Socialism After Communism?: The Socioeconomic and Cultural Foundations of Left Politics in Post-Soviet Russia

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This article examines socioeconomic foundations of leftist politics in post-Soviet Russia. It is often argued that the reemergence of left politics is the result of contingent factors connected to transitional crises. While this is one source of strength for the left, there are two more important and enduring sources: a “socialist value culture” among a large majority of Russians, and an emerging pseudo-capitalist system that is creating “traditional” class-based and left-leaning attitudes and affiliations among particular social groups. The article examines the extent of this value culture and the emergence of these attitudes and affiliations through an analysis of statistical data and interviews conducted with Russian workers and intelligentsia figures from 1994–1997.

One of the most striking trends in the politics of post-communist states has been the reemergence of communist and socialist parties—often “successor” parties of the old ruling communist organizations—as successful electoral forces. More than six years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation holds the largest share of seats in the Russian Duma, while successor parties have become important political actors in a number of post-Soviet and East European states. Given Russia’s geopolitical importance, and the fact that anti-communism was so pronounced in the late Soviet and early post-Soviet period, it is important to understand why and how left politics has been able to succeed to the extent that it has in Russia. In the preface to her book Russia’s Communists at the Crossroads, Joan Urban cites the difficulty she had in finding anyone to work with her on a study of the post-Soviet communist movement because people told her that “the Russians had turned their backs on communism” (Urban, 1997, p. ix). While Russians may have rejected the political structures of the Soviet Communist Party and related organizations, have they in fact rejected the underlying worldview that Soviet socialism purportedly represented? While significant attention has been paid to the organized political forces of the left that espouse this worldview, this paper is primarily interested in exploring the socioeconomic foundations of left politics in post-Soviet Russia and their relation to organized leftist forces, if indeed there are such foundations.
Leftist Sentiment: Contingent or Structural?

Most explanations of the renaissance of “the left” focus on two variables: the socioeconomic effects of post-communist economic crises, and/or what I term “residual factors”: that is, left-over organizational structures and constituencies from the communist era which have reorganized after the initial phase of anti-communist measures ran their course. The implication of this line of analysis is that the successes of the postcommunist left in post-Soviet states and east Europe will be short-lived. In the case of the first variable, most analysts see these crises as having bottomed out without causing coups or the collapse of state structures. As economic crises ease and the difficulties of creating capitalism are overcome, the argument runs, people’s living standards will improve and their impetus for voting for the left will evaporate. In the case of the second variable, as the older generation that lived under communism passes from the political scene, and with them the party structures that are overwhelmingly staffed by this generation, the institutional force of the left will diminish. Therefore, theoretically and politically the resurgence of the left is not a matter for long-term analysis or concern.

While these factors clearly play a role in the electoral success of leftist parties, survey and interview data suggest that the success of the postcommunist left in these states derives from much more enduring socioeconomic and cultural sources that are not directly linked to crises, organizations or generation. According to this hypothesis, the strength of the left derives from two sources. First, as the work of other scholars suggests, “socialist” structures and attitudes, whether or not consciously identified as such by the people involved, are embedded in the socioeconomic institutions and cultural discourses of post-communist states (Nagle and Mahr, 1995). Second, “market-oriented” reforms—quite apart from the immediate crises they have caused—have begun the process of creating a new social formations in these states that look more like traditional class-based systems than has previously been the case (Ost, 1993). As in West Europe historically and more recently in much of the rest of the world, class-based divisions are generating support for the left and the right. Further, historical experience would lead one to expect that the working class would be the most important (although by no means exclusive) social base of the left broadly defined. This being the case, I will examine the relationship of the working class to existing left political forces in Russia and how the working class and these groups conceptualize “democracy” in the post-Soviet context.

If the argument that the sources of potential strength for the left derive from a socialist value culture on the one hand and the emergence of at least a partial capitalist mode of production on the other is correct, examining only at the short-term explanations of economic crisis and “residuals” will not tell us a great deal about the long-term political salience of leftist forces in postcommunist states.

