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The Image of the Past as an Object of Cultural Understanding. A New Conceptual Approach

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Abstract. Humanitarian scholars show increasing interest in the phenomenon of the past. It arises from the complex state of the modern sociocultural situation in general, and has a number of particular psychological, communicative, sociocultural, scientific and methodological, political and ideological reasons. The past as the subject of a list of sciences (from history to sociology), acquires a number of specific features in the field of culturology, one of which is constructability. The past, or rather the image of the past, helps to solve crucial cultural tasks. The past, therefore, exists in culture as sociocultural reflection on the past reality; it concentrates the dominant values and other cultural affirmations. In this article we define the image of the past as a set of constructed, historically variable, but locally stable, social representations of the past, which, on the one hand, reflect characteristic and relevant attitudes for a given culture, and on the other – have significant influence on their formation. Beside the constructability, the image of the past has other distinct features. It is indirect, i. e. characterized by the absence of direct references in reality, manifested in the form of «traces». Subjective, i. e. not based on verified facts and judgments. Sociocultural, i. e. conditioned by the parameters of the relevant culture. Value-based, i. e. the image of the past is an evaluation of the past, which implies some expressed attitude to it. Stable within the framed period of the certain culture. Furthermore, the past has a collective nature of existence, i. e. formed within a certain sociocultural community, and it has temporal duality, i. e. the image of the past belongs to the past in its temporal status and to the present in its value and normative content. The sociocultural conditions, which allow the past to become an independent area of temporal reality, are the distance; the past must create in the mind of a person or group a subjective sense of distance from the reality. Irreversibility; a person must perceive it as irrevocable, gone forever, as the Other, as compared to the present. In addition, the past must be in demand and valuable for the present (as a source of answers to the requests of time).

Keywords: culture, culturology, past, image, image of the past.

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Образ прошлого как объект культурологического осмысления: новый концептуальный поворот

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Аннотация. Актуализация исследовательского интереса ученых-гуманитариев к феномену прошлого обусловлена комплексным состоянием современной культуры, но может конкретизироваться через ряд наиболее значимых причин психологического, коммуникативного, научно-методологического, политико-идеологического и социокультурного порядка. Являясь предметом интереса целого ряда наук (от истории до социологии), в пространстве культурологии прошлое приобретает ряд специфических черт, главной из которых можно назвать конструируемость. Прошлое, точнее его образ, создается культурой для решения наиболее значимых для нее в актуальности задач, существуя в ней как результат социокультурной рефлексии относительно минувшей реальности и концентрируя в себе доминантные ценностные и иные установки культуры. Под образом прошлого в контексте данной статьи понимается совокупность конструируемых, исторически изменчивых, но локально устойчивых, социальных представлений о прошлом, которые, с одной стороны, отражают характерные и значимые для данной культуры установки, а с другой – оказывают значительное влияние на их формирование. Наиболее значимыми сущностными параметрами образа прошлого (помимо упомянутой конструируемости) являются: опосредованность (отсутствие прямых референций в реальности, их присутствие в форме «следов»), субъективность (наполненность неverified контентом), социокультурная детерминированность (обусловленность параметрами актуальной культуры), ценностная окрашенность, коллективная природа бытования, устойчивость в рамках определённого периода существования культуры, темпоральный дуализм (принадлежность к сфере прошлого по своему темпоральному статусу и к сфере настоящего по своему ценностно-нормативному наполнению). Социокультурными условиями формирования образа прошлого выступают дистантность (осмысление прошлого как принципиально Другого по отношению к настоящему), необратимость (восприятие прошлого как тотально невозвращаемого, ушедшего навсегда), востребованность (прошлое должно помогать решать актуально значимые проблемы).

Ключевые слова: культура, культурология, прошлое, образ, образ прошлого.

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Научная специальность: 24.00.00 – культурные исследования.

Introduction

Reference to the past is extremely popular in modern humanitarian science. Such regard to this specific phenomenon has. In our opinion, a number of reasons.

