

Collective Identities in an Era of Transformations

Analysing developments in East and Central Europe
and the former Soviet Union

edited by

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seeking to identify and analyse these images, however, he shares a dilemma with the parliamentarians who are the focus of his inquiry. Given the absence of the Berlin Wall, where does one place the mirror in which the collective self is reflected? Where in the new political environment does the site of the Other begin that gives the collectivity its sense of self? Put differently, given the emergence of new constellations and actors in the place of the former Soviet Union and beyond, which collective selves are at issue?

Petersson assumes they are national selves, a logical approach when seen from the perspective of political science and foreign policy research, with its state-centric emphasis. Globalization theory, on the other hand, has tended to focus on the global/local axis, and has been more successful in dealing with the complexity of a continent unified by democratic norms yet tugged apart in a multitude of ethnic fragments. Petersson assumes that home, to his image-holders, is the 'Not Abroad'; the place where Russians (*russkie* and/or *rossiyane*, depending on the respondent) live. A globalization theorist, on the other hand, would probably expect to find it in the local (in this case, the regions within the Russian Federation).

The global-local linkage is a compelling version of the dialectic so palpably a characteristic of the era of transformation, but globalization theory's lack of grounding in empirical research means that satisfactory accounts of how these linkages actually *work* are conspicuous by their absence. Foreign policy theorists (especially of the 'first generation') have, for their part, tended to adopt either a macro perspective, attempting to discern grand patterns and model all-encompassing frameworks, or adopt a micro approach that obsessively charts the minute cognitive worlds of a handful of decision-makers. What has been lacking has been a concern for the middle groups—inhabiting the legislative, societal and cultural realm—and their relationship to external policy.

Petersson's study thus addresses a need in both discourses. The relationship between region and Russia is not yet developed in his chapter, and when he mentions it, he does so in terms of the centre-region dichotomy, which is not the same thing. Nevertheless, Petersson's empirical approach and attention to factors such as region and political affiliation, (however their impact on the sense of collective self is to be made sense of) provide insights into how the linkages highlighted in globalization theory could actually work. And his choice of research objects—parliamentarians from the Russian regions and capital—means that his results will yield information about one corner of the middle realm often overlooked in foreign policy theory, namely the legislative.

A key question remains, nevertheless. What is the link between the views of these middle realm parliamentarians and the national Self of which they have an

Comment:

Through the Looking Glass:

Alexa Robertson

An editorial in the Swedish broadsheet *Dagens Nyheter* in late 1996 compared Swedes, and their increasingly negative views of the European Union they had recently joined, with the citizens of the new democracies in Central and Eastern Europe, and their increasingly negative attitudes towards the West. The writer found an explanation for popular Swedish hostility to the EU "in the relation between *now and then*" and opined that refusal to live in the EU was a way of glorifying the proud Sweden of yesteryear. Succumbing to a comparable nostalgia, people in the fragmented communist world who had once seen themselves as prisoners, and who had glorified everything the West stood for, were finding the new world difficult to assimilate, and beginning to long for the security of the old Soviet era (Narti 1996).

Globalization theorists have drawn attention to a sense of dislocation that Featherstone has referred to as the "inability to find the way home, to return to the lost point of coherence and order." (Featherstone 1995:1). The Cold War, it is said, provided a framework that organized, shaped and contextualized understandings about the international environment, or what Walter Lippmann famously referred to as the "maps of the world" people have in their heads. Schlesinger has called the Cold War "an organizing grand narrative about democracy and totalitarianism, capitalism and socialism, freedom and repression" (Schlesinger 1997:369). The Berlin Wall served as a giant mirror, refracting that narrative in two different directions, differentiating 'Us' in the West/East from 'Them' in the East/West.

When that mirror shattered, and was swept away with the fragments of the polar division between East and West in the post-1989 period, the old certainties disappeared too. A common activity in the subsequent era of transformation has thus been, to borrow Featherstone's phrase, "finding the way home"—regaining a sense of self. Bo Petersson's study of collective self-images held by politicians in the epicentre of the collapse is therefore both astute and timely. In

image? "Individuals", Petersson writes, "are bearers of the national self-image, and there will be a multitude of national self-images" (Petersson in the present volume). But, I wonder, if people hold "the" national self-image (rather than "a" national self-image), how can there be a multitude of them? If the 'self' is Russia, surely there cannot be a different national self-image for every Russian interviewed? The image of Russia which Petersson seeks in the study reported here is one that individuals hold of the collective rather than a collectively-held image of the collectivity. Yet, for it to be a self-image, surely it must be the latter? At the very least, the interviewee must comprise some part of the 'self' in question, particularly given his status as representative of the people. It would thus be worthwhile knowing how Petersson's respondents view their place in the collectivity—their relationship to that of which they hold an image.

Consequently, while his attention to the 'meso' level often overlooked in both globalization and foreign policy theory is one of the strengths of Petersson's study, this reader hopes he will develop the linkage between the micro, meso and macro levels. This means attending to the linkage between the individual and the collectivity—a responsibility shared by all scholars interested in exploring questions of identity.

One author who is explicitly concerned with political responses to international change, and who is at pains to interweave the micro, meso and macro levels of analysis, has written of political-cultural identity as "*the creative response of groups to the structural circumstances enfolding the collectivity which they inhabit*" (Preston 1997:1). Like Petersson, Preston is concerned with ways of "*reading and reacting*" to structural opportunities that involve people "*locating their territory within shifting global structures*"—i.e. finding the way home. He claims that until the narrative of the Cold War was dismantled with the Berlin Wall, identity was a problem neither in everyday life nor for social scientific research. Can this be said of Russia, as well as of 'Western' experience and scholarship?

