Studying Empires

Ronald Grigor Suny

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Empire Studies has become a flourishing interdisciplinary sub-discipline in recent years, something akin to genocide studies or nationalism studies, though perhaps neither as broad or groundbreaking as gender studies or cultural studies. This very journal, *Ab Imperio*, has been at the foreground of the "imperial turn," the debates and discussions foundational to the conceptualization of a field of research. As fraught as the struggles over definition and boundaries of the inquiry have been, the very disagreements over the terms "empire" and "imperialism" have encouraged participation and inclusion in ways that other sub-disciplines have not. Empire is unashamedly about conquest and annexation, and empire studies is positively imperialist about insisting on its right to discuss related questions of nations and nationalism, the role of subalterns, globalization, transnationalism, state formation, state dissolution, and ethnicity, conflict, and violence.

A tireless investigator of all things imperial, Mark Beissinger, now of Princeton University, is like a veteran wrestler who cannot give up the fight to tame terminology until the slippery categories that we need for our work are forced to submit. In a series of articles and papers, he has defended and developed a constructivist approach to render more precise the unruly language that has hindered more fruitful investigation. Among the insightful propositions he has put forward, six seem to me to be particularly helpful:

- "Empire," Beissinger contends, is an ambiguous term that eludes a simple objective, structural definition and must be recognized as a highly normative claim about the value and durability of a particular state forma-

tion. Empire is in part, at least in the modern world of nation-states, about negative reputation. It speaks of the illegitimacy of a particular polity. Empire is a mental construct that orders the way we understand the world and expresses our relationship to a polity – a set "of images, expectations, and behaviors in interaction with structures."[1]

• Empire, or at least empire-thinking, has not yet seen its last days. Ideas about empires, discourses of imperialism, and expectations based on past colonial experiences are alive and well in our world. Both Russians and former Soviet non-Russians live with their own conflicting understandings of the Soviet imperial experience, which construe the new and unpredictable social reality in which they live. These peoples live within a *habitus* shaped by history and their various interpretations of that history. On the one side, there remains a "longing for empire" on the part of some Russians, and on the other, a visceral anti-imperial (read, anti-Russian) response on the part of many former Soviet republics (most notably, the Baltic states, Georgia and Azerbaijan). The assertions of a Great Power are read in Tbilisi or Tallinn (not to mention Washington) as the harbingers of essentially aggressive and expansionist policies of an aging but ambitious empire.

• Beissinger defines empire "as a large-scale system of alien domination" that "involves hierarchy and control," but with the additional subjective dimention of a "sense of the alien or foreign character of power (even if this cultural boundary is not always ethnic in nature): and the arbitrary, willful self-interested exercise of power" (in Philip Pettit's words, the sense of "having to live at the mercy of another").[2]

• Definitions and understandings change over time, and empire is not what it used to be. In the post-World War II international arena, anti-imperial norms of sovereignty and self-determination have engendered empire to become a political pathology.[3] Conquest and annexation of one state by another has become nearly impossible, unacceptable to that amorphous entity known as the "international community." Colonialism in the old understanding is passé. The hegemony of the discourse of the nation, and the nation-state

[1] Mark R. Beissinger. The Persisting Ambiguity of Empire // Post-Soviet Affairs. 1995. Vol. XI. No. 2. P. 163.

[2] Mark R. Beissinger. The Persistence of Empire in Eurasia // NewsNet. 2008. Vol. XLVIII. No. 1. P. 4; Mark R. Beissinger. Soviet Empire as "Family Resemblance" // Slavic Review. 2006. Vol. LXV. No. 2. P. 300; Philip Petit. Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government. Oxford, 1997. Pp. 4-5.

[3] Ibid.

as the dominant form of modern states, have rendered empires illegitimate usurpers of the nation's rightful sovereignty, its right to rule itself. In Beissinger's own succinct review of imperial history, "Prior to the late nineteenth century, empire was employed mainly as a term of prestige and as a claim to legitimate control, not as a stigma and a claim about the illegitimacy of control as is true today – a transformation in meaning associated with the rise of international norms of self-determination and sovereignty and with the dissolution of European colonialism."[4]

- Empire is both structure and claim. It is a reputation that some states acquire over time. Beissinger focuses primarily on this notion of reputation. The USSR may have been, in the structural sense, an empire before it was widely described as a empire in the West or by its constituent peoples. Structure plus discourse gives rise to reputation. But, he insists, good reputations are fleeting – one act can do damage – whereas bad reputations are sticky and give rise to further confirmation. Present-day Russia, for example, is burdened by a "historical stigma of empire" (Dominic Lieven's term).