The apparent contradiction between the two sources of left political sentiment—a socialist culture and emergent capitalism—reflects the transitional nature of post-communist societies. In the Russian case, twelve years of reform starting with Gorbachev and continuing, albeit in very different ways, with Yeltsin has turned Russia into a deeply divided country, not just politically but systemically. In economic terms, Russia is now a hybrid of capitalist structures grafted onto Soviet structures and institutions. “Capitalization”1 is taking place at two levels: that of trade and finance, and that of new service industries and to a much lesser degree in the industrial sector. For many workers and managers in state and quasi-state industry, the old

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1. By “capitalization” I refer not only to market mechanisms, privatization, and the like, but also to social, cultural, and ideological attitudes that dominate capitalist systems.
patterns of production and labor relations remain unchanged (Blasi et al., 1997; Christensen, 1997). There is a clear correlation between the less “capitalized” regions of Russia and the strength of leftist political sentiment, but it is not clear which way the correlation runs (McFaul, 1996). Are these regions more “left” because they are less “capitalized,” or is it the other way around? What forces are at work that structure the economic and political attitudes of various groups within the Russian population?

The working assumption of this paper is that for large sectors of Russian society, particularly in those areas where domestic and foreign market intrusions have been weak—that is, outside of a few urban centers—a “socialist value culture,” inculcated over decades and supported by existing institutional arrangements, remains strong and relatively stable. This value culture consists of attitudes about the proper role of the state in society, about equality and justice, about political and economic democracy, and about the nature of change, particularly as it concerns distribution of wealth and social goods. The attitudes evinced about these subjects, whether identified as “socialist” or not by those that espouse them, clearly fall within that category on the conceptual map of western social science theory.

For those groups and individuals that occupy a social space in the more thoroughly “capitalized” sectors of the Russian political economy, the sources of support for left politics seem to derive from more “traditional” class-based interests. As the capitalist sector in Russia has developed since 1992, people who work in that sector have become more aware of the need to organize and defend their interests independently as the state has pulled back from its previous roles as both employer and guarantor of social security. While support for the left has been weaker in this sector than others, recent indications are that this is beginning to change. In the more “capitalized” sectors of Russia, even wage laborers began with the belief that “capitalist relations” were the way to a “normal, civilized” country and were good in principle: an attitude quite different from their counterparts in the “less capitalized” parts of Russia. Yet even within this sector, at least among many workers and intellectuals, many of the egalitarian norms normally associated with left politics in the west still have currency. These norms have been reinforced by the highly inegalitarian outcomes of Yeltsin’s economic policies since 1992, which have caused workers and trade-unions to undertake a serious reevaluation of their positions on “democracy and capitalism” as these terms were understood in 1992.

The “Socialist Value Culture” in Post-Soviet Russia

Using the word “socialist” in the same breath with the word “Russia” is apt to lead to confusion and needs to be defined carefully. In this context, “socialist” and “socialist value culture” do not refer to the political or organizational practices and structures of the Soviet state, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, or the fringe communist groups in Russia today that still adhere to the precepts of Stalinism. Rather, the terms refer to a set of beliefs originally and traditionally espoused by socialist and communist movements, East and West; or, if you

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2. By this I mean that they are the product of conflict between capital and labor as generally understood in western capitalist systems, keeping in mind the fact that Russia’s capitalist structures are less “developed” than those in the west.

3. This assessment is based on the remarks made by trade unionists and both party and non-party members of the Russian intelligentsia during interviews that I conducted in 1994 in Moscow and St. Petersburg. The results were all the more surprising given that these two cities are known to be much more “western” in orientation than most other parts of Russia.
will, to the articulated ideological views of those movements. By “socialist value culture,” I mean a culture that puts a high value on economic egalitarianism, democracy in the economic as well as in the political realm, and traditionally views an expansive role for the state in the operation of society as a positive social good (Elster and Moene, 1989; Miliband, 1994).

In the Russian case, there is strong evidence to suggest that large sectors of society continue to view relative economic egalitarianism and an expansive role for the state as legitimate and positive. Survey data also suggest that these views have remained stable and in some cases have been strengthened over the course of the post-Soviet period (Zubova, 1996). The evidence on the issue of political and economic democracy is more mixed and difficult to identify, possibly due to the association of these terms with recent and controversial events and policies, including the constitutional crisis of 1993, the war in Chechnya, and the effects of privatization, among others. There is, however, substantial anecdotal evidence on the issue of economic democracy, either supporting the concept directly or bemoaning the lack of it.

