Ido Oren
Power and Identity Panel

Discussion of:
• James Richter, “Russian Foreign Policy and the Politics of National Identity.”
• Douglas W. Blum, “Globalization, National Identity, and Agency: Constructing Youth Culture in the Transcaspian Region.” (unpub. ms.)

If I were refereeing these three pieces for a professional journal, I would have taken them on their own terms. I might have had a quibble or two with each article (for example, I might have asked Doug Blum to better explain his decision to study three cases rather than just one, given that he does not really conduct a comparison across the three cases), but overall I would have recommended publication. Larson’s study of Gorbachev’s new thinking thoughtfully brings psychological theory (Social Identity Theory) to bear on the study of Soviet identity; it is very well-written and well-organized. Jim Richter’s analysis of the politics of Russian identity in the early 1990s is very clear-headed and tightly-argued; it imaginatively explains how competing visions of Russia’s domestic political-economic organization were intertwined with visions of Russia’s place in the international system. Blum has conducted an impressive amount of field research in three sites in the former Soviet Union; he produced a tremendously-rich, nuanced and original analysis of the ways in which state and non-state actors work together to mediate the homogenizing pressures of globalization and build national identities.

But the purpose of this workshop, I think, is not to discuss the papers on their own terms so much as debate these very terms. In this spirit, the bulk of my remarks will involve raising questions about the underlying presupposition shared by the three studies: they all, it seems to me, presuppose a separation between subject and object; value and fact. They presuppose that it is possible to study another nation’s identity independently of the author’s own embeddedness in
a national and historical context; independent of the author’s vision of the identity of his/her own society. And they presuppose that the truth of their claims lies in correspondence to Russia’s objective reality rather than in their embeddedness in an enduring Western discourse about Russia. It is these presuppositions that I wish to call into question.

As Jennifer Sterling-Folker (2000) had recently observed, in the past decade constructivism has basically evolved into a branch of liberal IR theory. It has been “domesticated” [my term] both in the sense that constructivist analyses now tend to reproduce liberal arguments and normative visions of international relations, and in the sense that constructivists have increasingly declared allegiance to the liberal-positivist “idea of social science” (Ruggie 1998, quoted in Sterling-Folker 2000, 99; see also Hopf’s 1998 defense of “conventional” as opposed to “critical” constructivism). The studies of Larson, Richter and Blum are all very fine exemplars of this domesticated constructivism: liberal visions are implicit in all of them (as I will try to explain below), and although none of them is positivist in the rigid, scientistic sense of the term, they do share, as I noted above, the positivist presupposition of separation between fact and value, object and subject.

I use the term “domestication” to describe the evolution of constructivist theory because, as Sterling-Folker (2000, 98) reminded us, “constructivism has several theoretical ancestries that are decidedly not liberal in their orientations.” Prominent among these ancestries are the “post-modernist” and/or anti-positivist ideas of thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Edward Said and Anthony Giddens that entered the margins of the IR discipline in the late 1980s, mediated by the scholarship of, among others, Richard Ashley, R.B.J. Walker and Alex Wendt (before he had become domesticated). These post-modernists would have been (and actually have been) chagrined to witness how, in subsequent constructivist scholarship, “the foundational insights of
postmodernism [were] being transposed into the field of IR in order to reify the project of modernity” (Sterling-Folker 2000, 9); they would be even more disappointed by the constructivist turn toward positivism.

The positivist idea that the truth of a social scientific claim lies in correspondence to an external object has been challenged by a distinguished roster of thinkers going back to Friedrich Nietzsche. Truth statements, Nietzsche claimed, were but “a mobile army of metaphors, metonymys and anthropomorphisms . . . which, after long use seem firm, canonical and obligatory to a people; truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are” (quoted in Said 1978, 203). More recently Michel Foucault elaborated the notion that the “objective truth of discourse lies within and is produced by the discourse itself” (Ashley 1986, 281). Inspired by Foucault, Edward Said (1978, 21-22) argued that cultural knowledge, including social scientific knowledge,

is not “truth” but representations . . . there is no such thing as a delivered presence but a re-presence, or representation. The value, efficacy, strength, apparent veracity of a written statement about the Orient therefore relies very little, and cannot instrumentally depend, on the Orient as such. . . . That Orientalism makes sense at all depends more on the West than on the Orient, and this sense is directly indebted to various Western techniques of representation that make the Orient visible, clear, “there” in discourse about it. And these representations rely upon institutions, traditions, conventions, agreed-upon codes of understanding for their effects, not upon a distant and amorphous Orient.

