

Professional Identity in Soviet Society: Factors and Mechanisms of Formation (Articulation of Issue)

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Abstract

Objectives: For the first time in domestic historiography this study considers the complex problem associated with consistent formation of professional identity in Soviet society. **Methods:** The authors describe the quantitative variety of real models of identity genesis that were realized within separate social groups among which the industrial workers and the technical and liberal intellectuals are particularly distinguished. An image of a Soviet engineer personifying the romantic idea of Industrialization is studied as a representative example of changing professional identity. **Findings:** The authors of this study come to the principal conclusion that the identity characteristics of separate personalities and social groups were formed by the ruling elite who extensively applied the mental tools associated with ideological stigmatization, with purposeful search for the alien Other, with large-scale deconstruction of traditional values. **Applications/Improvements:** The results of the study will facilitate further investigations of the issues of consequential transition from labor to professional identity and of gender-related and social aspects of personal identification.

Keywords: Identity Genesis, Ideological Stigmatization, Professional Identity, Technical and Liberal Intellectuals

Introduction

Systemic transformation of modern society that predetermines the consequential evolution of professional identity stipulates the purposeful reference to the historical aspects of the complex self-identification of a separate personality that has to function in the complicated environment of the world outlook crisis. Epistemological experience associated with subjective construction of personal and collective identity characteristics makes it possible to observe some certain regularities of a specific type of “appropriation” of a differentiated set of social roles by the interested individuals. In this context the comprehensive investigation of professional identity of Soviet citizens which has been formed under the specific conditions of socialist society enables approaching the qualitative solution to a complicated aggregate of investigative tasks. In particular, authentic discovery of the logical connections between personal identity characteristics and the large-scale transformation of social institutions that took place in 1920–1930 is inextricably related to the fundamental

problem of political paternalism. State patronage that used to be of strictly defined ideological nature largely affected the functions of Soviet professional communities. Notwithstanding the fact that USSR officially represented “the all-people socialist state of the working men,”¹ it is obvious that the gradual formation of Soviet identity was of a contradictory nature. The sophisticating social structure determined systemic differentiation of the widely spread professions; and learning these professions consciously was the objective result of personal self-identification. In the context of the abovementioned circumstance the complex analysis of identification mechanism established in Soviet society was an important element of potential correlation between professional communication practices that used to be of both vertical and horizontal character. Such approach implies the purposeful determination of dynamic succession in specific reproduction of the identified professionals still exercised by modern Russian society.

The chosen problem is also of considerable investigative significance from the perspectives of the complex

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transformation of the established ideas about the dynamics that is capable of introducing drastic changes in the fundamental parameters of the turbulent society. In the USSR the accelerated professional identification often represented an objective result not of social and economic trends but of the changing ideological situation that used to predetermine some kind of fashion for certain spheres of social activities. Soviet experience of deep modernization of professional identity that was determined by the mental climate of socialist society makes it possible not only to adequately interpret the associated changes in modern Russian community, but also to reach main theoretical generalizations of universal consequences.

Consistent investigations of the selected problem represent a relatively new scientific area that emerged in the end of the 20th century. Systemic study of professional identity involves considerable attention to the multiple sources of personal origins that were introduced into scientific circulation in the post-Soviet period and that vividly illustrated the complex process of individual socialization in “closed society”. To some extent, the abovementioned trend has been predetermined by the so-called “anthropologism” of modern historical knowledge that is focused on the unique features of some certain persons of the preceding epochs.

The initial problem that emerged on the cutting edge of the scientific interest was represented by the consistent destruction of the old social identity and systemic construction of the new identity characteristics of separate personalities and quantitatively different social groups. In this context special attention should be paid to fundamental investigations of B.M. Firsov² and Sh. Fitzpatrick,³ who formulated the specific image of “state worker” that changes organically in the historical time and space. Systemic influence of Bolshevik housing policies, writing practices and individual self-description, of organizational aspects of social everyday life on consequential formation of social and professional identity of early Soviet man has been described in detail in the famous works of Yu.P. Zaretsky,⁴ A.Ya. Livshin and I.B. Orlov,⁵ M.G. Meyerovich,⁶ M. Rolf,⁷ B. Studer and B. Winfried.⁸ Fundamental analysis of identification specifics of particular categories of Soviet population, such as industrial branch workers, party and engineering staff makes an inseparable part of the deep and comprehensive investigations belonging to J.M. Ister,⁹ S. Devis¹⁰ and S. Schattenberg.¹¹ It is also important to note interesting articles of V.G. Bass,¹² M.G. Raku¹³ and G.G. Belyayeva,¹⁴

