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Trends and Prospects in Growing Sociocultural Complexity

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Abstract

Modern culture demonstrates increasing complexity. Today, complexity is beginning to be envisioned as a modernity's immanent quality, a source both of uncertainty and of hidden opportunities for cultural development. This article outlines the socio-cultural features of increasing complexity. Modern culture does not promote stability, but, on the contrary, multiplies differences and becomes a kind of differentiation flow. From being a system of sustainable, vitally important forms of human activity, culture is transformed into a kaleidoscope of individual experiences against the background of network structures and technosocial systems that exist according to their own logic. Permeating all cultural forms, complexity becomes sometimes a source for the emergent new cultural practices, sometimes a source of chronic anxiety caused by the inability to 'master' socio-cultural transformation.

Keywords: culture, society, progress, simplicity, complexity, simplification, complication

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1. Introduction

Modernity is often described through neologisms. Postmodernism was especially prolific in this respect, constructing a multitude of new words and vastly extending the meaning of the old ones. Familiar classical philosophical and scientific concepts are actively reused with such prefixes as 'un', 'trans' and, of course, 'post'. Postindustrialism, postmodernism, transhumanism: this is far from a complete list of concepts proposed to describe contemporary age. Even the prefix 'neo' used in conjunction with our era points not to it creative re-imagining, but rather to something blown out of proportions; it is often used negatively to describe something that is new but degraded compared to an original. As a result, despite the visible technical achievements, modernity becomes associated with simplification and degradation.

Throughout the XXth century, we encounter a wide variety of models of regressive social development. A multitude of negative definitions used to describe modernity can't but look suspicious: 'crisis of meaning' (E.Husserl), 'death of man' (E.Fromm),

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'end of history' (F.Fukuyama), 'age of homelesness', 'age of emptiness' (G.Lipovetsky), 'dissolution of man' (M.Foucault). It seems that our present does not create any positive connotations. Since the works of O.Spengler and K.N.Leontyev, our society has been diagnosed as moving "towards the loss of qualitative diversity and to cultural flattening (simplification)" [2, p. 75]. Fiction, together with modern cinema, actively sublimates an idea of the 'end of times', perceiving it as a chance to challenge the burden of civilization and to return to more simple and transparent existence.

Many researchers believe that modern culture exists in a state of internal conflict engendered by the contradictions within the Western civilization. For example, according to E.Morin, "Paradoxically, Western civilization triumphing across the globe is in crisis, stricken in its very core" [4, p. 54]. Crisis states of Western civilization are encoded in the logic of its development. Western culture, being obsessed with an idea that it embodies the triumph of human reason, 'absolute will', and 'absolute law', brings itself to the state of self-denial. The search for absolute foundations of being and for the common good leads to the disillusionment about progress, to the 'irrationality of rationality' (G.Ritzer), archaization of society, the concepts of the 'New Middle Ages'. Crisis states of Western civilization are determined by the collapse of its main ideals. These ideals are a set of myths: a myth of the power over the universe, a myth of the progress, a myth of the possibility to achieve happiness in our earthly existence. Among such myths is a myth of simplicity. Western civilization loses its ideas of sociocultural reality as something simple and transparent, something governed by yet unknown, but potentially simple principles.

2. The Transformation of Culture

Culture is not a simple homogeneous reality: it reflects the multifaceted character of human life and the complexity of human nature. Yuri Lotman wrote in one of his works that "one of the main functions of culture is to resist entropy" [3, p. 85). The literal meaning of the Greek word 'entropy' is, of course, 'turn' or 'transformation'. The concept of 'entropy' in thermodynamics proves that matter is inherently geared towards the destruction of any kind of order. The discovery of entropy opened a vast scientific and philosophical field of research regarding the dialectical struggle between the two tendencies exhibited by complex structure: to submit to entropy and to form stable structures.

Complexity is immanent in culture, since culture itself is predetermined by an irreducible complexity of symbolic systems and their self-organizing tendency. According

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to N.M.Smirnova, “the complexity of communicative and semantic characteristics of the social world, human activity and cultural artefacts not only competes with the complexity of natural self-organization, but often even exceeds it, both ontologically and in the required methodological depth” [5, p. 172]. An idea of complication is encoded in the world ‘culture’ itself. Soil cultivation presupposes its preparation to something that is more complex. The Romans, of course, used the word ‘culture’ in genitive in phrases meaning a certain degree of perfection, a qualitative improvement of the thing that the word ‘culture’ was applied to. Modernity is a visible proof of the objective tendencies towards sociocultural growth in complexity. However, we cannot say that culture becomes more complex through the process of competition (similar to biological ‘natural selection’). At the same time, increased cultural complexity demonstrates spatial and temporal changes in the topological and functional organization of culture. Rising cultural complexity is characterized by the compression of spatial and temporal scales, while the periods of development are interspersed with the periods of recession, crisis, and degradation. This is also relevant for such a specialized cultural field as art. According to Yu.Lotman, “Art – and here we see its structural affinity with natural life – has an ability to transform noise into information; it complicates its own structure through its correlation with the environment” [3, p. 85].