In sum, our knowledge of the Oriental Other “has less to do with the Orient than it does with ‘our’ world” (Said 1978, 12).

Now I wish to apply this post-modernist critique to the three studies at hand.

First of all, let me point out that in all three studies the bearers of the identity that is the object of the research do not speak for themselves. The object of Richter’s study is Russia’s “national identity” but, as he explicitly states, “In this chapter I concentrate on how Russian elites represent Russian identity to harness the resources of the state rather than on how Russians
themselves feel” (p. 70). In Larson’s article the identity of the Soviet Union/Russia is similarly reduced to the ideas of Mikhail Gorbachev and a few like-minded “new thinkers.” Neither Richter nor Larson have delved into Soviet/Russian culture beyond the views of a narrow elite. Doug Blum has gone deeper and his essay significantly incorporates the voices of mid-level bureaucrats, teachers, librarians, psychologists and NGO activists. But even in Blum’s rich essay, the group whose identity is the object of the study – post-Soviet youth – does not speak for itself; the focus is entirely on the construction of youth culture by adults, and the youths’ own viewpoint is conspicuously absent. In sum, in all three studies the identity of the groups being studied is not constructed by the groups themselves so much as by the authors, mediated by the views of local elites (or adults). It is as if the authors accept Karl Marx’s characterization of the French peasantry, featured by Said as the epigraph for his book: “They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented.”

Now, what gives the authors’ representations of Russia’s identity their authority? [I am using “Russian” here for convenience even as I am aware that Larson’s study deals largely with the Soviet Union and Blum’s research deals with Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan in addition to Russia]. The norms of the disciplinary mainstream in which the three studies are embedded presuppose, and require, that the truth of knowledge claims rests on correspondence to external reality. I would like to raise the question, however, of whether the authority of the authors’ claims might actually lie in correspondence to a 500 year old discourse that we might call “Russianism.”

To the best of my knowledge there is no critical study of “Russianism” analogous in breadth and scope to Said’s critique of Orientalism. Fortunately, though, Iver Neumann has laid a solid foundation for such a critical study in chapter 4 of his Uses of the Other: “The East” in
European Identity Formation (1999). Neumann finds that although European representations of Russia have changed in many ways since the 16th century (for example, until the 18th century Russia was often said to be located in “Northern Europe”), there is a central theme that has proven remarkably durable amid an otherwise changing representational landscape. In its vulgar form, this theme is captured by the old adage that when you scrape a Russian, you wound with a Tatar. Russia has been repeatedly represented by Europeans and Americans as a country oscillating between Europe (or the West) and Asia, and, respectively, between modernity and tradition, rationality and spiritualism, nature and supernatural/magical occurrences, civilization and barbarism, freedom and (“Oriental”) despotism. Throughout five hundreds years of European discourse, Russia continuously appears, as Neumann puts it, to “always just have been tamed, civil, civilized; just having begun to participate in European politics; just having become part of Europe; since the enlightenment it has, furthermore, been seen as a pupil and a learner” (Neumann 1999, 110; emphasis original). In short, European discourse about Russia has been dominated by the metaphor of a “learner that is forever just about to make the transition into Europe.” (Neumann 1999, 112).

