

The Western Study of Contemporary Russia: Double Bottoms and Double Standards

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Abstract

The study of Russian politics is challenging at the best of times, but contemporary Russia provides some specific difficulties that render the endeavour particularly difficult. For every statement there appears to be an equally valid contrary assertion, and for every fact a dozen qualifying indicators that hollow out the original assertion. One is left doubting whether contemporary scholarship really is coming to grips with Russian reality, its complexities and nuances. Some fundamental methodological issues are raised, but the pervasive ontological question remains unresolved: what is the nature of Russian reality, and by what means can we analyze and describe its key features?

Cognition and Methodology

Liliya Shevtsova (1998, p. 4) long ago identified the “double bottom” principle in the analysis of Russian reality, according to which “there is one thing on the surface and something completely different inside”. Profound methodological issues are involved; the bases of our epistemological understanding of our epoch are not clear. At the general level post-communist Russia has been engaged in the attempt to establish the foundations of democracy and to establish the rudiments of a market economy. However, in conditions where democracy becomes an end and not the means, and a *dirigiste* regime tries to manage economic processes, a fundamental duality becomes an inherent characteristic of the system. There is the thing in itself—for example, elections, legislation shaping the party system, reduction in the punitive legislation applicable to economic offenses—and the reality which appears to have negligible connection with the declared reality. This is not simply a question of the manipulations of the administrative regime, described by Andrew Wilson (2005) as “virtual politics”, or even the sociological realities of a society still operating the entrenched survival codes of the Soviet era as described by Alena Ledeneva (1998), but a process of inherent doubling to which the regime and the whole polity is susceptible to create a “dual state” (Sakwa 2010).

The response in part has been a revival of neo-Kremlinological studies of the minutiae of leadership politics, but while it is important to understand who is doing what to whom at any given point in time, such analyses by definition will only deal with one level and fail to get to grips with the constant interaction between the two levels of the polity. Thus detailed analyses of elite politics and its professional composition have generated important data on some of the actors shaping the policy process, notably the role of former security officials (Kryshchanovska and White 2003), but such studies leave out of account the contrary pressures. For example, the

role of the business elite has been stressed (Rivera and Rivera 2006), and at the same time macroeconomic policy for the last decade and longer has clearly been in the hands of a group of liberal economists and central bankers pursuing classical neo-liberal policies. At the sectoral level this is challenged by various notions of “national champions” and a state-shaped energy strategy, which only reinforces the elements of the “dual economy” noted by Hanson (2007).

Thus any model of straightforward state capture by a particular professional group or class has to be tempered by a broader consideration of the nature of the post-communist Russian state, the social forces to which it responds, and the ideological narratives within which it is framed. Work on the political economy of contemporary Russia has not always been tied in effectively with analysis of state development. The notion of a “dual economy” tries to bridge the gap, yet the specifically political aspects of this remain to be explored. Equally, those studies which focus on the development of political institutions, notably parliaments, elections, the judiciary and the general constitutional order, sometimes lack grounding in issues of political economy. If there is a single defining feature of contemporary Russia, it is fungibility between the economic and political orders. In her analysis of “how Russia really works” Ledeneva (2006) makes a brave attempt to come to grips with this reality. This opens up into the grand field of corruption studies and the view of Russia as a “mafia state”.

The status of our understanding of any specific facet of contemporary Russia is contested, as is the epistemological basis of our knowledge. Gorbachev’s and Yeltsin’s presidencies, for example, remain the subject of dramatically opposed interpretations, and reflect a gulf in appreciations of their achievements. There remains a profound gulf between the overwhelmingly benign accounts of Gorbachev’s leadership by western scholars (notably, Brown 1996), and the rather more negative portraits current in Russia itself. Yeltsin’s leadership has been

the subject of two surprisingly positive western biographies. Although neither hides his weaknesses, notably his impulsiveness, jealousy of others in his entourage, and personalized style of ruling, they both ultimately rate him highly on both the normative and effectiveness dimensions (Aron 2000; Colton 2008). The great mass of the western literature, however, is highly critical of his leadership (for example, Reddaway and Glinski 2001).

