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# Paradigms, categories, or fuzzy algorithms?

Making Sense of Soslovie and Class in Russia

*Paradigmes, catégories ou algorithmes flous ? De la signification des notions de  
soslovie et de classe en Russie*

**Robert E. Johnson**

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- 1 In the Province of Ontario where I live, and in most other jurisdictions in the modern world, automotive traffic is regulated by an elaborate set of laws that limit the speed at which one may drive. On four-lane superhighways, Ontario's posted limit is usually 100 km/hour, on urban boulevards 60-70 km/h, and on residential streets 40 km/h.
- 2 In the absence of traffic congestion or visible police surveillance, most if not all drivers routinely exceed the speed limit, whatever it may be. The police do, of course, issue summonses for violations, but it is generally acknowledged that only a minute proportion of offenders are ticketed.
- 3 Viewed through one lens, these speed limits might seem an empty sham. And yet on closer examination most drivers stay within 10 to 15 km/h of the posted speeds. They violate the laws in predictable and consistent ways that allow the police, most of the time, to concentrate their attention on the more egregious offenders. The traffic laws, in other words, provide a *useful approximation* of people's behavior, and even of their attitudes: The person who cruises at 110 km/h may actually complain about the one who passes him at 120 ("Where are the police when you need them?")
- 4 Let me suggest that the Russian system of *soslovie*, for all its obvious faults and weaknesses, also provides a useful approximation of social reality. The boundaries between groups were often fuzzy, and the not-so-tidy categories that the system defined could be defied, ignored or transgressed. Nonetheless, most Russian subjects, most of the time, were influenced, shaped, and regulated by those categories. *Soslovie* does not provide a full reflection of social and economic behavior, much less of individual identities and attitudes, but the *soslovie* system did establish parameters within which

individual actors could function in predictable ways. This remained true after 1861, especially with respect to the broad and diverse category of “peasants.”

- 5 As both Michael Confino and Elise Kimerling Wirtschafter have pointed out, terms such as “estate,” “*soslovie*” and “class” have been used in diverse and even contradictory ways over the centuries – and not just in Russia.<sup>1</sup> For the present commentary, I will focus on the administrative/juridical definition of *soslovie*. I see this as a set of categories through which rulers and legislators tried to subdivide the Russian Empire’s population, in order to facilitate the extraction and distribution of goods, services and privileges. *Soslovie* defined an individual’s tax status. It made some members of the population subject to conscription, to *corvée*, or to corporal punishment, and exempted others. It constrained, to varying extents, a person’s choice of occupation: The higher ranks of state service were (at least in principle) open only to a privileged minority, defined by *soslovie*; the right to own serfs was among the attendant perquisites. Access to higher education was similarly restricted. Spatial mobility was (albeit imperfectly) regulated by an internal passport system in which *soslovie* played a significant part.
- 6 The system of *soslovie* was intended to impart or enforce distinct identities among the groups that it defined, and to ensure social separation between them. As Vasilii Kliuchevskii recognized and Confino reiterates, the modern categories of *soslovie* were not arbitrarily created by law-makers, but were built upon pre-existing divisions in society. Warriors, artisans, traders and agriculturalists coexisted and interacted – usually in mutually exclusive groups – long before any attempt was made to codify their positions. From the *Ulozhenie* onwards, Russia’s rulers tried to regularize and formalize those relationships and – when possible – to make the different categories mutually exclusive. Over the course of several centuries the categories evolved, as did the relations among them. Periodically, as Gregory Freeze pointed out some years ago, the state intervened to reinforce group identity and coherence, as it did with respect to “trading peasants” early in the nineteenth century and more broadly in amendments to the Great Reforms after 1870.<sup>2</sup>
- 7 Although the categories and boundaries that were defined were always a bit fluid and permeable, they were also – like the traffic laws of Ontario – more or less respected most of the time. The anecdotal evidence presented in Wirtschafter’s commentary shows some Russians manipulating (or attempting to manipulate) the system, but it also shows others, including members of unprivileged strata, appealing to the legal norms in self-defense. (Note that their appeals were not only to the “just and merciful tsar,” but to “legal identities and attendant rights.”<sup>3</sup>)
- 8 Within this system there were undoubtedly many individuals at the margins, sharing traits of groups from which they were supposedly distinct or excluded. Even so, we should be cautious about describing people in one category as “liv[ing] in a manner barely distinguishable from” another. Wirtschafter<sup>4</sup> applies these words to the semi-fictional Bagrov family of rustic nobles. Was the lifestyle of Sergei Aksakov’s grandfather Bagrov really indistinguishable from that of a peasant? I find this a curious reading of the author, for whom the patriarchal grandfather embodied elite hereditary virtues that were lacking in his sophisticated urban in-laws. Those virtues were hierarchical and implied, among many other prerogatives, almost limitless powers over the lives of his serfs. To me it is inconceivable that Aksakov or any of his (sympathetic) characters would have had the slightest hesitation in distinguishing such a noble from a peasant.

