



The Lord and the Land. Vladimir Putin, Russian History, and the Concept of the State

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Review of Claudio Ingerflom. *El dominio del amo. El estado ruso, la guerra con Ucrania y el nuevo orden mundial*. Buenos Aires, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2022, 216 pp.¹

Historical work is necessary when confronted with the political problems of the present. All the more so when the present seems crushed by the catastrophe of meaning and extended as a mere surface of the hectic leafing of the chronicle. For more than a year, Russia has been invading Ukraine. In the military occupation of the public stage by political scientists, generals, international relations experts, and journalists accusing one side or the other of pro-Putinism or pro-American imperialism, few voices have yet been raised to place the war within the framework of the long-term structures that pervade history. In his latest work, Claudio Ingerflom, who describes his research as a contribution to the “history of the present”, uses his deep expertise as a historian of Russia to deconstruct the political (and for that very reason: illegitimate) use of history cultivated by the inner circle of politicians, intellectuals,

¹ An augmented translation has recently come out in France: *Le Domaine du Maître. L'État russe et sa mission mondiale*. Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2023.

and lawyers close to Vladimir Putin. In doing so, on the one hand, he clarifies the meaning of the “special military operation” launched on 24 February 2022, by situating it within the oft-repressed and long history of Russian imperial colonialism —imperialism that precedes NATO’s expansionism eastward in the crisis triggered by the collapse of the Soviet regime. On the other hand, his conceptual assumptions deconstruct the state-centered rhetoric codifying the “mission” that Putin’s Russia projects into the global future.

In Putin’s “Manifiesto for the New Millennium” (*Rossia na rubezhe ty-siachiletii*), the primary arguments subjected to the genealogical and historical-conceptual investigation carried out in this book are made explicit. Starting from it, Putin claims a project of authoritarian transition, as seen from the broader constellation of texts published by his closest collaborators and compiled in the wake of this inaugural gesture in the following years. On the internal level, this project appeals to the idea of a strong state, identified with a neat executive verticality that rejects pluralism and the differentiation of social positions. On the external level, however, it locates in an assertive Russia the new global leader destined to assume the role of a decadent West that has entered its final crisis. From the perspective of the new order to be established, the invasion of Ukraine represents a caesura that takes on the profile of an absolute “creative destruction”. It marks a break with international diplomacy and the too many treaties with which the “collective West” keeps the Russian power in check. It equally breaks up with the threatening manifestation of the West by its intrusion into the international arena.

Finally, it emphasizes the defense of a set of values historically rooted in *rossiskaia ideia* and an alternative to liberal values.³ Putin and his closest associates vigorously defend the idea of a cultural identity based on patriotism, social solidarity, and *derzhavnost* (power). The latter goes hand in hand with the maintenance of a traditional thesis that recognizes the state —a strong and authoritarian state— as the main actor and authentic driving force of Russian history.

What Ingerflom calls the “state paradigm” matures in the late nineteenth century in the legal historiography of authors such as Sergey Soloviev (1820-1879), Konstantin Kavelin (1818- 1885), Boris Chicherin (1828-1904). Through the lens of this paradigm, Russian history appears as the history of

2 *Nezavisimaa gazeta*, 30 December 1999; engl. transl. by Catherine A. Fitzpatrick: “Russia at the Turn of the Millennium”, in Vladimir Putin: *First Person: An Astonishingly Frank Self-Portrait by Russia’s President Vladimir Putin*. New York, Public Affairs, 2000, pp. 209-229.