The contested nature of Russian reality applies with no less force to specific incidents. For example, there is no good study of Sergei Kirienko's brief tenure as prime minister in 1998. Was he beginning to challenge the power of the "oligarchs" and was thus dismissed at their insistence; or did he fail utterly to grasp the depth of Russia's financial crisis and was it incompetence that led to his downfall? What about the October 1993 events, when the conflicting aspirations of the Russian presidency and the parliament headed by Ruslan Khasbulatov exploded into armed conflict? As the years pass, we seem to be ever less sure about who was doing what, when and why. Similarly, although we know a lot about the manoeuvrings that led to the first Chechen war (1994–96), does the unfurling of the second from 1999 force us to re-evaluate the deeper significance for Russia and Chechnya of the first? As for the sordid wheeler-dealing of privatization, is there a level at which we can agree with the view of Anatoly Chubais, the mastermind behind the rapid disbursement of state property, that the main thing was to break the state's monopoly on ownership as quickly as possible to prevent a communist restoration and to create a class with a stake in the new social order? The fact that this group was to a large extent not an independent middle class, a group that democratic theory suggests is essential for democracy, but a rapacious and criminalized oligarchy, has to be taken into account in our judgement. Yet the power of the bureaucracy over the economy was weakened (at least temporarily), and a market economy did emerge responsive to classic tools of economic management. No doubt in time, a relatively accurate picture will emerge. To date, however, the paucity of accounts of these turning points in post-communist Russian politics is remarkable. There have been some grand synoptic accounts (Hahn 2002; Hough 1997; McFaul 2001), but with the exception of Fish's work (2005) there have been few attempts at a grand synthesis.

Key Problems

The fungibility between the economic and political is accompanied by an analogous permeability between formal institutional processes and informal practices. One way of getting to grips with this is the application of various forms of network theory (Buck 2010; Kononenko

and Moshes (eds) 2010), but when taken in isolation this can at best give only a partial picture. From a very early point in Russia's post-communist trajectory observers noted the emergence of "clans" as functional substitutes mediating between the state and social forces in the absence of developed political parties and a functioning party *system*. I have argued that the notion of "factions" is more accurate, since this term conveys better the fluidity and temporality of these coalitions arching across the political and economic spheres (Sakwa 2011).

In a brief review it is impossible to do justice to the many detailed studies of Russian politics. The analysis of parties and elections is one of the central aspects of the field, and with good reason. As Hale (2006) notes, Russian parties operated in a distinctive political terrain, and were not able to defend the customary monopoly on political aggregation and representation, and hence "party substitutes" proliferated. The study of Russian regionalism and federalism has undergone an interesting trajectory. In the 1990s this was one of the central motifs in western studies of Russia, and a wealth of valuable analyses was produced. However, perhaps in conformity with the decline in the autonomy of Russia's "subjects of federation", the study of this field has also declined in scale, if not in quality. In recent years the study of internal micro-regions has been accompanied by the growth in the study of macro-regional blocs (Fawn (ed.) 2009). The fragmentation of Soviet space runs counter to the growth of the regionalizing impulse in other continents, and the dynamics of this process remain to be analyzed.

The issue of Russian national identity and national integration has been to the fore. Hosking (2006) notes the continued disjuncture between the Russian nation and the Russian state, while Tolz (2001) and Laruelle (2009) have provided perceptive studies of national identity. This blends into studies of Russian foreign policy, which have increasingly been focused by the constructivist emphasis on identity issues and long-term patterns in Russia's interaction with its European neighbors (Neumann 1995; Tsygankov 2010). The study of Russian foreign policy and relations with NATO and the United States is accompanied by the growing field of energy politics (Baev 2008). Russia's distinctive civilizational trajectory has encouraged a raft of perceptive studies.

In all of this the neo-Kremlinological question hangs over our study of contemporary Russia. It is for this reason that the publication of various missives by American diplomats in Russia published by WikiLeaks in late 2010 gained an almost canonical character so quickly. As the *Guardian* reported in a special section on the affair, "Russia is a land of rumor, misinformation and outright lies", and although the long report on Chechnya by William Burns, who was ambassador between

2005 and 2008, is a model of clarity and insight, the standard cable, however, is shocking for its crudeness, portraying Russia as “virtual mafia state” ruled by Medvedev’s Robin to Putin’s Batman (*Guardian* 2001).

New Approaches

The priority traditionally accorded to formal institutions is derived from the positivistic legal-constitutional tradition, although the counter-movement of the behavioral revolution from the 1950s went too far in prioritizing the social over the political. Social sciences did indeed have to “bring the state back in”, but how and in what way remains a matter of controversy. It is this problematic which is explored by the new field of International Political Anthropology (IPA). The new “discipline” of political anthropology has gained wide resonance in the social sciences, drawing on the work of Marcel Mauss (for example, Balandier 1970). Its focus is on the micropolitical level, as well as the role of symbolic artefacts—in which category even constitutions can be rendered.

