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INTERDISCIPLINARY SYNTHESIS: ANTINOMIES OF RUSSIAN MODERNIZATION

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Abstract

In this chapter, we put our analytical results into an interdisciplinary synthetic perspective. We conceptualize the contemporary epoch in Russia based on ten fundamental tension fields. These antinomies are not necessarily articulated as interrelated political problematiques, in which case the choices are outside the control of Russian agencies, being for example, enforced by global markets or foreign policy constraints. That said, there is no external agency that could determine the complex whole of modernization antinomies within Russia. In most cases, the Russian elites balance themselves within the antinomy. We have emphasized the genuine multiplicity of agency, bringing into the picture counter-forces and power resources beyond the elites. There is no coherent 'other Russia' that would somehow emerge out of the blue, but the conservative power bloc is certainly not the only force determining the future of Russia. In Russian society, there is a great need to articulate a political programme of more social justice, towards a real multiplicity and inclusiveness of political participation, and one of ecological responsibility. All these challenges must be faced in a global environment of climate change, and in an international system that risks the prospect of being locked into a new Cold War.

7.1. New paradigm

We started our analysis by formulating five macro-level challenges of contemporary Russia. Our research on basic structures and agencies within these issues has demonstrated the complexity of these problems. Both structures and agencies are multiple within each great challenge, and the multifaceted tensions cannot be overcome with some simple act of will or a more strategic approach. As we have seen in the culture chapter, our empirical analysis of Russian media shows a strong tendency in public discussion to find one single explanation for failing modernization. If only phenomenon x would happen, everything would work out fine. Our results point us in the other direction. We seem to need both new theoretical instruments and detailed empirical analysis if we want to conceptualize and explain social development, including both the failures and the successes of contemporary Russia.

At the same time, we have to be aware of the limitations of the social sciences' explanatory capacities. Suggesting a new paradigm for Russian studies, we want to base our argument on a reflective relationship between theoretical concepts and empirical analysis. We argue that most theoretical perspectives have so far neglected the complexity of Russian society, and for that reason, the theoretical approaches have not been able to open new horizons for studying ongoing, empirically-observable processes. Rather, they have been apt to reduce Russian problems to some *basic historical determinants, linear processes, or simplified contradictions*. Before opening our own analysis of antinomies of Russian modernization, we offer some specifications concerning the limitations of the previous grand theories, or major explanations of modernization.

Many contemporary approaches to Russia, we assert, deal with real phenomena but without reflecting on *the limits of their explanations*, as if other aspects, contrary tendencies, or even counter evidence would not be worth considering. This is the case, for example, with theory of patrimonialism, or various approaches highlighting the role of rent-seeking, corruption, or informal relations in general. Rent-seeking and neopatrimonialism are relevant explaining mechanism for the relationship between

economic interests and the form of political system. Rent-seeking interests are decisive for promoting the elite-driven, narrowest form of economic modernization, which is focused on the hydrocarbon sector. However, these interests contradict with the economic interests both of other sectors, and of comprehensive programmes oriented towards developmental role of the state. We have shown that interests and action frames within Russia are contradictory in many ways. Our new paradigm intends to give a more comprehensive conceptual frame by introducing the key antinomies and their complex relationships. At the same time, we do indicate the limitations of our own approach. We are not arguing for a theory of modernity or modernization that would be valid without spatial or temporal specifications. Furthermore, the choices dealing with antinomies are neither obligatory nor impossible, they are contingent and the relations between the choices are complex and nonlinear.

By antinomies of Russian modernization, we mean permanent tensions that characterize contemporary Russian society in terms of basic structural constraints and action frames. These tensions are not theoretically deduced from some kind of general logic of modernity, they are empirically-observable, historically-constructed structures and frames of action that define the institutional matrix in which the choices with regard to contemporary Russia are made.