3. Cultural Space Under the Influence of Technosphere

Today technosphere is becoming increasingly complex, and this process has a considerable impact on cultural space. Humans are ‘surrounded’, ‘taken hostage’ by complex systemic structures, which are their own creation. Position in a list, in an electronic queue or in a database substantively determines today’s individual existence. Internet ‘dictates’ our way of life and our mode of thinking. All spheres of social and cultural life are regulated by a multitude of complex rules and procedures. Hyper-awareness and information overload become “the choking complexity of modern life” (A.Toffler) and the “havoc of overcomplication” (Alan Siegel and Irene Etzkorn), while the “runaway complex world” (A.Giddens) becomes a part of our everyday reality.

Rising cultural complexity is an objective process which engenders traumatic subjective responses. It is hard to accept that culture no longer conforms to the traditional ways of thinking about culture. We believe that the images of cultural degradation and depletion that were popular in the XXth century, are overblown. Statements about decadence and moral decay does not justify such assertions. We agree with D.I.Dubrovsky’s thesis that there exists neither a moral progress a nor moral regress, but rather human culture demonstrates an equilibrium between an individual's egoistic and altruistic intentions. [1, p. 91]

Contemporary culture is full of 'life forces' and potentialities as never before. Rising cultural complexities possess a lot of dangers, but they are also the vehicles of possibilities. An increase in socio-cultural complexity is objectively driven by the scientific and technological progress – however, this is not a full story. The loss of 'simple' relations between humans and objects happens because of their overabundance and technical complexity. There are too many things, and the things themselves are more and more difficult to manage; they demand a certain learning curve in order to be used efficiently. Many objects in contemporary culture act in conjunction with other objects, creating a kind of spider network of interactions.

Cultural space feels an impact of changing notions about materiality, wholeness and discontinuity of being. Virtual existence substitutes reality with its simulation. Digital revolution is increasingly erasing the boundaries between reality and virtuality. Virtual objects become a part of everyday life, and cultural practices acquire their virtual interpretation. Many cultural phenomena have their virtual representation. Virtual culture simplifies the reality, but 'suffers' from fragmentation. Internet changes human concept of the communicative logic itself in many spheres and social subsystems. At the same time, Internet produces only an illusion of unity, localizing humanity within the disparate Internet communities based on diverse attributes (gender, age, interests, needs). A search for orderly reality, for simple and transparent principles of existence, engenders complexity: social and cultural atomization following the logic of network.

The consequence of rising complexity of cultural symbolic space is the rising complexity of its semantic space. In modern culture, the growth point of complexity is an outgrowth of the symbolic cultural space and a transformation of its symbolic referentiality. Modernity increasingly loses touch with reality; signs become liberated from the need to correspond to an original. Replication of empty forms becomes a trend: decaffeinated coffee, nicotine-free cigarettes, non-alcohol beer, fat free cheese, diet Cola, etc.: this is far from the complete list of such products liberated from the requirement to conform to an original prototype. Even human beings are now free from the demand to follow human nature – a trend reflected, for example, in transhumanism. Complex existence determines not only cognitive and methodological approaches in science and philosophy, it provides foundations for the humanity's ethical and humanistic principles.

In conclusion, let us note that the tendencies in rising socio-cultural complexity are contradictory. Cultural space is being transformed by technically complex self-developing systems – computer networks, Internet, financial markets etc. – that change our concepts of materiality and logic of cultural development. As a result, culture is becoming more diverse, dynamically reacting in response to the needs and desires of modern individuals, fulfilling the demands of their 'complex' nature. At the same time, these trends lead to the increase in formal cultural complexity, but also to the simplification in its content. Cultural content becomes fragmented, reduced to separate images and signs actively reassembled and recombined by the individuals. The discovery of the complexity of human culture and its radical irreducibility to any familiar cultural pattern becomes a new sociocultural challenge fraught with both new opportunities and new dangers.

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