

Response to Comments on *Estate Origins of Democracy in Russia*

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The Estate Origins of Democracy in Russia: From Imperial Bourgeoisie to Post-Communist Middle Class, by Tomila V. Lankina, Cambridge University Press, 2022, 496 pp., £29.99, (hardcover), ISBN 9781316512678.

I would like to offer heartfelt thanks to Professors Stephen Hanson, Egor Lazarev, Bryn Rosenfeld, and Gulnaz Sharafutdinova for taking the time to read the book carefully and for offering their thoughtful comments and critique. I am also grateful to the editors of *Nationalities Papers* for providing a forum for and facilitating the symposium.

Some background: The book began as a very different undertaking from the project that took shape many years later as *Estate Origins* (Lankina 2022). As the contours of the argument were only just emerging, I would branch into topics that I knew were important to the analysis, and I embraced multiple agenda that would be inevitably too big for one book. The project started as an ambition to delve into several interrelated facets of social persistence: religious ethics and the resilience of faith, national-cultural values, and, as just one of the “persistence” streams, social structure. Gaps and omissions that the symposium raised are artifacts of this long process of enthusiastic immersion into an area of work and then abandonment because there would be three or four books, not one, in the making, the realization that the data are just not there, and the issue of time. But Hanson, Lazarev, Rosenfeld, and Sharafutdinova raise pivotal issues of credibility, research design, historiographical interpretation, concepts, and, most importantly, the plausibility of the penultimate causal link between *sosloviya* and democracy. Had I addressed all those thoughtful critiques in the process of writing, I would have produced a much stronger book. This symposium would hopefully aid other scholars in reinterpreting Russian politics and history and help students of comparative historical analysis more broadly to study mechanisms of social persistence following critical historical junctures. Below, I group the critiques under several subheadings and address each in turn.

Nationalism and Empire

As Sharafutdinova rightly notes, no story of social inequalities and social persistence in the Russian and Soviet empires would be complete without factoring in the ways in which colonial policies created second-class subjects among subjugated nations and otherwise severely circumscribed the rights and social opportunities for some groups while aiding the social advancement of others. Discussing the bureaucratic-classificatory category of *inorodtsy* and their mobility conditioned by “otherness” within the framework of the narrower “four-estateparadigm” should have featured more prominently in the book. And the analysis would have benefitted from carefully addressing the germane questions like what were the implications of being classed as *inorodtsy* for social rights,

citizenship, social mobility? What were the consequences of forced Christianization for communities? How did colonial policies dent the social possibilities of subjugated groups within the *sosloviye* system of limitations and opportunities? That being said, the book is careful to identify how the estates channeled social aspiration among minority communities even when being limiting in other ways. As several contributors to the symposium note, I discuss how the peculiarities of settlement (Germans) and even discrimination and persecutions of some groups—(Poles, Jews)—including residential restrictions and exile to the frontier, created possibilities for social mobility within the *sosloviye* system. And a chapter on Bolshevik education policy delves into the consequences of the *jadidi* movement of enlightenment among Muslims for shaping social aspirations in Bolshevik Russia (see discussion on p. 195). Movements such as these that Tatar intellectuals spearheaded came as a reaction to tsarist discrimination and assimilationist impulses. But they also aided the integration of the elite segment of minority communities into dominant society. I discuss how children of Muslim clergy (*mullahs*) in Tatar communities had comparatively low school dropout rates and were achievement oriented; they would get their coethnics in the local soviet to procure certificates that they are “peasants” so that they could advance their education and careers in Soviet Russia.

The line of inquiry that I ought to have pursued in the book is the ways in which national consciousness spurred pro-democracy impulses, national liberation movements, and an impulse to organize among minority communities; and, relatedly, the ways in which the estate structure shaped those. Delving into these topics would have also strengthened the analysis linking tsarist society with subnational political outcomes in the 1990s. For not only were some minorities represented highly among the *meshchane*, enjoying the rights and possibilities typical for this estate in towns, but their “nationalist” values may have also impinged upon their orientations toward the political system (Lankina 2022).