In the empirical analyses, we have come to the conclusion that the contemporary Russian modernization effort can be conceptualized on the basis of ten antinomies:

1. Hydrocarbons as a blessing and a curse
2. Neo-liberal economic policy versus a developmental state
3. A hybrid of democracy and authoritarianism
4. Rule of law versus informal networks and practices
5. Neo-liberal withdrawal of the state versus state-oriented expectations of the population
6. External vulnerability versus internal vulnerability in social policy
7. The elite's conflict with the middle and working class
8. Global processes clashing with nationalistic closing
9. Tension between power politics and interdependency
10. A conservative hegemonic project versus secular liberalism.

The intention in this chapter is to discuss the relevance of these antinomies for how they might open new research horizons and provide new forms of explanations. Let us start with a few methodological points to clarify how our approach differs from some key competing approaches.

We offer neither a single or simple explanation. Rather, we would argue that contemporary Russia is difficult to open to interpretation, dirty and complex as empirical reality always is. We do not see any possibility to resolve the antinomies that could be presented at the level of a kind of philosophical master approach. There simply is no 'general dialectics' of Russian antinomies. Nor is there a *dominant contradiction*, which would be present in all others and define their direction. Structuration implies many alternatives and unpredictability of choices, intended and unintended results, and interdependencies between the various facets of society. Only interpreted in this way can the concept of contradictions and antinomies can be sociologically usable in analyzing multi-causal processes.

We cannot postulate as a starting point that a clear functional differentiation of society's institutional spheres is an inevitable constitutive feature of any modernization process. In order to analyze the

interaction between economy and politics, welfare and the political system, culture and foreign policy, we need historical ideal types and new explanatory models that can characterize the structuration principles and contradictions of the contemporary epoch in Russian society. These cannot be found in the Western modernization paradigm, which presupposes functional differentiation.

If our analysis shows anything, it indicates that the understanding of Russian problems must be open to empirical research and falsifiable scientific hypotheses. For example, Žižek's position that theory does not need to care about empirical facts is absurd in the Russian context (cf Žižek 2009 and 2011). The last things that Russia needs is some kind of abstract decisionism or revolutionary approach. The choices are open for alternatives, but they cannot be evaluated without empirical evidence on the full range of effects of action, whether planned or not.

On the other hand, there is no 'general equilibrium' because societal interests are contradictory in concrete and observable ways, and the antinomies are not going to disappear in any foreseeable future. Even in more general terms, sociological theories based on dichotomic understanding of epochs and linear understanding of processes are misleading. Not because of Russian specificity, but because of the far-too-abstract character of their categories. Already in the beginning of our book we defended the structuration approach because it does not have any master processes such as general differentiation, as many modernization theories do. We can now strengthen this argument since antinomies obviously cannot be conceptualized in the context of a predetermined differentiation process. The differentiation thesis does not seem to have any empirical relevance in the Russian context. There is no general Russian solution to the relationship between economy and politics, and the relationship between various antinomies cannot be explained by the concept of differentiation. Rather, there is complex concrete and historical reciprocity between the various solutions to major antinomies. Actors struggle over a specific historical setting, while constrained by specific historical structures.

But we have to go even deeper. Instead of counterposing or eliminating practice, we have to accept that modern phenomena co-exist with traditional ways of life: industrialization does not only produce environmental problems as collateral damage, we have seen de-industrialization, and after democratic turns we have witnessed new forms of authoritarianism using and misusing democratic instruments. Secularization exists side by side with desecularization. In many respects, Russian development is still affected by unintended legacies of the Bolshevik project. But there are also the legacies of counter-reactions and backlashes: the conservative project resonates heavily with the fear of radical changes. There still exists the memory of purges, terror, the NKVD or just the chaotic unpredictability of life in the 1990s.

