

Michael David-Fox, Crossing Borders, Modernity, Ideology, and Culture in Russia and the Soviet Union

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REFERENCES

Michael DAVID-FOX, *Crossing Borders, Modernity, Ideology, and Culture in Russia and the Soviet Union*, Pittsburgh, PA : Pittsburgh University Press 2015, 286 + viii p.

- 1 A simple question demands a complicated answer: What about Soviet modernity? Even without its geographical restrictions the term created a lot of confusion on the basis of countless concepts among all sorts of academic disciplines. A tired out student of science studies already in 1991 moaned, the number of its meanings corresponds to the number of thinkers and journalists writing about it.¹ The problem became more complicated when “modernity” was applied to the Soviet “case” where processes of modernization like industrialization, urbanization, literacy and others seemingly did not coincide with the existence of a cultural modernity, to use the conceptual differentiation of sociologists and philosophers. David-Fox’s book offers a distinct answer by relying on Shmuel Eisenstadt’s concept of multiple modernities, thus not only doubtlessly placing the Soviet Union under the umbrella of modernity but also locating the author’s theoretical and methodological position in a wide range of conceptual options.
- 2 The answers to the question are given in seven chapters of which five re-appear as more or less revised articles, or certain sections have been published before. The composition of the book is conceptually funnel shaped: the chapters get more and more focused as to time span and topic, and the “red file” of modernity-discussion frays after

chapter 4. All chapters are hold together by aspects concerning the history of the intelligentsia.

- 3 Although the problem of the book seems to be a conceptual one, the author does not begin with a discussion of theory of modernity, but at first turns to the opposition of continuity and discontinuity, uniqueness and relativism in Anglophone historiography on the Soviet Union. Historiography has written about modernization processes and their unique Soviet facets and results as well, but the central question remained open: may the elements of the Soviet system be regarded as features of modernity or a lack thereof? The author tells us right in the beginning, that he considers the binary opposition as a false one, and he attempts to deconstruct this long lasting binary paradigm of Soviet studies in order to prepare the “third way,” i.e. transnational history, which ought to connect Soviet Studies to other fields of historical research and to build a “significant bridge to a more comparatively and internationally informed discussion with other fields and disciplines” (p. 7). Which seems reasonable, one should endorse and remind the author of the words of the declared sociologist of modernity Hans Joas who noticed a gap between the flourishing theory of modernity and its empirical basis: “The accomplishments of sociological theoretical abstractions require the connection to the intimate knowledge of affairs provided by historiography.”²
- 4 In the first chapter the reader finds a fine discussion of the modernist and neo-traditionalist wings. David-Fox observes that the first group began to work on the multiple modernities-concept *avant la lettre*, because its members had to come to terms with the evident facts of modernization processes and a certain phenomenological convergence with Western societies. So again the West became a sort of matrix for Soviet modernity, but this also helped to identify “deficits”, or sometimes phenomena of anticipation of future developments even to come in the West. The neo-traditionalists, i.e. historians who underline traditional elements in Soviet society, doubted the Soviet level of modernity. One should get away from this conceptual trap, the author writes, because both “agreed that the Soviet order to some extent combined or mixed modern features with others” (p. 38), and go over to the more promising transnational history since even the Soviet Union borrowed from abroad.
- 5 So the question is raised, what is particular for Soviet modernity, while the answer should not be captured by the binary opposition mentioned above. As a main feature David-Fox figures out the role of the intelligentsia and its relationship to the state and mass culture. Although we learned that the modern/tradition-alternative is a dead-end, we read a detailed discussion of the problem how the intelligentsia since the 19th century shaped the path of Russian modernity, how its project continued after 1917, what changes took place during Stalinism and later. Roughly said it is a history of reconstruction from above and internal civilizing mission along Western ideals in order to overcome Russia’s backwardness. It did not stop during Stalinism, but became more mass driven. The main feature however is statism, because “the Soviet version of modernity [...] incorporated civilizational patterns that interacted with the political and economic structures of the party-state” (p. 70). Unfortunately though for the leadership, “extreme statism, the encompassing role of codified doctrine, and the political time bomb created by the claim to systemic superiority undermined the regime’s accounting practices” (p. 71).