- 9 Confino writes that poor provincial gentry “lived like their peasants,” but this does not mean that even they – or the peasants among whom they lived – were indifferent to the social distinctions that divided them, or that they did not try to invoke those distinctions in their everyday interactions with other strata or with officialdom.<sup>5</sup>
- 10 “Trading peasants” were another borderline group whose members might appear indistinguishable from a different category – the urban traders.<sup>6</sup> Closer examination suggests otherwise. Here it is worth remembering that at some moments their peasant status put them in a favorable position over townspeople who, as guild merchants, *meshchane* or *tsekhovye*, were inscribed into an urban settlement (*posad*) and subject to various obligations from which peasants – who carried different burdens – were exempt. In Alfred Rieber’s description,
- Well into the nineteenth century the trading peasant had no legal rights and was completely at the mercy of his owner, yet he enjoyed several advantages over the merchant. He was immune from bankruptcy penalties and exempt from commercial taxes and service obligations. Operating with virtually no overhead, not restricted to trading in a single district unless so specified by his landlord, he was occasionally able to overcome the technical and organizational superiority of his merchant competitor.<sup>7</sup>
- 11 For better or worse, the trading peasants were significantly different from the townsmen in many particulars, and were the object of more than a few petitions of complaint from merchants trying to defend their own position in society.<sup>8</sup> The Guild Reform of 1824 caused some number of trading peasants to enter the town guilds, but those who formally registered and paid to change their status were only part of a much larger influx of petty traders from the countryside. In Rieber’s terminology, urban life after 1824 was “re-peasantized”:
- On the eve of the emancipation, the great majority of merchants had close personal and family ties to the villages. They were deeply marked by the customs and beliefs of the bonded peasantry [...] These newcomers resembled nothing so much as their remote forebears, who had also emerged from the peasantry a century earlier. This process was repeated again after the emancipation. Its general effects on the merchantry were to lower its cultural tone, to delay the Westernization of its education, to disrupt the introduction of modern business practices, and to stunt its participation in public life.<sup>9</sup>
- 12 The social distinction between so-called peasants and so-called townsmen – as reflected and reinforced by the system of *soslovie* – was, in other words, one with real consequences for Russia’s social and economic life, even when the circumstances of everyday life made one group outwardly similar to another.
- 13 The same can be said of the peasants who moved to towns to work as laborers and artisans after emancipation. Industrial life was a crucible that undoubtedly transformed them in many ways. Nonetheless, Russian law and administrative practice prevented all but a minority of urban workers from severing their ties to the village. As “peasants” they had to carry passports that were subject to renewal by village authorities. Renewal, in turn, was contingent upon payment of the rural household’s share of taxes and land redemption dues. For four decades after emancipation, Russian law made it extremely difficult for any peasant to formally withdraw from the village or – where landholding was communally defined – to give up his share of communal land.<sup>10</sup> Successive generations of migrating workers (*otkhodniki*) married in the villages and kept their families there instead of moving them to towns. Successive generations of laborers were

recruited from the countryside, and the hereditary urban proletariat on which Marxists pegged their greatest hopes was slow to emerge. Even the children of veteran workers spent their formative years away from the towns and factories. These were not peasants in name only. Thanks to the system of *soslovie* they retained networks of rural ties – many, no doubt, burdensome and unwelcome, but no less significant for that – that distinguished them from urban workers of most other industrializing countries of Europe and North America.<sup>11</sup>

- 14 What I am suggesting is that, although *soslovie* never fully defined the identities and relationships that comprised Imperial Russian society, it did provide a useful approximation of most Russians' social condition. And it did help to define and regulate their various behaviors and outlooks. The reason that it is, in Confino's words, "too well established in the historians' vocabulary to be abandoned" is that it still provides a useful tool for examining society and economic life.
- 15 Can the same be said of "class"? Here Marx's definitions, as Wirtschafter and Confino have both noted, were incomplete and ambiguous, and have been a source of much confusion and disputation. I wonder, however, whether the two authors have overstated the difficulties and overlooked some useful features of the analysis. Marx did, after all, focus attention on the social relations of production which, though they may not fully define an individual or group's outlook or behavior, certainly contribute to the formation of these. Marx also tried to distinguish between a class "an sich" and "für sich," acknowledging that a shared economic condition does not necessarily produce a shared outlook or sense of commonality. The French peasants whom he disparaged were like "a sack of potatoes" – all basically the same but having no collective consciousness or purpose to define them.
- 16 Russian peasants have often seemed, in Teodor Shanin's memorable phrase, an awkward class. Confino terms them a "disparate assemblage" of artisans, petty traders, itinerant laborers etc.<sup>12</sup> This was true in Imperial Russia and remains true of peasants in many countries today. But here I believe my earlier comments are again relevant. A peasant trader is not the same as any other, non-peasant trader; a peasant artisan is not just any artisan. The question we must ask is whether, behind all the varieties of experience, there existed some approximation of a *shared condition* that distinguished these individuals from other groups in society.
- 17 Eric Wolf offers a definition that seems to me to address this requirement: a peasant is "a cultivator who has an enduring link to the city"<sup>13</sup> – "city" being in this case a shorthand term for all the external factors and forces that restrict the peasant's existence and extract value from the peasant's output (e.g., landlords, tax collectors). Wolf goes on to suggest that "it is only when [...] the cultivator becomes subject to the demands and sanctions of power-holders outside his social stratum that we can appropriately speak of peasantry."<sup>14</sup> Seen in this light, an *otkhodnik* or a city-based trader who continued to pay dues and taxes to a remote village can be seen as sharing, in part, the condition of village neighbors who only tilled the soil. In like fashion, the state-imposed passport system gave employers an extra instrument of control over rural-born workers, who could be threatened with deportation to the countryside; this was another shared condition that distinguished the peasant-worker from his urban-born counterpart.
- 18 A peasant, in brief, may live *in* a city without being fully *of* the city. The constraints and demands that set him apart from other city-dwellers may also bind him to a rural collectivity, defined by a shared subordination to external power-holders. To understand