The papers of Richter, Larson and (in a somewhat muter form) Blum all reproduce this metaphor. Richter conceptualizes the politics of Russian identity between 1992-1994 as a struggle between “liberals” and “statists.” The “liberals organized their image of Russia’s identity around the claim to a shared identity with the United States and Western Europe. They believed that Russia should return to the ‘civilized community of nations’ [and] build liberal institutions at home” (p. 77). The statists, on the other hand, “shared a preference for greater state intervention in the domestic economy to shore up industrial production and to preserve Russia’s status as a Eurasian great power distinct and independent from the West.” The struggle ended in
1994 when “most elites agreed that their country should preserve its great power status in the
form of a Eurasian state distinct from the West” (p. 69; emphasis mine). Hard though Russia
might try to join the liberal West, Richter’s analysis implies, it is bound to be dragged back by
the weight of its “Eurasian” (i.e., despotic, uncivilized) heritage. Or, in Richter’s own words,
“the movement of Russian foreign policy back toward one informed by institutional forms and
practices harking back to the Soviet and even imperial period, indicates just how difficult it is to
translate such critical [liberal, westernizing] thinking into practice” (p. 88; emphasis mine).

Larson argues that Mikhail Gorbachev’s adoption of the “ideals of the new thinking” was
tantamount to creating a new Soviet “identity based on ‘soft power.’” This new identity “would
have allowed the Soviet Union (and Russia) to achieve the status of a great power without first
attaining a level of economic and technological development comparable to that of the United
States; it was a shortcut to greatness” (p. 2). Larson explicitly places the new thinking in the
context of four centuries of Russian attempts to join the club of European great powers. Since the
18th century Russian rulers have repeatedly
tried to modernize their military organization as well as politics, society and culture to
improve Russia’s ability to compete with the West. But their accelerated top-down
reform efforts preserved important elements of premodern [read: Asian] Russian political
institutions and culture. The Russian elite sought to attain great power status quickly,
through accelerated, often superficial means rather than slower, more organic [read:
Western-style] development of political and economic institutions (p. 16).

Thus, Gorbachev’s attempted “shortcut to greatness” was but another episode in an enduring
historical cycle whereby Russian elites repeatedly reach for “magical solutions” (p. 16) and
“magic shortcuts” (p. 17), or “hope for miracles” (p. 16). Again, hard though Russia tries to
become European (modern, rational), and close though it may often get to accomplishing this
transformation, it ultimately remains fundamentally constrained by the weight of its Asiatic
(premodern, magic-oriented) heritage.
Blum interprets the building of new nations in post-Soviet Russia, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan as a project of balancing Western neo-liberal, individualist values (“Modernization”) with partly-invented local traditions of “spirituality” (p. 16) and community (“Retraditionalization”). Although he appears more optimistic than Richter and Larson regarding the ability of these new nations to shake off their Russian/Soviet past, even Blum acknowledges that the “massive influx of neoliberal norms” dovetails with “the lingering presence of statist assumptions” (p. 26). He writes that “the ubiquity of statist assumptions in the post-Soviet context suggests that the institutional legacy of the USSR is in play” (p. 25). Ultimately, then, even Blum’s analysis can be read as a variation on the metaphor of Russia as a learner that is just about ready to join the West; just as soon, that is, as the “lingering presence” of vestiges of despotism would entirely recede into the past.

As I noted above, the gist of “Russianism” is captured, in a somewhat crude and exaggerated form, by the adage “scrape a Russian, find a Tatar.” What does one find, then, when scratching the patina of social science theory and method off of contemporary analyses of Russia’s identity? I wonder if what one finds is not essentially this very adage. In other words, I wonder if what one finds is but a metaphor with a history of several hundred years, the metaphor of Russia as a learner that is just about to make the transition into Europe. And what is the truth but, to quote Nietzsche again, “a mobile army of metaphors . . . which, after long use seem firm, canonical and obligatory to a people”?

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All three essays deal ostensibly with Russia’s national identity. They all implicitly follow the norms of domesticated constructivism (indeed, the norms of mainstream political science) by bracketing out the author’s own identity. The three authors all argue that the visions of Russia
harbored by Russian elites were mutually-constituted with these elites’ visions of the West, even as the authors’ claim an exemption for themselves from this mutual-constitution. They refuse to admit that their own views of Russia’s identity may also be intertwined with visions of America.

