Social Science and Understanding in a Post-Soviet World

A Field Statement
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Introduction

It is nearly cliché, by the beginning of the 21st century, to begin an essay on Russian or Post-Soviet politics with an astounding statement regarding the fall of the Soviet Union. It almost goes without saying that the years 1989-1991 may indeed have been the most important of the 20th century. Nonetheless, the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics continues to reverberate throughout the globe, not least for the inhabitants of the former Soviet Union. On December 8, 1991, Russia gained, formally, independence from the Soviet Union. With Russia’s independence, the last (formal) vestiges of the USSR vanished, and Gorbachev’s office is emptied as a begrudging Christmas present. Russia’s independence triggered that of the Baltic states, and formally placed independence on the shoulders of the Central Asian states. In the Baltics, independence was wrested from the dying clutches of the USSR, but the Central Asian states found independence rather like an orphan on their doorstep.

Following the implosion of the Soviet Union, it seemed as though Western academics, politicians and business executives gained an ideal space in Central and Eastern Europe for the exportation, implementation and development of Western forms of capitalism and representative democracy. These groups seemingly assumed that the newly open states of the former Soviet Union could provide an ideal laboratory for the culturing of Western economic and political norms and practices. Within a few short years, however, the bodies politic of many former Soviet states had rejected this foreign skin graft, and replaced it with lesions, scabs and sores. Many contemporary post-Soviet states and societies can be much more accurately described as authoritarian and populist than as democratic and liberal.
Why was the “democratic experiment” such a failure in most post-Soviet states, and what sort of politics have emerged from these failures? How do citizens in post-Soviet states construct their identities, live their daily lives, and negotiate their existence in general? And how, in the absence of civil society, and (functioning) democratic institutions, can these people act politically? The literatures reviewed herein attempt, with varying degrees of success, to answer these questions.

By considering the dominant approaches to post-Soviet politics (transition literatures and new institutionalism) we can gain insight into the assumptions carried by American (and to a lesser degree, British) political science about democracy, capitalism, Russia and post-Soviet space. It is fair to conclude that these assumptions were shared by the Western advisors to the regimes-in-transition blossoming by the early 1990s in post-Soviet states. These literatures will demonstrate the extent to which certain misunderstandings, methodological assumptions, and inexperience fueled the thinking on reform and democratization in post-Soviet politics.

After providing a critique of mainstream approaches to post-Soviet politics, we will be able to turn in other directions to overcome the blind-spots of these approaches. Considerations of culture, history, and identities will suggest ways in which politics prior to and after the breakup of the Soviet Union were already structured according to dominant cultural codes. Once culture is considered, the essay will turn toward a consideration of outside factors on the attempted transition to democracy, and the situation left in its wake. In particular, we will consider the role of globalization in shaping and influencing these transitions, and the effects of globalization on local populations. For the majority of the essay, the focus will be on Russia itself, with Russia playing the role of the major case for consideration and analysis. While it is

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1 Perhaps experiments have a habit of failing in this part of the world, for the “democratic” failure is merely the latest in a string of failed experiments, falling close on the heels of the previous failures.
not correct to assume that the situation in Russia is the same as that of all post-Communist states, it is fair to suggest that the scholarship on Russian “transitions” and Russia in the post-Soviet era are representative of larger academic schools, and that those within specific methodological approaches treat the institutions and processes that varying states have and have undergone as related and similar. It is fair, then, to suggest that the scholarship on Russian politics after the fall of the Soviet Union is representative of larger academic trends in the study of post-Communist politics. Before a consideration of particular approaches to the study of politics in this area then, a brief overview of the Soviet period is in order.

The 1917 Bolshevik revolution set Russia, and its neighbors, on a road that for seventy-four years, would wind through periods of excitement, and furor, but would best be characterized as bloody and brutal. Histories of this period are many and ever increasing, but consideration of these literatures would prove beyond the scope of this essay. Rather than scouring what history has produced, it may be more useful to consider introductory texts, and broad overviews. First among many are the works of Mary McAuley and Ronald Grigor Suny. McAuley’s *Russian Politics 1917-1991*, and Suny’s *The Soviet Experiment* represent two exemplary introductory texts to the Soviet period in the history of Russia and the former USSR.

Before I begin the introductory section of the essay a word on writing about Soviet and Russian politics is in order. In general, history and politics are not linear and logical, and in Russian history and politics in particular this fact is particularly apparent. Most studies seem to separate into autonomous realms areas of life that are, in fact, relational, such as culture, state, economy, institutions and demographies. This is a particular weakness of most of social science’s treatments of Russian, Soviet and post-Soviet politics, which will be critiqued in this

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2 Which would suggest that they were, in turn, being whispered into the ears of the “reformers” in these countries.
essay. In an effort to provide cogency and coherence to the introductory sections of this essay, however, this weakness will be reproduced before it is critiqued.

Recycling the Past, Presupposing the Future; the Soviet Period

The history of the Soviet Union is best considered as a set of cycles, oscillating between revolution and retrenchment; between “advance” and “retreat”, or better, between thaw and deep-freeze. More will be said below regarding Yuri Lotman’s theories of the dynamic movement of Russian culture, but for the moment let it suffice to say that Lotman suggests that because of Russia’s Orthodox past, history moves in Russia as always the radical replacement of the present with a new which inverts the past to create the future (Lotman and Uspenskii 1985).

“Change takes place as the radical rejection of the preceding stage. The natural result of this was that the new emerged not from the structurally ‘unexploited’ reserve, but as a result of the transformation of the old, as it were, of its being turned inside out” (Lotman and Uspenskii, 5). Lotman traces this pattern of dialectical change in the ancient Russian past, but the pattern serves as an extremely useful tool in the analysis of not only Russian history, but of Soviet history, and the Russian present.

We can see the dialectical movement in the stages of Soviet history, with each new stage replacing the prior with a recycling of the available old. Starting with the Bolshevik Revolution, each historical change in the Soviet Union can be viewed as replacing the old by turning it inside out. Stalin replaces the Leninist years with a return to tsar-like autocracy, Khrushchev replaces Stalin’s legacy with a re-Leninization of the Soviet Union (and the accompanying thaw), Brezhnev returns to Stalin’s legacy, and Gorbachev replaces Brezhnev’s neo-Stalinism with an

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3 This is, in fact, one of Marx’s main critiques in his *Eighteenth Brumaire*, and the insistence that society be studied as relational is indeed one of Marx’s biggest contributions to social science.
even more liberal version of Khrushchev’s thaw (*perestroika* and *glasnost*).\(^5\) A brief overview of these periods is provided in the paragraphs below.

John Reed famously called the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 “ten days that shook the world”. “In January 1917 Russia was ruled by an autocratic Tsar, flanked by the nobility, supported by the army, sustained by the Church and the state bureaucracy. A year later the country had a Bolshevik government, a Council of People’s Commissars, committed to the introduction of social ownership, a workers’ government, and equality” (McAuley, 12). Within three years of the original revolution, Bolsheviks consolidated their power, and a sort of stability became entrenched. The Bolshevik order, however, differed greatly on the ground from the vision nurtured in the imaginations of the Bolshevik revolutionaries. “The aim had been a highly productive industrial sector, manned and run by conscious, educated, skilled workers. Instead there was a devastated industry, lacking both the economic resources and a class-conscious proletariat capable of running the country” (McAuley, 30). The shambles that Russia found itself in soon sparked rebellions and mutinies, but as McAuley notes, “This was the last challenge, the last flicker of opposition to Bolshevik rule; hereafter the political authority of the party remained unchallenged” (31). In 1921, at the Tenth Party Congress, Lenin instituted a “ban on factions” within the Communist party, further prohibiting challenges to Communist hegemony (Sakwa, 2002, 6).\(^6\) Lenin introduced the ban on factions hand-in-hand with another extremely important policy: the New Economic Policy (NEP).

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\(^4\) He states himself, this is the “negation of the negation,” an obvious reference to Hegel (5).

\(^5\) For one of the best summaries of the Soviet Era, see: Mary McAuley, *Soviet Politics: 1917-1991*, Oxford: Oxford, 1992. My linking of these stages with individual leaders does not imply that one should consider only the leaders of the Soviet Union in a historical examination, nor does it suggest that Soviet society was merely an empty vessel for these leaders to mould as they wished. I label the periods by naming the leaders purely for sake of convenience.

\(^6\) With this ban on factions, “the distinction between opposition to the revolution, by various forces outside the regime, and opposition within the system by those seeking to explore alternative policy options was extinguished, and the door opened to Stalin’s monocratic rule” (Sakwa, 6).
The ban on factions and NEP represented a shift in Bolshevik strategy on both the political and economic fronts. Lenin’s notes for his Party Congress speech are as follows: “The lesson of Kronstadt: in politics—the closing of the ranks (+ discipline) within the party, greater struggle against the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries; in economics—to satisfy as far as possible the middle peasantry” (quoted in Suny, 1998, 136-137). The NEP returned small-scale industry, and agriculture, to private ownership in an attempt to jump-start the Communist economy, feed the towns, and win the support of the still-resistant peasantry. According to Suny, “the New Economic Policy was a concession to the peasantry, giving them incentives to plant, expand production, and to market their grain” (1998, 138). Far from being an economic free-for-all, however, NEP represented only one end of Soviet economic policy. At the top, by 1928, economic planning and state control reigned supreme. Despite the shambles that the new Bolshevik state found itself in, “NEP was a bright spot in the first decades of Soviet history. The state eased up on the people, both economically, and in terms of repression and compulsion” (Suny 1998, 138). These golden years, however, would not last long, and with Lenin’s death in January 1924, their end was nigh.

December 1922 witnessed two of the most important events of Soviet history; events that would have profound impact in the years ahead: Lenin’s first stroke, and the creation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Lenin never recovered from this stroke and died a short thirteen months later. The Union treaty of 1922, however, would live on, and would play an integral part in not only the birth, but also the death, of the Soviet Union.

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7 The Kronstadt rebellion was a brief mutiny of sailors at the Kronstadt base, from which comes the famous dictum “Soviets without Bolsheviks”. To the outside world, “the rebels, who were demanding greater democracy, aroused great sympathy,” but Lenin warned of the rebellion, “Kronstadt could be a ’step, a ladder, a bridge’ for a White victory, and he convinced his comrades that they must use force to crush the rebellion” (Suny, 136).
8 Gosplan, the economic planning organization of the Soviet system was created just prior to NEP, and represented, throughout the Soviet years, the main planning body of the state economy.
The establishment of the USSR in December 1922 reflected a peculiar type of ethno-federalism, where ‘union republics’ like Ukraine, Belorussia (as it was known before changing its name to Belarus in 1991) and the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (RSFSR) came together to form a new state whose legacy of dual federalism (with representation based on both territorial and ethno-federal principles) lives on to this day in Russia (Sakwa, 6).

The Union treaty formally created an ethno-federalist state, that “enshrine[ed] the principle of territorial autonomy for specified ethnic groups with the formal right to ‘self-determination up to and including succession’” (Sakwa, 204). This formal arrangement, like most other aspects of the Soviet state, however, differed greatly between formality and practice. “The principle of federalism was only grudgingly acknowledged, and then only partially implemented” (ibid.). The Union treaty contained the tensions of prolonged conflict and negotiations regarding concepts of autonomy, sovereignty and control within the regions and republics of the new Soviet Union. It also initiated a long, convoluted and contradictory history of “nation building” in the Soviet Union.⁹ These policies, contradictions and legacies would take “revenge” on the Soviet Union and Russian state within the century.¹⁰

As noted above, the course of Russian, and Soviet, history can be viewed as cyclical changes wherein the old is replaced by its inversion, through “negation of negation.” That is to say, every new stage contains elements of the old, in inverted form. Two tangible examples can be found to suggest that, even in the early years of Soviet history, old forms of subjectivity gained new life. The first is the decisions made at the tenth party congress, introduced above, representing a nearly immediate retreat to past forms of politics and economy: autocratic rule and nascent capitalism. Ken Jowitt points toward the second of these examples, suggesting that, in

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the attempt to create new Soviet subjects, traditional forms of authority, particularly that of the charismatic leader, were grafted onto a new form of authority; impersonalism, where the party (in theory), rather than a person carried the authority (1992).

The combination of traditional (heroic/charismatic) and modern (impersonal) forms of authority is, on its face, contradictory, yet this is precisely the cocktail that Jowitt suggests the Leninist regime succeeded in mixing. “The distinctive quality of Leninst organization is the enmeshment of status (traditional) and class (modern) elements in the framework of an impersonal-charismatic organization” (Jowitt, 16). In the quest to bring allies to the cause, Leninism appeals to traditional identities by adopting traditional forms of organization and infusing them with new substance (Jowitt). Jowitt notes that charismatic impersonalism, the charisma of a non-human entity (the Communist Party), and one’s allegiance to this body became the motivating factor (or motivating discourse) in the creation of the new Soviet citizen.

