

Sources and Mechanisms of Persisting Social Inequality in Russia: Attending to the Blind Spot

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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, 469 pp., £29.99 (hardcover), ISBN 9781316512678.

An original, empirically rich, and analytically multilayered and provocative statement by Tomila Lankina, *The Estate Origins of Democracy in Russia* (2022) is a meticulous work of sociology focused on the exploration and elaboration of social mechanisms of resilience in a transforming polity and society. It is also an attempt to link the past, the 19th-century reform of the estate system in Russia, to the present, Russia's failed democratization, by arguing that the social basis for democracy in postcommunist Russia was associated with the thin stratum of the more privileged, educated, and politically engaged members of the middle class who were able to build on the intergenerational capital and became “the silent custodian of institutions and values that nurtured the democratic promise of post-communism” (391). As such, it is a passionate statement against Soviet historiography that has been influential in shaping the mainstream Western understanding about the socially transformative nature of communism. The book goes against the received wisdom about the degree to which the Soviet society has been modernized and transformed through communist experience: “the narratives of grand revolutionary rupture,” as Lankina phrases it (394). Excavating specific family histories, Lankina shines light “on the ‘tectonic’ layers of skills, values, and occupational complexity” that underlay wealth-supporting strategies along with the pursuit of better education and the acquisition of better-paid jobs in the Soviet Union. The already privileged social groups—the urban and rural *meshchane*—were better “connected, networked and engaged” and therefore better-equipped “with the skills, tools, and capital” (393). The Soviet regime reincorporated these privileged professional groups into an elite layer (*prosloyka*) of the Soviet society, commonly known as Soviet intelligentsia.

Read as a story of persistence in historical privilege reproduction, even in the face of reforms promoted by an ideologically leftist, equality-centered regime, this book is a valuable addition into a much-needed (but practically nonexistent at this moment) debate about the drivers of overlapping inequalities in Russia today (G. Yusupova 2023). This debate is being actively developed in the West, especially in the United States, where the links between educational achievement and income persistence have been tested and established (Bloome, Dyer, and Zhou 2018). In the postcommunist context, this debate would have to inquire additionally into the lasting effects of intergenerational upward or downward social mobility under communism and during the transition period on support for democracy (Gugushvili 2017). If large groups of former peasants have experienced upward mobility under decades of communist rule (as we know from the Soviet experience) and have then been unable to adjust to the market economy in the 1990s, their experiences might be sustaining their attitudes toward the political and economic order associated with their and their

families' life experiences (Pyle 2021). In many countries on other continents, social mobility shapes support for democracy (Houle and Miller 2019). Testing this Tocquevillian thesis in the context of postcommunist transition had just started and would benefit from further exploration (Acemoglu, Egorov, and Sonin 2018; Gugushvili 2017).

When the field of Russian studies is ready to face these issues in their present-day relevance (and we see these trends developing energetically, starting with historians and cultural theorists), scholars would have to include another crucial dimension of social stratification issues in imperial Russia that is omitted in *The Estate Origins of Democracy in Russia* and is, therefore, conspicuous by its absence. The focus on the four-pronged estate system that is at the center of this book (as well as in the prominent Russian historiography on the issue, Boris Mironov's *Rossiyskaya imperiya: Ot traditsii k modernu*, heavily relied on in this book) and is the foundation of the argument about the origins of Russia's democracy ignores a crucial element of the historical context of the late 19th-century imperial Russia: colonial expansion and the creation of citizenry with a distinct second-class status.

Continuing an earlier expansionist trend, in the second half of the 19th century Russia was involved in colonial wars in the Caucasus and Central Asia. The new non-Slavic and non-Christian people of the Caucasus and Central Asia were incorporated into the empire as *inorodtsy*, a category of nonnative Russian people whose legal codification started under Catherine the Great and was advanced by the 1822 *Ustav ob upravlenii inorodtsev* prepared by Speransky. According to Kappeler, the 1822 reform established a new juridical category of non-Russians who did not have full rights of imperial subjects (Kappeler 1994, 150; Slocum 1998, 181). The category of *inorodtsy* was expanded in 1835 to include the Russian Jews, revealing the importance of religion to perceptions of "otherness" in the Russian empire (Slocum 1998, 182). By the early 20th century, the term *inorodtsy* was being used not in a strict juridical sense but in a broad fashion, conflating religious identities with ethnicity and referring to all nonnative Russians in the empire. The earlier connotations of *inorodtsy* as people that were to be assimilated and civilized by the core Russian group were enhanced by viewing *inorodtsy* as a source of threat to the Church and to the state in the context of rising non-Russian nationalisms (Slocum 1998, 184, 174). Given that *inorodtsy* comprised around 55% of the population of the Russian empire, such Russian nationalist anxieties are understandable (Dameshek 2014). The tsarist empire found itself not only under the weight of inequalities associated with its estate structure but also under the added weight of racial inequalities and nationalist unrest threatening the imperial society.

The *inorodtsy* population of Turkestan—the new territories in Central Asia added to the Russian empire in the second half of the 19th century—are not as relevant to contemporary Russia. But the *inorodtsy* of Siberia, the Volga-Ural region, and the Caucasus are still an integral part of Russia, arguably carrying the historical legacies of racial inequality, an issue that has been long silenced in the Russian studies and made, tragically, relevant by the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war (M. Yusupova 2021). Lankina's study highlights the importance of educational aspirations and achievement of *meshchane* estate. The education opportunities available to *inorodtsy*, especially to the Muslims in the Russian empire, were importantly conditioned by their otherness. The best initiatives to advance education opportunities and literacy among Tatars and Bashkirs, such as the system of education promoted by Nikolai Il'minsky in the Kazan *Gubernia*, were driven by the missionary impulse and the desire to bring Volga Muslims closer to Russians through the Russian language and conversion to Christianity. These efforts proved controversial: they were resisted by Tatars who wanted to preserve their religious identities against forced Christianization (Dowler 2001; Tuna 2015).

The social inequality story is the most fruitful tangent in the book, and I hope it is taken further by Russia scholars to focus on the effects of ethnic (racial) inequalities and historical legacies of colonialism on failed democratization in Russia. Whereas Lankina focuses on making a connection between the descendants of *meshchane* estates that have lived through the Soviet experience and their democratic values and orientations (indirectly implying that the rest of the society is not ready

for democracy), a different aspect of imperial, pre-Soviet history might shed further light on Russia's current political predicament. Despite the anticolonial rhetoric underlying the Bolshevik political action, already from the 1930s Stalin reestablished a Russo-centric view of Soviet identity thereby reinforcing the earlier ethnic inequalities (Brandenberger 2002). The gradual autocratization of Russia that has taken place over the last two decades has also gone together with the retreat from federalism and the growing focus on Russian ethnic group and Russian language as a "state-forming language" while minority languages have been disadvantaged and ethnic activism in Russia's ethnic republics and regions actively repressed (G. Yusupova 2022). The parallels between the end of tsarist Russian empire facing its restless nonnatives as a threat and the repression of ethnic activism in modern Russia are striking and point to the unresolved issues of ethnic (racial) inequality, positing this issue as a fundamental condition for thinking about Russia's future.

Lankina's study does not go in that direction. However, the book's exemplary exploration of *longue duree* historical legacies opens this avenue of research, starts the debate, and invites a long-needed collaboration between political scientists, sociologists, and historians in addressing fundamental issues with immense political relevance today.

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