

The State and the Frontier

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AN: What is it that makes Siberia an interesting place for a western scholar?

RF: I think for most westerners, Siberia is synonymous with isolation and remoteness, and that in itself makes it an object of fascination: when we think of Siberia, we think of exile, the gulag, of harsh weather and impossible distances. For a scholar in the social sciences, though, Siberia is interesting for a more specific reason, which is that it is a natural experiment in population resettlement. In Siberia we can study the effects of the movement of entire nationalities during the Stalinist era, for example the deportation of Kalmuks, Germans and Poles in the 1940s, or where entire cities such as Norilsk or Magadan have been founded by prisoners of the gulag system. Obviously, for ethical reasons we could never justify conducting such an experiment on purpose, but as it has happened, we can study its effects and learn a lot I think about how populations carry stocks of norms and values with them.

AN: And have your impressions of Siberia confirmed your expectations?

RF: In terms of my own personal experiences and impressions, one thing that I have to say has surprised me is the extent to which Siberia really has the feel of a frontier culture, a frontier society. In many ways I was reminded of those remote regions of the American or Canadian west, an Anchorage or a Calgary, where people are used to managing by themselves without waiting for approval from some distant capital to act. Even down to fairly small things, the way so many people have a residence in the forest, and some experience in hunting, or fishing, and winter sports, for example. There is really something about that vast openness you can see from the aeroplane as you land, which stretches into the city, into the suburbs, and into the people themselves – a certain ease and informality, a certain directness, a certain pragmatism. I suppose if you want to survive out here it can't be any other way.

AN: You mention survival, but is it really true that there is a still survival way of life here now? Eastern Siberia, thanks to its industrialisation and vast natural resources, is considered as one of the more developed regions of Russia, and there are plenty of distant and underpopulated territories in Russia with much harsher economic and climatic conditions. Eastern Siberia really stands out from territories of that kind, and not only in geographic and economic terms. If we look at the data on the Krasnoyarsk Territory and neighbouring Siberian territories from the UN human development reports on Russia, for example, in 2008 the Krasnoyarsk Territory was rated 11th among 80 Russian regions and the Tomsk region 6th. If we compare surveys of material wellbeing, we can see that in 2010 the proportion of people who can't afford everyday expenditures are only 28% in the Krasnoyarsk Territory and 30% in the Republic of Khakassia compared to 31% on average across Russia. So survival conditions don't really exist for people in the area.

RF: Right, and there I would say that what makes for a "frontier culture" is not the current level of material security, but the extent to which a settling people have had to survive historically under uncertain conditions, far from established centres of political authority. The American or Canadian west are also quite wealthy today, but what matters is that they were not so historically, and that experience has left a legacy in the culture that lasts until today. You'll know I'm sure the "frontier thesis" of Frederick Jackson Turner, an American anthropologist who, in the late nineteenth century, suggested that what made American identity and values was the experience of settling the western frontier -- as the settlers had to become more individualistic, more self-reliant, more aggressive, and more dependent on mutual cooperation than established government and hierarchy. I'm suggesting - and it is only a suggestion - that you find something similar in the culture of the Russian east, which likewise had to be settled and under quite precarious and uncertain conditions.

AN: I agree that clearly there are very specific features of the Siberian national character, mentality, and beliefs that have been shaped over the centuries. This phenomenon is widely described in Russian literature, dealt with either in sociological and historical publications. But I think two additional features are necessary to mention here: the history of settlement of this territory, and the multiethnic setting. The Krasnoyarsk territory is extremely varied in nationalities and minorities, and according to the official statistics, there are 157 ethnic groups in the Krasnoyarsk Territory. The largest are Ukrainians, Tatars, Germans, Azerbaijani, Belarussians, Chuvash, Armenian, Mordovians, Dolgans, Khakas and Tajiks. It was these historical circumstances that created a very special atmosphere for the formation of contemporary Siberians - not just the economic conditions of modern Russia.

