farm shop'. The shop also had some Swedish posters from the food-chain ICA in the window; representations of obviously Western food, communicating 'Western-ness' at a glance. The primary function of these signs, I would argue, was not advertising, but rather a display of the aesthetics and ideology of the free market. Certainly in the village, and to a lesser extent in the nearest town, there were not enough shops for any real competition to take place. Everybody knew where the shops were, and which shop to use for what. Since the area gets a significant number of Swedish and Finnish visitors in the summer, it might be argued that the signs were set up for the tourists. The correlation between the signs and the shops where a Western visitor would conceivably buy anything seemed weak, however. The signs, then, I would argue, were there not so much for the Western visitors as to

proclaim a symbolic allegiance with things Western and capitalist, or in other words the ideology which is seen as replacing the previous socialist ideology.

There was still a commercial semiotic of communism, consisting of small and generic signs. Unlike the Western signs, however, the relationship between the signs and the signifieds was perfectly aligned: the old and worn signs for the shops awakened expectations which were consistently matched by the meager reality of the shops themselves. The formerly ubiquitous slogans, on the other hand, which were posted all over Soviet towns, were dis-aligned with the contemporary reality of the society they signified in a way which might perhaps be compared to the new signs. Both the new signs and the communist slogans represented allegiance to a social order and an ideological system. 'Society' and social organization was the realm of the communist signs, proclaiming the solidarity, effort and sacrifice of the present and the past which was to produce the future communist state. During the time of my fieldwork, the free market signs, in the Estonian context, also implied a hope for the future, when the goods pictured would actually be available, and Estonia would have become a 'normal' Western country again. The means of the realization of that future was commonly identified as the free market. Both kinds of signs have little relationship with the present, and if the communist slogans were finally associated with the obvious failures of the system, the capitalist signs seem at least to be regarded with some ambivalence. Whilst they are sometimes regarded as decorations, as in the case of the ICA food posters in the local shop, they are also associated with a global mass culture which was commonly seen as potentially dangerous both to the national specificity of Estonia, and to the integrity of my informants. People often, for example, talked about the 'propaganda' of advertising, and the 'unremitting' campaigns for this or that product. In this context, the struggle to construct and maintain autonomy within the Russian Empire and, later, the Soviet Union, has clearly had an impact on the discourses about the new order, in the sense that a similar struggle is commonly envisaged vis a vis the West.

### **Signs of De-collectivization**

The collective farm still framed the experience of local life, even though it formally voted itself out of existence in February 1993, with only one vote against abolition. The government, although insisting that each kolkhoz must decide by democratic vote whether or not to continue, made continuation next to impossible by declaring that any state loan, previously free, would

have a 38% interest rate. The land and buildings owned by the collective farm were at the time of my fieldwork owned by a transitory commission organizing privatization. De-collectivization, then, was an on-going process. Primarily, it had led to a loss of work and security: about a third of the people were unemployed, or worked a few days here and there. People still talked in terms of the collective, however. 'Official' projects, like the restoration of the old manor-house, are associated with 'the collective', and many of the unemployed people worked on and off on the restoration projects.

### **Gorbiland: Drink and Culture**

There were, however, a number of signs of de-collectivization. The empty flag holders on every building signaled the end of the Soviet Union, whilst the few satellite dishes constituted signs of the new order. The notion of a coherent power structure, or, in Caroline Humphrey's words, 'domain', with certain defined functions and responsibilities, was breaking down (Humphrey 1993:4). Since the collective farm was defunct, the uncertainty of small local share companies, many of them going bankrupt within a few months of starting to operate, was taking over. Of these share companies, there were two in particular which were interesting, standing in clear opposition to the ideology encompassed in the buildings in which they were housed. One of them was the bar, ironically named 'Gorbiland', carved out of the basement of the culture house, with the entry, appropriately, at the back. You entered through a half broken door, and went down a damp concrete stair case. The deterioration of the entrance was in contrast to the bar itself: a small cozy room, with 6 tables, sofas and chairs, and a bar at the end. Several different kinds of beer, vodka, Gin (including an Estonian brand of blue Gin named 'Dzinn'), and liqueurs were available, as well as Western soft drinks in cans, ice-cream, Western chocolate bars, packets of Western coffee, cigarettes, Soviet and Western. The whole place, however, was non-smoking, due to the asthmatic tendencies of the owner. That meant that there was a steady traffic of mostly men coming in and out of the bar, smoking on the stair-case outside, which deterred the more respectable smokers from coming to the bar at all.