We have seen that there is no *inevitable* development in any of the Russian great challenges. However, Russian development is not a complete failure either. No general dialectics, no wisdom in great sociological narratives on differentiation, no inevitably developing subjects of resistance. This lack of inevitable and totalizing explanations has two significant implications with regard to the social sciences in general. Since choices are contingent, we cannot make longstanding predictions. We also seem to need new forms of critical theorizing to look at the concrete structures and agencies, and a new boldness in theorizing concrete antinomies and alternatives. Instead of seeking totalizing and systemic alternatives in Marcuse's sense, where reason is already wiser than reality, we have to focus more on unintended results and complex interdependencies between the choices that are contingent, neither inevitable nor impossible. Contingency is a necessary element in the structuration process. No reason, whether in Kant's or Hegel's sense can foresee contingent choices, let alone all their unintended results.

In this chapter, we put our analytical results in an interdisciplinary synthetic perspective. Specifying the results of major structuration analysis in terms of multiple agencies and structural constraints, we show how major tensions, conceptualized as antinomies, stay as generic structuration principles in contemporary Russian social change. Having characterized the logic of individual antinomies we also show their complex interrelationships.

7.2. Antinomies

People – including people in Russia – are not helpless victims tossed about by the overpowering “values” or “systemic mechanisms” of culture or economy. Rather, they are actors who can use their knowledge and skills both as individuals and as members of organizations. People in different positions have different power resources with which they can make choices. Moreover, they can observe their own actions and learn, which may lead to new ideas on interests and goals. In this way, our understanding of the modernization of Russia cannot be based on any theory of linear modernization. It is more fruitful to adopt the more modest “episodic” concept of history proposed by Giddens. Because of societal conflicts, institutions are not value-implementing mechanisms, but rather structures that are formed through interest struggles and the intended and unintended consequences of actions. We started our analysis with five Russian macro-level challenges. Our interdisciplinary synthesis ends by suggesting a new vocabulary for studying social change in contemporary Russia. The contemporary epoch in Russia can be conceptualized, based on ten fundamental tension fields.

(1) Hydrocarbons as a blessing and as a curse

Diverting from the existing resource curse discussion, we show how energy resources are both the blessing and the curse of Russian development. They have been the main source of Russian economic growth, but at the same time key branch for rent-seeking. Oil prices have a direct impact on Russia’s economic growth, while the country cannot determine the overall market situation, Russia has learnt to regulate the related short-term problems by pegging the value of the rouble to the price of oil. It has also continued in its narrow economic diversification strategy path, strengthening the competitive advantage of the energy sector by increasing the refining degree of production. However, after the West imposed the current sanctions, Russia also launched the largest development programme of other industrial sectors to date in order to substitute imports. Russia has many renewable energy resources, too, but they are still mostly unexploited, as both Russian industry and consumers are dependent on hydrocarbon production structures. This is becoming an increasingly problematic issue in the long term, as global efforts towards carbon-neutral solutions due to climate change increase.

(2) Developmental state versus neoliberal economic policy.

In existing literature, Russian economic policy is seen as either neo-liberal or state-run. Our empirical analysis shows that it is both. Currently Russian think tanks are hankering for a mixed economy and developmental state, whereas the actual economic policy still also has strong elements of neoliberalism. Our results show that state-led programmes started intensively already in 2007. They were initiated by the observation that Russia’s developmental capacities had been significantly weakened because of the destruction of institutions by ‘shock therapy’ in the 1990s. Neoliberal starting points define the priorities of low inflation, labour markets flexibility, and high integration with the international economy in terms of trade, investment, and finance. That said, Russian elements of mixed economy are driven by East Asian examples, and Russia’s commodity-based economic

structure is generally compatible with developmental industrial policies. However, bureaucratic power in Russia is not centralized in the developmental state fashion.

(3) Democracy versus authoritarianism

Russia's is an electoral political system biased towards authoritarianism. Our analysis shows that such a system combines the risks of both institutional forms. The connection between the elite and the public must be built in the environment of changing political cycles and conflicting economic aspirations, while taking care of the fact that the elite's power will not be genuinely challenged or the public be given any real participation. The Russian elite sees modernization very narrowly as only improvement in economic and technological competitiveness. However, they avoid long-term commitment to related programmes because a concrete failure could lead to a crisis in the legitimacy of power. At the same time, strong independent civil society organizations and the mobilization of the people's wishes are avoided. In this way, the elite is both a promoter and an obstacle to narrow modernization. A change of leadership would be considered a *high* risk; this leads to increasingly authoritarian practices.

