

COMPARATIVE POLITICS

Roads to the Temple: Truth, Memory, Ideas, and Ideals in the Making of the Russian Revolution, 1987–1992. By Leon Aron. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012. 483p. \$40.00.
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In contrast to an endless barrage of analyses of postcommunist “transitions” and “reforms,” the writings on the so-called revolutions that ostensibly set the former in motion are relatively few. Most of them, however, address the *annus mirabilis* of 1989, while the breakdown of the USSR is rarely discussed as a “revolution.” This has left some important aspects of the phenomenon of postcommunism underexplored and some seminal questions unaddressed.

All this makes Leon Aron’s new book especially welcome. Aron’s explicit aspiration is to help us “explain the origin and course of the latest Russian revolution,” as well as to shed light on “the reasons why this course has, thus far, proved so uneven and contradictory” (p. 6). To attain this goal, he constructs an “intellectual” (or “cultural” or “moral”) history of the revolution (p. 7) that is meant to demonstrate how “de-mythologization” of the consciousness of the Soviet people (p. 45) “opened a gap in the moral foundation of the regime” (p. 114), and how “newly articulated values and ideals” impacted “perceptions, then attitudes, and, finally, political and economic choices” (pp. 34–35), thus leading to the downfall of the Soviet regime.

Aron employs an “idea-centric” approach, which presumes that “all political movements originate in the minds of men” (p. 19). His first chapter delineates the theoretical underpinnings of this approach. The rest of the book chronicles the debut of the new moral code in the early phase of perestroika and its later transformation into the then-dominant liberal-democratic discourse revolving around the three axial questions: “Who are we?” “Who is to blame?” “What is to be done?” In the Epilogue, Aron projects his conclusions onto the current situation in Russia, explaining the ills of Vladimir Putin’s regime in terms of the persistence of “two infernal sources” that have poisoned Russian public mores—“empire” and, more surprisingly, “unexpurgated Stalinism” (pp. 299–302).

Aron has produced a wonderfully erudite, gripping, and passionate account of the liberal-democratic discourse of perestroika, and his book is unparalleled in the existent literature. But it is exactly the fullness and precision of his account that invites questions about both the character of the phenomenon and its political significance, as well as the theoretical foundations of his study itself. In this review, I will be able to touch on just a few of them. In doing so,

I will advance a simple point: While Aron illuminates the role of liberal-democratic activists during the period of glasnost and perestroika, he also exaggerates the role of this perspective, and flattens out what was in fact a much richer range of discourses of resistance.

Let us begin with the author’s conclusions. If Stalinism persists as an “infernal source” of troubles and if “finishing it off” was *the* supreme goal of the “latest Russian revolution,” one is left to wonder why it is believed that the “revolution” has been “victorious”? Clearly, many institutions usually identified with the Soviet regime, from the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) to the Warsaw Pact, are gone. But does this amount to the victory of the “revolution of freedom and morality”? Edmund Burke’s rebuttal to the French revolutionaries (whether it does justice to them or not) may be pertinent to this case: “You may have subverted Monarchy, but not recover’d freedom” (J. C. D. Clark, ed., *Edmund Burke: Reflections on the Revolution in France: A Critical Edition*, 2001: p. 62). In our case, the recovery of freedom would have implied a dismantling of the actual *modus operandi* of the late Soviet regime, that is, of its real political economy of oppression and exploitation of which a “standard” description of totalitarianism has very little grasp. Why, after all, were the “omnipotent” elites, or the sizable factions thereof, reluctant to defend the pillars of the status quo by all means? Why did *they* initiate the regime’s metamorphoses toward “market and democracy”? Why was the elites’ turnover in all postcommunist countries, and particularly in Russia, so low?

In *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution*, Tocqueville placed the interdependence between continuity and discontinuity at the center of the theory of revolution. What made the French Revolution a *revolution*, on this view, was that it sought to build “the new society out of the *debris* of the old one” (Tocqueville, op. cit., p. 1; emphasis mine). Yet sometimes, contrariwise, only the institutional and ideological scaffolds of the *ancien régime* are shed, while its linchpin and supporting frame are preserved. The point is to distinguish the former from the latter. Were the undone Soviet institutions, to use Joseph Schumpeter’s idiom, the “flying buttresses” of the society called “real socialism” (as distinguished from Stalin’s “totalitarianism” *per se*) or just its “institutional deadwood”? A lack of clarity about the *political economy* of “real socialism” causes confusion about what should be counted as its “overcoming” (although some promising Marxist and non-Marxist approaches to this subject have to be singled out—Mancur Olson, *Power and Prosperity: Outgrowing Communist and Capitalist Dictatorships*, 2000; Neil Fernandez, *Capitalism and Class Struggle in the USSR: A Marxist Theory*, 1997; Vitali Naishul, “Institutional Development in the USSR,” *Cato Journal* 11 [Winter 1992]: 489–496).

