

**Angelo Segrillo (ed.)  
Camilo Domingues  
César Albuquerque  
Vicente G. Ferraro Jr.**

**Karl Marx and Russia**  
Pre-Socialist, Socialist and Post-  
Socialist Experiences and Visions

1<sup>st</sup> edition

(online version for free distribution)

FFLCH/USP  
São Paulo (Brazil)  
2019



# **Karl Marx and Russia**

## **Pre-Socialist, Socialist and Post-Socialist Experiences and Visions**

*A book sponsored by:*

**Laboratório de Estudos da Ásia (LEA)**  
(Coords. Angelo Segrillo/Peter Demant)

**Department of History**  
(Head: João Paulo Garrido Pimenta)

**FFLCH**  
(Dir. Maria Armanda do Nascimento Arruda  
Vice-Dir. Paulo Martins)

**University of São Paulo**  
(Rector: Vahan Agopyan  
Vice-Rector: Antonio Carlos Hernandes)

São Paulo – Brazil  
2019

Copyright © 2019 by the authors  
All rights reserved.

Printed in Brazil

**Catálogo na Publicação (CIP)**  
**Serviço de Biblioteca e Documentação**  
**Faculdade de Filosofia, Letras e Ciências Humanas da Universidade de São Paulo**

---

K18 Karl Marx and Russia: pre-socialist, socialist and post-socialist experiences and visions / Angelo Segrillo (editor) ; Camilo Domingues, César Albuquerque, Vicente G. Ferraro Jr. -- São Paulo : FFLCH/USP, 2019.  
143 p.

ISBN 978-85-7506-349-1

1. Marxism. 2. Socialism (Russia). 3. International relations.  
I. Marx, Karl. II. Segrillo, Angelo, *coord.*

CDD 335.4

---

Elaborada por Maria Imaculada da Conceição – CRB-8/6409

Text design and edition: Laboratório de Estudos da Ásia (USP)  
Cover: Laboratório de Estudos da Ásia (USP).

**Laboratório de Estudos da Ásia (LEA)**  
**Departamento de História - FFLCH**  
Universidade de São Paulo  
Av. Professor Lineu Prestes, 338  
CEP: 05508-900 São Paulo – SP  
Tel: (55) (11) 30913760  
e-mail: laboratoriodeestudosdaasia@usp.br  
Brasil

# CONTENTS

About the Authors	vii
Foreword	ix
Two Centuries of Karl Marx Biographies: An Overview <i>Angelo Segrillo</i>	11
Confessions of a Biographer <i>Angelo Segrillo</i>	33
Revolution in the Revolution: Michael Heinrich's Challenge in the Realm of Karl Marx Biographies <i>Angelo Segrillo</i>	45
Some Economic and Social Aspects of Russian Industrialization in the Nineteenth Century <i>Camilo Domingues</i>	51
Gorbachev as a Thinker: The Evolution of Gorbachev's Ideas in Soviet and Post-Soviet Times <i>César Albuquerque</i>	75
An Overview of the Russian Post-Soviet Political System from Yeltsin to Putin <i>Vicente G. Ferraro Jr.</i>	105



## About the authors

**Angelo Segrillo** is a Professor of History at the University of São Paulo. He holds a Bachelor's degree from Missouri State University, an M.A. from the Moscow Pushkin Institute and a Ph.D. from Universidade Federal Fluminense. He is the author of *Karl Marx: uma biografia dialética*, the first biography (*stricto sensu*) of Karl Marx by a Latin American author.

**Camilo Domingues** ([camilodomingues@hotmail.com](mailto:camilodomingues@hotmail.com)) is a Ph.D. student in the Graduate Program in History of Fluminense Federal University (UFF – Brazil). He is currently undertaking the research project “The Aesthetic Relations of Art to Reality: The Interaction between History, Philosophy and Literature in the Work of N. G. Chernyshevsky,” under the supervision of Prof. Daniel Aarão Reis.

**César Albuquerque** ([rasecalbuquerque@gmail.com](mailto:rasecalbuquerque@gmail.com)) is a Ph.D. student in History at the University of São Paulo. He researches the political and economic transformations in the USSR and Russia since the beginning of Perestroika. His master's thesis, titled (in Portuguese) *Perestroika Unfolding: An Analysis of the Evolution of Gorbachev's Political and Economic Ideas (1984-1991)*, is available online at: [http://lea.vitis.uspnet.usp.br/arquivos/trabalhos/pesquisadoresdolea/dissertacaodemestrado\\_Cesaralbuquerque.pdf](http://lea.vitis.uspnet.usp.br/arquivos/trabalhos/pesquisadoresdolea/dissertacaodemestrado_Cesaralbuquerque.pdf).

**Vicente G. Ferraro Jr.** ([vgferraro.jr@hotmail.com](mailto:vgferraro.jr@hotmail.com)) holds a Bachelor's degree in International Relations from PUC-SP and an M.A. in Political Science from the Moscow Higher School of Economics. He is working towards a Ph.D. in Political Science at the University of São Paulo. Ferraro researches politics and conflicts in Russia and the post-Soviet space. His master's thesis was about the changes in the Russian political system since the end of the USSR. It is available online (in Russian) at [http://lea.vitis.uspnet.usp.br/arquivos/trabalhos/pesquisadoresdolea/dissertacaodemestrado\\_vicenteferraro.pdf](http://lea.vitis.uspnet.usp.br/arquivos/trabalhos/pesquisadoresdolea/dissertacaodemestrado_vicenteferraro.pdf).



## Foreword

This is the fourth book published under the auspices of the Center for Asian Studies (*Laboratório de Estudos da Ásia - LEA*) of the University of São Paulo; the first one in English for an international audience. In the wake of the 2017 centennial of the Russian Revolution and of the 2018 bicentennial of Marx's birthday, *Karl Marx and Russia: Pre-Socialist, Socialist, and Post-Socialist Experiences and Visions* presents essays by LEA researchers on Marx and/or Russia.

**Angelo Segrillo** wrote three pieces ("Two Centuries of Karl Marx Biographies: An Overview," "Confessions of a Biographer" and "Revolution in the Revolution: Michael Heinrich's Challenge in the Realm of Karl Marx Biographies") which analyze the universe of the Marx biographies written so far and introduce methodological remarks about the craft of biography writing itself.

In *Some Economic and Social Aspects of Russian Industrialization in the Nineteenth Century*, **Camilo Domingues** presents a bibliographical review about the Russian economy in the period from the late eighteenth century to the eve of the First World War. Among the various components of Russian economic and social development in the period, four are dealt with in particular: population growth, educational reforms, economic growth, and (economic, fiscal and financial) state measures. The article traces the main trends of development in these areas, with special emphasis on the contradictions that permeated the process of industrialization of the Russian Empire in the nineteenth century.

*Gorbachev as a thinker: The Evolution of Gorbachev's Ideas in Soviet and Post-Soviet Times* presents some preliminary findings by **César Albuquerque**, who is pursuing doctoral work on the same theme. It draws on Albuquerque's master's thesis [*Perestroika Unfolding: An Analysis of the Evolution of Gorbachev's Political and economic Ideas (1984-1991)*, in English translation]. These works constitute the first major academic effort to analyze in detail the evolution of Gorbachev's ideas (as a thinker, not merely as a politician) before, during and after Perestroika. The original master's thesis can be read, in the Portuguese original, at [http://lea.vitis.uspnet.usp.br/arquivos/trabalhos/pesquisadoresdolea/dissertacaodemestrado\\_Cesaralbuquerque.pdf](http://lea.vitis.uspnet.usp.br/arquivos/trabalhos/pesquisadoresdolea/dissertacaodemestrado_Cesaralbuquerque.pdf).

*An Overview of the Russian Post-Soviet Political System from Yeltsin to Putin* summarizes and updates, in a modified form, the main

results and conclusions of **Vicente G. Ferraro Jr.**'s master's thesis on the same theme. The thesis can be read, in the Russian original, at [http://lea.vitis.uspnet.usp.br/arquivos/trabalhos/pesquisadoresdolea/dissertacaodemestrado\\_vicenteferraro.pdf](http://lea.vitis.uspnet.usp.br/arquivos/trabalhos/pesquisadoresdolea/dissertacaodemestrado_vicenteferraro.pdf).

We hope you enjoy the reading.

## Two centuries of Karl Marx biographies: an overview<sup>1</sup>

Angelo Segrillo<sup>2</sup>

There is extensive literature about Marx's *works*. But there is one kind of bibliographic assessment that has not yet been made: an overview of the books written about Marx's *life*. That is what I propose to initiate here.<sup>3</sup>

The beginning of the twenty-first century is a good observation point for such a task. Not only do we have a retrospective view of the nineteenth century — when Marxist socialism was only a theoretical vision — but we also experienced the so-called real socialism in the twentieth century, its (partial, but significant) collapse at the end of the century and now we live in an admirable and ironic new “post-Berlin Wall” world in which “socialism is over,” but the most dynamic core of the world economy (with the possibility of soon having the largest GDP in the world) is ... a socialist country: China. It is interesting to see how the various biographies about Marx, and their projected vision of this thinker, were affected by the climate of the times in which the biographers lived themselves through all these different historical experiences.

A question arises right from the start: are there many biographies on Marx? I believe that most people (even those familiar with Marxism) would hesitate, in doubt about this question. And the answer is: it depends on the definition we use for “biography.” Karl

---

<sup>1</sup> This is the second modified and updated version of Angelo Segrillo's article “Karl Marx: um balanço biográfico” published in Portuguese in the Brazilian journal *Estudos Ibero-Americanos* (vol. 43, no. 3, pp. 601-611, Sept.-Dec. 2017). We thank the editors of *Estudos Ibero-Americanos* for the permission to reproduce the content here.

<sup>2</sup> Angelo Segrillo is an Associate Professor of History at the University of São Paulo (Brazil) and author of *Karl Marx: uma biografia dialética* (Curitiba: editora Prismas/Appris, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> A review of Marx's biographies can be seen in Goller (2007), but it only covers the works published until 1938. In this review, I will focus on the specific biographies of Marx individually. There are a number of other interesting biographies of Marx with other people but, for reasons of space, they will not be analyzed here, for example, the biography of the couple Karl and Jenny Marx in Gabriel (2013) and the combined biography of Marx and Engels in Cornu (1955-1970). In addition, there are biographies about people close to Marx that also help to illuminate the life of the German thinker, such as Jenny Marx's biography by F. Giroud (1992) or Marx's great-grandson's writings about him in Longuet (1997). Although they fall outside the scope of this article, they may be of interest to readers and researchers.

Marx is one of the most studied thinkers and there is a myriad of books about him and his work. However, “biography” is a study of the “life” of an author, not necessarily about his work. Of course, especially with Marx, it is difficult to separate the author’s life from his work. But this differentiation is important so that we can sort out the biographies (*stricto sensu*) of this character from the huge amount of books that exist about his theory and works.

The task becomes more complex because of the existence of the so-called intellectual biographies. They are books that may describe (usually in a brief manner) biographical aspects of Marx’s life, but focus primarily on the formation and development of his thought and works. The most famous of these intellectual biographies was written by the philosopher Isaiah Berlin in 1939: *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment*.<sup>4</sup> A few intellectual biographies practically omit the factual part of Marx’s life, being devoted almost exclusively to the analysis (of the evolution) of his thought. This is the case of the book *Karl Marx*, written by the German theorist Karl Korsch in 1938.

Thus, if we count the so-called intellectual biographies, there is a considerable number of biographies of Marx. Not to mention various other types of “frontier” works, such as commemorative political texts describing or discussing aspects of Marx’s life (for example, *Karl Marx und Sein Lebenswerk* by the German Communist leader Klara Zetkin in 1913). But if we adopt a *stricto sensu* definition of biography as being primarily devoted to Marx’s *life*, and moreover, fulfilling the academic demands of rigorous use and referencing of primary sources and original documents that validate what is being narrated, then the number is more limited. With some exceptions, we might even say that this kind of biography with strict referencing of primary sources for events in Marx’s life is a relatively new phenomenon, from the second half of the twentieth century onward. Marx’s earliest biographies in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century were more adequate when referencing his theoretical side — indicating the textual sources of their quoted passages, for example — but they were far less rigorous in describing the events of Marx’s life, often using knowledge obtained via oral accounts by contemporaries or assuming that certain broadly disseminated versions of past events were true. In the second half of the twentieth century there appeared biographies such as those of David McLellan (1973, considered by many the best and most complete to date), Francis Wheen (1999), Jonathan Sperber (2013) and Gareth Stedman Jones (2016) which perfectly meet the strictest academic requirements for a biographical

---

<sup>4</sup> The books mentioned in this article are listed in the BIBLIOGRAPHY at the end of the text.

work from an historical point of view.

In this article, I will give an overview of how this differentiated mosaic of books that took the form of biographies of Marx appeared, showing the peculiar characteristics adopted by some of the most important biographers when describing the Moor. "Moor" was Marx's nickname among his adult friends and family due to the color of his skin.

Marx died on March 14, 1883. In 1885, the first biography (description of life) of that thinker was published in Leipzig. It was *Karl Marx: Eine Studie* by the professor of political economy of the University of Vienna, Gustav Gross. This first attempt foreshadowed the difficulties of separating the life of the Moor from his work. As the title itself denotes ("Karl Marx: a study"), the book, although narrating aspects of the Moor's life in chronological order, mainly comments on his works. The author himself announced in the preface that the life of the German thinker was not known in detail and that he was not the person best suited to narrate it in depth. According to him the appropriate people for the task would be the executors of Marx's literary will: Engels and Eleanor (one of the Moor's daughters). In the absence of biographies by them, his work might perhaps be useful. He announced that his goal was to comment on and elucidate aspects not so well known in Marx's work. It is important to note that this first biography was not written by a Marxist but rather by a liberal: Gustav Gross had an active political career in this field. In the preface, Gross (1885, p. VI) promised his "subjective preferences to suppress and keep criticism to a minimum." Throughout the book, Gross attempts to describe Marx's actions and ideas in the most "objective" way possible, that is, in the way Marx himself exposed them and only after, and occasionally, criticize them from a liberal point of view.

This first biography foreshadowed the difficulty of future biographers to dwell on the description of the Moor's life without almost automatically jumping to the side of the "intellectual" biography, that is, a work of discussion of Marx's ideas. The controversial and combative character of the Marxian thought made it difficult to have an indifferent, "neutral" description of his ideas.

Another characteristic that this first biographical work evinced was the tendency of Marx's life to be described based on testimonies and notions passed orally through time (mainly in socialist circles) rather than on real research of primary sources and written documents. Most early biographies of Marx (say, up to the middle of the twentieth century) follow this general pattern. *Stricto sensu* biographies centered on Marx's life (not on his work) and using painstaking historical research from primary sources are

characteristic of the second half of the twentieth century, with works such as those by David McLellan, Francis Wheen, Jonathan Sperber, and Gareth Stedman Jones.

As previously mentioned, Marx's first "biography" was written by a non-Marxist. This situation could not last long or Marxism would risk "losing the race" for the memory of the Moor. Thus, soon a heavyweight from the Marxist camp prepared a book in this vein. In 1896, Wilhelm Liebknecht published his *Karl Marx zum Gedächtnis: ein Lebensabriss und Erinnerungen* (in the English version translated as *Karl Marx: Biographical Memoirs*). Liebknecht was one of the leaders of the Social Democratic party in Germany. He was close to Marx and his family, with whom he had been acquainted during their exile in London. In the foreword, Liebknecht warned that, due to the fact that he dedicated almost all his time to practical political activities in Germany, he had little time for theoretical work. When he was asked to write something biographical about Marx, the compromise he was able to make was to compose, instead of a biography of the Moor, an autobiographical book in which he would describe the many common events and experiences he had with Marx and his family. In this way, the readers would have a perspective on the intimate life of that great thinker. These opening words are important to understand the real purpose of the book, which has often been misunderstood. Contrary to Gustav Gross's already mentioned work, Liebknecht's book hardly ventured into explaining Marx's works or thought. After an initial brief chronological summary of Marx's life, the book describes passages from the life of the Moor that Liebknecht shared. Despite the remarkable interest of the work for historians, many observers (especially from the left) criticized the somewhat mundane character (formed of everyday episodes, without major political consequences) of several of the passages described. As Liebknecht's aim was to depict Marx in a sympathetic light, many did not understand why he inserted passages in which the Moor even seemed childish. For example, he described an episode in which he, Marx and Edgar Bauer heard words of criticism about Germany from some Englishmen in London. Then, overtaken by a sudden attack of patriotism, they decided to respond by defending the exploits of German artists and thinkers against the philosophical/political alienation of Englishmen. Moreover, having drunk a few beers, they later behaved like teenagers. Following Bauer's sardonic example, they picked up paving stones from the street and smashed street lamps before fleeing from the police. Many critics wondered why Liebknecht wasted time describing such infantile episodes that could even show Marx in a bad light. I have a hypothesis to explain this kind

of description by Liebknecht. It has to do with the political environment of the times when the book was written. In the 1890s, the so-called *Anti-Socialist Laws* were repealed in Germany and the German Social Democratic Party began its rise as a “respectable” and legitimate organization in the political competition. Liebknecht, in drafting a book in which he described Marx in his daily life as a loving father and a “normal” person (“like all others” despite his above average intellectual brilliance), tried to do with the image of the Moor what was happening with the Social Democratic party: becoming normal and respectable. Unlike the subversive, conspiratorial, “outlaw” Marx — as the Moor had hitherto been described by conservative governments — the prosaic episodes in Liebknecht’s book conveyed the image of a more “human and playful” Marx, thus making him more acceptable in the legal political game they were now taking part in.

For the sake of doing justice to the biographer, it must be said that although the book was largely favorable to Marx, Liebknecht did not shy away from pointing out the moments when he had differences with the Moor, such as when he commented that Marx was not a good speaker or that Marx had been wrong in predicting the timing of certain capitalist crises to come. Within the spirit in which it was constructed — an “indirect” biography through the autobiography of the other author, both of whom were important political figures — the work certainly has historical relevance.

The next big step (for many, the *first* step) in the field of biographies of the Moor would come from the United States. It was the book *Karl Marx: His Life and Work*, by John Spargo, an intellectual from the Socialist Party of America. The above mention of the “first step” refers to the fact that some critics think that the first works described above did not constitute a *stricto sensu* biography of Marx — that of Liebknecht being a book of memoirs and that of Gustav Gross, for the most part, an intellectual biography. Spargo researched for 13 years (in the midst of his journalistic and political activities) to write the work, and really concentrated mostly on the life of Marx and not only on his works or ideas. It was a great qualitative leap for the time in terms of *stricto sensu* biography, but it had limitations because it was not written by a professional or academic historian. Like most of Marx’s biographies until the first half of the twentieth century, the referencing of primary sources was erratic, most of the time with the facts being narrated without documentation, based on stories that were common currency in leftist circles, accepted at face value. In any case it can be considered the first big step toward *stricto sensu* biographies of Marx. It is interesting that Spargo — like Gustav Gross

in his original work — was modest and said that he was not in the best position to write the definitive biography of Marx and indicated, as a potential candidate for such a task, the great historian of the German social democracy, Franz Mehring; a prophecy realized, for Mehring would later write a biography of Marx that would be considered the standard work for many decades, at least until David McLellan's in the 1970s. It is interesting to note the ideological course of Spargo's work. John Spargo was a moderate socialist, and yet he described the intellectual development of Marx and his role in the world socialist movement in a positive light. In spite of showing the radicalism of the Moor throughout the narrative, in the conclusion of the book he makes a reading of Marxian thought almost as if it were evolutionist (following the trends of history) rather than purely revolutionary. He illustrated this in the passage in which he described Marx's misguided prediction that capitalism would not withstand the impact of electricity (that is, of the technological transformations brought about by electricity, which would revolutionize the world). Spargo wrote:

[...] Marx belongs with the great evolutionists of the nineteenth century [...] That electricity is revolutionizing the world has been a commonplace for a generation. Marx was right in regarding it as a great revolutionist, but he was rather mistaken as to the speed and duration of the revolution. Electricity very admirably typifies the "revolutionary evolution" which was the basis of Marx's profoundest thought. (Spargo, 2012, pp. 329-330)

Unlike Gustav Gross — another moderate politician who, despite a relatively sympathetic description of Marx, made it clear when he disagreed with his thinking — Spargo actually gave a somewhat contorted reading of Marx's philosophy and had the thinking of the German theorist closer to his own political philosophy.

As Spargo predicted, the politician and historian of German social democracy, Franz Mehring, in 1918 published a biography of Marx (*Karl Marx: Geschichte seines Lebens*) that would be considered the best for decades to come. This reputation may have to do with the intellectual/political profile of the author. Franz Mehring was an important German intellectual and politician who, after having begun his career in the liberal field, drifted to the left to become one of the great names of the German Social Democratic party until World War I. Disagreeing with the support the Social Democratic party lent to the war effort, he participated in the founding of the Spartacus League along with his good friend Klara Zetkin, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl

Liebknecht. Consequently, in his final years, he belonged to the extreme left wing of Social Democracy, the one closest to Marxism. This, together with his status as a highly cultured intellectual, gave him an in-depth knowledge of theoretical Marxism, which allowed him to contextualize the everyday facts of Marx's life and to relate them to his intellectual development. The difficulties of the early biographers in understanding Marx's complicated theory were thus overcome. On the other hand, the fact that Mehring was originally from another political tradition (liberalism), and had never been an "orthodox" Marxist, allowed him latitude in occasionally criticizing the Moor himself. The book would not turn out to be mere hagiography about the Moor.

And that really was the profile of the book. In addition to emphasizing the facts of Marx's life, in his analysis of his thought — which also takes up a good portion of the book — his vision, although sympathetic in general, does not fail to present the contradictory or opposite side, sometimes supporting the contradictory side against Marx. A good example would be the relationship between Marx and the German labor leader Ferdinand Lassalle. Mehring occasionally defended Lassalle against Marx in his works. In addition to all the reasons mentioned above, the other reason to explain the prestige of Mehring's biography is that he had previous experience as an "historian," since he wrote a famous *History of German Social Democracy*. Working with the primary sources from party archives gave him a strong theoretical and practical basis for the future biographical work on Marx.

The result was that his biography was widely recognized as the standard for a long time.

After Franz Mehring raised the level of biographical work on Marx, the 1920s saw the emergence of other works at a higher level. Very similar to Mehring's biography was the one written by Otto Rühle in 1926, *Karl Marx: Leben und Werk*. Rühle and Mehring had similar profiles: both were from the left wing of the German Social Democratic party and, during World War I, participated in the founding of the Spartacus League. The formal part of Rühle's biography was akin to that of Mehring: really describing the *life* of Marx but also analyzing the theoretical part of his works. However, perhaps reflecting the subtle differences in profile between the two authors — Mehring died shortly after World War I, whereas Rühle lived on until 1943 and developed a position similar to that of the so-called "council communists" critical of the centralist authoritarianism of the Soviet Leninist experience — Rühle, while also accepting the greatness of Marx's thought and action, exposed more criticism of the

Moor in his book. In fact, his final conclusion is that Marx's extreme eagerness to overcome capitalism and capitalist vices was a way of compensating for his inferiority complex due to his early life as a Jew with health problems in an alien environment.

To summarize, we may say that the three characteristic features of Marx's individuality — poor health, Jewish origin, and the fact that he was firstborn — interact, and combine to produce an intensified sense of inferiority. The resulting compensation begins with the formulation of an aim. The lower the self-esteem, the higher the aim [...] Inferiority seeks compensation [...] Marx sought for spiritual compensation in the realm of ideas. His compensatory endeavour made him the founder of an economic theory, the creator of a new economic system [...] Unquestionably Marx was a neurotic [...] Had Marx, as a neurotic, been content with the semblance of achievement, his work would have crepitated in the void, and he himself would have been a figure tragical in its futility. As things were, however, he performed a supreme task in the history of his own time [...] (Rühle, 1929, pp. 187-196)

In the 1920s, a new reality emerged. The Soviet Union, a country founded on the basis of Marxism, after the destruction of the early period of the civil war of 1918-1921, was rebuilt and appeared to the world as a new center for the study of Marx's work (and life). There was not a specific major biography of Marx, but in 1927 David Riazanov wrote *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: an introduction to their lives and work*, a combined biography of Marx and Engels. The important thing here is not so much the form of the book, but the way it was written. David Riazanov founded the Marx-Engels Institute in Moscow (1921) and was its director throughout the 1920s. The Marx-Engels Institute was commissioned to publish the complete works of Marx and Engels, a project that would continue despite political vicissitudes, interruptions and renewed starts over decades in different countries. It is the current *Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels Historisch Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA, for short), a gigantic work in progress which will publish "everything" from Marx and Engels in approximately 114 volumes. The biography written by Riazanov could count on the initial foundations of this powerful project. In addition, this collective effort would be the basis of what in the post-World War II period would become Marx's standard biography in the Soviet Union, the book *Karl Marks: Biografiya* ["Karl Marx: a biography"] published as a collective work of the *Institut Marksizma-Leninisma pri TsK KPSS* ["Institute of Marxism-Leninism of the Central

Committee of the CPSU"], the new name of the former Marx-Engels Institute. This is one of the most underestimated books in the West. Although widely consulted and possibly one of the bases for many works by Western authors, it is often described as a dogmatic work typical of Soviet orthodox Marxism. Indeed, it is a somewhat stereotypical Soviet book, but it also constitutes the result of profound factual research by many experts, using a bibliographic base larger than that available to most Western authors. If the conclusions of the book can seem somewhat stereotyped and controversial, the factual part of it (data about the Moor's life, when certain concepts first appeared in Marx's texts, etc.) is very well grounded. It has the strength of a collective work, with many experts collaborating to deepen research grounded upon a powerful primary source base. And much of this powerful base of primary sources (including MEGA itself) has its origins in the pioneering spirit of Riazanov and his Marx-Engels Institute.

In the 1930s, biographical — or at least partially biographical, as in the case of “intellectual biographies” — work on Marx began to multiply. Three books stood out then: 1) *Karl Marx: Man and Fighter*, by Boris Nicolaevsky (1936); 2) *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment*, by Isaiah Berlin (1939); 3) *Karl Marx: A Study in Fanaticism*, by E. H. Carr (1934).

Boris Nicolaevsky was in a favorable position to do this kind of work. He was a Russian Menshevik who, after the Revolution of 1917, worked as a professional archivist. Deported from Soviet Russia in 1922, he moved to Berlin where he subsequently worked as an historian and archivist at the Marx-Engels Institute there, later becoming director of the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam (repository of archives related to socialist and labor movements). He, thus, had an enormous supply of primary sources available when writing his biography of Marx. It is a book that has characteristics similar to that of David Riazanov's: a biography of Marx based on archival research and documents (some unpublished) at a level well beyond that of the first writings on the life of the Moor. Indeed, the very fact that Nicolaevsky was writing in the 1930s, with access to the latest advanced research, facilitated the mention of important unpublished texts by Marx in his biography. For example, Marx's crucial book *The German Ideology* was first published by David Riazanov in 1932 in Moscow. Nicolaevsky was able to incorporate these previously unpublished texts into his biography, which represented a quality leap in relation to what existed before him. Nicolaevsky's biography was a step forward in the direction of a *stricto sensu* historical biography because, despite contextualizing and

commenting on Marx's work, it mostly emphasized his life. In this sense, it surpassed previous (perhaps even Mehring's) biographies that generally stood on the side of intellectual biography in the sense that Marx's life was described more as a support for the contextualization of Marx's works than as an end in itself. Nicolaevsky emphasized the life of Marx and, within it, contextualized his works. Finally, it is interesting to note that Nicolaevsky's biography is very sympathetic to Marx, who is described as the greatest socialist theorist. This is surprising not only because Nicolaevsky was a Menshevik but also in the light of his later trajectory to more conservative post-World War II positions when he emigrated to the United States and became one of the founders of the field of kremlinology. In this biography of the 1930s, Nicolaevsky still seemed to maintain his strongly socialist impetus of the 1920s when he had intellectual affinity with and organic connection to the socialist movement.

The fate of E.H. (Edward Hallett) Carr's book, *Karl Marx: A Study in Fanaticism* (1934), is paradoxical. E. H. Carr would become one of the greatest historians specialized in the USSR, with his monumental *A History of Soviet Russia* (14 volumes). And later he would evolve politically to the left, approaching socialism. But at the time of the publication of his biography of Marx, he held a political position that was more to the right and his book presented a rather unfavorable picture of the Moor (as suggested by the subtitle!). It was a well-crafted book (although not yet at the level of Carr's more mature historical works based on full mastery of the target language and original sources). However, when Carr later adopted leftist political positions, he decided to disavowal his biography of Marx and even banned its publication after the first edition sold out.

Finally, in the 1930s, the book *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment*, by Isaiah Berlin (1939) achieved a distinguished status. Considered by many to have been the best example of an intellectual biography of the Moor, it represented an interesting project for the philosopher Isaiah Berlin. Berlin is acknowledged to be one of the greatest authors in the field of the history of ideas. Jewish, born in Riga (capital of present-day Latvia, then part of the Russian empire) in 1909, he lived through the Revolution of 1917 before emigrating to the West and becoming one of the major intellectuals at Oxford University in England. Author of several works in the field of the history of ideas (many related to Russia), the biography of Marx commissioned by a publisher was, for him, an intellectual challenge. Since he was not a Marxist and until then had no special interest in the Moor's theory, writing the book for him was to have a personal

encounter with Marxism. As previously mentioned, the book — despite chronologically describing Marx's life — was basically an intellectual biography centered on the analysis and discussion of the works and the evolution of the Moor's thinking. The result was an intellectual *tour de force*. Although Berlin did not agree (entirely or even basically) with Marx's ideas, he was able to describe them relatively freely and even sympathetically, without losing the ability to make critical, authoritative comments. After World War II, Berlin (2013, pp. XXV and 288), commenting on his biography written in 1939, considered it basically valid, but added some retrospective critiques. He said that, at the time of the publication of his biography, several previously unpublished writings of the “young Marx” — *i.e.*, Marx in his earlier phases, more concerned with philosophical themes such as alienation as opposed to the “mature Marx” who focused primarily on economics — were just coming to light and had not yet had the great influence they would subsequently have. Thus, the image of the Moor projected at his time was that of the Soviet “official” Marx, an image very much based on Engels' somewhat orthodox and simplistic texts. Berlin especially regretted that he had glossed over the importance of the then recently published *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, since he now believed that they showed the humanist face of Marx more clearly (curiously, Berlin underestimated *The German Ideology*, also published for the first time in the 1930s, in its capacity to also highlight this more “humanist” face of the German thinker).

It is interesting to note the irony of one of the final conclusions reached by Berlin (a philosopher who valued the history of ideas, a realm that Marx allegedly relegated to the superstructure “determined” by the economic base): “[Marx ...] departed from the position of refuting the proposition that ideas decisively determine the course of history, but [his] own influence on human affairs weakened the force of this thesis.” (Berlin, 2013, p.265)

The biographies mentioned above were the most important until World War II. In the second half of the twentieth century, the methodological requirements for such works would be higher and biographies of Marx's life would appear which would fulfill all the requirements for professional historical biographies. The great outstanding name in this new context was that of David McLellan, with his *Karl Marx: His Life and Thought*, released in 1973. Considered by many to be the best biography of Marx to date — it has undergone revisions in successive editions — it was a landmark. McLellan achieved a rare balance in having both a highly documented description of Marx's life (biography *stricto sensu*) and high quality as

an intellectual biography, describing the evolution of Marx's ideas within the context of his life. This is a difficult balance to reach. Usually, on the one hand, we have well documented biographies of Marx's life which describe his ideas and theories less brilliantly (*e.g.*, Wheen, 1999); on the other hand, we have high-level intellectual biographies (*e.g.*, Berlin, 1939) which, in the aspect of documentation of the day to day life of Marx, are not so strong. What McLellan did was to maintain high level on both sides of the equation. Not only did he investigate, in a precise methodological manner, aspects of the Moor's life (some not so studied before), but he also managed to make the reader follow the evolution of Marx's thought along its intricate path. In addition, he did a fairly balanced job, without succumbing to hagiography or demonology. In fact, McLellan, a professor of political science and disciple of the philosopher Isaiah Berlin, in his biography remedied the shortcoming that Berlin pointed out in his own work: having in the 1930s given a description of Marx based mostly on the canonical Soviet-Engelsian version without being able to explore the more humanistic version of the young Marx stemming from the unpublished texts of the Moor that were being published for the first time in that decade. McLellan explores the work of Marx in depth in these formerly unpublished texts, which lends his biography a greater balance between the humanist vision of the young Marx and the greater emphasis on economics of the mature Marx. Rejecting Althusser's idea of an "epistemological break" between the young Marx and the mature Marx, McLellan follows the evolution of the Moor's ideas through their twists and turns but concomitantly shows their internal concatenation and coherence. What Mehring's biography had been for the first half of the twentieth century — the standard thus far — McLellan's was for the second half (and probably even today). McLellan raised the bar of methodological requirements for biographical work on Marx. Thereafter, some authors rose to the challenge and met the new standards of documentation quality and use of primary sources (such as Wheen, 1999, and Sperber, 2013, who brought different new insights into the life of that German thinker), although arguably one can say that the rare balance achieved by McLellan in being excellent both as a biography *stricto sensu* as well as an intellectual biography has not been achieved again since.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Shortly after McLellan's book appeared, Fritz J. Raddatz published *Karl Marx: Eine politische Biographie* in 1975. It is a biography that emphasizes the political side of Marx's activities in an extremely provocative but well-documented manner. In my opinion, Raddatz sometimes loses himself in rather sterile discussions about aspects of Marx's activities based on his own personal prejudices, but, given that

For the description of biographies about Marx from the second half of the twentieth century onward, perhaps the best methodology for us is to use the criterion of relevance — the most important or seminal ones first — instead of following the chronological order, as we have done so far.