Russians’ support for economic egalitarianism is reflected in the responses of Russian citizens to questions about property ownership, income, price controls, and class differentiation. The views of respondents do not indicate a belief in absolute equality, but rather in an almost Rawlsian narrow tolerance for social differentiation.

The views on property are particularly interesting, given the context of large-scale privatization over the last five years. Whereas the privatization program has allowed a very small percentage of people to gain control over a very large percentage of formerly state property, no sector of the Russian population supports this form of property distribution. On the one hand, almost no group in Russian society, whether divided by age, sex, occupation, education, sector of the economy, income, or place of residence seems to oppose the idea of people owning small enterprises or small plots of agricultural land. Over 70% of people under fifty view such ownership positively; over 60% of men and women support such ownership (men slightly more so than women—68.7%/74% men, and 63.6%/70.2% women, the first number representing enterprises and the second land). All occupational groups surveyed, including managers, specialists, employees, workers, and students viewed such ownership positively, from a low of 66.4% among workers to a high of 83.8% among students. The only group that fell below fifty percent was pensioners (and those over 50 years old, the overlap being substantial). But even among this group, more viewed ownership of small enterprises positively than negatively (45.2% to 35.8%), and almost 60% viewed ownership of small plots of land positively (VTsIOM Intertsentr, 1996).

On the other hand, when asked about the ownership of large-scale property, that which up until 1992 was considered “the property of the whole people” by the Soviet state, attitudes are markedly different. No group in Russian society in any of the categories listed above approved in their majorities of the private ownership of either large factories or large quantities of agricultural land. On the question of private ownership of large factories, the number viewing it positively by age ranges from 7.2% for people over fifty to 31.8% for people under 29. The negative views by age were 74.9% for people over fifty to 44.1% for those under 29. There was virtually no difference in attitude depending on education level, where approximately 60% of all respondents gave negative answers to both questions. The results categorized by sex and occupation were virtually identical. Even managers and specialists, who one might surmise would have the greatest chance of benefiting from private ownership of large-scale firms, evinced negative views of such ownership in their majorities (VTsIOM Intertsentr, 1996). The only group that viewed large-scale ownership more positively than negatively was students, and then only on the question of land.
The implications of these responses are clear. The legacy of state ownership of the means of production, and the idea that the property of that state was somehow the “property of the whole people” continues to exert a strong influence on the population as a whole. This in turn leads to a view that no one should be able to enrich themselves on the property of the society as a whole, and that everyone deserves a portion of the social wealth created by these large enterprises (Pchelintsev, 1996). Russians seem perfectly happy to see their fellow citizens earn a decent living through the ownership of small firms or plots of land, but not to become extremely wealthy through large-scale capitalism. These views of property are a reflection of the egalitarian bias of much of Russian society. It is interesting that the one group that appears to be shifting in regard to these questions is students. Should this trend continue, it will lead to a lessening of the egalitarian bias and will provide evidence of the “contingent” nature of support for the left. However, it is still a minority of students who feel positively about these forms of ownership, so one must keep this particular datum in perspective.

The prevailing egalitarian norms concerning property are reflected in people’s attitudes toward prices for consumer goods. The responses to questions about pricing are particularly interesting because the centerpiece of the government’s “shock therapy” program of 1992 was the removal of price controls. Ideologically and programmatically, price liberalization as a means of market-clearing is central to the liberal economists’ and the International Monetary Fund’s view of the type of structural adjustment policies that the former communist states require to become market economies. The responses to questions pertaining to prices are also revealing in terms of what they indicate about prevailing attitudes toward the government’s role in the economy.

