

Kagarlitsky, Boris: *Vosstanie srednego klassa*, Moscow: Eksmo, 2012, 224 pp., 180 roubles, ISBN 978-5-699-55608-3

The protests that erupted across Russia after the 2011 parliamentary elections surprised many not only in their scale and extent – thousands took to the streets from Moscow to Arkhangelsk, Kaliningrad to Vladivostok – but also in their social composition. Rather than being an outpouring of discontent from the country's poorest and most marginalized people, the protests prominently involved those who had benefited most from Putin and Medvedev's rule. Was this, then, a 'revolt of the middle class', as the title of Boris Kagarlitsky's recent book suggests? The question is likely to remain pressing, in Russia and beyond, as the consequences of the global financial crisis continue to play out; indeed, authors such as Göran Therborn see a new global middle class as a central protagonist of coming contests over economic resources and political power.

Kagarlitsky is a prominent Russian sociologist, known in Soviet times as a dissident critic of the system from the Marxist left. Today he remains a key figure on the Russian left, contributing frequently to newspapers and public debates. In the West, he is perhaps best known as the author of *The Thinking Reed* (1988), on the Soviet intelligentsia, and *Empire of the Periphery* (2008), a world-systems history of Russia, among other scholarly works. *Vosstanie srednego klassa* [*Revolt of the Middle Class*] belongs in a different genre, which Russians call *publitsistika*, somewhere between analysis and commentary. It is very much a rapid-fire political intervention – published in February 2012, amid rising discontent ahead of Putin's re-election in March – and as such, inevitably suffers from certain analytical flaws. Nevertheless, it advances several polemical ideas that are of interest to those curious about Russia's possible future trajectories.

Kagarlitsky's underlying premise is that the transformations of late twentieth-century capitalism – flexibilization of labour, developments in IT, globalization of finance capital and trade flows – created what has been designated a 'new middle class' across much of the world. This new middle class is, in his view, distinct from its twentieth-century precursor in that it is principally defined by its consumption patterns and greater access to technology. These give it both marked advantages in the labour market and commonalities with peers around the globe; its culture, indeed, is supranational, making it a discount version of the transnational capitalist class. However, the new middle class now finds itself at the sharp end of the global economic crisis, as austerity regimes bite, unemployment climbs and the hi-tech boom comes up against the limits of profitability. In Kagarlitsky's opinion, this makes it a potential ally both for working-class movements and for reactionary clampdowns from above.

Most of the book is devoted to setting out the foregoing analysis, which seems to criticise the idea of the new middle class as an ideological construct while accepting it as a social category. The ambiguity is never resolved, leaving Kagarlitsky's conclusions somewhat confused, and his political predictions ungrounded. But for many readers the principal interest of *Vosstanie srednego klassa* will lie in its long final section, which addresses various specific features of the Russian case. One is the rift that, according to Kagarlitsky, opened up between the middle class and the neoliberal model as early as 1998, when the rouble collapse wiped out the savings of this embryonic social layer. The post-2000 oil boom enabled it to recover, but its trust in Western-imposed models was broken, making it more receptive to Putinism. Kagarlitsky also identifies a phenomenon he calls 'civil society in reverse', whereby the standard logic that applied in the West has been inverted. In the 2000s, it was not those immediately affected by a given issue who tended to mobilize; rather, it was individuals motivated by commitment to abstract, collective ideals who protested first, drawing in workers, local residents and so on; Kagarlitsky mentions ecological protests in defence of Khimki forest near Moscow, but the argument seems to apply more broadly.

While welcoming the anti-Putin movement of 2011–2012, Kagarlitsky is scathingly critical of its political misjudgements and programmatic incoherence; he notes the symbolic irony by which the organizers switched the venue for a demonstration on 10 December 2011 from Revolution Square to Bolotnaia – 'Swamp' – Square. Perhaps most striking, however, is the absence of social demands. In a country where universal healthcare and education have been dismantled and replaced by massively unequal systems, where housing is often ramshackle and labour rights remain minimal, a focus on such basic needs would, as Kagarlitsky observes, seem an obvious rallying point. Yet thanks to the hegemony of liberals within the movement, only small fringe groups have even raised them. Almost two years after Kagarlitsky's book appeared, the movement appears to have fragmented, under considerable pressure from the authorities, and the social dimension remains absent. Its re-emergence onto the agenda would seem to be a precondition for the coalescence of any further revolts – whether by the middle class or by anyone else.

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