- In a discussion of articles on the early Soviet state by historians Adeeb Khalid, Adrienne Edgar, and Peter A. Blitstein, Beissinger introduced the idea that empire should be considered a case of "family resemblance." "Empire," he argues, "is not a clearly bounded transhistorical model but rather a Wittgensteinian 'family resemblance' whose meaning and referents have altered significantly over time."[5] His sensitivity to historical nuance leads him to appreciate the ways in which the early Soviet experience was understood by many non-Russians (for example, in Central Asia) as a colonializing project by Russians over indigenous peoples, even as many Soviet leaders themselves worked diligently to overcome the imperial stigma of tsarism and attempted to transform the "backward" peoples of the periphery into modern citizens of a socialist federation. The early Soviet state resembled an empire for those who saw Soviet programs as a novel form of foreign domination. For Beissinger empire is not a "causal paradigm, but rather [a] political outcome meriting explanation."[6]

Beissinger's emphasis on discourse, reputation, and claims is extraordinarily important. Yet, as he argues himself, "empire is not solely a claim, for claims of empire without acts of domination that might justify the claim

[4] Mark R. Beissinger. Soviet Empire as "Family Resemblance". P. 299.
[5] Ibid. P. 303.
[6] Ibid. P. 302.

are not convincing performances."[7] What happens if we shift the focus back toward "the contested ontological status of the Soviet Union as an empire?"[8] What can we learn from bringing structure back into the discussion of reputation?

The definition of empire becomes central to the ongoing discussions of what Russian states fit that bill only if it does more than simply describe characteristics they might share with empires whose status is less contested. Empire should tell us something about the dynamics of the state, its behaviors, capacities, constraints, and contradictions. Tsarist Russia is considered indisputably as empire – it proudly declared itself one – and is used as a case that defines the model. But Soviet Russia and post-Soviet Russia present a whole set of interrelated problems. Both emphatically reject the label of empire, yet both are repeatedly so labeled by others. On the USSR, I detect three positions: those that emphatically claim that the Soviet Union was an empire; those that hold it was not; and those who take the "radical middle position," such as myself, who argue that the USSR became an empire despite the best intentions of many of its leaders and its ideological underpinnings, and over time displayed features of both a modernizing empire and a nationalizing state. The dilemma for the Soviet Union was that in many ways it achieved some of its modernizing goals, including the consolidation and development of new and reforged nations within the Union that no longer required or would accept the restraints of a self-denying imperial rulership.

Empire is about institutionalized hierarchy, maintenance of difference between ruling metropole and ruled periphery, distinction and inequality, and rule legitimized by conquest (superior power) and the inherent superiority of the rulers. It is fundamentally non-democratic, often autocratic or dictatorial, and is not based on a real practice of popular sovereignty. As an ideal type, empire can be contrasted at one end of a spectrum of political regimes from ideal types of nation-states and multinational states based on civil equality, horizontal equivalency of citizens under the law, practices of homogenization of populations either ethnically or politically, and ideas of popular sovereignty and democracy. Empires tend to be inclusive in their populations and porous at their frontiers, while national and multinational states tend to be more tightly bounded, exclusive about "others," and jealous guardians of their borders. Many regimes combine features of empire and

[7] Ibid. P. 298.
[8] Ibid.

nation-state; hardly any are completely ethnically homogeneous, despite assimilation, ethnic cleansings, and genocides, or fully egalitarian. A tiny state like Belgium may be the state of the Belgian nation for some but an imperial oppressor for many Flemish speakers. As Beissinger has proposed, reputation and perception are key to the subjective sense of empire. Yet structure and experience feed into reputation and perception.

As Adeeb Khalid showed in a suggestive comparison of the early Soviet project and the contemporary Kemalist transformation of republican Turkey, the Soviets similarly sought to overcome difference, to break definitively with past traditions, combat imperialism, and rapidly modernize the country by massively mobilizing the population, building a powerful new state, emancipating women, teaching literacy, and secularizing society.[9] While he argues that the universalizing drive of the Soviets makes it more like a modernizing state than an empire, that drive can also be seen to resemble the civilizing processes of more conventionally colonial empires. Cultural revolution and the overcoming of backwardness was based on a distinctive hierarchy of superior and inferior cultures and values. Acculturation and assimilation (*sblizhenie i sliianie*) can also be weapons in the arsenal of empire, for they are imposed from the metropole, often through local agents, but ultimately, like the homogenizing efforts of nationalists they require the notion of difference and distinction – between ethnicities or peasants and workers or levels of development – even when the stated goal is the obliteration of difference. Like other kinds of states, empires may desire the efficiencies that come with shared language, bureaucratic management, and removal of particular local practices. But, of course, differences were not obliterated in the Soviet empire. They were in practice reinforced: sovereignty existed only with a small elite in the center; Russians were "elder brothers," their history taken as the foundation of the whole union, their language the lingua franca for the Soviet people ("Unbreakable union of free republics," the national anthem proclaimed, but "forged over centuries by Great Rus'"); and actual practices of governance and social advancement were intricately embedded in ethnic discrimination. From 1917 the Soviet system turned from anti-imperial in design to imperial in actuality, as the most effectual decisions were made by the metropole over the periphery. "Civilizing" and "modernizing" occurred, but in Soviet fashion. Schools, the army, the formation of literary

