Introduction

CURRENT TRENDS IN RUSSIAN AND AMERICAN POLITICAL THEORY

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1. Introduction

Enormous changes have been occurring in international politics since 1989. With the peaceful revolutions in Eastern Europe and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the East-West conflict that dominated the last half century dissolved leaving political theorists optimistic about a “new world order” of democracy, peace, and justice. Now, at the advent of a new millennium, international relations face new dangers as well as new possibilities.

Likewise, for philosophers, the end of the Cold War heralded hopes for rethinking and moving beyond the dominant Hobbesian-based paradigm of Realpolitik. At the same time, however, massive inequalities in the distribution of resources globally, genocidal wars in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, and a nuclear arms race between India and Pakistan seemingly undermine these arguments for global justice and a “democratic peace” among nations. In bringing together chapters by current Russian and American political theorists, this inaugural volume in Contemporary Russian Philosophy raises candid questions about, assesses prospects for, discloses problems of, and provides clues to new alternatives in the quest for justice in the aftermath of the global resurgence of democracy.

The emergence of democracy in the former Soviet Union was the culmination of what has been termed the “global resurgence of democracy.” Political theorist Samuel P. Huntington, for example, observes in his essay “Democracy’s Third Wave” that between 1974 and 1991 more than thirty countries made transitions to democracy. Prior to this “resurgence of democracy,” the actual number of democracies in the world and the global prospects for democracy had been significantly reduced. With the election of Vladimir Putin (a former KGB official) as President of Russia, some political theorists currently wonder if this is the beginning of a reversal of fortune for democracy in Russia, in particular, and global democracy in general. Others by contrast see in Putin’s election a leader who solidifies Russia’s turn towards democracy. Thus the three parts of this book provide reflections on the important question: Can the “third wave” of democracy be sustained?
2. Democracy: Virtues and Vices

As the authors in this book suggest in their diverse considerations, if democracy is to continue to thrive, then such an accomplishment will entail the promotion of justice politically, socially, and economically. In her opening chapter, Tatiana Alekseeva examines Russia’s inheritance of the legacy of the former Soviet Union and the philosophical implications of no longer living in a “bipolar” Cold War world. According to Alekseeva, the creation of a “unipolar” world, in which the United States is the singular dominant power, places Russia in a precarious position. Under the bipolar Hobbesian–based paradigm of political realism, Russia’s political identity was secure in part due to the capacity of the Soviet Union to wage war. Although Russia still maintains much of its military capabilities, Russian political identity remains uncertain. Alekseeva asks, what is Russia’s global role, particularly when we consider the failure of political realism to address in a nonviolent manner the issue of hegemony. Alekseeva suggests that this “new world order” is fraught not only with difficulties awaiting potentially violent resolution, but also new possibilities of achieving just international relations. If we are to avoid becoming both victims and executioners in this “unipolar” world of political realism, then what is needed, Alekseeva contends, is a rethinking of democratic political philosophy along the lines of John Rawls’s idea of overlapping consensus and/or the work of recent theorists such as Klaus Hoffe and Jürgen Habermas.

Although one of the values of democracy is taken to be the inclusion of a country’s citizenry in the political process, democratic governments face particular dangers. One such danger is political corruption. The abuse of public office for private gain poses serious dangers for a democracy because exposure of such corruption under the democratic conditions of constitutionalism and a free press, damages the political legitimacy on which democracies depend for their survival. For example, Robert Mundt, in his chapter “Corruption and Democracy,” considers the connection between democracy and corruption. Examining global trends for corruption, Mundt concludes that democracies are highly vulnerable to corruption of the electoral process. Raising the philosophical question of whether a system can socialize its members into selflessness, Mundt suggests that in the absence of socialized constraints, the success of a democracy against corrupting influences, such as economic disparities among its citizens, is dependent upon the degree to which decision making has been institutionalized— for example, in an independent judiciary.

While Alekseeva examines the conditions from which institutionalized overt violence (war, etc.) may arise during this “global resurgence of democracy,” Abdusalam Guseinov considers the possibility that democracies, in theory and in practice, covertly carry the seeds of violence. Understood as a government of the people, democracy, according to Guseinov, is a contradictory idea. Since the idea of a government presupposes hierarchy and subordination, the concept of governmental decisions being a democratic expression of self-
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3. Challenges to Democracy in Russia

As a recent democracy, Russia becomes important for understanding the connection between democracy and justice. The biggest challenge facing the implementation of democratic reforms in Russia, according to Vyacheslav Stiopin, is Russia’s historical legacy. For Stiopin, all attempts at modernizing Russia (of which democracy may be considered the latest) have failed because Russian consciousness has been molded by centuries of enslavement and oppression which has left the people of Russia with a loss of faith in technological progress. Since democracy depends on individual freedom, responsibility, tolerance of others, and rights and laws as universal regulators of social relations, the fate of government continually runs the risk of anarchism and totalitarianism. In particular, Guseinov notes that when a democracy loses its democratic legitimacy, as in Mundt’s example of political corruption, violence becomes the foundation for governing.

Violence by a democratic government needs a certain context in which to arise. Guseinov locates the seeds of this context in what he calls “moral demagoguery.” Characterized by an excessive use of ethical language in evaluations of social communications, moral demagoguery creates an atmosphere of self-glorification on the part of a subject or group while misdirecting a people’s social energies toward an “other” group deemed unworthy. With the designating of an unworthy group, forcible measures (violence) is legitimated morally if not legally as a means to compel these “unworthy others” against their will. Guseinov examines and concludes that the current situation in Russia is one which is characterized by a high degree of moral demagoguery. Therefore, if Russia and other democracies are to impede the prospects of violence, then laws must be instituted which recognize that morality is meant to promote coexistence and tolerance.