In response to the question, “Which of the proposals on price control on the state’s part would you more likely support?,” the majority of Russian citizens indicated support for varying levels of control. In this regard, the differences in response by occupation are especially revealing. While all groups (by age, sex, education, and occupation) indicated support for some controls by over 70%, the extent of control preferred by different groups varied widely. The question gave people three choices: the state should fix the prices for a majority of goods, for a small number of necessary goods, or should not interfere in pricing at all. For example, 73.7% of managers supported some level of control, but only 17.8% supported the idea of fixing a majority of prices, while 55.9% preferred option two. Of the pensioners surveyed, on the other hand, 49.9% preferred fixing the majority of prices, while 30.7% preferred option two. All other categories of people ranged in between, with specialists closer to managers and all other groups closer to pensioners (VTsIOM Intertsentr, 1996).

There were two questions regarding support for fixing prices, one about basic foodstuffs and one more general. There was almost equal support for fixing some prices or for giving poorer families compensation for high-cost goods, but the question on food prices did not suggest who should set the prices or give the compensation. In the food question, support for fixing prices was lower among all groups than it was in the more general question. However, when the more general question specifically asked what the state should do, support for fixing prices rose dramatically. This bespeaks a much more activist view of the state among the population as a whole than among the political leaders of the Yeltsin government; or perhaps it would be more apt to say that the population prefers egalitarian intervention by the state in the economy while the government seems to prefer intervention on behalf of powerful economic interests.

The final point on the question of economic egalitarianism concerns income levels, and what if anything the state should do to limit income differentiation. It is in this category that the
differences among groups are the starkest, and it is only in this category where the differences fall on relatively predictable lines. On this question there also three choices: 1. The government should do nothing to limit income differentiation; 2. The government should limit differentiation to no more than 3–4 times; and 3. The government should limit differentiation so that “there will not be people who are too rich.” Out of twenty two possible social groupings, seven preferred no interference at all, while fifteen preferred some limitations on income differentiation. Those who preferred no limit at all on income differentiation were people under 29 years of age, those with higher education, managers, specialists, those working in private firms, those with higher incomes, and residents of Moscow and St. Petersburg. Of the remaining groups, all preferred choice number 3 over choice number 2, but it is difficult to judge which of those two choices is the more egalitarian in essence. The numbers also support the thesis that residents of “less capitalized” parts of Russia retain stronger egalitarian norms than their counterparts in the more capitalized regions of the country.

Whether the issue is property, prices, or incomes, Russian citizens remain uncomfortable with the non-egalitarian implications of liberal market economics and unconvinced by the political arguments in favor of them that have been made over the past six years. Insofar as this is true, the potential strength of a politics that appeals to those egalitarian norms would seem to be impressive, at least as far as economic policy is concerned. A similar picture emerges from an analysis of Russians’ attitudes toward the role of the state in society as reflected in opinions on the provision of basic social goods that traditionally have been associated with socialist or social-democratic welfare statism. The provision of basic “social guarantees” was of course one of the bedrock principles of the Soviet state, however badly realized those guarantees proved to be in practice. Available evidence indicates that Russian society has adopted the belief that an extensive welfare state is theirs by right.

In the view of most Russian citizens, the state has an obligation to provide free or subsidized medical care, education, and housing, and also to guarantee a job to whoever wants to work. On the question of medical care, in all twenty two possible categories of social groups, over ninety percent of people agreed that there should be free medical care, and the vast majority of groups believed that there should be basically only free medical care (that is, they did not favor a public/private medical care system). All groups in society also agreed by over 90% that primary education should be only free. While an equally high percentage agreed that there should be free higher education, all groups were divided as to whether higher education should be basically only free or whether there should be both free and paid higher education. In terms of housing, over 90% of Russians believe that there should be free housing available, although many more people are comfortable with the existence of both public and private housing than they are with the other categories above. Finally, by overwhelming majorities Russians continue to believe that the state has an obligation to provide work for anyone who wants it. This is true regardless of age, education, sex, occupation, sector of the economy in which people are employed, income level, or place of residence. Of those in the two categories of people who agree the least with the position that the government has such an obligation—students and private sector workers—over sixty percent still believe that the state should guarantee work (Zubova, 1996).