But, as Edward Said (1978, 11; emphasis original) argued, “no production of human knowledge in the human sciences can ever ignore or disclaim its author’s involvement as a human subject in his own circumstances . . . For an American or European studying the Orient [or Russia, for that matter] there can be no disclaiming the main circumstances of his actuality: that he comes up against the Orient as a European or American first, as an individual second.” A careful reading of the three texts suggests that the authors’ visions of their own nation are not neatly separable from their characterization of Russia’s identity.

According to Larson, Gorbachev’s “new thinking argued that the world was complex and interdependent. States had to cooperate in solving global problems such as the growing gap between rich and poor nations, nuclear war, and ecological disasters; universal values should have priority over class interests. Security was indivisible and could only be attained by political means. A comprehensive international security system should be created, one that would address states’ economic, ecological and humanitarian as well as political and military needs. . . . “ (p. 8). When reading this and other passages depicting Gorbachev’s “extraordinarily creative” ideas (p. 11), I could not help but feel as if I was reading a cross-combination between a liberal IR textbook such as Keohane and Nye’s *Power and Interdependence* and a foreign policy speech by President Bill Clinton. My feeling was reinforced by the expression that Larson chose to describe the new Russian identity envisioned by Gorbachev: not a Russian expression but “soft power” – a term coined by liberal IR scholar and Clinton administration official Joseph Nye to depict *America’s* place in the world. Thus, one wonders: in the article, where does Russia’s identity
(object) stop and Larson’s identity (subject) begin? Is there a neat line separating the two or does Larson’s own identity as an American, liberal IR scholar and (I would venture to guess) a liberal democrat not intrude upon her characterization of Russia? Should her depiction of Gorbachev’s vision of Russia not be read as a surrogate for her own liberal vision of America’s place in the world?

Richter’s depiction of the liberals’ vision of Russia’s international position also sounds much like American liberal IR theory. The statists, on the other hand, “interpreted the processes of international politics much along the line of more traditional realists such as Hans Morgenthau.” (p. 81). Now Richter finds, as I noted above, that by 1994 the statists appeared to be winning the political battle over Russia’s identity. Still, his own liberal politics/scholarship intrude upon the analysis in the conclusion, where he describes the statist (realist) vision as “oddly anachronistic in a world of globalized production,” and advocates a U.S. policy of fostering “transnational ties” in order to strengthen the hands of Russian liberals. Again, one wonders: is Richter’s hope for a liberal Russian future, cautious though it may be, not intertwined (mutually-constituted) with his liberal vision of America’s place in the world?

Doug Blum describes throughout his paper how state and non-state actors, including NGOs, in the former Soviet Union work together to “embed youth culture within a transcendent moral foundation of social connectedness, and to thereby offset the egoistic and profligate tendencies introduced along with modernization” (p. 17). Blum judges favorably the “robust nature of state-society collaboration over youth identity forms” in the three post-Soviet republics he studied, and he even opaquely implies that this state-society collaboration could serve as a model for other nations: “Clearly such mechanisms are relevant not only to contentious politics but also to national identity formation in a globalized setting” (p. 26).
Can Blum’s relatively favorable account of nation-building efforts in the Caspian region be read as a surrogate for his views of America’s identity? Of the three authors, I find Blum’s vision of US to be the hardest to infer from the text. Still, I would venture to say that in positively portraying the post-Soviet project of tempering the excesses of liberal individualism with a healthy dose of community and spiritual renewal – a project conducted through the combined efforts of public and private actors – Blum implicitly endorses a Putnam-esque, communitarian vision of U.S. society. Implicit in his vision of Russia’s post-Soviet identity, in other words, is a vision of the United States in which faith-based and civic organizations work in concert with the state to build social capital and mitigate the excesses of capitalist individualism.

Again, the general question I am trying to raise here is whether it is appropriate for us as students of identity to suspend ourselves from the social dynamic we theorize, the social dynamic of the mutual constitution of self and other. Would we not be more realistic and intellectually-honest if we theorized the politics of identity in a more reflexive manner, namely if we theorized it in a way that took into account our theory’s embeddedness in the history and politics of our nation?

References