which were presented within the special section of “New Literary Review” and considered the immanent specific features of social, political and cultural construction of creative professional communities. Some observations associated with the complex genesis of the new working class and with the systemic development of professional communication practices have been described in famous works belonging to A. Bloom and M. Mespule,¹⁵ V.P. Buldakov¹⁶ and M.F. Nikolayeva.¹⁷ Fundamental investigations dedicated to the qualitative analysis of identity characteristics of creative professionals, including domestic artists¹⁸ should be especially noted. M.L. Magidovich was right to observe that “under modern conditions special significance is attached to the identity of an art-worker as a social agent whose professional activity can play an important role in the formation of national awareness.”¹⁹

In all, it can be maintained that modern researchers achieved considerable success in the area of the complex investigations of the interior mechanisms of social engineering aimed at consistent creation of the upgraded identity of a Soviet worker. At the same time, further investigations should concentrate on the serious issues associated with the real determination of professional identity by social trends and by the purposeful development of personal elements in the consolidated space of the everyday life of Soviet epoch.

2. Method

In methodological dimension systemic reference to the fundamental problems of individual and collective identification becomes possible under the conditions of considerable growth of the objective status of humanitarian knowledge that creates the scientific picture of the global world. The updated way of perceiving separate man implies the purposeful identification of new epistemological areas associated with situational orientation of the individual who is developed in co-existential and evolutionary environment of the established society.²⁰

It seems that the complex investigation of professional identity from historical, sociological and psychological perspectives is, undoubtedly, associated with the new imperatives of humanitarian cognition founded on interdisciplinary epistemological practices. Objective recognition of personal identity characteristics as the derivatives of social interaction directs modern scientist to the detailed investigations of the complex mecha-

nisms related to intra-group self-awareness, to systemic positioning of some definite individual within the changing world, to natural formation of binary oppositions of a separate man and syncretic collective groups.²¹ In the context of the abovementioned circumstance an important role that is played by personal characteristics requires that special attention should be paid to such meaningful elements of social reality as “subjective attitude toward one’s own professional belonging”, professionally important qualities, and objective-driven mindsets.^{22,23}

Such theoretical self-identification directs modern scientist to historical analysis of the fundamental manifestations of social and personal factors within the framework of consecutive construction of “Soviet professional identity”. Systemic use of theoretical typification and empirical generalization makes it possible to interpret separate messages about production, infrastructure or intellectual activities placed into micro-historical dimension in the context of consistent acquisition of identity characteristics of some certain subject property.²⁴ The developing methodology of new social history implies the purposeful discovery of so-called “virtual” social structures that are engineered as “imagined” phenomena but that also produce deep and comprehensive effects on the surrounding environment. Consecutively revealing the subjective aspect of identification processes it becomes really possible to undertake systemic analysis of the specific sources of personal origins not in the traditional context associated with the verification of content authenticity, but from the perspectives of teleological interpretation of ideological heritage of social actors.²⁵

3. Results

Political coup of 1917 heralded the principal start of social and cultural revolution which significant element was represented by systemic destruction of the old social identity and the intensive construction of the new markers that used to position separate individuals in the community. In the context of the abovementioned circumstance the selected issues associated with evolutionary change in professional identification of Soviet working man can and should be considered from wider social perspectives. It should be noted that the initial form of the specific mental self-arrangement was represented by labor identity that was mechanically verified in the context of everyday production and intellectual activities. The chosen profession

invariably correlated with the a priori formulated aggregate of identity characteristics that were not changed within the framework of individual and collective development.

