


Democracy for the Democrats? Historical Origins of Soviet and Post-Soviet Intelligentsia

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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, 2021, 496 pp., £29.99 (hardcover), ISBN 9781316512678.

Tomila Lankina's *The Estate Origins of Democracy in Russia*, published by Cambridge University Press in 2021, is a very powerful and thought-provoking book. It contains a bold argument, exhibiting the author's erudition across several disciplines, as well as an unusual richness of empirical evidence and an exquisite prose style. The book delves into the intricacies of social resilience in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution. Contrary to the notion that the Bolshevik Revolution served as "the great leveler," Lankina demonstrates the enduring presence of Tsarist-era estates within the social fabric throughout the Soviet era and even into the post-Soviet period. The estates encompassed a system of legal classifications that stratified Russian imperial society into distinct categories: aristocracy, clergy, merchants, and *meshchane* (petty bourgeoisie), as well as peasants. Lankina's primary focus lies upon the meshchane, an estate that, by the twilight of the tsarist regime, accounted for approximately 10 percent of the empire's total population.¹ Within Lankina's narrative, the meshchane emerged as an imperial middle class – comprising individuals such as small shopkeepers, rentiers, doctors, teachers, engineers – who mostly resided in urban centers and towns. Many among this group hailed from ethnic and religious minority backgrounds, including Jewish, Polish, German, Old Believers, and others.

Lankina contends that despite the professed aspirations for a classless society and the Bolshevik regime's repressive measures against the bourgeoisie, individuals who belonged to the educated estates (aristocracy, clergy, merchants, and meshchane) of the Russian empire persisted in exerting dominance over key professional sectors within the Soviet state. These sectors encompassed education, science, medicine, engineering, as well as the cultural domain. Descendants of those who had been part of the educated estates under the Tsarist regime emerged as the backbone of the Soviet intelligentsia and professional stratum. This historically developed, "organic" middle class has important long-term consequences for economic and political developments in Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Most notably, the share of the educated estates across Russian regions and smaller administrative units predicts the level of democratic competitiveness and media freedom in post-Soviet Russia. Thus, democracy in Russia has estate origins.

In lieu of restating the plethora of valuable insights and offering further commendation, I will focus on engaging critically with Lankina's work. I will start with the title. Of course, editors have an important say in choosing the final title, but here I believe there is an issue at stake beyond academic marketing. The book effectively has two parts: the first part documents the resilience and reproduction of the tsarist educated estates into the Soviet professionals and cultural elite. Five chapters containing a wide variety of empirical evidence, including in-depth historical

ethnographic accounts along with statistical evidence, are devoted to this theme. The second part is about the link between the educated estates and democracy in the Russian regions. This theme is developed in Chapter 9 – and also in a related APSR article (Lankina and Libman 2021) – and is based on statistical associations. The sheer volume of pages shows that the first part is much more developed and therefore I believe a more appropriate title for Lankina’s book is “The Estate Origins of Soviet Intelligentsia.” I find the first part of the book much more persuasive, but I critically engage with both.

Was the Russian Revolution the Great Leveler?

The author’s portrayal of the resilience and perpetuation of the Tsarist educated estates within the ranks of Soviet professionals and the intelligentsia is indeed compelling. Nonetheless, I believe one needs additional theoretical and empirical benchmarks for properly assessing the author’s argument that the Bolshevik revolution was not “the great leveler.”

My main question is this: what proportion of professionals continuing their work post-revolution would be indicative of societal resilience – 30, 50, 90 percent? This is a matter of a theoretically set benchmark. I would have appreciated more guidance here. A related question is about the reproduction of social structure through education. What percentage of “heritage students” from families that belonged to the educated estates prior to the revolution would be an indicator of resilience after the revolution? Let us consider the medical profession, which is one of the core domains of Lankina’s analysis. The author’s delving into the intricate histories of renowned medical dynasties, and their continuation after the revolution without a doubt, enhances the narrative of resilience. Correlation between professional post-revolutionary professional occupations and pre-revolutionary family estate origins further supports the story of resilience and reproduction. However, from these correlations and family genealogies, we do not get to know who the other non-heritage doctors were – those who entered the profession through different paths. For me, a strict test of the author’s argument will be a descriptive analysis of the yearbooks of the graduates of Samara (the author’s main case study) medical institutes: what were the shares of the descendants of the meshchane/educated estates in 1930, 1950, 1970, and 1990? What were the shares of the descendants of the working class and peasantry in these periods? I understand that it is very difficult to get such data because family estate origins cannot be derived from the lists of names, but without such a picture of the overall composition of the student body and the profession, it is not possible to reject “the great leveler” argument.

