

International “Society of the Spectacle”

Stanislav O. Byshok

Stanislav O. Byshok, PhD in Political Science
Moscow State University, Moscow, Russia
Faculty of Political Science
Department of History and Theory of Politics
Specialist

SPIN-RSCI: 2820-5046

ORCID: 0000-0002-2441-4975

IstinaResearcherID (IRID): 230929538

E-mail: sbyshok@gmail.com

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Abstract

The present crisis in international relations manifests itself in several domains, including diplomatic communication. The degradation in this sphere is both quantitative (fewer communicators and/or acts of communication) and qualitative (a change in the substance of interaction and the emasculation of interstate dialogue). Attempts to find common ground have become increasingly rare, and ultimatums more frequent. Devoid of substance, international dialogue has become more emotional. Traditionally reserved and kept behind closed doors, diplomatic communication is now exposed to the general public, with contradictions deliberately highlighted and discussions theatricalized. This article explores new forms of international dialogue using the concept of ‘society of the spectacle’ proposed by philosopher Guy Debord. Originally developed to study the socio-political and economic dynamics within individual countries in the late capitalist era, this concept is applied here to interstate relations, specifically to analyze diplomatic communication amidst the current crisis.

Keywords: Guy Debord, diplomatic communication, international relations, society of the spectacle, postmodernity, securitization.

A decade ago, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov recounted how his then U.S. counterpart, John Kerry, had advised him to ignore President Barack Obama's public statements equating Russia with international terrorism and Ebola. For traditional diplomacy, there is nothing scandalous if harsh words addressed to the public differ from substantive conversations behind closed doors. But what happens when those symbolic doors become transparent or are even dismantled altogether?

In 1967, Marxist philosopher and activist Guy Debord's instant best-seller *Society of the Spectacle* was published in Paris. According to the author, late capitalism is a stage in the development of production relations in which not only labor relations, but all relations among people and between the state and its citizens undergo alienation. Every country becomes "an immense accumulation of spectacles" (Debord, 1970, p. 8), i.e. of images and roles, where representation—a picture—replaces live, non-alienated interaction. Under late capitalism, "the specialization of images of the world is rediscovered, perfected, in the world of the autonomized image" (Ibid, p. 8). Endlessly repeating, the multitude of spectacles provides "for a constant reinforcement of the conditions of isolation of 'lonely crowds'" (Ibid, p. 17)—i.e. of ordinary citizens. In modern terms, the issue on the agenda is *information bubbles or echo chambers*, quite autonomous and capable of sustaining themselves indefinitely. The actor of the spectacle is "the opposite of the individual; he is the enemy of the individual in himself as obviously as in others" (Ibid, p. 34). The system of alienation "personifies itself" in its actors (Ibid, p. 34).

The concept of 'society of the spectacle' was introduced by Guy Debord in his 1967 work of the same name, as well as in his detailed commentary on it in 1988. Like critical theory or poststructuralism, it was not intended for analysis of international relations. However, the

current global situation prompts us to try to apply this methodology not only to the individual states of late capitalism (as Marxist authors have done since the 1960s), but also to the system of diplomatic communication in the hypothesized period of transition to (early) multipolarity (MFA, 2023). Alongside the general belief that the “end of history” has been postponed indefinitely, there is also a widespread belief that contemporary diplomacy and the world order in general are in deep crisis. As Guy Debord put it, “a world division of spectacular tasks” (Debord, 1970, p. 33) is an accomplished fact.

DIPLOMACY AS A CALLING AND PROFESSION

What are the role and place of diplomacy in this volatile world—and what were they before, in more stable eras? “Filled with nostalgia, we look at the 19th century or the second half of the Cold War era as a period of the *triumph of diplomatic art*” (Bordachev, 2022, p. 39). The Vienna system envisioned a Concert of Europe, an agreement by great powers to maintain the current world order. The Yalta-Potsdam system was an agreement to at least avoid destroying the world order, by adhering to designated spheres of interest. However, as Timofei Bordachev notes, “the foundation of this order began to crumble due to the evolution of its constituent living organisms—states.” When rules and procedures cease to operate, diplomacy “yields the leading role to politics” (Ibid, p. 39). The role of diplomacy diminishes “at each new round of history,” and it is national leaders, acting as diplomats, that have “to assess the extent of permissible injustice with regard to everyone’s claims that creates an order which is accepted by all states of significance.” (Ibid, p. 39). Once the political leaders have resolved the new problems, professional diplomats get back to work in a changed environment. Until then, diplomats have to lock themselves within the community of *friendly countries* that will agree with the basic theses of your foreign policies or, at least, not publicly oppose them.