In this example, we see old forms of authority turned inside out to create new authority. Secondly, Stephen White argues that tsarist patterns of authority (paternal and autocratic) continued, albeit morphed, into the Soviet period (1977). This “autocratic inheritance” (25) has structured both institutions of government, and personal identifications with authority into the Soviet period.

The Lenin years of the Soviet era provided future leaders and generations the foundation for the road of Communism. The historical legacy of Lenin’s rule would never disappear, but would lurk behind subsequent eras in Soviet history to varying degrees of the macabre. Perhaps its most horrible face was its immediate incarnation in the hands of Josef Stalin. By 1929 Stalin emerged, from years of manipulation, jockeying and intimidation, as undisputed ruler of the

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Soviet Union (McAuley, 39). Stalin then initiated years of five-year plans, repressions, famine, purges, and terror. Stalin’s years of rule witnessed the total control of social and economic life, of art, of literature (Sakwa, 6), of work and of conversation. During these years, however, a backward country was brought, in astoundingly short time, from the backwaters of Europe into the role of a great power. One result of this crash-industrialization proved to be the defeat of the Nazi armies, and the building of a “modern industrialist economy” (Sakwa, 6). Ronald Grigor Suny describes Stalin’s rule in particularly able fashion, and is worth quoting at length:

The 1930s were both a heroic and tragic period of Soviet history, a time of compressed industrial revolution, the victory of the party over peasant resistance to collectivization, and the creation of a new society. The price paid for the social and economic changes was high indeed: millions of lives lost or broken in the dekulakization, the resulting famine, and the purges. Collectivization, which was supposed to pay for the industrialization by providing marketable surpluses of grain and other agricultural products, in fact led to a permanently depressed agriculture and created a sullen and passive peasantry. Workers as well lived at near subsistence levels and fared little better than their rural cousins during Stalin’s five-year plans. The Soviet state expanded enormously, swallowing up much that been left to the market and to society in the 1920s. The political apparatus took over the economy, dominated all aspects of culture, and eliminated any social movements it did not initiate or could not control. But it was not the Communist Party that emerged at the end of the decade as the ruling class of the Soviet Union. The party itself fell victim to the dictator who set the police on those he decided were disloyal or threatening to his monopoly of power. The revolution that had begun twenty years earlier in a popular uprising for liberation petrified into a leviathan state headed by a leader with totalitarian ambitions (Suny 1998, 217).

Indeed between the repressive and murderous years of the 1930s and the devastating years of World War II and its effects, Stalin’s reign represents the most terrifying and bloody period of Soviet History.11

Continuing our assertion that Soviet history should be viewed as a series of inversions, of the replacement of the old with the new old, we can see in the Stalinist era the replacement of
aspects of Lenin’s legacy (concretely, the NEP, ephemerally the freedoms of the early years of the revolution) with new forms of control (a much deeper and stronger repressive regime) which harkened to tsarist modes of autocracy. Nonetheless, Stalin’s new order contained inverted forms of the old, particularly in the form of the Lenin cult. Stalin’s era combined the traditional modes of religion with new, Soviet, forms of worship, and the result was the love for a god-like Lenin, and the worship of Stalin as the voice of god. This new form of reverence replaced one old (Lenin’s legacy) with an older old (tsarist), in the form of the new.

In yet another inversion, Khrushchev reversed Stalin’s policies and instituted a thaw, which is yet another attempt to return to Lenin. “In his ‘Secret Speech’ of 25 February 1956 at the Twentieth Party Congress, Nikita Khrushchev began to lift the lid on some of Stalin’s crimes, including the deportation of whole peoples in 1944 (the Chechen, the Ingush, the Balkars and others)” (Sakwa 7). This is not, however, a radical break with the Soviet past. Khrushchev in no way suggested that Stalin represented the natural outcome of a flawed ideological system. “De-Stalinization was a recognition of the need for change, but it was also an attempt to limit the change to a condemnation of the man Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin, and not of system that had allowed such a man to terrorise his own population for so long” (ibid). In this sense, Khrushchev only represents a pole in the continued cyclical nature of Soviet history. He did not break with the whole legacy of the Soviet past, but only with the immediate past, and found in Stalin a convenient figure to critique without needing to suggest fundamental change in the system, he merely initiates one half of the reform/retreat Soviet binary. Nonetheless, the impact of the

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11 McAuley notes that the Stalinist Terror is more than just repression. Terror, according to McAuley, and embodied in the purges of 1936-38, was a “system, if one can call it a system, of arbitrary and indiscriminate violence employed by the rulers against large sections of the population” (50).

12 Hillel Ticktin (1992) suggests that Khrushchev, in fact, first initiated the “party state” in the sense that before Khrushchev, the Communist Party was not a party (Ticktin, 7). We can add this assertion into our model, however, because we can indeed view the Bolsheviks as a party at least before their consolidation of power.
Secret Speech of 1956 should not be underestimated. “Its impact was shattering. Some who heard it in the hall fainted, others subsequently committed suicide” (McAuley, 65).

Khrushchev’s legacy is of the utmost import. “The ten year period that followed Stalin’s death was important in two respects. First, it witnessed the **reassertion of political power** over the means of coercion and, second, it thereby put back on the table the **question** of how a system of one-party rule could or should be maintained” (McAuley, 62, italics mine). Through re-introducing political power, and re-opening fundamental questions, the Khrushchevian period exhibited a (brief) return to **politics** in the Soviet Union. Debate and political struggle again became possible in Soviet space. “For the first time voices were heard arguing that the system of central planning possessed certain in-built problems,” and the symphony of voices produced “open conflict in the cultural sphere” (McAuley, 73). The cacophony of voices, and the conflicts in cultural, political and economic spheres, however, did not prove conducive to real improvements of material life in the Soviet Union. Indeed, many of Khrushchev’s reforms were ill-fated and executed, and others only half-heartedly attempted. “In the event, Khrushchev’s reforms, conducted under the slogan of returning to the alleged original purity of the revolution under Lenin, were deeply ambiguous and flawed….There was no original grail to which Stalin’s successors could return” (Sakwa, 7). Khrushchev’s policies, as well as his personality became increasingly “erratic and arbitrary,” (McAuley, 73) and soon, “Khrushchev’s erratic style of rule…had so thoroughly alarmed the defenders of the elite revolution that in October 1964 they ousted him” (Sakwa, 7). If Khrushchev represents a period of de-Stalinization, Brezhnev, the next long-term Soviet leader, can be viewed as a neo-Stalinist, and his period can be regarded as one of re-Stalinization.
Viewed as a cycle, this reversal makes perfect sense; Brezhnev’s new replacing the old (Khrushchev) with the old (Stalin). Brezhnev’s assumption of power, in 1964 signaled a large-scale rollback of many reforms of the Khrushchev era, perhaps most importantly, the re-introduction of politics into Soviet society. “Most of the institutional innovations of the Khrushchev era, like the creation of some one hundred regional economic councils (sovarkhozy) in an attempt to improve economic coordination, and initiatives to stimulate popular participation, were reversed: the Stalinist centralized ministries were restored and the stifling rule of local party committees, where jobs were effectively for life, was restored” (Sakwa, 7). It is not surprising that Sakwa suggests that the Brezhnev years can be considered the most “normal” of the Soviet era, as Brezhnev’s rule initiated widespread stagnation, attempted no major reforms, and faced no threats from without or within (ibid).

The trust in cadres policy that Brezhnev initiated effectively meant that the nomenklatura now ruled unchallenged, and that the status quo now reigned supreme. This “conservative, bland style” (McAuley, 75) shifted the goals of the Soviet Union from “transforming the present,” to “maintaining the status quo” (ibid, 76). In this sense, neo-Stalinism differed from its original archetype by removing the massive efforts of mobilization and revolution that characterized Stalin’s rule. The old, turned inside out, in this instance provides a static face to a dynamic model, while maintaining the institutional forms of Stalinism. On the other hand, the end of the Brezhnev era witnessed major changes in Soviet politics which would soon lead to massive upheavals in Soviet society. The harbinger of these changes was, of course, Mikhail Gorbachev. Gorbachev, as should be expected by this point, in his turn replaced the old (Brezhnev) with the old (Khrushchev and Lenin) creating another, and ultimately final, period of thaw in Soviet history.
Gorbachev’s legacy, and his reforms, cannot be underestimated in their import. As our model of cyclical change suggests, Gorbachev inherited a Soviet Union containing the seeds of the past, as well as structured possibilities for the future. Within six years of his ascendancy, Gorbachev would witness (if not cause) the disintegration of the Soviet Union, partly through the sprouting of the very seeds which Soviet history had incubated during its long tenure. This era also provided the scripts for the rise and fall of the Russian republic a short time later. Most concretely, Gorbachev’s major reforms attempted to provide political freedoms to citizens who had never experienced such freedoms through glasnost (open-ness or voice-ness), and to restructure the Soviet economy into a market-socialist economy through perestroika (restructuring). Glasnost and Perestroika, initiated in 1985 provided the stage for which the drama of the next six years would be enacted.

This essay accepts the proposition that there is not an objective reality going on “out there” that can be directly known, but rather a reality being constructed by subjectivity, by discourse.13 That is to say, there is not one, real history or period between 1989 and the present. Rather, there are constructions of this history. For our purposes, we will consider the constructions of this history which have taken place within academia with the acknowledgement that academic discourses do not exist in a vacuum and are always in communication with larger discourses. Nonetheless, the varying academic treatments of post-Communism serve as constructions of their subjects. It is to these constructions which we now turn.

Shaping the Subject; Academic Treatments of Post-Communism

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With the crumbling of the Soviet Union came the “transition” period (still under way) in
the now post-Communist world. While some of the former Warsaw Pact countries are “success
stories,” the Russian case has apparently “faltered.” It turns out that capitalism and
“democracy” (meaning Western capitalist democracy) do not travel, intact, to places where they
have never been. The fall of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and its party state, has
precipitated a shift not only in the lives of the hundreds of millions of former subjects in the
regimes, but a shift in academia. What was once treading water as Sovietology has been reborn
as Postcommunist studies.

It is to this area that I now turn. “Holding constant” the events between 1917 and 2003 in
Russia, I will first group, then examine the methodological approaches of three identifiable
schools in the study of contemporary Russian politics. These schools can be arranged
geographically and theoretically in space. Discipline, in the Foucauldian sense of the word,
structures subjects through the use of discourse and knowledge. Academic disciplines, residing
within particular locales and discourses, structure the field of possibilities for members of the
community. Therefore, we can think of disciplines, such as “American political science” as
approaches to and structures of knowledge regarding a given topic. For convenience and clarity,
I use a geographic description to arrange different approaches. By linking methods and
approaches to specific locations, I hope to allude to the cultural and discursive disciplining that

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14 Burawoy and Hendely suggest (1998) that it is better labeled a transformation than a transition, for the signifier “transition” implies a given “to”.
15 meaning they have opened their borders to Western capital, and have successfully jumped from the pan of state socialism to the fire of late capitalism.
16 Yeltsin, in 1997, is quoted as saying “We are stuck halfway…” in Colton, *Transitional Citizens*, 1.
17 Much of the post-Communist literature is, like its older sibling Sovietology, “less than useful for purposes of understanding” (Ticktin, 6).
18 It is interesting to note that, within mainstream approaches, theories can be linked with locations, almost as particular cultures carry particular assumptions.
takes place within these varied disciplines. The first of the geographically linked approaches which I consider herein is the American political science approach.

Residing in the halls of American political science is the orientation that focuses on explanation. American political scientists attempt to explain, through “rigorous scientific methods” outcomes through creating causal relationships and chains. Coupled with this prioritization are many a priori assumptions regarding the whole of life: assumptions regarding the (non)rationality of the political subject, the “proper” place for politics, regarding political elites, their actions, and the institutions they exist in. Peter Reddaway and Dmitry Glinsky note that many of the methodological assumptions used in political science analyses stem from an “inferiority complex” in the social sciences (2001, 8). These assumptions privilege certain methodologies which perpetuate and reflect the desire to exist as a “hard” science. They often assume the primacy of quantitative relationships, and accordingly endeavor to construct large and elegant data sets with which to demonstrate increasingly “scientific” methods of distilling the messy world outside of the computer into neat and contained charts, graphs and tables.