1. Psychological reasons. In this case, we identify two aspects. First, we can explain the frequency of referring to the past by the fact that the galloping pace of modern society progress alongside with the revolutionary futurization of life create psychological discomfort for the average person who does not keep up with the pace of renewal, transformation and modernization of life. While referring to the past, such person obtains some certain stability, thus compensating the loss of a sense of familiarity in the culture.

Secondly, the appeal to the phenomenon of the past relates to the natural and timeless psychological need to oppose oneself to «the one-dimensional everyday life» (Assman, 2004), devoid of other dimensions of reality.

2. Communicative reasons. Increasing interest in the phenomenon of the past is associated with the emergence of new electronic, virtual forms of storing and transmitting information (including information about the past), which, according to Ya. Assmanis the third Cultural Revolution after the invention of writing and printing. The use of such technological innovations, on the one hand, allows creating an almost limitless «archive of the past», and, on the other hand, raises the question of developing a new strategy for remembering and forgetting (Assman, 2012).

3. Scientific and methodological reasons. Postmodernists. In particular, have accelerated the processes of democratization of history as a field of scientific knowledge and knowledge. Specifically, the discovery of previously

unknown or classified historical facts together with the unveiling of their author's interpretations, even non-scientific ones, produced significant changes in the understanding of who and how can study the past. This creates a proliferation of actors engaged in historical science and intensifies the appeal to past problems.

4. Political and ideological reasons. The past is the subject of political manipulation and speculations (it should be noted it has always been). The slogan of democratization and pluralization of historical knowledge was put forward by postmodernists; however, the past continues to be an effective tool of management. To justify and reinforce modernity, people construct some «adequate» history. Such cultivated representations of the past serve to satisfy the current needs of the present, and help to eliminate the information, which has no use to the present.

5. Sociocultural reasons. The number of other circumstances explains the growing interest in the problem of the past. These include the so-called post-traumatic syndrome of modern culture, caused by the sociocultural upheavals of the XX century (both world wars and other armed conflicts, genocides, etc.). In this context, we receive the interpretation of the past in the categories of trauma, guilt, remorse, etc. This connects the understanding of past mainly with the «fear of oblivion», with the need to preserve the most objective information about these shocks, alongside with the desire to preserve the memory of them, to extract experience for an extremely long time (Kauganov, 2015).

The interest in the past also results from the strengthening processes of national, ethnic, cultural and group identification, based on

the shared historical destiny as a symbol of the group unity.

A number of researchers point to another reason for renewed efforts to study the past – artistic nostalgia. «Creative impotence» (Linde, 2009), the inability to create something new with breakthrough qualities in the field of culture, which leads to a different level of understanding of the world, generates its opposite in the form of conservation and museumification. In this context, the past becomes a powerful resource that reanimates the artistic existence of the present.

The interest in the past also manifests itself on an everyday and practical level. Speaking of the latter, we should recall the huge number of theatrical, film and song remakes and remixes that are gaining popularity in the media, based on the «reanimation» of the past.

Problem Statement

Thus, we can say that both scientific and everyday interest in the phenomenon of the past is caused not by the separate developmental domains of the modern sociocultural situation (local relevance), but by its complex state (systematic relevance). The crisis of identity, the rapid pace of progress and its consequences, global problems—all this turns into a need for a deep, systematic understanding of the past. Although not just past «in itself», but also as the reverse side of the present, the past as a mirror that reflects modernity. This approach allows the modernity to see itself in this mirror. In particular, its own problems, and ways to overcome them.

Conceptual basis of the research

The past is the subject of a wide variety of humanitarian sciences such as history, philosophy, archaeology, anthropology, and others. Perhaps, two most significant features that unite the diversity of humanitarian concepts of the past are the recognition of the recreated nature of the past, and the recognition of the crucial role of the present in its cognition.