RF: And I wouldn't disagree. I think in Siberia you clearly see this dynamic between a European settler population coming in over successive waves, and the many indigenous groups of the area. That is really as another fascinating similarity that Siberia has with the frontier zones of the north and south of the Americas. That coexistence may have contributed to the insecurity of life for the early settlers, though obviously, it doesn't mean that any more today.

AN: I think this idea of settling the "eastern frontier" in Russia might be illustrated with some data on the self-identification of the Siberian and Russian population. Most of the surveyed residents of the Krasnoyarsk territory and the Republic of Khakassia (59%) identify themselves with the village, town, or city in which they live. Less than a third (31%) of respondents identify with the region, and an even smaller proportion of respondents living in the Krasnoyarsk Territory identify themselves with Russia (17%). Meanwhile, more than half of the residents of the Krasnoyarsk Territory (57%) and the Republic of Khakassia (52%) consider the citizens of Moscow "distant strangers" – even more than their view of human beings in general (47% and 42%)! This shows that residents of Eastern Siberia are really characterized by anti-identification with the residents of Russia and its capital. This I think expresses a dissatisfaction with what is perceived to be the "colonial policy" of Moscow, though it has not yet developed into Siberian separatism. But identification with the "local homeland" is clearly seen, because people living in any other social space are often perceived as distant and alien.

RF: That's very interesting, and of course you see a similar 'anti-identification' among Americans, say in the South or the Midwest. But what you also see is a kind of assumption of being a 'true' American, in this case, against the apparently 'false' or even 'Europeanised' Americans of the

coastal regions, and I'd be interested to know whether something similar exists in the outlying regions of Russia.

AN: Well, I am reminded here of one discussion among European and American academics this summer, experts on the Soviet Union and the Post-Soviet space, whether Russian society sees itself as a European, Eurasian or even "Asiatic". I was astonished at some of the western colleagues' point of view that Russians can really consider themselves to be Asians. The term Eurasian is predominantly used by scholars in Russia, not by people expressing their identity. If you ask a person from Central Russia, or even from the Caucasus, a person from the Far East, then a Siberia person - who is he/she? I would imagine the common answer will still be "a European", not an Asian, and highly unlikely a "Eurasian". Actually that discussion surprised me with the idea that many western academics in social sciences don't see both the cultural variety of Russian society and its European roots, and don't realise its complicated identities. Of course, different identities co-exist and vary from one geographical area to another. But the fact that people had settled deep in the Eurasian part of Russia centuries ago doesn't make them automatically "Eurasians" or, strange to say, "Asians" in our perception.

RF: That makes sense in that the Russian Far East is a settler society, and settlers tend to take the identity of the place they are from, and not the place they have arrived. So given that Russia's settlers came from Europe, it is natural that they consider themselves European. The fact that the experience of the settlers on the frontier was shaped for a long time by their interactions with the 'native', and so to speak, 'Asiatic' populations they found there most likely only served to reinforce this self-perception.

The debate about whether Russia is a European, Asian, or 'Eurasian' society is of course a long one, and not one over which I have a strong opinion. In my lectures, though, I have argued that the defining feature of Eurasian societies, relative to the rest of the world, is the length of time that states have formed there, and from this we can explain a broad cluster of attributes such as greater deference to authority, hierarchy, higher levels of public order, the dominance of secular over religious authorities, or the acceptance of greater taxation and redistribution. By contrast, in settler societies, such as those of the Americas, Africa, or Australasia, a "frontier" culture predominates, as predicted by the Turner thesis, which is characterised by greater informality, individualism, enterprise, and the absence of fixed rules or boundaries.

AN: So does that make Russia a Eurasian or a frontier society?