In terms of advancement in the research of Marx's life (biography *stricto sensu*) one should mention *Karl Marx: A Life*, by the journalist Francis Wheen (1999). Being the first major biography of Marx after the end of the Cold War, the work reflects the time when it was written. Leaving aside the emphasis on Marx's thought of most biographies thus far — though he provides informed comments on this as well — Wheen goes very deep in his research into the life of the Moor, bringing new elements and new angles to the public. In addition — and probably reflecting the fact that Francis W. is a journalist — the reading is very fluid and enjoyable, with an intelligent humor that gives it a special charm. I died laughing, for example, on pages 84-85 of Wheen's book (2001, paperback edition), where he described the idiosyncrasies of Marx's relationship with Engels! The sardonic way he described aspects of Marx's life (including highlighting aspects of the Moor's humor) earned him criticism from certain quarters, especially from Marxists zealous in the pursuit of a "serious" image of the great German thinker. For the description of Marx's life, Wheen's book is very well researched.

Another cutting-edge work, which came close to McLellan's in terms of being good both in the aspect of *stricto sensu* biography and intellectual biography, is *Karl Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life* by Jonathan Sperber (2013). Sperber, a professor of history at the University of Missouri and a specialist in nineteenth-century Germany, wrote what may have been the best biography of Marx in the post-Cold War era until the date of its publication. Using the greater wealth of primary sources that came with the end of the Soviet regimes in Eastern Europe, he not only explored Marx's life in detail but also deeply investigated Marx's thought to state a controversial thesis in the end: as the subtitle of the book indicates, the great Marx must be seen as a nineteenth-century figure and his thought must also be seen in that context. This means, on the one hand, that Marx should not be considered the "culprit" of what his Soviet followers did in the twentieth century. On the other hand, it also means that his thinking was valid for the nineteenth century, but is not the most appropriate one to illuminate the very different

---

Raddatz had a clearly polemical purpose (against orthodox Marxism), his biography meets the higher level demanded for this type of work in the second half of the twentieth century.

realities of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Marx's actual ideas and political practice — developed in the matrix of the early nineteenth-century, the age of the French Revolution and its aftermath, of Hegel's philosophy and its Young Hegelian critics, of the early industrialization of Great Britain and the theories of political economy deriving from them — had, at most, only partial connections with the ones his latter-day friends and enemies found in his writings [...] Marx's life, his systems of thought, his political strivings and aspirations, belonged primarily to the nineteenth century, a period of human history that occupies a strange place in relation to the present: neither evidently distant and alien, like the Middle Ages, nor still within living memory as, for instance, the world of the age of total war, or communist regimes of the Eastern bloc [...] Critics] see Marx as a proponent of twentieth-century totalitarian terrorism [...] Defenders of Marx's ideas vigorously reject these assertions, often interpreting Marx as a democrat and proponent of emancipatory political change. Both these views project back onto the nineteenth century controversies of later times. Marx was a proponent of a violent revolution, perhaps even terrorist revolution, but one that had many more similarities with the actions of Robespierre than those of Stalin. In a similar way, adherents of contemporary economic orthodoxy, the so-called neoclassical economic theorists, dismiss Marx's economics as old-fashioned and unscientific, while his proponents suggest that Marx understood crucial characteristics of capitalism, such as regularly recurring economic crises, that Orthodox economists cannot explain. Marx certainly did understand crucial features of capitalism, but those of the capitalism that existed in the early decades of the nineteenth century, which both in its central elements and in the debates of political economists trying to understand it is distinctly removed from today's circumstances. (Sperber, 2013, pp. XVIII-XIX, 560)

Certainly a controversial thesis, but the book was beautifully written and documented.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> A methodological approach similar to that of Sperber was adopted by Gareth Stedman Jones (2016) in his *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion*, a top-notch work that tends toward the intellectual biography profile and whose stated objective is to situate Marx's ideas in their context in order to isolate them from the additions and later modifications brought forth by other Marxist thinkers (including Engels's own posthumous contributions). As Jones (2016, p. 5) put it: "The aim of this book is to put Marx back in his nineteenth-century surroundings, before all these posthumous elaborations of his character and achievements were constructed."

The works mentioned above are those which can be considered the main biographies of Karl Marx, or the most seminal ones, that somehow marked a new direction or a deepening in the quality of the biographical work itself. There are other books that did not impact the biographical field so much, but that also brought contributions to the knowledge of Marx's life. There are those more orthodox biographies written in the socialist countries (e.g., Stepanova, 1956; Genkow *et al.*, 1968). There are also biographies (more or less *stricto sensu*) written by political activists (with various degrees of theoretical knowledge of Marxism), such as Lewis (1965). There are also biographical works that cover a specific period of life or a special theme related to Marx, such as Cornu (1934) or Monz (1964). *Marx*, by Vincent Barnett (2009), approaches this group (and the intellectual biography profile) by giving emphasis to the economic aspect of Marx's theories. The fact that these biographies were not mentioned together with the most important ones at the beginning of this text does not mean that some of these other biographers have not made their own special contributions, at least in certain specific aspects. For example, *Karl Marx. Eine Psychographie*, by Arnold Künzli (1966), is an interesting psychological biography of Marx, emphasizing his mental processes and using insights from the fields of psychology and psychiatry. Robert Payne, author of *Marx* (released in 1968), was a prolific biographer in view of the number of biographies of different personages he wrote. What might be regarded with suspicion — slips and errors by authors not specialized in Marxist theory when attempting to describe Marx's complicated thought have become proverbial in the field — may have helped him to make the book more valuable in relation to the *factual* aspects of Marx's life. In addition to the salutary (from the point of view of *strict sensu* biographies) emphasis on the events of Marx's *life*, Payne carried out research that brought about original factual knowledge. For example, he was able to locate and for the first time publicly present some original documents (such as the birth certificate) of Marx's supposedly bastard son, Frederick Demuth. Similarly, works such as those of Schwarzschild (1954), Blumenberg (1962), Padover (1980), Körner (2008), Hosfeld (2009), Thomas (2012) and Liedman (2015), although not making breakthroughs in terms of documented knowledge of Marx's life, added idiosyncratic points of view which, in their own way, help us in the discussion of the complex thought and controversial life of Marx.

*Addendum: the bicentennial of Marx's birth in 2018*

The original text of this article in Portuguese was written at the end of 2016 and published in 2017. New biographies about Marx appeared around the bicentennial of his birth in 2018. At the end of 2017, *Marx: Der Unvollendete*, by Jürgen Neffe, was published in Munich. At the beginning of 2018, two new biographies appeared: *Karl Marx: uma biografia dialética* by Angelo Segrillo (in Brazil) and *Karl Marx und die Geburt der modernen Gesellschaft. Band 1: 1818-1843* (the first volume of a planned three-volume biography by the German author Michael Heinrich).

It is interesting to note that, in the period preceding the bicentennial, the last biographers (Jonathan Sperber and Gareth Stedman Jones) worked with the hypothesis that Marx's analyses were valid for nineteenth-century capitalism but lost vitality in explaining contemporary capitalism. The three biographies of the bicentennial go in the opposite direction: they attempt to rescue the validity of Marx's thought for the present conditions as well.

Jürgen Neffe found a clever way to achieve this. He describes the development of Marx's ideas in correlation with (using examples from) 21<sup>st</sup>-century capitalism instead of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century one. As the author quotes Marx's passages about globalization, alienation, creation of superfluous needs, commodity fetishism and so on, the readers have the eerie impression that these conceptual images are depicting their own contemporary experience. The title of Neffe's biography ("Marx Unfinished" in translation) refers primarily to the fact that the German thinker was not able to finish volumes II and III of *Das Kapital* during his life, but it also metaphorically implies the open character of Marx's theory, which can yield different (more libertarian) readings besides traditional orthodox Marxism.

The subtitle of the biography by Angelo Segrillo ("Karl Marx: A Dialectical Biography") refers to the fact that the author, after presenting an introductory overview of earlier biographies, describes Marx's life in constant dialogue with the descriptions and interpretations of previous biographers. It thus constitutes a kind of balance sheet of the biographical efforts on Marx thus far. Segrillo's book was the first *stricto sensu* biography of Marx written by a Latin American author.

Both Neffe's and Segrillo's works present interesting insights based on the different views and interpretations by these two authors, but they remain, so to speak, on the level (and under the general paradigm) of previous biographies.

The case is different with the first biographical volume written by

Michael Heinrich. Heinrich's proposal is more ambitious and, if fully realized, will reach a new level and perhaps constitute a new (or rather, renewed) paradigm among the biographical works on Marx. This is due to some peculiarities.

First of all, Heinrich makes a devastating critique of (many of the leading) earlier biographers. With “mathematical” precision and detail — he is a mathematician by training — Heinrich points out different episodes in Marx's “life” that biographers accept as true at face value, without reliable primary sources to back them. As authors accept the versions of earlier biographers as true, “legends” about Marx are passed on (and sometimes magnified) in later works. Thus, in the first volume of his biography (dedicated to Marx's childhood and youth), Heinrich points out several of these long-standing “legends”: the erroneous dates of Marx's father's conversion to Protestantism, the would-be duel in which Marx was wounded as a university student, the erroneous dates given for his engagement, Eduard Gans' alleged influence on Marx, Franz Mehring's opinion (accepted uncritically by later biographers) that *all* of Marx's youth poems were artistically poor, the idea that participation in the so-called “Doctor's Club” induced Marx's transition to Hegelianism, etc. Using the advantage of having personally worked in the edition of MEGA (*Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe*), the largest collection of Marx's texts and documents (including unpublished manuscripts), Heinrich uncovers these legends and shows — indicating the pages in the works of previous biographers where they committed these errors — how the primary sources tell a different story.

Heinrich's challenge to raise the level of biographical research on Marx's life can metaphorically (“mathematically”) be described as being 100% based on reliable primary sources. The author of this overview of Marx's biographies, a historian by profession, is highly appreciative of such appeal. It remains to be seen, however, how other biographers and analysts will react in these present times of postmodern mistrust about the very concept of credibility of “primary” sources.

Another important point about Heinrich's biography is that he proposes not only to describe Marx's life factually but also to make an analysis of the development of his intellectual work by temporally connecting these two aspects so that one can follow the continuities and changes in Marx's thought in a clear manner, avoiding conflation of different ideas and periods. From my own experience as a biographer of Marx, I consider this extremely important. Marx changed his ideas throughout his life and it is very important to follow the evolution of his ideas chronologically so as not to make a

“salad” by mixing ideas from different periods and creating a Frankensteinish Marx composed of synchronically superimposed theories which in real life were actually diachronically refined, modified or simply discarded by the German revolutionary thinker. If Michael Heinrich succeeds in achieving this goal in all three volumes of his work, he may break David McLellan's “record” of having written a biography that was as excellent in describing Marx's personal life as in describing his ideas. Judging by the first volume, it is possible that Heinrich may “break this record” taking advantage of the fact that a multi-volume work provides more room for deeper analysis on both sides of the equation.

### *Conclusion*

Despite the existence of numerous bibliographic/theoretical writings on Marx's thought and work, we do not have an overview of the books written so far about Marx's *life*. One factor that complicates such a task is the existence of the so-called intellectual biographies, *i.e.*, books that, while often providing data on Marx's life, actually focus on the evolution of his thought and the discussion of his theories. Due to the interconnection between Marx's life and his work/theory, it is difficult to establish the boundary between the books that basically deal with his thought (describing his life additionally) and those that could be considered *stricto sensu* biographies of his life. In the present text, I tried to show the works that are closer to *stricto sensu* biographies. We note that it was difficult to cut the “umbilical cord” from the womb of “intellectual biographies”; the first biographies were generally of this type. In the first half of the twentieth century, even when we began to have more *stricto sensu* biographical works — such as those by Riazanov and Nicolaevsky (for even Mehring, the first great biographer, concentrated heavily on the analysis of Marx's thought) — these works (perhaps for the sake of saving space in the book) kept stricter bibliographic referencing in relation to Marx's thought (citing the pages from the original sources, and so on) than in relation to his life, which was described as if these episodes were common knowledge. It was as if Marx's “life” were somewhat less important and needed less methodological rigor than his thought and theory. To paraphrase what Marx said about *Das Kapital*, we can say that the method of investigation (research) was different from the method of presentation. Indeed, authors like Riazanov and Nicolaevsky clearly searched the various archives and documents available to them in order to narrate the factual episodes of Marx's life, but even they (let

alone lesser biographers) tended to view as unnecessary minute referencing of primary sources in the passages of Marx's life considered to be well-known in Marxist or socialist circles. These methodological shortcomings would be remedied in the second half of the twentieth century with the appearance of biographies that meet the strictest academic requirements for historical biographical work.

And what final result do we have today with regard to this overview of Marx biographies? Certainly the factual knowledge of the Moor's life was deepened by constant research and the elevation of the methodological level of his biographies. As could be expected from such a controversial figure, no consensus was reached. I suspect that the reason is not only the controversial character of Marx's life and work. Each new age reads the previous ones with its own set of eyes. The Marx of flesh and blood was one, but the interpretations that were put forth about him in his time, in the years immediately after the Russian Revolution, in the years after the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union that ended Stalin's cult of personality, after the fall of the Berlin Wall and today have varied enormously. And this not because the Moor turned in his grave, but because eyes contemplated him under varying circumstances...

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BARNETT, Vincent. *Marx*. London: Routledge, 2009
- BERLIN, Isaiah. *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment*. London: Thornton Butterworth, 1939.
- BERLIN, Isaiah. *Karl Marx* (with a foreword by Alan Ryan; edited by Henry Hardy). 5th ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013.
- BLUMENBERG, Werner: *Karl Marx in Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten*. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 1962.
- CARR, E.H. *Karl Marx: A Study in Fanaticism*. London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1934.
- CORNU, Auguste. *Karl Marx. L'homme et l'oeuvre. De l'hégélianisme au materialism historique 1818-1845*. Paris: Alcan, 1934.
- CORNU, Auguste. *Karl Marx et Frierich Engels: leur vie et leur oeuvre*. Paris: P.U.F., 1955/1958/1961/1970. 4 vols.
- FEDOSEYEV, P.N. *et al. Karl Marx: a Biography*. 4th. revised ed.. Moscou: Progress Publishers, 1989. Available online at: <https://ia600301.us.archive.org/23/items/KarlMarxABiography/Kar%20Marx%20A%20Biography.pdf>

- GABRIEL, Mary. *Love and Capital: Karl and Jenny Marx and the Birth of a Revolution*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2011.
- GENKOW, Heinrich et al. *Karl Marx. Eine Biographie*. Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1968.
- GIROUD, Françoise. *Jenny Marx, ou la femme du diable*. Paris: Robert Laffont, 1992.
- GOLLER, Peter. Karl Marx-Biographien 1883-1938. In: GOLLER, Peter. *Marx und Engels in der bürgerlichen Ideologie und in der sozialistischen Theorie*. Vienna: Alfred Klahr Gesellschaft, 2007. Pp. 11-71.
- GROSS, Gustav. *Karl Marx: Eine Studie*. Leipzig: Verlag von Duncker & Humblot, 1885. Available online at: <https://ia802608.us.archive.org/0/items/karlmarxeinestu00grosgoog/karlmarxeinestu00grosgoog.pdf>
- HEINRICH, Marx. *Karl Marx and die Geburt der modern Gesellschaft: Biographie und Werkentwicklung. Band 1: 1818-1843*. Stuttgart: Schmetterling, 2018.
- HOSFELD, Rolf. *Die Geister, die er rief. Eine neue Karl-Marx-Biografie*. Munich: Piper, 2009.
- INSTITUT MARKSISMA-LENINIZMA PRI TsK KPSS. *Karl Marks: Biografiya*. 2nd ed. Moscow: Politizdat, 1973.
- JONES, Gareth Stedman. *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion*. London: Allen Lane, 2016.
- KARL MARX, FRIEDRICH ENGELS; HISTORISCH KRITISCHE GESAMTAUSGABE (MEGA). Frankfurt a. M.: Marx-Engels Archiv; Berlin: Dietz Verlag; Amsterdam: Internationale Marx-Engels-Stiftung (IMES) et al, 1927-2025. 114 vols. planned.
- KÖRNER, Klaus. *Karl Marx*. Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuchverlag dtv, 2008.
- KORSCH, Karl. *Karl Marx*. Londres: Chapman & Hall, 1938. Also available online at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/korsch/1938/karl-marx/>
- KÜNZLI, Arnold. *Karl Marx. Eine Psychographie*. Vienna: Europa Verlag, 1966.
- LEWIS, John. *The Life and Teaching of Karl Marx*. London: Lawrence & Wishart 1965.
- LIEBKNECHT, Wilhelm. *Karl Marx zum Gedächtnis: ein Lebensabriß und Erinnerungen*. Nürnberg: Wörlein, 1896.
- LIEBKNECHT, Wilhelm. *Karl Marx: Biographical Memoirs*. London: Journeyman Press, 1975. Also available online at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/liebknecht-w/1896/karl-marx.htm>
- LIEDMAN, Sven-Eric. *Karl Marx: En Biografi*. Stockholm: Bonnier,

2015.

- LONGUET, Robert-Jean. *Karl Marx: Mon Arrière-Grand-Père*. Paris: Editions Stock, 1977.
- MARX-ENGELS WERKE (MEW). *Karl Marx Friedrich Engels Werke*. Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1956-1977. 41 vols.
- McLELLAN, David. *Karl Marx: His Life and Thought*. London: Macmillan Press, 1973.
- McLELLAN, David. *Karl Marx: a Biography*. 4th. ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.
- MEGA (Marx Engels Gesamtausgabe): see KARL MARX, FRIEDRICH ENGELS; HISTORISCH KRITISCHE GESAMTAUSGABE.
- MEHRING, Franz. *Karl Marx: Geschichte seines Lebens*. Leipzig: Leipziger Buchdruckerei, 1918. Also available online at: [http://www.mlwerke.de/fm/fm03/fm03\\_000.htm](http://www.mlwerke.de/fm/fm03/fm03_000.htm)
- MEHRING, Franz. *Karl Marx: The Story of His Life*. London: Routledge, 2003.
- MEW: see MARX-ENGELS WERKE.
- MONZ, Heinz. *Karl Marx und Trier. Verhältnisse, Beziehungen, Einflüsse*. Trier: Neu-Verlag, 1964.
- NEFFE, Jürgen. *Marx: Der Unvollendete*. Munich: C. Bertelsmann Verlag, 2017.
- NICOLAEVSKY, Boris & MAENCHEN-HELFEN, Otto. *Karl Marx: Man and Fighter*. London: Methuen & Co., 1936. Also available online at: <https://ia800301.us.archive.org/4/items/karlmarxmanandfi029120mbp/karlmarxmanandfi029120mbp.pdf>
- PADOVER, Saul K. *Karl Marx: An Intimate Biography*. New York: New American Library, 1980.
- PAYNE, Robert. *Marx*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1968.
- RADDATZ, Fritz J. *Karl Marx. Eine politische Biographie*. Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1975.
- RIAZANOV, David. *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: An Introduction to Their Lives and Work*. New York: International Publishers, 1927. Also available online at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/riazanov/works/1927-ma/index.htm>
- RUBEL, Maximilien. *Karl Marx. Essai de Biographie Intellectuelle*. Paris: Librairie Marcel Rivière et Cie, 1957.
- RUBEL, Maximilien & MANALE, Margaret. *Marx Without Myth: A Chronological Study of his Life and Work*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1975.
- RÜHLE, Otto. *Karl Marx: Leben und Werk*. Hellerau bei Dresden: Avalun-Verlag, 1926.
- RÜHLE, Otto. *Karl Marx: His Life and Works*. New York: The Viking Press, 1929. Available online at:

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/ruhle/1928/marx/index.htm>

- SCHWARZSCHILD, Leopold. *The Red Prussian: The Life and Legend of Karl Marx*. New York: Scribner, 1947
- SCHWARZSCHILD, Leopold. *Der rote Preuße. Leben und Legende von Karl Marx*. Stuttgart: Scherz & Goverts, 1954.
- SEGRILLO, Angelo. Karl Marx: um balanço biográfico. *Estudos Ibero-Americanos*, vol. 43, no. 3, pp. 601-611, Sept.-Dec. 2017.
- SEGRILLO, Angelo. *Karl Marx: uma biografia dialética*. Curitiba: Prismas/Appris, 2018.
- SPARGO, John. *Karl Marx: his life and work*. New York: B.W. Huebsch, 1910.
- SPARGO, John. *Karl Marx: his life and work*. 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed. New York: B.W. Huebsch, 1912. Available online at: <https://ia700400.us.archive.org/19/items/cu31924002310864/cu31924002310864.pdf>
- SPERBER, Jonathan. *Karl Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life*. New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2013.
- STEPANOVA, Evgeniya Akimovna. *Karl Marx: Short Biography*. Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1956.
- THOMAS, Paul. *Karl Marx*. London: Reaktion Books, 2012.
- WHEEN, Francis. *Karl Marx: A Life*. London: Fourth Estate, 1999.
- WHEEN, Francis. *Karl Marx: A Life*. New York: Norton Paperback (W.W. Norton & Company), 2001.
- ZETKIN, Klara. *Karl Marx und Sein Lebenswerk*. Elberfeld: Molkenbuhr & Co., 1913.

**Confessions of a Biographer:  
Reflections upon the Theory of Biography by an Historian Novice  
in the Field**

*Angelo Segrillo<sup>1</sup>*

CONFESSION NO. 1 (*about theory*)

I started writing my first biography without having (deeply) studied the theoretical underpinnings of the genre. As a Brazilian historian with several books published, I assumed that my previous professional training in the general field would suffice for the new task.

REFLECTION NO. 1 (*about theory*)

In the process, as I started reviewing theoretical works about biography, I was struck by the number of them stressing that the genre seems to be “resistant to theorization” (Fetz & Schweiger, 2009, p. 5), “undertheorized” (Lee, 2009, p. 94) or “not having solid theorizing” (Renders and de Haan, 2014, p. 4). Monk (2007, p. 528) is the most radical in this direction: “biography is fundamentally and essentially, to its very fingertips, as it were, a *nontheoretical* exercise” (and it is all to the good this way, according to him).

Why should it be so? What makes it so difficult to provide biography with proper theory? A number of factors seems to be involved in this phenomenon, but a central one, in my view, is the indeterminate status of biography among several fields. The main dichotomy is whether biography is history or literature. Since there are different types of biographies, specific cases can occupy different spaces in a wide spectrum that ranges from one pole (history, non-fiction) to the other (literature, fiction).

The problem is not only the oscillation of biography between the poles of literature and history (non-fiction and fiction). There are several other fields of knowledge that claim to provide underpinnings for the genre, be it sociology (*as per* the Diltheyan model described in Erben, 1993 or the Weberian impulse suggested by Nadel, 1984, p. 188), psychology (especially, but not only, in the so-called psychobiographies), philosophy (see, for example, Monk, 2007), and even ethnology (as in the idiosyncratic suggestion by Clifford, 1978), to name just a few of the major spheres of knowledge which contend

---

<sup>1</sup> Angelo Segrillo is an Associate Professor of History at the University of São Paulo (Brazil) and author of *Karl Marx: uma biografia dialética* (Prismas/Appris, 2018).

for the biography “prize.”

This indeterminacy makes it difficult to create (a) proper theory for biography. Depending on where a specific biography locates itself in this broad spectrum, theories coming from history or literature (or from the other fields mentioned) may not be able to encompass it. If biography clearly belonged to one specific field of knowledge, it would probably be easier to have this established theoretical field enveloping it naturally.

Of course, one alternative out of this problem would be to make biography an autonomous field, not related intrinsically to history, literature or any other field, along the lines suggested, for example, by Pimlott (1999, p. 33), according to whom biography should “shake off its own inferiority complex, and establish independent credentials in relation to art, literature and objectivity.” However, this is a minority viewpoint and has not been implemented in practice (in this case, *in theory*).

The degree of difficulty involved in extricating biography from its root sources becomes clear when we see how biography evolved historically. When biography arose in Greco-Roman times, it did not belong to either literature or history: it was related to ethics. (Fornara, 1988, p. 3) For example, Plutarch made clear that his biographies were not history and that he wrote them with the purpose of providing examples on what to do and what not to do in order to inspire greatness and moral character. The introduction he wrote for the comparison of Alexander, the Great, with Caesar in *Parallel Lives* reads: “It must be borne in mind that my design is not to write histories but lives. And the most glorious exploits do not always furnish us with the clearest discoveries of virtue or vice in men; sometimes a matter of less moment, an expression or a jest, informs us better of their characters and inclinations [...]” (Plutarch, 1996)<sup>2</sup>

Even though biography was viewed as closer to ethics in the beginning, it soon gravitated towards the two poles of literature and history. This can be seen as a “natural” movement. On the one hand, biography was a form of narrative, a “story” and, therefore, the literary qualities inherent in it came to the fore. If biographies are supposed to motivate people ethically, they will fulfill this function better if they are written in a way that is artistically beautiful and enticing to the audience. Thus, being a good biographer meant being a

---

<sup>2</sup> The mainstream view is that biography originally was not considered part of history. Fornara (1988, p. 185), for example, said that in those times “history, the record of man’s memorable deeds, was irrelevant to biography, except when deeds illuminate character.” For an alternative, more nuanced view, which regards biography closer to history even in Plutarch’s work, see Hershbell (1997).

good writer. On the other hand, biography was not a literary genre in the sense poetry was. Since biography had a commitment to the faithful description of the life of an individual, here imagination could not have free rein; its outermost limit was truth, the boundary of which it could (should) not overstep. Gradually there was a coming together of biography and history, with biography seen as an historical writing, a form of history. After all, the “great deeds of men” were, from the beginning, part and parcel of history. (Fornara, 1988, p. 185) One can see the gradual overlap of this expression with biography, more and more encompassing narratives of deeds (actions) of “great men.” (Carlyle, 1841)

This oscillation of biography between literature and history, between fiction and non-fiction, has accompanied the development of the genre for a long time. In modern times the movement toward history (the commitment to truth) became stronger. Abandoning the style of hagiography typical of the Middle Ages, Samuel Johnson in his seminal essays on the biographical method — *The dignity and usefulness of biography*, in *The Rambler*, no. 60, October 13, 1750, and *Biography, how best performed*, in *The Idler*, no. 84, November 24, 1759 — stressed the need for the biographer to be faithful to truth, even if it is unpleasant. As he wrote in his concluding words in *The Rambler* essay no. 60: “If the biographer writes from personal knowledge, and makes haste to gratify the public curiosity, there is danger lest his interest, his fear, his gratitude, or his tenderness, overpower his fidelity, and tempt him to conceal, if not to invent [...] If we owe regard to the memory of the dead, there is yet more respect to be paid to knowledge, to virtue, and to truth.” (Johnson, 2017)

The Johnsonian paradigm became a model to be followed by biographers and was a watershed in the development of the genre. Arguably, one might say that it became the main paradigm since then — even today most conventional biographies proud themselves on being truthful. However, this *avant la lettre quasi* positivist approach to biography soon came under attack from different quarters. The nineteenth-century Victorian biographies would later be accused of sycophancy, of being mere meek, servile, flattering portraits of important people. At least this was the scathing criticism expounded by Lytton Strachey (1918, p. V-VII) in the foreword to his *Eminent Victorians*. Virginia Woolf elaborated on Strachey’s foundations in order to spell out some principles of what came to be called the *New Biography*. Woolf, while retaining the commitment of the biographer to truth, opened the door to the importance of imagination in the biographical craft. In other words, with her the biographical pendulum swings again subtly to the literature pole. As she put in her

1939 essay *The Art of Biography*:

[The biographer] is a craftsman, not an artist; and his work is not a work of art but something betwixt and between [...] By telling us the true facts, by sifting the little from the big, and shaping the whole so that we perceive the outline, the biographer does more to stimulate the imagination than any poet or novelist save the very greatest. For few poets and novelists are capable of the high degree of tension which gives us reality. But almost any biographer, if he respects the facts, can give us much more than another fact to add to our collection. He can give us the creative fact; the fertile fact; the fact that suggests and engenders [...] (Woolf, 1939, p. 509-510)

The next big movement of the biographical pendulum towards the literature (“fiction”) pole — as opposed to the “history/non-fiction” pole — came with post-structuralism and post-modernism in the late twentieth century. The concept of “truth,” even in history itself, came under attack from these positions. (White, 1980) Pierre Bourdieu, in his 1986 essay “The Biographical Illusion,” pointed out that describing life as an orderly, cradle-to-grave logical sequence is to fall prey to the illusion that life is a coherent whole when it is not.

To speak of “life history” implies the not insignificant presupposition that life is a history [...] consisting of a beginning [...], various stages and an end [...] To produce a life history or to consider life as a history, that is, as a coherent narrative of a significant and directed sequence of events, is perhaps to conform to a rhetorical illusion [...] Trying to understand a life as a unique and self-sufficient series of successive events (sufficient unto itself) and without ties other than the association to a “subject” whose constancy is probably that of a proper name, is nearly as absurd as trying to make sense out of a subway route without taking into account the network structure [...] (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 69-72)

In some radical post-modern variants, “history” has been reduced to “stories” or “histories” (*i.e.*, the different narratives by individual historians without any metanarrative above them). Accordingly, biography lost its conventional character as description of lives of men (usually great men) and new, unconventional, experimental forms appeared. Gender studies stimulated biographies that were not of “men” (males); microhistory brought with itself biographies not of “great” people but also of “ordinary” people. And biographies are not necessarily of “people” anymore: biographies of animals (*e.g.*, Virginia

Woolf's *Flush*, about a dog) and even objects (Tretiakov,1929) have surfaced. And biographies are not necessarily about a whole life but rather can concentrate on a specific period of someone's life or even be a collection of "biographemes" (memory fragments) written in no specific chronological or logical order. (Barthes, 1971, p. 14)

Being methodologically torn between many different fields and sprawling functionally across diverse spheres, no wonder there is difficulty in tying biography to a specific field of knowledge or sphere of action. This can give freedom of action to biographers in practice, but hinders the establishment of theoretical underpinnings that can be accepted in a more or less consensual manner.

However, I believe there is another, less noticed reason, for the fact that it is difficult to theorize biography in a comprehensive manner. Biography is directly, intrinsically, viscerally, related to *life*. And life as a whole is not a rational, systematic, purely logical form of existence. Although life encompasses rationality, its non-rational components — emotions, instinct, etc. — simply make it impossible to describe, study or otherwise encompass life in a purely rational fashion. That is one of the main reasons why it is difficult to create a theory on biography, just as it is difficult to create a (comprehensive) theory about life itself. It is a different situation with history. History certainly encompasses life (and, therefore, by the way, biography too, in my opinion). After all, a purely structural history — which would not take into consideration aspects of the lives of people — would not only be dull reading but also unrealistic (again, in my opinion). But history encompasses not only lives (individuals, people, etc.), with their non-rational aspects but also many other aspects (social institutions, the economy, etc.) which are more impersonal and can be analyzed from a purely rational angle. Therefore, history has many aspects which can be grasped in rational ways. This facilitates the creation of (rational) theories about history. Since history also has non-rational segments (related to lives, emotional aspects of people, etc.), even history has difficulty in being captured by *one* big, general theory. We do not have *one* (consensual) theory of history but several (competing ones). That is the best we can get because the non-rational aspects in history — many related to *life* — prevent us from being able to grasp the whole panorama in one swoop.

Now, the question arises. If we can have various theories of history to explain rationally those parts of history that can be rationally explained, why can't we have the same with biography, that is, not *one* (general) theory of biography but rather several competing theories? The fact that *life* encompasses many non-rational sides — unlike history which, reversely, encompasses many rational sides —

makes it difficult not only to have one general theory of biography, but even several theories of biography. The situation is compounded by the fact already mentioned above that biography lies among many different spheres of knowledge and therefore has an intrinsic identity crisis.

This double quandary makes theorizing difficult and leads us to the present situation when we actually do not have (fully-fledged) (even partial) *theories* of biography, but only useful theoretical *insights* into biography and the biographical method — brought about by authors like the ones cited along this article. I believe we have not yet made the leap from *insights* to *theories* on biography because we cling on the hope (a new “biographical illusion”?) that we can encompass biography as a whole, as a relatively homogeneous genre. As we saw in this article, not only biography has historically oscillated amongst various poles but it has grown into such multi-faceted medium (biography of individuals, group biography, biography of animals, biography of objects, etc.) that we should give up the illusion that we can strive for a theory that can encompass biography as a whole (actually, as a homogeneous whole). We should accept biography’s heterogeneity; that different types of biographies require different methods; that biography can be multidisciplinary and therefore we need different theories of biography that can coexist and illuminate certain types of biographies, but not necessarily others. With this more modest goal in sight — and full conscience of the non-rational sides in biography (life) that are “theory-resistant” — we may be able to make the leap from *insights* to *theory* (*theories*, that is) in the biographical field.