It is common belief that diplomats are much more frank, straightforward, and cynical (in the sense of *calling things by their proper names*) behind closed doors than they are in public, where different rules of communication apply (Mearsheimer, 2011). Today,

amid the growing transparency of political processes to the general public (WikiLeaks being the clearest example), the question arises whether it is possible in principle to maintain diplomacy's original seclusiveness. If we accept the new transparency of international communication as a norm to be reckoned with, then we will have to build our dialogue with our negotiating partners accordingly. For one, some Western leaders, including German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French Presidents François Hollande and Emmanuel Macron, in describing their one-on-one conversations with Russian President Vladimir Putin, have lamented that his private explanations of Russia's position regarding the Ukraine crisis do not fundamentally differ from his public ones. The Western leaders perceived this as disrespectful and contrary to the traditional frankness and value of face-to-face high-level communication, instinctively rejecting even the partial alignment of public and private conflict messaging.

Spectacle, according to Guy Debord, "would be merely the excesses of the media" (Debord, 1990, p. 7). Whenever the boundary between the confidential and the public disappears, publicity instantly fills the space that was private a moment ago. When a procedure, as a set of norms and principles of interstate interaction, is questioned by negotiators, "its performance easily turns into a public and theatrical action" (Bordachev, 2022, p. 50). Hence the live broadcast on French TV of part of Macron's confidential (according to the official protocol) telephone call to Putin, or the military threats publicly declared and then disavowed with equal ease.

Whereas classical diplomacy is the art of governing contradictions, the logic of a spectacle, or a political talk show as one of its manifestations, is based on the play of emotions and the emphasis of contradictions. In talk shows, dialogue often turns into two parallel monologues, which can eventually degrade into a vulgar brawl. This vaguely resembles international relations in crisis, but talk shows differ fundamentally in the presence of a moderator recognized by all the participants, and of security guards behind the scenes. In the real world, there is rarely a moderator—a concrete actor or even a set of commonly recognized rules—and there are no security guards, even theoretically.

CONCENTRATED THEATRICALIZATION

In discussing the current Russia-West confrontation, Dmitry Trenin writes that the fundamental feature of the present is that “the main battlefield of the ongoing struggle is inside the country—where the main object of confrontation is located” (Trenin, 2022). Based on this securitizing vision of reality (security is arbitrarily interpreted as broadly as possible, with the boundaries between domestic and foreign policy blurred), it is necessary to clearly establish and divide, according to Carl Schmitt (2007), ‘friends’ and ‘foes’ *within* the country—with the corresponding conclusions and decisions made regarding the latter. The foe’s opinion in this case is no longer perceived as a statement acceptable in public discussion, equal in status to any other point of view and worthy of free discussion, and is instead seen as a potentially criminal offence. “Wherever the concentrated spectacle rules, so does the police” (Debord, 1970, p. 36).

Securitization, with its tendency to form an imagined internal loyalist majority, is justified by the specifics of the foreign policy situation. The Schmittian ‘state of emergency’ is not formally imposed, but discursively implied. The pursuit of society’s ideological homogenization, and of its patriotic-defensive consolidation, somewhat undermines the notions of struggle against the ideological and political hegemony of the United States and its allies, of a transition to multipolarity, worldview pluralism, and the blooming complexity of different civilizational patterns. The connection between intrastate and interstate democracy, or lack thereof, is a matter for a separate discussion.

