

"Envisioning Russia from Disciplinary and National Borderlands"  
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My vision of Russia has been shaped by extraordinarily boring circumstances, at least in comparison to the rest of this conference's participants. Russia hardly touched my private life before I entered graduate school in 1979. Like many American youth, I recognized Russia only as a synonym for the Soviet Union, and as our opponent in a Cold War. As I became more politically conscious, and more aware of my sympathies for democratic left politics, I also came to recognize that Soviet communism was a burden the American right wanted to assign the American left. Even as we conducted the Cold War in early 1980s Central America, the Russian shadow loomed large through a Cuba envisioned as proxy and a Soviet Union that was leading the unwary down the road to global serfdom.

I entered graduate school with the American right's challenge in mind, and thought that it would be best to develop my political sense by studying inequality in the Soviet Union directly. A special issue of the sociology journal, Social Forces, provided the inspiration in 1978. Its leading authors – Gerhard Lenski and Anthony Jones – came to be my academic advisors on the sociology of Russia track at the University of North Carolina. But this sociology also shook my political sense.

Both Jones and Lenski conducted a comparative sociology that was more scientific than critical, and they tended to interpret the Soviet Union more as a variation on a theme of modernization or societal evolution than they did as a political, challenge threat or dystopia. For them, the Soviet Union was an alternative modernity. They disliked the political overtones of totalitarianism. They criticized the politically charged comparisons that laid normatively ideal types of democratic capitalism against negative portraits of a Soviet reality. Ideology and reality needed to be disentangled, they argued, and one of the best ways to get to that reality was to focus less on the political aspects of the Soviet Union, and rather to address more its social dimensions. Here, then, we could acknowledge and recognize the greater economic equality of Soviet life, and compare favorably the ways in which Soviet Central Asia developed its modernity in comparison to capitalist modernities to their south. Of course, they argued, there was a tradeoff. Greater economic equality produced greater political inequality. Inequality in human societies beyond hunters and gatherers was inevitable. It's simply a choice which inequality one aggravates.

The normative implications of this argument were, of course, radically different from both my originating democratic left commitments and simple interpretations of totalitarianism. Communist rule, they argued, did offer a powerful means for economic development and improving life chances, but it also meant that one would, of necessity, give up some of those political equalities associated with liberalism. Their vision of Russia was thus a vision of the Soviet Union, which in turn was a vision of an alternative

modernity that produced a tough choice. Sociology's job, it seemed, was to analyze the conditions of the choice and explain the tradeoffs.

In the spring of 1980, Gerhard Lenski took me aside, and recommended that I switch my focus from Russia to Poland. After all, he said, Polish sociology was much better than Russian sociology, and given the relatively free Polish environment, I could conduct more interesting research there. If I stuck with studying Russian, I might be stuck with studying the sociology of sport in Russia if I got there at all. If I switched to Polish, I could at least study occupational inequalities. I switched before Solidarity's formation, but that movement certainly reinforced my decision. But note the disciplinary viewpoint. One society is as good as another for understanding, and explaining, alternative modernities.

To be sure, Lenski and other sociologists recognized Russia's distinction, but its difference paled before the systemic difference between capitalism and socialism. In this, sociology probably shared more with economics than it did with political science, at least in the latter's world politics side. Lenski for instance noted and was intrigued by Russia's "frontier character", making it more like America in their common egalitarian manner, in contrast to Eastern and Western Europe's greater accent on cultural inequalities. But this was superficial in comparison to the accent on systems. Thus, Poland was as good as any other communist-ruled society for understanding the dynamics of socialism, the systemic other to capitalism.

I still feel this disciplinary distinction, this borderland feel, even after communism's collapse in European and northern and central Asia. Our discipline continues to speak in terms of systemic tendencies, without acknowledging, or recognizing, the ways in which different national traditions shape our discussions. Consider, for instance, the forthcoming debate in the American Journal of Sociology. Our discipline's understanding of transition is disproportionately shaped by Hungarian conditions and questions without much discussion or acknowledgement. Michael Burawoy introduces Russia to disturb the argument, and to show that capitalist hopes are based on faith. I would rather say they are based on Hungarian conditions, and that distress over capitalist futures is based in and around Russia. So, I appreciate very much this conference's focus on Russia itself, but one can tell it is not being designed by the American Sociological Association. They would rather call this conference *Imagining Post-Socialism*. So, while my discipline is on this conference's borderlands, I nevertheless feel quite at home. And that takes me to the other borderland, the other place I have come to call home.