One of the most important dividing lines in the community concerned the question of respectability, a question which was most immediately, but not exclusively, defined with reference to alcohol consumption. This had both a Soviet and a particularly Estonian aspect, which combined to form a ubiquitous everyday discourse of drink. The Soviet state, after its bout

of Brezhnevian decadence and corruption, tried to control widespread alcohol abuse by regulating both public and individual consumption. One of the effects of excessive alcohol consumption in relation to the state was that the drinking worker simultaneously placed him or herself outside the domain of the workplace, and enacted a scenario which was anti-ideological: irresponsible, individualistic and nihilistic, the drinkers created an anarchic and transitory resistance.

Significantly, people who in the West would receive a response limited to somewhere between compassion and contempt were regarded with a certain amount of gleeful tolerance on the collective farm. Regarded as more eccentric than sick, and certainly as people with some wit or even wisdom, their position is gradually changing. The older alcoholics are now invariably unemployed, and informants commented on their increasing alienation from the new society. The alienation is emphasized by the fact that whereas before they were supported by the collective farm, which itself was partially subsidized by the state, they are now barely supported by the new village council, whose available means is limited to the income from the few taxpayers in the area. It also, however, has to do with a shift in culture: like Michel de Certeau's description of the 16th Everyman, trapped in a common, and humorous, fate, the collective farm alcoholics were often described as essentially funny (de Certeau 1988:1-2). Their funniness, however, was dependent on their fate, i.e. their relationship to the state, which simultaneously supported and berated them: the change of state, and the new emphasis on the concept of individual responsibility and initiative, diminished their humorous potential.

The particularly Estonian aspect to the question of alcohol can in some ways be defined as a matter of thrift, comparable to the thrift in Simon Schama's description of the Dutch culture of the Golden Age. The most important factor of that age was arguably the wealth of the republic, the conspicuous abundance which was unsettling both to themselves and to the rest of Europe (Schama 1987: 259). For the Dutch, anti-patrician values merged with anxieties about excessive wealth, to create a moral opposition between permissible and reprehensible foods (the healthy and patriotic cheese and herring, as opposed to partridges, capons, sugar and spices), and strong notions of the dangers of idleness, both to the nation and to the moral state of the individual (164-5, 215). Strict cleanliness in the home was mandatory, and expressive of the battle against the sins of sloth and indolence (388). Old anxieties around wealth-creation in Europe caused the kind of virulent accusations which Schama sees as analogous to later

outbreaks of anti-Semitism (267). The Dutch were condemned as phlegmatic and sluggish, blunt and coarse, 'impervious to rank and honor', described as, 'The buttocks of the world, full of veins and blood but no bones in it. (265)' They were regarded, and regarded themselves, as conspicuously different, as the *Nederkinder*: the children of a new covenant.

Unlike Holland, Estonia, of course, does not suffer from an 'embarrassment of riches.' The wealth which so disconcertingly made the Dutch a race apart is conspicuously absent in the former Soviet state. The 'apartness' of the Estonians, however, which through various attributes distinguishes the Estonians primarily from the Russians, but also from other Soviet peoples, plays a significant part in the perceptions of national identity. Thrift and honesty, for example, are regarded as national virtues, whereas the Russians are routinely accused of embodying the corresponding vices, of living for the day with no thought for the morrow, and of getting away with what they can. Russian-ness, then, is identified with a sense of low and anarchic living, and of having no sense of thrift as a virtue. This, in turn, merges with poverty, as was the case with the family I was living with. The husband was an alcoholic, who got by on a string of temporary jobs on the farms, often paid in kind, and the wife was a caretaker at the school.