On its face, these may not appear as strong criticisms, and indeed many readers would most likely reply with a resounding so what? The criticism will become more apparent when I turn to more nuanced approaches to Russian politics. For the moment, let me suggest merely that

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20 Actors, for the American political scientists either do, or do not, act rationally (Colton). The proper place for politics, is apparently at the elite level, and elites will, most likely, act in a manner that the “analyst” can then regard as either rational (gain maximizing) or nonrational, and accordingly will abide by all sorts of “games” (Anderson et al). Institutions of the state are presumably separate from and above “society” and/or “culture,” and in some cases, have achieved the ability to act as political agents themselves (Moser, Remington). From the appearance of these seemingly autonomous institutions, the qualified analyst can make judgements regarding the depth or width of democracy and the actions of the subjects of democracy (Colton).

21 “This set of methodological conventions was closely linked with the theories of rational choice, game theory models, and similar antihistorical constructs imported from economics, which treated society as a mechanistic sum total of individual consumers with a given and uniform system of ‘innate’ and ‘rational’ preferences and values. This framework, characterized by neglect for cultural and psychological factors and for the diversity of values within societies right down to the level of individuals, deprived social inquiry of its human dimension…” (Reddaway and Glinski 2001, 8).
in the attempt to create neat explanations according to established norms, American political science runs the risk of becoming reductive, uninformative, uni-dimensional and blind toward the histories, cultures and subjects within the contexts they are studying. In fact, at times “politics” seems to wholly disappear, and becomes a ghost haunting the frameworks and “analyses” from the sidelines.

Second in our geographic delineation of approaches to Russian politics is the British approach. Britain, the stronghold of modern positivism (empiricism),\(^\text{22}\) provides a noticeably different method than that of American political science. Stephen White’s *Russia’s New Politics* (2000) and Richard Sakwa’s *Russian Politics and Society* (2002) are demonstrative of the approach I will call the British positivist approach. What this approach lacks in theoretical “sophistication” it makes up for with wonderfully vivid attention to detail. It appears that instead of attempting to explain anything through theoretically dictated methods, this approach endeavors to paint a vivid representation of “what actually happened” in the transition from the Soviet Union to Russia. As a result of this attention to detail, important factors tend to go under theorized (see below) and analysis appears, at points, flattened. Where the American political scientists sacrifice flavor for neatness, the British positivists reject heavy analytical models in order to describe what is going on on the ground. As a result, the British positivists in my grouping provide moments of brilliant clarity and vivid color right alongside aspects which beg to be elaborated on, and explained.

The next grouping provides a geographic and theoretical bridge from the position of the subject (analyst) to the object (Russia). These scholars are Russian-born and Oxbridge\(^\text{23}\) trained. Their approach combines several fortuitous factors. Firstly, both Vadim Volkov’s *Violent* 

\(^{22}\) See: Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, 1941. 

\(^{23}\)
Entrepreneurs (2002), and Alana Ledeneva’s Russia’s Economy of Favours (1998) approach the study of Russian politics from a unique perspective. Rather than looking at formal institutions (the Duma, voting, the presidency) Ledeneva and Volkov examine informal institutions. Through their studies of two dominant forms of living in Russia, these scholars are able to present how Russians live, and what they must do to survive. For the student of Russian politics, these books provide an excellent opportunity to read the political situation in contemporary Russia through these lenses. This affords us the opportunity to learn about the day-to-day realities that the reforms and revolutions in Russia have imposed on the Russian people. Methods of survival, and the daily negotiations involved provide the reader a feeling for life in Russia, and as a result a deeper understanding of contemporary Russian politics. This approach is not linked to a specific geographic location, and may be considered (methodologically) transnational.

This school, however, is at a disadvantage. In both examples, the scholar is writing about a practice that he or she has grown up with. In fact, in the introduction to Economy of Favours, Ledeneva states that before going to Oxford, she did not know that Russia had blat’. (It was so integral to her life that she never questioned its function, development, nor importance). We find that this proximity to the object of study provides interesting conclusions. In both cases, the conclusions seem to be overly colored by the proximity of the analyst to the institution under study. In the one case (Volkov) this amounts to a “happy ending,” and in the other to the argument that blat is by no means corrupt, and is in fact a positive phenomenon. So, while these Russian-born, British-trained scholars provide us the wonderful opportunity to read Russian

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23 Oxford+Cambridge=Oxbridge
24 As such some forms of transnational ethnographies, such as those of Michael Burawoy, and the survival narratives which they produce may fit in within this category.
25 See: Ledeneva, Russia’s Economy of Favors, “[blat is] just a daily routine, habitual and therefore fairly automatic. I grew up in such an environment, and took most of it for granted. What made me think about blat as something specific was my experience in the West… I became alert to ‘Russian ways’…” (4).
politics *through* extremely compelling accounts of Russian’s day-to-day lives and the practices that inform them, their lack of critical distance from their objects of analysis sometimes fogs their lens, and as such, should be read critically.

Our final geographic location, although properly defined as the “other” category, can be spatially denoted as the Santa Cruz, California grouping.

Lost among the pine trees, the fields, and the rivers (it is an old ranch that was donated to the university), and made up of little blocks, each one out of the sight of the others, like the people who live in them: this one is Santa Cruz. It’s a bit like the Bermuda Triangle (or Santa Barbara). Everything vanishes.\(^{26}\)

As Baudrillard notes above, Santa Cruz can be seen as a sort of Bermuda Triangle where everything, including disciplining disciplines, disappears. It is because of this Bermuda triangle-effect that I link those sources that manage to escape the overwhelming stifling of factors that do not fit within neat models that goes on within American political science approach to Santa Cruz.\(^{27}\)

Characteristic of the approach I am denoting as Santa Cruzian, is a well developed, and analytically cogent theoretical framework. The difference from the American political science approach is that this framework is neither overly “scientific,” nor reductive. The analytic frameworks found in the works of Michael Urban, and Nancy Ries’s *Russian Talk* (1997) provide an apparatus designed to *understand* (rather than explain) actions on the cultural and political fields of Russian politics. These works belong together because of their shared investment in looking at the *discourses* of Russian culture (Ries) and Russian politics (Urban). This approach provides the reader with a way to understand Russians’ groupings and

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positionings on the ground, in Russia. By looking at positioning, we can further understand the delineated manner in which all politics, and all identification occurs. Ries provides us a lens to understand the oppositionally negative manner in which Russians construct identity, and Urban fills this in with empirical and theoretical evidence and depth. The Santa Cruz school shares with the Russian/Oxbridge school the influence of Pierre Bourdieu, this shared heritage is visible in the dual desire to look closely at life in Russia, and to consider things in terms of Bourdieu’s primary concepts, such as field and cultural/social capital. Furthermore, this commonality points to the level of sophistication and theoretical profundity that both schools exhibit in their works.

Spatially, then, these approaches begin in the United States, move toward Britain to encounter two varied approaches, and return to the Bermuda triangle (Santa Cruz). Along the way we encountered major differences in methodology (quantitative in various forms, versus qualitative in various forms), theoretical sophistication (reductive versus instructive), goals (explanation versus description) and results. It, most likely, goes without saying that I am most critical of the American political science approach to Russian and post-socialist politics, but these literatures are nonetheless prominent, and should be fairly considered for all their prominence and importance.

The American Political Science Approach

Richard Anderson, Stephen Fish, Stephen Hanson and Philip Roeder’s *Postcommunism and the Theory of Democracy* (2001) resides fully in what I have called the American Political

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27 It should be noted, however, that I am in no way arguing that only in Santa Cruz are interesting studies of Russian politics coming out in the United States. In fact, Santa Cruz, as a signifier, can also refer to Berkeley with Ken Jowitt, and although I am grouping her work in Santa Cruz, with Colgate and Nancy Ries’s work.

science approach. It shares with many others its privileging of quantitative analysis, its goal of explanation of a “problem,” assumptions that elite-driven politics is the only game in town, and that Western structures should, at some point, work in Russia and can be analyzed from Western perspective (success or failure). However, it differs from the other books in this paper in an important way: where its compatriots in this category are concerned with the functioning of singular institutions (the institution of voting, and the Duma), this book is concerned with the success/failure of Democracy in the postcommunist world (although they use the formal institutions to illustrate this). As such it is situated fully in the literature on democratic transitions, even as it ignores, or criticizes that literature’s postulates and generalizations.

The following is concerned with the four primary chapters of the book, and will not consider the introduction or the conclusion. In chapter 2, “The Rejection of Authoritarianism,” Philip Roeder asks how to “account for the nondemocratic alternatives that can be chosen and rejected,” (11) and why they have been rejected. It is interesting that Roeder reverses the usual question of “why did democracy fail?” into “why did authoritarian alternatives fail?” but his approach does not seem to exemplify a true alternative. Roeder employs rational choice institutionalism to answer his question. Roeder states,

> the least favorable condition for the authoritarian option has been institutional pluralism within the authoritarian state…Rather than finding the source for the failure of authoritarianism in the economies, political culture, or social life of the successor states, the explanation attributes the failure…to the political institutions of the existing authoritarian order itself (12).

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29 His methodological assumption is that the rejection of authoritarianism is based on “regime choice,” where “constitutional outcomes result from a bargaining process that determines whether existing constitutional rules remain in place or change” (Roeder, 23). The assumption is that elite actors will act rationally in order to maximize gains while limiting costs.
The hypothesis that results can be boiled down to, and understood through, elite choice at a given point in time is common to the American political science approach. In Roeder’s case, the “failure of authoritarianism” can only be explained through elite choice by reducing the contingencies of each case he examines, “Because the Soviet successor states began with nearly identical institutions that were established in their common recent history, the successor states provide a ‘natural experiment’…” (Roeder, 13). Roeder’s analysis rests on a narrow definition of democracy, where, “democracy is a political system that approaches the ideal in which any 50 percent plus one of the population can remove or prevent the removal of governors” (ibid) to even begin to grapple with “success versus failure”°.

Perhaps because of this narrowness, Roeder’s analysis makes several important reductions. Let me offer a few representative examples.

This model focuses on bargaining within authoritarian regimes. It does not address cases in which a coup or revolutionary seizure of power by the opposition simply replaces an authoritarian regime with another authoritarian regime or with a democracy (23).

On its face, this model rejects Russia (its primary case), which was the location of not only a semi-violent coup (in 1991), but also of a violent putsch in 1993.° Roeder goes on to argue that Russia exhibits a pattern of choice in which, “the compromise [in the 1990 elections] among elites rejected authoritarianism and accepted projects for democratization” (36). Upon analysis, it becomes clear that Roeder’s analysis is problematic. To argue that 1990 represents “elite compromise” among the Russian elite is to completely miss the fact that soon after this

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° Roeder’s conclusion that authoritarianism has failed in Russia is surely suspect at the moment of Putin’s reelection (March 2004). The beginning of 2004 has witnessed increasing amounts of articles both in the west, and in Russia, that suggest that Putin’s Russia is slipping backward into the authoritarian models of the tsarist and Soviet past.

°° This also assumes that what has been called the “war of laws” was, indeed, normal politics when, in fact, it was a war waged with law as its weapons (see: Urban 1996).
compromise, there will be both a non-violent “war of laws,” and a violent coup. Finally, “All four of these successor states initially rejected authoritarian constitutions after 1991 (Armenia, Lithuania, Russia, and Ukraine) and only Armenia subsequently took steps backward toward authoritarianism” (40). This statement seems to ignore the continuing “super-presidential” (semi-authoritarian) power arrangement in Russia, as well as Russia’s attendant problems with human rights, media freedom, and government/police repression, not to mention the “retreat” from democracy that Vladimir Putin’s Russia is apparently undergoing currently. Roeder’s focus on elite choice and institutional structure provides a narrow, perhaps limited view of Russian politics. Furthermore, amid the increasing din of voices questioning the status of Russian democracy in light of the Duma elections of winter 2003, and the presidential election of March 2004, Roeder’s conclusion that authoritarianism has failed in Russia is increasingly suspect.32

M. Stephen Fish’s chapter, “The Dynamics of Democratic Erosion,” employs the same conceptions and methods as Roeder and it is interesting to note that Fish’s chapter sets out to explain the opposite of Roeder (democratic failure rather than success), but does so with an identical apparatus (elite choices within given and static institutions). Where Roeder causally links the failure of authoritarian alternatives to elite plurality, Fish links democratic erosion to the super-president.33

The three main conditions that enabled the chief executive to operate in a manner that degraded democracy were: superpresidentialism—that is, an institutional environment that created few hard constraints on presidential highhandedness; a weak domestic opposition; and the presence of a powerful external patron (75).