#### CONFESSION NO. 2 (*about practice*)

There are many perils along the path of the biographer. For example, according to those who emphasize the essentially literary character of biography (the “literature pole”), it must have literary qualities, must be written in a beautiful (artistic) way. According to those (*e.g.*, Freud, 1910) who emphasize the inherent psychological nature of description of *lives*, one needs to adequately describe the psychological make-up and motivations of the main character. According to Ian Kershaw (2008; and other history-minded professional historian-biographers), a biography needs not only to describe the individual characteristics of its subject but also illuminate wider aspects of society at large. According to Monk (2007), a biography may (and should) also have philosophical implications. According to Bourdieu (1986), a biographer should not

fall prey to the “biographical illusion” that a life can be described as a logical, purposive sequence of events of the “cradle-to-grave” type. Barthes (1971) proposed the writing of *biographemes* instead.

There are many perils along the path of the biographer indeed!

However, I must confess that the most dangerous peril and the worst methodological “temptation” to resist for me in my practical experience as a biographer was a very classical one; actually one could call it the “original” pitfall (sin) that biographers have been warned against by ancient (*e.g.*, Plutarch) and modern (*e.g.*, Samuel Johnson) pioneers of biography: the need not to be “hypnotized” by (attracted to) one’s subject to the point of losing the critical faculty about him/her.

## REFLECTION NO. 2 (*about practice*)

In my case, the danger was especially strong because the subject of my biography was a highly controversial individual who divides opinions, sparks both admiration and revulsion (but rarely indifference): Karl Marx.<sup>3</sup> And not only that. My own life background put me in a strange position in relation to Marx. I graduated from an American university and went on to pursue my master’s degree in the Soviet Union. My students joke with me that I am a product of the Cold War with this bipolar educational background. It also left me feeling like a fish out of water — wherever I was — in relation to Karl Marx. In the United States, where Marx was often demonized, I used to defend him; and in the USSR, where he was often subject of a type of “hagiography,” I found myself pointing out failings and contradictions in him.

Although I am not a Marxist militant, I am an admirer of Marx’s intellectual prowess. Therefore, I thought I was in a fairly “objective” position to write a biography of Marx. My moderate admiration made possible fairly extensive reading about of his works — knowledge necessary to be able to understand and convey the gist of his rather complicated theories. The fact that I was not a Marxist “militant” (plus my first-hand experience with the problems of actually existing socialism) ensured that I would not be uncritical about him.

But reality is more complicated than theory. In real life (in the real biography), things were not so simple. To start with, my own premises as an historian came into play. I began my studies of history trying to shun the traditional history “of great men” (rulers, kings, wars, etc. as determinant factors) that we were taught at school. I was

---

<sup>3</sup> Segrillo, Angelo. *Karl Marx: uma biografia dialética*. Curitiba: Prismas/Appris, 2018.

more attracted to investigating the wider social conditions under which all individuals (not only the “great” ones) lived. Although I enjoyed reading biographies of influential figures — Catherine the Great, Hitler, Churchill, etc. — I was suspicious of the tendency of some of these books to reduce the history of the times to actions by the “biographee of the moment.” Before I started my first biography, from the many authors/theoreticians of biography we mentioned in this article, my position was probably closer to that of Ian Kershaw (2008, p. 38) who wants to use biography “as a prism on wider issues of historical understanding and not in a narrow focus on private life and personality.” In other words, what delighted me most in the biographies of Catherine the Great, were not so much the spicy details of her secret love life (or the way she had her husband killed), but how aspects of her life (her education, the way she, as a foreigner, related to Russia) contributed to generate specific conditions that influenced Russian history.

Expecting to write my biography on the level of a respected newspaper, rather than a gossipy tabloid, I soon became entangled with the special features of Marx’s life. I could have written an intellectual biography of Marx, emphasizing his ideas and his works. Great biographies were written in this way, like Berlin’s (1939) and Cornu’s (1955-1970). But even I was not satisfied with remaining in the comfortable (for a “high-brow” like me) safe realm of ideas. If I was going to write a biography, I would go all the way. I would dirty my hands in the bath water of daily life minute details no matter how unimportant — from the standpoint of society — they might seem to be.

In the beginning, I felt safe doing so. In the realm of ideas, I would occasionally defend or attack certain intellectual positions when disputes arose between different interpretations. However, in the realm of everyday life, I was bent on being very non-committal, dispassionately describing facts (habits, actions) with the cold detachment of a doctor examining his patient or a zoologist describing the habits of animals; no intention to be judgmental but only describe them without much commentary. My comments would be reserved for the more important intellectual moments of Marx’s life which ended up having wider social consequences.

Alas, things did not exactly happen this way *in real life* (in the real biography)! And the problem was not that previous biographers of Marx passed judgment on his personal actions and life (was he a sponge for borrowing money from Engels his whole adult life? Was he a careless father for not providing proper conditions to his family having as a result half of his children dying in infancy? Did he actually

cheat on his wife by impregnating their maid?). No, even these completely personal details I would describe in a very dispassionate, non-judgmental way, stating simply the — excuse me for the word — *facts* as they appeared to me from the extant primary sources and documents.

The problem came because in Marx's case, the Kershawian stance on biographies took a strange turn. Some biographers questioned whether Marx's personal way of dealing with people in his political relationships, which some deemed heavy-handed and even disloyal (Machiavellian), was reproduced by his followers (like Lenin and Stalin) and led to a kind of politics whose result was the authoritarian (totalitarian) socialism of the USSR type.

Wow! Personal life (and ways) having social consequences! If I was to follow Kershaw's advice, I could not simply avoid the issue whether this kind of personal behavior really had these social consequences.

This is not the place to reproduce the debates on this question in my biography. Suffice it to say that this brought me down from the clouds of my highbrow initial stance and made me grapple with the evaluation of many daily life actions (and their consequences) "under the pretext" of their social implications. I subtly started to regard personal, day to day behavior under another light and gained appreciation for the existential value inherent in simple actions and habits of daily life which had not been apparent to me before. For example, I reproduced in my biography the well-known fact that Jenny, Marx's wife, used to make clean copies of Marx's terrible handwriting before sending his texts to the editors. However, on closer examination, I noticed how these copying sessions became not only a passive copying exercise but also moments when Jenny could discuss with Marx many of the ideas in his texts, including giving him suggestions on how to improve them. This "active" stance did not become clear from traditional biographical descriptions of Marx. Not many readers realized that Jenny was an intellectually active woman, writing theater reviews, discussing politics with Marx's partners and even writing political texts of her own. Much of this other side of Jenny became apparent to me only when I explored these mundane copying sessions in more detail. Another example is when I dug deeper into the daily routine of Marx's household and of its governess/maid Helene Demuth (nicknamed *Lenchen*). Often seen as a secondary character in the Marx drama, the examination of her quotidian routine reveals some interesting aspects. The fact that this semi-literate woman of peasant extraction could beat one of the most powerful brains of the world then (*i.e.* Marx himself) in chess says

something about her own intellectual potential (and perhaps helps to explain the great influence she had on Marx's daughters' upbringing and on the Marx household in general).

Little by little, I came to appreciate the heuristic value of the small actions of everyday life *in and of themselves*. I felt that this was my baptism as a real biographer instead of being an historian writing a biography.

About my final conclusion whether Marx's personal actions and way of handling himself in political battles were passed on to his followers and ended up creating the type of authoritarian socialism we had in the twentieth-century ... Well, I am not giving you a spoiler of my own biography here, dear reader. If you want to know this specific detail, read *Karl Marx: uma biografia dialética*.

#### REFERENCES

- BARTHES, Roland. *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1971.
- BERLIN, Isaiah. *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment*. London: Thornton Butterworth, 1939.
- BOURDIEU, Pierre. L'illusion biographique. *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, vol. 62-63, pp. 69-72, June 1986.
- CARLYLE, Thomas. *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and The Heroic in History*. London: James Fraser, 1841.
- CLIFFORD, James. Hanging up Looking Glasses at Odd Corners. In: AARON, Daniel (ed.) *Studies in Biography*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978. Pp. 41-56.
- CORNU, Auguste. *Karl Marx et Frierich Engels: leur vie et leur oeuvre*. Paris, P.U.F., 1955/1958/1961/1970. 4 vols.
- ERBEN, Michael. The Problem of Other Lives: Social Perspectives on Written Biography. *Sociology*, vol. 27, no. 1, pp. 15-25, February 1993.
- FETZ, Bernhard & SCHWEIGER, Hannes (eds.) *Die Biographie : Zur Grundlegung ihrer Theorie*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009.
- FORNARA, Charles William. *The Nature of History in Ancient Greece and Rome*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.
- FREUD, Sigmund. *Eine Kindheitserinnerung des Leonardo da Vinci*. Vienna: Franz Deuticke, 1910.
- HEMECKER, Wilhelm & Saunders, Edward (eds.) *Biography in Theory: Key Texts with Commentaries*. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2017.
- HERSHBELL, Jackson P. Plutarch's Concept of History: Philosophy from Examples. *Ancient Society*, vol. 28, pp. 225-243, 1997.

- JOHNSON, Samuel. *Samuel Johnson's Essays ~ republished 260 years later*. Retrieved December 23, 2017, from <http://www.johnsonessays.com/>
- KERSHAW, Ian. Biography and the Historian: Opportunities and Constraints. In: LÄSSIG, Simone & BERGHAN, Volker. *Biography between Structure and Agency*. Nova York: Berghan Books, 2008. Pp. 27-39.
- LEE, Hermione. *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2009.
- MONK, Ray. Life without Theory: Biography as an Exemplar of Philosophical Understanding. *Poetics Today*, vol. 28, no. 3, pp. 527-570, Fall 2007.
- NADEL, Ira Bruce. *Biography: Fiction, Fact & Form*. New York: St Martin's Press, 1984.
- PIMLOTT, Ben. Is Contemporary Biography History? *Political Quarterly*, vol. 70, no. 1, pp. 31-41, 1999.
- PLUTARCH. *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans [Parallel Lives]*. Retrieved January 12, 2018, from <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/674>
- RENDERS, Hans & de HAAN, Binne (orgs.) *Theoretical Discussions of Biography: Approaches from History, Microhistory, and Life Writing*. Leiden: Brill, 2014.
- SEGRILLO, Angelo. *Karl Marx: uma biografia dialética*. Curitiba: Prismas/Appris, 2018.
- STRACHEY, Lytton. *Eminent Victorians*. Garden City: Garden City Publishing Co., 1918.
- TRETIAKOV, Sergey. Biografiia Veschchi. In: CHUZNAK, Nikolai (ed.) *Literatura Fakta*. Moscow: Federatsiia, 1929. Pp. 66-70.
- WHITE, Hayden. The Value of Narrative in the Representation of Reality. *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 5-27, Autumn 1980.
- WOOLF, Virginia. The Art of Biography. *The Atlantic Monthly*, pp. 506-510, April 1939.



**Revolution in the Revolution:  
Michael Heinrich's Challenge in the Realm of Karl Marx  
Biographies**

*Angelo Segrillo<sup>1</sup>*

**T**he German political scientist, economist and mathematician Michael Heinrich is one of the world's leading Marx specialists. This is partially due to his experience in the edition of MEGA (*Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe*), the most complete collection of Marx's and Engels' works, documents and primary sources. In 2018 (the bicentennial of Marx's birth), he launched the first volume of his planned three-volume biography of the German thinker: *Karl Marx and die Geburt der modernen Gesellschaft: Biographie und Werkentwicklung. Band 1: 1818-1843* (Stuttgart: Schmetterling Verlag).

We can derive some highlights from this first volume and from the descriptions that Heinrich himself gave of the ensemble of the work. Firstly, the solidity of the research, which uses not only the treasures of MEGA but also a number of other primary sources and relevant secondary literature. In addition, Heinrich sets himself an ambitious mission: to refute Louis Althusser's thesis of an "epistemological break" (as of 1845-1846, with the writing of the *Theses on Feuerbach* and *The German Ideology*) between the works of the *young Marx* and those of the *mature Marx*. Unlike other authors, he will do that without postulating mere *continuity* between the young Marx and the old Marx. He will accept that there have been changes — even radical ones — in Marx's thinking. However, they should not be seen in a binary way ("young Marx versus mature Marx") *as per* Althusser. On the contrary, there were continuities and discontinuities in Marx's thought; but they occurred in different dimensions and at different speeds, therefore they should be examined on a case-by-case basis. This makes the biographical character of the work even more important, since it allows us to understand the peculiarities of the various moments of Marx's life that led him to change his mind at specific points.

These features highlight the relevance of Heinrich's book as a meaningful addition to the ensemble of Marx's biographies. But there is an extra aspect that may potentially bring forth an important methodological discussion in the biographical field. Heinrich criticizes many earlier Marx biographers by accusing them of not

---

<sup>1</sup> Angelo Segrillo is an Associate Professor of History at the University of São Paulo (Brazil) and author of *Karl Marx: uma biografia dialética* (Prismas/Appris, 2018).

always basing their descriptions on reliable primary sources and even relaying “legends” about the life of the German thinker without proper checking of sources. Heinrich gives several examples of such “legends”: the erroneous dates of Marx’s father’s conversion to Protestantism, the would-be duel in which Marx was wounded as a student, the erroneous dates given for his engagement, Eduard Gans’ allegedly great influence on Marx, Franz Mehring’s opinion (accepted uncritically by later biographers) that *all* of Marx’s youth poems were artistically poor, the idea that participation in the so-called “Doctor’s Club” induced Marx’s transition to Hegelianism, etc. Heinrich uncovers these legends and shows — even citing the pages in the works of previous biographers where these errors occur — how the primary sources tell a different story.

Heinrich’s challenge to raise the level of biographical research on Marx’s life can metaphorically (“mathematically”) be described as being 100% based on reliable (primary) sources.<sup>2</sup> This is a high bar to reach. The author of these lines, an historian by profession, is highly sensitive to such an appeal. After all, traditionally one of the greatest duties of an historian is to rely on robust primary sources so as to be able to stay clear of erroneous or falsified versions of the past. Thus, it will be interesting to see if Michael Heinrich will be able to maintain — in this respect — the high level of the first volume of his biography in the remaining volumes. His effort to point out that Marx’s biographers have become somewhat lax regarding source checking is salutary and will probably lead to greater methodological rigor in the future. The authors who follow Ian Kershaw’s (2008) line on biographical work — which emphasizes rigor with primary sources and the social relevance of studies on individuals — will certainly applaud Heinrich’s effort.<sup>3</sup>

However, this effort toward methodological rigor with sources — an angle that might seem consensual — will find skepticism in certain quarters of the biographical community. In biographical studies — as well as in historiography itself — postmodern skepticism has made deep inroads. Postmodern authors criticize the traditionally closed concepts of “truth,” “objectivity,” the “real” and even the “fetishism of primary sources” as the basis for absolute truth. They may counter Heinrich’s position on different levels.

---

<sup>2</sup> This “100%” expression is not used by Heinrich himself. It is my metaphorical way to describe his position in defense of extreme rigor in the use of primary sources to validate claims in biographical works.

<sup>3</sup> KERSHAW, Ian. *Biography and the Historian: Opportunities and Constraints*. In: LÄSSIG, Simone & BERGHAN, Volker. *Biography between Structure and Agency*. New York: Berghan Books, 2008 (pp. 27-39).

An immediate first level is that in the case of several of the facts about Marx's life indicated above as "legends" by Heinrich, his criticism is that there are no primary sources substantiating such assertions. One can counter that with the assertion that the lack of evidence to prove a phenomenon does not mean that the phenomenon does not exist (the famous tree in the forest that nobody has ever seen ...).

This is a philosophical objection to which Heinrich would probably retort by saying that in his biography he not only points out that there are no primary sources to substantiate such "legends" about Marx but also that there are other primary sources pointing in opposite directions.

At a deeper level, our would-be postmodern skeptic could also criticize the very fetishism of primary sources and the possibility of an "objective," "neutral" evaluation stemming from them. The most radical postmodernists point out that what historians (and biographers) do is to create a *narrative* about the past. And, according to them, there is no higher metatheoretical ground from which one can compare the various narratives from different historians (biographers) and judge which ones are "right" and which ones are "wrong." Similarly, the traditional Rankean historical view that the so-called primary sources convey the truth about past history is an illusion. After all, the "reliability" of a source is in itself a relative concept and constitutes a value judgment stemming from subjects who have decreed the "reliability" of such source.

As most Marx biographers tend to be historians, political scientists or journalists who, to a greater or lesser extent, adhere to a traditional conception of history and biography, I believe that Heinrich's challenge will be taken in face value and the debate will take place in terms of whether the primary sources indicated by Heinrich really point in a correct direction not detected by previous biographers or not. However, on a theoretical-conceptual level, it should be noted that other critics may start off from the postmodern view described above and then the picture becomes fuzzier. Biography, as a genre, has oscillated between the poles of history (non-fiction) and literature (fiction). For example, the so-called fictionalized biographies have no total commitment to the truth and (in some cases) to primary sources, constituting a reading in which entertainment has a prominent role — sometimes even to the detriment of the commitment to the "faithful" description of the facts. The overwhelming majority of biographies about Marx does not belong (or purports not to belong) to the field of fictionalized biographies, claiming to be an accurate account of Marx's life.

Thereto, however, postmodern skeptics may raise two objections. First of all, what does “faithful description of the facts” mean? Heinrich’s own criticism of earlier biographers already indicates that even if one thinks that he is giving a “faithful” description of the facts, there is a good chance that it may not be the case (even if this becomes evident only later). Secondly, what if we come to encounter fictionalized biographies of Marx? Should they be deemed *stricto sensu* biographies of the German thinker as well? Or should they be considered a minor subgenre within the ensemble of existing biographical works? Or not biographies at all?

Some traditional biographers of the Kershawian school may brush aside such discussion as mere play on words. However, Heinrich’s own “modern” challenge to earlier biographers — that metaphorically (“mathematically”) we described as requiring documentation based 100% on primary sources — will excite postmodern sensibilities exactly in the direction of the discipline that seems the most solid and aprioristic of all: mathematics. Is a 100% description based on primary sources even “physically” possible? There are so many assertions in every paragraph of a work that documenting them 100% based on primary sources is “physically” impossible. As in all works, most assertions, especially those considered universally known truths — *e.g.*, Germany in the first half of the nineteenth century did not constitute a unified state; Marx was born in 1818, etc. — are usually stated without the backing of primary sources. For example, even Heinrich often cites secondary sources (the authoritative author’s argument) in his book to reinforce his point in non-controversial matters. Considering all these details not based on primary sources — which make up the majority of assertions in any biography, including Heinrich’s, as can be seen when we compare the number of phrases on a page with the number of footnotes with sources — the postmodern skeptic would argue that a biography 100% based on primary sources is a mirage. Thus, Heinrich’s biography would be like the others: one basing less than 50% of its assertions on primary sources (even if Heinrich’s is closer to 50% than all others).<sup>4</sup>

Just as the postmodern skeptic would criticize the goal of achieving 100% reliability on primary sources as a play on words,

---

<sup>4</sup> The meaning of these “mathematical” magnitudes may be more clearly understood if we take the case of Leopold von Ranke, who is considered to have originated the modern emphasis on using primary sources as the basic mode of historical research. When one reads the original works by Ranke, one notices that not even 10% of his assertions on each page are based on primary sources documented in the footnotes.

Michael Heinrich would probably retort that these postmodern objections are also a mere play on words, that everyone knows that not everything can (or needs to be) based on quotations from primary sources and that these details do not affect the broader discussion of the need for greater methodological rigor in the field of Marx biographies.

In that case, where do we (Marx biographers and Marx biography readers) stand?



## Some Economic and Social Aspects of Russian Industrialization in the Nineteenth Century

Camilo Domingues<sup>1</sup>

This essay presents a bibliographical review of some of the leading Western authors — mainly British and North American — who devoted themselves to research about the Russian economy in the period from the late eighteenth century to the eve of the First World War. Among the various components of Russian economic and social development in the period, four will be dealt with in particular: population growth, educational reforms, economic growth, and (economic, fiscal and financial) state measures. We shall trace the main trends of development and behavior in these areas, with special emphasis on the contradictions that permeated the process of industrialization of the Russian Empire in the nineteenth century.

Although our sources follow different schools of thought about the development of the Russian economy and its process of industrialization, there is no divergence between them as far as the data presented. Almost all of the data are based on the surveys elaborated by Lyashchenko, Prokopovich and Strumilin.<sup>2</sup> Together with the statistics provided by the imperial government, they are the most reliable sources of data so far, in spite of the precariousness and lack of accuracy of the methods then used. If the available data precludes more precise conclusions, on the other hand they at least allow the verification of trends in economic behavior and evolution.

Our analysis has the data presented by the sources as its starting point. Thus, we intend not only to present the economic and historical

---

<sup>1</sup> Camilo Domingues is a Ph.D. student in the Graduate Program in History of Fluminense Federal University (UFF - Brazil). He is currently undertaking the research project "The Aesthetic Relations of Art to Reality: The Interaction between History, Philosophy and Literature in the Work of N. G. Chernyshevsky," under the supervision of Professor Daniel Aarão Reis. Contact email: [camilodomingues@hotmail.com](mailto:camilodomingues@hotmail.com).

<sup>2</sup> We refer to the works by Russian economists Pyotr I. Lyashchenko (1876-1955), Sergei Nikolaevich Prokopovich (1871-1955) and Stanislav Gustavovich Strumilin (1877-1974), extensively used by Western historians and economists as sources of data on 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russian economy. Of note are Lyashchenko's *Istoriya narodnogo khozyaystva SSSR* ("History of the National Economy of the U.S.S.R.", 1939); Prokopovich's *Opyt ischisleniia narodnogo dokhoda 50 gub. Evropeiskoi Rossii v 1900-1913 gg.* ("Calculations of Personal Income in the 50 Provinces of European Russia between 1900 and 1913", 1918); *Promyshlennyyi krizisy v Rossii* ("Industrial crises in Russia", 1939) and *Promyshlennyyi perevorot v Rossii* ("Industrial Revolution in Russia", 1944), both by Strumilin.

conclusions reached in the specialized literature but also put the reader in contact with the information in its most elementary form, so that one can follow the working out of the theses and have one's independent judgement on the subject matter.

By bringing together analyses of social and economic processes embedded in the development of Russian economy in the nineteenth century, we seek to grasp the historical, social and economic facts as they occur: to examine their dialectical interaction — sometimes seemingly incomprehensible and contradictory — in search of the main trends that arise from them, and of the possible directions to which they point.

### **Population growth**

During the nineteenth century, Russia nearly quadrupled its population: from 36 million in 1796 to 129 million in 1897. It was surpassed in the same period by the United States alone.<sup>3</sup> Paul Gregory<sup>4</sup> points out that, particularly from 1861 onward, Russia's population growth followed the same growth pattern of advanced economies when they transitioned to a modern economy (75-100 years before Russia). Table 1 presents estimated data for the Russian population between 1722 and 1897:<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Ellison, Herbert J. "Economic Modernization in Imperial Russia: Purposes and Achievements." *The Journal of Economic History*, vol. 25, no. 4, 1965, p. 524.

<sup>4</sup> Paul R. Gregory, "Economic Growth and Structural Change in Tsarist Russia: A Case of Modern Economic Growth?", *Soviet Studies*, vol. 23, no. 3, 1972, pp. 420-421. The author did a comparative study of the development level of the Russian economy during the nineteenth century in relation to the economic development levels observed in advanced countries during their transition to being a modern economy. For this, he uses the notion of MEG (modern economic growth) developed by Simon Kuznets. According to Gregory, the MEG concept refers to the economic growth observed in advanced capitalist countries in their transition from the pre-modern to the modern phase.

<sup>5</sup> In table 1, as well as in the next ones, the empty cells indicate that there is no available data, according to the sources used.

**Table 1. Population of Russia (millions), 1722-1897***Including population of Poland, the Baltic, and Finland.*

Year	In original area	%	In annexed territories	%	Total	Rural		Serfs	
						millions	%	millions	%
1722	14	100	---	---	14	13.5	96.4	---	---
1762	19	100	---	---	19	14.5 <sup>1</sup>	---	7.6	52.4 <sup>2</sup>
1796	29	80.6	7	19.4	36	34.7	96.4	20	55.5
1815	30.5	67.8	14.5	32.2	45	43.3	96.2	20.8	46.2
1851	39	58.2	28	41.8	67	63.6	95	21.7	31.5
1859	45	60.8	29	39.2	74	69.8	94.3	22.7	30.7
1897	65	50.4	64	49.6	129	112.7	87.4	0	0

<sup>1</sup> Great Russia and Siberia only. <sup>2</sup> Among rural population only.

Source: Kaser, Michael C. "Russian Entrepreneurship." In: *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, vol. VII, part 2, 1978, p. 446. The author uses data from the studies of Pyotr I. Lyashchenko: Lyashchenko, Pyotr I. *Istoriya narodnogo khozyaistva SSSR*. 2 vols. (1939 [English translation]; 1947-8 [2nd Russian edition]).

From the early nineteenth century until 1897, Russia's great imperialist advance towards possessions in the West and Far East also changed the Empire's population composition in relation to its original area. If by late eighteenth century (1796) only 19% of the Russian population lived in the annexed territories, in 1897 the original area and the annexed territories each made up 50% of the total.

Table 1 shows that population growth did not drastically change the composition of the rural population. From the early eighteenth century until the mid-nineteenth century, about 95% of the Russian Empire lived in the countryside. The only sharp decline in the rural population occurred in the period between 1859 and 1897, when the countryside still accounted for 87.4% of the total.

Although from 1796 to 1859 the total population doubled (from 36 to 74 million), the number of serfs remained practically the same (from 20 to 22.7 million). Their share decreased from 55.5% to 30.7% of the total population, or approximately from one half to one third. This means that the 38 million individuals incorporated into the Russian Empire between 1796 and 1859 did not directly integrate the serf population and (even more importantly) that there was already a downward trend in the number of serfs before the Emancipation Reform of 1861.

The demographic data of Russia for this period indicates several

characteristics, economic contradictions and trends of the Empire. The absolute figures of Russia's population growth during the nineteenth century show that the country traversed the same typical phase that the countries of Western Europe and North America passed through when they became capitalist. However, according to Gregory<sup>6</sup> the composition of Russia's birth and mortality rates for the period corresponded to pre-modern levels in relation to the latter countries. Additionally, Russian population growth did not imply transfer from the countryside to the cities; a very slight trend of rural population decrease appeared only in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Finally, the share of serfs in the total population was reduced dramatically between the mid-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, showing that the population increase did not necessarily incorporate workers into agricultural activities or into servile work but chiefly into other activities, such as interregional trade, transport service and the new rural industry that developed in the villages.

On the one hand, Russia reproduced patterns of economic development similar to those of the capitalist economies of the West in their respective phases of transition to the modern economy. On the other hand, Russia exhibited peculiarities and complexity in its own demographic and economic developments.

### **Educational reforms**

Since the reforms of Peter the Great (r. 1682-1725), concern for education was present among the main Russian emperors — above all, Catherine the Great (r. 1762-1796) and Alexander II (r. 1855-1881). Along with the requirement of raising the level of education of the state bureaucracy, there was an urgent need to educate the armed forces (especially after the defeat in the Crimean War of 1853-56) and to teach the mass of peasants who little by little was recruited for the incipient industry in the rural villages. Thus, the expansion of the educational system at its various levels involved not only the Minister of Public Instruction, but also the Minister of Finance — mainly in relation to specialized technical education — as well as the most important industrialists concerned with increasing workers' efficiency and productivity in their factories.

According to Patrick Alston, the factors that drove educational reforms in the nineteenth century included: the need to modernize the state and the armed forces; the increase of bureaucracy and the

---

<sup>6</sup> Gregory, *op. cit.*, pp. 420-421.

growth of local governments (*zemstva* and *dumas*):<sup>7</sup>

In the early 1800s the university system had been created to supply the state with a management class trained in European science. Legislation in 1809 made university-level examinations mandatory for promotion in the civil service table of ranks created by Peter the Great in the 1720s. The decree of 1834 ranked state officials according to the three standard European educational levels. (...) After 1864 the *zemstva* competed with the state bureaucracy (expanding in part to supervise the *zemstva*) for the doctors, lawyers, teachers, and scientists graduating from the expanding universities.<sup>8</sup>

During the 1880s and 1890s, discussions of industrial legislation placed on opposite sides government and industry as to which of them would be in charge of workers' education. The government ended up covering basic and higher education and industrial enterprises vocational education. In 1903,

*Zemstva*, municipalities, local organizations, and industrial firms were called upon to organize schools, model workshops, courses, museums, and exhibitions, to promote good taste in the population, to teach industrial drawing, and in general to try to overcome the inferiority of Russian design and patterns compared with foreign ones. Many firms responded and instituted special classes and courses of industrial drawing and design in factory schools.<sup>9</sup>

Educational initiatives by government, local organizations and industrial enterprises raised the educational level of the population from the second half of the nineteenth century onward. However, illiteracy was still widespread at the turn of the century:

---

<sup>7</sup> *Zemstvo*: rural local government. *Duma*: urban (district) local government. Both were instituted after the Emancipation Reform of 1861. They were organized in assemblies and enjoyed some administrative, tax and financial autonomy in relation to the central state.

<sup>8</sup> Alston, Patrick L. "The dynamics of educational expansion in Russia." In *The transformation of higher learning 1860-1930 - Expansion, Diversification, Social Opening and Professionalization in England, Germany, Russia and the United States*, 1982, pp. 90-91.

<sup>9</sup> Crisp, Olga. "Labour and Industrialization in Russia." In *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, vol. VII, part 2, 1978, p. 395.

**Table 2. Literacy rates, 1897 (%)**

Year	Total	Men	Women
<b>Whole Population</b>	21.1	29.3	13.1
Urban	45.3	54.0	35.6
Rural	17.4	25.2	9.8
<b>Wage-earners<sup>1</sup></b>	40.2	47.2	25.8
Workers <sup>2</sup>	53.6	57.8	28.4
Factory Workers	50.3	56.5	21.3

<sup>1</sup> All wage-earners, including agricultural laborers.

<sup>2</sup> Workers in industry, transport, and commerce.

Source: Crisp, *op. cit.*, p. 389.

Table 2 draws attention to the low literacy rate of the Russian population in 1897 (around 20%), to the disparate educational levels between urban and rural populations (the literacy rate was 2.6 times higher in the cities) and between male and female populations (1.5 times higher in urban areas and 2.5 times in rural areas). The data also reveal that, among wage workers, the literacy rate was about 2.5 times higher than that of the whole population. Thus, in this sample, wage workers represented the largest contingent of literates in Russia in 1897.

Despite the discrepancy in literacy rates between men and women, in general wage labor guaranteed to workers a higher level of education, as well as the proximity to the more prosperous industrial centers. According to Olga Crisp,<sup>10</sup> the literacy rates for the general population in St. Petersburg in 1869 (59.5%) and in Moscow in 1871 (45.7%) were more than double that of the national average in 1897 (almost thirty years later). That is, in the third quarter of the nineteenth century, the two main Russian cities had a literacy rate twice as large as that of Russia at the very end of the same century. St. Petersburg and Moscow concentrated the major industrial activities of the Empire, as well as the largest and most outstanding universities. The evolution of the number of students at all levels for the period 1865-1914 is shown below:

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 390.

**Table 3. Growth in the number of pupils and students in lower, secondary, and higher education, 1865-1914 (Index: 1865=100)**

Year	Index
1865	100
1875	150
1885	237
1895	350
1905	700
1914	1.187

Source: Crisp, *op. cit.*, p. 390.

So, between 1865 and 1905, Russia increased student enrollment by 7 times at all levels of education (11.87 times if we enlarge the period until 1914). The data available for the second half of the century allow us to consider that there would be at least one element that could unite the various educational initiatives in Russia: industrialization. We have also seen that urbanization, especially the emergence of large urban industrialized centers, was accompanied by high levels of education.

Furthermore, Table 2 shows that the literacy rate among wage earners (including agricultural laborers) in 1897 was higher than the overall rural literacy rate. This indicates that, in the countryside, wage labor relations were also developed and raised the literacy rate of this specific population. It is well known that in some landed estates, long before the Emancipation Reform of 1861, several landowners and even the Empire itself maintained and managed consumer goods industries (especially in the textile and sugar production branches).<sup>11</sup> For their part, peasants also developed handicrafts. That is, despite the fact that industrialization is predominantly linked to urbanization, it cannot be ignored that in nineteenth-century Russia the process of industrialization also took place in the countryside, in the so-called industrial villages, which stood out for their specific (often regionalized) industrial or handicraft production.

Therefore, greater access to education was related to industrialization not only in the cities but also in the countryside. The peculiarities and extreme complexity of the components present in

<sup>11</sup> Of note on this subject is the work by Richard L. Rudolph, "Agricultural Structure and Proto-Industrialization in Russia: Economic Development with Unfree Labor." *The Journal of Economic History*, vol. 45, no. 1, 1985, pp. 47-69.

the Russian economic and social world at that time made its educational development a very contradictory process which would dialectically affect (and be affected by) them. Nineteenth-century Russia undeniably advanced in the field of education, but this advance was assessed differently by the political and economic agents involved at the time and also by historians. Particularly, the question of education in the Empire was controversial when dealing with the problem of low labor productivity — especially in the agricultural sector — and its consequences on the process of industrialization, as we shall see below.

