

The Leopard's Guide To Understanding Russia:

The Transition to Democracy and the Free Market in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies

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The gravest charge against Western analysts of Russia in the 1990s is not so much that we often misinterpreted that country. After all, the collapse of Communism and the Soviet state was or appeared to be highly unprecedented, and up to a few years before most of the country had been largely isolated from the outside world. It was hardly surprising that so many of us were left thrashing about for models and frameworks of analysis, and ended with the simplest available.

A more serious indictment is that most so completely failed to examine the history of our own liberal capitalist system, even as Western governments and international financial institutions, with the enthusiastic support of most of the Western media, was seeking to introduce this system virtually overnight to Russia and the other former Soviet republics.

If they had looked even briefly at the global history of capitalism, they would have seen that where it has fully succeeded in developing a country economically and leading it to some form of true democracy, it has done so on the basis of a long and immensely complicated set of prior economic, social, institutional and cultural developments. As observed by many analysts, including

most notably Douglass C. North (who won the Nobel Prize for this perception) this process in Western Europe and especially England took four centuries and more.

As a result, countries which have undergone a fully successful transformation even over several decades remain in a small minority among the states of the world. Most states today are highly imperfect economic providers as far as the great mass of their populations are concerned, are highly corrupt, and have democratic systems which are often mere facades for the rule of predatory elites. And above all, what should have been noted was that the attempt to introduce a liberal capitalist system rapidly and by dictat in an unprepared, semi-collectivist society with weak traditions of social solidarity and social ethics has been almost invariably disastrous for much of the population, not just in the short term, but often for decades or centuries to come. Many societies have indeed never recovered from this blow; their social order has been riven and their cultural self-confidence destroyed.

In particular, there is rather a close parallel between the Russia of today and parts of Italy - and other liberal-ruled states - of the 19th Century; this applies above all to the processes by which the new elites acquired their wealth: in Russia, through privatisation of state property; in Italy, Spain, Mexico and elsewhere, through 'land reform'; in both cases, with the help of massive corruption, and under the ideological umbrella of a triumphalist liberal capitalism. We have seen all this before, and not once but many times.

The land reforms which in Italy, Spain, Mexico and elsewhere redistributed the lands of the Church, of the village communes, and of some of the great feudal landowners, have a very familiar ring to anyone who knows Russian privatisation. The social, political and economic consequences are with us to this day in Chiapas and other regions. And as in the case of Russia in recent years,

both local reformers and their foreign backers and advisers resolutely turned their eyes from the reality of what was happening, and justified privatisation not for any goods it was producing, but as an absolute good in itself.¹

In southern Italy, where the regimes first of Napoleon's satraps and then (after 1860) the new Italian kingdom introduced legislation to end feudalism and break up the great latifundias, the result was the same. Most of the peasantry was effectively excluded from participation by legal chicanery and high registration fees, and were also stripped of the common village land which they had held under the great estates. Together with the confiscation of Church property, this destroyed the two main institutions of social support for the rural poor.

The result was that the great bulk of the land was acquired by a small number of great magnates, whether the old feudatories themselves or new bourgeois proprietors - often civil servants of the Bonapartist government, like the two greatest owners in Calabria, who between them gained control of almost half the province.² Once again, this very notoriously did absolutely nothing to improve agricultural efficiency, let alone the general wellbeing of the population, which in many areas declined sharply as a result.

In other words, there is nothing very new about the way in which Russian public property was grabbed in the course of 'privatisation' (and if the result is only continued incompetence, exploitation of existing resources rather than new investment, and general economic stagnation, that will not be new either). It is exactly what has always happened over the past 200 years when a ruthless

¹ See Knight, *Mexican Revolution*, pp.94-97; Cumberland, *op cit*, p.204-210.

² See John A. Davis, 'The South, the Risorgimento and the Origins of the Southern Problem', and Adrian Lyttelton, 'Landlords, Peasants and the Limits of Liberalism', in the same volume.

liberal capitalist ideology, which is prepared to justify almost anything in the name of 'progress', combines with a corrupt bureaucracy and a weak legal order.

The greatest work of fiction written about such a "transition" is *The Leopard (Il Gattopardo)* by Giuseppe Tomasi, Prince of Lampedusa, most of which is set in Sicily in 1860, the year of the overthrow of the Bourbon monarchy and of the "vote" for unification with Italy. This work is indeed of greater use in understanding the Russian transition than most works on Russia. One phrase in particular is absolutely emblematic for the behaviour of the more intelligent (or cynical) sections of the Communist elites: when Prince Tancredi Falconeri justifies his joining the movement of Garibaldi to his more conservative uncle, he speaks of the need to make sure that the nobility's ascendancy passes on unchanged into the new liberal and national order: "If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change."