4. This last category is of course highly subjective, but in the context of a society where the “new Russians” are widely disliked, to put it mildly, the egalitarian bias of the question is clear enough.
5. In this case “preferred” means that more opted for the first choice than for the other two combined, not necessarily that an absolute majority preferred no limits.
The strong egalitarian norms evident in the attitudes expressed above also appear to hold for at least certain sectors of the population in the area of economic democracy. Among the working class and trade-unionists, among whom I have done the majority of my research, there remain strong feelings that workers have a right to participate in the decision-making process about issues affecting their lives at work. In part, this is a legacy of the worker mobilization campaigns and self-management policies of the Soviet period and more particularly of the Gorbachev years. It is equally the result of the fact that workers were the ones who built the factories and produced the goods when the factories were the “property of the whole people,” and most workers believe that this gives them the right to have some say over the disposition of that property. This part of the workers’ belief system was evident during the privatization programs beginning in 1992. As it became clear that control over property was shifting from the state primarily into the hands of old elites turned new owners, workers and unionists began to speak more and more of privatization as a “betrayal” of the Russian people and as “theft” of the national wealth (Christensen, 1997). As much as the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia is often accused of being a “conservative” force, by 1997 its leadership was articulating a “leftist” line on economic democracy. Mikhail Shmakov, the President of the FNPR, stated that “economic democracy is not a synonym for freedom of ownership, as the term is understood by some, but rather is a method through which labor’s right to participate in the management of production and to receive its share of the profits is realized” (Shmakov, 1996, p. 25). Among other sectors of the working class and trade-union movement not associated with the FNPR, there is still at the very least a belief in the legitimacy and necessity of “social partnership,” that is, a form of societal corporatism which recognizes and provides for the legitimate interests of workers, managers, and the state.

The evidence adduced above is not intended to show that the majority of Russians consider themselves socialists, or that there will be a groundswell of support for parties that claim to represent the egalitarian norms that much of the population exhibits. There are a number of intervening factors that make this unlikely. It is presented to make the case, however, that a “socialist value structure” continues to exist in Russia and according to many indicators does not seem to be limited to any one sector of the population. This being the case, I would argue at the very least that the attitudes of the present government do not reflect those of the Russian population, and that there is a significant potential for “leftist” movements to tap into those norms over the relatively long term.

**Capitalism, Labor, and the Left: the Changing Calculus**

In the immediate post-Soviet period, most workers and trade-union activists within the independent trade-union movement—which included the powerful Independent Mineworkers Union, Sotsprof, the Metal workers Union, and the Transport Unions in Aviation, Railways, and the Moscow Metropolitan—supported the idea of a transition to free markets and democracy. The successor organization to the old “official” Soviet trade-unions, the FNPR, was more circumspect, but by 1992 the FNPR also came out in favor of the transition in principle. This was entirely understandable in the context of the times. Just as workers had initially supported Gorbachev and perestroika, they supported Yeltsin and his policy initiatives, and for the same reasons: both promised them a better life, higher living standards, and improved working conditions.

The independent unions were particularly single-minded in their support for Yeltsin and his policies because they were directly implicated in Yeltsin’s victory in 1991 over Gorbachev.
Indeed, the crippling miners’ strike in the spring of 1991 was only settled when Yeltsin came to the coal-mining region of the Kuzbass and signed a document transferring ownership of the mines to the Russian Federation. The flip side of this support for Yeltsin was a vociferous opposition to anything communist or even to anything that seemed related to communism, at least on the rhetorical and programmatic levels. The typical attitude of the independent unions was enunciated by Sergei Khramov, the leader of Sotsprof, who argued that the role of trade-unions was to protect workers rights and negotiate their contracts; any talk of workers’ control or even social partnership was, in his words, “Bolshevism pure and simple.” While his was an extreme view, the bias of the independent unions against “socialist” trade-unionism was relatively consistent. This too was understandable given the history of Soviet labor relations, which preached “workers’ control of the means of production” while controlling workers at every turn.

For all this, however, the actual practice of the independent unions and the FNPR often belied the rhetoric. Workers and unions expected to do well out of the transition, and they believed they had a right to be involved in the process of articulating a new system of political economy in Russia. The unions across the board embraced the idea of social partnership in practice, and took Yeltsin at his word that together they were going to construct a “social market economy,” which labor understood to mean a western European type of welfare state and system of labor relations. The FNPR initially hedged its bets, coming out strongly against the early “shock therapy” and privatization reforms of the Yeltsin government, siding with the Congress of People’s Deputies in the 1993 constitutional crises, and trying to forge a relationship with the reconstituted Communist Party of the Russian Federation. At the same time, the FNPR did not oppose reform altogether, but rather focused on what it said was the lack of concern for the “social” in Yeltsin’s program (II’in, 1995).