the peasant's many non-agricultural roles, we should begin by evaluating the components of that condition. Properly used, the vocabulary of class – like that of *soslovie* – may be a helpful tool for assessing the degree of an individual's subordination to (or separation from) the forces that influenced rural society. It may thereby offer a *useful approximation* of power relationships and their effects.

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## NOTES

1. Michael Confino, "The *Soslovie* (Estate) Paradigm: Reflections on Open Questions," *Cahiers du Monde russe*, 49, 4 (Oct.-Dec. 2008): 681-699; Elise Kimerling Wirtschafter, "Social Categories in Russian Imperial History," *Cahiers du Monde russe*, 50, 1 (Jan.-March 2009): 231-250.
2. Gregory Freeze, "The *Soslovie* (Estate) Paradigm and Russian Social History," *American Historical Review*, 91 (1) (Feb. 1986): 24-25, 27.
3. Wirtschafter, "Social categories," 243.
4. *Ibid.*, 246.
5. Confino, "The *Soslovie* (Estate) Paradigm," 686.
6. *Ibid.*, 687.
7. Alfred Rieber, *Merchants and Entrepreneurs in Imperial Russia* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1982), 47.
8. P.G. Ryndziunskii, "Gorodskoe naselenie: Izmeneniia v obshchei chislennosti gorodskogo naseleniia Rossii," in M.K. Rozhkova, ed, *Ocherki ekonomicheskoi istorii Rossii pervoi poloviny XIX veka*, (M.,1959), 310.
9. Rieber, *Merchants and Entrepreneurs*, 52.
10. The obstacles were, however, significantly fewer for widows and other unmarried female peasants than for males.
11. I developed this argument at greater length in my *Peasant and Proletarian* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1979), esp. ch. 2-3. On the burdens and benefits of rural ties, see Jeffrey Burds, *Peasant Dreams and Market Politics: Labor Migration and the Russian Village, 1861-1905* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998), esp. 53, 133.
12. Confino, "The *Soslovie* (Estate) Paradigm," 683.
13. Eric Wolf, *Peasants* (Prentice-Hall: Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1966), 10. Cf. David Moon, *The Russian Peasantry 1600-1930* (London: Longman, 1999), 13, who begins a summary of anthropological/historical definitions of peasants as follows: "Peasants are politically and socially dominated and economically exploited by elite members of the larger societies of which they are a part..."
14. Wolf, *Peasants*, 11.

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## ABSTRACTS

### Abstract

Addressing the recent commentaries of Michael Confino and Elise Kimerling Wirtschafter on *soslovie* and class in Imperial Russia, the author suggests that both have overstated the difficulties associated with these concepts. Admittedly, problems of imprecision and inconsistency are associated with both terms, yet both refer to tangible divisions in Russian society – divisions that affected identities, perceptions and behavior. Although ideas of class and *soslovie* do not conclusively *define* the divisions in Russian society, they do *illuminate* those divisions and direct researchers' attention toward significant empirical questions.

### Résumé

Tout en se reportant aux récents commentaires de Michael Confino et Elise Kimerling Wirtschafter sur les *soslovija* et les classes sociales en Russie impériale, l'auteur laisse entendre que l'un et l'autre ont surévalué les difficultés liées à ces concepts. Certes on ne saurait nier ce que ces deux termes véhiculent d'imprécision et d'incohérence, cependant ceux-ci renvoient à des catégories tangibles de la société russe, catégories qui ont affecté les identités, les perceptions et les comportements. Bien que les notions de classe et de *soslovie* ne *délimitent* pas de façon probante les catégories de la société russe, elles les *mettent en lumière* et attirent l'attention des chercheurs sur des questions empiriques significatives.

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