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_Cultures of Power in Post-Communist Russia: An Analysis of Elite Political Discourse._


Our knowledge of power and of how it really works remains insufficient. From this point of view, attempts to study power, its forms and outcomes deserve encouragement. Studies of power in Russia seem particularly promising. Russian power, as some scholars call this culture-specific form of power, might well represent a critical case in studies of power in general. Critical cases allow for a better understanding of the circumstances under which the assumptions (namely, about the sources and constitution of power) will and will not hold.

The title of this book is somewhat misleading, however. It leads the reader to expect a comprehensive discussion of various forms of power and their cultural determinants. Such a discussion must necessarily include an analysis of power relationships both at the micro- (in everyday life) and macro- (in politics) levels. It also serves to differentiate power (narrowly defined as power not requiring legitimation), authority (legitimate power), as well as their particular forms. Finally, a comprehensive study of power cultures in Russia can hardly be conceivable without paying attention to the particularities of the various groups that make up the power elite: the administrative class (some scholars also refer to this as a “service class” composed of top state servants), the _siloviki_ (the members of the political and administrative classes who came from the military and the KGB) and so forth.

This book does not meet such broad expectations, unfortunately. For instance, the only reference to power relationships at the micro-level comes at the very end of the book where the author discusses “an everyday politics of deliberation.”

References to the works of Harry Eckstein are notably absent. Eckstein is known for his attempts to understand a problematic interface between power relationships that exist at various level of social organization. One of his latest books focuses on post-Soviet Russia as a critical case in this respect (H. Eckstein, et al. _Can Democracy Take Root in Post-Soviet Russia?_ [Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998]).

A particular form of power is chosen by the author as a starting point for his analysis: authority and power relationships as a means to achieve other ends (“some good”, in the author’s words). This approach has its origins in Max Weber’s theory of authority. However, authority hardly represents a starting point in the evolution of power both ontologically and epistemologically, as David Beetham rightly pointed out in _The Legitimation of Power_ (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1991). Yuri Pivovarov and Viktor Makarenko, two
prominent Russian social scientists (references to their works are also notably absent), argue that the use of authority as a starting point is particularly questionable in the Russian context. Power might transform into authority in the process of its evolution, but only if several conditions are met. The basic condition refers to a system of constraints under which power holders act: their power is limited both “from below” (by the actions of civil society) and “from above” (by the actions of the competing power elites in international affairs). These constraints are manifestly absent in post-communist Russia. It is no coincidence that a very particular meaning is attached to the word “authorities” in the Russian language. Russians call representatives of a traditional criminal milieu by this name – avtoritety (because their actions must be justified by references to the informal norms, poniatiia, however specific this justification might be). State officials and government bodies are called vlasti (powers) instead.

The failure to differentiate between power and authority reduces the value of the new interpretation of civil society offered by the author in chapter 2. On the one hand, the author’s attempt to avoid using Western templates for analyzing the case of Russia could be applauded. He argues that a conventional definition of civil society (“civil society I”) derives from the Western institutional environment and its application outside of this context is unsound both methodologically and practically. On the other hand, what he views as a country specific form of civil society (“civil society II”) – a web of informal networks penetrating all layers of the Russian social organization, including the state, – is neither independent from the state nor able to limit the power holders’ discretion. As a matter of fact, the embeddedness of the Russian power elite in networks (teams and “benches” – skameiki) makes it immune to the control “from below” exercised by autonomous actors.

Speaking more specifically about the composition of the power elite, the author makes a very strong assumption indeed. Namely, he equates the power elite with something that constitutes only a part of it – a group of liberally oriented “professional politicians” and “professionals in politics” (to use an apt distinction proposed in the book). The reference to liberalism as “the dominant tendency in the country since perestroika” (p. 23) is not convincing, for there are serious doubts about whether this claim is valid. What about the siloviki as the second (if not the first) most influential group in the Russian elite? Their discourse of power remains obscure. The same is true about the nationalists and certain other groups as their presence in the power sub-elites becomes increasingly difficult to ignore.

Last, but not least, the book discusses a part of the Russian political class while ignoring its administrative (“service”) class. Even Weber admitted that