### **Economic growth**

Many of the academic works on Russian economic growth in the nineteenth century produced in the Western world refer to the survey by Raymond Goldsmith,<sup>12</sup> which in turn refers essentially to the works by Prokopovich and Strumilin, from which he extracts, considers, and analyzes available data. Goldsmith presents data only from 1860 onward because the previous period lacks reliable records — or even proxies — that could provide insight into the Russian economic development. For the author, in the half-century that he analyzes (1860-1913), Russia presented two different moments: a first period of slower growth, between 1860 and 1883, and a later period with slightly faster growth between 1883 and 1913. The three fundamental sectors of its economy (agriculture; industry; and trade and services) had different dynamics in both periods, indicating a non-standard economic development pattern in which we can observe: (a) high economic growth in comparison with European economic powers (restricted to a few prominent industrial centers, however), combined with (b) moderate agricultural growth with a very low productivity rate which ended up (c) slowing down the overall economic growth rates of the Empire in the period.

---

<sup>12</sup> Goldsmith, Raymond W. "The Economic Growth of Tsarist Russia 1860-1913." In *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, vol. 9, no. 3, 1961, pp. 441-475.

**Table 4. Average annual rate of growth of agriculture, industry, trade and services in Russia, 1860-1913 (%)**

	1860-1883	1883-1913	1860-1913
Crop production <sup>1</sup>	1.6	2.3 <sup>2</sup>	1.75-2.25 <sup>3</sup>
Livestock	---	---	1.0-1.25
<b>Total Agricultural Output</b>	---	---	1.75-2.0
Factory industry	5.25-5.75	5.5-6.0	5.0-5.5
<b>Total Industrial Output</b>	4.75-5.25	5.0-5.5	4.5-5.0
<b>Trade and Services</b>	---	---	2.0-3.0 <sup>4</sup>
<b>Gross National Product</b>	2.0-2.5	2.5-3.0	2.25-2.75
<b>GNP per capita</b>	0.5-1.0 <sup>5</sup>	1.0-1.5 <sup>6</sup>	0.75-1.0

<sup>1</sup> 50 Provinces of European Russia.

<sup>2</sup> 1883-1915. <sup>3</sup> 1860-1915. <sup>4</sup> 1858-1913. <sup>5</sup> 1860-1885. <sup>6</sup> 1885-1913.

Source: Goldsmith, *op. cit.*, pp. 453-454; 471-472.

Goldsmith points out that, taken individually, the agriculture and industry growth rates between 1860 and 1913 are about average or slightly above the average growth of European countries in the same period.

However, as shown below, in spite of these high individual average growth rates, the downward effect of the agricultural sector, which still accounted for more than 66% of annual output in 1880, left its mark. The low productivity of this sector suggests that the agricultural economic growth verified in the period was not due to more efficiency but rather mainly due to the incorporation of new workers. On the other hand, one can observe a fast-growing industrial sector with a productivity rate higher than the agricultural, but which accounted for only 14% of annual output in 1880 and therefore had a modest contribution to the Empire's *gross national product*. Table 5 presents labor force and product share for each economic sector, as well as their average productivity between 1860 and 1913, according to the above-mentioned work by Gregory.

**Table 5. Various estimates of Russian industrial structure and sector Productivity – 1860, 1880, 1900, 1913 (50 European provinces)**

	Agriculture	Industry	Services
<b>1860</b>			
Labor Force Share	91 <sup>1</sup>	9	---
<b>1880</b>			
Labor Force Share	74	13	13
Product Share <sup>2</sup>	66-71	14-15	20-14
Product per worker <sup>2</sup>	0.89-0.96	1.27-1.34	1.00-1.41
<b>1900</b>			
Labor Force Share	71	18	11
Product Share	60-63	24-26	16-11
Product per worker	0.85-0.89	1.33-1.44	1.00-1.41
<b>1913</b>			
Labor Force Share	72	18	10
Product Share	58-60	28-30	14-10
Product per worker	0.81-0.83	1.56-1.67	1.00-1.41

<sup>1</sup> Agriculture and Services.

<sup>2</sup> As specified by Gregory, the data presented in “Product Share” and “Product per worker” are those from Goldsmith.

Source: Gregory, *op. cit.*, p. 425.

The agriculture product share ranges from a maximum of 71% in 1880 to a minimum of 58% in 1913. On the other hand, when we look at the industrial sector, we observe that its product share increased by 100% between 1880 and 1913, and its labor force share increased by 38.46%. Hence one can only explain the doubling of industrial output in the period with the data referring to the increase of this sector’s productivity (23.75%).

However, if industrial productivity was increasing, agricultural productivity was decreasing relative to the former. In 1880, agricultural productivity corresponded to 70.88% of industrial productivity, in 1900, to 62.82% and in 1913, to 50.77%. Towards the end of this period, the low agricultural productivity functioned as an obstacle to the free development of industry. According to Gregory, this is one of the reasons why Russia has not followed the organic, or endogenous, path to industrialization (the MEG standard), like its neighbors from the West. This process was highlighted by Sergei Witte (the Russian Finance Minister between 1892 and 1903):

The French state budget is 1,260 million rubles for a population of 38 million; the Austrian budget is 1,100 million rubles for a population of 43 million. If our taxpayers were as prosperous as the French, our budget would be 4,200 million rubles instead of its current 1,400 million, and if we matched the Austrians, our budget would be 3,300 million rubles. Why can we not achieve this? The main reason is the poor condition of our peasantry.<sup>13</sup>

Agricultural surplus was the basis for launching the manufacturing enterprises. If productivity growth in agriculture was insufficient — in fact, in Russia there was a decrease in that index between 1880 and 1913 — the only way to develop industry was “artificially”, by means of capital from the state itself which therefor raised taxes or attracted foreign capital. However, such measures did not ultimately resolve the agricultural sector’s low productivity, which would pose further problems later. The productivity gap between agriculture and industry contributed to the agricultural crisis at the end of the nineteenth century. This situation began to improve only with the 1906 reforms by Stolypin,<sup>14</sup> which freed peasants from obligations that prevented more dynamic growth of the agricultural activities.<sup>15</sup>

Turning to the data on Russian overall economic growth, we can have a comparative perspective from the following table:

---

<sup>13</sup> Witte *apud* Peter Waldron. “State Finances.” In *The Cambridge History of Russia*, vol. II, 2006, p. 468.

<sup>14</sup> Pyotr Arkadyevich Stolypin (1862-1911) was the Russian Prime Minister between 1906 and 1911.

<sup>15</sup> Ellison, *op. cit.*, pp. 523-540.

**Table 6. Rate of growth of aggregate real national income (a) and of real income *per capita* (b) from 1860 to 1913 (per year)**

Country	(a) %	(b) %
USA	4.50	2.50
Japan <sup>1</sup>	4.00	3.00
Germany	3.00	2.00
Russia	2.50	1.00
United Kingdom	2.25	---
France	1.75	---
Italy	1.50	---
Canada	---	2.50
Sweden	---	2.50

<sup>1</sup> 1878-1912.

Source: Goldsmith, *op. cit.*, pp. 474-475.

In relation to the aggregate real national income growth rate between 1860 and 1913, Russia was in the fourth position among the main economies of the globe. However, the real measure of absorption of this growth is seen in the third column, which gives the rate of growth of real income *per capita*, in which Russia ranked last.

Goldsmith also presented data on the composition of industry, according to its various branches. For him, Russia was an Empire with a typically colonial economy. In 1887, 82.4% of Russian industrial output was of basic products with low technological incorporation; in 1900, this rate was 73.4%; and in 1908, 71.6%. No wonder that Russia was then known as the granary of Europe.

Regarding consumption patterns, Gregory noted that in 1913, Russia largely relied on subsistence. More than 40% of consumption was composed of basic food items, mostly grains, since access to meat and milk was restricted.<sup>16</sup> Goldsmith presented data from Prokopovich which showed that, between the middle and the end of the century, meat consumption declined in Russia. Given that the average crop production growth was between 1.75 and 2% *per year* between 1860 and 1913, and that the population growth for the period was 1.5% *per year*, agricultural growth in this period was above population growth by only 0.25 to 0.5% *per year*. Given that there was an increase in grain exports and in the use of agricultural products as industrial inputs in the same period, Goldsmith considered unlikely that there had been a real increase in *per capita*

<sup>16</sup> Gregory, *op. cit.*, p. 431.

consumption. For the author, in fact, there must have been a decline, which can also be inferred from the agricultural crisis of the turn of the century.<sup>17</sup>

In summary, the figures for Russian economic growth in the nineteenth century denote two trends, with some authors labeling the 1861 Emancipation Reform as a watershed. One trend kept Russia linked to an agrarian economy — territorially dispersed and not productive. The other trend attracted Russia to an industrialized economy, with European-like productivity rates — but concentrated in some regions of the Empire. The data undoubtedly reveal the dynamics between these two forces that propelled Russia in its economic development, as well as the dialectic between its contradictions. Table 7 summarizes the main data of the Russian economy at the end of the nineteenth century and presents interesting new items, such as the expansion of railroads, exports, budget, currency in circulation and public debt, which will be analyzed in the next session.

---

<sup>17</sup> Goldsmith, *op. cit.*, pp. 452; 454.

**Table 7. Selected Economic Indicators, 1890 and 1913**

	<b>1890</b>	<b>1913</b>	<b>% change</b>
<b>Population</b>	117,787,000	161,723,000	37.30
<b>Urban population</b>	11,774,000	18,604,000	58.01
<b>Per capita grain output</b> (1913 rubles)	20.60	27.88	35.34
<b>Per capita gross industrial output</b> (1913 rubles)	19.16	42.91	123.96
<b>Per capita trade turnover</b> (current rubles)	34.24	72.68	112.27
<b>Per capita exports</b> (current rubles)	5.84	9.06	55.14
<b>Wholesale price index</b> (1913=100)	76.70	100.00	30.38
<b>Employment in manufacturing, mining, and railways</b>	1,682,100	3,844,000	128.52
<b>Length of railway network</b> (km)	30,596	70,990	132.02
<b>Per capita currency in circulation</b> (rubles)	7.88	13.88	76.14
<b>Per capita expenditures of state budget</b> (rubles)	8.97	20.92	133.22
<b>Per capita government-guaranteed securities</b> (rubles)	50.14	77.18	53.93

Source: Kahan, Arcadius. "Capital Formation during the Period of Early Industrialization in Russia, 1890-1913." In *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, vol. VII, part 2, 1978, p. 270.

### **Economic, fiscal and financial measures**

The figures in table 7 seem to undoubtedly show a new level in the process of industrialization that took place in Russia in the late nineteenth century. According to Alexander Gershchenkron,<sup>18</sup> there occurred a *great spurt of industrialization* dominated by foreign capital and technology, with emphasis on the intensification of the pace of construction of new railroads. In purely economic terms, this data series leaves no room for challenging these assumptions. All the basic development and growth indicators showed considerable

<sup>18</sup> Gershchenkron, Alexander. "The Beginnings of Russian Industrialization?", *Soviet Studies*, vol. 21, —no. 4, 1970, pp. 513-514.

growth over a short period of 20 years. Ellison summarizes the main aspects of the modernization of the Russian economy during the nineteenth century and its relationship with government policies:

There were subsidies to individual industries, a minor agricultural program affecting only state peasants, very limited educational measures, and extremely limited railroad building. For the considerable advances in industrial growth, government policy could claim scant credit. The era that is opened by the emancipation of the serfs offers far broader evidence of both direct and indirect contributions of the government to the process of economic modernization: the emancipation itself, railroad building, the reorganization of the financial system in the sixties and the nineties, the currency reorganization of the nineties, the protective tariffs, and the comprehensive agrarian program of the early twentieth century. (...) Such studies will reveal more, too, of the negative side of government policy — the expensive operation of state-owned railroads; the bureaucratic obstacles placed in the path of entrepreneurs, domestic and foreign; the paltry sums devoted to general and technical education; and many other aspects.<sup>19</sup>

The analysis of the economic, fiscal and financial measures taken by the Empire since the beginning of the nineteenth century neither identifies nor provides a single and systematized policy that covered the whole period. On the contrary, erratic political-economic measures took place, sometimes even in contradiction with the industrializing impulse of the tsarist regime. If one evaluates these measures through the actions taken by successive Finance Ministers<sup>20</sup> of the period, it will be observed that the economic policy responded to three fundamental mandates: to ensure the former as well as the newly conquered possessions of the Empire (military expenditures);<sup>21</sup> to ensure the *status quo* of the nobility as well as the

---

<sup>19</sup> Ellison, *op. cit.*, pp. 539-540.

<sup>20</sup> Of note were Count Kankrin (1823-1844), Alexander Kniazhevich (1858-1862), Mikhail von Reutern (1862-1878), Nikolai Bunge (1881-1886), Ivan Vyshnegradsky (1887-1902) and Sergei Witte (1892-1903).

<sup>21</sup> Until 1879, the Minister of Finance had little power over the expenditures of other ministries. They could appeal directly to the tsar. The task of the Minister of Finance was to find sources of revenue for the expenses of the other ministries, especially the military ones. Russia's pre-World War I military budget was twice as large as the average of Europe's major economies: England, France, and Germany. During periods of war (during the nineteenth century), finance ministers were obliged to meet the financial needs of the state through the printing of paper money, as well as through domestic and foreign loans. Russian internal debts in

corresponding financial blessings from the state; and to promote the modernization (industrialization) of the economy.

This triple mandate entailed an extra concern: to guarantee the balance between revenues and expenditures in the state budget and not to strain the current social relations inside the borders of the Empire. Since the modernization of the economy should not threaten the tsarist regime, the achievement of such goals put in the hands – and in the heads – of the various finance ministers the need to take contradictory measures. From Count Kankrin (Finance Minister in 1823-1844) to Sergei Witte (F.M. in 1892-1903), Russia witnessed diverse fiscal and financial initiatives that marked the uneven pace of its process of industrialization in the nineteenth century.

According to Walter Pintner,<sup>22</sup> Count Kankrin, together with Emperor Nicholas I, developed a conservative policy regarding the modernization of the Russian economy. Pintner estimated that although there are records of the minister's concern to promote the Empire's industrialization, his measures ranged from timid to purely reactive. The author suggested that the Kankrin administration favored the nobility and delayed the process of industrialization.

Between 1822 and 1845, deposits in the State Loan Bank ceased to be largely private (from the gentry) and came to originate mostly from the Commercial Bank. In theory, the Commercial Bank should meet the demand for credit in the commercial and industrial sectors. However, according to Pintner, Kankrin transferred resources from the Commercial Bank to the State Loan Bank to cover rising state military spending, the maintenance costs of the bureaucratic apparatus, and withdrawals of the gentry (often related to luxury private consumption). It is worth mentioning that the Loan Bank only accepted as collateral the mortgage of land with serfs, preventing the access of peasants and merchants to its resources. The nobility's indebtedness came therefore at the expense of the Commercial Bank resources — which should, actually, provide credit for trade industry — and of the mortgage of 52.4% of the Empire's serfs.<sup>23</sup> For Pintner,

---

1845 amounted to 166 million rubles; in 1859, 441 million. External debts amounted to 365 million rubles in 1859. Attempts to curb indebtedness and avoid an inflationary process led Ministers Kniazhevich and Reutern to intercede with the tsar, which, however, did not guarantee them success in this task. The data were taken from Peter Waldron. Waldron, *op. cit.*, pp. 468-486.

<sup>22</sup> Pintner, Walter M. "Government and Industry during the Ministry of Count Kankrin, 1823-1844." *Slavic Review*, vol. 23, no. 1, 1964, pp. 45-62.

<sup>23</sup> At the end of the century, the fierce opposition that the gentry offered in the discussion about the Emancipation Reform was not only due to social and political questions but also because the serfs not only provided the labor power to the nobility but were also its main financial burden in national banks. To free the serfs

the policy was not only conservative, but also anti-industrial, since it removed the most dynamic and promising segments of society from access to credit.

The contingencies that Minister Kankrin faced – and his conservative character – led him to prioritize the state budget balance and the fulfillment of the demands of the gentry. Concern about balancing the state budget seems to have been a cornerstone for the ministers who succeeded him. Haim Barkai<sup>24</sup> drew attention to the fact that they all followed the *Gladstonian*<sup>25</sup> prescription and complied strictly with orthodox economic precepts.

Arcadius Kahan<sup>26</sup> and Barkai analyzed, respectively, the high tax burden linked to tariff protectionism in some segments of industry, and the monetary tightening in the second half of the nineteenth century. As stated earlier, the Russian labor force's low productivity, specifically in agriculture, rendered the transfer of resources from this sector to the industrial one insufficient. Since agriculture did not generate enough surplus, the way of collecting this surplus was via taxation of the population in general (*i.e.*, peasants).

Between 1885 and 1913, there was a gross increase in *per capita* taxation. In the period, there was an increase of 1.78 times (in nominal terms) in the incidence of total taxes *per capita*.<sup>27</sup> Particularly in relation to the indirect tax — the consumption tax — the increase was more than three times. During these almost 30 years, there was a policy of replacing direct taxes with indirect taxes. Indirect taxes were 37.91% of the total in 1885; they accounted for 64.22% in 1913. Much of this change came with post-Emancipation tax reforms — in 1863 and 1886 — that tried to equalize and rationalize taxation and its administration. However, even with the elimination of the capitation tax, the higher tax burden continued to fall on peasants,<sup>28</sup>

---

would mean to bankrupt a good part of the gentry, which would be called to pay off their debts backed by male serfs. Hence the ultimate conservative format of the Emancipation Reform and the financial burden saddled on the peasantry thereafter.

<sup>24</sup> Barkai, Haim. "The Macro-Economics of Tsarist Russia in the Industrialization Era: Monetary Developments, the Balance of Payments and the Gold Standard." *The Journal of Economic History*, vol. 33, no. 2, 1973, pp. 339-371.

<sup>25</sup> William Ewart Gladstone, English Minister of Finance four times (1853-1855, 1859-1866, 1873-1874 and 1880-1882), Prime Minister of England also four times (between 1868 and 1894) and leader of the Liberal Party.

<sup>26</sup> Kahan, Arcadius. "Government Policies and the Industrialization of Russia." *The Journal of Economic History*, vol. 27, no. 4, 1967, pp. 460-477.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 462.

<sup>28</sup> Not counting the heavy annual taxes and the indemnities they were required to pay after the Emancipation Reform (*i.e.*, the land-redemption, which was only revoked in 1906).

since indirect taxes disproportionately affected the lower income strata.

These fiscal measures ended up preventing the growth of the domestic market. In 1900, taxes represented a quarter of industrial output and retail, limiting access to consumer goods and the market. Fiscal measures seemed to be against the industrialization measures intended by the government.<sup>29</sup>

Barkai supplemented the fiscal analysis with data on monetary measures. The author analyzed the macroeconomic variables of government between 1853 and 1913 and concluded that part of the measures taken throughout the century were against the intention of industrialization.<sup>30</sup> One of these inconsistent measures, according to Barkai, was the monetary squeeze promoted during the second half of the century.

Between the periods covered here, specifically between 1861 and 1913, Barkai estimated that there was an annual average supply of money in the range of 2.5 to 3%. For the same period, he estimated that there was a demand for money of around 4% *per year*. Therefore, the money supply in the period did not meet the demand. The author questioned the validity of this monetary tightening, considering that there was no inflationary pressure, since, according to his calculations, any excess currency issued during periods of war<sup>31</sup> was absorbed in later periods and it could not, therefore, generate inflationary pressure. For him, “the policy of contracting the stock of money initiated by Bunge [1881-1887] and continued by Vyshnegradsky [1887-1892] through the 1880’s was therefore out of all proportion to the largely imaginary threat of inflation.”<sup>32</sup> These policies caused monetary contraction at a time when the economy needed stimulus for expansion.

Barkai argued that long periods of monetary tightening would be

---

<sup>29</sup> Kahan added that the adoption of protectionist tariffs in certain branches of industry led to an increase in the consumption cost of raw materials in 1897 — about 44.1 million rubles (pig iron), 20 million (cotton yarn) 18.6 million (iron), 17.5 million (steel) and 12.3 million (raw cotton). This increase was due to the tendency to balance domestic prices with the price of imported products plus taxation. Protectionist tariffs ended up posing serious risks to the domestic consumer market and entailing a technological gap in the domestic industry due to lack of competitiveness. *Ibid.*, p. 473.

<sup>30</sup> Barkai’s conclusions are controversial, as discussed in Paul Gregory, “The Russian Balance of Payments, the Gold Standard, and Monetary Policy: A Historical Example of Foreign Capital Movements,” *The Journal of Economic History*, vol. 39, no. 2, 1979, pp. 379-400.

<sup>31</sup> Crimean War (1853-56), Russo-Turkish War (1877-78), famine of 1891-92, Japanese War (1904-05) and Revolution of 1905.

<sup>32</sup> Barkai, *op. cit.*, p. 355.

restrictive to business demand and mood, and would not form the most conducive environment to industrialization. The tightening made any increase in the supply of money big enough to meet the high demand cause uncontrolled growth, as in the Witte period (when supply was 4.5% *per year*, only 0.5% above demand).

Why did the ministers who worked on the process of industrialization in Russia during the nineteenth century use such openly anti-industrial measures? As stated at the beginning of this section, the triple mandate of the Ministry of Finance forced its representatives to take contorted fiscal and financial measures. Ironically, they were charged with promoting a bourgeois reform from the court center. However, it was not only political issues that determined the contradictions of economic measures. The ministers clearly knew about the scarcity of capital available in the Russian economy, which was not enough to promote a rapid process of industrialization. Barkai believed that, for the Ministry of Finance, orthodoxy and solid finance were the way to access the only source of resources for Russia's rapid industrialization: the Western European market (Berlin, Paris and London). In a memorandum to the Emperor, Sergei Witte, Minister of Finance between 1892 and 1903, responsible for the *great spurt of industrialization* at the turn of the century, wrote:

The measures taken by the government for the promotion of national trade and industry have at present a far deeper and broader significance than they had at any time before... The creation of our own national industry, that is the profound task... In Russia there is yet too little industry, capital and spirit of enterprise... What then must we do? We cannot wait for the national accumulation of capital in a country in which the majority of the population is experiencing hard times... The influx of foreign capital is, in the considered option of the minister of finance, the sole means by which our industry can speedily furnish our country with abundant and cheap goods... Why not let foreign capital help us to obtain still more cheaply that productive force of which alone we are destitute?<sup>33</sup>

According to Barkai, the Finance Ministers, specially Reutern (1862-1878), Bunge (1881-1887), the industrializer Vyshnegradsky (1887-1902) and even the *super-industrializer* Witte (1892-1903) considered that accelerated capital formation and resource transfer to priority sectors were the two pillars of Russian industrialization. None of these processes could occur by themselves, without the

---

<sup>33</sup> Sergei Witte *apud* Haim Barkai, *op. cit.*, p. 357.

involvement of the state. In particular, Vyshnegradsky and Witte felt that it was the government's task to direct resources (domestic or foreign) for capital formation, to identify high-growth sectors and to offer them incentives for their rapid development.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, for the Russian ministers, monetary/fiscal tightening and industrialization were complementary. Only in this way would the state be able to increase its gold reserves and enter the select club of countries that adopt the convertibility of their currency: the *gold standard*. Such a measure would ensure free access to European markets and provide the capital needed by the Russian economy.

Between 1895 and 1897, a series of measures adopted by Witte would finally introduce the gold standard in Russia. With its adoption, foreign investment in private companies rose from 750 million rubles between 1881 and 1897 to 1.85 billion between 1898 and 1913 (a 250% increase). The share of foreign capital in the government and municipalities went from 1.05 billion rubles in the first period to 2.38 billion (a 238% increase). From the beginning to the end of the gold standard (abolished in 1914), the share of foreign capital in Russian public companies rose from 25% to 43%.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, according to Barkai, the substantial increase in capital inflows (shareholding, private securities, etc.) was a sign of the success of the seemingly contradictory measures adopted by the several Finance Ministers.<sup>36</sup> The success is greater if one includes the intensification of new railroad construction in the Empire, which contributed not only to the installation of heavy industry but also to greater dynamism of domestic and foreign markets. Between 1850

---

<sup>34</sup> Polemically, Barkai traced a line of continuation between Vyshnegradsky, Witte and Lenin. For him, "The figures also show that the bias in favor of heavy and producer industries, which has gained prominence as the specific characteristic of the Soviet industrialization drive, was already an integral element of the industrialization policy initiated by Vyshnegradsky, and carried out by Witte. Vyshnegradsky, Witte, and later Lenin, were inspired by English and German models of industrial development. The early industrializers and later the Bolsheviks deduced from their experience, which proved to have been a formula for growth, that each and every developing economy must follow exactly the steps of the pioneers of industrialization. The *non sequitur* of this reasoning is obvious". Barkai, *op. cit.*, p. 366.

<sup>35</sup> Kaser, *op. cit.*, p. 473.

<sup>36</sup> But Kahan pondered: "one ought not to exaggerate and to attribute the net increase on both accounts solely to the monetary reform. It coincided with greater availability of capital in the international money market on the one hand, and with the strengthening of the French-Russian political alliance, which opened up the Paris money market for Russian government and private securities on the other. It was also due to the fact that relative to other countries interest rates in Russia still remained high, and the return on Russian securities and on foreign investment in Russia were still higher than elsewhere". Kahan, *op. cit.*, p. 475.

and 1910, the Russian railway network jumped from 488 km to impressive 54,752 km.<sup>37</sup>

However, the contradictions presented here are not resolved by the data of the success of the gold standard, the consequent greater inflow of foreign capital, and the rapid industrialization of Russia at the end of the century. In addition to the already-mentioned erratic course of this process, one can question its social cost. Even Witte, the most radical among the industrializing ministers, knew which social group would carry the burden of the modernization of the Russian state: "Even the most beneficial measures of the government, in the realm of economic policy, seem to impose hardship on the population... years, even decades, must pass before the sacrifices can bear fruit."<sup>38</sup> Such suffering took the form of a major revolt in the early years of the twentieth century:

The great industrial spurt of the 1890's ended in the depression year 1900. The slump has been variously reported as an overproduction crisis, as a financial crash, or, as the result of unfavorable conditions outside Russia... Any of these explanations would be incomplete, and in fact quite superficial without talking into consideration the exhaustion of the taxpaying capacity of the peasants. For the first time since the days of the Emancipation Act peasant unrest assumed major proportion.<sup>39</sup>

Not only direct and indirect taxes became increasingly unbearable to peasants (former serfs). According to the clauses of the 1861 Emancipation Reform, the indemnity costs of that Act would fall on the former serfs, as land-redemption payments to the landlords and to the state. Table 8 presents figures that reveal the exhaustion of peasants' ability to pay for their redemption:

---

<sup>37</sup> Data from Pyotr I. Lyashchenko *apud* Jacob Metzger, "Railroad Development and Market Integration: The Case of Tsarist Russia", *The Journal of Economic History*, vol. 34, no. 3, 1974, p. 536.

<sup>38</sup> Sergei Witte *apud* Haim Barkai, *op. cit.*, p. 367.

<sup>39</sup> Alexander Gershchenkron *apud* Haim Barkai, *op. cit.*, p. 368.

**Table 8. Land-redemption payments and arrears, 1888-1898 (rubles)**

Year	Ex-serfs of individuals	Ex-Serfs of the State	Arrears on 1st January
1888	43,052,109	49,217,707	---
1889	42,414,504	49,332,385	---
1890	40,967,115	47,265,080	---
1891	34,850,911	34,197,945	39,800,000
1892	35,763,663	39,223,266	68,100,000
1893	42,802,337	53,128,544	90,000,000
1894	40,100,456	49,642,822	90,300,000
1895	42,123,910	55,845,478	95,800,000
1896	40,625,734	53,096,708	92,800,000
1897	37,543,857	47,952,180	94,200,000
1898	38,018,500	46,303,000	104,200,000
1888-1898	438,263,096	525,205,115	---

Source: Ford, Worthington C. "The Economy of Russia", *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 17, no. 1, 1902, p. 112.

This is hence the progression from economics to politics. The costs of the fiscal and monetary measures taken for the industrialization of the state, in addition to the costs of the Emancipation Reform, fell on the peasantry, which created social tension. At the beginning of the twentieth century, this social tension made the seesaw of contradictions of Russian economic development tilt towards revolution(s).

## Conclusion

Herbert Ellison gave a reasonable summary of the development of the Russian economy during the nineteenth century. For him, "an impressive feature of Russian modernization... is the incredible mixture and the kaleidoscopic quality of the changing economic scene."<sup>40</sup> This brief overview of only four aspects of this changing economic ensemble confirms the kaleidoscopic spectrum of transformations that happened in the Russian Empire. Available data and analyses of population growth in the period, educational reforms, economic growth, and economic, fiscal and financial measures indicate that the Russian society and the Russian economy have engendered numerous contradictions and possibilities, some of them

<sup>40</sup> Ellison, *op. cit.*, p. 524.

coming to prominence to the detriment of others.

This essay, as specified in the introduction, presents only those contradictions and possibilities in the process of industrialization in nineteenth-century Russia which are based on the analysis of the four aspects addressed above. There are several possible interpretations of the information presented. For Alexander Geshchenkron, that process had its culmination in the *great spurt of industrialization* of the last years of the century. For Richard Rudolph,<sup>41</sup> according to the *proto-industrialization* thesis, the process of industrialization in Russia dates back to the sixteenth century, and developed steadily over time, despite the observable differences in rhythm. It is also necessary to include the Marxist approach, not dealt with in this article. For Vladimir Lenin, that process had the signs of a greater economic transition from one mode of production (feudalism) to another (capitalism), bringing with it the clash between the productive forces and the relations of production in Russia.

However, although they reveal several interrelationships of the complicated nineteenth century in Russia, the aspects studied here are insufficient for a definitive analysis of the development of the Russian economy in the period. More economic and social history studies on this subject are necessary and should include detailed analyses of the imperialist wars that Russia participated in, the dynamics of the European international market (and how it exerted influence on the Russian economy),<sup>42</sup> the proto-industrialization theory and, fundamentally, the social and political processes that were intrinsic to the economic transformations.

---

<sup>41</sup> Rudolph, *op. cit.*, pp. 47-69. For more on Russian proto-industrialization, see: Crisp, Olga. "The Economic History of Pre-Reform." *The Slavonic and East European Review*, vol. 51, no. 125, 1973, pp. 582-593; and Melton, Edgar. "Proto-Industrialization, Serf Agriculture and Agrarian Social Structure: Two Estates in Nineteenth-Century Russia." *Past & Present*, no. 115, 1987, pp. 69-106.

<sup>42</sup> For more on this, see Ananich, Boris. "The Russian economy and banking system." In *The Cambridge History of Russia*, vol. II, 2006, p. 394-425.



## **Gorbachev as a Thinker: The Evolution of Gorbachev's Ideas in Soviet and Post-Soviet Times**

*César Albuquerque*<sup>1</sup>

**O**f the prominent world leaders who marked the twentieth century, Mikhail Gorbachev is perhaps one of the most controversial. Although in the West he is praised for his role in ending the Soviet authoritarian regime, he is far less popular among his countrymen. For many Russians, the former General Secretary of the Central Committee (CC) of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) was a weak leader. His inability to carry out the reformist policies begun in 1985 led not only to the end of the USSR but also plunged the region into a serious crisis that would drag on throughout the 1990s.

Reflections on Gorbachev's role tend to address the political-institutional performance of the former Soviet leader during perestroika. As a result, these studies generally seek to understand Gorbachev's role in driving reforms as their executor — as a political agent.<sup>2</sup> Little has been said, however, about the evolution of Gorbachev's political and economic thinking *before* and especially *after* perestroika. In other words, it is necessary to analyze the role of the former General Secretary *as a thinker*, in addition to his role as a politician.

Although the policies of perestroika have been a subject of debate among historians, the systematic study of Gorbachev's thinking is still underexplored by researchers. This essay will present preliminary observations obtained from an ongoing research project that aims to identify the main trends in the final Soviet leader's ideas before, during, and after perestroika. The project, conducted at the University of São Paulo's Ph.D. program in History, draws from Gorbachev's publications, speeches, interviews and public utterances. We believe it is the first comprehensive academic examination of Gorbachev's thought which includes all the periods of his adult life, independently of perestroika.

---

<sup>1</sup> César Albuquerque (rasecalbuquerque@gmail.com) is a Ph.D. student in History at the University of São Paulo and author of the master's thesis titled (in Portuguese) *Perestroika Unfolding: An Analysis of the Evolution of Gorbachev's Political and Economic Ideas (1984-1991)*, available online at: [http://lea.vitis.uspnet.usp.br/arquivos/trabalhos/pesquisadoresdolea/dissertacaodemestrado\\_Césaralbuquerque.pdf](http://lea.vitis.uspnet.usp.br/arquivos/trabalhos/pesquisadoresdolea/dissertacaodemestrado_Césaralbuquerque.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Cf.: LEWIN, 1988; BROWN, 1996; D'AGOSTINO, 1998.

In general, it is possible to distinguish two phases in Gorbachev's intellectual trajectory. The first — which extended from his political rise to the fall of the USSR — corresponds to the period in which he was in power. His texts and speeches reflected reformist trends within the limits of the ideology of the Soviet regime, given the restraints imposed by the political position he occupied. In the second phase, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Gorbachev was a free agent, no longer a politician in office. Although still active in public life, he could now express himself with greater freedom, without the political and institutional constraints of before. In both of these periods, it is possible to observe distinct motivations and themes, which are directly related to the historical context he experienced at each stage.