- 6 Since ideology is on the agenda and “simply cannot be ignored” (p.103), a whole chapter debates its role and meaning. While a single definition would be useless, the book differs six “faces”: ideology as doctrine, worldview, historical concept, discourse, performance, and faith. Several side glances to the history of other states and societies give the impression that sometimes there are options of comparability and sometimes not. In particular the role of ideology as to terror offers the “third way” transnational history-perspective, because French terreur, Nazi extermination and Stalinist repressions are rooted in some aspects in ideology. It might not be astonishing to read in a book conceptually based on multiple modernities, that we have to acknowledge “multiple faces of ideology” which allow “to recognize Soviet distinctiveness while not making the Soviet or totalitarian case utterly unique” (p. 102).
- 7 The author’s expertise as a historian of Soviet culture in the interwar period becomes most evident in his chapter on cultural revolution. Starting from a critique of (earlier characterized under the rubric of traditionalist) Sheila Fitzpatrick’s seminal article on the topic, David-Fox carves out two main interconnected aspects of cultural revolution –the internal one trying to fashion the revolutionary vanguard and revolutionary individual, and the external one aiming at civilizing the “backward” nationalities and classes of the USSR. We read of well-known pre-revolutionary cultural concepts hammered out during emigration, Lenin’s standpoints, his problems with Proletkul’t, the turn toward “culturedness,” thus indicating the penetration of culture into byt (way of living) and preparing the Stalinist way of cultural engineering. As soon as the bolshevik cultural concept became a normative behavioural code it could be used as a weapon against cultural enemies. That is why Soviet cultural revolution always connected the civilizing mission with coercion.
- 8 The last three chapters may be summarized as follows: Chapter 5 deconstructs the history of the Academy of Science between 1918 and 1929. It can no longer be read as the continuation of the tsarist temple of knowledge where “bourgeois” scholars could do what research demanded, but the bolshevization of the honorable institution was prepared by the rivalry of the Communist Academy which in a way continued to live behind the façade of tradition. Chapter 6 keeps an eye on Mariia Kudasheva who became the wife of Romain Rolland. She intensely influenced his perception of the early Stalinist Soviet Union. David-Fox regards her as an “intimate mediator” (p. 166), i.e. one of three types of mediators of Soviet culture into the West (no. 1 – Soviet professionals and scientist, no. 2 – cultural officials). In comparison to the other types Kudasheva’s role was “unique,” because she had emotional forces that made Rolland intellectually come closer to her mother-country. The last chapter is on German intellectual history. It describes Ernst Niekisch’s very “German” intellectual career from left social democrat in the Kaiserreich to nationalist and racist during Weimar Republic to rightist intelligent-adversary of plebeian Nazism; after 1945 he taught at Humboldt-University in East-Berlin, finally left the GDR and settled in West-Berlin. While Kudasheva’s “work” was quite successful, those who tried to manipulate Niekisch and his group of National Bolsheviks in order to foster their pro-Soviet orientation lost their labour.
- 9 It is nice to read how the author cuts aisles through the jungle of literature, if a typical metaphor of modernity may be used here. The book offers many opportunities for discussion though some conclusions seem to be not the freshest ones. One should leave the question, if all historians mentioned in the first chapters find themselves correctly

sorted, to an in-group debate. But why did the author overlook Russian contributions to the topic, in particular the stimulating books of A. Vishnevskii, where “the horse pulls the car”—modernity is analyzed in the cultural realm and beyond, and A.V. Krasilshchikov, who studied Soviet economic modernization in a comparative manner?³ Many observations would need contradictory discussion. Just some examples: byt may be interpreted as the acknowledgement of local, accidental, non-structured factors, and not as the cultural preparation of Stalinism, cf. the development of *kraevedenie* in the 1920s. In this case the (temporarily allowed) cultural heterogeneity of the 1920s was no cultural “prelude to Stalinism”, to vary a book-title by Roger Pethybridge.⁴ Or, recent richly documented publications on the practices of Stalinist terror do not find a significant role of ideology,⁵ thus posing a “binary opposition” to David-Fox’s statement. Or, the German rightist nationalist Niekisch was not alone when he admired the Soviet Union. His position was not a question of personal intellectual attitude, but one of concepts about authoritarian states and societies. There was a strange respect for the USSR among some Italian fascists, too.⁶