33 Which is, in effect, creating a causal chain between the retreat of democracy and the retreat of democracy.
My concern here is not the relative validity of Fish’s conclusion, but the way he arrives at it. By subsuming his analysis under “the opportunities and constraints that chief executives face,” (80), Fish seems to be ignoring many important factors, such as everything that is taking place outside of the executive offices of the countries he is examining. Both Roeder and Fish rely on conceptions of regime constraints on action; institutional factors that prevent elites from acting willy-nilly, and that constrain their choices. These authors assume that the success or failure of democracy, can be completely explained by these institutional factors. Like Roeder, this leads Fish into making statements such as, “In fact, post-communist societies did not enter the post-Soviet period with, nor did they subsequently give birth to, dense, weblike societies…” (84), to validate their claims that institutional factors are the best location to analyze transitions to democracy. Fish and Roeder go beyond the institutionalist assumption that “institutions matter”, which they surely do, to imply that institutions matter most.

I will now move to Richard D. Anderson Jr.’s “The Discursive Origins of Russian Democratic Politics.” From its title, this chapter appears to stand apart from the preceding ones. To a certain degree, it does. To his credit, Anderson seems to be attempting to work outside of the American Political science box. In some respects this provides him opportunity to critically engage with Russian politics, but in most instances he remains within the political science box. His fundamental interest, however, is worth noting. Anderson proposes a “discursive theory of democratization,” wherein elite discourse shifts from an isolating discourse to an inclusive one (97). Anderson is on the right track when he links discourse to identity, and shares this in common with some of the approaches to be discussed below, and he makes several interesting moves. He links texts to their referents in the reader’s identity, arguing that a text can either call

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34 This conclusion is contradicted by the numerous studies of networks, both formal and informal, that continue to
attention to social or personal identity, and depending on which of these it calls upon, the subject will identify with either social groupings or the personal world (100). This, Anderson argues, is important because for democracy to work, the subject must be a social one, and discourse is the tool to call this social being out of the personal self (101-107).

Although this is the best chapter in the book, it too encounters problems inherited by the discipline. Anderson is unable to develop a non-institutional explanation for discursive shifts, and consequently relegates this to (again) elite choice, elite competition, and institutional constraints (109-110). Anderson makes important mistakes in his argument, suggesting that in “nondemocracy, discourse cues a positive identity only for the rulers and the enforcers of their rule,” (italics in the original, 102). This one-dimensional perspective on identity (a top-down approach to subjectivation) leads to other simplifications as well, such as Anderson’s argument that democratic discourse is automatically positive, “given a shared positive identity universal to the population…” (105). This is not only a simplification, but is misleading. Surely this cannot be so simple. In fact, as Ries demonstrates, most identity in Russia is both negative and positive. The “people” of Russia discursively create an identity as both “not them” and as “us, the sufferers, the narod” (see below). All in all, Anderson’s chapter represents a nice break counter-point to Fish and Roeder, but still falls prey to their methodological assumptions and the reductions attendant on their approaches. Ultimately his “discourse” study amounts to the political science version of discourse analysis: content analysis, not unlike David Laitin’s (1999) analysis of the uses of “Russian” in post-Soviet discourse, which amounts to little more than tabulation.

greatly effect life and politics in postcommunist societies, particularly Russia, but also in Central Asia and other newly independent states.
The final substantive chapter is Stephen Hanson’s “Defining Democratic Consolidation.” Hanson’s work is fully entrenched in the democratization literature, and his chapter represents another aspect of American political science: engaging in debates focused on the definition of terms (in this case, the meaning of “consolidated democracy”). It has become popular to look at “democracies” and ask if they are “consolidated.” Hanson’s personal definition of consolidation is, “a situation in which the enforcers of [democratic] state institutions can be counted upon with high probability to act in ways consistent with, and supportive of, formal institutional goals” (128).\(^\text{35}\) Consolidation, as Hanson states, is linked to rational choice theory insofar as a consolidated democracy will exhibit actors playing by the “rules of the game” (133). So, democracy, according to Hanson, is consolidated if elites act rationally, and follow the rules of the game, that is, if they act and speak democratically. Hanson makes no attempts to understand why elites do or do not act rationally, and any such attempt to will fall short unless non-institutional factors, such as the desires for social and cultural capital (both domestically and internationally) are considered. In Hanson, they are not.

Timothy Colton’s *Transitional Citizens: Voters and What Influences them in the New Russia*, (2000) represents a demanding call for scientific rigor.\(^\text{36}\) Most of Colton’s critiques of others’ work is that they do not perform a rigorous scientific treatment of the data available, and that they avoid “painstaking empirical research” (175). Colton, then, treats elections, election

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\(^\text{35}\) It is important to note that if this definition does indeed describe “consolidated democracy”, Russia is by no means consolidated, as politics in Russia still seems to fit Churchill’s description of Russian politics as “bulldogs fighting under a rug.”

\(^\text{36}\) This is indeed common among political scientists, some of whom all to often assume that complex subjects (in all the senses of the word) can be quantified and that survey data can provide *true* conclusions about individuals in society. For instance, see Fletcher and Sergeyev’s conclusions regarding “tolerance” in Kyrgyzstan: Joseph F. Fletcher and Boris Sergeyev, “Islam and Intolerance in Central Asia: the Case of Kyrgyzstan,” *Europe-Asia Studies* v45, n2, 2002, 251-275.
choice, and election outcomes as data to be mined, and manipulated, by computer-driven models. The book, as a whole, represents tireless data-collection, and myriad quantitative analyses.

In asking “what affects voter choice in Russia” Colton suggests, “… there is no doubt that issues often play an important part in elections…” and that,

Without attributing to them more sagacity and high-mindedness than they have, the data allow us to say that Russia’s subjects-turned-citizens nurture a wealth of prescriptive political opinions…the politically more attentive have them in greater abundance than the less attentive... (172)

Colton informs us here that Russians have opinions, and that these opinions matter in voting, and those Russians who are more politically interested have more opinions. Furthermore, proves that in voting for president, “Russians’ judgments of how good or bad a job the president has been doing have a colossal impact on their use of their democratic franchise [on their voting]” (184). Colton, then, provides scientific proof, that Russians have opinions, that they make judgments, and that these opinions and judgments inform them at the voting booth.

Finally, in the end, Colton’s question (what influences voters in Russia) is answered by suggesting that the Russian voter is informed by,

social structure and group loyalties, citizens’ assessments of current conditions in the country, partisan sentiments, normative opinions on burning national issues, retrospective evaluations of incumbents, appraisals of the personal qualities of leaders, and prospective evaluations of the services of victorious parties and candidates would provide after the election (212).

Colton represents a different face of American political science than the one discussed above. Instead of having his focus lead him to reductions, Colton’s focus on science, and scientific methods leads him to the elucidation of (apparent) givens, and the reification of his assumptions. Colton’s contribution to the literature is completely confined within the scientific discourse he
employs. It seems as though Colton is more interested in multivariate regression analysis, formal models, and scientific parsimony than the study of lives, agents or political events.\(^\text{37}\)

Robert Moser’s *Unexpected Outcomes* represents a “new institutionalist” approach to politics in Russia. This is a variant of the American political science approach, but represents a shift from the above works. The underlying argument of all new institutionalism is, “institutions matter” (146). Moser is particularly concerned with electoral institutions, and their effect on Russian political outcomes. The book is an attempt to weaken the universal assumptions of other institutionalists, particularly the assumptions regarding electoral systems, and specifically, represents a challenge to Duverger’s Law, which assumes, “plurality elections, in which the candidate with the most votes wins office in an SMD, produce[s] two-party systems and single-party majority governments, while PR systems, in which candidates run on party lists in multimember districts, create[s] multiparty systems and coalition governments” (2). Moser attempts to challenge these conclusions, along with others that get wrapped up in the mix, such as the assumption that PR always advances women’s and minorities’ representation better than SMD (Chapters 4 and 5).

If, in the field of labor studies “American Exceptionalism” has become the standard approach to explaining why the U.S. did not have a workers’ revolution,\(^\text{38}\) Moser represents what I would call *Russian Exceptionalism*, which can be broadly defined as the attempt to explain the failure of Western-style institutions to create Western-style capitalist democracy in Russia.\(^\text{39}\)

\(^{37}\) Again, Putin’s Russia almost completely negates the conclusions Colton draws. It seems that *issues* don’t actually affect voters judgments as heavily in regards to Putin. See for instance recent postings on “Johnson’s Russia List” where it is suggested that while Putin enjoys a 80% approval rate, his policies are only approved of by 20% of Russians. See also the New York Times on March 9, 2004, “Putin’s strage allure: ‘he’s not making life any worse’” where the status quo has become valued.


\(^{39}\) note that this is different than both Roeder and Fish, who are asking *what factors lead to the acceptance/decline in democracy?* In both, elite action takes the head of the causal chain, whereas for Moser, it is institutional design.
Unfortunately, because he accepts the fundamental *a priori* of western democratic theory (regarding parties, voters, elites, the ‘autonomy’ of the state etc.) he is unable to explain this exception. Instead his work focuses on two goals: 1) the negation of universal assumptions regarding electoral structure (refutation of Duverger’s Law) and 2) engagement in debates on causality.

Moser’s finds his own argument regarding the primacy of electoral institutions on fragile ground in the Russian permafrost. Although repeatedly attempting to set up electoral systems as the first link the causal chain, he also repeatedly repudiates this claim. After discussing the failure of PR and SMD to perform their assumed (by Duverger and others) functions, Moser falls back on the assertion that,

> The Russian case goes beyond the endogeneity problem; institutional effects of electoral systems are dependent on the social contexts in which they operate. The number of parties is an interactive effect of the electoral systems in social cleavages, but this may not fully acknowledge the influence social context has on institutional effects (55).

Moser’s method relegates social context to a variable that is “held in constant,” which in turn, allows Moser to suggest that, “different outcomes observed between the two [electoral] tiers [can be] attributed to differences in institutional design” (21). This seems problematic in several ways. First, and most obvious, while the Russian PR tier is a national-level election, the SMD tier is structured on 89 regions, including republics and 2 cities. Thus, while holding “social context” constant, Moser is suggesting that the context in the Jewish Okrug (which is by far closer to Anchorage than it is to Moscow) has the same context that Moscow does. Moser is then compelled to use social context to explain the uniqueness of Russian outcomes. This amounts to ascribing the primacy of his argument to a variable that is held “constant”. This variable, which amounts to the whole of his explanation, in being held constant, wholly
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disappears from the analysis and the pages of the book. Moser’s constant variable, then, becomes a black box into which he can throw all the shortcomings of his analysis in order to explain his outcomes.

Thomas Remington’s *The Russian Parliament* (2001) “has two goals: to describe how Russia’s parliamentary institutions arose, and to assess how they operate in practice” (x). Remington’s approach to these two goals is one centered on institutional choice theory. Institutional choice is founded upon the same *a priori* methods as the above cases. Remington describes the process of the emergence of the post-1993 *putsch* constitutional arrangement through a focus on the choices of elites, dedicating considerable time to Gorabachev’s choices, and the “war of laws” period. Accordingly, he is primarily concerned with what took place in the halls of the state institutions. Elites are, again, the primary (in fact, the only, save for in one short section) actors in the book. Further, his assumptions rest on notions of path dependency,

Choices over electoral systems and constitutional balance between president, government, and parliament seem to be better explained by accounts of the bargaining power of competing [elite] groups, for instance, which may have long-lasting effects downstream. Significantly, such arrangements sometimes appear to lock in inefficiency for protracted historical periods (13).

Elites, then, in Russia act accordingly, in rational fashion and pursue advantages (17).

Rational actor theory presupposes that elites act out of self-interest, to maximize gains. Although rational actor theories are often problematic and reductive, this position provides clarity, and often, freedom from assumptions regarding altruistic policies (although it cannot account for ideology or cultural narratives that might fly in its face). Surely political elites act, and it is not going out on a limb to suggest they do so to maximize their potential for gain and power. Remington’s work demonstrates this well in Chapter 4 (“The Power Game in Russia”). In
fact, this chapter provides a focus on the “war of laws” period that is nearly missing from the works discussed previously. This is surely a credit to Remington.