In the early post-Soviet period, the majority of rank and file workers and the emerging independent labor movement initially evinced greater support at the political level for the principles of liberal market capitalism than for the egalitarian ones discussed in the previous section. While unions and workers often behaved more in accordance with the latter than the former in specific cases, they were in something of a box because they had initially staked so much on Yeltsin’s reforms to lead them out of the crisis that many believed Gorbachev’s reforms—that is, socialist reforms—had caused.

The evolution, or perhaps one should say devolution, of events between the introduction of “shock therapy” and privatization in 1992 and the dire economic situation that most workers find themselves in 1998 has led to an increasingly apparent shift in the attitudes and behavior of workers and unions (Rakitskaia, 1995). The macroeconomic causes of Russia’s economic crisis, as well as arguments about the severity and likely duration of that crisis, have been extensively documented elsewhere, and I will not rehearse them here (Aslund, 1995; Blasi et al., 1997; Gowen, 1996; Lloyd, 1996; McAuley, 1997; Nelson and Kuzes, 1994, 1995; Sachs, 1996). While there is some dispute about the extent of the collapse of the Russian industrial sector, the statistical and anecdotal evidence is overwhelming that for Russian workers the socio-economic effects of Yeltsin’s policies from 1992 to 1998 have been devastating.

Using the least dire estimates, those of the Ministry of Labor, by March, 1996 one quarter
of the Russian population was living below the minimum established poverty line. In November, 1993, 61% of unskilled workers and 52% of skilled workers qualified as “poor” or “very poor.” Six months later, a study of working families indicated that of all poor working families, 61% were skilled and unskilled workers (43% and 10% respectively); of the poorest working families, 67% were workers (52% skilled, 25% unskilled). By conservative estimates, the percentage of people living below the poverty line was five times higher in 1996 than it had been prior to the implementation of shock therapy in 1992 (Silverman and Yanowitch, 1997).

The issue of wages, and more particularly the non-payment of wages, remains the most explosive problem in the arena of labor relations. Quite apart from wage arrears, the real wages of Russian workers have fallen dramatically since shock therapy began. Taking 1985 as a baseline (1985–100), the average real wage fell from a high of 132 in 1990 to 55 in 1995; that is, the value of a worker’s pay packet fell almost two and a half times in the space of five years. The distribution of income became more and more skewed during the same period as well (Silverman and Yanowitch, 1997, p. 86).

In addition to the fall and polarization of wages, wage arrears have been mounting rapidly since the winter of 1992. As of September, 1997 Russian workers were owed over nine billion dollars in unpaid wages. While the Russian government has at times paid the wages of workers in certain sectors, the overall scope of the problem remains undiminished. To make matters worse from labor’s perspective, in January, 1998 the Russian Supreme Court overturned part of the Russian civil code which required that enterprises use monetary resources to pay wages first, before using it for other purposes such as paying taxes (Weselowsky, 1998b).

The wage issue has complicated the unemployment and underemployment situation, which has also been worsening since 1992. By the fall of 1996, unemployment was estimated by the ILO at 9.2 percent of the working population; this in a country that had not known structural unemployment for over sixty years. These figures do not include workers who are officially employed but who either receive no wages (due to the wage arrears problem) or who are on “administrative leave,” which means that they are on the books as working at a plant but neither report to work nor receive wages. Estimates of the number of workers in this situation vary, but recent studies suggest that approximately one third of all workers fall into these two categories (Weselowsky, 1998a). This puts the effective unemployment rate at a around forty percent.

To add insult to injury, since early on in Yeltsin’s presidency organized labor has been systematically excluded from the policy making process at the executive level. While the unions have made their presence felt in the drafting of legislation in the Duma, at the local and regional political levels, and sporadically at the national level through mostly symbolic strike action, the sustained “social partnership” promised by the government never materialized. This is particularly galling to the independent unions and labor activists who saw themselves as instrumental in Yeltsin’s rise to power in the first place.