Social Mobility

There is, as several contributors to the symposium noted, in the urge to prove the point about persistence, a short shrift to the well-established argument that the USSR did achieve enormous social change and mobility for the working masses. As Hanson notes, even those least sympathetic to the Bolshevik project acknowledged the social uprooting rather than a reproduction of “bourgeois” society that had been intrinsic to it—and the scholars he cites are giants in the field of Soviet history. An equally valid point is that projects such as the new cities did create new channels of social mobility. But as I note in the book, the intention is to zoom in on the hitherto underresearched facets of social persistence without negating the enormous changes that Lenin, his party, and his successors wrought on Soviet society. I felt that because so much had been written already in the spirit of “grand revolutionary change,” there was no point for me to restate this in the book. I also note how prominent works of history, notably the ground-breaking research of Sheila Fitzpatrick on Soviet social mobility, were written at a time when access to sources had been severely limited, to say the least (Fitzpatrick 1979). Inevitably, that would shape the interpretation of historical events. Furthermore, the ability of scholars to interview Soviet citizens, and, importantly, to get them to frankly talk about their “bourgeois” past and values had been severely circumscribed. My own family left no papers and no records from before the Revolution bar a couple of photographs—they were probably all destroyed because people were terrified of revealing their “bourgeois” origins, religious beliefs, and such. But in the 1990s people started talking. And, they began opening their proverbial family closets, or whatever survived of them. Scholars of my generation had the luxury—if not an embarrassment of riches—when it comes to new available sources. Among these are not only memoirs, hitherto concealed archival papers, oral history recordings, etc. but also new works of historians rethinking past historiography (Fitzpatrick 1993, 2000).

Whereas Hanson's critique is focused on the book's interpretation of Soviet history, Lazarev suggests that the author would have benefitted from looking more beyond Russia and the USSR and considered western countries. Did the Bolsheviks accomplish more than policy makers did in the industrialized social democracies of western Europe? And what benchmarks should we use to test the "great leveler" argument? Say, let's examine the social backgrounds of medical students of the 1930, 1950, 1970, and 1990 cohorts, suggests Lazarev, and do some benchmarking using the backgrounds of medical graduates, for instance, in France or Germany for those same decades. I accept that this would be one valid way of doing it and it would enhance the credibility of my claims. But such an exploration is hard, if not impossible for Soviet Russia. Many people would not admit to their bourgeois pedigree, and if they did during the 1920s–1940s, they might face the camps or even death for revealing their true origins. There was a high probability of inflation of "peasant" or "worker" ancestry too. And on the eve of the Revolution, even those still ascribed to the peasant estate often had one foot in towns and were on their way to obtaining a *meshchane* status, as I write in the book. Furthermore, in Soviet Russia citizens from intelligentsia families during the 1920s–1930s opted for manual work to gain "proletarian" credentials and thereby conceal their bourgeois social backgrounds. I cite these examples not to deny that the USSR accelerated rates of social mobility. Rather, they illustrate how not only would it be difficult to engage in a systematic "benchmarking" exercise of the kind that Lazarev proposes but also that there is a case to be made that the Soviet achievements had been overstated. The statistics are going to be inevitably muddled given the reality of class warfare and witch hunts.