One of my criticisms of American political science is that on-the-ground politics rarely (if ever) make an appearance in the pages of the works coming out of this approach. Remington provides one example of an attempt to incorporate an “outside of the state” occurrence into his account of Russian institutional development. Remington briefly discusses the 1989 minors strikes in Kuznetsk (31-32). Although this treatment is minimal, it provides an interesting counterpoint to the near-denial of “outside-of-state” politics in the previous three books. Remington also conveys the feeling that Russian politics, even within the state, is not as neat as it appears in the works discussed above, “Below the surface turbulence in Russian politics there is a steady stream of normal legislative politics within the Duma, between the two chambers, and between parliament and president” (230). This addition of tumult into the picture simultaneously challenges the static approaches encountered thus far while it implicitly suggests that the only “below the surface” conflict that is taking place is between the institutions of state power. A final strength that Remington possesses over his compatriots is an in-depth treatment of the conflict between the center and the regions in the Russian Federation (beginning on page 152). This further challenging of the “Russian state” appears, again, only marginally if at all in the pages of *Unexpected Outcomes, Transitional Citizens,* or *Postcommunism and the Theory of Democracy.* Remington’s approach, although sharing the methodological and normative assumptions of others in the American political science approach, provides a further softening of the problems. His approach is not overly quantitative, and he makes (a little) room for factors that refuse to be considered by neat quantitative methods and analysis.
Perhaps most prominent among the approaches to post-Communist politics which I am calling American is that of transition literature. Transition literatures in general hypothesize ideal conditions and procedures by which a formerly non-democratic state can transition into a democratic one. Transition literature also debates the relative success and failures of democratic transitions, applying ideal type definitions of what democracy entails to evaluate the strength of democratic institutions, norms, and practices. Above I noted that Stephen Hanson’s chapter in *Postcommunism and the Theory of Democracy* (2001) represents the problems of transition literature, with its attendant reductions and blind spots. Transition literature has produced some of the most troubling conclusions regarding post-Communist societies. First among these is John Mueller’s conclusion in “Democracy, Capitalism and the End of Transition,” (1996) that because capitalism is the freedom to be greedy and democracy is the freedom to complain, Russia is a capitalist democracy.

Burawoy and Verdery note, “theories of transition often [are] committed to some pregiven future or rooted in an unyielding past” (1999, 4) which overly predetermines their conclusions regarding the success or failure of transitions to democracy.

Thus, on the one side we have economists who debate whether a revolutionary break or a negotiated transition is the most effective way of climbing out of the socialist abyss into the promised world of capitalism, as they debate the character of the change, the generally think of only one future: textbook capitalism. On the other side, historians, political scientists, and sociologists debate the impact of the past (ibid). Transition literature in general, according to Burawoy and Verdery, fails to consider social, cultural, historical, political and economic factors as relations (rather than reified variables), and as a result, their analysis are always already condemned to fail and obscure.40 This is linked to

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40 Their solution to this problem is ethnography that considers “how the unfolding uncertainties of macro institutions affect practices within micro worlds and also how family, work, and community are refashioning themselves—often
the assumptions transition literature makes toward subjects on the ground in transitioning societies.

Transition literature, according to Reddaway and Glinsky, assumes the existence (and actions) of *homo economicus*, an abstract human being who is un-reflecting, endowed with absolute infallible rationality, fully informed, and relentlessly in pursuit of short-term material interests within a rigorous and uncontradictory payoff matrix. In the mechanistic and one-dimensional world of *homo economicus*, the past is irrelevant, as are any circumstances beyond the immediate context of the problem at hand... (Reddaway and Glinsky 2001, 65).

This assumption, shared by academics and reformers alike, has surely added to the tragedies of transition visible in the postcommunist world.

Michael Mandelbaum (1996) argues that although transition literature is, indeed, a “mirroring” (in our eyes, imposing) process, the biggest endorsement for the study of transitions to capitalism and democracy are the post-Communist countries themselves. He suggests that because these post-Communist states *themselves* have appeared to embrace Western norms, institutions and communities, the imposition of Western academic forms is not oppressive, but warranted (Mandelbaum, 4). Mandelbaum, in this assertion, reproduces yet another of political science’s assumptions in regards to post-Communism: that elites mean what they say, and that elite actors and institutions are the whole of post-Communist politics.

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41 This assumption is a cornerstone of transition literature, and is echoed in many locations. Take, for instance, Elster, Offe and Pruess: “They [Westernizers] conclude that representative democracy and a market economy yield prosperity, and as persperity is evidently the highest, at any rate the most urgent priority, all ‘we’ need to do is imitate and transplant Western patterns—above all in order to motivate the provision of urgently needed Western assistance and cooperation” (2000, 15). This formula ignores the potential that these “decisions” are made in order to enrich elites only, rather than create general “prosperity” in general. The large scale theft of the Russian economy during the 1990s serves as a powerful counterpoint to this assertion. Furthermore, as Urban (1997) shows, these westernizing trends are by no means uncontested, and by no means conform to “actual” desires for Westernization.

42 This conclusion, of course, completely disregards the political, cultural, social and economic capital that post-Communist elites stand to gain by claiming democratic aspirations and goals (not to mention the on-the-ground
Transition literature reproduces the assumptions of political science regarding politics, democracy, and capitalism, and produces seemingly parsimonious conclusions. Because of its attempt to evaluate transitions by positing the end point of a transition it has become based on a suspect teleology. In the mid-nineties, many transition scholars declared the transition to democracy in post-Communist societies a success, with only a few stragglers and laggards. By 2004, however, the successes are far outnumbered by the failures, and authoritarianism can be observed in Belarus, Russia, Central Asia and Romania. Katherine Verdery notes that the discourse on “transitions” in post-Communist studies is a constructed discourse based around themes of “rescue” (Verdery 1996, 205). Social science, according to Verdery, constructs this discourse, and positions itself as the savior of post-Communist societies,

The rescue scenario has two common variants: ‘shock therapy’ and ‘big bang.’ The first compares the former socialist bloc with a person suffering from mental illness—that is, socialism drove them crazy, and our job is to restore their sanity. The second implies that (pace Fukuyama) history is only now beginning, that prior to 1989 the area was without form and voix. While the image of ‘shock therapy’ represents Western advisers as doctors, the ‘big bang’ figures them as God.

With images like these guiding our approach to the transition, it would be surprising if we learned very much about what is happening in the former socialist world. I prefer an image that denies the notion of progress (from sickness toward health, from nothingness to being, from backwardness into development) and purposefully mocks the very idea of evolutionary stages (ibid).

In fact, these discourses (of savior and doctor), did little to treat or cure post-socialist societies, but, in fact, worsened them.

The reforms designed to revolutionize state-socialist economies into “modern” capitalist ones represent a moment where academics and policy makers collaborated in an effort that soon proved disastrous, if not fatal for many in post-Soviet space. The combination of ignorance of actions of these elites). Take, for example, the mossovietization El’tsin undertook upon his election in 1991, not appointing democratic reformers and allies, but rather old Soviet nomenklatura.
local histories, cultures, and situations on the part of Western academics combined with the ideologies of liberal democracy (capitalism) to produce reforms that killed 6 million men in Russia alone (Burawoy, Krotov and Lytkina 2001, 231). This combination, in turn, was fueled by local inexperience with economics. “The sheer ignorance of leading economists played an even greater role in the failure of post-1989 policies aimed at the transition to the market…the most damaging element of the economic ignorance was not what the experts did not know, but what they thought they knew that was not so” (Ellman and Kontorovich 1998, 19). The western advisors and local reformers founded their actions on reductive theories of democracy and capitalism where “‘democracy’ translated quickly into elections; ‘a market economy,’ into privatization” (Cohen and Schwartz 1998, 6). While Cohen and Schwartz suggest that this reductive reasoning, and the overwhelming drive to privatization added to the destruction of Russian life, Aslund Anders insists that, in fact, the Russian transition didn’t privatize enough (Anders and Olcott 1999, xix).

This unique combination of multiple mistakes assumed, then, that “a feature of the market economy, transplanted into the command one, will work there just as well as it did in the market economy” (Ellman and Kontorovich, 19). The economic transition ruined the many economies in the post-Soviet sphere, sent Russians into their homes (Burroway, Krotov and Lytkina 2001; Shevchenko, 2002), replaced work-place economics with domestic ones (ibid), and crushed the social institutions with which many Russians organized their lives (Ashwin 1998; Nazpary 2002). Bardak, or chaos soon became the prevailing organizing factor in post-

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43 This seems almost appropriately ironic, for as Griemas notes, Russian folkloric discourse is structured around the journey of a savior. Urban shows (1988) how this embedded discourse prevails in Soviet and post-Soviet discourses. 
44 As Cohen and Schwartz note, “The collapse of the Soviet regime opened the way for the eager construction of a new Russia to be built upon the pillars of political democracy, a market economy, and an open society. The results are proving to be disastrous. Since 1989 every economic and social indicator has fallen—except one: the ration of exports to GNP rose because GNP fell faster than exports. And all these indicators did not just fall once in a big
Soviet space (Nazpary 2002). In the face of these facts, some transition scholars still maintain that Russia has transitioned to a “normal” country (Aslund and Olcott 1999, xxiii).

One of the biggest weaknesses of social science’s approaches to post-Soviet politics is the ignorance of the all-too-real disparity between formal arrangements and actual relations in both Soviet and post-Soviet life. The highly structured, formal and centralized state that appears on paper in the 1993 Russian constitution bears little, if no, correspondence to actual Russian politics. In fact, it describes a state that can hardly be described as extant. As Vadim Volkov notes, Russia in the 1990s did not have the requisite monopoly over violence, or the ability to collect taxes which normally denotes the existence of a state (Volkov 2002). Furthermore, processes of “privatization”, “democratization” etc., that appear on paper as formal, thought-out and impersonal more often than not appear on the ground as informal, fluid, corrupt and haphazard (Ledeneva 1999; Burroway and Hendley 1992; Ellman and Kontorovich 1998; Nazpary 2002).45

45 “Indeed, in the early years of the transition, Russia looked more like a flea market than a free market” (Burawoy, Krotov, and Lytkina 2001, 245-246).

British Approaches

As stated above, the American political science approaches to Russian and post-communist politics, although varied, share many of the same assumptions, methodologies, and shortcomings. Most of these shortcomings are a result of American political science’s commitment to scientific methods, and the drive to create explanations and predictions. This desire leads political scientists to reduce, reify and quantify a world that, in “reality” appears as complex, chaotic, messy and unpredictable into a world that fits conveniently into a neat, clean,
coherent model. The examples of the “British approach” given below break with this trend in American political science, and focus instead on descriptions, histories, and details. Their works do not, like the American’, reduce the complex world of Russian politics into neat models and chains.

Richard Sakwa’s *Russian Politics and Society* (2002) is a truly laudable accomplishment. Sakwa attempts to run the gamut of Russian politics from the process of disintegration to the present. *Russian Politics and Society* is both comprehensive and approachable. His method, that which I have called the British approach, takes a period of history (rather than an institution, or set of state institutions) as his object, and explores this object through several different, thematic, lenses. As a result, the student not only receives a very strong understanding of what actually happened between the 1980s and the present, but also learns about different aspects of this time period, different ways of looking at the same events, different factors all leading up to the present.46

Sakwa’s explanation of the transition from Soviet rule to the contemporary situation does tend to privilege the “strong leader” approach, paying close attention to details in the description of decisions made by Gorbachev, Yeltsin and Putin, but he does so in a way that leaves ample room for other approaches and conclusions. Furthermore, rather than asking a question such as “what influences voters?” or “does parliament matter?” or “is Russia a democracy?” Sakwa takes as his starting point the fact that there are a bunch of people in Russia, living under some form of state, and that to approach any of the above questions, we need to see first what has happened. Rather than establish a causal chain, and only focus on the relevant links, Sawka attempts to cover every aspect of Russian politics and society (as the title suggests). This attempt, as

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46 it is still, all in all a top-down approach rather than the bottom-up approaches of Volkov, Ledeneva, Ries and, in many respects Urban (see below).
suggested in the intro, is often brilliant, but sometimes goes flat. Nonetheless, it is a macro-politics approach at its best.\(^{47}\)

The immensity of the book makes it impossible to provide a useful summary, so I would rather focus on a few of the moments that exemplify the strengths and the weaknesses of this book. The weaknesses in Sakwa stem from his top-down, and ultimately, his overwhelming focus on formal institutions. While he provides excellent and vivid accounts of the political/institutional process of transformation from the Soviet regime to the Russian federation, when he attempts to discuss “social” factors, such as culture and social movements, his work is limited by his focus on formal institutions and organizations. Sakwa’s chapter, “Society and Social Movements,” is indeed disappointing in light of the strengths of his work. Unfortunately, Sakwa’s discussion of social movements is instead a discussion of the left-over state-sponsored union organizations (319), his discussion of “gender politics” focuses exclusively on the state organizations for women under Soviet rule, and the party of women (322-325), and his discussion of environmental politics is reduced to a discussion of state elites who have exhibited interest in the environment (325-329). All in all, then, the disadvantage of Sakwa’s approach is exhibited when he covers an area that is outside of his scope, such as social movements, or culture.