To conclude this section on the values and vices of democracy, Alan Woolfolk examines the theoretical implications of the traditional distinction between “civic nationalism” and “ethnic nationalism.” Arguing that this theoretical model conceals moral assumptions about the superiority of Western “civic” nationalism, which has led Western democracies into misunderstandings of and conflicts with Eastern Europe over their “ethnic” nationalism,” Woolfolk suggests a new model of “higher” and “lower” nationalism. He bases his model upon how well coexistence, respect, and inclusion are promoted. Using Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Masaryk, Bosnia, and the Los Angeles riots as his examples, Woolfolk demonstrates that “higher” and “lower” nationalisms are not endemic to one aspect of the globe and often are mixed models as is currently the case with Russia. Asking us to rethink our political theory of democracy in terms of nationalism, Woolfolk contends that by doing so we will move away from tribal and liberal ideologies and more towards just and moral understandings of nationality.
Russian democracy, for Stiopin, requires an understanding of how such conditions run counter to the historical legacy of Russia. If democratic reform in Russia is to succeed, Stiopin suggests that it must find support in the Russian moral consciousness rather than in the liberal economic experience of western democracies.

If the attempt to establish a capitalist democracy constitutes a challenge for the people of Russia, then how may we assess and understand the recent Russian experiment with democracy? Nicholas Caste contends that a fruitful means is by analyzing the flow of communication and information within Russian society. Basing his argument on the liberal democratic theory of John Stuart Mill and John Rawls which espouses the necessity of a free flow of information to maintain an informed citizenry and provide a fund of ideas from which informed decisions may be made, Caste suggests the use of communicative studies such as the notion of “cascade theory” of Kenneth Sayre and Peter French as a means to assess whether democratic reforms are facilitating the flow of information or distorting it. The facilitation of the flow of information between citizens and decision makers is necessary, Caste argues, because without it the concerns and wants of the citizens will have little influence on the decisions made. One way to promote the flow of information is to maintain a free press and promote the influence of local and regional governments rather than one centralized authority. Given that newly elected President Putin immediately ordered the forcible closure of a dissenting press after his election, we may ask using Caste’s model about the future of democratic reforms in Russia.

To Konstantin Zuev, Russia’s democratic reforms must be understood in terms of the elements of its prior totalitarian legacy and how this continues to adversely affect the transformation to democracy. For example, governmental authority is still concentrated in the executive branch which is alienated from the majority of the Russian population. Moreover, Zuev notes, this executive branch advocates equality politically while hypocritically fostering a lack of reliable and socially significant information to the populace. Corruption, power struggles, and discrepancy in wealth characterize the current state of Russia’s democracy, according to Zuev, which has encouraged a degrading of Russian intellectual properties, a loss of national identity, religious intolerance, and drastic demographic changes. The question for Zuev is how long will Russia find itself in a transitional period in which social, political, and economic tensions remain high?

4. Democracy and Economics

Zuev’s recognition that Russia’s democratic transformation is becoming more of a meritocracy provides a transition to the last consideration—the relationship among democracy, justice, and economics. If democracy calls for equal participation of all citizens in resolving community problems, then America is no longer a democracy. This contention is the theme of Laura Duhan Kaplan and
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Charles Kaplan’s chapter. Using various social critics, they describe how various technological and educational developments have deprived many Americans of the incentive and/or capability to voice their interests in civic affairs. These same developments they contend result in an American meritocracy where a small well-educated elite have enormous influence concerning social and economic decisions. Drawing upon John Dewey, they propose that a democratic community must be cultivated at all levels of education and communal interaction. Particularly, they suggest development of civic equality is necessary to resist the influence both locally and abroad of transnational corporations which tend to foster meritocracy under the banner of democracy.

Ruben Apressyan follows the chapter by Laura Duhan Kaplan and Charles Kaplan with his own suggestion that a more just relationship between democracy and capitalist economics might be achieved by cultivating a civil society. Differing from prior theorists on civil society such as Hegel, Apressyan contends that civil society should focus neither on politics nor economics but on sociality, that is, a system of non-political institutions which cooperate socially separate from the state. Such institutions which include mass media, churches, schools, universities, trade unions and, other organizations, create a pluralistic context by allowing citizens a free exchange of ideas and information separate from the influence of the government. Moreover, Apressyan contends cultivation of civil society is necessary for a democracy in order to provide voice to those people socially and materially deprived by economic disparities.

To conclude the book, William Gay returns us to a consideration not of violence but of nonviolence when he offers an analysis of and suggestions for considering anew the possibility of economic democracy. As I noted at the start of this introduction, the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe was heralded by many theorists to be evidence for the superiority of capitalism and democracy. What Gay asks in his chapter is whether economic equality and political liberty should be pursued simultaneously in practice and why. After analyzing various forms of neoclassical and post-Keynesian economists, Gay suggests that Russia, in particular, should reconsider outright rejection of any state influence on the economy. Arguing that capitalist economies require some state control, Gay advocates maintaining some connection between market economies and democracy. Rethinking economic democracy becomes for Gay, “the final frontier,” because if democracy and market economics are separated, then we lose in theory and in practice the notion of positive peace, that is, the cultivation of nonviolence and are left solely with peace conceived in the negative terms of the practice of avoiding war.

Notes

2. Ibid., pp. ix-x.