RF: Well if there is an irony about my analysis it is that Russia, which is often touted as being at the core of something called 'Eurasia', is not really by my terms an ideal-typical 'Eurasian' society. A better candidate for this status would be somewhere like France, or Persia, or Japan, because these are long-established states with deep bureaucracies, fixed borders, strong national identities, and a more rooted sense of social solidarity. Russia, on the other hand, fits inbetween the state and the frontier. On one hand there is this long state history stretching back to Muscovy, the legacy of which you find in the intricacy of Russia's centralised bureaucracy, its elite educational or research institutions, or its military and surveillance apparatus. Yet the further you are from the 'centre' the more apparent it becomes that Russia is also a frontier society, a settler society, like the United States, Mexico, or Brazil, suffering from many of the same pathologies, such as localised political fiefdoms, pockets of criminal violence, indigenous territories over which the state has limited control, poor fiscal compliance, and so on. I know this is true of all states to some extent, but it is particularly the case for large states with distant and ungovernable frontiers, such as Russia, which I do find interesting.

AN: I'm interested to know whether you'd agree that, insofar as there is a specifically Siberian mentality that is shaped by the frontier experience, that distance from "the state" might be seen as an advantage rather than a weakness. The fact that from early times this region has been inhabited by migrants, who moved here either by their own will, or were exiled in different periods of Russian history, due to their cultural, national or religious identity, led to differences in the basic values and social beliefs of Siberians in comparison with Russians in general. Throughout the centuries the population of Eastern Siberia was known for its tolerance to other religions and cultures, its determination, its independence. Moreover, I even would say that people here are more open, direct and sincere in their everyday behaviour. Such things can be better seen and understood from qualitative experience than from quantitative data. For example, a couple of years ago a doctor of sociology from the Central European part of Russia came to Krasnoyarsk on a business trip, and she told an interesting story about how she had visited an open street market to buy local smoked fish, meat, vegetables and so on. She noticed that there was no open competition or rivalry between the owners of different stalls at the market - if she asked for another kind of fish, or cooked in different way, they recommended the goods of their rivals to her, sent her to other stalls without a purchase, etc. Despite individual ownership of a business, they helped each other and sold goods together, so she was amused and told us that it is hardly possible to imagine such a situation in Moscow or in the South of Russia. These positive peculiarities of Siberian society, this ethic of mutualism and cooperation, might also be explained by the conditions of the frontier.

RF: I think that is quite likely true, and of course there is this long tradition going back to de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* or Rousseau's *Second Discourse* arguing that the rough conditions endured by the settler in his natural environment might induce certain positive moral effects, insofar as they lead to a greater spirit of freedom, mutuality, or trust. Indeed, many of the writers who have studied the 'frontier culture', following in the tradition of Jackson Turner, have tended to see it as something which is fundamentally liberating and progressive.

Yet I have to say that I'm more qualified in my appraisal of the frontier culture. For one thing an ethic of self-defense can easily become an ethic of aggression, and the frontier is always a place of insecurity and violence - as is evident enough from the homicide figures here in Siberia. Meanwhile the same lack of hierarchy and bureaucratic order which allows for the flourishing of civil society, or networks of mutual support, also explains the existence of political clientelism, or organised criminal groups. Once you remove the state from people's lives you may easily end up with "bad" as well as "good" social capital, where the former is exclusive and directed to zero-sum advantage.

Thus in contrast to someone like Jackson Turner arguing for the benefits of frontier society, I would point to a thinker like Norbert Elias as making the positive case for "state society" -- insofar his "civilising process" is essentially a narrative about how the state's monopoly of control leads societies to a higher level of order, stability, peace, and cultural refinement. When American writers for example write about the appeal of the frontier, for example, they forget that throughout history, there have always been much larger numbers who have preferred the safe and staid formalities of London, Lisbon or St Petersburg, over a life on the American west, in Amazonia, or the Siberian steppe. There's no absolute criterion for preferring one to the other.

AN: So you don't have a preference?

RF: Well, it really depends – sometimes one, and sometimes the other. But perhaps the fact that I'm here, now, in Siberia, shows that at the very least I do find the "frontier" a truly fascinating place.