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« Digital Cultures: Alternatives »

Varia

“Apie karvių melžėjas” (“About Dairy Maids”)

Algirdas Julien Greimas

Algirdas Julien Greimas, born in 1917 in Toula, Russia and dead in 1992 in Paris, was a linguist and semiotician from Lithuania. After being a professor in Alexandria (with Roland Barthes) then in Ankara and Istanbul, he was appointed professor of French linguistics at the University of Poitiers in 1962. In 1965, he was appointed professor (directeur d'études) at the EHESS. *Sémantique structurale* (1966), *Du sens* (1970) and *Du sens II* (1983) are his major publications.

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Now that I am in Paris, Soviet Lithuanian papers reach me more frequently. I would like to share some observations with my readers.

The cult of Stalin is over, yet much of it still remains. To me, a hardened individual, the cult of dairy maids still amazes me¹. In every paper you read, you will find the praise of the heroic dairy maid and her photograph with her cow or cows. True, the thaw has brought a bit of fantasy: sometimes, instead of a dairy maid, there are photographs of painters at their easels

¹ Translator's note: in the USSR, milking cows was traditionally woman's work—a heroic blonde, smiling, milk pail in each hand. The best of them were awarded the Stakhanov medal annually.

painting dairy maids milking cows; how about photographs of composers writing symphonies to increase milk output? Only the swine feeders might possibly compete with the cow maids. Looking at it all from a distance and summing it up, it would appear that the Lithuanian girl's mission is to milk cows. And when the quota is fulfilled, perhaps a turn at folk dancing would be allowed.

That which officialdom over there calls the cult of the individual, here in France we call a myth. We see no difference between the cult of Stalin and the cult of a dairy maid. I have a friend in Paris, Roland Barthes, who wrote a book about the myths of bourgeois society. He was asked to lecture in Europe, and several years ago found himself in Yugoslavia where the Yugoslav Communist Writers Union asked him to lead a discussion about myths. He describes all kinds of bourgeois myths and told everyone, that according to him, the duty of socialism is to free people from all kinds of myths. He also added that myths abound not only in bourgeois societies, but flourish as well in socialist societies. I don't know what socialist myths he mentioned, but I am sure he did not forget the dairy maid myth.

A great silence ensued. At last a writer stood up and started lecturing to the effect that people need myths and that they must be segregated into two groups: good and bad myths...

Let us now speak seriously. What does the red-cheeked dairy maid myth mean in Lithuania? First of all, it says that work is good, that work is a great pleasure. Can this be considered true? I believe not. Or else one must keep it in reserve. In Paris I see garbage trucks pass by. Could one say that it is a great joy to pick up stinking garbage? Hardly, even in a socialist society. The French Socialist Party, out of touch with the world and having lost its fighting spirit, proposes that the purpose and goal is not work, but leisure, and that work hours should be reduced and free time increased.

Let us now return to the dairy maids and swine feeders. To praise the heroism of dairy maids is the same as to say that the mission of working people is to care for cows and swine. In a way, it is to limit future possibilities.

Several years ago, I met a Lithuanian excursion of writers and other enlightened people roaming the world. We talked about various issues and the increasing progress in all areas. They told me about new factories in Vilnius and Kaunas and how Lithuania is being industrialized.

Good, said I, can you tell me what is the percentage of industrial workers and how many are still in agriculture. They looked at each other and then one of them said: we don't really know for sure, but at least 300.000 workers.

So, the Lithuanian writers and artists know well that the flaxen-haired maidens milk cows; that is very good, but reality, alas, is not within their grasp.

The facts are as follows: industrial countries attempt to have as few workers in agriculture as possible.

The system of kolkhozes should allow for agricultural mechanization and relieve people to pursue other useful occupations. But to expand kolkhozes and to put the entire Lithuanian population there and then say milk and feed

and you will be happy is downright silly. It just cannot be justified. In America, only 11% are occupied in farming, in France about 20-25%; it appears that 70% of the Lithuanian work force is sitting uselessly in the country.

I understand that it is not the fault of Lithuanians, I understand that the Soviet Union is far behind economically, that it is not easy to encourage industrialization. But the purpose of economic development is clear: let all Lithuanians live in cities and only then will Lithuania's economy and culture flourish. Therefore a myth must fit social goals. To worship milk maids simply means the same thing as telling Lithuanians, stay put in your villages and be glad.

To the question what is the percentage of Russians in Vilnius, the answer is 60%. Why so high? Does it mean that Russian specialists are highly qualified? No, there are all kinds: bus drivers are mostly Russians. That is why I don't like the dairy maid myth. I just cannot get used to it.

Let us pursue another issue. In the West one can seek public opinion on one or another matter, Gallup and other such agencies have perfected the method very well, but there is nothing like it in the Soviet Union—it has its basis in the Stalinist principle that the Communist Party knows better what people want and need than do the people themselves. It is not funny at all and I don't agree at all with that explanation. But one should ask the dairy maids themselves what they want, or if they like what the papers write about them all the time, or if they would like to say something different themselves. I am sure that they would be glad to relinquish the honor of the cult bestowed upon them. It is human nature that things are best where you are not, that what one wants is not available, that literature and the arts—including newspapers—are successful because they relieve daily tedium and daily worries. It is certain that the dairy maids would respond to the Lithuanian Soviet Writers Union representatives: don't write about us, we know our own lives very well, write about how the city maidens live, how the girls in foreign countries live—we will then read your papers with the greatest interest.