The comparative perspective is also important here. One of the main theoretical foundations of this part of the book is the scholarship of Pierre Bourdieu. When Bourdieu studied at the École Normale Supérieure in the early 1950s, in his cohort, he and Jacques Derrida were basically the only two students from non-elite backgrounds. This was not the case in the most prestigious departments of the Moscow State University at that time. Bourdieu’s academic work shows that the education system in France works as the main facilitator of the class reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron 1979, 1990; Bourdieu 1996). Now, with Bourdieu’s work in mind, let us have a thought experiment. Imagine a scenario wherein we discover that, in 1990, a proportion of 30, 40, or even 60 percent of medical students in Samara are descendants of the Tsarist proto-bourgeoisie (aristocracy, clergy, merchants, and meshchane). Such findings suggest a considerable degree of resilience. However, envision that we do a similar study of the social composition of student body at, let’s say, the medical institute in Bordeaux (or another provincial town in France) and find that it has a staggering 90 percent of students who hail from bourgeois family backgrounds. This comparative vantage point could potentially reveal that dismissing the “great leveler” argument in Russia becomes challenging. Since we do not have such comparative evidence, I believe that it is possible to say that Lankina’s book supports the social resilience argument, but there is not enough evidence to reject the “great leveler” argument.

In a broader sense, I contend that it is not possible to reject the great leveler argument by focusing on meshchane and educated estates alone. Undoubtedly, Lankina’s emphasis on meshchane is well-

founded, considering the dearth of scholarly attention directed toward this estate within social sciences. Her meticulous scrutiny of meshchane families serves as a rationale for her concentrated exploration. However, class, stratification, and inequality are relational concepts, and it is hard to make inferences about these parameters if the study does not include the peasantry and workers – groups that constituted the overwhelming majority of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union populations.

Democracy for the Democrats

Lankina's book develops an esteemed theoretical tradition that links middle class/bourgeoisie with democracy (Moore 1966; Ansell and Samuels 2014). The simplistic version of this approach is that democracy is the power of the *democrats* – educated people with liberal democratic values. Lankina develops a much more sophisticated version of this argument, specifying the role of human capital (*democrats*) as well as of the capacity to autonomous collective action, which can be manifested (for example, in professional associations) and thus creates a public sphere. What is missing from this account though are struggles for political power. Middle class, whether “organic,” rooted in the pre-revolutionary bourgeoisie or “incubated” by the state developmental projects, in the Soviet and post-Soviet contexts was not organized in political parties or special interest groups; it was not engaged in any coalitional politics with the rich or the working class like in other national contexts, so, I would have appreciated an outline of a path of how Soviet/Russian middle-class acquires political subjectivity. In other words, on the theoretical level, it remains underspecified how the prevalence of meshchane or their descendants, whether it is 5 or 20 percent, would directly affect democratic development on the local, regional, and national levels.

Turning now to the empirics: The process of reproduction of tsarist educated estates in the Soviet period in Lankina's book is meticulously documented. The book introduces us to key figures of the civil society of Samara before and after the revolution, delves into their family histories, and explores their educational pursuits, marriage patterns, and cultural preferences. It provides an intimate understanding of their day-to-day lives, thereby offering insights into the mechanisms driving social resilience. In contrast, when examining the relationship between the share of meshchane and democracy, we get only dry numbers of correlation coefficients rather than the vivid and textured accounts that enriched the earlier sections. For instance, we remain in the dark regarding the individuals who assumed roles within local newspapers in the post-Soviet period, or who held positions as campaign officials during 1996 Russian Presidential elections in Samara. We do not know how and why the descendants of the tsarist bourgeoisie increased competitiveness of elections of 1996, in which the main challenger Gennady Zyuganov represented the Communist party. Similarly, we do not get to know about the democracy activists who emerged in Samara during subsequent periods. These omissions detract from the richly textured nature that characterizes the book's exploration of social resilience.