Several other passages and descriptions in *The Leopard* echo with bell-like clarity developments in the former Soviet Union in the 1990s: for example, the way in which the population's initial naïve faith in democracy is shattered by the comprehensive rigging of the referendum on unification by the new authorities under cover of a great flood of democratic, progressive and liberal rhetoric; and the way in which a new/old political middleman, Don Calogero Sedara, moves into control of the new state institutions (and the patronage they dispense) with the help of the local mafia:

Late that night the shutters on the balcony of the town hall were flung open and Don Calogero appeared...To the invisible crowd in the shadows below he announced that the plebiscite at Donnafugata had had the following results: Voters: 515; voting yes: 512; voting no: zero...

At this point calm descended on Don Fabrizio, who had finally solved the enigma; now he knew who had been killed at Donnafugata, at a hundred other

places, in the course of that night of dirty wind: a new-born babe, good faith. Just the very child who should have been cared for most, whose strengthening would have justified all the silly vandalisms...Six months before they used to hear a rough despotic voice saying "Do what I say or you're for it!" Now there was already an impression of such a threat being replaced by a money-lender's soapy tones: "But you signed it yourself, didn't you? Can't you see? It's quite clear. You must do as we say, for here are the IOUs. Your will is identical with mine." ⁱⁱ

A novel at a much lower level of artistic genius, but historically very revealing, is Federico de Roberto's *The Viceroys (I Vicere)* written only a generation after the events of 1860. It contains the thoroughly emblematic figure of Don Blasco Uzeda, a Benedictine monk from a leading local noble family in Catania. Before the liberal-national revolution, Don Blasco keeps three mistresses, and lives in fairly high style from the proceeds of his monastery's large property, while fervently supporting the Bourbon dynasty and the Papacy and denouncing the liberals and "heretics". During the revolution, Don Blasco disappears for a while, and when he reappears – surprise, surprise – he has become a fervent supporter of liberalism, of the House of Savoy, and of the Italian national state. When the land reform privatises the property of the Church and the peasant communes, he uses his old inside knowledge and his new political connections to acquire a large part of his former monastery's land at a knockdown price. Don Blasco Chernomyrdin, as you might say. ⁱⁱⁱ

The contemporary lessons of the transition in the former Kingdom of the Two Sicilies however go further than parallels concerning the nature of privatisation and the rapid and ostentatious debauching of the infant democracy. *The Leopard* is one of the most acute and powerful accounts ever written of the sudden marginalisation of a social order and culture which though poor had been self-sufficient and centred on itself, and now found itself the despised backward

fringe of a new “European” culture represented by northern Italy and northern Italian representatives in the South.

One Lombard deputy, Giuseppe Ferrari, argued at the time in the Italian parliament that this rush to replace southern traditions, institutions and laws was a mistake; that these were not in fact so bad compared to those of other countries, and should be preserved at least in part; and that the process of change should be a deliberate and considered one involving consultation with the southern population:

The laws of the Two Sicilies are very good and compare well with those of other civilised nations...yet you want Naples to submit unconditionally and immediately, with her eyes shut, to a kingdom whose laws are unsettled, whose finances are rocking, and whose administrative organisation seems to be a mystery even to the members of the cabinet themselves...Would it really be such a disaster if annexation were delayed for a month, even for a year? What misfortune would result if southerners were given the time to reflect on their own future?^{iv}

Ferrari was shouted down by the liberal majority. And far more typical, unfortunately, were the sentiments of the new Piedmontese liberal Governor of Naples, Luigi Farini,

It is a good thing that the deputies who have come here from Italian Italy will have seen what a hell-pit Naples is. It will enable them to be fair to us if we fail to turn swine into heroes...Oh if only our accursed civilisation didn't forbid floggings, cutting people's tongues out, and *noyades*. Then something would happen. We would have a clean slate and create a new people. The land is fertile, and the human animal is prolific here.^v

These charming lines were written by a man who doubtless sincerely considered himself a representative of humanity and progress, only months after a large number of southerners had revolted (albeit with confused and

complicated motives) against the Bourbons and in support of some form of unification and reform; and at a time when officials (including Farini himself) were indulging in an orgy of sententious rhetoric about the love of all Italians for each other and the Southerners' "Historic Choice for Italy".

In the words of the historian Gabriella Gribaudo,

When the Piedmontese administrators went south, they carried these images with them. The South was a happy land, kissed by the gods, favoured by the climate and the fruitfulness of the soil. Yet violence and anarchy reigned there because of the former rulers, the Bourbons. The good, rationalising, honest Piedmontese administration was going to solve everything. Once the tumour of Bourbon corruption had been excised, everything would return to the gentle and happy state promised by the natural environment. But when the Piedmontese realised that the Southerners were rebelling against them and rejecting them, they changed their tune and reverted to the idea of a paradise inhabited by devils. The Southerners had to be made happy even at gunpoint...^{vi}

Most damaging to the southern peasantry however was not the quasi-racist contempt and hatred of the new northern ascendancy, but the defection of their own elites and especially intelligentsia. The most ferocious work on the "African" masses of the Mezzogiorno, and the conscious or unconscious source for many subsequent popular quotes on the subject, was Alfredo Niceforo's *L'Italia Barbarica Contemporanea (The Barbarian Italy of Today)* of 1898, which contains explicit statements about the racial inferiority of the South – and Niceforo was a native-born Sicilian.