3 See Sergey Karaganov. “Russia’s New Foreign Policy, the Putin Doctrine”, *RT*, 23 February 2022. Available at <https://www.rt.com/russia/550271-putin-doctrine-foreign-policy/>, accessed 10 June 2023.

a progressive state-building by uncritically putting at work teleological and evolutionary assumptions derived from the universalization of the modern European state form. Within these authors, the exchange between word and concept on which the Putinist rhetoric is grounded has been realized. The word in question is “gosudarstvo”. In appearance, it might be translated as “state”. But *Gosudarstvo* is, in fact, a recurring term in legal and political texts since the fourteenth century. Only through an evident anachronism, therefore, its meaning can be forced into coinciding with the concept of the state, which performs the function of a filter in the historiographical operation being carried out. As a matter of fact, on the one hand, we meet the difficulty of recognizing in the events of the Moscow principality between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries anything immediately corresponding to the modern constitutional framework. On the other hand, we can see the temptation to solve the problem by operating the split between what represents the dissolution of traditional power structures and what embryonically anticipates the state to come through the adoption of an interpretive scheme that generalizes its constitutional model.

What Claudio Ingerfom is carrying out regarding the Russian political language is an operation analogous to that which, in the historical-conceptual sphere, allows Werner Conze and Reinhart Koselleck to mobilize Otto Brunner, Otto Hintze, and Carl Schmitt for a radical historicization of the categories of the political and the concept of the state that corresponds to them.⁴

1) The state is a very recent product of constitutional history and represents a “plastic abstraction” that tends to be surreptitiously transferred onto the concrete associative forms that precede its emergence (Hintze).⁵

2) The stratified pre-modern legal pluralism cannot be thought of based on the modern formal idea of the law, whose production is secured by the sovereign’s monopoly (Brunner).⁶

3) A state is a specific form of the spatial organization closely tied to the system of international relations following the peace of Westphalia and to the idea of sovereignty elaborated by modern natural law (Schmitt).⁷

Hintze, Brunner, and Schmitt, as well as Conze and Koselleck after them,

4 Hans Boldt, Werner Conze, Görg Haverkate, Diethelm Kippel, Reinhart Koselleck. “Staat, Souveränität”, in Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, Reinhart Koselleck (eds.): *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*. Stuttgart, Klett-Cotta, 1990, vol. VI, pp. 4-154.

5 Otto Hintze. “Wesen und Wandlung des modernen Staates”, *Sitzungsberichte der Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, 1931, pp. 790-810.

6 Otto Brunner. *Land und Herrschaft. Grundfragen der territorialen Verfassungsgeschichte Österreichs in Mittelalter*. Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, [1939] 1973.

7 Carl Schmitt. *Staat als konkreter, an eine geschichtliche Epoche verbundener Begriff* (1941), in Id.: *Verfassungsrechtliche Aufsätze aus den Jahren 1924-1954. Materialien zu einer Verfassungslehre*. Berlin, Dunker & Humblot, [1958] 2003, pp. 375-385.

point to the same effect of convergence between the modern concept of the state, used as an analytical category, and the teleology retrospectively projected onto the sources in which the recurrence of words assonant, synonymous or coinciding with “state” is used to fix anticipations, prodromes or projections. The same recurrence is used to stitch together historical continuities between ancient and modern, universalizing the conceptual framework proper to the modern constitutional organization of powers. The Russian legal-historical school of the late nineteenth century puts this same circularity to work. Only once having fixed the modern sense of *gosudarstvo* (“state”), the history of Muscovy is reconstructed by making it revolve around a signifier that does not belong to it. This improper superposition causes the contextual use of the term to be lost sight of. It likewise allows the historical “lag” of Russian political socialization to be tied to a process of centralization and statization of powers. The latter, in fact, only retrospectively can be stabilized as a filter for the legal and constitutional evolution of those territories.

