


Russia's Autocratic Resilience and the Sources of Political Change: Lankina's Estate Origins

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The Estate Origins of Democracy in Russia: From Imperial Bourgeoisie to Post-Communist Middle Class, by Tomila V. Lankina, Cambridge University Press, 2022, 496 pp., £29.99, (hardcover), ISBN 9781316512678.

In *Estate Origins*, Tomila Lankina sheds new light on the logic of persistence and resilience in the Russian social structure that shapes political possibilities in Russia to the present day. It is a wonderful and rewarding read on the historical origins of social requisites of democracy, such as greater civic activism and more pluralistic political competition. To understand variation in attitudinal and behavioral support for democracy in contemporary Russia, according to Lankina, we must go back to tsarist Russia's estate institutions. A set of institutions that codified the rights and privileges of different social groups, the estates system created incentives for an eclectic and growing stratum of urban dwellers known as *meshchane* to invest in education while simultaneously fostering the creation of institutional “infrastructures”—professions, educational institutions, charitable, civic, and local governance bodies—that retained during the communist period a degree of autonomy vis-à-vis the state. This, Lankina argues, allowed the *meshchane*'s distinct value orientations to persist over time.

Estate Origins thus also challenges a prominent thesis about the Soviet system's “leveling” impact on Russia's social hierarchy. While accounts of Soviet modernization often emphasize repressions of the previous class constellation and the dramatic, even chaotic, upward mobility of lower social strata during communism's early years, Lankina draws our attention to the significant continuities in what she calls the “submerged” (p. 42) social structures of the tsarist era. In appropriating existing social structures and institutions from the old estates system, communism did not just destroy. Lankina maintains that it created spaces in which the discreet charm of the bourgeoisie (that is, the proto-democratic attitudinal and behavioral orientations of the tsarist-era's *meshchane*) survived.

Estate Origins has beautiful breadth—in the broad sweep of Russian history that it covers, in the way that it telescopes from the particular social relations and structure of the Russian region of Samara to analyses that encompass and exploit the full range of variation across Russia's regions, and in its embrace of methodological pluralism. In one volume, Lankina presents evidence from historical ethnography, network analysis, large-N statistical analyses, and deep archival research.

Along with its breadth, *Estate Origins* has texture. It is richly detailed. It is filled with nuanced descriptions. In telling the stories of particular families, their networks, and their professions, it makes its story engaging and vivid. Its account of the pre-communist origins of Russia's post-communist society is meticulously written. And it is so clearly a labor of love—a work of personal biography and excavation.

The book makes several contributions and raises several further questions. For one, *Estate Origins* add to our understanding of the estate system's impact on Russia's political development—

a subject that has been less well-studied than the long-run impact of the estate system on Russia's social structure and status hierarchies. In this way, Lankina builds on work by Russian scholars such as Ovsey Shkaratan—with Vadim Radaev (e.g., Radaev & Shkaratan 1996), Gordei Yastrebov, (e.g., Shkaratan & Yastrebov 2008, 2010, 2011), and others—who argue that estate hierarchies laid the foundation for a differential system of rights and privileges that were based fundamentally on one's service to the state, and who document remarkably high intergenerational stability in Russians' social status. This “etacratism” social and political tradition (Shkaratan & Yastrebov 2010) persisted in Soviet Russia (corrupting its “socialist” development), and it persists in contemporary Russia, as when the connected go unpunished—their status before the law linked to their relation to the state, according to Shkaratan.

Estate Origins adds to this story evidence of the long-run persistence of values antithetical to this system of privilege by those in the *meshchane* estate—among them Old Believers, Jews, Germans, Poles, and other ‘outsiders’—who rather than directly serve the state like those in *sosloviye* above them, provided the ingenuity and vigor that spurred proto-capitalist development in tsarist Russia's urban centers and whose (often much-needed) expertise provided them leverage against the state in the Soviet period.