For some Central Asian states, it is argued, constitutions are designed to demonstrate to international society the democratic credentials of the young state. Plenty of books deal with political anthropological issues, such as clientelism and patrimonialism, even though formally they do not consider themselves in this category. While the grand macropolitical movements of modernity have by no means exhausted their potential, notably political parties, trade unions and various social movements, and the study of individual motivations and collective action problems retain their validity, the micropolitical approach suggests that the study of the capillaries of power at the meso-level can provide important insights. This is not simply displacing the study of one process for the sake of another, but the complementary development of new approaches.

The post-communist Russian experience has once again demonstrated that democracy is as much about the development of certain cultural traits as it is about building robust institutions. This has been the focus of Tocquevillian discussions about the development of “habits of the heart” in civil society, the importance of social capital, and the long-term debate over the role of political culture. Much of this discussion has been self-serving and has done little more than reinforce existing patterns of international hegemony. Peter Gowan (1999, p. 2) notes how “The neo-liberals also took up the language of civil society to turn the liberal concept on its head. Instead of being a network of associations and institutions for invigilating state executives and market forces and articulating collective interests and concerns, it was to become a mixture of big business charitable foundations and self-help institutions for the deserving

poor on one side; and archipelagos of unaccountable quangos for managing a depoliticized, privatized, publicly passive individual consumer on the other”. Thus critiques of conventional approaches to global hegemonic discourses come to the surface. From a Foucauldian perspective, ideas have an innate disciplinary power, and when combined with harder forms sustain not only existing hierarchies of power but also mystify these systems and render them unintelligible to their subjects.

An expanded notion of the public sphere can provide a helpful way of thinking about practises of critique. Although for Habermas the idea of the public sphere was rooted in the development of a particular society at a particular time, it is nevertheless increasingly used in the examination of disparate societies at different levels of development. The idea brings together the development of collective organizations with the formation of political identities, giving voice to values, the articulation of views, and search after truth (*parrhesia*). Without these elements public discourse is reduced to little more than the dissemination of decontextualized “news”, the propagation of partial and often entrenched traditionalism, and the sphere of unbounded consumerism. This is a point stressed by Ikeda in his Postscript to the discussion with Gorbachev. He stressed that Walter Lippman, in his book *Public Opinion*, had “insisted on the importance of Socratic methods to the development and maturation of democracy” (2005, p. 157). He warned against the regression of all—not just American—democracy and dreamed of cultivating “the use of the dialogue methods of Socrates and Shakyamuni as far as possible and on the maximum number of levels, to stimulate individual cultural revolutions all over the world in the hope of cultivating citizens capable of thinking for themselves” (p. 158).

Of greatest interest is the interaction between legal postulates, institutional development and cultural predispositions. These are historically shaped but susceptible to changing patterns of governance as well as governmentality. The normalizing process is crucial here: why do certain patterns become “normal” for a given society at a certain time, although they may have been extremely “abnormal” for that same society in its own past, and for other societies at the same time. The normalizing process can be contrasted with liminality: the first represents closure and the reduction, if not suppression, of possibilities; whereas liminality suggests openness in historical development.

The Regime Question: Norms and Double Standards

At the heart of the contemporary western studies of Russia is the “accursed” regime question, an issue that has

been on the table for as long as Russia has engaged western observers. From the very beginning Russia appeared as something odd and disruptive both of the international order and of the given nature of things (Neumann 1999). This oddity at points has taken a strongly orientalist inflexion, with Russia perceived to be not only exotic but also as not quite meeting accepted standards of civilization, boorish and uncultured in its manners and juvenile in its demands to be taken seriously as an equal (for a critique of “orientalizing” discourses, see Brown 2010).

This infantilization was given form in the European Union’s assumption of a tutelary status vis-à-vis Russia in its various negotiations (Prozorov 2006), a stance that paradoxically mimics the regime’s stance towards its own population. Until at least the mid-2000s the EU assumed that it would become the undisputed hegemonic power in greater Europe, exercised through a blend of normative instruments and “soft power” (Zielonka 2007). In an extraordinary recrudescence of the logic of Soviet-style communism although with an inverted content, those who disputed the EU’s status were considered not only to be mistaken but somehow malevolent, since the EU project was so patently benign to all who would but see. This approach was manifested in numerous forms and couched in terms such as “external governance” to advance an EU-centred model of good governance. The notion of “Europeanization” as an endlessly expanding vision of a specific type of governmentality was both a cultural project but it has also struggled to find an adequate institutional form for the “outsider” countries.