The combination of economic and political factors discussed above has led workers and their unions slowly but consistently toward a reassessment of their positions on liberal free-market capitalism, on support for the Yeltsin government, and particularly as a result of privatization on the idea of economic democracy. The realities of living in a relatively uncontrolled capitalist market environment that has become almost Darwinian has strengthened workers’ belief in the idea that they have to organize in defense of their own interests and has led workers back toward egalitarian norms. Like the “socialist value culture” discussed above, the experience of living in the new political economy of Yeltsinism has created at least the potential for a “left” politics among workers that did not exist in 1991.
The essence of Lenin’s 1902 pamphlet is that organization is the key to political effectiveness. The question is how to translate social discontent, or relatively unorganized societal opinions, into political power. I would argue that this is the basic issue in Russia today as well. While the evidence strongly suggests that there is a potentially broad social constituency for “left” politics broadly defined, up to now none of the organized political forces in Russia have been able to organize that constituency in any kind of sustained way. Whether one thinks that a strong “left” politics would be good or bad for Russia—and I think it would be good for a number of reasons—the important analytical question is why the potential has not been translated into effective politics. There are three major reasons for the lack of translation, all of them deeply intertwined.

First of all, Russian political parties have failed organizationally and ideologically to find a way to attract and mobilize their potential constituencies due to the tendency of the party elites to spend their time and resources on internecine squabbling, endless reorganization of their central party apparatuses, and the formation of ever new factions due to personal and programmatic differences. As Joan Urban illustrates in her book on the Russian communist movement, it took years for all of the various communist groups to come to any level of agreement on how to present themselves politically, and even now there are a number of competing organizations. And this does not include the various social-democratic and socialist parties, all of which remain small and poorly organized nationally.

The central ideological conundrum for parties on the left has been how to articulate a left politics without being perceived as somehow implicated in the discredited political authoritarianism of Soviet communism. This is of course complicated by the fact that there are groups in Russia that still adhere to a Stalinist or neo-Stalinist ideology of “socialism,” and given the confusion among many people as to which party is which, it is not surprising that parties on the left are easily tarred with the communist brush by their opponents. That the collapse of the Soviet Union has ideologically compromised “socialism” as an idea is not a problem limited to the left in Russia. As Roy Medvedev argued to me in 1996, the left in Western Europe and Eastern Europe has also lost its ideological coherence, its “socialist vision.” The problem in Russia is simply more intense because the Soviet Union was seen as the geographical center of a “failed” ideology. Until and unless the left in Russia can find a way of articulating an egalitarian program that does not raise the specter of Marxism-Leninism, translating potential into politics will remain problematic.

The second problem with translating the potential into effective politics is social in character. Essentially, the vast majority of Russian citizens simply do not have the resources or the time for political organizing because the policies of the Yeltsin government since 1992 have effectively undermined the social and economic infrastructure on which people relied. Alekandr Zolin, an advisor to Moscow mayor Iuri Luzhkov, said in 1996 that people who could not afford to live in Moscow should be forced to leave, stating that “there is no freedom without financial means (Silverman and Yanowitch, 1997, p. 55). However harsh the comment seems, Zolin was simply reiterating one of the fundamental postulates of democratic theory. “Political sociologists since Aristotle have argued that the prospects for effective democracy depend on social development and economic well-being,” writes Robert Putnam in *Making Democracy Work.* "Contemporary democratic theorists, too, like Robert A. Dahl and Seymour Martin Lipset, have stressed various aspects of modernization... in their discussions of the conditions underlying stable and effective democratic government (Putnam, 1993, p. 11). On these
grounds, given the condition of most social groups in the political economy of Yeltsinism, Russians enjoy little freedom and have even less opportunity for “effective participation” in the putatively democratic institutions of Russia’s political system.