Furthermore, the elements of social structure I discuss are not reducible to incomes or occupational standing in one generation. As Lazarev rightly notes, social mobility is relational. I draw on insights from Max Weber and Pierre Bourdieu to discuss the "intangible" aspects of social structuration. Even if, say, a cultivated *meshchanin* or aristocrat became a worker at the furnace while a peasant became a white-collar clerk or a party *apparatchik*, the cultural capital of the cultivated estates would continue to create social barriers between the groups and provide different foundations for what kinds of knowledge and values they could pass on to their children. Distinctions that citizens carried from the past into Soviet society were often subtle and were recognizable at the level of educational aspirations, career choices, and cultural pursuits. These, as Alexander Libman, Katerina Tertychnaya, and I discuss in a recent article, likely manifested themselves in counterintuitive ways even at the height of Stalinist repressions (Lankina, Libman, and Tertychnaya 2024). You can cram everyone together into a *kommunalka* or hideous tower blocks, but equality that does not make. In *Estate Origins*, I illustrate these elusive aspects of Soviet social hierarchies by invoking the Soviet-era film classic *Pokrovskiye Vorota*. The intelligentsia in a communal apartment are deriding the boyfriend of one of the apartment dwellers, a common man with a peasant mode of speech and limited cultural horizons. Technically, they are all equal, sharing as they are the *kommunalka*. But their social status is very different from that of the boyfriend parvenu no matter how loud he invokes his white-collar credentials and some claim to cultural sophistication. The peasants may have advanced on the Soviet social ladder, becoming urban factory technicians, as did the factory workforce joining the *rayon* party cadre, but the *meshchane* would not be standing still either. They would be leveraging their cultural, educational, and social capital to forge ahead as university professors, curators in art galleries, publicists in prominent print outlets, as radio and TV personalities, and so forth.

We should not forget too that the peasant emancipation did create a momentum for social fluidity in tsarist society. In the book, I give examples of rural folks ascribed to the peasant estate who got into gymnasias and pursued successful careers before the Bolsheviks took power. Bolshevik policy may have accelerated for some, but simultaneously, due to collectivization, severely circumscribed for many others the peasant social mobility that had accelerated toward the final decades of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth. One test of the extent of social change would have been to examine the extent of mobility already under the Romanovs, then to consider, hypothetically, the mobility that we would observe in the twentieth century absent the Revolution,

and then ascertain what effect had been strictly speaking due to the Revolution. For instance, *likbez* may have accelerated levels of literacy, but peasant literacy rates were already rising before the Revolution, well before the Bolsheviks' draconian and, often, violent and humiliating policies of social uplift. A proper test of the mobility scenarios before and after the Revolution would factor in calamities like famines (admittedly also occurring under the tsars), day-to-day struggles for survival, forced collectivization and "dekulakization," enormous social dislocation, deportations of entire ethnic groups and peasant villages, executions, arrests, and other accompaniments of the Bolshevik project. Contrarily, we would consider what would happen to the mobility of the least-privileged peasant estate absent these calamities but factoring in, say, in the interest of a fair comparison, the famines of the tsarist era. The people who perished in Stalin's death traps as *spetsposelentsy* (special settlers), as "kulaks," were often the most socially mobile and aspirational. The "thought experiment" ought to also include how many of those sons and daughters of so-called kulaks would have, say, become first generation college entrants if the Revolution had not happened but were killed, deported, or died in famines.

The Bolsheviks' policies in the countryside—and the social advancement of peasant and worker cadre—have been explored before. But scholars who have analyzed the revolution in the countryside—either looking at social advancement or the human costs side of things—tended to neglect to examine what happened to the "former people" or bourgeois strata. These strata were assumed to have disappeared in the furnaces of history. I tried to resurrect them in my book. But the resulting urban bias creates an imbalanced account. There needs to be another book looking at precisely the aspects of peasant mobility—or immobility—that I covered only cursorily. But my own sense from the interview transcripts and from the genealogical essays of school pupils in the Samara region that I cite in the book is that it had been very limited indeed for kolkhoz workers. To back my observation about limited social mobility of workers and peasants, I cite several studies that did tackle this question more systematically though using very different sources: the Novosibirsk study and the Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System (Inkeles and Bauer 1959; Shubkin et al. 1968).

Ideology and Verstehen

The point about ideology brings me to the very important critiques that Professor Hanson raises about the motivations of the leaders in the Bolshevik movement. I accept that the discussion of policy skirts over the *Verstehen* aspect—Bolshevik motivations and self-understandings—in a Weberian sense. Presently, I am rereading Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*. Solzhenitsyn's discussions of orthodoxy that prevailed among the staunch "believers"—the Old Bolsheviks in the camps (Solzhenitsyn 1991)—very much echoes Hanson's point. One is struck with what Nanci Adler, the historian who analyzed the biographies of Gulag survivors, calls "keeping faith with the party" (Adler 2012); she finds this fanatical "faith" even among the committed cadre who experienced what the "heroic" visions meant in terms of human cost. Ideology—and a sincere commitment to radical transformation—was certainly there. It infused every corner of Bolshevik thinking, and the inevitable class compromises need not signal that the revolutionaries were mere power-hungry opportunists. The belief systems of the movement leaders and how they impinged on policy ought to have featured more prominently in the book.

