

## Europe, Russia and the 'non-historic peoples'

When Putin advisor Vladislav Surkov coined the concept of Sovereign Democracy, IR students were pleased to have a theorisation of Russia's position in the world. As expanded, the concept seemed to mean that the aspiration to democracy would be expressed in Russia's relation to other nations, not in its relation to its citizenry. At home, developments towards 'managed democracy' carried sinister overtones, with the exclusion of critics from the political process and the creation of loyal opposition parties.

Here was an example of the Kremlin's duplicity, said some: the Russian state demands sovereignty, but treats that as a qualification on domestic democratisation; more pointedly, said others, here is an example of the limitations of the concept of Sovereignty, that it is a qualification upon democracy.

It ought not be so strange to IR theory, though, that democracy is a relation between states before it is one within states.

What did Surkov say? That Sovereign Democracy meant that Russian policy should be based on a refusal to be "dictated to from outside."

What Surkov is doing is laying claim to Russia's status as an *historic people*, one that dictates its own destiny, without having it determined from outside.

This is not something to be taken for granted. In Russia's history the country has had to avoid the other fate, of being rendered a *non-historic people*, one whose destiny is determined from the outside.

Frederick Engels coined the distinction between the historic and non-historic peoples in his articles in the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* on the Slav minorities in the Austro-Hungarian Empire:

There is no country in Europe that does not possess in some remote corner, one or more ruins of peoples, left over from an earlier population, forced back and subjugated by the nation which later became the repository of historical development. These remnants of a nation, mercilessly crushed as Hegel said, by the course of history, this national refuse is always the fanatical representative of the counter-revolution and remains so until it is completely exterminated or de-nationalised, as its whole existence is in itself a protest against a great historical revolution. (in Rosdolsky, *Engels and the Non-Historic Peoples*, 125)

Engels' concept of the non-historic peoples has always been something of a scandal to the later followers of Marx and Engels. Roman Rosdolsky, who drew our attention to Engels' views, dismissed the categories of historic and non-historic peoples as philosophical idealism, derived from GWF Hegel. Rosdolsky insisted that it was truer to Marx and Engels' later views to see the course of nations arising out of the evolution of the material forces of production and the class struggles resulting from it (Rosdolsky, 130). Engels, Rosdolsky charged, had succumbed to Hegel's view that

nations were organs of an ideal world history. The net effect of Engels' 'false prognosis' was to relegate the 'non-historic peoples' to the dustbin of world history.

Of course, Rosdolsky is right to point to the under-theorised appropriation of Hegel's world-historical idea in Engels' categorisation. But is there anything that we can salvage from it?

I think there is. We can abandon the normative implications of the categorisation, non-historic peoples, that these people are in themselves worthless. Also we can reject the ahistorical assumption that the situation of the non-historic peoples have been judged by history for all time as reactionary.

But still it seems to the point to insist that some nations have a greater capacity to determine their fate, while others are, by their lack of an internal dynamic, more subject to external necessity. That should not be confused with a moral judgement on the character of nations, but is instead a realistic assessment of the actual capacity for self-determination.

The subsequent development of the theory of historic and non-historic peoples shows that there is something in the idea that corresponds to the real course of history. Among anthropologists, like Melville Herskovits, the category of 'non-historic people' seemed relatively unproblematic, as in his paper to the Royal Anthropological Institute, 'the New World Negro as an anthropological problem' (Man, April 1931).

Lenin reversed the polarity of the distinction in his revolutionary policy, where he saw the nations of the world divided not between historic and non-historic, but between oppressed and oppressing nations (i.e. between Imperialist Powers and their subject peoples).

Here Lenin comes close to reversing the polarity of Engels' distinction. Certainly in M.N. Roy's reading of Lenin's argument, justice lies with the oppressed (formerly 'non-historic') peoples, while the oppressing (historic) states represent reaction. Roy's judgement is echoed in Franz Fanon's evocation of the Wretched of the Earth as the demonstration of the lie of universal humanity. (Lenin himself, I think, would not have gone so far as Roy or Fanon, seeing the justice of the oppressed nations' cause as historically relative, not absolute, which would only present the obverse of Engels' Hegelian error.)

Certainly Soviet anthropologists rejected the categorisation of the 'non-historic peoples' as an ideological cover for imperialism.

'the peoples of Africa have traversed a long and peculiar way of historic development. Every people has its history. The general laws of social development find various manifestations. There is no written history of these peoples yet, but there are no non-historic peoples.' D. A. Olderogge, I. I. Potekhin, B. I. Sharevskaya, and V. P. Lutsky Peoples of Africa (Moscow, 1954)

In 1991 Francis Fukuyama remodelled the Hegelian distinction positing a world divided this time between Historical and Post-Historic peoples. The terminology is

more or less reversed but the value judgment is broadly similar. The Historical nations, like Iraq, were still trapped in the historical past of national struggle, while the post-historical, like those participants in the United Nations' New World Order were liberated from a historical past that was shaped by the struggle over resources. The ascendancy of liberal democracy was the End of History, those that failed to get with the programme would have to be raised up by force, if need be. (Fukuyama probably took the idea from the august Hegel scholar Alexandre Kojève, by way of his student and Fukuyama's teacher Alan Bloom.)