- 10 However, the main problem of the book is its conceptual approach. Firstly: It is alright to rely on Eisenstadt’s concept of multiple modernities, but it needs discussion. Its value as a research strategy (it helped to break the dominant Western perspective) is inversely proportional to its theoretical substance. Maybe that is the reason why we find a declaration of respect, but no discussion. Shouldn’t we agree that within scholarly debates critique is the highest form of recognition? Secondly: The author is right when he leaves the fruitless have and have-not debates. But he does not clarify his understanding of modernity except the fact that there are many varieties. He considers Soviet modernity as a failed alternative. Modernities that “fail” or “anticipate” something, need a normative understanding. It remains unclear what the norms could be, especially within a bunch of varieties, and it remains in particular open how the implicit normative use of the term can be conceptually handled without being filled as regards content. Additionally, a “failed” modernity echoes the concept of modernity as progress, but this characterization has been avoided by theoreticians for many years. Thirdly: David-Fox is right when he draws on sociologists like A. Giddens and P. Wagner. They could have been the starting point for a discussion about the margins of Soviet modernity⁷, in particular Wagner’s skeptical view on the liberal version of modernity. If there is a convergence among almost all theoreticians of modernity before the rise of post-modernism, it is the negationist perspective that binds together extremely different positions such as Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s, Z. Bauman’s and M. Foucault’s. On the basis of this long-lasting discourse one cannot avoid questions about the “modern” aspects of rationality and coercion, internal colonization and violence, “system imperatives” (A. Touraine, J. Habermas), behavior of administrations and power relationships. These important questions that help to place the Soviet Union within the ambivalences of modernity,⁸ are not posed in the book, although David-Fox several times comes close to them, but then he retreats to empirical findings. Fourthly: The transnational approach deserves full support though the difference between transnational and comparative history is somewhat blurred in the book. In the case of the latter it has to be founded very carefully on methods and concepts in order to avoid comparisons of similarities; a phenomenological approach does not help (“features of modernity” in this book). Unfortunately the book overlooked the results of a whole series of books that analyzed the multiple histories of European societies under the auspices of modernity.⁹

- 11 Although the book comes a little late and lacks conceptual homogeneity (if I may use the compromised term), its observations and interpretations are worth to be discussed; its ability of structuring research literature opens doors for alternative interpretations of Soviet cultural history.
- 12 Finally I cannot evite a little bêtise against the publisher who should have read the foreword. There the author expresses his gratitude to his companion of many years who appears on the cover as the commentator of the “brilliant book”-type. The book does not deserve such an odious advertisement.
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NOTES

1. Bruno Latour, *Wir sind nie modern gewesen: Versuch einer symmetrischen Anthropologie* (Frankfurt a. M. 1998, p. 18) (*Nous n'avons jamais été modernes: Essai d'anthropologie symétrique* P., 1991).
2. Hans Joas, “Die Modernität des Krieges: Die Modernisierungstheorie und das Problem der Gewalt,” *Leviathan*, 24 (1996): 13-27, quotation p. 27.
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4. Roger Pethybridge, *The Social Prelude to Stalinism* (London, et al.,1974).
5. Rolf Binner et al., eds., *Massenmord und Lagerhaft: Die andere Geschichte des Großen Terrors*, Berlin 2009; Idem, *Stalinizm v Sovetskoi provintsii 1937-1938 gg.: Massovaia operatsiia na osnove prikaza no. 0044* [Le stalinisme dans la province soviétique, 1937-1938: l'opération de masse sur la base du décret 0044] (M., 2009); Idem, *Massovye repressii v Altaiskom krae 1937-1938 gg.: Prikaz no. 00447* [Les répressions de masse dans le territoire de l'Altaj, 1937-1938 : décret 00447] (M. 2010).
6. Stefan Plaggenborg, *Ordnung und Gewalt: Kemalismus – Faschismus – Sozialismus* (Munich 2012), 43 ff.
7. Wolfgang Knöbl, *Spielräume der Modernisierung: das Ende der Eindeutigkeit*. Weilerswist 2001.
8. Stefan Plaggenborg, *Experiment Moderne: Der sowjetische Weg* (Frankfurt a. M., New York, 2006). I covered the whole time span of the Soviet Union as David-Fox requires for future research (speaking in the words of A. Krylova).
9. Ulrich Herbert, ed., *Europäische Geschichte im 20. Jahrhundert*. The following volumes were published up to now: Hans Woller: *Geschichte Italiens im 20. Jahrhundert* (Munich, 2010); Franz-Josef Brüggemeier: *Geschichte Großbritanniens im 20. Jahrhundert* (Munich, 2010); Walther L. Bernecker: *Geschichte Spaniens im 20. Jahrhundert* (Munich, 2010); Włodzimierz Borodziej: *Geschichte Polens im 20. Jahrhundert* (Munich, 2010); Marie-Janine Calic: *Geschichte Jugoslawien im 20. Jahrhundert* (Munich, 2010); Dietmar Neutatz: *Träume und Alpträume. Eine Geschichte Russlands im 20. Jahrhundert* (Munich, 2013); Ulrich Herbert: *Geschichte Deutschlands im 20. Jahrhundert* (Munich, 2014).

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