In line with the culturally sensitive approach, the present plays the role of not just a source of influence on the past cognition, but also a source of its formation, precisely, the for-

mation of the image of the past. Culture constitutes the image of the past in order to solve its most important tasks (social integration, formation of an identification platform, justification of power, etc.). The past, therefore, exists in culture as sociocultural reflection on the past reality; it concentrates the dominant values and other cultural affirmations.

In contrast to history, which is focused on the objective study of the facts of the past in their logical sequence (Hilton, Liu, 2017), culturology focuses on the value interpretation of the past, on reflecting its subjective perception within a particular sociocultural community. History struggles with the myths in the pattern of ideas about the past, while culturology accepts it. History examines the past as «a foreign country», as «a vanished world that is fundamentally different from the modern one» (Leont'eva, 2011), culturology seeks to overcome this distance, to revive the past and take it as a continuation of the present.

There are very few cultural studies aimed at a systematic understanding of the past as a cultural phenomenon and its conceptualization. Most cultural-oriented studies of the past are related to a distinct particular aspect of it, such as memorial, commemorative, historical, artistic, etc. As the exception we can mention the works of D. Louehntal «Past – the Forgotten Land» (Louehntal, 2004), and Ya. Assman «Cultural Memory. Writing, Memory, and Political Identity in Early Cultures» (Assman, 2004) and P. Nora «France-Memory» (Nora, 1999).

The title of D. Louehntal's work firstly captures the perception of the past as an alien world, as the Other one, separated from the present by an insurmountable gap. This kind of the past perception as an alien world, distant from the present one is only one form of attitude, field-proven by historical science. Secondly, D. Louehntal refers to another side of perception of the past; he call is «heritage» – a more familiar form of understanding the past as a familiar area of reality that is closer to the common person, understandable and comfortable. The researcher records the fundamental differences between the historical and «hereditary» approaches to the past in the following

way: «History explores and explains the past, which is progressively covered with a haze as time passes. Heritage simplifies and clarifies the past, while bringing modern goals and intentions to it... History implies one century looking upon another one. Heritage refers to the past as the heritage of the present century» (Louehntal, 2004).

Any appeal to the past (historical or «hereditary»), which serves as an alternative to the former), according to D. Louehntal, is connected, first, with the benefits derived from it. These include awareness of recognition, confirmation of beliefs and actions, guiding examples, awareness of personal and collective identity, diachronic enrichment of the present experience, the ability to delay the onset of the present. However, work with the past also contains a number of threats, such as the need to displace traumatic experiences, to suppress the present from the great past and thus generate competition with it. This bipolar nature of the past gives rise to the same ambivalent attitude towards it. Accordingly, people may either censure, or honor the past, resent it, or develop a call of duty to it.

The main conclusion arrived at by D. Louehntal was that cognition of the past can only be based on a set of diverse, but meaningfully interconnected sources that allow only partially overcoming the influence of his own modernity on the research procedures. «Knowledge about the past is not «ready-to-use» copies of the past, but an eclectic, selective reconstruction of the latter, based on subsequent actions and perceptions, as well as on constantly changing codes by which we distinguish, symbolize and classify the world around us» (Louehntal, 2004).

The most striking example of a culturological approach to understanding the past is the so-called memory-studies, or the history of memory, the name for this area of humanitarian research as proposed by Ya. Assman. Memory, understood as a supra-individual phenomenon, as a cultural phenomenon, is a bridge between the past and the present, since society forms its own identity in the present through cultural memory and the ideas of the past stored in it. Pointing out the fundamental difference be-

tween the historical and cultural or memorative approach to the past, L.P. Repina notes: «In contrast to the actual history, the «history of memory» does not study the past as it is, but studies the past that remains in memories, that is in the tradition (historiographic, literary, iconographic, etc.). Therefore, the purpose of studying the «history of memory» it is not to isolate the «historical truth» from this tradition, but to analyze the tradition itself as a phenomenon of collective or cultural memory...» (Repina, 2010). «History of memory» is not concerned with comparing the content of memories with historical realities. Otherwise, its main function is to understand the reasons for the formation of historical realities, their contents and form, to analyze the cultural meanings and images that comprise the memory of the group, to research the ways of manifestation in the space of actual culture as well as mechanisms for forgetting and reanimating memories, and so on.