More recent scholarship has tended to the view that no peoples are 'historic', in the sense that national history is for the most part a mythological assertion of continuity. In this spirit, Maria Todorova writes that 'the compulsive attempts at historical legitimation by the new east European states were a response precisely to west European obsessions with the rights (or lack thereof) of "historic" and "non-historic" peoples' ('The Trap of Backwardness: Modernity, Temporality, and the Study of Eastern European Nationalism', *Slavic Review*, Vol. 64, No. 1., Spring, 2005 152-3).

The struggle not to be relegated to the status of 'non-historic people' has been central to Russia's relations with Europe in the twentieth and twenty-first century. Lenin's national policy aimed for the difficult goal of inserting the Soviet economy into the international division of labour on the one hand while on the other avoiding the trap of being relegated to the status of an organ of western capitalism. If Russia isolated itself from the international division of labour altogether, it would be relegated to economic backwardness. If it allowed itself to develop according to the tempo and needs of western capitalism it would be reduced to being Europe's breadbasket, a source of primary goods, and a market for West European machine tools (Preobrazhensky, *New Economics*, 1965).

The instrument for governing Russia's economic development was the state monopoly of foreign trade. The political determination of trade would skew Russia towards industrial growth. With the relaxation of the state trade monopoly under Bukharin's advice, farmers did well trading grain for American tractors, but jeopardised the industrialisation policy. Stalin's policy of Socialism in one Country went to the opposite extreme 'delinking' Russia from the world economy altogether. Superficially that was a successful policy, if one of astonishing brutality, because the downturn in the fortunes of western capitalism disguised its underlying weaknesses. Later, though, the problems of Soviet autarkic development were unavoidably evident in stagnation that descended in the 1970s.

The contemporary policy of economic nationalism comes after a period of uncontrolled liberalisation. The demoralisation of Soviet society led Boris Yeltsin's government to sell-off state assets in shock-therapy marketisation. It should be said that that was not entirely an unsuccessful policy, in some senses creating the conditions for present-day growth. However, Russians' experience of being subjugated to the vicissitudes of the world market raised again the spectre of becoming a non-historic people.

Surkov's Sovereign Democracy is an assertion of economic nationalism designed to enhance national authority over the course of economic development, to ensure that

Russia remains master of its own destiny. Of course, that leaves the question of which Russians are masters of Russia's destiny unresolved.

It should be said that neither Engels nor Marx ever thought that Russia itself was non-historic. They thought that Russia was most decidedly an historical actor, but very far from a champion of progress. Rather, Russia's social backwardness was unfortunately allied with England's reactionary opposition to the emergence of rivals to its status as market leader. Marx and Engels both read the history of the Anglo-Russian alliance as the meeting of capitalist front-runner, and backward despotism in a conspiracy to frustrate the social development of Europe.

In recent times there have been many attempts to develop a critique of realism in International Relations out of Marx's social theory (as in China Mieville's, Justin Rosenberg's and Martti Koskenniemi's work). Of course, Marx himself wrote a critique of one central plank of realist theory, that of the Balance of Power, or what he calls 'the axiom: keep up the status quo'. The argument is in an article in the New York Herald Tribune, uncovered by David Riazonov, which is unsigned, but plainly by Marx, (or just possibly Engels):

'A testimonium paupertatis, an acknowledgement of the universal incompetence of the ruling powers, for any purpose of progress and civilisation, is seen as the universal agreement to stick to things as by chance they happen to be'.

In particular, Marx deplored the policy of attempting to sustain decadent Turkey

'Turkey goes on decaying, and will go on decaying, as long as the system of the "balance of power" and maintenance of the status quo goes on.'

The immediate danger of the Balance of Power policy was that it lent reactionary Russia an unearned respect from the Ottoman Slavs, to whom it represent a saviour.

More broadly, Marx rejected the theory of the Balance of Power because it was at odds with the real character of human history:

Whosoever has, in the study of history, learned to admire the eternal mutations of human affairs in which nothing is stable but instability, nothing constant but change; whosoever has followed up that stern march of history whose wheels pass relentlessly over the remains of empires ... whoever knows how to appreciate the eminently revolutionary character of the present age, when steam and wind, electricity and the printing press, artillery and gold discoveries cooperate to produce more changes and revolutions in a year than were ever brought about in a century, will certainly not shrink from facing an historical question because of the consideration that its proper settlement might bring about a European war. (quoted in David Riazonov, Marx and Engels on the Balkan Question, 2003, 193, 199)

There is no basis for the absolutisation of the division between historic and non-historic peoples in Marx's social theory (of which Engels was the first and best student). But that should not lead us to the utopian assertion that all people are brothers, as if we could be indifferent to the actual distribution of power between

states. Russia's economic nationalism arises out of a wholly justifiable determination to be author of her own history.

James Heartfield

University of Westminster, Centre for the Study of Democracy

[Heartfield@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:Heartfield@blueyonder.co.uk)

17 Giesbach Road, London N19 3DA

[www.heartfield.org](http://www.heartfield.org)