The main independent variable of the book – the share of meshchane in the local population, based on the census of 1897, is used throughout the book but introduced in detail only in Chapter 9. This variable looks like a silver bullet for the Russian political economy. There are more than forty statistical tests presented in the main body of the book, and the share of meshchane is a significant predictor in all of them. What is behind this variable? Where does spatial variation in the share of meshchane that drive the most important inferences of the book come from? Meshchane were predominantly an urban stratum, resulting in, I believe, a very high correlation between their share and urban development. Within the meshchane estate, a notable portion comprised ethnic and religious minorities, most notably the Jewish, Polish, and German communities. Certain members of these minority groups faced deportation to Siberia and the Far East, accounting for the elevated prevalence of meshchane in these regions. However, in the regression analysis, the author includes controls for the pre- and post-revolutionary urban development and for the shares of ethnic and religious minorities. To my surprise, even with the incorporation of these controls, the share of

meshchane remains statistically significant in all tests. This leaves me puzzled: what then accounts for the continuing variation, given the inclusion of these controls?

Due to the relatively late introduction of spatial variation in the meshchane share in the book, contemplating the impact of meshchane prevalence in terms of counterfactual scenarios is rather challenging. The extensive case study focusing on pre- and post-revolutionary Samara is very rich in detail. However, without the author's guidance, it is difficult to understand whether Samara embodies a case of remarkably high-educated estate concentration or merely represents an average town in this regard. Furthermore, a comparative case study featuring a town characterized by a low concentration of educated estates is absent, rendering it difficult to think about political development comparatively. It is important to note that this absence is understandable given the substantial effort invested by the author in accumulating evidence for the fascinating social portrait of Samara. Nonetheless, the inclusion of a comparative case could have offered valuable insights.

Political Science Is Political

There are serious political implications at stake when we think about the link between the share of educated estates in late 19th century and democracy in post-Soviet period one hundred years later.

There are numerous academic, media, and popular narratives about “two Russias.” One “Russia” is of the proverbial “86 percent,” those who would align with Putin, endorse the invasion of Ukraine, and express antagonism toward the West, democracy, and liberalism. The “second Russia” is a minority believed to consist of educated individuals who champion liberal democratic values. This dichotomy became particularly pronounced during the wave of protests in 2011–2012, when the liberal opposition with “bright faces” were protesting against the Putin's regime, allegedly supported by the “grumpy lumpen proletariat” (Bikbov 2012; Matveev 2014). Needless to say, this rhetoric has been extremely alienating to the majority of the Russian population and weaponized by the regime, who portrayed protesters as an arrogant westernized wealthy minority, culturally hostile to the Russian people. Lankina's book, by contending that this political schism possesses historical roots, runs the risk of reifying this social, cultural, and political construction.

Relatedly, one can build an opposite argument to the one advanced in the book: that the insular, socially exclusive nature of the Russia's liberal elites, the very same nature that Lankina shows helped educated estates to survive and adapt to the revolution and subsequent repressions, facilitated the schism with the majority of the population and contributed to building of autocracy, not democracy, in Russia.

The heightened focus on the historical connection between the proportion of the middle class a century ago and present-day democratic development also carries a potential risk of being interpreted as a deterministic account. This approach, if not carefully nuanced, might seemingly preclude the possibility of substantial political change. After all, one cannot alter the past and magically increase the meshchane population through time travel. Does this mean that Russia (some Russian regions) is doomed for autocracy?

Finally, imagine that the study was not about Russia, but about India. Suppose a researcher conducts a study and uncovers a correlation between the proportion of brahmins (or another caste) within a district's population and the degree of electoral competitiveness observed throughout India. Would we, in turn, make the conclusion that democracy in India finds its origins in the caste system? It is worth noting that my intention is not to argue against the advancement of academic findings solely due to unfavorable political implications. However, given that, in my view, the mechanisms underpinning the connection between middle-class proportion one hundred years ago and contemporary political outcomes rely on fragmented evidence, we should approach the political ramifications with careful consideration.

Lankina's book actually is very careful in both theoretical and empirical work. However, some of the book's key lessons, such as the one highlighted in its title regarding the estate origins of democracy in Russia, can be easily misread and politicized. Therefore, I recommend that

Nationalities Papers readers delve into the book in its entirety. It not only offers valuable insights but also opens up avenues for comparative research that will help to further advance and anchor its fascinating story of revolution and social reproduction.

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Note

1 Nobility was 1.5%, clergy 0.5%, peasants 77.1%. See Lankina 2021, 43–44.

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