### *The Reformer: Gorbachev's ideas during the Soviet period*

A listing of Gorbachev's texts and speeches shows that the political relevance and degree of penetration of his ideas accompanied the process of his rise through the ranks of the CPSU. During his years as a local party cadre, Gorbachev's words rarely reached outside the borders of the localities he administered. His promotion to Central Committee member in 1971, and especially his move to Moscow in 1978 (already as a Politburo member), would pave the way for his reflections to reach the most important political circles of the country. Beginning in 1982, as head of the agricultural sector of the CC of the CPSU, Gorbachev pointed out the main problems with the Soviet rural sector. While launching a large investment plan in agriculture and supply, he affirmed that overcoming the problems in the sector would entail a reformulation of the management system and the worker incentive policy:

The complexity and scale of the tasks presented in the Food Program necessarily bring new demands to the management system and to the economic management apparatus [...] Today this means: the management system's orientation to the final results of the economic activity; the best combination of territorial and managerial principles of management; the advantages of centralization combined with the initiative of labor collectives; the strengthening of economic management methods at all levels; the elimination of duplicities in production and the greatest possible incentives for creative initiative and entrepreneurship.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> GORBACHEV, 1987-1990, vol. 1, p. 312.

The change in management mechanisms, the rapprochement between local and central bodies and the emphasis on an incentives policy are some of the points that would later become the basis for his reformist policies. The more cautious and moderate tone of the speech indicated the degree of freedom and autonomy that Gorbachev had at that moment. The "golden rule" for those aspiring to a career at the highest levels of the CPSU was full compliance with the official discourse and respect for the boundaries and themes defined by the leadership. Gorbachev was aware of this.<sup>4</sup> Such a view is shared by Archie Brown who, in analyzing the same speech, points out that the insertion of new themes by Gorbachev could not be dissociated from the standards acceptable to the regime.<sup>5</sup>

From 1984 — when he was practically the second in command of the regime — onward, Gorbachev saw these constraints to his freedom of expression “within the system” decrease considerably. In December of that year, he made one of his most important speeches before being elected General Secretary of the CPSU. The future leader made a rather critical analysis of the country's economic situation — especially when compared to the official Soviet discourse then current — and defended positions that would later be identified with the first measures of perestroika. The diagnosis of the economic problems faced by the USSR was not a novelty in itself. But the speech introduced new elements in the characterization of the problems and, above all, in the description of their causes:

It seems that the slowdown in economic growth in recent years is not only due to the coincidence of negative factors but also because of the need to change certain aspects of production relations not detected in a timely manner [...] But persistence of stagnant elements of previous production relations result in the worsening of the economic and social situation. Unfortunately, emerging contradictions cannot always be readily identified and overcome. This is often hampered by the force of inertia, conservative thinking, the inability or unwillingness to change existing forms of work and adopt new methods [...].<sup>6</sup>

By linking the economic downturn to the inability to recognize the need for changes in the productive system, Gorbachev made his criticism of the main leaders of the economic apparatus and their methods clear. His early diagnosis of the party and state bureaucracy

---

<sup>4</sup> GORBACHEV, 1995, p. 147.

<sup>5</sup> BROWN, 1996, p. 79.

<sup>6</sup> GORBACHEV, 1987-1990, vol. 2, pp. 80-81.

as conservative is indicative of what would later become one of the main obstacles to the progress of his reforms.

Faced with such reality, Gorbachev pointed out that economic development and increasing growth rates depend substantially on the expansion of “money-commodity relations” — a euphemism used at that time to refer to market mechanisms.<sup>7</sup> Although he discussed the insertion of elements often seen as hostile by the Soviet orthodoxy, such as profit and market, his proposal did not distance itself from an “improvement of the system.” Market structures were seen as an integral part of socialism, inherent in its relations of production, and not as the pure and simple application of capitalist concepts. Success would come not through the mere adoption of these structures but through their harmonious relationship with the intrinsic advantages of a socialist system. In this sense, the main task facing the Soviet leaders would be to transition to a path of intensive development and to accelerate technical-scientific progress.<sup>8</sup>

In relation to politics, Gorbachev also mentioned some central elements of the future reforms. His major focus was on the need for greater transparency in all spheres of social and political life. Transparent information was seen as beneficial and necessary, an incentive for motivation and a right of the population:

An integral part of socialist democracy, the rule of social life should be transparency [*glasnost*]. Broad, timely and frank information; this is proof of trust in people, respect for their intellect, ability to understand them in various situations. It increases the initiative of the workers. Transparency in the party and in government is an effective means of dealing with bureaucratic distortions, and requires a more careful approach to decision making control over performance in order to correct deficiencies and omissions. Moreover, it depends heavily on the credibility of its advocates and the effectiveness of its training, ensuring unity of word and action.<sup>9</sup>

He accompanied his energetic defense of greater transparency in the regime with a call for a deepening of “democracy and the socialist rule of law.” However, these concepts should not be isolated from their historical context. Transparency, democracy, and the rule of law under a Soviet regime were not equal to the transparency, democracy, and rule of law described in Western liberal theory. In any case, this triad reinforced the need for greater popular participation by the

---

<sup>7</sup> GORBACHEV, 1987, vol. 2, p. 81.

<sup>8</sup> GORBACHEV, 1987, vol. 2, p. 86.

<sup>9</sup> GORBACHEV, 1987-1990, vol. 2, p. 95.

masses in the control of the country's destiny, reversing the visible rift between society and the political elite. At this point in time, he did not mention changes in the electoral legislation, in the mechanisms of government or in the institutionalization of opposition forces. The strengthening of socialist democracy was understood as an extension of participation through the soviets (councils) and other popular organizations, such as trade unions and the Komsomol.

Gorbachev's first speeches as General Secretary of the CC of the CPSU in the first half of 1985 reinforced the need for changes in the *modus operandi* of the system. To overcome negative economic trends, he presented proposals to accelerate technical-scientific progress and put the USSR on a path of intensive economic development. In a report presented to members of the CC of the CPSU in April 1985, the new General Secretary advocated a change in central planning mechanisms, greater autonomy for production units and reinforcement of work discipline and organization:

The main question today is how and by what means the country can intensify its development. [...] The rate of growth may be substantially higher if economic intensification and scientific technical progress are put at the center of our activity accompanied by the restructuring of management, with better planning policy for managing economy and investments, better organization and discipline, and radical improvement of the work style.<sup>10</sup>

On several occasions after the release of this report, Gorbachev highlighted the extremely centralized character of the economic management structure as well as its dependence on extensive growth methods. To combat this, he proposed to increase the degree of autonomy in the production sector by promoting self-management and self-financing principles, stricter accountability for results, and the use of material and moral incentives for workers. In principle, none of these measures jeopardized central control over the economic sphere. They were only intended for changing management mechanisms, as the General Secretary himself stated in his report:

Continuing to develop the principle of centralized solution of problems of strategic scope, we must more decisively expand the powers and autonomy of companies, implement self-management and, from this base, increase the responsibility of worker collectives and encourage them to achieve better

---

<sup>10</sup> GORBACHEV, 1985, p. 17.

results.<sup>11</sup>

Critics worried that these measures meant a retreat from the socialist character of the regime. However, Gorbachev reiterated that the reforms aimed to perfect Soviet socialism with the full use of its potential. In his report to the XXVII CPSU Congress in February 1986, he sought to identify the reformist discourse with the strengthening of socialism:

Unfortunately, there is a view that any change in the economic mechanism is a retreat from the principles of socialism. In this sense, it should be pointed out that the highest criterion for the improvement of management, as well as of the whole system of socialist production relations, must be socio-economic acceleration and the practical strengthening of socialism.<sup>12</sup>

Aware of the risks associated with bureaucratic resistance, the Soviet leader began to more actively criticize government officials' attachment to old management methods. He stressed the need to develop a critical and self-critical spirit within the spheres of command without jeopardizing the stability of the regime. The democratization of the system should become one of the main reformist banners, an essential condition for the advancement and success of perestroika.<sup>13</sup> However, references to democracy were not yet associated with the development of representative mechanisms or reforms in the political/electoral system. Proposals in this field revolved around strengthening popular participation and management structures, such as local and factory councils (soviets); increasing transparency (*glasnost'*) in the political/administrative sphere; promoting the creativity of the masses; and highlighting human capital ("the human factor") as a driving force of the system.

In terms of foreign policy, Gorbachev saw a change in the international scenario as a key element for the success of the reforms. Military expenditure consumed large sums of resources, which, if converted to peaceful purposes, would constitute an important reserve for productive investment. From this perspective, the official discourse on foreign policy was based on two fundamental pillars: peaceful coexistence and nuclear disarmament. In his speeches, especially to foreign leaders and peoples, Gorbachev argued that the

---

<sup>11</sup> GORBACHEV, 1985, p. 22.

<sup>12</sup> GORBACHEV, 1986, p. 59.

<sup>13</sup> GORBACHEV, 1986, p. 79.

world lived in the shadow of a common enemy, the danger of a nuclear catastrophe, the avoidance of which depended on cooperation on a world scale that would put the interests of mankind above political and ideological differences. He proposed lowering international tension, reducing the number of nuclear weapons, ending the arms race, replacing the atmosphere of confrontation with one of peaceful and mutually beneficial cooperation. In 1985, the new Soviet leader highlighted the alternatives facing the international community:

Today mankind faces a choice: either the continuation of the fomentation of tension and confrontation or the constructive pursuit of mutually acceptable agreements that put an end to the preparations for a nuclear conflict.<sup>14</sup>

The year 1987 can be seen as a turning point not only for perestroika, but for Gorbachev's thinking in general. Considering the first two years of the reform, he described the process in the following terms:

In the last two years, we have advanced in the adoption of new economic methods elaborated based on the analysis of the situation in the 1970's and 1980's and of the results of the economic experiments that we conducted. I cannot say that the transformations occurring in this domain are definitive, since the mechanisms of stagnation have not yet been replaced by an acceleration mechanism. As before, we are obliged to compensate for their absence with administrative methods.<sup>15</sup>

The diagnosis highlighted the bias of the measures implemented until then. The advancements achieved during the first two years were in the field of subjectivity: increasing the commitment of the workers and developing an atmosphere of greater discussion, debate and creative freedom. However, the objective results, as measured by economic performance indicators, were not positively impacted. At the same time, the Soviet leader pointed out what would, in his view, be the main obstacle of the early years of perestroika:

The revolutionary changes taking place in society have advanced to the foreground the contradiction between the demands for renewal, creativity, initiative, on the one hand, and conservatism, inertia and selfish interests on the other.

---

<sup>14</sup> GORBACHEV, 1985, p. 43.

<sup>15</sup> GORBACHEV, 1988b, pp. 66-67.

The lack of correspondence between the growth of mass activity and the bureaucratic style in the most diverse domains of life, and the attempts to hamper the process of restructuring are manifestations of this contradiction.<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, resistance from bureaucrats was the main obstacle to reform. As criticism of party and government cadres grew more intense, the proposal to democratize the system became a priority, on which the success of all reformist efforts depended. The General Secretary himself pointed to this as the main weapon against the resistance offered by the bureaucracy:

What, in the opinion of the Political Bureau, is the best way to end this contradiction? The answer is unequivocal: the deepening of democracy. Life goes back to proving that the administrative forms of management of society hamper our progress. Only democratic reforms can ensure a rapid acceleration.<sup>17</sup>

During this time, perestroika acquired more defined contours. The new measures were no longer seen by Gorbachev as a mere means to overcome economic stagnation, but rather were associated with a broader transformation of the established system, a real revolution.<sup>18</sup> Some proposals gained greater clarity, such as the need to adopt new economic mechanisms that rationalize and stimulate the economy. That meant stimulating competition, profit-oriented entrepreneurship, conversion of central planning from directive (mandatory) to indicative, payment of salaries proportional to results, and strengthening the principles of self-financing and self-management. In his bestselling book *Perestroika: New Ideas for My Country and the World*, originally published in 1987, Gorbachev used the expression "socialist market" to describe the new dynamics of the Soviet economy:

In short, the advantages of planning will be increasingly combined with stimulating factors of the socialist market. But all this will take place within the mainstream of socialist goals and principles of management.<sup>19</sup>

Regarding his ultimate goals for the process of perestroika,

---

<sup>16</sup> GORBACHEV, 1988b, p. 49.

<sup>17</sup> GORBACHEV, 1988b, p. 49.

<sup>18</sup> GORBACHEV, 1988b, p. 53.

<sup>19</sup> GORBACHEV, 1988a, p. 102.

Gorbachev further stated that his primary objective was to strengthen and modernize Soviet socialism:

Often they ask us what we want from perestroika. What are your ultimate goals? We could hardly give an accurate and thorough answer. We do not usually prophesy and try to predestinate all the architectural elements of the public building that we will erect in the course of perestroika. But in principle I can say that the final result is quite clear: the total renewal of all aspects of Soviet life; to give socialism the forms of a more modern social organization; the total revelation of the humanist nature of our social system in its decisive aspects, that is, economic, social, political and moral.<sup>20</sup>

As far as foreign policy is concerned, Gorbachev's discourse remained mostly unchanged. However, the reduction of international tensions and the policy of rapprochement with the capitalist powers led to a gradual change in his use of certain terms. The "nuclear danger" became increasingly distant, while the need for rapprochement and international cooperation gained more emphasis. The USSR was viewed as an integral part of the world economic system, seeking to definitively overturn the separation of the world into opposing blocs. This issue appeared clearly in Gorbachev's report to the plenary of the CPSU CC in June 1987:

No state can now isolate itself economically from other countries. And our country is no exception. The Soviet economy is part of the world economic system and is bound to be influenced by international trade and monetary-financial relations and by the latest successes of science and technology in one form or another.<sup>21</sup>

The year of 1988 was marked by the adoption of measures that would profoundly alter the structure of the system that had been in force until then. Paralleling these changes, new themes gained prominence in Gorbachev's speeches. The debates during the XIX CPSU Conference, held in June of 1988, are indicative of this moment in the reform process. Criticism of the poorly performing reforms became more frank and forceful. In his report *On the course of the implementation of the decisions of the XXVII CPSU Congress and the tasks of deepening perestroika*, presented during the June Conference, Gorbachev addressed these questions candidly:

---

<sup>20</sup> GORBACHEV, 1987, p. 37.

<sup>21</sup> GORBACHEV, 1988b, p. 76.

Does this mean that changes for the better run everywhere and advance at full speed, that revolutionary transformations are irreversible? No! If we are to have our feet on the ground, if we are to be realistic, we must admit that, for the time being, this has not happened, comrades. We have not yet overcome the root causes of stagnation, nor do we set ourselves in motion everywhere, and in some cases, we have not even set up the mechanism of renewal.<sup>22</sup>

The fight against bureaucratic resistance took on new shapes through a critical review of the party's history. As deficiencies of the system were connected to the Stalinist period, criticism of the Georgian leader increased substantially. The condemnation of the crimes and excesses committed by Stalin, a previously sensitive issue for leaders, resurfaced not only in discourse, but in debates and public discussions. Gorbachev saw this unrest as justification for the necessity of more radical reforms in the political system:

But one wonders: why the need for radical political reform today? Because comrades — and it is imperative that all of us today acknowledge it — the political system resulting from the victory of the October Revolution underwent, at a given stage, serious deformations. As a consequence of them, the omnipotence of Stalin and of those around him made possible a wave of repression and arbitrariness. The administrative and enforcement methods implanted at that time had a fatal influence on the development of our society. Many of the difficulties we face today have their roots in this system.<sup>23</sup>

During this stage of the political reform, the public began to debate and question some structural aspects of the Soviet system. Gorbachev now openly advocated a greater separation between the tasks and attributions of the state and of the CPSU, criticizing the excessive interference of party cadres in government business at different hierarchical levels.<sup>24</sup> The government began to discuss the need for a reform of the political-electoral system that would ensure the strengthening of local and central representative mechanisms. Other issues were also highlighted, such as the need for legislative/judicial reforms and the guarantee of fundamental rights and freedoms. In short, the formation of a “socialist rule of law” was

---

<sup>22</sup> GORBACHEV, 1988b, p. 94.

<sup>23</sup> GORBACHEV, 1988b, pp. 112-113.

<sup>24</sup> GORBACHEV, 1988a, p. 138.

imminent. As the Soviet leader himself stated in his report to the 19th Party Conference:

Briefly, what is essential, in characterizing the rule of law, is to ensure the prominence of the law. No state body, no official, no collective, no party or social organization, no individual is exempt from the obligation imposed on them to submit to the law.<sup>25</sup>

The increasing radicalization of the debates and disputes among prominent political groups regarding the future of perestroika would directly influence Gorbachev's position. In his speech at the Congress of People's Deputies in May 1989, Gorbachev criticized both the more radical wing, that sought progress towards the establishment of an economic market with *quasicapitalist* mechanisms, and the more conservative wing, which feared that the reforms would become too liberal:

It is considered that the problem can be solved by fully activating all market methods. The market would put everything in order. We do not share this attitude because it would provoke a social explosion and disrupt the ongoing processes in the country [...] There are even those who think that many of our economic failures are due to the new management methods, and that it is not worth hastening the reform. We cannot agree with this opinion [either]. The Central Committee and the Government consider that the main means for development of the economy is the gradual implementation of economic reform.<sup>26</sup>

Seeking a middle ground, Gorbachev began to openly defend the institutionalization of a socialist market, which, in general, meant attempting to combine a market economy model with the Soviet socialist model, giving the state a unique role in economic life. The market, once combined with a planned economy, would become an integral part of the USSR:

Of course, the market is not omnipotent, but mankind has not yet developed a more effective and democratic mechanism for managing the economy. The planned socialist economy cannot do without the market.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> GORBACHEV, 1988b, p. 128.

<sup>26</sup> GORBACHEV, 1990a, pp. 58 and 69.

<sup>27</sup> GORBACHEV, 1990a, p. 69.

Another topic that gained prominence in Gorbachev's speeches from 1989 onward was the discussion concerning ownership. The lack of private ownership in the means of production was one of the pillars of Soviet socialism. Private ownership was traditionally considered a symbol of the exploitation and alienation of workers in the capitalist system. However, this debate on the topic culminated in the adoption, in March of 1990, of a law establishing new forms of property in the Soviet economy and ending the monopoly/primacy of state ownership. In a speech, Gorbachev approached the issue by proposing greater flexibility in the use of public goods and forms of property, provided that these changes did not lead to the exploitation of workers:

Practice has proved that economic reform is not feasible without the radical renewal of property relations and the development of their various forms. We advocate the creation of a flexible and effective system for managing public goods, so that each form of property proves its life force and reason for existence in open and fair competition. The only condition to be imposed in this case is the inadmissibility of the exploitation and alienation of workers in relation to production [...].<sup>28</sup>

One of the most sensitive changes is seen in proposals for rural areas. Until then, agricultural measures were not that different from urban enterprise measures, granting greater administrative and financial autonomy to state and cooperative farms. However, given the poor performance of agricultural production, the Soviet leader started advocating for specific measures to encourage peasants to feel like "real landowners":

[...] at the heart of the political theses and resolutions adopted at the March plenary [1989] is the objective of returning land to the peasants through new forms of economic activity, giving them the means of production, making them real landowners and thereby arousing individual material interest in increasing agricultural production.<sup>29</sup>

It is important to note that when speaking of converting peasants into "real landowners," Gorbachev did not intend to reestablish private ownership of agricultural land. This proposal was limited to leasing public goods to individuals, thus officially maintaining state

---

<sup>28</sup> GORBACHEV, 1990a, p. 69.

<sup>29</sup> GORBACHEV, 1990a, p. 60.

ownership. Formally, there would be no return to private property. However, the leased property and cooperative enterprises, in their actual day to day functioning, would gradually come to resemble private capitalist firms in many aspects.

In the midst of these discussions, the role of the state was the object of fierce debates. Gorbachev affirmed that what was on the agenda was not the reduction of the role of the state in the Soviet economy but rather the change in the manner of its operation: from direct interference in the production units to the regulation of commercial and business relations. In discussing measures that ensured greater autonomy for enterprises and production units, Gorbachev indicated what would be the new attributions of the state, now resembling certain functions of the capitalist regulatory state:

Such an attitude does not diminish the role of the state, if we obviously do not identify it with the ministries or confuse economic management with state management. The direct interference in the management of the economic units disappears, the state direction begins to take place through the creation of norms and conditions for the operation of the companies. [The state will have] as spheres of activity: the fundamental orientations of technical and scientific progress; infrastructure; protection of the environment; control of the social protection of the individual; and the financial system, including taxes and economic legislation (especially against monopolization and its negative consequences for society).<sup>30</sup>

In the political sphere, criticism of bureaucracy remained as a fundamental motto. The proposal of democratization, understood as the only effective weapon in the fight against the conservatism of the system, was increasingly paralleling (Western) liberal perspectives by evoking the restoration of representative bodies and the guarantee of fundamental freedoms and rights. As a result of this process, the role of the CPSU should undergo significant changes: from driving force and reform leader to an element of the harmonization of social interests. Thus, the attempt to reduce the party's direct interference with the government sphere is evident, attributing typical characteristics to other representative organizations:

Based on deeply democratic foundations, perestroika alters the role of the party, its interaction with the state and with the social organizations. What is essential today for the party is to express and harmonize the interests of the main social groups

---

<sup>30</sup> GORBACHEV, 1990a, p. 70.

and the entire population; and ensure the consolidation of activity at all levels of the political system of society.<sup>31</sup>

The ethnic question became a key element in the Soviet political scene, resonating in Gorbachev's speeches from 1989 onward. According to the Soviet leadership's own diagnosis, advances in the process of openness, and democratization and the fight against the repressive and authoritarian nature of the system, had brought to the forefront the crisis of nationalities. The roots of this crisis lay in the ethnic politics that had been practiced since the Stalinist period, marked by a strong unitary and homogenizing tendency and by disrespect to the particularities of the different groups that made up the multiethnic state:

[...] Lenin's ethnic politics were brutally disfigured and perverted in the 1930's, a situation that virtually all peoples felt. [...] Our inheritance is quite heavy. Negative processes in ethnic relations worsened immensely at the time of stagnation because they were neglected or muted. The eruption became evident.<sup>32</sup>

It is particularly interesting to highlight the change in the analysis in relation to the foreign policy of the period prior to the beginning of the reforms. In the early years of perestroika, the official discourse stated that Soviet policy in the international arena had been guided by the principles of peace and peaceful coexistence, but that the USSR was sometimes obliged to respond to threats and imperialist militarism. With the resurgence of criticism of the party system and practices, the revisionist stance also reached Soviet practices at the international level, assuming mistakes in its conduct. Such errors were not seen as results of the pressure of the capitalist world but as directly related to the nature of the authoritarian system:

In the past, there have been cases where our practice on the international stage contradicted the high principles of socialist foreign policy that we proclaimed. Arbitrary acts were practiced that seriously harmed the country and reflected negatively on our international prestige. It was the consequence of the authoritarian experience and of the secret decisions made.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> GORBACHEV, 1990a, p. 72.

<sup>32</sup> GORBACHEV, 1990a, p. 77.

<sup>33</sup> GORBACHEV, 1990a, p. 82.

The growing tendency of this critical stance toward the most diverse aspects of Soviet reality reached its apex in the final years of perestroika. At the end of 1990, Gorbachev for the first time described the pre-perestroika Soviet system as “totalitarian” — marked by the monopoly of opinion and by the priority of military industries in relation to the civilian ones. Among the main achievements of the reform, were the transitions to democracy, a market economy and political pluralism. In a speech at the summit of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (now the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, OSCE), which took place from the 19th to the 21st of November in Paris, the leader spoke about the ongoing changes in the USSR in the following terms:

As is well known, one of the major changes in the world today has been the historical shift in the Soviet Union, which moves away from totalitarianism to freedom and democracy, from the bureaucratic command system to a state supported by the rule of law and political pluralism, from state monopoly on the economy to a diversity of equitable property and market relations, and from a centralized state to a union of sovereign states based on federative principles.<sup>34</sup>

Months earlier, during the XXVIII CPSU Congress, held in July 1990, when discussing the need to accelerate perestroika, Gorbachev stated that economic and social difficulties forced him to push for fundamental changes in the system. This issue was no longer posed as a strategy for strengthening or enhancing socialism. Incidentally, it is notable that there was a decline in the number of direct mentions to “socialism” in his speeches. The Soviet leader now said that these profound changes or even the transition to a market economy were tasks that were implicit at the very beginning of the reforms:

This task has been assigned to us since the beginning of perestroika. But it is only now, after we have gained some experience with the new economic structures, advanced on the path to political reform and passed a number of important laws (beginning with those relating to property, leasing, land, etc.), that we can devote ourselves to the transition to the market economy.<sup>35</sup>

Discussions of changes in the agricultural sector also advanced significantly. While denying any intention to reverse the

---

<sup>34</sup> GORBACHEV, 1990b, p. 1.

<sup>35</sup> GORBACHEV, 1993, p. 297.

collectivization of Soviet lands, the leader proposed fair treatment of the various forms of property and labor on the land. Real competition was open between the various organizational structures of peasant labor.<sup>36</sup>

Ironically, the advances in the processes of democratization and liberalization of the regime would also be in the origin of the economic and social chaos that settled in the country in the final years of perestroika. By removing the mechanisms of ideological control and political repression, the regime opened the door for the explosion of contradictions and internal problems of the system. The conclusion reached by Gorbachev was that it had become very difficult to change a system in which people had been conditioned to live without questioning or rethinking their own situation. He highlighted this issue in his 1990 Nobel Peace Prize speech:

During the last six years we have discarded and destroyed much of what was disrupting the path of renewal and transformation of our society. But when society was given freedom, it could not recognize itself, because it had lived a long time, so to speak, "without looking itself in the mirror." Contradictions and addictions rose to the surface, and even blood was spilled, although we were able to avoid a bloodbath. The logic of reform came into conflict with the logic of rejection, and with the logic of impatience that generates intolerance.<sup>37</sup>

Although the expression "transition to capitalism" was not used, Gorbachev aimed at Soviet integration in the international economy, accepting the "rules of the game" in his relations with other countries. He spoke for the first time of joining organizations considered bastions of the capitalist world such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.<sup>38</sup> In an article written just days before the failed coup attempt in August 1991, published in his book *The August Coup: Truths and Lessons*, Gorbachev viewed this Soviet insertion as a natural consequence of the reform process:

Political reform has taken us to the point where the state has not only changed its form but will also change its name. Society is rapidly releasing itself from ideologies. The monopoly of power in the hands of a single party is replaced by pluralism [...] Economic reform has made irreversible the

---

<sup>36</sup> GORBACHEV, 1993, p. 303.

<sup>37</sup> GORBACHEV, 2006, p. 14.

<sup>38</sup> GORBACHEV, 2006, p. 18.

transition to a market economy based on the multiplicity of forms of property. Both reforms opened the door for the country's entry into the world economic system according to the rules of the game.<sup>39</sup>

At the same time, he reassessed the trajectory of the reforms. He pointed out that the problem with which he came to assume the post of General Secretary was not “the crisis of certain isolated parts of the social body, but of the very model of barracks communism.”<sup>40</sup> He argued that in the early years it was not possible to predict the fate of the reforms or how deep the proposed changes would be, but that in the end it became clear that perestroika could not be limited to the improvement of the system.

Of course we did not understand at once how far we would have to go, what profound changes would be necessary. [...] Sometimes we gave too much attention to people who seemed to appeal to restraint and caution, but who were actually impeding the advance, slowing down the movement. [...] In the end, we also understood that perestroika would not take place within the parameters of the old system, no matter how hard we tried to renew it and improve it. What we needed was a change of the entire economic and political system, a reform of the entire multinational state; that is to say, on all aspects, a true revolution [...]<sup>41</sup>

Finally, in assessing the failings and problems in the conduct of the process, which resulted in the grave political, social and economic crisis that plagued the country at that time, Gorbachev reiterated the strong resistance of conservative and reactionary forces, both in society and in government. As a result of these obstacles, he affirmed in his last official speech as a Soviet leader — broadcast by TV stations on December 25, 1991 — that in the end:

The old system decayed before the new one could start working. And our society slipped into an even deeper crisis.<sup>42</sup>

### *The Thinker: Gorbachev's ideas in post-Soviet times*

A few hours before publicly announcing his resignation, in a

---

<sup>39</sup> GORBACHEV, 1991, p.107.

<sup>40</sup> GORBACHEV, 1991, p.109.

<sup>41</sup> GORBACHEV, 1991, pp.111-112.

<sup>42</sup> GORBACHEV, 2006, p. 48.

farewell phone call to U.S. President, George W. Bush, Mikhail Gorbachev said he had no intention of abandoning Russia's political space.<sup>43</sup> Fulfilling his promise, in the years that followed, the former Soviet leader actively participated in the public debates about the main processes experienced by his country. Now, however, he was free from what he called the limitations imposed by the function he held until 1991.<sup>44</sup> These ties to which he referred were not restricted to the specific ideological censorship of the Soviet regime but encompassed a larger set of reservations to which any head of state or government, to a greater or lesser degree, is subject when expressing himself in public during his term of office.

In this period, the character of his intellectual production and the content of his reflections changed significantly. No longer were there speeches by a political leader in full exercise of power, defending his reforms and positions before public opinion and under strong pressure from different sectors and political forces. We faced a former president, who, despite all the turbulence of the final years of the USSR, left power relatively quietly. It may be said that the Soviet regime had been deconstructed under his leadership peacefully, without systematic use of violence either by state security forces or by political groups or sectors of civil society — with the exception of conflicts arising from the aggravation of the problem of nationalities, which had a very specific character. If Gorbachev's rise to supreme power was the product of a decision by a small elite of an authoritarian regime, his departure from the Kremlin was little different from political resignations in Western democracies.

Such a scenario allowed Gorbachev to remain politically active. His legacy, although subject to intense debate and severe criticism from practically all sectors of the political and social spectrum, was not linked to the figure of a tyrant. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Gorbachev waged a public relations battle to defend the image of perestroika and of his actions as a leader. In the former Soviet republics, especially in Russia, a vision was emerging that the reforms begun in 1985 were responsible not only for the disintegration of the USSR but also for the serious political and economic crisis these newly-formed countries faced in the early 1990s. Opinion polls showed that, in 1995, 69% of Russians did not share the positive image the former Soviet leader had in the West.<sup>45</sup> A historical memory

---

<sup>43</sup> GORBACHEV, 1992, p.83.

<sup>44</sup> GORBACHEV, 2002 p. 3.

<sup>45</sup> Data from: FOM - *Fond "Obshchestvennoye Mneniye"*. M. Gorbachev - politicheskiy deyatel' i chelovek. Moscow, 2014. Available at [http://bd.fom.ru/report/cat/polit/roy\\_pol/gorbachev\\_m\\_s/dd040815](http://bd.fom.ru/report/cat/polit/roy_pol/gorbachev_m_s/dd040815) [Accessed on 07/25/2018].

dispute was under way during that decade.

The 1990s were a period of profound change and turmoil in the former Soviet republics. With the Union dissolved, each of the new independent states began to autonomously conduct the reforms which were to complete the process of economic and political reorganization initiated by perestroika. In Russia, under the leadership of Boris Yeltsin, a serious political and economic crisis marked the period.

Gorbachev's central argument in the early years of his post-USSR intellectual production was to assert that perestroika was not responsible for, nor did it aim at, the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The end of his former country was supposed to have been the result of the combination of the attempt to restore the old order by the conspirators of the failed coup of August 1991 and the political opportunism of some of the leaders of the former Soviet republics — notably Russia, Ukraine and Belarus — which culminated in the signing of the Alma-Ata Treaty on December 21<sup>st</sup>, 1991.

To Gorbachev, the negative view of reform that was consolidating in Russian society was partly a result of the way the media now covered the process and the performance of the former leadership:

I want to present my position during the events of December [1991], because for a large part of the citizenry it remains unknown. Many of my arguments did not seem to match me. Thus, contrary to the rules of *glasnost'*, my speeches were silenced or shortened, making them difficult to understand. Television was more generous. But its information, by its nature, does not preserve a stable and complete view, especially on complex and controversial issues. The press, especially the mass media, preferred to publish the impressions of journalists at meetings with me, not the content of what I said about the merits of the issues being decided at that time.<sup>46</sup>

His words did not represent a step backward against the defense of transparency [*glasnost'*] or freedom of expression. It is, in fact, a question as to the way the media functions, their partiality in the face of events and the power of these media in the construction of public opinion — recurrent discussions in countries with greater political-institutional openness. According to Gorbachev, the media in his country contributed to the negative image of the reforms and of himself — which was consolidating in society at that time — because they did not fully and cohesively convey his position vis-à-vis the then

---

<sup>46</sup> GORBACHEV, 1992, p. 7.

ongoing events and processes.

It should be noted that Gorbachev's view of the way information is conveyed, especially by state organs, was deeply influenced by his experience with Soviet communication media. Traditionally, the official newspapers and televisions of the former regime, although inserted in the logic of ideological propaganda, published verbatim the speeches and articles of the main leaders, as well as decrees and more relevant decisions. In Western democracies, on the other hand, the manifestations and positions of rulers appear in summary form, often accompanied by favorable or unfavorable comments, influencing the perceptions of readers and spectators.