[9] Adeeb Khalid. Backwardness and the Quest for Civilization: Early Soviet Central Asia in Comparative Perspective // Slavic Review. 2006. Vol. LXV. No. 2. Pp. 231-251.

languages ("print socialism") – all in the idiom projected by Soviet power – were accompanied by the destruction of old elites, nationalist or even national-Bolshevik intellectuals, campaigns against veils and religion, and the erosion of autonomy in the republics.

Khalid is certainly correct to claim that traditional colonial empires were less interventionist in society than the Soviets. The difference invalidates for him the argument that the Soviets were imperial, but it is easy enough to argue that the degree of intervention may only confirm a more radical imperialism. To this reader, Khalid's narrative of Kemalist nation-making does not resonate with the story of Soviet state-building. While the Kemalists assiduously, forcibly dissolved various ethnicities into a single Turkish ethnic nation, the Soviets diligently created or reinforced different nations and nationalities within a pseudo-federation, sharply marking them off as different from one another, reifying their distinctive features, and ultimately biologizing and primordializing their origins. What the Soviets did for Armenians, Georgians, or Turkmens may have parallels with what the Kemalists did for Turks, but there is no convincing parallel between forging a centralized Soviet Union based on differentiation among peoples and a nationalizing state based on assimilation, deportation, and brutal suppression of difference. Both states were modernizers and mobilizers, the one an empire, the other a purported homogeneous ethnonational state. In her essay Adrienne Edgar comes closer to a "radical middle position" when she argues that the Soviet Union was neither an empire nor a unitary state but had features of both and concludes that its policies "were not imperial in intent but imperial in effect."[10]

The term empire gives us some purchase on the dynamics of the Soviet state. Even after it shifted from its more radical nationalizing efforts among its constituent peoples and promoted greater "nationalization" by the mid-1930s, the USSR never completely abandoned *korenizatsiia*.[11] The word fell into disuse (friends of mine in Moscow in the 1990s insisted that there was no such word in the Russian language!). As Peter Blitstein sums up, "by 1938 Soviet nationality policy emerged as a unique hybrid of contradictory practices…. [U]ltimately in the Soviet Union indigenization for the vari-

[10] Adrienne Edgar. Bolshevism, Patriarchy, and the Nation: The Soviet "Emancipation" of Muslim Women in Pan-Islamic Perspective // Slavic Review. 2006. Vol. LXV. No. 2. P. 272.

[11] Peter Blitstein. Cultural Diversity and the Interwar Conjuncture: Soviet Nationality Policy in its Comparative Context // Slavic Review. 2006. Vol. LXV. No. 2. Pp. 273-293.

ous non-Russian peoples increasingly came into conflict with policies of Soviet nationalization."[12] Greater emphasis was placed on acculturation and even assimilation during the Khrushchev and Brezhnev years, yet the very institutions and practices of the "federal" state blocked effective merging of nations and, indeed, fostered greater identification on the part of many nationalities – particularly in the Caucasian and Baltic republics – with their own nations. There were discussions at the top about dissolving various distinctions of the union republics. But no Soviet *natsiia* was "created," only a Soviet *narod*. Structures, discriminations, and discourses of the nation reinforced the distinctions and differences among peoples, hindered the development of an unambiguous identification with the Union as a whole, and nourished a growing perception down below that the USSR was an imperial enterprise. Multiple loyalties coexisted right up to the end, shifting at times in one direction or another, until the center failed beyond redemption, and the local emerged as the only refuge left.

Nancy Condee raises the question of how cultural studies might help us understand empire – and how empire might help illuminate problems in cultural studies. Her central problem is that of mediation, the relationship between cultural text and social reality. By their nature cultural products do not give clear, unambiguous information, nor are they available for simple interpretation. Yet, as she points out in myriad examples, the theme of empire, particularly its collapse, resonates in contemporary Russian culture. Russians think about empire, and the fate of empires affects them on both a cognitive and emotional level, not to mention on even more mundane levels. Going back to Ivan Aivazovskii, the great maritime painter, Condee senses that Russians (in this case, actually, a Crimean Armenian) have had empire on their minds. Seascape and landscape, in their grandeur and references to the wider world, along with travel and pilgrimages, reach beyond the horizon to express the boundlessness of the Russian world, the vast unbroken space that lies at the base of its political imaginary. By her subtle reading of the products of "Russian" and Soviet culture Condee reinforces the centrality of empire and the imperial to the senses of self and politics in the Russian and Soviet worlds. Like other empires Russia and the Soviet Union conceived of itself as inclusive, multinational, and universal in its mission.