Systemic process of the consistent formation of new sociocultural and ethic identity commenced by Bolshevik party after the October coup was of complex and ambivalent nature. On the one hand, since the 1920s there has been a significant trend for chaotic atomization of Soviet society predetermined by specific policy of so-called “declassing”. Economic collapse that followed after the civil war and rigid technologies of state government resulted in natural agitation of social mobility associated with labor migration. Sh. Fitzpatrick was right to observe that “because of the chaotic and amorphous conditions of the society and because of high social and professional mobility in the period of revolution, social standing of the huge number of citizens could not be precisely determined.”³ The specified phenomenon developed to even larger scales and, notwithstanding the titanic efforts of the authorities, the social inertness of the working class in particular reached quite a threatening level by the end of the 1920s. The unconditional leader of revolutionary transformations envisaged by Marxist doctrine from practical perspectives often proved to be teleologically inert and amorphous community of differentiated individuals.

Bolshevik government considered that the principle means for eradicating this problem should be represented by class policy aimed at complete annihilation of potentially hostile social groups. Systemic filtration of alien elements implied strict social identification that became the unofficial marker for selective repressions. Such practices can be well exemplified by a specific “discovery” of antagonist classes that were personified by traditional industrial proletariat and “new” bourgeoisie. And while it is safe to say objectively that the educated bourgeois strata that were supposed to include, for different reasons, liberal and technical intellectuals did possess mature professional identity, the same mental characteristics of the workers were, probably, of strictly class-related nature.

However, new identification of the working class did not always have strong foundations that would undergo serious ordeal within the framework of the inevitable incorporation of new participants of this social group. In particular, the principal element of the process of incorporation was represented by the continuous inflow of new

workers from the village, who preserved their relations with traditional rural institutions; and this fact hampered the unification of the mindsets of “proletarian” identity.

By the 1930s the purposeful engineering of new identity characteristics underwent some certain transformation associated with real trends of social, economic, political and cultural development of Soviet society and state. Gradual disappearance of bourgeoisie that came and went quickly and evolutionary rotation of ideological priorities in economic and social life resulted in the new orientation to further formation of special “Soviet” identity. Under the changed conditions the already developing process of social “stigmatization” acquired more regular nature and the general pattern of personal and collective identification organically met the requirements of the initial ideological imperatives. At the same time, the upgraded social mentality used to include certain contradictions that inevitably emerged within the framework of the transformational activities. Some particular social strata had specific cultural stereotypes complemented with differentiated identification practices. In the context of this circumstance some scientists express well justified doubts as regards the availability of a single form of the targeted imposition of the identity characteristics exercised by the authorities and by the ruling party.^{15,26} In particular, a specific argument can be represented by the verified practice associated with the obligation to fill out the profile line “social standing” in the official passport that has been given to all soviet citizens in 1932. The major part of the accounted population identified itself as “worker”, “public servant”, “collective farm worker” while the educated strata, including technical and liberal intellectuals used to demonstrate mature professional identity. They strived at mandatory specification and wanted to identify their profession: doctor, engineer, teacher.²

In all, it should be noted that the consistent formation of the new social identity in the USSR was highly intensive. As a rule, under the conditions of the large-scale social transformation associated with the crisis phenomena the protective function dominates over the natural need for maximal self-fulfillment of an individual personality.³ Soviet party and state machine required that the controlled population should be systemically identified by the established attributes dictated by the general ideological trend. Simultaneously, the consequential formation of the “desirable” identity was expectedly well supported by the wide circles of social strata who considered that strict

adherence to the predetermined mindsets represented a sort of the guaranteed stability of life.

In the USSR there were certain mechanisms aimed at engineering social identity. In the first place, the state authorities used specific tools associated with narrative description of biographic experience of each particular individual in the special personal documents: questionnaires, autobiographies, diaries and also in personal self-reports as and oral form of personal reflection of separate workers. The relevant documental complexes were developed by statistical institutions that often used to be created to methodically collect the empirical data on the class stratification of governmental structures, industrial enterprises and other types of functioning organizations. Such identification procedure was prescribed by the higher level institutions that performed target-oriented monitoring of the achieved results and could suggest potential organizational solutions. Apart from the industrial workers of the lowest level and the collective farm workers who actually were no more than surfs, the specified documents also had to be filled out by the able people who were employed on a full-time basis, who changed their service status, or who were sent abroad on business.