Gorbachev also seeks to clarify his vision of how the USSR could have remained integrated under a new Union Treaty. The years 1990 and 1991 were marked by the advancement of national issues and the strengthening of autonomist and independence movements, leading to a debate about the need to revise the structure of the Soviet state. The republics and nationalities demanded greater autonomy from Moscow's excessive centralism. At the same time, negotiations were underway in Western Europe to deepen the integration of the member countries of the European Community, which would culminate in the signing of the Treaty of Maastricht in February 1992 (basis of the institutional design of the European Union).

The former Soviet president's proposals were heavily influenced by the discussions of the country's western neighbors. Gorbachev had proposed that the USSR become a kind of confederation, in which the republics would gain greater autonomy to legislate on domestic affairs, while the central power would retain the command of the Armed Forces and foreign policy.<sup>47</sup> Although recognizing the need to strengthen local powers, the former leader opposed the formation of an association or community of independent states in which central power would be weak or merely representative.<sup>48</sup>

In Gorbachev's opinion, negotiations were moving favorably, with the support of Russia and Belarus for the formation of a confederation, until the Ukrainian referendum of November 1991, when the population of that republic approved its unilateral declaration of independence. Kiev had not participated in the negotiations of the new treaty and this was a recurring concern for other leaders and for a large part of Soviet society, while Gorbachev sought to reassure them by stating that the Ukrainians would join the debates as the new structure gained form and strength. Ukraine

---

<sup>47</sup> GORBACHEV, 1992, p. 9.

<sup>48</sup> GORBACHEV, 1992, p. 10.

represented the second largest political and economic force in the USSR, behind Russia, and its participation and consent in the process were seen as the key to success in the proposed new state formation.

If the outcome of the Ukrainian popular consultation had undermined the credibility of the Union's reform process vis-à-vis the republican leadership and society at large, the same cannot be said of Gorbachev. He remained in favor of signing the document on the terms negotiated by the participating republics, confident that it would still be possible to maintain the integrity of the country, and even more so with the presence of Kiev. If today this view seems somewhat naive, at that time many accused him of defending the maintenance of Soviet unity as a desperate attempt to hold on to power. To those critics, Gorbachev replied:

[...] I often hear: now, they say, power is leaving Gorbachev, but he clings to it. I'll say this: if Gorbachev wanted so badly to keep power that way and it was unbearable for him to split with it, he would not have started it [the reforms] in 1985. He would have ten years [...] to stay in power without changing anything. But I started the process of change and I will not give up on my choice. I do not need this, not me. I assume, perhaps, the greatest responsibility because I started and I continue to stimulate the transformation process, but I do not want to allow collapse. And when they say that it is necessary for me to remain president to command [...] All this is absurd, cheap speculation thrown at people to confuse them. No, it's about the fate of people.<sup>49</sup>

In fact, some historians agree that although the Soviet economy showed clear signs of deceleration or even stagnation in the first half of the 1980s, the regime remained strong and socially structured, which would allow the system to remain intact for some time before the transformations became unavoidable.<sup>50</sup> In other words, Gorbachev could indeed have maintained all the power conferred on him by the post of General Secretary of the CC of the CPSU for years without the need for major reforms.

The defense of the maintenance of the Union, although in a new form, was justified in Gorbachev's discourse by the negative effects that would be caused by the disintegration, some of which would in fact become serious problems that the former Soviet republics would have to deal with for decades. To Gorbachev, the peoples who composed the Soviet multinational state shared historical

---

<sup>49</sup> GORBACHEV, 1992, p. 41.

<sup>50</sup> Cf.: KEEP, 1995.

connections, formed over centuries of interaction, which would make the separation process extremely costly and contrary to collective interest.<sup>51</sup>

In addition to economic losses stemming from the dismantling of joint productive structures and of the integrated common market, the former leader pointed to other problems of a political and social nature. On the one hand, many internal borders of the USSR were modified by administrative decisions that showed no concern for the historical origins and forms of occupation of the territories. One of the examples most quoted by Gorbachev was the transfer of Crimea from Russia to Ukraine by Nikita Khrushchev in 1954 — a bone of contention between the two countries since the end of the USSR, culminating with the occupation and annexation of the territory in 2014 by the Russians in spite of the protests by the Ukrainians and by much of the international community.

At the same time, after years of living under one and the same state, migrations — voluntary and forced — led to the formation of ethnic minorities in virtually all the republics and territories of the country. For Gorbachev, the dissolution of the USSR would lead to a worsening of the problem of nationalities, citing as an example the processes that occurred in the Baltic republics at that time, which in his view were converting the minorities residing in their territories into second-class citizens.<sup>52</sup>

In dealing with his relationship with Yeltsin, Gorbachev presented a more forceful and personalized critique. He felt betrayed by what he saw as the opportunism of Russia's new leader, who, on the one hand, was supportive of the negotiations for the new Union Treaty, while at the same time separately negotiating the formation of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) with the leaders of Ukraine and Belarus. In his words:

Here's how Yeltsin behaved. Together we lead the preparation for the Union Treaty and together with the other republics we sent the project to the Supreme Councils for discussion. But in Minsk, Yeltsin presented something completely different. He did not even call me. At the same time, he talked to George W. Bush, although there was no need to involve the U.S. president in this. This is not just a question of morality. I see no justification for this style of behavior.<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup> GORBACHEV, 1992, p. 39.

<sup>52</sup> GORBACHEV, 1992, p. 61.

<sup>53</sup> GORBACHEV, 1992, p. 63.

Although contrary to the option in favor of the CIS, Gorbachev spent his last days in the Kremlin arguing that the proposed new Union would maintain some of the characteristics that had been discussed in the project of the new Treaty of the Union. He highlighted, as a central point, the maintenance of the unity of the defense systems - including the armed forces - and the succession of the international responsibilities of the USSR, which in his view should remain with the central structure.<sup>54</sup> At that time, the international community was closely watching the unfolding of the negotiations held by the republics, especially in relation to the control of the Soviet nuclear arsenal. This was also a concern for Gorbachev, although the then USSR president was essentially sidelined by the leaders of the 15 Soviet republics that debated the future of the new entity.

Although Gorbachev remained very critical of the option of dissolving the Union, he defended the legacy of the reforms that he began in 1985 as the thing responsible for the democratic opening in the country. The problems faced by the population and the wandering course of the process were seen as commensurate with the size of the challenge of transforming the Soviet system. Speaking to the Italian ambassador a day before his resignation, Gorbachev said:

The storm of totalitarianism, as you see, was very difficult, because it is in all of us. It is not only a clearly delineated object, its microbes are scattered throughout the body of society, deep within the public consciousness. That is why it is so difficult to change and transform.<sup>55</sup>

Gorbachev's words in the early 1990s seem to be in tune with the more recent debates about the democratic character of the Russian state. Data from opinion polls conducted with the Russian population by the Pew Research Center show that, when asked about the alternatives between widening democracy or being under command of a strong leader to solve national problems, only in 1991 was democracy chosen by the majority of Russians (51%). From 1992 onward, the preference for a strong leader was chosen by most citizens — reaching the high point of 70% of the population in 2002 (already under Putin).<sup>56</sup>

Speaking about the challenges faced by Soviet society at the time

---

<sup>54</sup> GORBACHEV, 1992, p. 59.

<sup>55</sup> GORBACHEV, 1992, p. 81.

<sup>56</sup> PRC – Pew Research Center. “*Russians Back Protests, Political Freedoms And Putin, Too*”. Washington, 2012.

he had become the General Secretary of the CC of the CPSU, Gorbachev pointed out one of the main reasons why, in his view, the reforms did not find enthusiastic support in the population of his country despite the visible political, social and spiritual crisis of the Soviet system.

[...] there was no mass protest movement in the country on which to base a policy of change. And this for several reasons, one of which, and no less important, was the habitual submission of a large part of the people, their passivity, their tendency toward conformism. These traits, rooted in the ancient traditions of Russia, took on an even more monstrous form and were reinforced during the decades in which the Stalinist leadership reigned mercilessly — and were not shaken during the post-Stalinist period.<sup>57</sup>

According to Gorbachev, this Russian conformist tradition had been responsible for a low participation of the vast majority of the Russian population in the conduct of the political processes of the country throughout history; the masses remained passive in the face of decisions and movements carried out by the elites and leaders.<sup>58</sup> Faced with this scenario, the initial thrust of perestroika could only come from above, from the leadership of the regime itself. However, this leadership was a product of that system in crisis, groomed in ideological dogmas, and therefore faced the challenge of overcoming its own traditional views.<sup>59</sup>

In the 1990's, some critics of the Soviet reforms contrasted them to the experiment initiated by Deng Xiaoping in China. The success of the Beijing reforms was seen as a result of the combination of major changes and openness in the economic sphere combined with the maintenance of centralized and closed political control. Gorbachev argued that initially perestroika was intended as a strictly economic reform, but that after encountering difficulties and obstacles imposed by the regime's own bureaucracy against the implementation of the proposed measures, it became clear that without a profound change in the political-institutional system, the efforts in the economy would not be effective.<sup>60</sup>

Gorbachev vehemently rejected the accusation of being “indecisive” during the period in which he was at the head of the

---

<sup>57</sup> GORBACHEV, 1993, pp. 9-10.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. HOBBSAWN, 2007, pp. 462-465.

<sup>59</sup> GORBACHEV, 1993, p. 10.

<sup>60</sup> GORBACHEV, 1993, pp. 11-12.

USSR. In his view, it was precisely his firm position to maintain the path of reforms that allowed the realization of ever deeper transformations in the system.<sup>61</sup> He reminded his critics that, even after the Soviet collapse, Russia maintained the main strategic guidelines of the reforms. The former leader, however, accepted the validity of some of the criticisms directed at the implementation of perestroika. One of the strongest accusations was that the Moscow leadership promoted the destruction of the old structures of the system without having new forms and mechanisms of management to replace them. Gorbachev acknowledged the lack of synchronicity between the two processes, which should have been planned and worked out jointly by the reformers.<sup>62</sup>

Another criticism accepted by the former leader was the delay in perceiving and positioning himself assertively on the question of nationalities. Gorbachev agreed that this may have been the biggest failure of his administration, a problem that had come to light, paradoxically, due to the advance in the process of political opening of the regime:

Under the influx of the oxygen of freedom, all unresolved national problems began to manifest themselves. But the fiction of indestructible friendship among peoples continued to blind us, and we remained convinced that the main problems of relations between the nationalities of the USSR were resolved. I must add, however, that during the years of Soviet rule enormous and progressive changes took place in the lives of many peoples, some of whom were still in the depths of the Middle Ages before 1917. The misfortune is that the general orientation involved the deletion of national distinctions, which in practice meant to disrespect the natural rights of peoples.<sup>63</sup>

Although it was not caused by the ongoing reforms, the problem of nationalities had emerged precisely at a time when the strong arm of the Soviet regime gave room to an atmosphere of greater political and social freedom. Gorbachev pointed out that in spite of the achievements and real advances made by many peoples since the 1917 revolution, the policy of “proletarian internationalism” applied to the nations that were part of the Union ended up stifling the specific demands and peculiarities of ethnic groups. The discontent built up gradually, like a pressure cooker, bursting out as soon as the

---

<sup>61</sup> GORBACHEV, 1993, p.17.

<sup>62</sup> GORBACHEV, 1993, p.17.

<sup>63</sup> GORBACHEV, 1993, pp 17-18.

center was no longer able to impose its rule as it once was.

If the fiction of indestructible friendship between peoples had blinded the leaders' eyes to the discontent of nationalities, other vicious ways of looking at the reality of the Soviet system also hampered the progress or even the formulation of reform proposals. Among them, Gorbachev pointed out the priority of heavy industry in the Soviet economy — reproduced in the elaboration of perestroika, whose initial focus was precisely this sector. If he had succeeded in overcoming the stereotyped vision at the time, it would have been better and fairer to start reforms in the agricultural and light industry sectors, especially consumer goods and food. In addition to being the major bottlenecks of the Soviet economy, the development in these areas would lead to a significant improvement in supply and, consequently, would win society's support for the measures underway.<sup>64</sup>

Responding to those who accused him of wanting, from the beginning of the reforms, the transition from the USSR to the capitalist sphere, Gorbachev said his initial view was that it would really be possible to reformulate the management mechanisms within the principles of socialism, which in the initial phase of the perestroika era echoed in his speeches as “perfecting socialism.” In the course of the changes, however, this expectation proved to be illusory:

We began with the illusory hope of “improving socialism within the existing system.” But by the end of 1986, it had become clear to me and my companions that renewal could not be achieved by old approaches.<sup>65</sup>

Finally, it is important to highlight some innovative aspects in the vision expressed by the former leader about socialism in the post-Soviet period. Contrary to those who at the end of perestroika imagined that Gorbachev would have become a liberal, he reaffirmed his belief in socialist values and rejected Western interpretations linking the dissolution of the USSR with the victory of liberalism over socialism and the “end of history.”<sup>66</sup> At the same time, the former General Secretary made clear that the socialism he espoused as an option for the future did not resemble the traditional Marxist view that was at the origins of the Soviet regime. Gorbachev opposed the view of socialism as an inevitable stage in the development of

---

<sup>64</sup> GORBACHEV, 1993 p. 18-19.

<sup>65</sup> GORBACHEV, 2006, pp. 51-52.

<sup>66</sup> GORBACHEV, 1993, p. 397.

societies, defending a conception of socialism linked to values such as justice, solidarity and equality, based on an irrefutable democratic platform.<sup>67</sup> Such a vision was formed over the years in which he was at the head of the CPSU, affecting the course of the reforms, which at one point would become a program resembling western social democracy:

We have chosen an evolutionary approach to reforming Soviet society on the principles of freedom, democracy and market economy — which, in effect, had resulted in a social-democratic project. Its implementation was intended to harmonize private and public interests, placing the human being at the center of the development of our society.<sup>68</sup>

*Between reformer and thinker: a perestroika of ideas.*

This walk through Gorbachev's speeches and public utterances before and after the end of the USSR, although far from contemplating all the reflections and ideas expressed by the last Soviet leader, nevertheless allows us to trace some of the main trends in these periods. From both a political and economic point of view, Gorbachev's thinking seems to have experienced a “perestroika.”

From the political point of view, it is interesting to note that the evolution of his ideas came in qualitative and quantitative dimensions. If in his early speeches the advance of the democratization of the system meant a greater popular participation in the existing political structures and a greater transparency in the discussions and decisions, at the end of perestroika, the defense of the values of liberal political democracy came to the fore. He had introduced its bases in the USSR starting with the major electoral reforms in 1989 and 1990.

The trajectory of the leader's view of the regime and of the ideology that characterized the regime he led is also curious. In his early years as head of the CPSU, Gorbachev still seemed faithful to the central principles that guided the construction of the Soviet regime, proposing mostly measures of improvement and modernization. Gradually, however, the leader moved away from this view, adopting an increasingly critical tone regarding the system, even characterizing it as totalitarian towards the end. In this process, his affiliation to the official Soviet ideology gave way to a set of ideas that in many respects resembles the principles of European social-democracy.

---

<sup>67</sup> GORBACHEV, 1993, p. 396.

<sup>68</sup> GORBACHEV, 2006, pp. 52.

In relation to the economy, the path taken by Gorbachev's ideas is even more intriguing. There are traces of criticism of the omnipresent centralized planning model and of the administrative allocation of resources in his speeches even before he assumed the top command post of the party. Although the market mechanisms have gradually gained space in his public utterances, it does not seem correct to affirm that the former leader has become a liberal. Not only his speeches but also his political performance in the years following his resignation as president of the USSR reinforce this idea: Gorbachev became a persistent critic of Yeltsin's "shock therapy" policies in Russia throughout the 1990s.

Against the claims that such changes of heart can be seen as intellectual fragility, Gorbachev not only avows them but also sees them in a positive light, as an intellectual evolution:

Have I, as a man and politician, changed after those years of hard work and suffering? When I remember what I was when I arrived in Moscow in 1978, and even what I was in 1985, when I became General Secretary, I would respond in the affirmative without any hesitation. I changed to the rhythm of perestroika and even surpassed it. I let go of the ideological vision that prevented me from seeing reality as it was, with all its facets and contradictions. [...] In a word, Gorbachev broke with the illusions of the novice reformer who had put on his shoulders the weight of the transformations in a vast and complex country. He now sees more, he has become wiser.<sup>69</sup>

### References

- BROWN, A. *The Gorbachev Factor*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996.
- BROWN, A. "Did Gorbachev as General Secretary Become a Social-Democrat?" *Europe-Asia Studies*. London, vol. 65, n. 2, March 2013, pp. 198-220.
- D'AGOSTINO, Anthony. *Gorbachev's Revolution*. New York: NYU Press, 1998.
- GORBACHEV, M. *URSS: uma nova etapa*. São Paulo: Revan, 1985.
- GORBACHEV, M. *A URSS rumo ao século XXI: XXVII Congresso do PCUS*. Rio de Janeiro: Revan, 1986.
- GORBACHEV, M. *Izbrannye rechi i stat'i*. Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1987-1990, 5 vols.
- GORBACHEV, M. *Perestroika: novas ideias para o meu país e o mundo*. São Paulo: Best Seller, 1988a.
- GORBACHEV, M. *A proposta*. Volume I. Rio de Janeiro: Expressão e

<sup>69</sup> GORBACHEV, 1993, p. 37.

- Cultura, 1988b.
- GORBACHEV, M. *A proposta: a perestroika e o processo de democratização*. Volume V. Rio de Janeiro: Expressão e Cultura, 1990a.
- GORBACHEV, M. *Speech by Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev to the Second Summit of CSCE Heads of State or Government, Paris, 19-21 November 1990b*. Available at <http://www.osce.org/mc/16155> [Accessed on 08/14/2018]
- GORBACHEV, M. *O Golpe de Agosto: Verdades e Lições*. São Paulo: Editora Best Seller, 1991.
- GORBACHEV, M. *Dekabr'-91. Moya pozitsiya*. Moscow: Novosti, 1992.
- GORBACHEV, M. *Avant-mémoires*. Paris: Odile Jacob, 1993.
- GORBACHEV, M. *Memoirs*. London: Doubleday, 1995
- GORBACHEV, M. *The Road We Traveled, The Challenges We Face*. Moscow: Izdatelstvo VES MIR, 2006.
- HOBSBAWN, E. *A era dos extremos*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2007.
- KEEP, J L. H. *Last of the Empires: A History of the Soviet Union 1945-1991*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995
- LEWIN, M. *O fenômeno Gorbachev*. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1988.
- SEGRILLO, A. *O declínio da União Soviética: um estudo das causas*. Rio de Janeiro: Record, 2000.



## An Overview of the Russian Post-Soviet Political System from Yeltsin to Putin

Vicente G. Ferraro Jr.<sup>1</sup>

The breakup of the Soviet Union in December 1991 gave rise to one of the most complex transitions in history. Political reforms were implemented simultaneously with the dismantling of a multinational state and radical economic changes marked the conversion from socialism to a market economy. This “triple transition” (Makarenko, 2018) left deep scars on the Russian democratization process.

This paper aims to analyze the institutional path taken by the main Russian political actors after the breakup of the USSR and how the arrangements established in the transitional period ultimately facilitated the subsequent “verticalization” of the political system. The central argument is that the combination of strong constitutional powers for the president and weak protection of the rules on the political competition permitted the president to conduct recurrent institutional changes and keep an advantageous political position. In other words, the flexibility of the 1993 institutional arrangements reduced the costs for the executive to engage in gradual reforms on the rules of the political game. Most of the changes that eroded the fragile system of checks and balances were not adopted by constitutional amendments, but by mere federal laws, which require absolute majorities in parliament, instead of supermajorities. Finally, it will be shown that the open arena for constant reforms on the rules of the political competition has also hindered the formation of a *de facto* federalism.

The paper has six main sections: 1. Theoretical framework; 2. The Yeltsin first period (1990-1993); 3. The 1993 Constitution and the presidential powers; 4. The Yeltsin second period (1994-1999); 5. The Putin period (2000-2018); and 6. Evidences of the consolidation of the “power vertical” system. The period in which Dmitry Medvedev (2008-2012) was in presidential office, also known as the “Putin-Medvedev tandem”, will be approached as part of the Putin period, since the latter continued to play a leading (personalist) role as prime minister.

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper draws on research from a master’s thesis written under the supervision of Professor Boris Makarenko at the *Higher School of Economics* (Moscow - Russia) and from a Ph.D. dissertation currently being developed under the supervision of Professor Marta Arretche at the University of Sao Paulo (Brazil), funded by CNPq. E-mail: [vgferraro.jr@hotmail.com](mailto:vgferraro.jr@hotmail.com).

## 1. Theoretical framework

In order to explain the transformations that the Russian political system has undergone since the dissolution of the USSR, we adopted the model of institutional change<sup>2</sup> developed by James Mahoney and Kathleen Thelen.

Mahoney and Thelen (2009) argue that institutional transformation strategies depend on the characteristics of the political context (mainly the possibilities of veto by different actors) and on the institutional characteristics regarding the discretion in the interpretation and enforcement of existing rules. According to them, the combination of these contextual and institutional factors delineates four types of transformation and change-agents:

- **Displacement.** It occurs when the existing rules are gradually or abruptly replaced by new ones in a scenario of *weak veto possibilities* and *low discretion*. The creation of competing institutions may also contribute to displace the older rules. These innovations are usually introduced by “insurrectionary” actors who were losers under the previous system and thereby reject the institutional status quo. They may form coalitions with other institutional challengers.

- **Layering.** In this process, new rules are attached to old ones through amendments, revisions and incremental additions. The accumulation of small changes may lead to a substantial change in the long run. Powerful veto players<sup>3</sup> may be able to preserve old institutions and simultaneously fail to prevent the addition of new rules. By seeking to transform the institutions gradually in a scenario of *strong veto possibilities* and *low discretion*, the actors who promote layering are called “subversives.”

- **Drift.** It usually takes place when the rules remain the same, but in view of *high discretion* their enforcement is affected by changes in external conditions. The *strong veto possibilities* by different players prevent the institutions from being formally adapted to the new reality.

- **Conversion.** The rules remain formally the same but are approached and enforced in new ways. Beyond *high discretion*, there are *weak veto possibilities*. Such a strategy is pursued by “opportunist”

---

<sup>2</sup> Mahoney and Thelen (2009, p. 4) outline that most of the definitions of institutions conceive them as “*relatively enduring features of political and social life (rules, norms, procedures) that structure behavior and that cannot be changed easily or instantaneously.*”

<sup>3</sup> According to Tsebelis (1995, p. 293), a veto player is “*an individual or collective actor whose agreement is required for a policy decision.*”

actors, who exploit the possibilities within the prevailing system to achieve their ends. They can ally themselves with both institutional supporters and challengers, depending on the configuration of power.

**Chart 1. Models of Institutional Change/Actors**

		Institutional Characteristics	
		Low Level of Discretion in Interpretation / Enforcement	High Level of Discretion in Interpretation / Enforcement
Characteristics of the Political Context	Strong Veto Possibilities	<b>Layering (Subversives)</b>	<b>Drift (Symbionts)</b>
	Weak Veto Possibilities	<b>Displacement (Insurrectionaries)</b>	<b>Conversion (Opportunists)</b>

Source: chart based on the models of institutional change by Mahoney and Thelen (2009)

In the following sections, we will present the main strategies of institutional change adopted by the major Russian political actors since the breakup of the USSR.

## **2. The Yeltsin first period (1990-1993): the dismantling of the USSR and the conflictive transition**

In the late 1980s, political and economic reforms gained unprecedented strength in the Soviet Union. In the face of the strong obstacles that the conservative factions of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) posed to the *perestroika* process, Mikhail Gorbachev adopted a strategy of weakening the party's political role and strengthening state institutions (Huskey, 1999). Gorbachev's own political status represented the overlapping institutional duality of the Soviet system — he was simultaneously General Secretary of the CPSU and Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, the country's most authoritative state organ.

In 1989, Gorbachev promoted the foundation of the Congress of People's Deputies, a legislative body that would function as an electoral college for the formation of the Supreme Soviet. Until then,

direct elections to the Supreme Soviet were highly controlled and uncompetitive. The new Congress, whose representatives were elected in partly free elections, gave space for a new composition and restructuring of the Supreme Soviet. Additionally, in March 1990, aiming to displace the party structure and gain more autonomy in the conduction of structural reforms, Gorbachev sought support to establish another institution — the presidency of the Soviet Union. Initially the Congress would appoint the president, but from the following terms onward, the office was expected to be filled via direct elections. The presidency was incorporated into the Soviet parliamentarism, giving birth to a semi-presidential model. According to Huskey (1999, p.16), the semi-presidential system:

was the least disruptive alternative to the existing institutional order. A parliament and a Government, headed by a prime minister, were already in place. The new arrangement required only the addition of a small presidential bureaucracy. With the decline of the Communist rule, the presidency was a logical successor to the party's Central Committee apparatus.

Similar institutions were duplicated in the Union's republics. In view of the hierarchical and legitimacy vacuum left by the CPSU, these arrangements contributed to accelerate the dismantling of the USSR. The Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic created its own Congress of People's Deputies in March 1990. In May, the new regional Congress chose Boris Yeltsin, Gorbachev's rival, as chairman of the Russian (regional) Supreme Soviet. In June 1990 the Congress passed Russia's Declaration of State Sovereignty, claiming the supremacy of the Russian laws over the Soviet legislation — the major political players of Russia and other Union's republics openly challenged the central Soviet institutions. In the following month, Yeltsin left the CPSU and in June 1991 he was elected president of Russia by popular vote, which enhanced his legitimacy *vis-à-vis* other Soviet bureaucrat officials.

In August 1991, the hardliners of the CPSU removed Gorbachev from the Soviet presidency, aiming to interrupt the reforms and prevent the disintegration of the state. Yeltsin led popular resistance against the coup, which allowed Gorbachev to return to office. However, the successful maneuver conferred even more power to Yeltsin and eventually accelerated the disintegration process. In December 1991, the presidents of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine signed the Belavezha Accords, putting an end to almost 70 years of Soviet history. Gorbachev had no alternative other than resign from the USSR "orphan" presidency.

Yeltsin inherited a troubled semi-presidential system, similar to Gorbachev's central arrangements, with a strong president occupying the vacuum left by the CPSU. In the beginning, the relations with the parliament were rather amiable — in late 1991, it provisionally conferred greater decree powers for Yeltsin to conduct major economic reforms. Nonetheless, the disagreements concerning the high cost of the rapid economic liberalization — the so-called “shock therapy” — gave strength to the counter-reform factions, which fueled a real institutional war. Morgan-Jones (2010, p.2) emphasized that:

the consistent inability of Russian politicians to decide on a stable set of constitutional rules produced competition between governmental institutions to control the process of economic reform and the establishment of a new post-Soviet legal order. During this conflict, Russia's executive, legislature and federal units issued contradictory legislation and claimed authority in overlapping policy jurisdiction. Confusion over the rules governing the operation of government and the economy resulted in failures in policy formulation and implementation and hindered the pursuit of stable economic and legal development.

Apart from the opposition in the legislature, Yeltsin had to face strong pressures from regional elites. In 1991, he managed to mobilize the support of regional elites to contest the political hegemony of the central Soviet leadership: with his famous phrase, “*grab as much sovereignty as you can swallow*,” he laid the foundation for the troublesome decentralization that Russia would face in the following years. The same pressures that led to the dismantling of the central Soviet ethno-federal system became a threat to Russian integrity: some “ethnic republics”, minorities and subfederal units sought to engage in ethno-nationalist movements, demanding greater state autonomy and even secession. Given the limited resources available to the central government, and in an attempt to maintain the Russian territorial unity, in 1992 Yeltsin signed a “federation treaty” with 19 of the 21 ethnic republics, providing them with special rights in the federative bargaining.

A referendum conducted in April 1993 on the country's political and economic course indicated an expressive popular approval to Yeltsin and his reforms, which was perceived as a new electoral victory (Huskey, 1999). The situation got worse in June, when Yeltsin instituted a new constituent assembly by decree, ignoring the project that the legislature had been negotiating since 1990. On September

21, 1993 the presidential decree N. 1400 extinguished both the Congress and the Supreme Soviet. The Constitutional Court<sup>4</sup> ruled that the decree was unconstitutional and the Supreme Soviet impeached Yeltsin, appointing the vice-president Aleksandr Rutskoy as acting president. In early October, army forces loyal to Yeltsin bombed and seized the parliament building. Popular unrest brought the risk of a civil war.

The new constitution was approved in a popular referendum in December, giving rise to new legislative bodies – the State Duma (lower house) and the Federation Council (upper house). There was no prior voting of the draft by a democratically elected legislature (Stepan, 2000, p.134). Additionally, Ross (2003, p. 173) underlines that forty-two federal subjects out of eighty-nine failed to ratify the 1993 Constitution: *“many of those ethnic republics which had rejected the Constitution soon went a step further, and declared that their own constitutions were to take precedence over the Russian one”*.

The overlapping powers of the different actors at the beginning of the 1990s led to a scenario of political stalemate and created incentives for the executive to engage in a rapid *displacement* strategy. Evidently this decision faced strong reactions on the part of the major veto players, which could be overruled only by a violent institutional rupture.

### 3. The 1993 Constitution and the presidential powers

Resulting from a conflict in which the executive branch emerged victorious, the new constitution granted Yeltsin broader powers. In a context of high political polarization, it would be virtually impossible to carry out deep economic reforms without an executive endowed with strong institutional powers (Makarenko et al., 2008).

Although the Russian system is formally semi-presidential, the president has steady control over the prime minister and the cabinet formation. Teitel (1994, p. 177) points out that *“the Russian presidency is a potent mix of executive, legislative and judicial powers”*. Among the various constitutional powers of the president, one can mention:

- **Decree.** The president may issue decrees about any matter, provided that they *“shall not run counter to the Constitution of the*

---

<sup>4</sup> Its first judges were selected in late 1991 by the Congress according to nominations by political factions or its committees and commissions (Henderson, 2008, p.494).

*Russian Federation and the federal laws*<sup>5</sup>. During the early phases of the political and economic transition, decree power facilitated the enactment of institutional change by the president. Formally, this legislative power of the executive is not constrained by major veto arenas, such as the parliament's lower and upper houses, but only by the Constitutional Court.

- **Veto.** The presidential veto may only be overridden by two-thirds of the members of the State Duma (lower house) and the Federation Council (upper house)<sup>6</sup>. All federal and constitutional laws, as well as constitutional amendments, must be signed by the president. The Federation Council can block legislation, but its vetoes may be overridden by two-thirds of the total members of the State Duma — it means that pro-president supermajorities in the lower house can *de facto* undermine the upper house veto powers<sup>7</sup>. In the meantime, the president may use significant minorities in the upper house to prevent the Duma's attempt to override presidential vetoes.

- **Appointment of the Prime Minister.** The prime minister is appointed by the president, with the consent of the State Duma<sup>8</sup>.

- **Formation and removal of cabinet.** The prime minister is responsible for forming the cabinet of ministers, with the consent of the president<sup>9</sup>. The president, in turn, may dismiss the entire cabinet, including the prime minister, irrespective of parliament consent<sup>10</sup>. In addition to the cabinet, one should mention the role of the Presidential Administration, a powerful organ — “the president's arm” — which deals with similar issues as the ministries, but is more oriented toward *politics* rather than *policies* (Makarenko, 2018, p.6). The constitution only postulates that the Administration is formed by the president<sup>11</sup>.

- **Dissolution of the parliament.** The Duma may be dissolved by the president in the following situations: if it thrice refuses the appointment of the prime minister; if it moves a vote of no confidence against the government twice in a period of three months; or if it expresses distrust of the government after being questioned by the prime minister<sup>12</sup>. Such devices have never been used, although in the 1990s they came close to be applied.

---

<sup>5</sup> Russian Federation's Constitution of 1993. Art. 90, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Const. Art. 107, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Const. Art. 105/5.

<sup>8</sup> Const. Art. 111.

<sup>9</sup> Const. Art. 112.

<sup>10</sup> Const. Art. 117.

<sup>11</sup> Const. Art. 83, “i”.

<sup>12</sup> Const. Art. 111 e 117.

- **Legislative initiative and constitutional amendments.** Both the president and the government (prime minister's cabinet) may present bills<sup>13</sup> (to the State Duma) and constitutional amendment proposals<sup>14</sup>. The amendment procedures demand a high level of consensus: it must be approved by at least three-fourths of the total number of the Federation Council members, two-thirds of the State Duma deputies, and be signed by the president. They come into force only after being approved by the legislative assemblies of no less than two thirds of the subfederal units.<sup>15</sup>

- **Federative issues.** The federal government counts on exclusive prerogatives on eighteen issues. Additionally, fourteen issues are under "joint jurisdiction" of the federal and subfederal governments, with no clear constitutional delimitation – the subfederal units were also endowed with residual powers over issues not specified in the constitution<sup>16</sup>. There are six kinds of subfederal units inherited from the Soviet ethno-federal system – republics, territories (*krai*), *oblasti* (areas), autonomous *oblasti*, autonomous districts and cities of federal significance –, but their constitutional powers are practically the same, except for the right of the republics to establish an official language alongside Russian and a local symbolic "constitution." All of them are equally represented by two senators in the Federation Council.

- **Constitutional review of governors' acts.** The president may suspend acts of the subfederal executive bodies that collide with the Constitution, the federal legislation, international commitments or individual rights and freedoms, until the competent court takes a final decision. This mechanism was used a few times in the 1990s<sup>17</sup>.