The tension within the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the attempts to draw its six eastern neighbors into closer orbit through the Eastern Partnership (EaP) has been examined by Elena Korostoleva (2008–10). In recent years the EU’s self-confidence has endured numerous blows, notably though the failure to adopt a constitution. The coming into force of the rather modest Lisbon Treaty in December 2009 was but a pale substitute for the soaring ambitions evinced in earlier years, yet the new instruments do allow the EU to formulate its foreign policy “actorness” with greater coherence. Russo-EU relations are a fundamental part of the continuing debate over the feasibility and effectiveness of “democracy promotion”. This has become quite an academic growth industry in recent years, reflecting the armed democracy advancement strategy pursued by the leading western powers on the ground. Two recent surveys of the topic examine the dilemmas, but at the same time reflect the classic lacunae of the topic: the lack of examination of different forms of democracy; the west-centric focus; avoidance of the problem of dedemocratization in established democracies; and the typical neglect

of the EU’s experience in this field (Barany & Moser (eds) 2009; Burnell and Youngs (eds) 2009).

It is when we come to the problem of comparative democratization that we run into the deepest problems. Classic debates over the relative weight to be given to agency-centred views of political change versus structural and historical patterns of causation have generated a rich literature applied to Russia, and while most commentators would suggest that a combination of the two is appropriate, quite what formula of combination is applicable remain unresolved, despite some brave attempts at answering the question (for example, Møller 2009). The spatial dimension is no less important: those countries close to the EU tend to become “Europeanized”, whereas those further away have tended towards authoritarianism. This law does not hold within the former Soviet area, however (with the exception of the anomalous case of the Baltic republics), since Belarus remains a stubborn outlier on the democracy gradient.

Conclusion

The western study of Russia appears to go through a standard cycle, with conventional tropes repeated over the ages. What begins as a rather benign sense of wonderment at Russia’s extraordinary combination of difference and sameness gives way to alienation and then hostility, typically accompanied by Russia’s engagement in the European state system followed by war in either a hot or cold form, before a new cycle begins where Russia is once again appreciated for what it is and not for what it might be. Russia is too similar to be completely alien, but too different to be quite assimilated into the western family. Russia reproduces in a different guise standard western social patterns and cultural norms, but at the same time takes these patterns to places that are utterly unfamiliar to Westerners.

Thus the double bottom is no more than a superficial manifestation of the inherent duality of Russian social forms. The response is either a programme for the full-scale westernization of Russia, which for Russian patriots entails the obliteration of all that makes Russia distinctively Russia, or some sort of alternative patriotic project which, when accompanied by *Sonderweg* aspirations, threatens to turn into yet another developmental blind alley accompanied by xenophobia and authoritarianism. There remains a fundamental tension between the liberal view of modernisation as inherently pluralistic and democracy-enhancing, and realist perspectives of great power contestation and power politics. These two great paradigms of our age are reflected in the endless debates about Russian national identity, which are then imported into the operation of the tandem power system as a whole.

What is missing in all of this is a sustained sense of critique. The Russian double bottom exposes the elements of pseudo-scientism in some of the west's social science. It even appears often that the more elaborate the methodology, the more puny and trivial the findings. It is remarkable how quickly much of what is written about post-communist Russia becomes dated. The short shelf life is often accompanied by a miniscule readership of ever-more specialist journals. This is emphatically not an attempt to denigrate the excellent work using sophisticated methodologies applied to understand the social and political realities of contemporary Russia, often in a comparative context (for example, Loveless and Whitefield 2011 on social inequality). Work using survey and polling data on electoral politics and voting behavior is crucial to our understanding of how citizen rights are applied and the degree to which trust and loyalty are fostered.

However, I do argue that Russia's multiple reality can only be grasped by a plurality of methodologies and a diversity of perspectives. This needs to be accompanied by a greater sense of critique, in the classical sense of the

word as an immanent examination of the categories of analysis and ideological paradigms employed. A notable example of just such an approach is Urban's recent analysis of the moral and political universe of a section of the Russian political elite, employing the instruments of semiotics to analyze the narratives and discourses of his interlocutors. This provides a profound insight into the contours of contemporary Russian political culture at the individual level. Urban argues that discursive practices reinforce authoritarianism, but he also suggests that they can provide a platform for the development of forms of deliberative democracy. His view that democracy is a "condition of society rather than merely a system of government" (2010, p. 188) has important implications for the whole field of comparative democratization. The glib assumption by the majority of Russian liberals that neo-liberalism is the natural form of organization of contemporary society needs to be challenged. Only through such a critique can a type and style of politics appropriate to present Russian conditions be devised.

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