Many of the strengths appear in both momentary instances of sheer brilliance, and page 198 stands out as an example of one of the gems hidden in Sakwa’s book. Sakwa is discussing party formation, and the disjunction of parties from both a social base, and an identifiable program. Sakwa then states,

\(^{47}\) all of this is not to say, however, that Sakwa abstains from engaging the larger debates of democratization, nor is it to say that he ignores important factors like voting, political institutions or the state. It is to say, that these appear in a different light in Sakwa due to their reduced status as variables rather than objects in-themselves.
In an ironic version of ‘catching up and overtaking’, and indeed of ‘combined and uneven development’, post-communist Russia displayed the symptoms of an advanced ‘post-modern’ social structure in a society whose ‘modernity’ remained archaic. It is this ‘modernization without modernity’ that we label mismodernization…Post-communist political life is even more fractured than the ‘post-modern’ and the ‘post-industrial’ societies of the west (198).

This example demonstrates Sakwa’s ability to bring light to the study of post-communist Russia that the American political science folks just cannot manage. Throughout the book, analytic cookies are sprinkled into the pages. The attentive reader will stumble upon these and they will provide stimulating points that otherwise may fly under the radar.48

Stephen White’s *Russia’s New Politics* (2000) is very similar to Sakwa’s. In fact, very little distinguishes them. Perhaps one factor is White’s even deeper commitment to detail. White provides details into the personal lives of Gorbachev (18) and Yeltsin (87). At times his work reads like a super-market tabloid, with vivid tales of debauchery, drunkenness, and scandal.49 The approach Stephen White takes to Russian politics is very much in the same vein of Sakwa’s top-down approach to politics. Like Sakwa, it simultaneously provides wonderful detail of the machinations of state actors, and at the same time glosses over things such outside of this top-down view (such as the massive protests, violence and survival of the Russian people). Because of its similarity to Sakwa’s book, and because I have briefly discussed above some of the problems of this approach, I would like to focus on what White adds to Sakwa’s painting, specifically on the two chapters which I would add to a syllabus on Russian politics.

Chapter 5 (“A divided society”) and Chapter 6 (“Changing times, changing values”) break the mold of the top-down approach, and focus on factors such as the disparity of wealth

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48 Take, for instance, Sakwa’s play on Russian reality: “Russia has an obsolescent communications infrastructure, but the Russian Internet is one of the fastest growing in the world. Russian software services are among the most technically innovative, based on a traditionally high level of *programming culture and habituation to levels of virtual reality*” (italics mine, 297).

49 This is especially apparent in Chapter 3, “Presidential government” (70-106).
between rich and poor (145), the position of women (171), political communication (194) and religion in Russia (203). These chapters provide detailed and compelling discussions of the lives of real Russians and their situation in a contemporary context. Chapter 5 details the intense poverty, in the face of intense wealth, that Russians cope with, estimating, “the proportion[of those living in poverty] as high as 80 percent” (147), and describes the survival method of prostitution and forced sex that women in Russia are subjected to (171-181). Chapter 6’s most interesting section focuses on the role that letter writing has played in political communication (194-203), and describes the astonishing situation where 75 percent of Russians described themselves as religious, while “no more than 7 per cent of the adult population attended [church] once a month or more” (210). While White is able to point out these intriguing factors and realities in Russian life and politics he does not attempt to analyze them. This highlights a drawback to the British approach: while it escapes the American prescription of explanation, it also eludes analysis of the on-the-ground situations it depicts.50

The Russian/Oxbridge approach

Alena Ledeneva’s Russia’s Economy of Favors (1998) represents a wonderful example of an approach that reverses the methods of all of the above scholars. Rather than regarding politics from the top down, Ledeneva provides the opportunity to read politics through life practices.51 This book is not concerned with any causal relationships, nor is it interested in the questions

50 On the other hand, Stephen White’s The USSR; Patterns of Autocracy and Industrialization (1977) goes to great lengths to help the student of Russian politics understand contemporary outcomes. In this case, I would not place this particular work in the what I have called the “British Approach” for its lack of journalistic method.

51 It should be noted, this is not really a bottom-up approach because this particular institution (blat) takes place nearly ubiquitously.
asked by the American political scientists. Instead, it asks, “in a situation of chronic shortages and poverty, how do Russians get by, and how they think about themselves getting by?” As it stands, this approach is far more informative than those discussed in our first section. It is, however, still subject to the critiques I suggested in the introduction, primarily its lack of critical distance.

The book is primarily concerned with an informal “institution” called blat. Blat is a system of exchange where people do favors for other people with whom affective bonds unite them. These favors are regarded as non-reciprocal, and often get framed in terms of friendship. Blat is founded on a fundamental and purposive misrecognition on the part of the participants (59-70). The section dealing with the different forms of this misrecognition is one of the high points of the book.

The book itself contains an element of this misrecognition, and it shows its face in two primary ways. The first is in the structure of the book. Although in the beginning Ledeneva valorizes blat as a method of survival, by the end she is describing the actions of the Soviet bourgeoisie, and their quest for vacations, goods and luxury. While she suggests at the beginning that this is a non-calculative form of exchange, by page 149, she is describing the participants in blat as cold, calculating consumers. The second major point of misrecognition is Ledeneva’s attempt to distinguish between different forms of corruption and blat (39-59). It seems, in these pages, that Ledeneva is unable to come to terms with the fact that while it is surely an important method for survival and even resistance (76), blat practices also bleed into organized crime situations, government appropriation of public goods, people getting jobs they do not deserve

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52 Ledeneva even goes as far as suggesting that blat exhibits a, “non-alienable character” (35).
etc. *Blat*, surely should be seen as Janus-faced, and Ledeneva’s proximity to it prevents her from seeing both its positive function, and its nefarious underbelly.

Vadim Volkov is squarely grouped with Alena Ledeneva in the Russian/Oxbridge approach. His *Violent Entrepreneurs* (2001) is another excellent piece of work that provides the student an in-depth account of life-on-the-ground in Russia. In the same vein as Ledeneva, Volkov focuses on an “informal” institution (his, criminal protection groups). This, again, provides the student of Russian politics an opportunity to read politics through the lens of the everyday. In addition, Volkov’s topic deals in an interesting way to an institution that actually fills the void of the state’s (non)monopoly on violence: violent entrepreneurs. This provides a counter-point to the assumptions of American political science insofar as it demonstrates the absurdity of regarding the Russian state as static, fully formed, or completely sovereign. Like Ledeneva, Volkov also exhibits wonderful theoretical nuance and sophistication. In the end, however, Volkov’s proximity leads him to view the changes in the form of Russia’s mobsters as potentially positive.

Violent Entrepreneurs are Russians who make lots of money from their willingness to commit violent crimes. They are primarily involved in protection rackets (33). In an in-depth treatment, Volkov describes the rise, the method, and the lives of Russia’s mobsters. His account seems to be exhaustive, and it is surely entertaining. The second half of the book should be of primary concern for the student of Russian politics. It is here that Volkov analyzes criminals as archetypical capitalists (chapter 4), and as privatized examples of the Russian state’s inability to monopolize force (chapters 5 & 6). These three chapters breath fresh air into the study of the Russian state, and its transition to capitalism and democracy. They both provide evidence that
complicates the ability to quantify and examine Russia from the perspective of American political science.

Volkov’s book has a “happy ending.” We see by the end that some of Russia’s violent entrepreneurs are hanging up their holsters for “legitimate” forms of business. “Regional and local authorities have already concluded informal pacts with certain financial-industrial groups despite their criminal origin” (185). In fact, in many areas, former mobsters have become khozyain (something like feudal lords, or patrons, first discussed: 107) and have taken it upon themselves to clean up their fiefdoms. Volkov regards this as the happy ending; that violent entrepreneurs are being absorbed into “normal” economics. Of course, it is better that they are not shooting anyone, and it is hardly surprising that they are wonderful capitalists, but why is this a happy ending? It would seem, from the outside, that the further integration of people willing (at least formerly) to use violence for gain into the state and economy not all that positive of an event. This minor criticism, however, in no way takes away from Volkov’s work.

Volkov and Ledeneva’s works, and the approach they represent, provide an important counter-approach to that of American political science. While political science, particularly transition literature, is concerned with post-Communist states, elites, institutions and their more or less adherence to democracy, Volkov shows how, in effect, the Russian state did not exist throughout the 1990s. On the same hand, blat networks completely challenge the assumptions of political science regarding the past and the future of post-Communist economies and states. Both of these book point toward a reality that is strikingly absent from political science and British approaches to Russian and post-Communist politics: that there is an astounding disparity

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53 On this page Volkov describes the (sadly) hilarious situation where a thug walks into a business and demands to know who is protecting the business. Upon being told, he actually calls the other mobster to confirm.
54 A typically Russian answer to a question such as this would be “Because it is Russia!”
between the *formal* institutions and mechanisms of states in the Former Soviet Union, and the *actual* processes and practices that go on daily in these societies.

*The “other” approach: (Santa Cruz style)*

As noted earlier in this essay, what I am calling the “Santa Cruz” approach is not actually geographically linked to Santa Cruz, California. Those works which I include in this heading, rather, exhibit approaches to post-Communist politics that attempt to *understand* life and politics in post-Communist societies not through reductive methods, but rather through the practices and relations that are happening in these places, and through the discourses, codes and cultures that color the understandings and actions of both on-the-ground subjects, and their leaders. As such, there is no “school” of post-Communist studies in Santa Cruz, but Santa Cruz is a sort of “Bermuda Triangle”, where the disciplining influence of American political science “disappears”.

Nancy Ries’s *Russian Talk* (1997) is concerned with Russian culture, and largely ignores formal institutions. Her approach looks at the forms and modes of speech that Russians adopted through the Perestroika years. Ries provides a compelling analysis of the forms of resistance to, and life with, the perils brought about by the reforms of perestroika. Through her discussions of gendered litanies, tales of mischief and suffering, and the daily signifiers of Russian speech, Ries provides a roadmap to the construction of identity in a fluid, and tumultuous “societal context”.

In applying this roadmap to Russian politics, the reader gets a clearer vision of the “failures” of western style reforms and institutions than a quantitative approach can provide. The
vividness of the polarity of Russian history and culture\textsuperscript{55} that Ries elaborates through her examples of the constructions of “us vs. them” and the we-ness of suffering, can be directly applied to the difficulties of an electoral system/political parties that are founded on the assumptions of both a stable society, and the stable political identities of its members. Through Ries, the student of Russian politics comes even closer to understanding how Russians live. Ries’s focus on the construction of identity through shared speech is one of the factors that places her firmly in what I have called the Santa Cruz approach. The interest in identity and discursive boundaries (fields) strongly links Ries to Urban (below).

Ries excavates the contents of the “black box” that American political science constructs (which contains those elements that will not fit into models and causal chains), and as a result we the readers move toward a deeper knowledge of not only the challenges to life under perestroika, but the continued challenges to life in Russia. Ries’s book is a step “up” (in focus) from the Russian/Oxbridge approach. It attempts to deal with the broad category of “conversation,” which shares the place of the “informal institutions” of blat and the Russian mob, but is much wider in its scope. By considering a dominant mode of being (speech), Ries makes wonderful headway in understanding Russian culture, and Russian identity construction.

Through conceiving of perestroika as ritual, and of reality as discursively created, Ries moves beyond the limitations of both the British (positivist) approach, and the American approach. Through her methodology, she allows Russia to speak through Russian speech. In other words, Russian forms of conversation construct the reality Ries analyses, rather than models, computers or teleologies constructing the world. Through examining the modes, structures and types of conversations Russians had during perestroika, Ries describes how

\textsuperscript{55} See: Lotman and Upsenskii’s “Binary Models in the Dynamics of Russian Culture (To the End of the Eighteenth
discourses and talk structure the understandings and the possibilities for Russians. As a result, the analyst is privy to the convincing idea that the social upheaval of the perestroika era was not only, or merely, material and formal, but also an upheaval of identity and subjectivity. Ries notes that much of the disintegration that perestroika witnessed was an undoing, through negation, of the cultural myths that bound the USSR to its inhabitants (169-171). During this period, the litanies that constructed and gave meaning to the lives of Russian speakers “spread from the media and from the kitchen table into politics” (167) creating suffering as not only an extremely powerful social signifier, but a paramount political signifier to boot. Perestroikan identities, it seems, were fully constructed around suffering and survival.56

Litanies, Ries notes, originated as overwhelmingly feminine forms of communication, with women both resisting and perpetuating the suffering in their lives (113). While women, according to Ries, litanized their daily experiences, producing identities based on suffering in the process, men wove tails of mischief, constructing identities based on the rejection of the social (and the suffering) around them (37). Both litanies and mischief tales reproduced formulas based on heroism and saintliness, founded on the holy fool and the saint. In effect, this discursive form of heroism allowed a Russian subjects at least discursive agency in the face of a world that seemed more and more alien, when in reality heroes and heroism nearly disappeared.57

*Russian Talk* equips the student of post-Communist politics with the tools to begin an archaeology of identification; with the ability to begin to understand how Russians construct their identities, negotiate their daily lives, and make sense of their conditions. Ries also

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56 This helps us understand El’tsin’s immense popularity, as a person who had truly suffered at the hands of the Soviets.