Even more importantly, Lankina builds a theoretical and empirical case for the survival of networks and institutions of the imperial period that served to *transmit* these advantages and orientations—the transmission belts so often absent from other accounts. In Samara, *meshchane* values were replicated in the university, the public library, the archives, the museum, and local government. In *Estate Origins*, Lankina devotes many pages (in Chapters 3–8) to documenting the reproduction of the tsarist-educated estates in the communist period. Without this attention to the mechanisms of transmission, the book's central thesis and evidence on the association of tsarist-era estate membership and contemporary, post-Soviet value orientations would be unconvincing. To an important degree, a causal interpretation of the book's key findings—that estate membership is associated with voting for parties favoring democratic reforms on the eve of the Bolshevik revolution and more than 60 years later in the 1990s with such markers of regional democracy as electoral competitiveness and press freedom—rests on the plausibility of these transmission mechanisms.

Estate Origins also offers a deep historical account of differentiation within the Russian middle class. Whereas recent work including my own book *The Autocratic Middle Class* (Rosenfeld 2021; see also, for example, Gontmakher and Ross 2015) substantiates the existence of significant heterogeneity in the regime preferences and political behavior of Russia's middle classes, Lankina crucially helps us to appreciate the historical sources of differentiation. Whether individuals opted for more or less state-dependent professional roles, Lankina underscores, depended in part on the social station they inherited from the estates system. Moreover, the distinctive democratic orientations of middle-class groups outside what Lankina calls the “state-engineered middle class” appear here to be a function not primarily of contemporary processes in which the upward mobility of rising groups is blocked by an overweening state (Ansell and Samuels 2014), but of long-run historical conditioning and outsider status.

Still, one might ask whether and how the mapping of such stark continuities, as Lankina undertakes, can help to explain change. The answer is not obvious, though the quandary is not unique to *Estate Origins*. Like other work on legacies and historical persistence, it is difficult to know where political change could come from in an argument that emphasizes such remarkable stability over the very long *durée*. In the extreme, the perspective is pessimistic: a static or frozen system (see, for example, Kordonsky 2016) in which social mobility is so circumscribed and cultural reproduction so perpetual that change, social and political, is unlikely.

Yet in Lankina's telling, some members of the *meshchane* estate found themselves incorporated into the state apparatus. Others resisted. Some that did allow themselves to be incorporated maintained their autonomy within state structures, choosing less ideological jobs or what she calls “an orientation of scrutiny” (p. 318). Meanwhile, some *meshchane* identified as “intelligentsia,”

while others did not. Thus, within this group alone, Lankina identifies significant heterogeneity, though she does not explore it.

In short, Lankina's account draws attention to the selection of some *meshchane* into more independent, autonomous, and even oppositional stances than others. It is important to understand this selection process better. Under what conditions were the *meshchane* cultural endowment and distinctive attitudinal orientation leveled in particular families and when did they survive? The question is not only pertinent for understanding the patterns of survival of "*meshchane* values" in the Soviet era; it is also pertinent to the present period of renewed attack on autonomous spaces of free expression in Russian society, and bears on the future of the legacy at the heart of Lankina's argument.

The title, "Estate Origins of Democracy in Russia," begs the question: What Democracy in Russia? Russia today is not a democracy, nor has it been one for most of the post-communist period. But while the title is deceiving, *Estate Origins'* argument is, nevertheless, germane to understanding Russia's autocratic resilience. What it shows is that the estates system created a deep fissure between the privileged and highly educated estates and the less educated rural and working masses of peasant estate origin. The Soviets reinscribed and even deepened antagonisms arising from the tsarist estates system, rather than level them. When Putin plays on resentment toward educated urbanites and cosmopolitans, he gains persuasive traction from inequalities of opportunity that have survived since tsarist times. Russia's contemporary autocratic regime exploits these antagonisms and this deep social divide, now more than ever since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine to perpetuate the *absence* of democracy in Russia.

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