According to Andrei Tsygankov, Russia’s “tradition of awareness of itself in the world...is based on a dialogue with the surrounding states and peoples,” and Russian thinkers describe “a world free of ideological and other extremes, [where] spiritual freedom, economic development, and social and geopolitical values are established not through exploitation of other peoples, but on the basis of an equitable dialogue” (Tsygankov, 2022, p. 21). Ivan Timofeev points to Russia’s “historically inherent” “empathy in the dialogue with very different cultures and lifestyles” (Timofeev, 2023). Sergei Karaganov writes about

“the need for preserving the freedom of discussion and intellectual creativity” within the country and the imperative to “speak the truth to ourselves, society, and the authorities” (Karaganov, 2022, p. 16). He also calls for the “qualitative strengthening of the feedback system between the government and society, the administrative apparatus and intellectual elites” (Ibid). Given that, according to Trenin, “Russia today is a country at war and will remain so in the foreseeable future” (Trenin, 2022), expanding or even simply preserving the space for a real intra-national dialogue may be a highly problematic task. As for the spectacle, however, the matter is simpler, because it represents “the uninterrupted conversation which the present order maintains about itself, its laudatory monologue” (Debord, 1970, p. 14).

REALITY AND DISCOURSE

Large-scale confrontation with the West dictates its own logic, which depends on many factors, above all, on the openness to cooperation of countries located in other regions. In this context, anti-colonial rhetoric, which is often used by Russia’s foreign policy officialdom, may have some applied value in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. It should be borne in mind that the accepted historiographies of a number of post-Soviet states treat Russia as a colonial power. Moscow can be part of the post- or anti-colonial trend only in regions that were never under the direct or indirect control of the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union. In the latter case, an anti-colonial dialogue is hardly possible—instead one will hear antagonistic anti-colonial monologues aimed at building or maintaining new/old national/civilizational identities. Within the framework of such ‘society of the spectacle’ a neutral examination of its foreign policy in terms of history, political science or philosophy has no intrinsic significance. The humanities lose their autonomy and are instrumentalized “to immediately justify everything that happens” (Debord, 1990, pp. 39-40).

Dmitry Trenin writes that Russia needs to “consistently build elements of a new system of international relations together with the non-Western countries, form a new world agenda in cooperation with them, and consistently promote it” (Trenin, 2022). The non-Western

countries that wish to develop cooperation with Moscow are interested in energy supplies, joint infrastructure projects, and cooperation in the military-technical sphere, but are unlikely to be eager to collectively promote an agenda to protect *traditional values*. The more so, since these values, which are themselves a modern construct, seriously differ in Iran and Brazil, China and South Africa, Russia and Pakistan. The spectacle of traditionalism “has the right to contradict itself, to correct its own past” (Debord, 1990, p. 28). The past is reinterpreted—for the sake of coping with current tasks.

The highly successful Immortal Regiment project dedicated to the commemoration of the ancestors who fought in WWII is a tool of cohesion of Russians and Russian-speakers, no matter where they live, but it does not extend beyond the ecumene of Russian culture. Moscow’s defense of the Russian interpretation of the *common* struggle against the aggression of Nazi Germany and its allies is increasingly seen in many countries, not only post-Communist ones, as an attempt by the Kremlin to *privatize* the subject for its own interests. “Reasoning about history is inseparably reasoning about power” (Debord, 1970, p. 74).

FROM TRADITION TO POSTMODERNITY

One element of the *hybrid war* between the West and Russia is interference in diplomats’ work. According to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, Russian diplomats “often have to work under extreme conditions, occasionally with a risk to their health or life” (MFA, 2022). Collective “expulsions” are motivated either by diplomats’ activities allegedly “incompatible with their status” or used in retaliation for similar actions by the opposite side. The space for traditional diplomacy is shrinking, but at the same time, paradoxically, the diplomatic discourse is becoming increasingly public “Media status has acquired infinitely more importance than the value of anything one ... might actually be capable of doing” (Debord, 1990, pp. 10-11).