The condition of workers is as good an example as any. By examining the fate of the Russian working class since 1992, we can go a long way in explaining why so many of the indicators of democratization that transition theorists whose western-derived models focus on the political realm narrowly defined are absent in Russia. Why, for example, political parties are ineffective and underinstitutionalized, “civil society” groups have failed to coalesce, and a “law-based” state has failed to emerge in spite of reams of legislation designed to establish one. In large part, it is because the working class, which makes up the bulk of Russian society, has neither the resources nor the conditions of life effectively participate. Further, the state and the economic elites that ignore rules and procedures do so because there is no countervailing social force powerful enough to stop them.

The size and social weight of the working class, its powerlessness in the present system, and the relatively unfettered power of the state and the economic elites in Russia are, in turn, direct living legacies of the Soviet system and the “transition” policies adopted to deconstruct that system. The industrial working class in the Soviet Union grew in response to the Communist Party’s developmental priorities and ideological preoccupations. Industrial workers were the economic foundation of the Soviet state, but they were also dependent on that state and more immediately on the industrial enterprise where they worked. When the new leadership in Russia, with its own priorities and ideological preoccupations, decided to bring down the Soviet system using shock therapy and what turned out to be “nomenklatura privatization,” it was inevitable that the industrial working class—and therefore the majority of Russian society—would be brought down with it. With the bulk of economic and social resources in the hands of very small minority of people, it is not surprising that political organization on the societal level has proven so difficult. This of course applies to political parties as well, that on a very basic level need money to organize, publicize, and campaign. All of this is not meant as an argument that the Soviet system should have been retained, rather that the choice of how to dismantle that system had logical if not entirely predictable consequences economically and politically.

Third, the structure of the Russian political system militates against the emergence of a strong “left” movement, or any other opposition movement for that matter, for at least two reasons. The first and perhaps more obvious is that the political system is so heavily weighted in favor of the President and the “party of power.” The strong presidential system that Russia adopted in the 1993 constitution and the extensive de facto powers that Yeltsin has accumulated have shut out much of society as well as other political actors from the political system. In addition, the focus on the presidency in the context of an undeveloped political party system, combined with the divided electoral procedures for legislative elections, has tended to concentrate political attention on personalities rather than programmatic content (White et al., 1997). It is therefore much more difficult to construct a sustainable social base for political activity in Russia since the fortunes of a political movement tend to rise and fall with the personal fate of the party leaders. Speculation over who if anyone Yeltsin will “favor” as his successor, which is rife in both Russia and the West, underscores the point: the debate has a distinctly Brezhnevian quality about it, with the assumption that whoever comes out on top in the “suc-

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8. The legislature is elected by a combined party list and single-member district method, with half of the deputies elected by each method.
cession struggle” will become the next leader of Russia. Elections in this context seem much more like coronation than competition.

As a final note, it is entirely plausible to argue that the same socioeconomic foundations that provide the potential for a strong left politics in the long term in Russia could also serve as the vehicle for other types of politics, most importantly some form of right-wing populist nationalism. One of the political theorists of the Social-Democratic Party of Russia, Sergei Magaril, recently argued that there is a distinct potential for a version of Peronist politics that might jettison democracy in the political sphere but appeal to the egalitarian social and economic norms that are prevalent in the Russian population (Magaril, 1997). Not only have we already seen a manifestation of this possibility in the person of Zhirinovsky; it has also appeared inside the labor movement in the pseudo-fascist Confederation of Independent Trade-Unions of Russia, and the organization Russian National Unity. While this remains an unlikely scenario at the present time—the Soviet Union’s experience with fascism still haunts many in Russia—the dire economic conditions in Russia and the inability of society to voice its concerns within the present political structures increases the likelihood of people reaching for more radical solutions.

The long-term influence of the postcommunist left—assuming that no abrupt reversal to a more authoritarian system occurs—depends on which set of variables, the “contingent” or the structural, carries more weight in determining the preferences of Russian citizens concerning socioeconomic and political goals. If the contingent variables are determinative, then the salience of the left will decrease; if the structural are more important, a strong left will likely be a presence in Russian political life for the long term. While the evidence is not conclusive, my reading of it points toward the long-term presence of the left in Russia. The fate of the left—and of all political movements in Russia—depends on the ability of leftist politicians and individuals in Russia to transform the existing potential into effective politics, and in the final analysis of course on the willingness of Russia’s leaders and people to continue their still fragile experiment with democracy.

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