It is only at first sight however that this seems curious. For a national intelligentsia which has rejected its own past and previous identity but still knows itself to be despised by the "metropolitan" elites does not have a great many choices before it; and one of the most obvious is to itself adopt an ostentatious contempt for the majority of its own people. This identifies the intelligentsia with the dominant national or world elites and sets (or rather tries to) a clear line

between the “civilised” local intellectual elite and the local “barbarian” masses. The element of racist hatred is also easily explained, because the elites see these masses as the main obstacle to the acceptance and recognition by their metropolitan “betters” which they so desperately crave.

This then is a partial answer to the question asked by a previous speaker about Russia: “The East Europeans can move towards the West by rejecting Russia; but who can the Russians reject?” The answer is that the westernising elites at least can reject the mass of their own people. Much of the Moscow intelligentsia and economic elite’s talk of the contemptible and retrograde characteristics of the *meshchanie* or “Homo Sovieticus” are a rather close parallel with these liberal elite attitudes from previous periods in history and other parts of the world (of course, in Latin America, racist attitudes on the part of the elites are still extremely evident today – but there, they also reflect genuinely different racial descents).

For this reason, I always found the talk about Homo Sovieticus in the Moscow elites and intelligentsia deeply disturbing. Its racist overtones reflected a ruthless contempt for the great majority of the Russian people, with clear implications for policy; and indeed, when such sentiments were at their height around Moscow dinner tables, Homo Sovieticus (and especially his older, younger and otherwise vulnerable sections) was dying en masse of malnutrition and stress-related diseases, while his moral and intellectual “betters” looted the state, stuffed their pockets and their stomachs, and slashed spending on pensions, wages, health, and education. Now Homo Sovieticus’s faults are real, just as the faults of the south Italian peasantry were (and are) all too real. But their faults and their sufferings are unlikely to be improved by this kind of attitude from above, and the kind of social and economic policies to which it contributes.

These attitudes are no longer as directly dangerous to Russia and Russians as they were in the early and mid 1990s; but they remain very dangerous to Western journalists and other writers on Russia, all too many of whom are far too dependent on the metropolitan Russian intelligentsia for our information and our opinions. Like any hegemonic power, we are in constant danger from our informants telling us what they think we want to hear, and more importantly what they consciously or subconsciously believe will make them look good in our eyes. This is all the more true of course when as so often, the informants concerned are or desperately want to be employed by Western institutions.

Thus I have read recently essays by Russians in English on the continued popularity of President Putin which have indulged in attacks on the “slave mentality”, “love of autocracy” and “gullibility” of ordinary Russians, without ever mentioning the words “wages” and “pensions” – the punctual payment of which (in sharp contrast to the Yeltsin era) is mentioned by every opinion poll as one major reason for public support for the President; as it would be in similar circumstances in Paris, or London, or New York. An unwary reader might draw the implication that Homo Sovieticus does not have to buy his food, and that his natural diet is roots and grubs.

It took more than three quarters of a century after the unification of Italy for an Italian intellectual to make a real effort to understand and reflect the views and culture of the southern peasantry from within: Carlo Levi, in *Christ Stopped At Eboli*.^{vii} He was not a southerner, and did not go to the southern countryside voluntarily (he was exiled there by Mussolini). And on publication of the book, he was promptly attacked by other left-wing writers for daring to suggest that the Southern peasantry had a mind and views of its own. No, his progressive colleagues roundly declared, the only path for the ignorant southern masses was

to follow the lead of the northern proletariat, despite the fact that the interests of the latter were in many ways diametrically opposed to those of the South.

It is to be hoped that it will not take a century for it to be recognised by Western analysts and their Russian interlocuteurs that Homo Sovieticus cannot live off liberal slogans, and that if his understanding of his own interests is not perfect, it is not necessarily worse than that of a Moscow intellectual. His own shirt, after all, is closer to his skin.

ⁱ Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, *The Leopard*, translated by Archibald Colquhoun (Harvill, London 1996), p.21.

ⁱⁱ *ibid.*, pp.76-78.

ⁱⁱⁱ Federico de Roberto, *The Viceroy*s, translated by Archibald Colquhoun (Collins Harvill, London 1989).

^{iv} Giuseppe Ferrari, Speech to the Chamber of Deputies, October 8th 1860, republished in Dennis Mack Smith, *The Making of Italy 1796-1866* (MacMillan 1988), p.341-345.

^v Luigi Farini to the Minister of the Interior at Turin, December 12th, 1860. Republished in Mack Smith, *op cit.*, p.330-331.

^{vi} Gabriella Gribaudi, *Images of the South* in Robert Lumley and Jonathan Morris (eds), *The New History of the Italian South: The Mezzogiorno Revisited* (Exeter University Press, 1997), p.88-89.

^{vii} Carlo Levi, *Christ Stopped At Eboli*, (1945), translated F. Frenaye (London, 1967).