Ksenia Shilikhina notes that, although interstate dialogue is “neither election campaigning nor parliamentary debates,” the “competitive nature of diplomatic communication” is becoming increasingly visible (Shilikhina, 2021, p. 77). This competitive nature does not imply the

presence of an arbiter recognized by both sides, and the very criteria for winning the rhetorical battle are unclear and do not correlate with the achievement of the country's *foreign policy goals*. In a situation of normal interstate relations, "diplomatic texts...are as explicit and formally unemotional as possible," which "reduces the [potential] conflictogenity of communication." But in aggravated relations, "the balance between the rational and emotional in public diplomacy...is upset" (Ibid, p. 78). Shilikhina points out that the tendency towards "carnivalization of communication" is clearly present in the diplomatic discourse of recent years, and the frequent use of irony—in order to "lower the authority of opponents, thus showing the untenability of their position and its inconsistency with international standards of diplomacy"—increases "the conflictogenity of the speech act" (Ibid, pp. 79-80). In the resulting spectacle, says Guy Debord, "false archaic oppositions are artificially reborn; [including in the image of] regionalisms or racisms" (Debord, 1970, p. 35) that confirm one's identity via sharp and direct opposition to the Other.

Irony that is aimed at the Other, and downgrades its status, should be distinguished from other types of humor, including *self*-irony, which is intended to ease tensions. Presenting oneself as a nonideological beacon of sanity, and one's negotiating partner as short-sighted, incompetent, and dogmatic, may win approval from a loyal domestic audience or immediate superiors, but certainly will not improve international relations.

In the absence of a universal order recognized as legitimate by the main actors, even the very language of normal diplomatic communication is ruined. Separate languages of interstate communication remain "only in narrower regional communities such as liberal democracies united within NATO and EU institutions, a special system of relations between Russia and China, the post-Soviet space, and other associations..." (Bordachev, 2022, p. 43). Meetings between representatives of communities that have essentially adopted different languages often end in mutual accusations of lack of good will, unwillingness to hear the opponent, and reluctance to compromise. Each side successfully finds examples to illustrate the Other's

dishonesty, and not necessarily within today's reality or the current century: "You vowed that your troops would not cross the borders of Ukraine."—"And you promised Gorbachev not to expand NATO." As a result, there emerges a situation in which "all communication is joyously proclaimed absent" (Debord, 1970, p. 104)—always through the fault of counterparts who have lost touch with reality.

FROM POSTMODERNITY TO TRADITION

It is impossible to conduct diplomacy when many of the most important actors refuse in principle to communicate, citing the current state of bilateral relations. The lack of trust between countries extends to the perception of diplomats, whose main functions include the establishment and maintenance of trust. Their restricted ability to conduct professional activities, coupled with the impossibility of even minimal long-term planning, breeds psychological and professional frustration. Statements like "it seems expedient to methodically reduce diplomatic contacts with the continental European and Anglo-Saxon communities" (Sushentsov, 2022) are easy to understand in such a situation.

At a time of political mobilization, the cost of an individual's error soars immeasurably. Amid uncertainty, focusing on the end goal may seem risky, and often gives way to action that is more formalized (and thus safer for the individual actor)—up to and including the verbatim quoting of official documents. Responsible countries ought to move somewhat against current trends, using training and meritocracy to preserve their own diplomatic and expert resources (through a system of training and meritocracy-based selection) in a condition necessary for coping with the traditional tasks of meaningful international dialogue.

According to the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, the foreign policy of the state is aimed at ensuring the security, sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country, creating favorable external conditions for its development, and strengthening Russia's position as one of the responsible, influential, and independent centers of the modern world (MFA, 2023). The transformation of diplomatic

efforts into a "spectacle" by no means contributes to the achievement of those goals, although it may sometimes entertain the unsophisticated general public. Guy Debord's postmodernism should be replaced or, at any rate, counterbalanced by more traditional—restrained and substantive—forms of international communication. According to Antoine Pecquet's classic 18th-century text on the art of official negotiation, "the members of the diplomatic corps, who constitute a kind of independent community," should "treat each other according to the relationship between their sovereigns, but always with courtesy and decency, even when their lords are at war" (Pecquet, 2007). Returning to this kind of tradition does not threaten backwardness, but rather promises to renew a history of successfully resolving international conflicts. As for spectacles, even the most spectacular ones, the truth is that "no one really believes the spectacle" (Debord, 1990, p. 60).

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