57 Urban notes that the few forms of popular mobilization (the protection of the White House in 1991 in particular) provided concrete arenas for the manifestation of this discursive heroism (Urban 1997, 253).
illustrates how these understandings have been challenged, if not shattered, by the “transition” to democracy in Russia. She, following Bourdieu, calls this shattering a “hysteresis of habitus”, wherein the past, and past forms of doing, knowing and understanding, cling to the present and its crises like a chain around the waist of the living. Ries ends her book with two paragraphs that deeply trouble students of politics in Russia, and powerfully challenge the political scientists “analyzing” these politics:

It is the irony of all societies, not just Russia, that strategies for coping with trouble, including the discursive mythification of trouble may also cause or allow the toleration of more trouble. In Russian in the time of perestroika, this has meant the submerging of an intended goal—the goal of liberation from oppressive practices and ideologies—in the deep waters of ritualistic signification.

In essence, the rituals of perestroika were a public marking and lamentation of the opposition between power and powerlessness, or, in a different valence, the battle between hierarchical and egalitarian impulses in Russian society. This opposition was hardly resolved or canceled by perestroika. If anything, it was culturally validated and reproduced, as systematic, rational modes of social transformation were excluded from imagination and practice. By uttering their litanies and mystical poverty narratives, many people rehearsed themselves in the very stances of passivity, ironic detachment, and victimization that have helped to ensure their continuing vulnerability to power and pain (188).

Literatures on transition, voting, and institutions are largely blind to the subjective politics occurring throughout the lives of Russians. Ries implicitly attacks any literature that theorizes democracy, capitalism and the transition of post-Communist states in a way that ignores the subjects of these transitions. These literatures have no way to, nor do they attempt to, understand the realities that Russians construct, and/or their effects on politics.

The strides toward truly understanding identity in Russia that Russian Talk takes are further forwarded by the work of Oleg Kharkhordin and Michael Urban, both of whom deal directly and masterfully with the construction of individuals in Russian culture. In The Collective

See also, Olga Shevchenko, “Between the Holes,” Europe-Asia Studies, v54 n6, 2002, 847.
and the Individual in Russia (1999), Kharkhordin suggests that identity in Russia and the Soviet Union, in contrast to that in the West, was produced by and in the *kul'letiv*. Practices of admonition, revelation, and excommunication which can be traced to ecclesiastical courts within the Orthodox church, and forward into Communist Party actions, serve as the model for Kharkhordin’s arguments on identity formation.

These practices highlight the external nature of subject formation for the Russian individual. Rather than religion and piety being an internal experience (a personal communion with God) as in Western Christianity, in Orthodoxy, outward forms such as admonition and revealing of sins within the community structured the individual’s relationship with God and the community. This, according to Kharkhordin, set the stage for identity’s outward and external manifestation, where the individual was defined by her role in the community. These practices found convenient translation within Soviet society’s rituals of criticism and surveillance. Later, Kharkhordin states, as these rituals became ever-more formalized and disregarded by Soviet citizens, the formulation of individuals took place within informal collectives, “with the ritualization of life in Soviet official sphere, I argue, the practices of hero identification and submitting individual morality to the judgment of the relevant community moved into the informal sphere of networks, subcultures, and friendship” (367). The reliance on external deeds, rather than inner essence, Kharkhordin insists, is still prevalent in Russia. This conclusion

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59 As Sara Ashwin notes, “Within the ideology of state socialism work was central to the self-identification of the individual and the group, while within Soviet society the work collective was a key site of social integration. The labor collective accordingly had a dual significance: it was simultaneously a locus of social control and a locus of self-realization, the point of intersection between the totalitarian aspirations of the party-state and the individual and collective aspirations of the workers in whose name the state ruled” (Ashwin 1999, 248).

60 Subculture in Russia is an extremely fertile location for the construction and negotiation of identity, and will be considered briefly below.
helps us understand the lack of parity between the spoken and done within Russian politics, and it strengthens the importance of outward signifiers and speech for Russian identity.

Michael Urban gives us some of the most vivid studies on discourse and identity in Russian politics, providing the link between the seemingly non-political works of Ries and Kharkhordin and the supposedly concrete work of political science. Within the past ten years, Urban has produced perhaps the most insightful examples of discourse analysis in/of Russian and post-Soviet politics. With the central assumption that “politics in postcommunist societies is in large measure a politics of identity” (Urban 1994, 733), Urban strives to demonstrate not only how speech and discourse shapes identity, but how shifts in both formal and informal discourses since the collapse of the Soviet Union, have affected post-Communist identities and politics, both formal and informal.

The primacy of the external over the internal in Russian identity that Kharkhordin observes, is reproduced, according to Urban, in Russian discourse as “non-referentiality of signs [where there is an] uncoupling [of] signification from practice” (Urban forthcoming, 10). Just as with laws, as we will see below, so too words became not the medium of communication, but weapons for battle (Urban 1996, 145). Following Yuri Lotman’s suggestion that Russian culture and identity is structured around binary oppositions (1985), Urban demonstrates that political identity and discourse in the post-Communist period in Russia are based on the demarcation of the negative to structure positions (1994, 1996, forthcoming).

Regardless of the particular identity mediating it in a given instance—democrat, gosudarstvennik, patriot, or communist—the discourse constructed some absolutized community...in which the identities of its subjects were embedded....the positive content of any of the identities appearing in the post-communist period was therefore flimsy; rather, identities were weighted toward the negative...correspondingly, these systems of representation also absolutized
the other—as the enemy of the nation—and the self as its protector and saviour, a status enacted by doing battle with the enemy/other (Urban 1997, 286).

In other words, identity and discourse is not so much structured around the affirmation of self or position, but the differentiation of that self or position from that of the other. This, perhaps, is the ultimate structuring of political and identity fields in post-Communist society.

Making the link between these identities and concrete Russian politics is Urban’s *The Rebirth of Politics in Russia* (1997) which is, perhaps, one of the best accounts of Russian politics. From the first chapter to the end, Urban develops an extremely sophisticated theoretical approach to the study of Russian politics. Their work is concerned not only with what happened, both in the halls of power, and on the streets, but also with the systematic and rhetorical constraints on this action. Urban employs Pierre Bourdieu’s notions of the available political field, and the structured positions on this field, to explain how Russian politics takes place.\(^61\) This approach incorporates both communicative and institutional structuring, and builds upon the oppositions found in Ries’s study of conversation, to bring to the study of actual politics, the underlying nature of Russian political action.

In a topic missing from all of the above, Urban describes and analyzes the Russian dissident movement throughout the final years of Soviet rule, running from the dissidents of the “pre-political” period to the *neformaly* movement of Perestroika to the democratic revolution(s). The book takes the reader on a journey through the period of Russian history that witnessed counter-revolution, revolution and attempted counter-revolution. This is a truly “ground up” approach. As such it can be described as an examination of *internal* politics in three important

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\(^61\) The field is developed in a manner that demonstrates that there are structured positionings ready-made for political identity. With each new entry into the political field, these positions get rearranged. This explanatory framework is extremely helpful in understanding the absurdities of Russian politics.
ways: internal to elite circles, internal to ‘groups’ and movements, and internal to subjects themselves. The result is a compelling and impressive read.

Urban attempts to challenge all of the appearances of positivism we have encountered above. He debunks rational actor theories, path dependency, scientific modeling, and new institutionalism. His notion of politics is described as,

we have treated ‘politics’ in an old-fashioned way, refusing to reduce it to the more sophisticated concept of elite competition and bargaining against the backdrop of public elections, registering an implicit protest against the tyranny of reality that sustains that view. From a positivist vantage, our conception would appear as utopian or ideal (310).

This description encapsulates the treatment of Russian politics as informed by multiple factors, the refusal to submit these factors to a causal chain, and the commitment to understanding how politics takes place.

If we broaden what I have called the “Santa Cruz” approach, we can include those works which, in general, advance the understanding of Russian politics. Furthermore, by reading various literatures through the Santa Cruz lens, one that is focused upon understanding rather than explaining, the student of post-Communist politics begins to be able to incorporate various perspectives, from the macro to the micro in order to approach an understanding of life and politics in post-Communist space.

Dramaturgy and Disaster; the Disintegration of the Soviet Union

By combining the British flavor for events with the understanding-focused approach I call “other”, we can see events as more than mere events, but rather as dramaturgy, many of the

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62 Edelman calls this the political spectacle (Edelman 1988).
events precipitating the fall of the Soviet Union, and the first Russian republic, when viewed as drama, fit a script called the “war of laws”. While no one explanation can adequately account for the disintegration of the Soviet Union, a deeper understanding of these events can be retrieved by considering them as relational and as following scripts.

The perception of freedom among the citizens and elites of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s surely encouraged the rumblings for independence in the Baltic republics, who had “never reconciled themselves to their incorporation into the Soviet Union” (Sakwa, 13). These events signaled the first major blows to Soviet sovereignty, and provided Russia and her neighboring regions with the scripts for their impending independence. In 1989, the war of laws began between regional authorities and central Soviet authorities. Wars, being fought with laws as the weapons of choice, became the major script through which the most important political events of 1989, 1991 and 1993 would be enacted, and would define politics at the end of Soviet history, and the beginning (and first end) of the Russian state.

By 1990, Russia and the Baltic republics had declared for independence.63 With Russia’s declaration of independence, and the ensuing echoes in the capitals of Russia’s neighbors, the “parade of sovereignties” and the accompanying ‘war of ‘laws’” began (ibid, 18).

The expression ‘war of laws’ captured in oxymoronic fashion the status of legal relations within the Soviet order: law was a medium for the expression of personalized authority structures, no more and no less. As these authority structures disaggregated in the late Soviet period, sections of the state captured by groups ascendant on the early waves of popular mobilization utilized the formal mechanisms of law to stake out their own claims. These were met by a series of annulling acts, decrees and decisions from the central authorities which, when

63 “The most important manifestation of this [insurgency against the communist regime] was the adoption by the Russian legislature on 12 June 1990, by an overwhelming majority, of the Declaration of State Sovereignty of the RSFSR…The Declaration stated that Russia was ‘a sovereign state, created by historically united states’; that “RSFSR sovereignty is the unique and necessary condition for the existence of Russian statehood’; that ‘the RSFSR retains for itself the right of free departure from the USSR’; and stressed the priority of the Russian constitution and laws over Soviet legislation” (Sakwa, 17).
ignored or annulled themselves, spiraled into battles over sovereignty expressed as a war of laws (Urban 1997, 236).

If the war of laws between Moscow and the Baltic republics signaled the beginning of the end of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the war of laws between the Russian president, Boris El’tsin, and the Soviet authorities of 1990-91 sounded the end of the end of the Soviet state. Furthermore, just as the struggles between the Baltic republics and the central Soviet state began as a war with law as the weapon yet ended in coups with real weapons, so the war of laws in Moscow ended with a coup d’etat and all-to-real violence.

Michael Urban calls the coups of 1991 in the Baltic republics “dress rehearsals” (Urban 1997, 235). “In January these elements of the coup machinery—army, OMON, committees of national salvation and Soviet president protesting his uninvolvment—were put to use in Lithuania and Latvia in a blood stained dress rehearsal for August. Determined civil resistance in the Baltic, supported by mass protest around the country, stopped the coup in its tracks” (ibid 236). The coup attempts in the Baltics, Urban suggests, accompanied the beginning of a “low intensity coup” (ibid, 235) in Russia, with the central authorities gearing up, creating “committees for national salvation,” and testing scripts for the August 1991 coup in Moscow. Accordingly, just as the dress rehearsal had been a failure, the main event also floundered on stage.

