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BOOK REVIEW

Russia’s postcolonial identity: a subaltern empire in a eurocentric world

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In Thomas Mann’s novel Der Zauberberg (The Magic Mountain), which is a panorama of pre-First World War European civilization, there are a number of Russian characters. They sit at two separate tables: the Good Russian table and the Bad Russian table. Our thinking, notes Geoffrey Hosking, a leading British scholar on the Soviet Union, has not advanced much since then. At one table, we seat Tolstoy, Tchaikovsky, Repin, and Shakharov, at the other, most Tsars, Stalin and, most prominently today, Putin.

Indeed, many commentators bemoan the West’s supposed incapacity to ‘understand’ Russia and adopt a pragmatic policy vis-à-vis the most complex geopolitical challenge Europe has faced over the past decades. One may not have to agree with Putin’s positions, Jörg Baberowski, a professor at Berlin’s Humboldt University writes in a recent op-ed (‘The West doesn’t get it’), yet dismissing them as purely irrational is unproductive and dangerous.

In the United States, only three out of the eight Ivy League universities have appointed a tenured professor in Russian politics since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and none of them has appointed a Russia expert in economics or sociology. The situation is similar in Germany. While there are 43 professors of Russian or East European history, there are only three professors of Russian politics, and one each in economics and sociology. Academics in developing countries such as Brazil or South Africa are generally even less knowledgeable about contemporary Russia.

In this context, Viatcheslav Morozov has written an important and thought-provoking book about Russia’s place in the world. Russia, he writes, must be viewed as a subaltern empire, and the focus should lie not on its imperial characteristic,

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but its subaltern nature, and as an object of external colonization that was integrated into the capitalist world-system on unequal terms.¹

This argument is unusual, of course, because Russia has never been colonized: Morozov disagrees, arguing that Russia has been colonized while remaining a sovereign state. The other, more precise way of putting this is that the Russian state has been and remains an instrument of colonization: it colonized the country on behalf of the global capitalist core while itself being integrated into European international society. (p. 32)

Russia's world view, furthermore, is eurocentric: strongly dependent on the West in both economic and normative terms, Moscow justifies its foreign policy conduct by accusing the West of neocolonialism while pointing out the injustices inherent in the current international order. At the same time, Putin continues to engage in imperial pursuits in its ‘near abroad’, explicitly relying on the Soviet legacy to secure and expand its ‘spheres of influence’. Contemporary Russian identity critically depends on its (post)imperial self-image as a great power, where greatness is still defined by referring to the Soviet past. The Kremlin’s rhetoric regarding the need to democratize the international system by promoting a multipolar world coexists with increasingly repressive domestic policies: each claim made in the name of the subaltern consolidates the oppressive authoritarian regime within Russia and thus reinforces its imperial order.

The claim that Russia is profoundly eurocentric may strike observers as counter-intuitive. Yet Morozov quite convincingly demonstrates that the traditional Russia which ‘paleoconservatives’ strive to recover from beneath the liberal distortions is no more than a mirror image of the West as it is seen through the lens of Russian common sense. The antagonization of the ‘false’ Europe (suffering from ‘post-Christian’ trends such as homosexuality or atheism) translates into a construction of a ‘true’ Europe centered around Russia.

Having internalized the Eurocentric worldview, Russia is nevertheless different from the core European countries. This difference is not determined by ‘culture’, but rather by uneven and combined development of global capitalism, in which Russia is integrated as a semi-peripheral nation. The Russian state has colonized its own periphery on behalf of the Western core, but has never been able to overcome economic and normative dependency on the West. The peculiar dialectic of the subaltern and the imperial during the post-Soviet period has given rise to a regime which claims to defend ‘genuine Russian values’, while in fact there is nothing behind this new traditionalism but the negation of Western hegemony. The only political subject that remains on the horizon of Russian politics is the West, while the Russian people, as any other subaltern, are being spoken for, and thus silenced, by the country’s Eurocentric elites and the Western intellectuals.

Policy makers dealing with Russia are unlikely to read Morozov’s book, yet it does contain a series of insights that may be useful for the ongoing political debate. The author identifies an ‘empty spot’ at the center of Russia’s traditionalist discourse that offers a romanticized version of pure, pre-liberal European values, but which has
nothing to do with Russian subaltern peripheral reality. This emptiness at the core of national identity discourse bodes ill for the future of relations between Russia and the West, Morozov predicts: it seems that antagonizing the West is the only source of Russia’s self-confidence, and it is bound to continue regardless of whether the West responds by the policies of containment or accommodation. That may remind some observers of discussions around Pakistan’s national identity, which, to a significant degree, depends on antagonizing India, thus actively resisting a lasting peace.

Indeed, as Morozov rightly observes, even Russia’s pro-Western excitement of 1991 was superseded by a more ambiguous attitude, which remained a consistent feature of Russia’s relations with Western-dominated international institutions and, in the final analysis, of Russia’s identity. This attitude remained eurocentric but, as in the previous centuries, was haunted by the feeling of resentment toward the West far more visible than in other countries in post-communist transition, such as Poland or the Baltic states. One of the main reasons, Morozov says, has been Russia’s imperial legacy and its desire to maintain influence in the post-Soviet space. Paradoxically, even imperial reflexes, as the intervention in Georgia, are justified by ideas Russians regard as Western, such as the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). In the same way, Russia’s attempt to improve its international image makes use of Western tools: it hired Ketchum, a US agency, to design what President Putin officially calls a ‘soft power strategy’. (Nye, the term’s creator, has repeatedly argued that neither Russia nor China fully understood the idea.) While opposing the West, Russia nevertheless frames its own demands in the Western language of democracy. These acts of mimicry, seeking to ‘catch up’ with the West are signs of normative dependency on the West and an incapacity to come up with any distinct ideological platform, Morozov argues.

All this suggests that Western attempts to depict Russia as the ultimate Other, or as the West’s ‘no. 1 geopolitical foe’, as has been common since 2014, are beside the point. Despite its rhetoric, Morozov suggests, Russia possesses no genuine ‘anti-Western’ or anti-capitalist project, like something North Korea, Iran, or Venezuela sometimes articulate. Even attempts to strengthen ties to China and the other BRICS countries will not turn Russia into a non-Western power: even the most virulent anti-Westernism cannot change the reality that its identity is, perhaps more than any other BRICS country except for Brazil, strongly influenced by Western ideas.

Russia’s subaltern imperial position translates into a nearly impossible, self-contradictory political framework, the author argues: a political action is only seen as legitimate if it is directed against the West (or at least demonstrates Russia’s independence from the West) and fits the ‘universal’ norm (defined and upheld by Western hegemony) at the same time. Viewing the case through a postcolonial lens, Morozov writes, alluding to Bhabha’s famous encounter between the Master and the Slave where the Slave engages in ‘colonial mimicry as the affect of hybridity—at once a mode of appropriation and resistance, from the disciplined to the desired’ (p. 129).
In his resentment, the Slave can mimic, distort or even invert the dominant norm; what he cannot do is establish any moral authority of his own that would not need the Master’s sanction to be credible.

Morozov’s book will not be received warmly in Russia—yet it is a must-read for Russia-watchers and those interested in Russia’s role in global affairs.

**NOTE**

1. In critical theory and postcolonial theory, ‘subaltern’ refers to the populations that are socially, politically, and geographically outside of the hegemonic power structure of the colony and of the colonial homeland. The term subaltern is derived from Antonio Gramsci’s work on cultural hegemony, which identified the groups that are excluded from a society’s established structures for political representation and therefore denied the means by which people have a voice in their society.