But, although I accept that "equality" may not have featured prominently within the parameters of "revolutionary heroism," the Bolsheviks did set out to build the "dictatorship of the proletariat"; they had visions of a classless society; they wanted to do away with private property through expropriations and rid the country, if not the world, of the social groups that exploit the labor of others. Lenin himself wrote in *State and Revolution*, "a working immediate object is to organize the *whole* of the national economy ... so that the technicians, managers, bookkeepers, as well as *all* officials, shall receive salaries not above a 'workingman's wage', all under the control and leadership of the armed proletariat." And, despite the many intellectual gymnastics, polemics, revisions, and dithering on the issue of "equality" among the great fathers of revolutionary Marxism-Leninism,

there were references to equality as a desirable goal in Soviet proclamations and legal documents (cited in Dobrin 1957, 339).

Whatever the terminology, objectives like doing away with “exploitation” strike me as relevant to social equality even if, narrowly understood, it may have been incidental to the broad spirit of Leninist ideological commitments. The book argues that despite the sustained effort to upend the societal structures of the past, elements of social persistence in tsarism’s social divides are still observable. This may come across as overstating the case for persistence, but hopefully it restores the balance somewhat given that the ground-breaking works of earlier generation of scholars overstated, I feel, the case too much the other way.

Change

Anyone who grapples with persistence ought to simultaneously consider the question of change, as Professor Rosenfeld rightly points out. How does change happen? Does it happen at all? And is, as Lazarev asks, Russia or some regions “doomed” to stay autocratic because of the peculiarities of self-reproducing social structure? Rosenfeld rightly draws attention to the pitfalls of postulating a “frozen” system in the extreme, one pregnant with pessimisms and surely one that would get us nowhere in accounting for the kinds of often radical breaks in institutional, social, cultural, and other types of persistence. This pivotal point is related to the question that other participants in the symposium also make. The sheer nature of social transformation that did happen is not given the prominence that it deserves. Is a “comprehensive social revolution” even possible, asks Hanson, given the arguments about social persistence passed on through families and other channels? And, asks Lazarev, should we not be alert to potential pitfalls (all political science is political!) of postulating and restating the “two Russias” trope, one that freezes and reifies the purported social divides between the numerically small intelligentsia and the inert mass of the overbearing majority of peasants and their descendants?

Change happened at many levels. Not only were old social hierarchies upended, but repressions, terror, class witch hunts, denunciationism, and such worked to instill fear, anomie, to atomize, and shatter old values. Meanwhile, greater social intermingling eroded the barriers that existed before between the peasant estate and the educated *sosloviya*. That meant the possibility of change at not just the level of material wealth and educational opportunities but also of cognitive orientations. But Rosenfeld’s work on the state dependent middle class, which had been a great inspiration for the analysis in *Estate Origins*, also made me consider the limited nature of Soviet-engineered social mobility (Rosenfeld 2021). The USSR, as Alexander Libman and I also write elsewhere, precisely engendered the middle class of the dependent white collar stratum variety (Lankina and Libman 2021). This, I think, is an important artifact of the accelerated peasantification of urban society—the kind of change that creates a middle class that, as we know from Rosenfeld’s work, is not very democracy supportive in an autocratic system.