(4) Rule of law versus informal networks and practices

Our results confirm Ledeneva's (2013) findings that the main constraints of Russian modernization stem from a combination of authoritarianism and informal administrative practices. However, we must take into account the other side of the hybrid tension as well. Russia's political system also includes elements of a competitive democratic system, and the development of the rule of law is progressing in judicial institutions – provided that the interests of the elite are not at stake. Legislation, legal practices, codification of laws, and the professionalization of lawyers all support the power of legal regulation in society. From the point of view of institutional reform, it is essential to examine both “functional” and “dysfunctional” informal networks, particularly in connection with institutions' official tasks and rules.

(5) Neo-liberal withdrawal of the state versus state-oriented expectations of the population

The Russian welfare state of today does not fit any of the ideal-type welfare models or regimes in the literature. The Russian welfare model is contradictory in many ways. The state withdraws itself from many tasks in a neo-liberal spirit, but social policy still includes some conservative and social-democratic elements. Our analysis also shows that the privatization of Russian social policy and the abandonment of institutional care are linked to the global neo-liberal trend. The low welfare budget and strong tendency towards the withdrawal of the state are at odds with the expectations of the Russian people. This is the most significant contradiction, and a domestic vulnerability, in Russian social policy.

(6) External vulnerability versus internal vulnerability in social policy

The external vulnerability of Russian social policy is linked with the energy policy antinomy. Russia is not able to control the energy markets and cannot count on the volatile equilibriums present in the global arena. This makes the resources for social policy highly unpredictable. The vulnerabilities have been realized during the 2015-2019 period. As the price of oil has declined and the Western sanctions have cut key Russian banks from the sources of long-term funding, Russia's state finances have become significantly squeezed. This placed a significant strain on the budgeting policy process, in

which the decisions related to the social sphere represent an important part. Meanwhile, consistently promoted fiscal conservatism, represented the baseline for the social budget. This is highly problematic from the point of view of growing inequality and domestic dissatisfaction with living conditions.

(7) The elite versus middle and working class

Our results show that classes are not major actors in Russian politics or policy choices. They may have different interests, for example, in taxation and educational policies, but there is not much of a democratic class struggle in the Nordic sense. The new conservative hegemonic project does not make any effort to reduce inequality. Rather it addresses the issues in terms of order, security, tradition, patriotism, and religion. Even the Communist Party is within the outer layer of the conservative bloc. However, in Russia, masses comply because they lack collective organization to do otherwise, and because they are embedded within collective and distributive organizations controlled by others. The power of an organized elite cannot be resisted by an atomized majority. Yet, an elite-driven political process seems to also lead to comprehensive resistance. Russian society is not politically-divided by classes; rather the conflict potential exists between the neo-liberal plus authoritarian elite, and the vast majority of population with their strong demands of more social justice and collective responsibility.

(8) Global processes versus nationalistic closing

Post-Cold War Russia is not a closed society. People and information flow across borders. However, a global tendency towards democracy is shadowed by religious fundamentalism, essentializing cultural differences, and growing nationalism. All these phenomena are visible in contemporary Russia. Nationalistic values that the conservatives conceive as national *cultures* seem to offer an ostensibly secure and stable foundation amidst the social tensions linked with increasing migration, globalized economy, and multiculturalism. In Russia, the whole political scene is more or less nationalistic. At the same time, the transnational flow of capital, resources, and media practices keeps integrating Russian citizens into global processes and intersectional communities beyond the boundaries of nation-states. Nationalistic approaches are currently creating new tensions and this may lead to losing out on a long-term global role.