This is the first level on which Ingerflom puts the lesson of German *Begriffsgeschichte* to good use. In this way, he proves to be one of its best interpreters not only among historians of Russia. Word and concept, even in the presence of the same semantic support, do not coincide, and the effect of circularity that tends to occur, between anachronism and teleology, when the occurrence of the same word is associated unreflectively with the same meaning, must be broken. In its earliest contexts of occurrence, *gosudarstvo*, the word that for Putin and Putinists, as well as for Russian legal historians, denotes the “state” and the specific continuity of the organizational model that pertains to it, does not mean state at all. *Gosudarstvo*—by its reference to *gosudar*, the term preceding that of Tsar, which later became the most generally used term for the monarch—refers to the semantics of domination with strict patrimonialist connotations. *Gosudar* refers to the One in front of his subjects according to the etymology that lumps it in with the Greek *despotes* or the Latin *dominus*. This latter is even more closely reflected in *gospodar*. This form precedes it and indicates the “lord of the house” if we understand the “house” as the living complex of persons and things that includes family members, property, and enslaved people. *Gosudar* indicates in this way the master and expresses a bond of personal dependence between him and the non-freemen over whom his rule is impressed.⁸

This rather ancient semantics reflects very long-standing structures in European history. Otto Brunner and Reinhart Koselleck have been able to identify in the aristocratic *Haushaltung* the model of the specific

⁸ See Claudio Ingerflom. *Le Tsar c'est moi. L'imposture permanente d'Ivan le Terrible à Vladimir Poutine*. Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2015, pp. 108 ff.

form of “constitutional” organization that precedes the advent of the modern state and which, in its irreducibility to the latter, denotes another way of thinking about politics.⁹ Within this model, “house” does not indicate the simple private and intimate space of the bourgeois mononuclear family, but rather the fundamental juncture of political and social relations of the Greek *politiké koinonia* or what Tocqueville may still call the “ancient European social and political constitution”.¹⁰

Between the *gosudar* and his subordinates, however, there is something different from the classical-novel model of the *Hausherrschaft*. What is relevant in the latter is a differentiated form of relationship between the titleholder of a power and those who find themselves included in his spectrum of action. This is a form of power that only apparently can be called such, if one assumes the modern connotation of power, that is, the one that turns it into a pure power of irresistible disposition over those who are subjected to it, as in the definition offered by Max Weber.¹¹ The Greek “oikonomic” relation, if one understands it according to the original Aristotelian description, is a relation of government that includes free and unfree persons and which, for that very reason, cannot be reduced (*contra* Weber) to the pure formalism expressed by the relation between (authoritarian) command and (absolute) obedience, between “Befehl” and “Gehörsam”.¹² It marks the permanence of a dualism that arranges on different positions, those who govern and those who are governed, without eluding the problem of the recognition of the latter as the holder of a position internal to the very same relationship of governance. This element determines the possibility of *foedera*, constitutions or agreements that, when broken by the governors imply the immediate possibility of resistance by the governed. This dualist matrix, driven by the political power of the governed, is so

9 Otto Brunner. “Das ‘ganze Haus’ und die alteuropäische Ökonomik”, in Id.: *Neue Wege der Verfassungs- und Sozialgeschichte*. Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1968, pp. 103-127; Id. *Adeliges Landleben und Europäischer Geist*. Salzburg, Otto Müller Verlag, 1949; Reinhart Koselleck. “Die Auflösung des Hauses als ständischer Herrschaftseinheit. Anmerkungen zum Rechtswandel von Haus, Familie und Gesinde in Preußen zwischen der französischen Revolution und 1848”, in Id.: *Begriffsgeschichten. Studien zur Semantik und Pragmatik der politischen und sozialen Sprache*. Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2006, pp. 465-485.

10 Alexis de Tocqueville. *L’Ancien régime et la Révolution*. Paris, Gallimard, [1856] 1967, bk. I, ch. IV, p. 76.

11 Max Weber. *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, III. Abteilung, *Grundriss der Sozialökonomik*. Tübingen, Mohr, 1922, p. 606: “Unter ‘Herrschaft’ soll hier also der Tatbestand verstanden werden: daß ein bekundeter Wille (‘Befehl’) des oder der ‘Herrschenden’ das Handeln anderer (des oder der ‘Beherrschenden’) beeinflussen will und tatsächlich in der Art beeinflusst, daß dies Handeln, in einem sozial relevanten Grade, so abläuft, als ob die Beherrschten den Inhalt des Befehls, um seiner selbst willen, zur Maxime ihres Handelns gemacht hätten (‘Gehörsam’)”.