The husband would often talk about the drunk and bad-smelling Russians, who eat garlic and drink vodka every day, the vodka and the garlic simultaneously denoting 'Russian-ness' and a lack of respectability. Then we actually had some pickled cucumbers with garlic, and I praised them, saying how much I loved garlic. My landlord was visibly happy about this, and told his wife, who hadn't been there - significantly this was during one of her week-ends away when standards used to slip considerably. The cooking then started to improve, in my eyes, with the occasional addition of garlic. It was clear, in other words, that they liked garlic, but assumed I wouldn't, because its status bridges the Russian and the low class, as opposed to the world of the respectable. There is a sense, then, in which class notions, articulated in terms of the respectable or the not respectable, seep into the notions about 'Russian-ness' and 'Estonian-ness', where the 'low class' and the 'Russian' become interchangeable, so that Estonians tend to be equally reluctant to display 'Russian' habits because they seem 'low class' as they are to display 'low class' habits because they seem 'Russian'.<sup>1</sup>

The 'apartness' of the Estonians needs to be contextualized in terms of the Soviet nationalities policies as well as the perhaps more ostensibly relevant history of pre-Soviet nationalism. The nationalities policy of the Soviet Union, which was designed to undermine

political resistance defined as 'bourgeois nationalism', in fact placed a great deal of emphasis on nationality and national characteristics. Thrift and order, as exemplified above, were important means of distinctions for the Estonians. In addition, the Russians were often described as sentimental, flattering, collectively minded, cruel, and despotic. Combining the first two with the lack of thrift, they were also, more positively, generally seen as more hospitable than the reserved Estonians. The Latvians, similarly, tended to be regarded as sentimental and emotionally excessive, expressed through the joke about the Estonians' definition of hell: a group of Latvians sitting around the campfire singing with their arms around each other. Irony and reserve were seen as Estonian traits, as well as a certain stubborn quiet, reflected, since the land was regarded as constitutive of the people and their characteristics, in the landscape of low-lying stony fields.

The bar was mainly, but not exclusively, a male zone. Once a week they showed Western videos such as Rambo, or the Teenage Ninja Turtles, cheaply dubbed into Russian or Estonian, with one voice performing all the parts. Usually they were watched in silence by clusters of men and boys. The effect was to emphasize the experience of the opposition between the bar and the culture house in the form of a homology: the videos seemed to be to the cultural program of the former collective farm what the bar itself was to the culture house. If the videos and the bar represented a fragment of a larger commercial culture which was both tantalizingly out of reach and, at times, perceived as a threat and an imposition, then the obsolete cultural program and the draughty dilapidated culture house ultimately represented both the ideology of Soviet socialism, with its particular attitude to rural life, and the failures of that ideology. More specifically, however, the effect was one of absolute opposites: the culture of alcohol vs. the attempts to disseminate 'high culture', the American videos vs. the former weekly film shows of Russian and European films. It's as if the kernel of daily life which constituted 'culture', in the sense of high culture, has shrunk and turned around: the vast hall vs. the small bar, the huge film screen vs. the TV screen of the video; 'high culture' vs. 'popular culture'.

### **Garden Pavilions: Leisure and Private Space**

The second set of opposites I will focus on here is the workshop buildings and a new one-man enterprise which rented space in one of the old workshops. The workshops were used mainly for the maintenance of the collective farm machinery, vast machines, many of which



were now rusting in an enclosure to the back. They are large buildings with broken windows and dirty floors, but like everything else in the community, the value of the floor space was carefully calculated by the commission which rented it out. The firm in question manufactured small wooden pavilions, primarily intended for export to Sweden and Finland. As in the case of the bar and the culture house, the new firm is situated within a space which embodies a diametrically opposite ideology to the one expressed in the material culture of pavilions. If drinking constitutes the rougher side of the decadence which Soviet socialism opposed, pavilions represented the more genteel aspect of it. Nabokov, for example, born to a liberal aristocratic family in pre-Revolutionary Russia, writes the following about pavilions in his autobiography:

In order to reconstruct the summer of 1914, when the numb fury of verse-making first came over me, all I really need is to visualize a certain pavilion. '...I dream of my pavilion at least twice a year. As a rule, it appears in my dreams quite independently of their subject matter, which, of course, may be anything, from abduction to zoolatry. It hangs around, so to speak, with the unobtrusiveness of an artist's signature. I find it clinging to a corner of the dream canvas or cunningly worked into some ornamental part of the picture (Nabokov 1989: 214).

