

Integrating Continuity and Change in the Study of Soviet Society: The Estate Origins of Democracy in Russia

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The Estate Origins of Democracy in Russia: From Imperial Bourgeoisie to Post-Communist Middle Class, by Tomila Lankina, Cambridge University Press, 469 pp., 2021, £29.99 (hardcover), ISBN 9781316512678.

Tomila Lankina has written a pathbreaking book. Impressively combining theoretical ambition, sensitive attention to historical detail, and the skillful use of multiple quantitative and qualitative methods, *The Estate Origins of Democracy in Russia* brings the study of Soviet history squarely back onto the agenda of contemporary comparative social science. For those of us who have spent much of our careers trying to explain to academics and policy makers alike why the story of the rise and fall of the USSR still matters for understanding our contemporary world, Lankina's book is both welcome vindication and a reason for real optimism about the future of social-scientific inquiry. This is, simply put, the best book I've read about the Soviet system and its legacies in many years.

Moreover, Lankina's primary finding—that essentially “bourgeois” definitions of what Max Weber called “social closure” managed to survive throughout the entire Soviet period such that post-Soviet Russians connected to this identity were still mobilizing politically in identifiably pro-democratic ways even after the Soviet collapse—is largely convincing. Here Lankina's multimethod approach cannot help but sway the reader. Lankina clearly identifies the causal mechanisms linking the tsarist-era *meshchane*, the Soviet-era intelligentsia and professional-managerial class, and the post-Soviet constituency for liberal democracy through careful process tracing of critical junctures in Russian and Soviet history, examination of copious archival materials from her family's ancestral home of Samara, and statistical analysis of voting behavior in the Yeltsin era, among other methods she employs. Building on seminal earlier works by Vera Dunham (1976) and Vladislav Zubok (2009), Lankina shows that the Russian “intelligentsia” and those social strata connected to it—far from remaining an isolated class of “superfluous people” (*lishnye liudi*) as is sometimes depicted—have instead constituted a vibrant and continuous shaper of political and social outcomes in Russia and the USSR from the 19th century straight through to the 21st. Lankina also demonstrates conclusively that, contrary to stereotypes about Russian cultural preferences for strongman rule, Russia's professional, educated civil society constituted a robust social basis for potential democratic state-building in the immediate post-Soviet period—even if this potential was, unfortunately, squandered by Vladimir Putin and his acolytes.

As with all ambitious books, however, Lankina's study must inevitably provoke debate and dissent. Indeed, her central thesis—that neither the Leninist takeover of state power in November 1917 nor even Stalin's violent destruction of Russia's peasant society in the 1930s fundamentally interrupted the social reproduction of bourgeois status boundaries inherited from prerevolutionary Russia—flies in the face of much of the standard historiography of the period. Even those least

sympathetic to the Bolshevik cause have tended to grant to Lenin and his political heirs that their assault on tsarist institutions and its associated social structures truly constituted a revolutionary break with the Russian past (Malia 1994). Scholars who did emphasize continuities between tsarist and Soviet “patrimonialism,” such as Richard Pipes, hardly saw the Soviet system as one allowing for the replication of bourgeois forms of social organization (Pipes 1974). Could it really be that seven decades of violent rule by a professed anticapitalist revolutionary party dictatorship left this important aspect of Russian social structure essentially unchanged?

One is tempted to say that if Lankina’s argument is correct and neither the Bolshevik Revolution nor the “great turning point” (*velikii perelom*) of the First Five-Year Plan can really be said to have fundamentally transformed the mechanisms of reproduction of Russian *meshchane* identity, then comprehensive social revolution itself is impossible in principle. After all, no matter how many millions of people a revolutionary regime manages to kill and no matter how many older forms of social closure it manages to disrupt, the individuals who survive will still be shaped by their childhood upbringing, by their inherited cultural beliefs, and by the influence of their social networks, which will typically find ways to regenerate and reconnect after even the most chaotic periods of social upheaval. Nor can the imposition of new ideological discourses and institutional incentives by self-declared revolutionary leaders ever entirely eliminate what James Scott (1990) has called the “hidden transcripts” of resistance among ordinary people. In these respects, Lankina joins political scientists like Kathleen Thelen (2004) and Paul Pierson (2011) in illustrating the surprising stickiness of underlying social structures, even in the aftermath of what seem to be significant critical historical junctures.

Still, there is a cost to such a single-minded emphasis on patterns of continuity in times of enormous social upheaval: it leaves us without any theoretically consistent way of making sense of the actions of revolutionary elites themselves. Before they emerged as the rulers of most of the former Russian Empire, Lenin and his followers had spent decades in exile, were repeatedly arrested by the tsarist police, and lost their previous prospects for personal advancement in tsarist society, all in the service of what was then a highly unusual interpretation of Marxist theory. Even if the Bolsheviks themselves were convinced that they would eventually lead the Russian and then the global proletariat to revolutionary victory, a dispassionate analysis of the “objective” evidence would seem to have suggested that such a quest was sociologically hopeless. Yet not only did Lenin’s Bolshevik party manage to take power in November 1917, but within three years they had consolidated control over the world’s largest country, officially in the name of “socialism.” This remarkable feat impressed would-be revolutionaries not only in Russia but also in countries around the world. Even if the degree of social transformation wrought by the Soviet experiment fell short of the loftiest expectations of early Bolshevik theorists, the subjective belief that the events of 1917 did mark some sort of epochal change in human history, among both supporters and opponents of the Soviet regime, was nevertheless demonstrably widespread.