12 Aristotle. *Politics*. A, 1253b.

strong and permanent that it can be adopted as the fundamental structure of European constitutional history.¹³

Weber adopts, for his definition of what appears to be a transhistorical model of “power”, the term *Herrschaft*. This same term, progressively unbalanced in a patrimonialist sense, seems to be the same that resonates —once having lost the dualistic connotations that make it resistible in the ancient European *societas civilis*— in the semantics of the term *gosudar* and in the implantation of the “state paradigm” put to work by Russian legal historiography and, later, by the circle of Putin’s ideologues of imperial *derzhavnost*. On a second level, Ingerflom can thus put Koselleck’s lesson to good use. The historical-conceptual reconstruction of the term *gosudarstvo* allows him to perform two different operations. Firstly, he separates word and concept. The concept of state, in fact, even in the contexts of the word’s use, is not effectively in force. As a result, the constitutional history of tsarism must be written without unreflective references to the concept of the state proper to European public law following the French Revolution. Secondly, he conducts the analysis on the nexus between permanence and innovation that connotes the different forms of duration that are layered into the same concept. Ingerflom refers to the Koselleckian idea of the different “Zeitschichten” gathering in language as an institutional and iterative form.¹⁴ *Gosudarstvo* (and *gosudar*, its root) indicates the specificity of Russian autocracy and allows us to grasp the particular declination that the patrimonial model of “house government” encounters at the intersection with the structures of administrative verticality that determine the depoliticization of civil society by the tsarist power apparatus.

It is highly significant that workers and peasants —branded by their superiors with ignorance and illiteracy for their unwillingness to grasp the transition taking place to a new idea of state— refuse in 1917 to swear allegiance to the *gosudarstvo*: if there is no *gosudar*, there is no *gosudarstvo*, they say.¹⁵ In this refusal we can observe processes of politicization and expectations aimed at constituting the Soviet power in a radically different form than the existing autocratic model. In Russian history, the latter asserts itself by modulating according to a pretty particular form the relationship of domination within the house. In the stable structures of European history, the exercise of “power” that is

13 Werner Näf, “Die Frühformen des modernen Staates im Spätmittelalter”, *Historische Zeitschrift*, 1951, pp. 225-243.

14 Reinhart Koselleck. *Zeitschichten. Studien zur Historik*. Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2000.

15 Claudio Ingerflom. “El desafío de la ‘no-Europa’ a la historia conceptual”, *Scienza & Politica*, vol. 30, N° 58, 2018, pp. 195-219.

expressed there is not exclusively that relating to servile subordination. It is instead that of estate autonomies. This very peculiar type of institution was at most minor until the French Revolution, which by abolishing *domesticité* in the Constitution of 1793 transcribes in terms of wage labor, thus in legally egalitarian and transactional terms, the rights and duties of the servant and lord.¹⁶ In Russia, since the 15th century, it is the latter that is generalized. The prince of Muscovy calls himself *gospodar* (*dominus*) and calls his subjects “slaves”, inscribing this form of domination in the very title of tsar. Through a careful analysis of the sources, Ingerflom can therefore deconstruct the vulgate of legal historiography that reads in Peter the Great (and, subsequently, in the enlightened despotism of Catherine II) the imposition of a paradigm of depersonalization of power aimed at imposing a modern abstract idea of the state. The oldest and most permanent stratum in the history of the concept of *gosudarstvo* corresponds to the “patrimonialist sediment” expressed by the oath formulas of sailors and soldiers. These formulas indissolubly unite, in the time of Peter the Great, oath to the state and oath to the Tsar, validating the formula of personal dependence and allowing, still in the statutes of 1721, to qualify officers and magistrates, who although formally are not, *raby* (enslaved people). *Rab* is traditionally rendered in German as *Knecht* and in English as *Lackey*), *slugi* (servants) or *poddannye* (subjects). Empress Anne had had no compunction, in this sense, to assert earlier that the empire was not some external thing over which the power of the monarch of the day was exercised, but that it was his thing, that it belonged to him. The *service public* of the administrative and judicial functionariat remains, in imperial Russia, which does not know, even in the “enlightened” epoch, the impersonality of powers, a pure “service” to the physical person of the Tsar in whom autocracy is embodied.