Given the nature of his material—living rather than documentary—there is no scope in Petersson's present study to investigate this; to analyse the evolution of self-images over time, or compare the views of his respondents with those of their counterparts in the 1970s or early 1980s. Nevertheless, he does include an historical element in his study, and this is to be welcomed. What Preston claims to be true in theory—that the "*business of memory is linked to the matter of change [...] traditions shift and change, and the past is invoked to explain and judge the present*" (*op. cit.* 63)—Petersson tests for in practice. The responses to his question about which historical periods could inspire Russian development in the future are among the more compelling parts of his chapter.

This, I would suggest, is due to images having both symbolic and epistemic functions, i.e. (as Aumont explains) they convey information about the world which facilitates knowledge of that world. If the relationship of the observer to the image is to be understood, then attention must be paid to the common knowledge prevailing in a specific historical moment and culture (Aumont 1997:53). This accords with Preston's view that collective identity has ultimately to do with "*the spread of understandings which are present as narratives available to [...] inform action*" (Preston 1997:65).

I am inclined to agree with these authors that, when dealing with image and identity, attention must be paid to the cultural as well as the political. Petersson defines national self-images in such a way that the adjective 'national' refers to "*the political community, i.e. the state*". If the image is positive, it is one that "*embraces and supports the idea, the institutions, and the external and internal policies of the state*" (Petersson in the present volume). This warrants further discussion, in my view. Surely the events of 1989 in Central and Eastern Europe (and, in the Polish case, the decade or more preceding them) warn against equating "political community" with "state"? And is the ambition of subtracting ethno-cultural components from the notion of political community realistic? The fact that the Russian Federation consists of 150 nationalities, as Petersson himself points out, could be seen as evidence of this, together with the fact that the polity is a federation rather than a nation-state. To define away the cultural element of the community may be to deny one of its essential features, and a significant way in which the current Russian project may differ from the failed Soviet one.

It is thus to be hoped that as this research progresses, Petersson will not overlook the intriguing possibility that a positive national self-image may be held by individuals who are deeply critical of the state. Space needs to be made in the definition of Russian self-image for the parliamentarian who has a positive image of his nation as the home of Dostoyevsky and Tchaikovsky (maybe even Eisenstein and Khachatryan), and of a people who have shown courage and forbearance in times of war, but who is deeply critical of the Russian political system, with its widespread corruption and inability to free the country from economic crisis. It does not appear unlikely that a number of Petersson's respondents could match this description. The decision to subtract the ethnic and the cultural from the notion of nationhood may mean ignoring a tension in Russian political identity that it would be more fruitful to unpack.

Just as I would argue that nationhood has to do with more than politics, so are images of the community and the Abroad that surrounds it more than responses to political events. As one sociologist put it, "*people create localised*

'realities' by endowing their experienced world with meaning" (Layder 1994:49). That they are nevertheless of interest to political scientists like Bo Petersson and myself is due to the distinct possibility that these meanings are generated and institutionalised by those in political power. As Preston puts it, memory may be a matter of personal coherence for individuals, but it is a matter of order and legitimisation for collectivities (Preston 1997:62).

What sense is thus to be made of Petersson's finding that more than half of the responses to his probe of the collective memory found the reigns of Peter and Catherine the Great and the Stolypin years to be a source of inspiration to the future development of Russia, while no one mentioned the Gorbachev era? What, as the *Dagens Nyheter* editorialist would put it, is the relation between now and then? What narrative has replaced that of the Cold War and who is the Other against which the Russian self is reflected?

The answer to the last question in particular is by no means self-evident, as Petersson's study clearly shows that the most acute threats to Russian security are now perceived as emanating from within, rather than abroad. This is a significant finding, if Bloom and Waever are right when they point out (cf. Petersson's chapter) that people who share and cherish a common identity will come together even more to defend themselves collectively against perceived threats. It will be interesting to find out who is "through the looking glass" when the national self-images of parliamentarians in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Volgograd and Khabarovsk are explored in Petersson's future work.

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Cultural and National Identification in Borderlands—Reflections on Eastern Central Europe

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In their empirical analyses and attempts at describing nation and nationalism, researchers cannot fail to notice the important part played in nation-building by borderlands. A constant interaction and confrontation takes place there between ethnic groups and cultures. Issues concerning the national and ethnic identity of individuals are continuously relevant and particularly vivid. The emergence of modern national ideologies has made many borderlands centres for national conflicts, places where national ideologies have been reshaped and have exercised a strong influence on all members of the nation, even those living in ethnically relatively homogeneous areas. It is no coincidence that many leaders of national movements and spokesmen for influential state ideologies in Central and Eastern Europe (and not only there) have their origins in borderlands or in ethnically mixed families. Such cases are the Pole J. Piłsudski, the Czech T. Masaryk, the Slovak L. Štúr, and the Hungarian S. Petőfi.

Cultural encounters in borderlands seem to lead to two parallel processes. On the one hand, distinct identities are clearly defined and strengthened. On the other, cultural limits are blurred, which results in cultural hybridisation and bi- or multilingualism. In such cases the individual's national identification becomes problematic. What seems obvious in a nationally homogeneous territory becomes highly complex in a borderland. When carrying out an empirical analysis of national identification in borderlands the researcher must abandon stereotypes on relationship between languages, ethnic origin, culture and national identity. In this context national identity appears all the clearer as a socio-psychological construction, the result of interaction between the individual, his/her choice to belong to a certain national community, and this national community's collective will to accept this person as "their own kind". The situation in borderlands reveals all the more clearly the 'nation' as a social and ideological artefact.