Like Beissinger, Condee defends the constructivist approach. She shows how nation cannot be collapsed into people, that "'nation' is not just any collective subjectivity (as [Anthony] Smith's more generous definition would

[12] Ibid. P. 291.

encourage), but one marked by independent, self-affirming and internally conflictual modern practices distinct from the state."[13] *Narodnost'*, therefore, should not be conflated with *natsional'nost'*, as in Official Nationality. Rather, Official Nationality is closer to an understanding of *narodnost'* and can be found in a film like Nikita Mikhalkov's *Barber of Siberia*, which brings people and state together rather than (as nationalism would) provide an autonomous space for nation. Her essay is – like her discipline of cultural studies – open and suggestive, hard to pin down, available for interpretation. As a discipline, cultural studies might seem undisciplined to some social and political scientists, but cultural historians and anthropologists can dip into her rich stew, pull out the rich and tasty bits, and digest or discard as they please.

Alexander Semyonov, one of the founding editors of *Ab Imperio*, is not only a constructivist but a vigorous defender of historical approaches to the study of empire. The story of empire must be radically historicized, he proposes, and not told only as "a mere appendix to or projection of national history."[14] The agenda of empire studies is to revive and restore the history and analysis of empires without either the inevitable trajectory of empire-into-nation-states or the lumping of very different regimes of the past into a single category. The very word "empire" seems to escape from history and is used promiscuously and irresponsibly for political ends, as in the case of Chubais' "liberal empire" or Kasianov's "empire of freedom" or even Thomas Jefferson's "empire of liberty." While he does not spell out in any detail the program of historicization, Semyonov's analytical agenda seems to be a program that empire studies is taking on with great energy and excitement. This essay and the others are program setting. Let the debates and discussions go on!

SUMMARY

Рональд Суни открывает свое выступление констатацией растущей популярности имперских исследований и связанной с этим проблемы нечеткости терминологии этой дисциплины, претендующей на новое осмысление множества социальных, политических и культурных феноменов. Именно в стремлении к терминологической ясности и

[13] Nancy Condee. Mediation, Imagination, and Time: Speculative Remarks on Russia Culture // Ab Imperio. 2008. No. 1. Pp. 177-192.

[14] Alexander Semyonov. Empire as a Context Setting Category // Ab Imperio. 2008. No. 1. Pp. 193-204.

саморефлективности имперских исследований видит Суни главное достоинство конструктивистского подхода Марка Бейссингера. В статье тезисно суммируются основные положения этого подхода, в основе которого лежит внимание к дискурсу империи и имперской репутации. Суни задается вопросом: что мы узнаем, привнося "структуру" в дискуссии об "имперской репутации"? Этот вопрос он разрешает на примере Советского Союза, который, в отличие от Российской империи, не являлся самопровозглашенным имперским государством и использовал антиимперскую риторику. В этой связи Суни предлагает типологию империи как идеального типа (институционализированная иерархия, поддержание различий между метрополией и периферией, прозрачность границ, неравенство, власть, основанная на завоевании и/или на превосходстве имперских правителей, недемократичность, неприятие принципа народного суверенитета). Такая империя как идеальный тип противопоставляется национальному государству как идеальному типу. Обращаясь к разбираемой Бейссингером историографической дискуссии о характере раннесоветского проекта, Суни использует структурные различия идеальных моделей для обоснования своей "радикально срединной позиции", согласно которой СССР не был ни империей, ни унитарным государством, а его политика не являлась имперской по своим интенциям, хотя ее результаты можно охарактеризовать как имперские.

Несмотря на стремление сбалансировать "конструктивистские" и ориентированные на анализ дискурса подходы к империи современными структурными и институциональными моделями, Суни отдает должное представленному в выступлении Нэнси Конди подходу культурных исследований. Он обращает особое внимание на ее интерпретацию советской (и досоветской "официальной") народности, которая не совпадает с дискурсом автономной самореализуемой нации, но обретает самодостаточность только через слияние с государством.

В выступлении Александра Семенова Суни выделяет призыв к историзации понимания империи как наиболее созвучный его собственному пониманию динамики дисциплины. Историзация имперского опыта позволяет обоснованно преодолевать теологию "от империи к нации", делает невозможным подведение под термин "империя" самых разных режимов и государств и препятствует злоупотреблению этим понятием в политическом дискурсе. Согласно Суни, соответствующая историзация и рефлексия на сегодняшний день формируют аналитическую программу имперских исследований.