My dissertation and first book focused on Poland and the Solidarity movement. I worked with a disciplinary approach that drew on my originating interest in critical theory and my newfound sociological imagination that focused on social systems. While I engaged the political implications of my argument directly, I still treated Poland as an example of a Soviet-type society. My arguments should, then, be able to be extended to other Soviet-type societies with appropriate modification. But I did this despite the advice of my Polish colleagues.

I remember the first presentation of my book's arguments at the University of Warsaw. They argued with me that Poland is *not* a Soviet-type society. Its society is radically different, even if it has the same system. How could this be?, my American sociological imagination said silently. We all know that systemic distinctions are what count. What about society is important that is not determined by systems? That, I see now, is an extraordinarily American disposition, even if the focus on systems implies that panoptic stance, the view from nowhere. It is a view from America.

In the nearly two decades that I have been working in Poland and other borderlands of Russia, I have become increasingly struck by the ways in which American sociology is thoroughly unprepared for a sociology for, and out of, Eastern Europe. In each of these societies, the sociology of the nation is one of the most important, if not the most important, areas of study. American sociology still struggles to articulate that sociology of the nation, and its relationship to the study of race and ethnicity. It can learn a great deal from East European sociology. Indeed, one might even improve our imagination of Russia to the extent we focus on how it is refracted through East European lenses.

I am struck by the degree to which East European sociologies of the nation must address Russia. Estonian sociologies obviously focus on the relationship to Russia, inquiring into the degree to which Estonia and Russia represent different civilizations. Ukrainian sociologies focus on different imperial legacies for national identities, and thus struggle to identify how the Austro-Hungarian and Polish influences have made a different kind of Ukraine than those lands formerly under Russian rule. And Polish sociology defines itself not only by the analysis of how the Polish intelligentsia made and remade Poland in the wake of partitions. It is remarkable how much sociology today is shaped by the question of accession to the European Union, thus marking the nation's distance from its immediate past, and from its former overlord in Russia, with each understood as reflections of one another. This East European lens is, however, more than just an interesting question in comparative sociology. I'm also struck by how much that East European lens shapes an American view of Russia.

The most recent evidence comes from The New York Times on March 14, 2001. Anatol Lieven and Celeste Wallender make a great argument about how the West should be treating Russian debt with the injunction to "Make Russia a Better Neighbor". Forgive Moscow its debts, they argue, only if Moscow forgives its debts to its neighbors. That view of Moscow is certainly one that is not at odds with an East European view. The expansion of NATO was also, of course, an argument with great resonance in Eastern Europe, if I have yet to find a Russian who found it compelling. The list of subjects influenced by East European viewpoints of Russia could multiply, for there are many people whose views of Russia are shaped by the lens they have acquired in Russia's borderlands.

On the other hand, there are many whose view of Russia has always been shaped by their residence, intellectual or physical, in the big nations of the world. I remember being astounded by one Ukrainian journalist's question when he asked why America sought to weaken Ukraine. Perhaps I was too influenced by my Polish colleagues and American colleagues like Roman Szporluk, but I could only see an American interest in a strong and independent Ukraine. I thought the question was non-sensical, but that was before the heat of the debate over NATO's expansion, when Adam Michnik's visit to Michigan clarified it all for me.

I was struck by the number of students and colleagues, with Russian grounding, challenging Michnik over his support for NATO's expansion. Shouldn't we respect Russia's position more? Shouldn't we worry about the unintended consequences of NATO's expansion in empowering Russian nationalists? Shouldn't we respect the Russian sphere of influence? Michnik replied that we should stop treating Russia like they are infantile. We should expect that they can accommodate to a new world order. But that did not stop the debate. It did highlight, however, just how difficult it was for the argument on the borderlands to acquire that panoptic status the view from the center has by default. Poland's interest in national security is identified as particular, while accommodating Russian national security concerns is a matter of global importance.

I look at Russia, therefore, through two lenses, both of which are borderlands in this conference, but also deceptively powerful. American sociology's disposition is powerful not because it focuses on the system, but because it masks its national origins by cloaking its questions in panoptic stances. I think it might improve its sociology, however, if it could make more explicit its grounding. My East European lens is also marginal, because of the ease with which Russia can be seen in the American mirror, from our common frontier identities to our fleeting superpower anxieties. But this East European lens is also powerful, because it encourages us to think about how our view of Russia depends on the place from which we look. I appreciate enormously, therefore, the point of this conference and look with great anticipation to the visions of my colleagues whose lives have been far more entwined with Russia than mine, and therefore far richer for considering the link between biography and history. And that in the end, might suggest why sociology is not so far from center after all, for that link is what C. Wright Mills identified as the foundation for the sociological imagination.