In the months leading up to April, 1991, the war of laws continued full-scale in what was left of the Soviet Union. The primary actors in this struggle, again, fought their war over one-sixth of the earth’s mass, and yet they fought from mere blocks away. Gorbachev, during this period, effectively ended perestroika and glasnost (in another turn of the Soviet cycle of history outlined above) and insisted the Soviet Union still reigned supreme. El’tsin, for his part, became the first Russian president in history, and attempted to secure Russian sovereignty. Despite a four
month détente, the wrangling culminated in August of 1991. On August 19, 1991, with Gorbachev at his dacha, the State Committee for Extraordinary Situation (GKChP) declared it had assumed power, and initiated a state of emergency (ibid, 245). Within three days, the coup failed due largely to botched planning, lack of resolve of Soviet troops, and popular mobilization in defense of the Russian republic. On the 21st of August 1991, the GKChP collapsed, and the coup was over. The failure of the coup sounded the death knell for the Soviet Union, now all but formally deceased. By the end of 1991, the first Russian republic was born. This new republic looked like a bricolage of western forms of democratic states with aspects of Germany, France and the United States.

Despite El’tsin’s victory in the war of laws against the Soviet state and Gorbachev, the war of laws script continued to be performed in the years between 1991 and 1993, the cast had merely been rearranged. Laws continued to be the primary weapon of struggle, indeed war, between political actors in the first Russian republic. Again El’tsin battled for supremacy, this time with the legislature. Despite the recent victory and sovereignty, both the legislature and the president relied on extra-constitutional means to create constitutional crisis. Between the end of 1991 and 1993, these two entities battled with presidential decree versus legislation, with each continually declaring the supremacy of its author. This battle culminated in the 21st of September, 1993, when, “El’tsin decreed the constitution null and void” (Urban 1997, 285). Again the script called for a violent end to a previously non-violent war, and the end of September witnessed another bloodletting on Moscow’s streets, as El’tsin shelled the parliament, and clashes between “defenders” of the White House and police produced, again, death (ibid, 287). October, however, brought an end to the macabre dramaturgy embodied in the play entitled
“the war of laws,” and once again El’tsin stood as the only actor bowing in front of the new curtain.

El’tsin’s encore act was the installation of a new constitution, this one fully super-presidential (Fish 2001), and the resumption of “normal” politics. Aside from the elections of 1990 and 1991, electoral politics had taken a back seat in Russian politics up until 1996. El’tsin, after the toppling of the first Russian republic, suspended democratic procedures in order to “protect democracy.” He did, however, face reelection in 1996. This election, El’tsin financed with an estimated $20 million gained by selling off gigantic chunks of the Russian state’s property in a program called the “loans for shares.” Loans for shares introduced a new player into the field of Russian politics: the oligarchs, or the “family”.

It is interesting to note that although a “war of laws” does not continue in Russia today, law has remained a weapon in political struggle. This struggle now takes place between the oligarchs and Putin’s power base, former force wielders (siloviki). The latest casualty of this struggle (besides, perhaps, civil democracy) has been Mikhail Khordokovsky, Russia’s richest oligarch who was arrested in the fall of 2003 most likely for supporting Putin’s opponents on the political field. Contemporarily, only one of the parties in the political struggle at the elite level has the ability to use law as a weapon, so this cannot be characterized as a war of laws, but Putin and the siloviki certainly wage war with laws.

*Codes and Cash: Globalization and Post-Communism*

The collapse of the Soviet Union, and the births of newly independent, post-Soviet states, has not taken place in a vacuum, but rather on a global stage. “And yet, both traditional-style

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64 The scare quotes around normal, here, should signify the irony that is embodied in the term, especially when describing Russia.
Sovietologists and, more strikingly, analysts of post-Soviet ‘transitions’ have tended until recently to treat the international dimension of Russian reforms as entirely exogenous and, moreover, an immutable and uncontroversial aspect of reality” (Reddaway and Glinksi 76). The current situations in postcommunist states, however, should be considered as both a global issue, and as a subject of globalization.

Globalization can be viewed in two particular ways: the global interconnectedness of capital and of cultures/discourses. Both of these aspects have had profound effect on post-Communist identities and politics. As the former Soviet Union and its satellite states attempted to integrate into the global economy, they came in direct contact with Western hegemonic capital and power, which by the late 20th century could be viewed as globalized power (Hardt and Negri 2000). Manuel Castells notes that integration of Russia into the global economy is one of the “defining features of the future European economic arena” (Castells 1998, 66). This integration comes in the form of widespread poverty for the bulk of the Russian population, but with the remarkable increase of conspicuous consumption by Russia’s new rich (ibid, 70). Conversely, Russia’s integration into the global economy also means the spread of Russian organized crime as, “solid linkages have been established between the various Russian mafias criminal organizations around the world, giving a new impulse to the creation of an interconnected global criminal economy” (ibid, 80). As stated above, culture and economy are inseparable, and should be considered in a relational manner.

The combination of the destruction of Soviet and post-Soviet economies, and the influx of Western goods (signifiers) has produced a situation in which Western commodities have taken

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65 For a fascinating exploration of this consumption in the form of new villas being built by New Russians, and the inability of these new rich to signify, see : Caroline Humphrey, “The Villas of the ‘New Russians’; A Sketch of Consumption and Cultural Identity in Post-Soviet Landscapes,” (2002).
on new importance in post-Soviet societies. As identity begins to be re-shaped in a more consumerist manner, Russians now look on commodities as security blankets that protect from the upheavals and chaos, both material and personal, of post-Soviet life (Shevchenko 2002). Amidst this economic globalization, traditional political identities have taken new forms.

As Urban notes, two prominent political identities have played major roles in Russian history: Slavophiles and Westernizers. While Slavophiles have traditionally argued for the primacy of Russian ways of life, Westernizers focus on the backwardness of Russia, and advocate a movement toward Europe. In the post-Communist global (dis)order, these positions continue to inform much of Russian politics. Douglas Blum (1998) notes, Russia’s struggle over access to the Caspian sea is enacted by two camps; one of which looks eastward and one westward. This serves as an example of how Russia’s integration into global capitalism is tempered by traditional political identities found deep in Russian culture. Furthermore, these positions are heavily influenced by the cultural codes they exhibit. Russia’s new Westernizers, otherwise known as “new Russians”, have attempted to take on Western identities through the commodities they dress in. As Caroline Humphrey and Alexei Yurchak note, the models on which the New Russians based themselves are cultural images of the young, rich and powerful of the West, often in inverted forms which exhibit the continued inability to signify (Hendley 2002; Yurchak 2003). The identity positions of those at the top (the overlap between the new rich and the violent entrepreneurs should be obvious at this point) are clearly a result of the influx, or globalization, of western cultural codes.

With the fall of the Soviet Union, western images, texts and symbols flooded the markets and societies of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet republics. The influx of new discourses

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66 Joma Nazpary (2002) suggests that the allure of Western fashion has been an extremely powerful motivating factor in many young Kazakh women turning toward prostitution as an economic alternative to poverty.
and meanings into the post-Communist world had profound effect in offering new symbolic and
discursive positions and models to the citizens of these regions. One tangible outcome of this
proved to be the providing of new scripts to Russia’s violent entrepreneurs. Lionid K., one of
such violent entrepreneurs remarks that, “our major manuals [for how to act as a criminal] were
videos about the American and Hong Kong Mafia; we watched them in video salons to get some
experience” (Volkov, 14).

On the other hand, this global flow increases the importance of the local, or the personal
(Castells 2004). Globalization of discourse and culture, then make micro examinations of
identity at the local level even more important. As noted above, deeply embedded cultural codes
in Russia place profound importance on outward deeds. This form of identity construction
trickled into subcultures in the late Soviet period, placing even more importance on outwardness,
or in the case of subculture, style. Global cultural flows provide Russians with new styles,
subcultures, and identities (Pilkington 1994, 2002). Pilkington notes that while many consider
globalization a process of the homogenization of localities in the image of the center, subcultures
in Russia exhibit a “mediation” of style and information in a way that allows them to adopt
Western styles (identities) while maintaining their Russian-ness (2002). This may, indeed, be a
case of the micro describing the macro, as Russia and other post-Soviet states attempt to both
integrate into global culture and capitalism while maintaining their unique identity. This attempt,
as Joma Nazpary points out, however, is dehabilitating, frightening, and chaotic (Nazpary 2002),
resulting in the wide-spread dispossession of those at the bottom.

Beyond Russia: The Others
If Russia exists as a telling and saddening example of the effects of a previously “planned” economy encountering a global capitalist one, other new states in the area provide a telling and depressing story of even worse effects. As noted above, the encounter with global capital is best described as chaotic. Chaos has now become the structuring principle in the lives and politics of Kazakhstani (Nazpary 2002), with the other Central Asian states faring worse still. Kazakhs have found globalization a disease which erodes their culture, morals and lives. In turn, they are deeply suspecting of foreigners and foreign capital (Nazpary). Furthermore, Kazakhstan’s first and only president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, according to Martha Brill Olcott (2002), has given up on his commitment to democracy, and instead has attempted to ensure his own dynastic rule, effectively “manipulated the country’s electoral system so that it should enable him to rule for life” (Olcott, 217). The Central Asian states, in the post-Soviet era have slipped into authoritarianism, poverty, and at times, armed conflict (Rumer 2002).

This process, in turn, is not limited to Russia and Central Asia. Katherine Verdery (2003) has described the process of de-collectivization in Romania as one of “decapitalization” (273), a process by which property is bought at bargain prices, and locals further dispossessed and impoverished. Romania itself, according to Katherine Verdery (1996), is transitioning both actually and metaphorically from “socialism to feudalism” (228), as Mafia takes hold, industry is decapitalized, and the state becomes increasingly illegitimate in the eyes of Romanians. Although John Dryzek and Leslie Holmes, with Bogdan Chiritoiu find tentative prospects for democracy in Romania, the country’s first president Ion Iliescu was both a radical nationalist and authoritarian (Dryzek, Templeman Holmes and Chiritoiu 2002, 191-192), and Romanian reformers have repeatedly failed to gain support from the Romanian population. As Romania

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67 I use this term loosely here, for as Ticktin notes, the Soviet economy can hardly be called planned (Ticktin 1992).
enters the global economy, Romania becomes “demodernized” (Verdery 2003, 357), and Romanians, like Kazakhs remain in dire poverty.

We have then, on the one hand the astonishing and saddening transformations that post-Communist states have endured since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and their “integration” into (or better, encounter with) global capitalism, and on the other hand, the scholarship that has attempted to analyze this period. Of course, these analyses are not uniform in their approach, and I have attempted to identify three major approaches, linked by method and location, to the study of post-Communist life and politics. For the most part, the literatures I have presented have dealt primarily with Russia, but it is fair to assume that, at least within American political science, it is the case that is variable, not the method. We can assume, then, that the literatures on other post-Communist transitions will employ similar, if not identical, methodologies and frameworks of those American scholars of the Russian transformation.

*The Quest for Feeling; a methodological conclusion*

As noted above, with the fall of the Soviet Union, Western academics rushed to fill the intellectual vacuum of the post-Soviet political reality. This can be viewed as yet another example of Russia and the newly independent states encountering global forms of discourse. As Western academics and advisors flooded the former Soviet Union, they brought with them Western norms, theories and methods, which surely added to the disastrous results of the transformations that these states suffered. While above my critiques were primarily epistemological, at this point we can see concrete results of Western (globalized) discourses paralleling the economic destruction that Western capital wrought in the former Soviet Union.
American political science approaches to the study of politics in post-Soviet space are ill equipped to understand post-Communist politics because they ignore, or deny, a consideration of the feeling of life in post-Communist states. To feel is to have a flavor for, or to attempt to understand a politics. This type of understanding cannot come without a consideration of culture, life and identity in a particular society. Quantitative analysis in particular, and hard social science in general, cannot incorporate these important factors into analysis, and as such they are condemned to fall far short of relevance to the student interested not in explaining, predicting and recommending, but rather on understanding and learning.

Ethnography, on the other hand, is infinitely better equipped for an attempt at understanding a situation and its politics. The best works analyzed in this essay, for the most part, have been ethnographies. Those that are not ethnographies approach understandings in ways that are not specifically ethnographic, such as discourse analysis or theoretical elaboration, but would combine well with ethnographic methods. Burroway and Verdery suggest ethnography, especially in the post-Soviet context, is best suited to understanding life and politics in post-Communist states.

It is precisely the sudden importance of the micro processes of lodged in moments of transformation that privileges an ethnographic approach. Aggregate statistics and compendia of decrees and laws tell us little without complementary close descriptions of how people...are responding to the uncertainties they face (Burroway and Verdery 1998, 3).

Ethnography allows the analyst, and the reader, to access the feeling of life and the politics surrounding this life in a context that is fully equipped to consider both the politics of identity and the politics of culture in a situation in which both have been upended and unearthed. Without the consideration of culture and identity in politics, political analyses will continue to be limited
to reductive analyses of institutions, states and elites, and will continue to ignore the lives of the subjects of the transformations taking place in the post-Communist world.
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