It has to be admitted that this factor associated with the normative requirements of social self-identification did not eliminate the subjective aspect of the informal engineering of personal identity. B. Studer was perfectly tight to mention that “if a public servant or a worker started, instigated thereto by party institutions, to think about their lives as of the one whole or tried to put its stages in a linear process aimed at some definite objective; if they took the pen to right down this narrative of their lives; if they were given their say at the party meeting to speak about themselves and if they did it for the first time in their lives, then all these things definitely had an aspect of subjectivization (emergence or strengthening of subjective perception).”⁸

Under those conditions a Soviet man tried to possess “desirable” identity that would ensure, though a minor one, immunity from the repressions of the state authorities. Domestic investigators note that consistent formation of the complex notion about the new generation of socialized individuals who are born by revolutionary transformations was taking place in that boundary mental sphere that used to artificially separate personal perception of one’s own life from the one that

was formally expected and that was predetermined by the dominating ideology and political practices.²⁷⁻²⁹

The objective result of the purposeful activities of the state authority was represented by the consistent creation of the canonical biography that perfectly characterized the life path of the true representative of proletarian community. Inseparable elements of syncretic example of a true proletarian were such facts as correct social origin, early formation of correct class awareness, principal lack of any intellectual interest in bourgeois ideas and one's personal educational trajectory. The specified systemic characteristics used to be organically supplemented by the non-structured list of moral imperatives that necessarily included apparent simplicity of individual character, respect to older comrades, that highlighted openness and personal honesty.⁸ This canon made it possible to "invent" one's own biography attracting the attention of the interested personnel service and supervisory bodies to the "correct" facts of their life journey.

Another tool of systemic engineering of the new social and professional identity was represented by consistent formation of the new ways of communal housing and professional interaction. Particularly, during the 20s a large-scale experiment was held which was associated with the arrangement of ubiquitous labor and household communes. A distinguishing feature of these social structures was represented by the consistent unification of the production process and everyday life into one communicative complex. Apart from facilitating the solution to the economic task that implied close accommodation of some definite individuals in tight conditions, this mechanism also made it possible to exercise total control over the domestic behavior and intellectual ambitions of Soviet citizens. Within the communes under consideration personal life became public property, and collective instincts played the role of the most important regulators of individual activities. Moreover, tight conditions of living used to nurture principal denial of free time in solitude which facilitated the controlling functions of the interested governmental structures. A natural result of these activities revealed itself in the construction of special "collectivist" personality that met the requirements of the new mindsets of Soviet society.

As it has already been noticed elsewhere, the systemic formation of unified "proletarian" consciousness was facing serious problems represented by high social mobility and permanent labor migration. The peasants of yesterday were in no haste to consolidate with regular

workers and with the so-called "non-workers"; socially alien elements gave preference to their personal needs and did not correlate them with the interests of the state. Quite numerable technical and liberal intellectuals represented by doctors, lawyers and engineers often revealed little interest in labor activities in line with their professional qualifications. Such approach was predetermined by the unsatisfactory household and working conditions, by insufficient material remuneration, by incompetent management, and it testified of the existence of obviously independent ethos. Party and state authorities were striving at consistent resolution of the abovementioned contradictions by establishing "obedient" working collectives. In particular, the bodies of power used to artificially restrict potential migration of separate employees by exercising monopoly in housing policy. M.G. Meyerovich was perfectly right to observe that "the authorities on a legislative level establish the dependency of man on his working place by reducing all possible forms of acquiring housing accommodations to the only one principal form and that is by acquiring it on the job location only".³⁰ Such restrictions created objective obstacles for the independent formation of professional identity of Soviet workers who had no alternative but to choose some definite type of the productive activity that directly depended on housing problem. It seems that the artificially implemented model of individual self-identification failed to promote the systemic development of personal elements of professional identity associated with consequential determination of one's own place in the labor community.