I agree also that social differentiation within the *meshchane* estate is a fascinating line of potential inquiry. This estate had been not only very spongy but also fluid. It not only absorbed groups that may have espoused more achievement-oriented and more democratic values but also varied internally. A not atypical small-town *meshchanin* would be a cobbler or a trader running a simple market stall. But *meshchane* also included people like Anton Chekhov—a literary genius, a medical doctor, and a *zemstvo* activist, all packed into one. What did it take to become a Chekhov or remain a street peddler indistinguishable from the urban and rural precariat? Which one—if we take a stylized image—would join the state-dependent, autocracy-supporting middle class, and which one would become a professional with autonomy and join the protest movement against autocracy? And, as Rosenfeld asks, what are the implications for social autonomy when the state makes deliberate attempts to obliterate autonomous spaces be they in the professions or civic activism? Questions such as these are pertinent to exploring social differentiation and for analyzing how change in otherwise seemingly rigid social institutions, values, and practices, happens, and why. I

have touched on some of these issues. But I accept that they should have been given greater consideration and prominence in the book.

Democracy. What Democracy?

The title—an artifact of the tug and pull of preferences between the publisher and the author—has come to haunt this book. The original title was to be *The Estate Origins of Democracy and Autocracy*. I accepted the publisher's nudge to shorten the title for a trivial argument—something to do with librarians, or marketing people, or both not liking long titles. But the substantive arguments raised go beyond the unfortunate title. As Lazarev notes and as I thought when sheepishly accepting the editorial decision to drop the word “autocracy,” people who will read the book carefully will know that it is about autocratic backsliding and fragility of the democratic impulse as much as it is about the democratic stirrings of a small social group.

But the commentators on this symposium also raise points about the “democracy” that cannot be explained away with the unfortunate title. First, as Rosenfeld notes, there is the erosion of democracy if there ever had been any, and there is the accelerating autocratization over the last two decades. Lazarev points out too that the book would have benefitted from a discussion of “struggles for political power”—the process of campaigning, organizing, and otherwise engaging in contestation for power in the political arena. What role, he asks, for “political subjectivity” of the inert and disorganized mass of the dynastic middle class?

I accept that much of the book is about social persistence. Democratic values, linkages, etc. are not explored nearly as fully. To me, an exemplar of how a good balance between the social and political aspects could be achieved is Bryn Rosenfeld's own book on the “autocratic middle class”; in it she carefully lays out the social-structural element of the argument and, using both large-*N* data and interviews, links social structure to aspects of democratic participation like propensity to engage in protests or vote for or against incumbent autocrats (Rosenfeld 2021). In *Estate Origins*, one reason for the disproportionate coverage of social persistence and the more limited space allocated to the links between social legacies and postcommunist political outcomes is the paucity of the relevant data and other materials. This is partly why the analysis of estates-democracy links are limited to dry numbers and the analysis is not backed up with the same kind of textured work that I did for the social persistence component.

By the 1960s, social inequality was not a taboo academic subject in the Soviet Union anymore, though of course one had to approach this area of inquiry with caution and with some ideological sanction. But exploring whether citizens hold democratic values dear and whether these are in some ways connected to the past society would have not received political approval. Furthermore, while Imperial census records from 1897 provide a systematic snapshot of social divides at the zenith of tsarism (Troynitskiy 1905), no such records are available for political orientations of Russians under the Romanovs. There were no public opinion data and no voting statistics bar evidence like the parties that citizens tended to endorse in the elections to the State Dumas of the 1900s. (Alexander Libman and I leveraged these data in our *American Political Science Review* article, and I discuss them in Chapter 9 of the book; Lankina and Libman 2021). Tracing persistence in values supportive of democracy or autocracy is also a challenge; the Soviet period until the late 1980s remained a tabula rasa in this sense—a critical temporal part of the causal chain. But certainly, it would have been feasible to trace the biographies of politicians and civic activists, say, in Samara, the main case study region, for the 1980s–1990s. This is an omission that is largely due to the space constraints of the book but could and should have been addressed.

Even so, although reconstructing social status from professional standing or estate of ancestors through the Soviet period is feasible, most people, bar a small group of dissident intelligentsia, were scared to indicate their views of Stalinism, democracy, and so forth. Whatever views people had, most kept them to themselves. This makes the task of tracing persistence in political beliefs rather

than social status, through communism, very hard indeed even if one were to focus on the biographies of individual leaders in postcommunist Russia.