Similarly, the concept of pavilions may have been clinging on to some part of the post-war Soviet culture in Estonia, providing, perhaps, an unconscious symbol for the project of restoring the pre-war independent republic. Furthermore, the specific connotations of pavilions, structures of elegance, leisure and indulgence, copied from the grounds of the aristocracy to the gardens of the bourgeoisie, represent a structural opposite to the collective farm agricultural machinery, whose industrial and functional appearance constitutes a representation of modernity frequently used in pictorial representations of the Soviet nation. The notion of an individual enterprise also, of course, forms a contrast to the ideological hegemony of the collectives, forming a powerful opposition. A second homology, then, emerges from the comparison between the production of pavilions and the new private bar, whereby alcohol was perceived of as detrimental to culture in a similar way as the values incorporated in pavilions; leisure and decadence, were in opposition to the promotion of work as ideology.

## Conclusion

It is of course not surprising that a systemic shift of the kind occurring in the former Soviet Union produces a number of signs which refer to the contrast between the Soviet and the Western systems, and which therefore lend themselves to a structuralist analysis. To refer back to the theme of the symposium at which this paper was presented, the semiotic significance of the signs described above have indeed come out of the ruins of the former political system. The point I would like to emphasize, therefore, is that despite the fact that their absence or presence are no longer dangerous, these signs are still framed within a context of the importance of signs as badges of allegiance; or in other words an essentially Soviet context. The contemporary western style streetsigns, then, are in a sense as political as the old slogans, and as political as their absence after the Russian revolution, described as followed by Pasternak, in *Doctor Zhivago*:

Living in Moscow, Yury had forgotten how many shop signs there still were in other towns and how much of the facades they covered. Some of those he was seeing now were so large that he could read the easily from where he stood, and they came down so low over the slanting windows of the sagging, one-storied buildings that the crooked little houses were almost hidden by them, like the faces of village children in their fathers' peaked cap (Pasternak 1958: 223).

A few pages on, the theme of advertising continues:

There were round red oil tanks on the skyline, and large advertisements on wooden hoardings. One of them caught Yury's eye; it was repeated twice and read: Moreau & Vetchinkin. Seed drills. Threshing machines. 'That was a good firm. Their agricultural machinery was first-rate' (Pasternak 1958:235).

All those signs, of course, were soon to be replaced by Soviet slogans, occupying similarly dominating positions. The re-instatement of the signs of 'capitalism', therefore, are arguably as political as the Soviet slogans, entangled in the history of the revolution and of socialism. The significance of a small bar named 'Gorbiland', and of a one-man enterprise producing garden pavilions, which at first sight from a western point of view seem arbitrary, is in fact part of the cultural logic of that history. In time, however, the signs may lose their power to evoke certain ideologies, and may be as taken for granted as they are in the west. Going back

to Barthes, that will be a process of 'naturalization', or of shielding ideological significance, but it will also be a process of assimilating the signs and the signifieds, adding to the signified ideology of the free market real goods and real services generally obtainable in the west.

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## Textnotes

1. There was also of course a high culture of Russia, which, despite Soviet efforts to the contrary, did not much interest my informants. Urban informants sometimes acknowledged it in the statement that the Russians were 'more intelligent' than the Estonians, who were 'blue-eyed'; 'naive', signifying the implicit association between goodness and innocence. The juxtaposition between the 'blue-eyed' Estonians and the 'cunning' Russians is reminiscent of the Russian wave of anti-Semitism in 1953, in connection with Stalin's invention of the 'doctors' plot', the idea that Jewish doctors, aided by so-called 'Zionists and American Imperialists', were engaged in a plot against the Soviet state. On the 8th of February that year, Pravda published an article entitled 'Simpletons and Scoundrels', listing Jewish names of 'swindlers, saboteurs and scoundrels' whom the 'simpletons', Russians who were no longer sufficiently vigilant, had had dealings with. The article legitimated, and un-leashed, a wave of anti-Semitic violence throughout the country, and may have been part of the preparation for a Soviet holocaust against the Jews, prevented by the death of Stalin in the same year (Radzinsky 1996:542). A quorum of ten are required for public prayer.