Ya. Assman, one of the classics of memory-studies, linked the formation of a particular image of the past with its own connective structure, existing in the depths of this culture. He defined it as a set of symbolic links that unite individual members of society into a group by integrating their past and present in the memory space (Assman, 2004). The connective structure is formed when group members follow established general rules and share values, while they have common past and ways to appeal to it.

Each kind of culture has its own type of connective structure. For example, traditional culture practiced «ritual coherence», based on imitation and preservation of the past. In its framework, the past was perceived as a mythological time (cosmological past, according to B.A. Uspensky), and the appeal to it was carried out through ritual repetition. The scientist called it absolute past or a variation of eternity.

The invention and dissemination of writing transformed the type of connective structure and the type of coherence, consequently transforming the form of reference to the past. Ritual coherence gave way to textuality, and imitation of the past and ritual repetition gave way to its interpretation and resurrection. Historical past replaced mythological past, arrang-

ing a series of events embedded in a rigid logic of cause-and-effect relationships.

Discussing the characteristic aspects of perceptions of the past, Ya. Assman named several important parameters equally manifested both in traditional and written cultures:

- Symbolic character (the memory about the past does not usually store specific events, places and characters orderly);

- Spatial and time relevance (the content of memory about the past must be clearly identified with time and place);

- Group relation (the content of memories must be related to a particular group, reflect its interests and requests) (Assman, 2004).

Summarizing the analysis of the concept by Ya. Assman we can cite his idea that places him in close quarters with many researchers of the past: there is no past as such, «there is only what society in a particular era is able to recreate in its current referential framework... it is reorganized by the changing framework of the present moving forward» (Assman, 2004).

The ideas of P. Nora, an outstanding French memory researcher, are very close to the ones of Ya. Assman. Like his colleague on the issue, P. Nora spoke about two main types of the past perception, traditional and modern (historical). The latter is a result of the gap, a «break» between past and present, between «before» and «after». Citing P. Nora: «We have moved from the idea of a visible past to an invisible one, from the stable past to the past, that we experience as a rupture, from the history seeking itself in the continuity of memory to the memory projected itself in the discontinuity of history» (Nora, 1999).

Constant and continuous actualization of the past in the present characterized the traditional perception of the past, based on repetition. Woven into the living fabric of the tradition, it constituted a part of the group's everyday existence, and therefore was not recognized as the past. Today, the living environment does not include past in itself; moreover, the actual culture as a whole keeps the distance with the past, so the only form of interaction with the past is its reconstruction.

According to P. Nora, the increased interest in recent decades in microhistory, re-

search of mentality, customs, and everyday life, together with an attempt to enter the value-based, symbolic world of the past. In order to make it more understandable and close. Indicates the growing crisis in the perception of the past. The stronger the gap with the past, the more intensely we try to overcome it, if not in face, then at least illusorily, giving the appearance, a «hallucination» of unity with it.

Discussion

The considered concepts allow us to speak about the special status of the past as an object of culturological knowledge. In this perspective, it appears as the result of the construction of a past reality carried out in the context of an actual culture. The past ceases to be the past as such and becomes an image of itself.

An image in the broadest sense is «a subjective spiritual and mental reality that arises in the act of perceiving any reality. In the process of contact with the outside world... a subjective copy of objective reality» (Bychkov, 2011).

We define the *image of the past* as a set of constructed, historically variable, but locally stable, social (collective) representations of the past, which, on the one hand, reflect characteristic and significant attitudes for a given culture (i. e. can be determined), and on the other – have significant influence on their formation (i. e. can determine).