Lazarev points out that a comparative case distinct from Samara would have been useful. Some corroborating evidence from other cases is presented in a footnote, but I accept that it could have been developed more. For instance, I cite statistics on voting in the Russian State Duma elections in 1995. I compare Samara (an old city with an established bourgeoisie) and a new city, an industrial giant at that, Toliatti, also in the Samara region, one where, as per Hanson's point, new channels of social mobility were at work. The statistics are quite revealing: In Samara, of the nine electoral districts, only two districts registered a vote of below 6% for the liberal Yabloko party; the "old" Samara Leninsky district registered as high as 10%. Toliatti, an industrial giant, had a sizably higher share of citizens who voted for the "Liberal-Democratic," actually, nationalist-populist party, of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy compared to the vote for Yabloko. The three electoral districts of Tolyatti registered votes of 5.7, 5.4, and 5.3% for Yabloko. In no Samara city districts did Zhirinovskiy's party obtain more than 10.4%. In contrast, in Tolyatti in the three electoral districts, Zhirinovskiy's party gained 16.9, 18.8, and 16.1% (statistics based on data in McFaul and Petrov 1998 and cited in *Estate Origins* (Chapter 9, 351, fn106).

These figures would hopefully go some way toward explaining the puzzling resilience of the *meshchane* variable to the inclusion of controls like urbanization or other "modernization" indices. Soviet "planned heroism" may have created many new urbanites and many more white-collar entrants from the peasant estate, but it would take perhaps another generation or more to alter the social and political orientations of this "new" middle class/urban citizenry or to endow citizens with the human capital required to navigate their way in the fraught terrains of post-Soviet politics.

Finally, I agree that we should be loath to postulate spurious links. This is not the place to delve into the complexities of the linkages between the caste system and politics in India—Lazarev's hypothetical example. But there are indirect links between the caste structure of Indian states and, say, movements and activism for social justice, and there is evidence of the historical role of the caste hierarchies in shaping education access, something that may be relevant both for social mobility and democracy. I discussed some of these processes in earlier publications (Lankina and Getachew 2013). (On Brahmins and education, see also Chaudhary 2010.)

Summary and Reflections on Moving the Analysis Forward

Events that have happened since the publication of the book not only make the critical comments of the symposium commentators more pertinent than ever but also chart future lines of inquiry that remain unaddressed in the book. Not only does the consolidation of Russia's autocratic regime raise questions about the resilience of the purportedly self-reproducing democratic values of citizens; it underlines the role of the legacies of communism rather than *pre*communism in shaping citizen political orientations—topics that are related to the earlier work of the symposium contributors (Hanson 1997; Sharafutdinova 2020). We have seen how Putin has skillfully leveraged symbols from the communist past to rally the people behind the autocracy and, to an extent and up to a point, the war against Ukraine.

Sharafutdinova is absolutely right that the phenomenon of "restless minorities" resisting subjugation and exploitation in Tsarist Russia may well come to haunt Russia's regime now. This is not the place to delve into this in detail, but this aspect of persistence—national consciousness—remains pivotal for understanding not only the impulses for democracy outside of Russia in the sovereign nations like Ukraine or the Baltic states but also those within Russia itself when we think of the antiwar movements among minority communities in Dagestan, Bashkortostan, or among Tatars. As Lazarev conjectures, in Russia the old social divides may well (re-)create a new kind of schism, precluding the emergence of citizenship and common struggles against autocracy. In contrast, the historical national liberation struggles of, say, citizens in Ukraine, may have well

worked to create a unifying impulse that would trump the social chasms (and *sosloviya* legacies of the Russian Empire). This is a topic I am developing in my next book on Russian dissent.

Communism, as I have hoped to demonstrate in *Estate Origins*, did not obliterate old social fissures, but equally, it did not supersede the national consciousness of subjugated minority groups. Both factors may play a crucial role in shaping Russia's political system in the years to come.

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