(9) Military great powerness versus economic, cultural and ecological interdependency

Since the Cold War, there have been no openly-agreed-upon spheres of interest, and recognizing such at the level of official agreements is considered impossible. However, spheres of interest are recognized implicitly in situations where the other party's military potential must be taken into account. On the other hand, economic interdependency is mutual, and in economic terms Russia depends on maintaining good relations with European markets as much as the EU depends on Gazprom to supply them. Russia's ability to coerce its energy customers as an energy superpower is constrained by financial and environmental factors. The complexity of this antinomy is visible in the Ukrainian crisis. Russia's own integration process EAEU was confronted by the EU, and a sphere of interest conflict turned into actual military action by Russia. As the next step, Russia received informal recognition of its sphere of interest in military terms, at the same time losing cultural goodwill and cooperative prospects for its domestic modernization. Russia is trying to seek new markets and support from Asia, and is giving in to China in sphere of interest conflicts in Central Asia. Yet at the same time, the Russian foreign policy modernization model imitates the West,

especially the US, and the Eurasian Union has adopted the four freedoms representing the key values of the European Union.

(10) **A conservative hegemonic project versus secular liberalism**

Existing literature is constantly paying more attention to the new conservative turn in Russia. However, this phenomenon has not so far been properly theorized. Our results show that Russian conservatism is a complex phenomenon, multifaceted, and a work in progress. It involves a multiplicity of individual actors, think tanks, movements, and institutions. The ideological spectrum is large; from communists to White emigration, from Slavophiles to Eurasianists, from the Western European kind of liberal conservatism to many anti-Western nationalisms, plus Soviet nostalgia. Essentializing the Russian conservative identity is a strong intellectual tendency in contemporary Russia. However, Russia's constantly top-down reproduced statism has also produced its counterforces. Russia is one of the birthplaces of the populism we acknowledge today – that is, empowering common people against the immoral elite – and it includes factors that bear important connections to the country's prospects of political modernization. Additional to these traditional political confrontations, there are many new forms of conflicts based on ideologies on economy (neoliberalism versus developmental state), religion (secularization versus desecularization, Islam versus Christianity), gender (conservative or liberal family values), ecological problems (climate change versus denialism), and international mass culture versus Russian tradition.

All of these antinomies comprise both several structural constraints and various agencies with varying power resources. For example, in the case of culture this means confrontation of the conservative turn with several other tendencies such as international neo-liberalism, environmental movements, feminism, international mass culture, mass consumption etc. These antinomies are not necessarily articulated as interrelated political *promlematiques*, in which case the choices happen behind the back of Russian agencies, for example, enforced by global markets and foreign policy constraints. On the other hand, there is no external agency that could define the complex whole of modernization antinomies within Russia. In most antinomies, the Russian elite is balanced within the antinomy, but without a long term analysis of their interdependencies in terms of matching rules and resources.

7.3 Between extremities: Critiques and choices

In the light of our analysis, we can now conclude that Russia does not have an alternative model of modernity to offer to global development. During the Soviet era, there was a programme for an alternative societal model, which was trying to completely eliminate the core traditional aspects of society. In the Soviet modernization model, the general tendency of social theorizing to lose any sense of proportion with regard to opposing tendencies is brought to the extreme – with tragic unintended results and ultimately with failure.

Russia has always been a source of various forms of social critique and also been subject to utopian thinking. In the contemporary situation, we should look for the actual alternatives of social development and the forms of critical social discourse that might be relevant for Russia's future. However, we should make this conceptual development open to a new forms of critical analysis. Peter Wagner (2008) has shown the fundamental problems in traditional critical approaches of capitalist form of modernity. First of all, it tends to deploy its concepts in such a way that they are stretched to

cover too large a variety of societal institutions, that is, practically all the history of the north-western quarter of the world since the Enlightenment. Wagner argues that we have to take the justifications for certain historico-institutional arrangements seriously. We should open the critical analysis of the experiences of changes in the ways of dealing with the various *problématiques* of modernity. These *problématiques* – the political, epistemic, and economic ones – exist in all societies, but we would need a historico-institutional analysis of the modern solutions to them. These are based on the modern idea of autonomy but the particular justifications of particular institutional settings cannot be conceptually concluded from this. Wagner's argument is methodologically significant because it shows that we have to have empirically-available justifications for changing the configurations of modernity.