The same confusion manifests itself when we grapple with the question of whether the anticommunist revolutions should be considered as typical future-oriented revolutions of modernity or as *restorations*, as a return to “normalcy,” “civilization,” “Europe,” the ideas of 1789, and so on—the terms so prominent in the rhetoric of those whom Aron calls “the troubadours of Glasnost,” akin to England’s Glorious Revolution of 1688–89 as explained by Hume or Burke. This ambivalence is nicely captured by Jürgen Habermas’s oxymoronic term “rectifying revolutions,” partly meant to explain a striking intellectual imitativeness and a lack of any sense of an “open-ended” future characteristic of the those revolutions (“What Does Socialism Mean Today? The Rectifying Revolution and the Need for New Thinking on the Left,” *New Left Review* 183 [September/October 1990]: 3–22). But perhaps Anders Åslund is right: Russia’s capitalist revolution succeeded whereas its democratic revolution failed (see his *Russia’s Capitalist Revolution: Why Market Reform Succeeded and Democracy Failed*, 2007), and Habermas’s “rectifying revolution” best captures the way that what had been perceived as “corruption” and “rot” before perestroika congealed into legitimate capitalism thereafter.

Another problem pertains to Aron’s “idea-centric” method. It is not easy to maintain values and ideas as independent variables driving social processes in light of post-neo-Kantian approaches to “values” (see Hans Joas’s *The Genesis of Values*, 2000) and of the critiques of “representationalist” conceptions of ideology, which associate this method with “false consciousness” (e.g., see Slavoj Žižek, ed., *Mapping Ideology*, 1994). Max Weber, whom Aron misinterprets as another exponent of the idea-centric approach (see p. 338), aphoristically expressed what ideas *can* accomplish in history: “Not ideas, but material and ideal interests, directly govern men’s conduct. Yet very frequently the ‘world images’ that have been created by ‘ideas’ have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest” (H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, 1958, p. 280).

If this is ignored, we can be recaptivated by the illusions spawned by the Age of Enlightenment, by the dazzling image of Reason dissipating the Darkness of Lies and Prejudices and thereby ushering in the Republic of Virtue (or liberal democracy and a market-based economy). This great feat is accomplished by a *vanguard* of the bearers of Truth, who inexplicably escaped the hypnosis of Lies and Prejudices and who rescue the miserable “dupes” (nearly everyone) from oppression by the “knives” (alluding to Maximilien Robespierre).

According to Aron, this is what actually took place in the USSR during perestroika: “[S]uddenly [the USSR and its economy] begin to be seen as shameful, illegitimate, and intolerable by enough men and women among the politically active minority, which everywhere and at all

times makes revolutions, to become doomed” (p. 18). Those enlightened individuals started to “cure” the nation of “self-deception,” of “the military-communist blind faith” (pp. 45–46). This brought about “an astonishingly swift and deep erosion of the ideological foundation of the ancien régime. . . . Gradually replacing these seemingly bedrock certainties were visions of different, just, equitable, and effective political and economic organization” (p. 30).

This description of the “recent Russian revolution” does not really square with some other observations regarding the ills of the Soviet regime suggested by the enlightened vanguard. Apathy and cynicism, irresponsibility and deceitfulness, and so on are presented as typical features of an “average” Soviet citizen—*Homo Sovieticus* (pp. 46, 188–92). But how can those qualities combine with “blind faith” and adherence to “myths” and “ideas” of *any* kind? The moral degradation of the *Homo Sovieticus* is said to be *complete* “naturally,” culminating in “forgetting all values” and in the loss of the very “need for conscience” (pp. 212, 219).

This reminds us of the famous “Liar Paradox” revamped as the “*Homo Sovieticus* Paradox.” If the *Homo Sovieticus* acknowledges his moral depravity and strives for moral betterment (through exposure to moral criticism), is he really morally depraved? To put this differently, if the *Homo Sovieticus* was as morally depraved as Aron’s “troubadours” portrayed him to be, then all their calls for moral revival should have fallen on deaf ears. If those calls, however, did produce cathartic effects, then the portrait of the *Homo Sovieticus* is burlesque. But if it is true, then the epical battle against the communist “blind faith” could not have played a very significant role in the downfall of communism.

Aron quotes the outstanding Soviet/Russian historian Dmitry Likhachev saying “We saw everything—and we were silent” (p. 223). If we maintain a difference between “factual truth” and “practical truth” (Slavoj Žižek), we can say that although an “average” Soviet citizen lacked much of the factual truth about his/her country, she/he was not completely deprived of the practical truth. After all, too many people perished in the Gulag or were dragged through it, too many veterans rendered their truths about the “Great Patriotic War,” and shortages, lines, and forced involvement in all sorts of senseless rituals were part of nearly everyone’s daily experience. Those mundane experiences and those bitter memories formed what James Scott has called the “hidden transcripts” of the dominated—their “backstage culture,” their practices of “hidden” resistance, and their claims and critiques of the rulers that could not be openly avowed. They coalesced in “latent power grids” that would supply future open defiance with energy and determination (Scott, *Domination and the Art of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, 1992).