The principal focus of Soviet authorities on collective forms of social communication has objectivized into the purposeful creation of professional communities and unions, especially widely spread in the social segments of intellectual workers. In particular, for technical intellectuals there were such organizations as ITS (Council of Engineers and Technicians), VMBIT (All-Soviet Intersectional Bureau of Engineers and Technologists), VARNITSO (All-Soviet Association of Scientists and Technologists to Promote Socialist Building) that were to replace the former proactively created unions. Similar situation was observed in liberal professions where some representatives were forced to enter patron-client relations with party and state elite through mandatory membership in one of specialized unions.

An important factor of the consistent formation of social identity was represented by specifically arranged pattern of Soviet citizens' free time where one of the most

significant fragments became to be associated with new holidays that often acquired the nature of rituals. The festive rituals were the additional form of social stigmatization that was to fix the already formed identity characteristics. M. Rolf was right to note that “a holiday was the pretext for proclaiming praise and censure: during holidays, by analogy with wall of honor or mural newspaper, the “activists” were rewarded and the “underperformers” were execrated.”⁷ The festive ritual embodied precisely the structure of soviet working people of whom some minor part was ostentatiously admitted to the narrow circles of the party elite. Famous Stakhanovites were admitted to the elite tribunes, the most distinguished leaders of industrial production marched in the front lines of the columns, and the cavalcade of any particular enterprise used to be closed by the underperformers. Thus, the identity characteristics of each individual were determined not only from intellectual perspectives, but also in some specific kind of spatial dimension.

A characteristic feature of Soviet mechanism of systemic construction of professional identity was represented by the purposeful exploitation of the specific image of Other often produced in antagonist form. According to A.Ya. Livshin and I.B. Orlov, “principal mechanism of social self-identification is to set the values, the models of behavior and the views of one’s own group in opposition to the alien or hostile interests”.⁸ It seems that in crisis situations the relevant processes possess a strong trend to be systemically strengthened which would transform into open hostilities. In this context it would be reasonable to agree to the principal idea of M.F. Nikolayeva who claimed that “Soviet culture of that period used to push out the non-hostile image of Other substituting it with the image of the enemy”.¹⁷

Consequential formation of professional identity had some objective aspects associated, in particular, with traditional conflict of different generations inside the working class. Age difference was complemented by natural contradictions between regular workers who possessed the required education and professional qualification and the hired personnel of the lowest level who were trying to get to the upper steps of social stratification. Similar elements of industrial competition were also observed in the uneasy relationships between old technical intellectuals and new Soviet engineers who were greatly different in terms of their initial mindsets. Continuous support of social confrontation was a specific trademark of Bolshevik policy, inasmuch as social tensions hampered poten-

tial consolidation of rebellious attitudes. The authorities used to cultivate the internal contradictions between “workers” and “non-workers”, between socially close and socially alienated classes, between workers and engineers, between party members and non-partisan citizens. As a result, the obvious antagonists of a Soviet worker were personified by “them”, “bureaucrats”, “ITR” (engineers and technicians) who could be easily turned into vicious saboteurs and “public enemies”. In fiction books of Stalin’s period the following characteristic address can be easily found: “You bureaucrat must obey when a working man orders you around and must not be as proud as you are!”³¹

A logical manifestation of the objective differences that existed within the working class was also actualized in the framework of political discourse where generation-associated contradictions were artificially constructed. S. Devis notes that older workers were unsatisfied with the significant fact that “the job of the young workers who possessed no more than one or two years of working experience used to be well-paid, they were invited to meet Stalin, and they enjoyed many other benefits”.¹⁰ From another perspective, the authorities prevented the systemic formation of horizontal social relationships in the working environment instilling animosities between the Stakhanovite activists and ordinary workers who were afraid of losing their working places or of having their wages cut simultaneously.