- **Constitutional supremacy.** The president "*is the guarantor of the Constitution of the Russian Federation, of the human and citizen rights and freedoms. [...] he shall adopt measures to protect the sovereignty of the Russian Federation, its independence and state integrity, ensure the coordinated functioning and interaction of all the bodies of state power*"<sup>18</sup>. In several countries this "guarantor" role and the constitutional review of governors' acts are assigned exclusively to a constitutional court.

In the Russian Constitution there are no details of how governors, mayors and members of the federal (deputies and senators) and

---

<sup>13</sup> Const. Art. 104.

<sup>14</sup> Const. Art.134.

<sup>15</sup> Const. Art. 108 and 136.

<sup>16</sup> Const. Art. 71, 72 and 73.

<sup>17</sup> Const. Art. 85.

<sup>18</sup> Const. Art. 80, 2.

regional legislature shall be elected, nor of the formation of political parties and the separation of powers at the subfederal level. Therefore, the rules of the political competition may be amended jointly by mere absolute majorities of the State Duma (lower house) and the Federation Council (upper house) or solely by qualified majorities of the State Duma.

In the following sections, it will be shown how the relations between branches and levels of power evolved under Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin.

#### **4. The Yeltsin second period (1994-1999): using decentralization to counterweigh the parliament**

While several countries in Eastern Europe passed through a process of “lustration,” in which leaders of the former communist regime were excluded from the new institutional settings, the political and economic transition in Russia, to a great extent, took place under the aegis of the former Soviet bureaucratic elites. Throughout the Yeltsin rule, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF) stood as a major party force in the State Duma and in several regional legislatures. Conversely, the executive’s minority position in parliament posed significant obstacles to the adoption of a weaker presidency and a stronger party system (Remington, 2010, p.37).

Apart from the parliamentary opposition, Yeltsin faced strong pressures from the subfederal elites, especially in the republics. Yet in 1991, some of them got the right to carry out popular elections for governor (“republic’s president”), as an extension of the Gorbachev’s institutional reforms and the strengthening of ethno-regional movements. In practice, informal agreements with the federal government conferred to them a special extra-constitutional status in the Russian system, recognized as a case of “asymmetric federalism” (Stepan, 2000).

Two republics played a major role in the federative bargaining process during the 1990s: Chechnya, which engaged in a separatist conflict and remained *de facto* independent for years, and Tatarstan, a region rich in oil resources that succeeded to negotiate a bilateral treaty with the federal government in 1994. In the subsequent years, other regions employed similar strategies: by 1996, 46 federal units had signed bilateral treaties with the central government, yet most of them played only a symbolic role, rather than conferring *de facto* regional autonomy powers (Ross, 2003). Such “negotiated” relations

contributed to undermine the constitution as a central guide to safeguard the rules of the political game, and created a situation of juridical conflict – the “wars of laws” – in which regional norms were adopted in opposition to federal and constitutional provisions, including measures constraining inter-regional trade and establishing local “citizenships.”

Several arrangements granted high bargaining power to regional elites within the federal legislative lower (Duma) and upper houses (Federation Council). Out of 450 Duma deputies, 225 were elected by a proportional closed-list system and 225 by a majority system in regional districts. In the first three Duma elections (1993, 1995 and 1999) almost a half of the majoritarian mandates were won by independent candidates (Makarenko, 2018, p.14). As many representatives were weakly bound to political parties — especially in the regional legislative assemblies — governors had greater room to co-opt them. Stepan (2000) holds that the low federalization of the party system provided scarce incentives for federal coordination among the subfederal units. He also emphasizes that the Federal Council was more of a blocking power in the hands of the subfederal elites than a legislative house.

The first legislature of the Federation Council (1994-1995) was directly elected by popular vote, which opened space for partisan politics. A new law<sup>19</sup>, supported by the executive, established that from 1996 onward there would be no more direct elections for the Council — the governors and speakers of the regional legislative assemblies would act directly as senators, strengthening the bargaining instruments of regional elites in federal politics. Yeltsin’s main motivation was to transform the Council into a non-partisan body that could counterbalance the communist opposition in the Duma (lower house), as well as garner wide support from regional elites in the upcoming presidential elections. Out of the 395 bills rejected or returned by the Council from 1996 to 2017, 184 (46.58%) were from the second Duma’s legislature (1996-1999)<sup>20</sup>.

The 1995 Duma election was marked by the victory of the Communist Party, which won 34.9% of the seats, while the pro-Kremlin party “Our Home – Russia” obtained only 12.2%<sup>21</sup>. Fearing an imminent victory of the communist leader Gennady Zyuganov and, thereby, a possible regression to a state-planned economy, the

---

<sup>19</sup> Federal law N. 192-FZ, 5 Dec. 1995.

<sup>20</sup> Statistika zakonodatel'nogo protsesssa. Gos. Duma. URL: [old.duma.gov.ru/legislative/statistics/](http://old.duma.gov.ru/legislative/statistics/) [last access: 20 Sept. 2018].

<sup>21</sup> Istoriya vyborov v Gos. Dumu v sovremennoy Rossii. Itar-Tass, 30 Nov. 2011. URL: <https://tass.ru/spravochnaya-informaciya/508433> [last access: 15 Sept. 2018].

representatives of the post-privatization business groups heavily invested in Yeltsin's 1996 presidential campaign. Some of these so-called "oligarchs" (= plutocrats; mainly the famous "Seven Bankers") had control over important mass media sources, such as television channels and national newspapers. Counting on all this support and other administrative resources, Boris Yeltsin defeated Zyuganov in the second round. This victory majorly contributed to the maximization of the oligarchs' influence in federal politics. Entrepreneurs like Boris Berezovskiy and Vladimir Gusinsky became part of the Kremlin's inner circle of decision-making, acting as informal veto players in the political system. With the privatization of state-owned enterprises and the weakening of the federal center, regional state power went into the hands of economic groups, some of which had never had any relation to the regions (Ivanov, 2008).

The federative bargain conducted by regional elites granted them significant dividends from the federal government. Turovskiy (2005) argued that the Russian federalism of the 1990s functioned as a real barrier to the entry of federal business groups into some subfederal units, since regional political and economic elites reinforced each other. Moreover, federal transfers were politically instrumentalized to coopt opposition regions (Treisman, 1996). The richest in natural resources, such as Tatarstan, Bashkortostan and Yakutia republics, managed to gain greater budgetary autonomy. Stepan (2000, p.141) holds that the federative game led to a low economic performance and to federal power deflation:

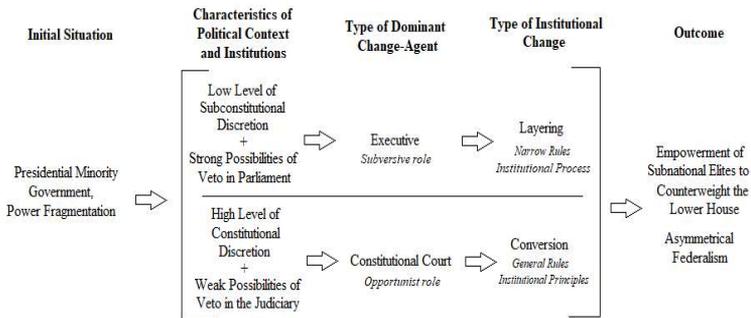
The competing and conflicting constitutions within the Russian Federation have contributed to a greater degree of *constitutional*, *aconstitutional* and *anticonstitutional* asymmetrical federalism than in any country in the world and to a degree of "market-eroding federalism" [...]. It has also contributed to a degree of non-implementation of the center's law that is unprecedented in any democratic federation.

The 1998 economic crisis severely weakened the government and gave impetus to the opposition forces. From March 1998 to August 1999, Yeltsin replaced the prime minister four times and was forced to make concessions aiming at containing pressures from the Duma, as impeachment attempts. The Chechen question and the various terrorist attacks promoted by separatists and religious extremists further deepened the government crisis. On 31 December 1999, physically and politically weakened, Yeltsin resigned from the presidential office.

In short, in a scenario of political antagonism, with high veto possibilities by different actors at the federal level and relatively low subconstitutional discretion, the president opted to adopt a *layering* strategy through executive decrees and formal accords with subfederal elites. Incremental changes in the federative institutions had a direct impact on the performance of federal institutions. Yeltsin had to empower subfederal executives both at the regional level in order to maximize electoral support and accommodate their demands, and at the federal level in order to mobilize the upper house (Federation Council) to countervail pressures from an antagonistic lower house (Duma). There were no major constitutional and subconstitutional rules on federative relations, thus the president was able to politically mobilize his interactions with the governors without facing strong possibilities of veto by other players.

The implementation of this strategy would be highly difficult without the consent of the Constitutional Court. Prior to the 1993 Constitution, the Court functioned as a veto player, but after being restored in 1994, it implemented a *conversion* strategy in the relations with the executive. Differently of the strong possibilities of veto in the legislature, the Court's decisions cannot be (at least formally) blocked. Baudoin (2006, p. 687) remarks that from 1992 to 1993, it "*reviewed the constitutionality of nine president acts, but from 1994 to November 2005 it reviewed only six of them. From 1994, the Court adopted a new approach towards presidential acts, based on the theory of implicit powers*". Dzmitryeva (2017, p.4) emphasizes that the legislation enacted after the 1993 constitutional crisis highly facilitated the empowerment of pro-president judges at the expense of the opposition ones: the Court was divided into two chambers, the number of judges was increased from 15 to 19, its competencies were narrowed, it was no longer allowed to decide cases on its own initiatives, nor to carry out judicial review to draft legislation.

**Chart 2. Institutional Change under Yeltsin (1993-1999)**



It should be mentioned that by “relatively low subconstitutional discretion” we mean the specific rules of the political game enshrined in common federal laws. In a comparative perspective, the constitution entails general rules with a broader scope, more open to discretion, while the subconstitutional laws contain more detailed rules and procedures.

## 5. The Putin period (2000-2018): using decentralization to counterweight the parliament

Yeltsin's resignation led his prime minister, Vladimir Putin, to power. In March 2000, Putin was elected in the first round of presidential elections with 53.43% of the votes, defeating the communist Gennady Zyuganov<sup>22</sup>. Putin is considered a *gosudarstvennik* (statist), supporter of a strong central state as a strategy for national economic and social modernization. Before becoming president, he had held bureaucratic positions in the KGB, the St. Petersburg prefecture, in the Presidential Administration and had been director of the Federal Security Service (FSB).

Addressing the popular commotion regarding the terrorist attacks of 1999<sup>23</sup>, Putin carried on military operations to retake the control of Chechnya. The relative success of the venture contributed

<sup>22</sup> Vybory Prezidenta RF 2000 g. TsIK, 5 Apr. 2000. URL: [http://cikrf.ru/banners/vib\\_arhiv/president/2000/](http://cikrf.ru/banners/vib_arhiv/president/2000/) [last access: 20 Oct. 2018].

<sup>23</sup> The apartment bombings of 1999 left almost three hundred casualties in Buynaksk, Moscow and Volgodonsk. Russian officials informed that the attacks were conducted by Chechen rebels. Nonetheless, the opposition blamed Putin and the security agency for planning the bombings in order to gain popular support for a new intervention in Chechnya.

to a rapid growth in his approval ratings. In addition, the rising oil prices in the international market created conditions for an economic recovery and provided the federal government with large resources to bargain with political and economic actors. Putin initiated a series of reforms that led to the centralization of the Russian political system, undermining the political role of the regional elites, the legislature and the oligarchs. The promotion of these transformations was greatly facilitated by the high presidential approval rating, the reduction in the legislature's fragmentation and the fragility of institutional checks to the rules of the political game.

Since the 1998 crisis, several regional players that previously opposed the Kremlin political course began to engage in a pro-centralist coalition as an attempt to overcome federative gridlocks:

the rise of Putin to the presidency (partly because he uses the military and holds the promise of being able to rebuild the state) increases the cost of playing an exit or even a non-cooperation game and probably will be seen by many subunit actors as increasing the benefits of playing a cooperative game. [...] many common citizens saw Putin as someone who could help end power deflation in Russia and continue with the post-August 1998 process of power creation (Stepan, 2000, p. 173).

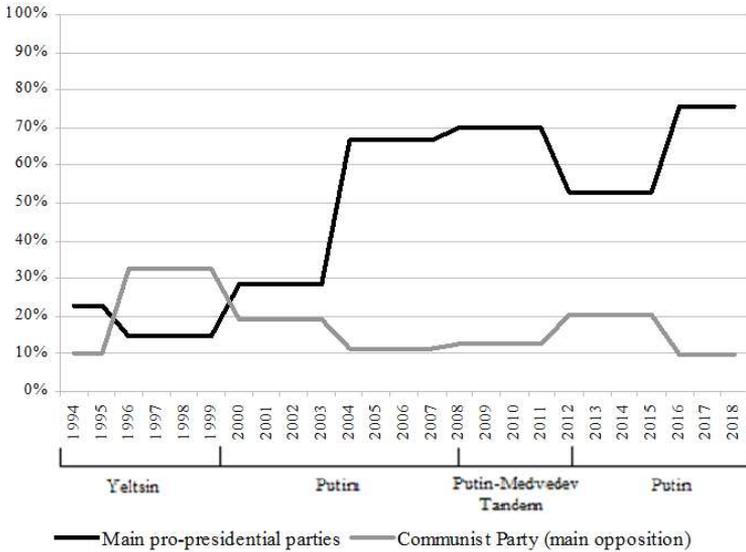
The subjugation of the legislature was strikingly facilitated by the "top-down" foundation of the "party of power" (United Russia) in December 2001, as a result of an elite's coalition between the pro-Kremlin bloc "Unity," which won 16.22% percent of seats in the 1999 Duma elections, and the "Fatherland – All Russia," which gained 15.11%. Independent deputies and representative from other blocs were also co-opted by the new party<sup>24</sup>. With this maneuver, the Kremlin succeeded to overthrow the Communist Party (21.11% of seats) from the Duma's head offices and committees. For the first time, the president could count on a strong and disciplined majority party within the parliament, which enhanced his strong institutional powers even more. Important economic policies were adopted in this period, such as the new tax legislation and the regulation of private ownership of agricultural lands (Makarenko, 2018, p.8).

After the 2003 Duma elections, United Russia managed to form a parliamentary bloc with 66.66% of the seats, against 11.55% of the Communist Party. Liberal parties did not pass the 5% barrier and were excluded from the federal legislature.

---

<sup>24</sup> Istoriya vyborov v Gos. Dumu [...].

**Chart 3. Party groups by proportion of seats at the beginning of each lower house's session <sup>25</sup>**



Source: data compiled from the Duma's official site and media sources<sup>26</sup>

Below we will examine the major reforms promoted by Putin through *displacement* and *layering* since 2000, especially those that have exerted direct impact on the rules of the political competition, as well as on the federative relations.

<sup>25</sup> By “main pro-presidential parties” we mean the party groups that officially supported the executive power in the Duma: “Democratic Choice of Russia” (group *Vybor Rossii*) and “Party of Russian Unity and Accord” (PRESS) after the 1993 elections, “Our Home — Russia” after 1995, Unity and “Fatherland — All Russia” after 1999, and “United Russia” since 2003. The data account for the proportion of seats only at the beginning of each legislative session – the sessions that started in December were rounded to the following year. The last session (7<sup>th</sup>) started in September 2016.

<sup>26</sup> Idem (Istoriya vyborov v Gos. Dumu [...]); “Edinaya Rossiya” teryaet konstitutsionnoe bolshinstvo v Dume. In: BBC, 5 Dec. 2011. URL: [https://www.bbc.com/russian/russia/2011/12/111128\\_russia\\_elections\\_start](https://www.bbc.com/russian/russia/2011/12/111128_russia_elections_start) [last access: 1 Oct. 2018]; Go. Duma. Fraktsii, 11.2018. URL: [duma.gov.ru/duma/factions/](http://duma.gov.ru/duma/factions/) [last access: 20 Nov. 2018].

## ***Centralization and federalization of the party system***

The multi-party system was introduced in 1990 after the abrogation of the sixth article of the 1977 Soviet Constitution, which had guaranteed the monopoly of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in the political system. The USSR law of 9 Oct. 1990 established that in order to found a political party (“social organization”) it was necessary the adhesion of at least five thousand members<sup>27</sup>. To accede to the State Duma, parties should overcome a 5% electoral threshold. This considerably liberal norm guided party dynamics during the 1990s.

In 2001, under the aegis of Putin, a new law “On Political Parties”<sup>28</sup> was adopted, prescribing stricter rules: in order to register and keep active a political party, it would be necessary to have at least ten thousand members and official divisions with not less than 100 members in more than half of the subfederal units. As an attempt to weaken regional elites and ethno-nationalist movements, regional, inter-regional, religious, ethnic and professional parties were banned.

In 2004, the minimum number of members was sharply raised to 50,000<sup>29</sup>, with divisions of not less than 500 members in more than half of the subfederal units. A new law in 2009 stipulated a reduction to 45,000 and 450 members from 2010, as well as to 40,000 and 400 members from 2012<sup>30</sup>. Earlier, a federal law passed in late 2002 raised the Duma's electoral barrier to 7% (one of the highest in the world) effective from the 2007 elections<sup>31</sup> onward. In protest against these measures, the Republican Party of Russia — which had its registration annulled after the legislation tightening — filed a suit in the European Court of Human Rights. In 2011, the Court ruled that the annulment was illegal and that the Russian party legislation did not meet European standards. According to the Federal Prosecutor's Office,

The European Court stressed that the requirement of a minimum number of members is a common practice in several member states of the Council of Europe. However, the requirements in Russia are the largest in Europe. The national legislation that set these standards have been amended several times in recent years, which [...] can be interpreted as an

---

<sup>27</sup> USSR Law N. 1708-13, 9 Oct. 1990.

<sup>28</sup> Federal law N. 95-FZ, 11 Jul. 2001.

<sup>29</sup> Federal law N. 168-FZ, 20 Dec. 2004.

<sup>30</sup> Federal law N. 168-FZ, 28 Apr. 2009.

<sup>31</sup> Federal law N. 175-FZ, 20 Dec. 2002.

attempt to manipulate electoral legislation for the benefit of the ruling party.<sup>32</sup>

In the process of “liberalization” initiated by Dmitry Medvedev in 2011, in compliance with the Court's decision, the barrier was reduced to 5%<sup>33</sup> (fully effective from the 2016 elections onward), the minimum number of members to form and maintain a party diminished to 500<sup>34</sup> and the Republican Party registration was reestablished. The opposition came to fear that this radical softening on the legislation would lead to the creation of “clone parties,” that is, the dissolution of the electorate among various small parties. In fact, from 2012 to 2018, the number of registered parties in the Ministry of Justice rose from 7 to 64<sup>35</sup>. For Alexey Makarkin (2013), in contemporary Russia there are two types of parties: the “spoilers,” which steal votes from the Communist Party (KPRF), and the “assistants,” which support the executive when necessary.

### ***Electoral Reforms***

The electoral reforms promoted by Putin helped reinforce both the verticalization and the federalization of political parties. Complementarily to the party system, the electoral system was transformed by *displacement* and *layering* strategies, without the need to promote any constitutional amendment (except for the enlargement in 2008 of the presidential term from 4 to 6 years, and the federal deputies' term from 4 to 5 years)<sup>36</sup>.

From 1993 to 2003, elections for the Duma were based on a mixed system: half of the deputies were elected by a closed list proportional system and half by a majority system. In a closed list proportional system, voters choose parties instead of candidates, which creates incentives for the institutionalization of political parties. In general, an electoral threshold is adopted to ensure that parties have a minimum significant representation. As we showed above, during the 1990s, the threshold was 5%. Parties that did not

---

<sup>32</sup> Informatsiya po delu “Respublikanskaya partiya Rossii protiv Rossii”. General'naya prokuratura RF. Moskva, 20.02.2012. URL: <http://genproc.gov.ru/documents/espch/document-75028/> [last access: 25 Sept. 2018].

<sup>33</sup> Federal law N. 287-FZ, 20 Oct. 2011.

<sup>34</sup> Federal law N. 28-FZ, 2 Apr. 2012.

<sup>35</sup> Spisok zaregistrovannikh pol. partiy. Minjust RF. URL: <http://minjust.ru/ru/nko/gosreg/partii/spisok> [last access: 18 Nov. 2018].

<sup>36</sup> To conduct both elections in separated years may benefit the executive.

reach this margin were not awarded a seat in the legislature. In turn, in a majority system, voters choose candidates in local districts, which may reinforce a more regional identification. Ideally, this system tends to strengthen the representatives' accountability to their constituencies. On the other hand, it may harm party discipline, enforce the influence of regional economic groups, and deepen territorial fragmentation, which in countries with large ethno-territorial cleavages may be perceived as a political threat to state integrity.

In the 1990s, part of the deputies elected by the majority system was weakly connected to federal parties. In regional legislative assemblies, party insertion was even more problematic: in some of them, all regional deputies were elected by a majority system. This phenomenon led to the consolidation of informal parliamentary groups controlled by governors. Consequently, the effective number of parties in the majoritarian system was much higher than in the proportional one (see chart 4). The figure of the "regional boss" was strengthened to the detriment of party federalization. Ross (2003, p.109) outlines that Russia's asymmetrical federalism made it very difficult for parties to establish strong unified structures, and party fragmentation had in turn intensified regional divisions.

In order to fight regionalism and encourage the penetration of federal parties in the subfederal units, in 2005 Putin promoted the replacement of the mixed system by an entirely proportional system for Duma elections<sup>37</sup>. In 2002 it was established that at least half of the representatives in the regional legislative assemblies should be elected by the proportional system<sup>38</sup>. In addition to the new party legislation and the formation of the United Russia, such strategy forced the insertion of regional elites into the "power vertical" system. The control of federal party leaders over regional party structures facilitated Putin's centralization project, but at the same time it weakened the accountability of representatives to their region. Many regions came to be represented by deputies who had never had any political ties to them.

The mixed system was re-established for the 2016 Duma elections. According to Putintsev and Kapitanova (2014), these constant changes are an evidence that in Russia the rules of the game are adjusted for the benefit of the "party of power": the 2004 reform reinforced the position of United Russia, as Vladimir Putin's high approval rating contributed to raise the party's competitiveness at the

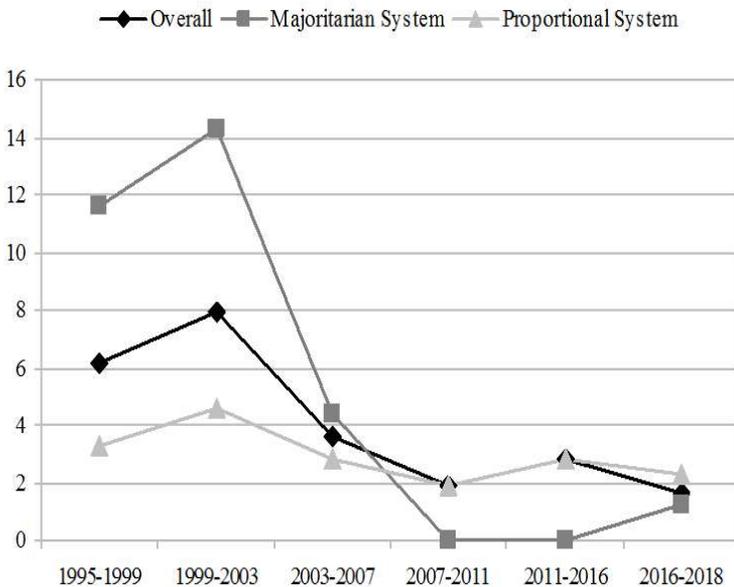
---

<sup>37</sup> Federal law N. 51-FZ, 18 May 2005.

<sup>38</sup> Federal law N. 107-FZ, 24 Jul. 2002.

federal level. Putin himself headed the party list in the 2007 Duma’s elections. Nonetheless, the party’s popularity gradually declined. The return to a mixed system, approved in 2014<sup>39</sup>, was a strategic decision to maintain its predominance in parliament. In fact, the United Russia was the only party that in the 2016 Duma elections obtained more seats through the majority system (203) than the proportional (140). Due to its administrative predominance in the regions, the effective number of parties in the majoritarian system was lower than the number in the proportional system — the contrary of the observed in the 1990s (chart 4). The control of regional elites could be maintained through the partisan hierarchical structure. This is evidence that the incumbent’s institutional preferences are not fixed and are likely to change as the political context evolves. Thus, it is more important to have flexibility in institutional arrangements, allowing *displacement* and *layering* structural adaptations at lower costs in order to keep power advantages in new scenarios, rather than a very favorable and steady initial arrangement. To a great extent, Putin’s reforms aimed at preserving large majorities in the lower house.

**Chart 4. Effective number of parties in the lower house immediately after the elections**



Source: data collected from Gallagher’s election indices dataset (2018)

<sup>39</sup> Federal law N. 20-FZ, 22 Feb. 2014.

Although today the effective number of parties is around two, in practice there are one dominant party and three relatively small systemic parties. This weak power fragmentation may harm the consolidation of *de facto* federalism. As Bednar, Eskridge and Ferejohn (1999) outline, in “structural federalism” the division of competencies among the center and the subfederal governments is enforced and protected not solely by legal provisions, but mostly by power fragmentation and an institutional equilibrium of checks and balances.

### ***Reforms of the Federation Council (upper house)***

One of the few provisions of the 1993 Constitution concerning the Federation Council's structure states that each region must be represented by two senators: one from the executive branch and the other from the legislative power. Except for the first legislature (1994-1996),<sup>40</sup> there was no constitutional prescribing whether these senators should be appointed or elected.

As mentioned earlier, a federal law passed in 1995 established that the senator's mandate should be taken by the governors and speakers of the regional legislative assemblies<sup>41</sup>. Yeltsin expected that an indirect selection of the Council's members would assist him to counterbalance the State Duma, controlled by the communists. Although in several cases the council supported Yeltsin, it became a “regional bosses' house”, where governors came to act as veto players in federal politics.

In order to remove the governors from federal politics and raise their accountability to Putin's central government, new procedures for the selection of the Council's members were adopted by a federal law in 2000: one representative would be elected by the regional legislative assembly and the other would be appointed by the governor (if there were no opposition by  $\frac{2}{3}$  or more of the regional assembly)<sup>42</sup>. As a result, governors and regional speakers were deprived of their parliamentary immunity, an important power resource in the Russian political system. In the first attempt, the Council tried to block the bill, but the lower house was able to override the veto. A joint (bicameral) commission reached an agreement on some of the issues. In fact, the Council did not have room to maneuver. It tried to block other important bills, but the pro-

---

<sup>40</sup> Russian Federation's Constitution of 1993. Concluding and transitional provisions, 7.

<sup>41</sup> Federal law N. 192-FZ, 5 Dec. 1995.

<sup>42</sup> Federal law N. 113-FZ, 5 Aug. 2000.

Putin Duma overrode the vetoes.

Many governors believed that they would be able to maintain their influence in the upper house by replacing representatives who did not follow their orders. 130 of 172 representatives were replaced between 2002 and 2004 (Ivanov, 2008, p. 89). Aiming to restrict this manoeuvre, the Kremlin promoted a new rule in 2004 that limited the cases of substitution<sup>43</sup>. Ross (2003, p. 113) claims that "*the upper chamber of the Russian parliament has become a passive, 'pocket' parliamentary body that is rapidly degenerating into an acoustic horn of Moscow in the regions, instead of being a defender of their interests at the federal level.*" As a "compensation" for the loss of governors' influence at the federal level, the executive founded in 2000 the State Council, an advisory body for regional lobbying in the federal government.

In 2012, a fourth substantial reform of the Federation Council was undertaken<sup>44</sup>. Since then, the representative of the regional legislative assembly must be one of its members, elected by the majority of the regional deputies whereas the regional executive representative (three possible names) must be announced in the electoral bulletin of the candidate for governor.

Finally, a constitutional amendment approved in 2014 allowed the president to appoint "representatives of the Russian Federation" to the Council, provided that the number of federal nominees does not exceed 10% of the total number of regional representatives<sup>45</sup>. Considering the difficulty of amending the constitution, the adoption of this measure evinces the high degree of "power vertical" consolidation. Indeed, these reforms are an indicative that the institutional changes have not been based solely on *displacement* and *layering* strategies, but also on *conversion*, since the federative constitutional provisions were partially ignored. Instead of engaging in a conflictive approach with the executive, by ruling the reforms as unconstitutional, the Constitutional Court opted to remain apart from the political discussions. The chart below shows how the Federation Council had its veto player role undermined in the beginning of the 2000s, when the construction of the vertical system took place.

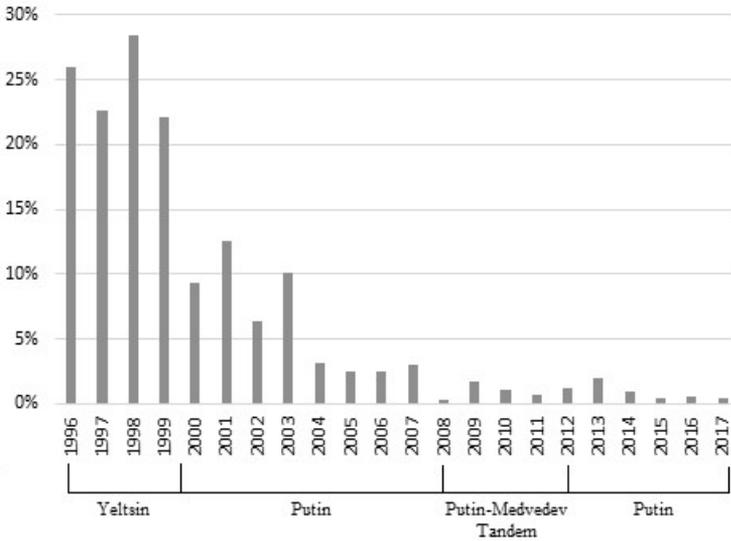
---

<sup>43</sup> Federal law N. 160-FZ, 16 Feb. 2004.

<sup>44</sup> Federal law N. 229-FZ, 3 Dec. 2012.

<sup>45</sup> Law of constitutional amendment N. 11-FKZ, 21 Jul. 2014.

**Chart 5. Percentage of bills vetoed or returned to the Duma by the Federation Council<sup>46</sup>**



Source: data compiled by the author from the Duma’s official website<sup>47</sup>

***Creation of federal districts, reform of polpredy and legal standardization***

In 1991 Yeltsin issued a decree creating the “plenipotentiary representatives of the president” in the *krai*, *oblasts*, autonomous *oblasts*, autonomous districts and cities of Moscow and Leningrad<sup>48</sup>. Associated with the Presidential Administration, Yeltsin's plenipotentiary representatives had the function of facilitating the interactions between the president and the regional legislative and executive bodies, supervising the observance of the federal legislation and the presidential resolutions, keeping the president informed on regional issues, proposing to him the interruption of governors’ acts that infringed the constitution, and even their dismissal from office.

According to Vitaliy Ivanov (2008), the appointment of representatives in the 1990s was agreed with the governors, which

<sup>46</sup> We took into consideration only the bills approved by the State Duma in the respective year. The Duma’s official website provides complete information on the laws adopted since 1996, thus, in most of the following charts we avoided to compile information prior to this date.

<sup>47</sup> Statistika zakonodatel'nogo protsesssa [...].

<sup>48</sup> Presidential order N.33-RP, 31 Aug. 1991.

led to their subordination to regional interests. Ross (2003, p.138) outlines that some “*bilateral treaties actually gave the governors the right to appoint their own presidential representatives or to approve presidential nominees*”. In order to strengthen the federal control over subfederal governments, Putin created in May 2000<sup>49</sup> seven (today eight) “federal districts” (macro-regions). Each of them incorporates a set of regions. They are supervised by the “plenipotentiary representatives of the president in the federal districts” (*polpredy*). Therefore the representatives were no longer dependent on a single region to fulfil their tasks. The new substitutes for the representatives in the regions further expanded control over the structures of regional governments and actively interacted with other federal organs in order to verify regional compliance with federal legislation.

Aiming at normalizing and organizing the Russian legal system, threatened by the “wars of laws” during the 1990s, regional divisions of the Prosecutor General’s Office aided the *polpredy* in the federal districts. Until the summer of 2001, “legal cleaning” took place in most of the regions, including the republics. Between 2000 and 2001, more than 7,700 violations of federal legislation were identified (Ivanov, 2008, p.64). Local protections for regional economic groups, which had functioned as barriers to inter-regional trade, were also diminished. From 2005 onward, the *polpredy* began to formally suggest candidates for the governor’s office to the president.

The *polpredy* reform contributed to *displace* regional institutions that had promoted a predatory “market-eroding federalism” and to integrate the regions into a nationally integrated economic space. Since it was based mainly on presidential decrees, there was no possibility of veto by opposition actors.

### ***Annulment of the federative bilateral treaties***

The 1993 Constitution stated that the delimitation of powers and competencies between the federal government and the regions should be carried out on the basis of the constitutional text itself, the Federative Treaty (1992) and other bilateral federative treaties<sup>50</sup>. However, it also established a hierarchy of norms: the constitution prevails over all other acts<sup>51</sup>, and it is up to the Constitutional Court to resolve the cases of conflict<sup>52</sup>. In practice, such a hierarchy was not

---

<sup>49</sup> Presidential decree N. 849, 13 May 2000.

<sup>50</sup> Const. Art. 11, 3.