In sum, we argue that the standard critique of capitalism does not itself live up to the requirements of modernity. Rather than fully accepting the commitment to autonomy and, as a consequence, the plurality of outcomes from the exercise of autonomy, it reasons the issue away by establishing a conceptual hierarchy between the *problématiques* of modernity, as well as between the realms in which those *problématiques* are dealt with. This move amounts ultimately to nothing but a rejection of these *problématiques* – which are seen as problematic only under capitalist conditions, but finding self-evident solutions once capitalism is overcome (Wagner 2008, 109). In the Soviet case, this elimination led to actual societal practices. In the contemporary totalizing critique against neo-liberalism, there is a similar eliminating tendency. But on the other hand, in the contemporary Western approach to Russia there is a tendency to reduce all *problématiques* of modernity to the question of a competitive political system.

However, the West does not have a ready-made model for Russian modernization. Contemporary justification debates concern all fields of organizing the economic, political, and cultural spheres of modern societies. Yet, the role of the state in economy is fundamentally different in the US from that in Continental Europe, let alone in Nordic societies. Ways of organizing civil society and party systems differ in fundamental ways, as does the religious activism or level of ecological responsibility. Structural principles of facing societal risks and organizing welfare policy vary fundamentally, and this can be evidenced in the results.

Of course, there are some shared key values with regard to rule of law, human rights, and democracy. Paradoxically, Russia *is* committed to these same values. As it is, in principle, committed to a rule-based international order. This is the core argument in neo-modernization theory.

However, in this book we have suggested that to explain Russian development we have to go deeper in terms of empirical social science, while also making an effort to generate new forms of critical approach. Our understanding is that this is significant not only for the Russian society, but for the West as well.

Starting with the structuration theory, we have conducted an empirical analysis of contemporary Russian development ending with the result that except on the general problematics of modernity, Russia is facing several historically specific antinomies. These antinomies seem to constitute the Russian institutional matrix as hybrid on many levels. This hybridity is not an ontological philosophical postulate but an *empirically-observable social fact*. Of course, the antinomies are not eternal, but we have argued that there is no evident or short route to a completely different society (cf. Sakwa 2019, 191).

Much of the discussion of Russia's future tends to focus on Kremlin, or on the power elite in more general terms. We have opened the issue by using the concept of conservative power bloc, Marlene Laurelle (2019) focuses on ideological ecosystems and Richard Sakwa (2019) on epistemological (or

interest-ideological) blocs. Whatever focus the analysis has, the most important conclusion is evident: the ideological horizons, or action frames, of Russian elites do not show much tendency to deal with societal contradictions or make efforts to find solutions to major antinomies. Rather the actions are aiming at finding temporary balances that reproduce hybrid structures. Modernization is understood only in the narrow sense of economic and technological catching up.

We have emphasized the genuine multiplicity of agency, bringing into the picture counter-forces and power resources *beyond* the elites. There is no coherent 'other Russia' that would somehow emerge straight out of the blue, but definitely the conservative power bloc is not the only force determining the future of Russia. In Russian society, there is a great need to articulate a political programme of more social justice, towards a real multiplicity and inclusiveness of political participation and of ecological responsibility. All this has to be done in a global environment of climate change, and in an international system that risks the prospect of being locked into a new Cold War.

The main message of this book is that if Russia is to develop politics in positive directions, these need to be developed with the help of social science. But the latter must be bold enough to maintain a dialog across the locked borders, and intellectually ambitious enough to discuss even the most significant paradigmatic foundations.