Thus, the party and governmental structures used to form a specific identity of Soviet working man that was typical for totalitarian societies and was of differentiated structure. The relevant trend is verified by means of the source study analysis encompassing large amounts of letters of simple hard-working people addressed to the authorities. Both domestic and foreign researchers highlight the important circumstance that the abovementioned authors used the role models of “simple worker wholly devoted to Soviet Power”, “honest peasant-worker who longs for socialism”, “woman-worker, a mother of future new world creators”.⁵ These identity characteristics definitely reveal the meaningful elements that form professional identity. In particular, working man or peasant self-identification, was, as a rule, accompanied by qualitative opposition to “others” within the framework of binary antinomies: “simple” – “academician”, “the one in power; “honest” – “scoundrel”, “miser”. An important characteristic is revealed here in synchronous demonstration of political loyalty that ensures some certain personal immunity.

Consistent construction of social and professional identity of Soviet engineer is of special interest. This image was interpreted as a new hero of industrial epoch empowered with the advanced ideology and called upon to replace the old technical intellectuals. By 1917 Russian engineers possessed stable professional identity founded on specific esprit de corps and reflected even in special uniform (a service cap with a badge and long overcoat). It should be noted that this uniform was officially prohibited only as late as in 1929 and this was the obvious manifestation of the purposeful struggle against the established identity of old “pros”. In this context the “linguistic” activities of the authorities should also be mentioned, particularly, the principal replacement of the major identification attribute, the traditional name of “engineer” by the sovietized notion of “ITR” (engineer and technical worker).¹¹

On the one hand, the consistent formation of special community of engineers possessing relevant professional identity had subjective foundations. Under the conditions of serious economic crisis and given greatest popularity of utopian social ideas, the industrial romanticism that used to enwrap Soviet engineer was especially attractive. On the other hand, Soviet government set strict limits to the “desirable” identity of Soviet engineer that was based on systemic actualization of the internal confrontation between the old and the new values. S. Schattenberg was perfectly right to note that “in the course of the struggle against the old engineer it was clear that the new, the Soviet engineer should differ from the former, the Tsarist engineer in all perspectives: he should be of the working class, he should dress as a worker and his attitude toward the production process should be in conformity with the ideas of the workers...”.¹¹ This conflict has several systemic aspects associated with the natural confrontation between different generations, between differentiated traditions and educational competences. However, the most significant was the principal conflict between social identities of technical intellectuals and the working class that used to artificially replace the social confrontation of the preceding epoch. Further evolution of the syncretic image of soviet engineer was associated with the expected accomplishment of the class war which objective result should be represented by the natural emergence of the unified society of depersonalized citizens. Within the period under consideration even the exterior appearance of an engineer has changed and was gradually deprived of proletarian details. According to imaginary description of

S. Schattenberg, if “in the beginning of the first five-year plan an engineer was wearing the worker’s overalls and did not shave, the dirt under his nails was the evidence of his proletarian mindset, then by its end he looked pretty like an American: wearing mackintosh, soft hat, a vest and a tie...”.¹¹

4. Conclusion

Consistent formation of professional identity of Soviet citizens was taking place at the background of serious socio-cultural collisions associated with systemic reformation of social and governmental institutions carried out by Soviet regime. Gradual transition from the identity characteristics that used to be predetermined solely by trade belonging was directly affected by different factors and the main factor among them was represented by ideological determinism. Complex replacement of labor identity by professional mental image implied the synchronous formation of basic social markers that would correspond to the new social reality.

Systemic construction of identity characteristics in separate professions was implemented by means of different tools where the important element was represented by social stigmatization. As a matter of priority the new class identity was formed prescribed by ideological directives of the authorities and predetermining personal self-identification of a particular citizen.

The complex process of identity construction was also predetermined by other factors of objective nature. First, under the conditions when the party and state machine did not hesitate to employ violence it could be expected that the protective function of identification should come to the fore. In other words, the question of acquiring identity was equal to the question of survival/wellbeing. Second, the insufficient educational level of the wide circles of the working population was an objective obstacle on the way of developing professional reflection. As a result, it would be safe to say that the professional identity was swallowed up by social one. Building totalitarian society the “collectivist” personality was formed whose opportunities for selecting the type of activities and profession were very limited.

Nevertheless, within the professions that required some certain level of professional knowledge (for instance, engineers) personal elements of professional identity used to develop, although gradually and not from the very beginning. The distance between the professions of

the working class increased. Gradually, professional ethos developed focused on some certain traditional values.

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6. References

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