<sup>51</sup> Const. Concluding and transitional provisions.

<sup>52</sup> Const. Art. 125.

respected for a long time. As previously mentioned, the signing of bilateral treaties between subfederal governments and the federal government in the 1990s was one of the main factors that led to the formation of an "asymmetric federalism" and the "wars of laws".

In 1999, when Putin was still prime minister, it was reaffirmed that all treaties should be in compliance with the constitutional norms. The new federative law<sup>53</sup> reinforced that treaties could contain only constitutional subjects of common competence between the federal government and the subfederal units, and prescribed new requirements for their approval. Another law passed in 2003<sup>54</sup> stipulated that all federative treaties must be approved by both the regional legislative assembly and the State Duma, in the form of a federal law, with a maximum term of ten years. By the autumn of 2003, 33 treaties (with 34 regions) had expired – some regions signed "corrected" versions, but they were not approved (Ivanov, 2008, p.127). Only Tatarstan succeeded in preparing a new treaty, approved in a second attempt in 2007, but it expired in 2017.

The annulment of the bilateral treaties represented one more *displacement* step to remove policy-making (*self-rule*) from the subfederal units.

### ***Cancellation of gubernatorial elections***

In the early 1990s, the vast majority of the heads of the regional executive, by exception of some republics, were appointed and dismissed by the president. In 1991, the Supreme Soviet passed a bill establishing direct elections for governor, but only in 1993 they took place, limited to a few regions. By means of decree, Yeltsin empowered the regional executives' chiefs before the regional legislative assemblies, which strengthened the governors' political supremacy in the subfederal units – indeed, the regional semi-presidentialism gradually became a strong presidentialism (Gel'man, 1998). In 1995, as an attempt to garner support from the regions for the 1996 presidential elections, Yeltsin issued a decree<sup>55</sup> stipulating direct gubernatorial elections in December 1996. Some regions were allowed to hold them prior to this date. The decree also laid down the deadlines for holding elections for the regional legislative assemblies and the municipal offices. Such facts evince how federative relations were excluded from constitutional politics. Both the regional

---

<sup>53</sup> Federal law N. 184-FZ, 6 Oct. 1999.

<sup>54</sup> Federal law N.95-FZ, 4 Jul. 2003.

<sup>55</sup> Presidential decree N.951, 17 Sept. 1995.

executive and legislative powers were formally subject to presidential decrees and common law bargains. To a great extent, the national legislature did not take part in the federative process.

In October 1999, the adoption of the aforementioned law on federative relations<sup>56</sup> led to the abolishment of the presidential appointment of governors and establishment of common rules to hold direct regional elections, with the exception of multiethnic Dagestan, whose executive head should be elected indirectly by the regional constitutional assembly<sup>57</sup>. This law actually became an unofficial “federation code,” stipulating the formal “rules of the game” for the interactions between regional branches of powers and the central government. Most federal reforms have been implemented through amendments to this law.

After the 2004 Beslan terrorist attack<sup>58</sup>, taking into account the popular commotion and the predominance of the ruling party in parliament, Putin promoted one of the most centralizing reforms of his “power verticalization” project – the cancellation of direct elections for governor<sup>59</sup>. According to the new procedures, the candidates for the regional executive would be presented by the president to the regional legislative assemblies, which in turn should approve or disapprove the appointment<sup>60</sup>. The new law also stipulated that the president could dissolve the regional parliament if it decided to refuse the indicated candidate.

Thanks to the predominance of the executive in the parliament and the removal of regional elites from the Federation Council, this ultra-centralizing measure was approved without great difficulties. In the State Duma, 79.6% of the deputies voted in favor. Even the votes of the United Russia solely (304 out of the 450 deputies) would be enough to approve it<sup>61</sup>. The only party that stood against the measure was the Communist: none of its 48 deputies supported the bill. In

---

<sup>56</sup> Federal law N. 184-FZ, 6 Oct. 1999.

<sup>57</sup> *Istoriya vyborov i naznacheniy rukovoditeley sub'yektov Rossii*. Tass, 07 Sept. 2018. URL: <https://tass.ru/info/5535044> [last access: 01 Oct. 2018].

<sup>58</sup> The Beslan school siege, promoted by radical Islamic militants in September 2004, left more than 300 people dead.

<sup>59</sup> Federal law N. 159-FZ, 11 Dec. 2004.

<sup>60</sup> In 2004 it was established that plenipotentiary representatives in their respective federal districts could suggest candidates for governor to the president. In 2005, this right was also conferred on the political parties represented in the regional assemblies. In 2009, the right was granted only to parties that have the majority of seats in their respective regional assemblies. Source: *Istoriya vyborov i naznacheniy [...]* [last access: 01 Oct. 2018].

<sup>61</sup> *Spravka o rezul'tatakh golosovaniya, proyekt № 93081-4*. Gos. Duma, 03 Dec. 2004. URL: [vote.duma.gov.ru/vote/54802](http://vote.duma.gov.ru/vote/54802) [last access: 20 Oct. 2018].

December 2005, the Constitutional Court ruled that the amendment was in accordance with the constitution<sup>62</sup>. In the words of Vitaliy Ivanov (2008, p.173), the reforms made possible the territorial integration of the country, since *“most governors no longer see themselves as ‘owners of their regions,’ but as ‘president’s men’; no longer as independent actors, but as ‘part of the system’; no longer as politicians, but as administrators and managers.”*

In May 2012, in the context of the liberalizing reforms introduced by Dmitry Medvedev after major political protests<sup>63</sup>, the return of direct elections for governor was endorsed<sup>64</sup>. The governor's term may last up to five years and only one consecutive re-election is allowed. Nonetheless, the new law established numerous requirements that in fact restricted the access to elections, such as the need to collect signatures from municipal deputies (the so-called “municipal filter”). The regions stipulate the number of signatures needed. In practice, that means that an opposition candidate depends on the support of United Russia’s municipal deputies. A new law<sup>65</sup> passed in April 2013 permitted the regions to hold indirect gubernatorial elections: each party with representation in the federal or regional legislature indicates up to three candidates to the president, who in turn chooses three of them and re-address the list to the regional assembly for a final decision.

Party centralization and federalization played a major role in the co-optation of the governors into the “power vertical” system. While in the 1990s the majority of the governors were not affiliated with any party, or had closer relations with the Communist Party, 76% of them are now<sup>66</sup> affiliated with or were indicated by the “ruling party”, United Russia. Only seven are members of the so-called “systemic opposition.”

### ***Other sources of “verticalization”***

In addition to the aforementioned reforms, Putin promoted the “verticalization” of other institutions, such as the judiciary, the police and the municipal administration.

Since 2001, the chairman of the Constitutional Court and his deputies should be appointed by the Federation Council after being

<sup>62</sup> Resolution of the Constitutional Court N. 13-P, 21 Dec. 2005.

<sup>63</sup> The 2011 and 2012 political protests were motivated by electoral frauds and the reelection of Vladimir Putin to a third presidential term.

<sup>64</sup> Federal law N. 40-FZ, 2 May 2012.

<sup>65</sup> Federal law N. 30-FZ, 2 Apr. 2013.

<sup>66</sup> October 2018.

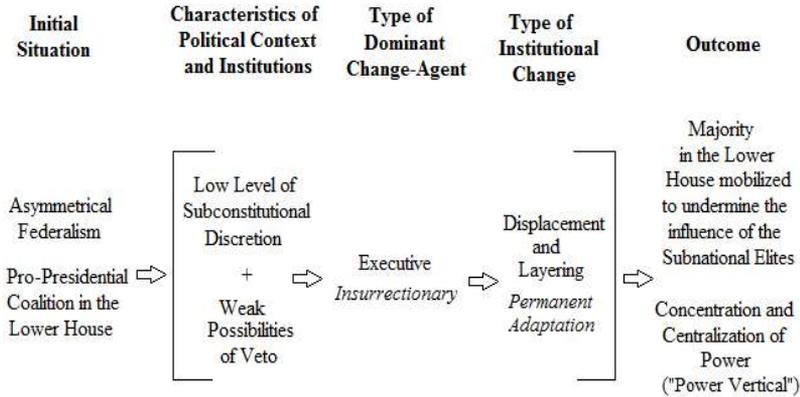
recommended by the president. According to Baudoin (2006, p. 685-686), the tumultuous experience in the period up to 1993 is still a constraint to the ruling of the Constitutional Court, especially after Putin's strengthening:

Until 2000, a great number of requests directly concerned the work of the institutions and consequently presented an openly conflicting character. [...] Since the President is supported by the loyal majority in Parliament, as is currently the case of Vladimir Putin with the support of *Edinaya Rossiya* [United Russia], the Court stands apart from political life. [...] The self-restraint of the Court reflects the spirit of the system. It is characterized, on the one hand, by the observance of silence with regard to the constitutional position of the President, and on the other hand, by a certain reserve with regard to the acts of the President, almost to the point of recognizing his absolute immunity from sanctions, even when his actions come under review.

Putin also undermined the political influence of the “oligarchs” — major informal veto players during the 1990s — depriving them of control over mass media channels and some key oil and gas companies. The arrest of Russia's biggest oligarch in 2003, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, accused of fraud, was one of the most sensational cases of the period.

The control over mass media sources has allowed Putin to prevent the “non-systemic” opposition to acquire political influence, while the statization of energy resources provided great revenues to the federal budget. Tax reforms and pressures on economic elites contributed to reducing tax evasion. Therefore, the federal government could count on sufficient resources to co-opt regional elites, distribute spoils to its supporting groups, and maintain its centralist governance.

**Chart 6. Institutional Change under Putin**

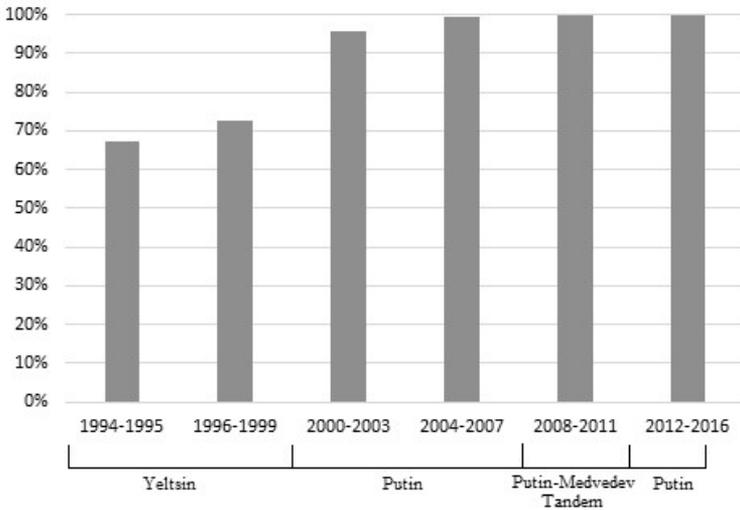


Finally, in chart 6 we summarize the trajectory of institutional change under Putin. In view of the transformations in the political context from “strong possibilities of veto” to “weak possibilities”, we saw a migration from a timid *layering* strategy under Yeltsin to a *displacement* strategy under Putin, as expected in the Mahoney and Thelen’s model. However, under Putin there were also recurrent *layering* changes, that is, gradual institutional adaptations to keep a highly advantageous political position to the executive power and the ruling party. For instance, we can mention the 2013 law allowing the regions to circumvent direct elections for governor. Additionally, the Constitutional Court maintained its *conversion* strategy, avoiding taking decisions against the executive’s will.

## 6. Evidences of the consolidation of the "power vertical"

The demobilization of institutional veto players may be noted through several institutional indicators. The chart below shows the number of laws signed by the president in relation to the total number of bills approved by the Duma since 1994.

**Chart 7. Proportion of laws signed by the president in relation to the total number of new bills approved by the State Duma in the period<sup>67</sup>**



Source: data compiled by the author from the Duma's official website and svpressa.ru<sup>68</sup>

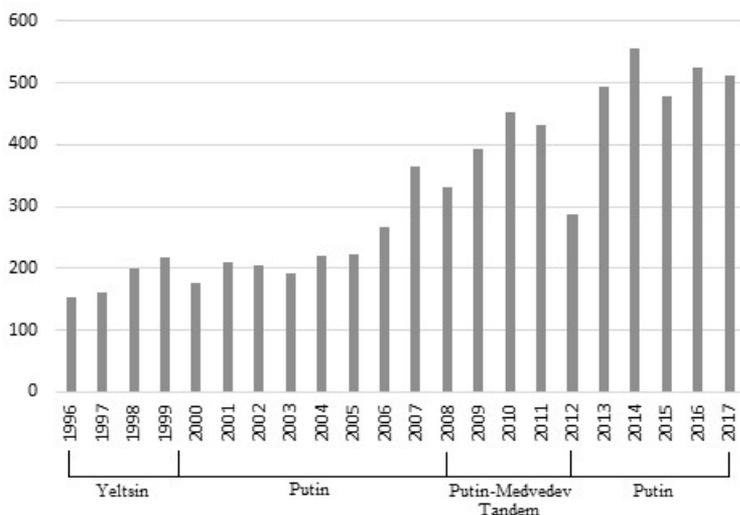
During the Yeltsin period, it was remarkable that the greater number of *de facto* veto players and the disagreement among political elites prevented a considerable amount of bills, approved by the State Duma, from concluding the entire legislative process — usually through vetoes of the president or the Federation Council (chart 5). In turn, even in the Vladimir Putin's first presidential term, the approval rating rose to more than 90%.

Another indicator that outlines the consequences of the “power vertical” is the annual amount of bills that underwent all stages of the legislative process and were signed by the president.

<sup>67</sup> We took into consideration only the bills that were firstly approved in each period. Bills that came from other periods to a second vote — due to vetoes by the Federation Council or the president — were not included.

<sup>68</sup> Statistika zakonodatel'nogo protsesssa [...]; 20 let Gosdume: degradatsiya ili evolyutsiya? In: Svobodnaya Pressa (Andrey Polunin). URL: <https://svpressa.ru/politic/article/80397/> [last access: 20 Sept. 2018].

**Chart 8. Number of adopted laws**



*Source: data compiled by the author from the Duma's official website<sup>69</sup>*

While in the final period of Yeltsin's rule (1996-1999) the average number of laws passed by year was 182, in the 2000s the rate rose to 272, and from 2010 to 2017 to 469. Such amount and celerity of approval shows that the Duma has increasingly become a “rubber stamp” parliament, granting free passage with little discussion to the executive's bills (Makarenko, 2018, p.8). The high degree of legislative productivity became especially noticeable from the fourth Duma's legislature (2003-2007) onward, when the ruling party "United Russia" won a super-qualified majority. In the words of the communist deputy Ivan Melnikov:

It was painful to note how in four years the deputies of United Russia interrupted any discussion, unanimously approved all that came from above by the Government and the President's Administration. [...] The people indeed lost the levers of influence on the ongoing politics.<sup>70</sup>

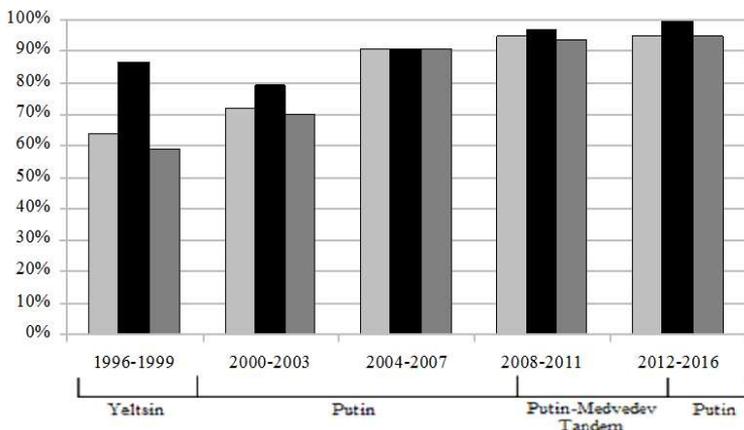
Looking at the success rate of the executive (chart 9), that is, the

<sup>69</sup> 310 laws came into force during the first Duma's session (1994-1995). Source: 20 let Gosdume: degradatsiya ili evolyutsiya? [...].

<sup>70</sup> I.I.Mel'nikov: Gos. Duma chetvertogo sozyva - ne byla parlamentom. Pavel Shcherbakov, press-sluzhba TSK KPRF, 16.11.2007. URL: <https://kprf.ru/dep/53079.html>. [last access: 18 Nov. 2018].

percentage of laws proposed by the president and the government (prime minister’s cabinet) that concluded the entire legislative process, we may observe that the rate was around 65% in the Yeltsin period, with a high imbalance between the bills proposed by the president and the government: while the latter usually dealt with unpopular policies, a great part of the bills proposed by the former concerned the ratification of international treaties. Since the consolidation of the United Russia in the fourth Duma the overall rate remained above 90%.

**Chart 9. Legislative success rate of the executive (president and government)<sup>71</sup>**

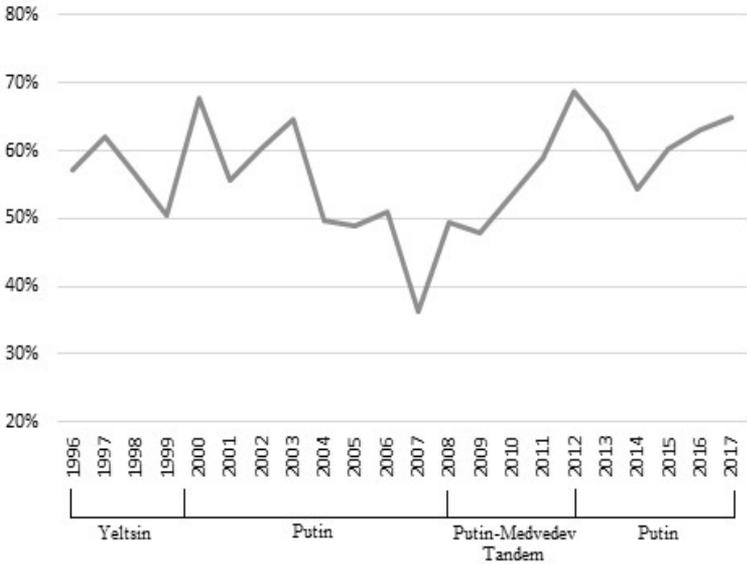


*Source: data compiled by the author from the website [sozd.parliament.gov.ru](http://sozd.parliament.gov.ru).*

The dominance of the executive in the legislature, specifically the ratio of laws proposed by the executive (president and government) in relation to the total amount of promulgated laws, indicates how strong the president’s agenda power is in parliament. The graph below shows that even in the 1990s the executive’s performance in the legislative process was considerably high.

<sup>71</sup> The rate consists of the number of adopted laws proposed by the executive (president and government) in relation to the total amount of legislative bills proposed by the executive. The reasons explaining why some bills did not conclude the legislative process in each period (vetoes, returning, withdrawal etc.) were not examined here.

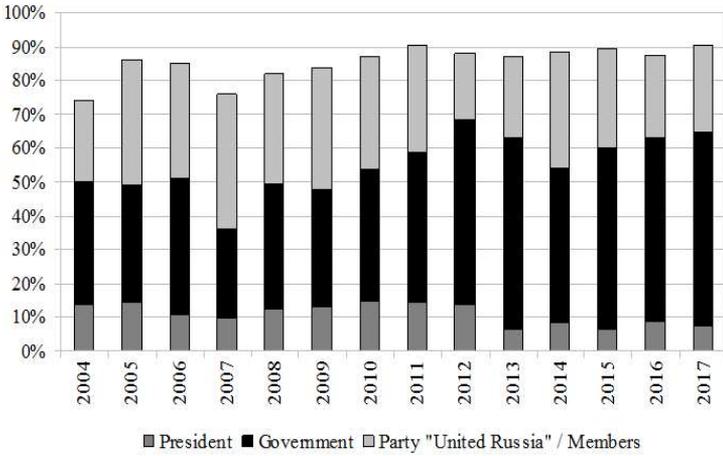
**Chart 10. Executive (president and government) dominance in the legislative**



*Source: data compiled by the author from the website [sozd.parliament.gov.ru](http://sozd.parliament.gov.ru)*

It seems that the fourth legislature saw a decline in the executive's legislative process. However, if we consider United Russia's bills as part of the executive agenda (chart 11), we can assert that the average dominance was around 80%. Since 2010, the index has been close to 90%. In its first years, United Russia gained space in the legislative process, but afterwards the government (prime minister's cabinet) recovered its predominance.

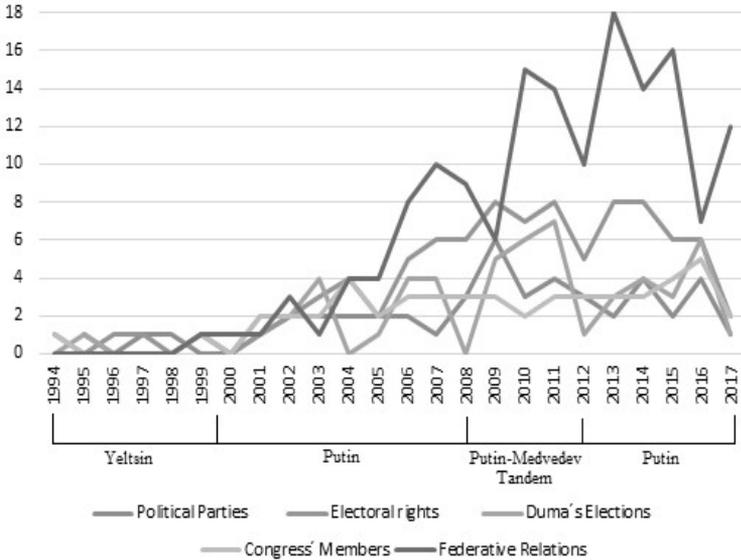
**Chart 11. Executive and ruling party dominance in the legislative**



Source: data compiled by the author from the website [sozd.parliament.gov.ru](http://sozd.parliament.gov.ru).

If we examine the norms related to the rules of the political game (chart 12), such as federal laws on political parties, electoral rights, elections for the lower house, members of the parliament (lower and upper house) and federative relations, we may notice that in 2001 there was a first significant increase in the number of reforms and amendments. In the following years, the predominance of the ruling party in parliament and the demobilization of other veto players allowed structural changes to become a recurring practice in the Russian political system, *i.e.*, a “permanent reformism” (adaptation) through *displacement* and *layering* strategies of institutional change. The 1999 federal law on federative relations was the most amended of all structural norms.

**Chart 12. Amount of adopted laws (including amendments) by subject**



Source: data compiled by the author from the website [pravo.gov.ru](http://pravo.gov.ru).<sup>72</sup>

Bednar, Eskridge and Ferejohn (1999, p.44) underline that *de facto* federalism depends on the capacity of a political system to prevent the central government from expanding its powers over the subfederal jurisdictions. Ideally, “juridical federalism”, based on norms and rules, must be complemented by “structural federalism”, sustained by power fragmentation. According to the authors:

Legal rules and institutions are particularly unlikely to succeed at preventing the national government from predatory jurisdictional expansion. The key to restraining such expansion is in the fragmentation of power within the national government which can prevent the formation of a legislative will. Fragmentation can be achieved by two ways: formally, by designing institutions that check the exercise of concerted

<sup>72</sup> The graph includes both the main laws on each subject and the laws amending them. Each law was counted as one unit. Main laws: (Political parties) Federal law N. 82-FZ - 19.05.1995, N. 95-FZ - 11.07.2001; (Electoral Rights) Federal law N. 56-FZ - 06.12.1994, N. 124-FZ - 19.09.1997, N. 67-FZ - 12.06.2002; (Duma's Elections) Federal law N. 90-FZ, 21.06.1995, N. 121-FZ - 24.06.1999, N. 175-FZ - 20.12.2002, N. 51-FZ - 18.05.2005, N.20-FZ - 22.02.2014; (Congress' Members) Federal law N. 3-FZ, 08.05.1994; (Federative relations) Federal law N. 184-FZ, 6.10.1999.

power, and informally, by inhibiting the formation of unified and disciplined political powers.

Indeed, the institutions designed after the breakup of the USSR did not manage to preserve the fragmentation of power. The arrangements adopted at the federal level were fundamental for the centralization of the federative relations, while the centralization aided the executive to keep permanent majorities in the federal legislature. There was bidirectional mutualism. In Ross's (2002, p.177) words, "*authoritarianism at the centre has been nourished by authoritarianism in the regions and vice versa. [...] Yeltsin and Putin, unlike Gorbachev, may have succeeded in maintaining the unity of the state, but only by sacrificing Russia's democratic transition*".

Apart from the Communist Party (KPRF), other parties, such as the LDPR, despite calling themselves "opposition", have voted in favor of most of the Kremlin's reforms. On the other hand, it is worth mentioning that even the KPRF has limited degree of contestation. The political forces that actually challenge the "power vertical" system are unable to accede to parliament either due to the Kremlin's administrative and media resources, or the lack of popular support and coordination among them. Boris Makarenko (2004, p. 17) points out that the centralization and weakness of the party system hinder the development of democratic institutions in Russia:

All parties (except for the KPRF), are fragilely accountable to their own constituents. Their regional and local structures are weak and play an insignificant role in party life, since their electoral success depends on how convincing is the "message" conveyed by the party's federal leaders. The underdevelopment of the party system is a strong constraint on political pluralism, hampers the formation of elites' succession mechanisms, and objectively precludes the maturing of a political discourse on the destiny of the country's development.

Based on the theoretical arguments by Gandhi and Przeworski (2007), we can assume that the "systemic parties" do not act as an arena of contestation, but indeed as an instrument of cooptation, information source on public preferences and political dissatisfaction channeling. After all, representative institutions matter even for hegemonic regimes.

## Conclusion

This paper highlighted how the combination of presidential strong constitutional powers and weak subconstitutional safeguards for the major political actors prevented erecting barriers against the political-economic reforms and granted the executive control over the transition process even in the face of an opposition parliament. Despite its rigid amendment procedures, the constitutional text established few protections to the rules of political competition, which were relegated to the congressional bargaining of common legislation. This structural flexibility diminished the costs for promoting reforms and facilitated the “verticalization” of the Russian political system through *layering* strategies of institutional change, when there were strong possibilities of veto, and regular *displacement*, when the possibilities were significantly weak. The main reforms promoted by the executive were implemented not by constitutional amendments, demanding supermajorities, but gradually by federal laws, which require solely absolute majorities in the legislature.

In the 1990s, Yeltsin empowered the subfederal elites through *layering* to counterweight his minority position in parliament. Conversely, in the 2000s, Putin used his majority support in parliament to undermine the influence of the subfederal elites on federal politics, through *displacement*, and to adapt the institutions for a long-term political advantage through a recurrent combination of *displacement* and *layering*. The “permanent reformism” of the rules of the political game indicates that institutional flexibility is frequently used by the executive to maintain political dominance and majorities support. In short, Putin's reforms aimed to demobilize three very influential veto players of the 1990s: the Communist Party, weakened by the creation of United Russia and party-electoral reforms; the regional elites, which lost influence both in federal and regional politics; and the “oligarchs”, informal actors who were partially deprived of their control of large media and natural resources.

To a great extent, the Russian case exemplifies five theoretical arguments: 1. Coordination gridlock among federal and regional elites (as in the “wars of laws” during the 1990s) may lead to governance crisis and, thereby, enhance their support (preferences) for centralist coalitions and strong institutions (as in the early Putin period). 2. The absence of strong requirements (*e.g.*, supermajorities) to promote changes in the rules of political competition may facilitate the adoption of *displacement* and *layering* strategies. In this scenario, only

high power fragmentation may prevent major transformations. 3. The absence of constitutional limits to institutional change reduces the costs to transform temporary majority support into long-term advantage for the incumbent, and thereby may facilitate the consolidation of a centralized hegemonic regime. 4. Institutional flexibility and fluidity may benefit the incumbent better than initial favorable and rigid arrangements, since the rules of the political competition may be recurrently adapted by amendments to common legislation in order to maximize the incumbent's advantages in different political contexts and the institutional preferences are not fixed. 5. Finally, as Bednar, Eskridge and Ferejohn (1999) assume, the absence of power fragmentation may hinder the consolidation of *de facto* federalism. Weak protections to federative institutions, allowing changes by mere absolute majorities or even presidential decrees, maximize the potential harmful effects of low power fragmentation and enhance the prospects for a predatory expansion of federal authority over regional issues.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Baudoin, Marie-Elisabeth, (2006). *Is the Constitutional Court the Last Bastion in Russia Against the Threat of Authoritarianism?*, in: Europe-Asia Studies, 58, Jg., p. 679-699.
- Bednar, Jenna, William N. Eskridge Jr., and John Ferejohn, (1999). *A Political Theory of Federalism*, in: John Ferejohn, Jack N. Ravoche, and Jonathan Riley (eds), *Constitutional Culture and Democratic Rule*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 223–269.
- Dzmitryieva, Aryna, (2017). *Case Selection in the Russian Constitutional Court: The Role of Legal Assistants*, in: Laws, MDPI, Open Access Journal, vol. 6(3), August, p. 1-23.
- Gallagher, Michael (2018). Election indices dataset.  
URL:[http://www.tcd.ie/Political\\_Science/people/michael\\_gallagher/ElSystems/Docts/ElectionIndices.pdf](http://www.tcd.ie/Political_Science/people/michael_gallagher/ElSystems/Docts/ElectionIndices.pdf) [last access: 01.nov.2018].
- Gandhi, Jennifer and Adam Przeworski, (2007). *Authoritarian Institutions and the Survival of Autocrats*, in: Comparative Political Studies, 40 (11), p. 1279-1301.
- Gel'man, Vladimir, (1998). *Regional'naya vlast' v sovremennoy Rossii: Instituty, rezhimy, i praktiki*, in: Polis, 1, p. 90-105.
- Henderson, Jane, (2008). *Making a Drama out of a Crisis: The Russian Constitutional Court and the Case of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union*, in: King's Law Journal, vol. 19, n. 3, p. 489-506.
- Huskey, Eugene, (1999). *The New Russian Political System*. Armonk,

- N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe. xii, 297 pp.
- Ivanov, Vitaliy, (2008). *Putinskiy federalizm: Tsentralizatorskiye reformy v Rossii v 2000–2008 godakh*. Moscow: Territoriya budushchego, 216 pp.
- Mahoney, James L., & Thelen, Kathleen, (2009). *A theory of gradual institutional change*. In: James Mahoney and Kathleen Thelen (eds.), *Explaining Institutional Change: Ambiguity, Agency, and Power*. Cambridge University Press, p. 1-37.
- Makarenko, Boris I., (2004). *Demokraticheskiy tranzit v Rossii*, in: *Mirovaya ekonomika i mezhdunarodnyye otnosheniya*, № 11, Moscow, p.44-58.
- Makarenko B.I, Bunin I.M., Zevina O.G., Makarkin A.V., Nazarova N.V., (2008). *Demokratiya: razvitiye rossiyskoy model*. Moscow: Biblioteka Instituta sovremennogo razvitiya, “Ekoinform”, 80 pp.
- Makarenko, Boris I., (2018). *Institutions of the Russian State: The Controversial Evolution*, in: Giancarlo Aragona (ed.), *La Russia Post-Sovietica: Dalla caduta del comunismo a Putin: storia della grande transizione*. Milano: Montodori, 196 pp.
- Makarkin, Aleksey, (2013). *Regional'nyye vybory – upravlyayemy plyuralizm*. In: *Ezhednevniy zhurnal*. URL: <http://www.ej.ru/?a=note&id=13191> [last access: 20.nov.2018].
- Morgan-Jones, Edward, (2010). *Constitutional Bargaining in Russia 1990-1993: Institutions and Uncertainty*. Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Routledge, 191 pp.
- Putintsev, Igor, and Kapitonova, Anastasya, (2014). *Komu vygodna reforma izbiratel'noy sistemy? Rossiya navsegda*. Tsentr nauchnoy politicheskoy mysli i ideologii, 25 fevr./ URL: <http://rusrand.ru/actuals/komu-vygodna-reforma-izbiratelnoy-sistemy> [last access: 05.may.2018].
- Remington, Thomas F., (2010). *Presidents and Parties: Leadership and Institution-Building in Post-Communist Russia*, in: Julie M. Newton, William J. Tompson (eds), *Institutions, Ideas and Leadership in Russian Politics*. St Antony's Series. London, Palgrave Macmillan, p.22-42.
- Ross, Cameron, (2003). *Federalism and democratisation in Russia*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 192 pp.
- Stepan, Alfred, (2000). *Russian Federalism in Comparative Perspective*, in: *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 16 (April-Jun), p.133-176.
- Teitel, Ruti (1994). *Post-Communist Constitutionalism: A Transitional Perspective*. *Columbia Human Rights Law Review*, 26, p. 167–190.
- Treisman, Daniel (1996). *The Politics of Intergovernmental Transfers in Post-Soviet Russia*, in: *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 26, N 3, p. 299–335.

- Tsebelis, George (1995). *Decision Making in Political Systems: Veto Players in Presidentialism, Parliamentarism, Multicameralism, and Multipartyism*, in: *British Journal of Political Science* 25, p. 289-326.
- Turovskiy, Rostislav, (2005). *Vlast' i biznes v regionakh Rossii: sovremennyye protsessy obnovleniya regional'noy elity*. In: *Regional'naya elita v sovremennoy Rossii*. Moscow: Fond "Liberal'nay missiya", p. 143-178.