Yet there is little attention paid in Lankina’s book to the views of the Soviet leaders themselves. Indeed, for a study inspired by Weberian sociology, *The Estate Origins of Democracy in Russia* is surprisingly lacking in interpretive understanding (*verstehen*) of the actual views of the Bolshevik leadership. Instead, Lankina seems to assume that the Bolsheviks’ professed ideological commitments were merely skin deep: “Lenin, his credentials of being a ‘fervent egalitarian’ notwithstanding, endorsed the first raft of concessions to the old bourgeoisie to maintain the Bolsheviks’ tenuous grip on power. Stalin went on to codify, institutionalize, and enhance the privileges of the white-collar professional elite” (p. 10). But this quick dismissal of the causal power of Bolshevik beliefs misunderstands the nature of Lenin’s ideological commitments. If one examines Lenin’s and Stalin’s own speeches and writings in detail, one discovers that neither ever argued for “egalitarianism” as a measure of Soviet revolutionary success (Hanson 1997). Even in the works of Marx himself, there is really no explicit statement that “equality” as such would be a major feature of social life after the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism—as opposed to “freedom” and

“community,” which Marx repeatedly emphasized as core features of communism (Walicki 1995). Instead, from Marx’s day until the final years of the Soviet regime, egalitarianism (*uravnilovka*) was explicitly castigated in both Marxist and Leninist discourse as a “petty bourgeois” orientation, to be rejected and resisted by more theoretically sophisticated party members. If neither Marx, nor Lenin, nor Stalin argued for egalitarianism, then its rejection under Soviet rule can hardly count as an indicator of ideology’s irrelevance.

What Marx hinted at in his few empirical descriptions of communism and what Lenin, Stalin, and other Bolshevik leaders *thought* they were building was a society that would make it possible for Soviet citizens to live everyday lives of disciplined, revolutionary heroism. And this, not a cynical embrace of hierarchy for its own sake, was the principle underlying the specifically Soviet forms of social mobility studied by scholars like Sheila Fitzpatrick (1979) and Lewis Siegelbaum (1988). Lenin and his successors certainly did rely upon the expertise of “bourgeois specialists” in industry, finance, and science, and Lankina’s study shows powerfully how this reliance created space for the continuity of older definitions of social closure characteristic of the Russian *meshchane*. But the Bolsheviks’ ultimate goal was to cultivate and promote new, “heroic” Soviet workers and managers who could demonstrate their fidelity to the socialist cause by mastering time itself through the “overfulfillment” of plan targets and work quotas. It is not a coincidence that Khrushchev, Brezhnev, Gorbachev, and so many of their Politburo peers rose to the higher echelons of the Soviet party system in part by organizing or participating in heroic production campaigns of exactly this sort.

In this context, Lankina’s criticisms of Fitzpatrick for overstating the degree of change in patterns of social mobility wrought by the Soviet system are misplaced. True, as Lankina scrupulously documents, the appearance of “new cities” in the First-Five Year Plan, epitomized by the steel town Magnitogorsk and replicated in the case of Samara’s neighbor Bezymyanka, never fully displaced the comfortable, prestigious “old cities” to which they were usually conveniently adjacent (pp. 299–309; Kotkin 1995). Throughout the Soviet period and still today, living in the historic center has remained a mark of high status and refined taste in Russian society. Yet this fact does not contradict Fitzpatrick’s contention that Soviet new cities *also* generated fundamentally new channels for social mobility for urbanizing peasants and less-educated proletarians willing to commit themselves to the newly institutionalized system of “planned heroism.” The migration of peasants to industrializing provincial cities in search of new opportunities also existed in the late tsarist period, to be sure. But the sheer scale of social transformation wrought by Stalin’s wholesale destruction of prerevolutionary peasant society in the 1930s and the accompanying incorporation of so many dispossessed rural workers within the new citadels of Stalinist industry surely still counts as socially transformative—especially when one also considers the mass violence, death, and suffering that accompanied it. There is no need to erase these “charismatic” elements of Soviet Marxism-Leninism, which subjectively appeared miraculously transformative to many millions of people around the world in the 20th century, to highlight the unexpected and underemphasized channels of social continuity that Lankina brilliantly uncovers.

Notwithstanding these areas of disagreement, *The Estate Origins of Democracy in Russia* clearly opens up new vistas for social science research into the long-run processes of social continuity *and* change. Max Weber’s theoretical framework, in fact, can help us understand *both* the mechanisms for reproduction of social closure across critical junctures in history *and* the subjective self-understanding of revolutionary elites who sincerely believe that they can push history itself in entirely novel directions. Lankina’s achievement in reintroducing Weberian theory into the comparative historical analysis of Soviet history is thus of immense scholarly importance.

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