Image of the past has distinct features:

1. Constructed (i. e. has a reconstructed and/or newly created artificial character).

2. Indirect (i. e. characterized by the absence of direct references in reality, manifested in the form of «traces»);

3. Subjective (i. e. the image of the past is not the result of a rational understanding of history, its content is not always based on verified facts and judgments – on the contrary, it may include myths and legends, unverified facts, misinterpreted sources, etc.).

3. Sociocultural (i. e. conditioned by the parameters of the relevant culture);

4. Value-based (i. e. the image of the past is an evaluation of the past, which implies some expressed attitude to it).

5. Social (collective) nature of existence (i. e. formed within a certain sociocultural community).

6. Stable within the framed period of the certain culture (i. e. the change of the actual cultural context determines its transformation; the image of the past can act as one of the markers of sociocultural paradigm shifts).

7. Temporal duality (i. e. the image of the past belongs to the past in its temporal status and to the present in its value and normative content).

The present updates and adapts the image of the past for its own values and norms. As according to L. Fevr: «A person does not remember the past – he constantly recreates it. This applies to both an individual as an abstractness and to a person in the real life conditions as a member of society. Such person does not store the past in his or her memory in the same way that the Northern glaciers store frozen mammoths in their thickness for thousands of years. He or she learns and interprets the past only through the prism of the present» (Fevr, 1991). Therefore, the present interacts with the past, perceiving it as a resource for solving crucial issues of our time, as a tool for forming or maintaining relevant values and norms.

The most important condition for forming the image of the past is to confirm the autonomous temporal status of the past. In other words, to distinguish past as a phenomenon different from the present. To differentiate past and present is difficult, as a research problem, it requires special attention. Scientific views vary among the researches, but below we state the conditions, which allow the past to become an independent area of temporal reality.

Firstly, it is distance. The past must create in the mind of a person or group a subjective sense of distance from the reality.

Secondly, it is irreversibility. A person must perceive it as irrevocable, gone forever, as the Other, as compared to the present. «The past begins at the moment when the door that separates the past from the future slams shut. The object of the research can only be that which is locked down pretty tight and has become unreachable for us» (Assman, 2012).

Thirdly. In order to form an image of the past, the past must meet another requirement – it must be in demand and valuable for the present. Primarily as an archive of potentially significant knowledge, or even as a source of answers to the requests of time (in the gap theory, such a mission of the past, as shown above, is denied). Otherwise, the past would simply not exist, and the entire past reality was forgotten. According to L. Repina, «for events and characters to be part of the past and to have the status of the «past» (and not, for example, the status of old, outdated) means to be socially perceived in relation to the image of the past. In the categories of the past. Thus, it is not just the time, which separates an event or a character from the present. Other than that the event and character should have a constructed and legitimate image, alongside with the significant meaning of it in the categories of the past to obtain the status of the «past»... While countless superfluous facts and persons that do not fit into the meaning of the relevant syntagmas of the past are forgotten» (Repina, 2005).

Conclusion

Summing up the above, we can say that in the context of cultural understanding, the past is understood as a past reality (preceding the present), where the image of the past is the form of sociocultural representation, constructed and transmitted by a particular culture and at the same time defining its specific features. We called this theoretical and methodological basis for interpreting the past as *past-conceptuality*.

Unlike other humanities, whose subject of study is the past reality (history, archaeology, anthropology, etc.), cultural studies focuses not so much on the reconstruction of an objective picture of the past, but on the understanding of the image of the past constructed in the culture. This research perspective allows us not only to recreate the temporal picture of the world (ideas of the past), typical of a certain period of cultural development, but also to understand more deeply its values, norms, ideology and other parameters (ideas of culture bearers about themselves). Culturological understanding of the image of the past has a special heuristic potential in relation to the actual culture,

the study of which is complicated not only by its super liveliness, but also by the lack of historical distance «from itself». The «reflection» of the present in the «mirror» of the past. In its constructed image, helps to define the internal logic, laws and trends in the development

of modern society more clearly. This aspect determines the importance of the image of the past for culturology as a science – both in the context of studying the history of culture, and in the context of solving applied problems of culturology.

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