One of Hannah Arendt’s deepest insights into the nature of totalitarianism is that it is *not* about “convictions”: “The true goal of totalitarian propaganda is not persuasion but organization Not the passing successes of

demagoguery win the masses, but the visible reality and power of ‘living organization’” (*The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 1966, p. 361). This is what “real socialism,” dubbed by some “posttotalitarianism,” tried to capitalize on by blending dictatorship and consumer society and aspiring to *demoralize* the populace through inculcation of “utilitarian motivations” in them (see Václav Havel’s *The Power of the Powerless*, 1985, pp. 30, 38, 45). This strategy did not fail—apathy and cynicism had been very real and widespread phenomena. But its very success backfired—the once 19 million–strong CPSU could mobilize barely a handful of its members to defend it when a “moment of truth” arrived.

How did it come about? Scott describes such “moments of truth” as a breach of the frontier between the “hidden and the public transcripts,” as the former’s “public declaration” that enunciates the overturn of the existent structures of power (*Domination and the Art of Resistance*, Chapter 8). The greatness of Aron’s “troubadours” consists in making such a declaration uncompromisingly and vocally. It is not that “truth telling” produced an eye-opening effect, nor that everything they said was “true,” nor that all “hidden transcripts” of the oppressed were publicly articulated by them (in fact, most of the socio-economic grievances, as distinguished from the legal-political ones, were not), and this is something very typical of the ideological struggles accompanying all “exits from communism.” But, recalling Likhachev’s adage, the “silence” was broken: At least something of what had always been “seen” became publicly voiced. And this brought about a hugely liberating effect.

The arrival of the moment of truth, however, was made possible by certain *structural* phenomena, by the deepening of the cracks in the system, greatly though inadvertently enhanced by Mikhail Gorbachev’s “reforms. No “strains” and “dysfunctions” in the system can explain why the system becomes politically “unsupportable.” But those cracks, or “displacements,” *may* make people behave in ways they never before considered, *may* induce them to experiment with their environment, which has ceased to be “familiar.” They *may* acquire, in the course of all that, a sense that “*habitus* is not destiny” (according to Pierre Bourdieu) and that an alternative may be possible. This is how agency may arise in a nondeterministic fashion. Ideas are indispensable for shaping agency’s “sense of meaning and purpose.” It may be true that “what matters for the stability of any regime is not the legitimacy of this particular system of domination but the presence or absence of preferable alternatives” (Adam Przeworski, “Some Problems in the Study of the Transitions to Democracy,” in G. O’Donnell et al., eds., *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*, 1986, III: 51–52). But it is equally true that no agency capable of transformative action can arise without a sense of its legitimacy.

That legitimacy’s formation is always a much more “agonistic” and a much less continual and “logical” process

than it appears in the retrospective accounts of historians such as Aron’s theoretical mentor, Bernard Bailyn, or by Aron himself: “Leaving aside the arguments of perestroika’s and glasnost’s opponents, both on the left and on the right” (p. 5), is not an ideologically innocuous and purely “technical” arrangement serving to limit the scope of the book. This arrangement suppresses the actual struggles for *hegemony* that took place during perestroika and that largely determined its outcomes, as well as the evolution of the troubadours’ liberal credos. This analytic move establishes the liberal credos’ *monopoly* on perestroika, misrepresenting *their* opponents as the opponents of perestroika *as such* instead of showing them as the proponents of some *alternative* versions of perestroika. We already have some profound attempts to deconstruct the liberal ideological monopoly on the American Revolution (e.g., Terry Bouton, *Taming Democracy*, 2007; Gary B. Nash, *The Unknown American Revolution*, 2005). It is to be hoped that similar attempts in relation to the “recent Russian revolution” are forthcoming. But the theme of “taming” the anticommunist revolutions and of suppressing their more radical aspirations and potentialities has already been introduced into political-theoretical discourse (see, e.g., Jeffrey C. Isaac, “The Meaning of 1989,” in *Democracy in Dark Times*, 1998; Gideon Baker, “The Taming of the Idea of Civil Society,” *Democratization* 6 [no. 3, 1999]: 1–29).

The aforesaid certainly does not either diminish the importance of Aron’s book or belittle the contribution of the “troubadours of glasnost” to the dismantling of communism in Russia. It is necessary, however, to place their contribution in a more sober perspective and to open it up to serious questioning from a standpoint of political theory.

Reorganizing Popular Politics: Participation and the New Interest Regime in Latin America. Edited by Ruth Berins Collier and Samuel Handlin. University Park: Penn State University Press, 2010. 408p. \$65.00 cloth, \$30.00 paper. doi:10.1017/S1537592712003337

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This important book provides a systematic and genuinely comparative effort to describe and explain the origins, operations, and impact of changing patterns of interest representation in contemporary Latin America. The editors and authors draw on a set of surveys administered in 2002 and 2003 in the metropolitan areas of the capital cities of Argentina, Chile, Peru, and Venezuela. They use the data from these surveys effectively to map the evolution of associational life and representation, and to explore the difference that new patterns make to the quality of individual and group participation and representation.

The argument of *Reorganizing Popular Politics* hinges on the transition from a pattern of group formation and linkage geared to political party–trade union ties (“UP-Hub”) to one characterized by multiple associations that