This theme allows Ingerflom to emphasize another aspect of continuity between Peter the Great, Stalin, and Putin. That is the element in which the patrimonialist foundation of the Russian autocracy identified with the “father” is combined with the iconic role of the powerful male body, a symbol exhibited on many occasions by the Russian president himself. It is highlighted in the book to dismantle the traditional historiographical interpretation that finds the transition between the late 17th century and the first half of the eighteenth century to be the fundamental passage of political modernization for Russia. On the one hand, we have the Statute of Succession of 1722, which does Peter the Great

16 Art. 18: “la loi ne reconnoit point de domesticité”. See Alexis. de Tocqueville. *De la démocratie en Amérique*, vol. II [1840], Third Part, ch. 5 : “Comment la démocratie modifie les rapports du serviteur et du maître”.

fix his right to choose his successor without being obliged to appoint one of his direct descendants. On the other hand, we have the combination of the abolition of the Russian Patriarchate (1721), which makes the Orthodox Church a kind of ministry subject to secular authority and the Tsar a kind of Christ (or Antichrist, from the point of view of the ecclesiastical hierarchies), and the role of Grand Phallus assumed by the Emperor in the Pan-Burlesque Council. Both they make it possible to highlight how the Russian political process reverses the European one. It is a political theology embodied in the Father, Great Phallus, Owner, and Spouse of the Whole Russia. Moreover, the absolute personalization of autocratic power is opposed to the progressive construction of impersonal state power in Enlightenment France's political theories and administrative practices.

Ingerflom carries out his operation by reversing the sign of Putinist rhetoric. Through a political use of history and the subordination of its heterogeneity to essentialism, in fact, Russia is identified with autocratic patrimonialism and not with the continuity of the state that obliterates it. This autocratic patrimonialism is expressed by a particular type of monocratic and personal government and by a theological-political legitimacy that enshrines it. We can equally recognize it, first, in the divine origin of power, then, in science identified with dialectical materialism and the Party as its sovereign interpreter, and finally, with Putin, in the mission assigned to the "Russian spirit" by a historical destiny to be accomplished. The vindication of the cultural and political continuities spanning Russia's "long century"—that is the one beginning with 1905 and not ended yet, during which the ancient functions of despotic rule into the Soviet system of power after Lenin have been ferried—proves to be entirely functional to the continuity of colonial action that Moscow inherits along with them. On the international level, of course. NATO's hegemonic ambitions over Eastern European countries accompany the westward thrust of what were once called satellite countries of the USSR. They express in this manner a long-standing tendency in those territories to reject the Russian imperial impulses that are an integral part of its history. Nevertheless, also domestically, tsarist autocracy also came to be built on the total depoliticization of civil society. In the last years of the 18th century, an ordinance of Paul I not only compelled the translation of the term "fatherland" with *gosudarstvo*, but forbade, indeed not by accident, the use of the word "society". Putin's not exclusively Putinian claim to the *Rossiskaia ideia* as an anti-Western, anti-liberal function not only expresses a fiercely reactionary stance but also claims Putin's vertical and autocratic governing practice as the adaptation of Russian authoritarianism to the harshest neoliberal

policies. That is, policies of depoliticization, de-democratization, and implementation or valorization of financial capital, even through the stabilization of legally and politically favorable regimes. The history of concepts, in fact —Ingerflom reminds us with Koselleck— is undoubtedly a history of iterations and innovations. This perspective interprets the “special operation” unleashed by Putin in Ukraine as a moment of “creative destruction” aimed at imposing and claiming the imperial role that Russia intends to assume in the balances of power that are being drawn in the crisis of globalization, the future to which it looks is all inscribed in its past.