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1

Political Culture and Post-Communism

Stephen Whitefield

It is more than twenty years since the publication of Archie Brown and Jack Gray's *Political Culture and Political Change in Communist States* (Brown and Gray, 1977) and Archie Brown's *Political Culture and Communist Studies* (Brown, 1984a). While Communist power has in the interim largely receded into history, the premise of this book is that the need to consider the value of the concept of political culture in the face of post-Communist realities has not.

The study of political culture, as this book itself amply demonstrates, has never been monolithic conceptually or methodologically. But a similar set of questions confronts all those who have utilised a 'political culture' approach in their various ways. Should the conditions of post-Communism have an impact on the value we learned to assign to political culture as a result of these two important edited volumes, and indeed from many other writings by Brown and others that followed from the initial opening? Has our understanding of the value of political culture been significantly altered by the availability of greater information and data, and more importantly by the removal of many of the obstacles to free expression of cultural commitments by citizens of post-Communist states? How much, finally, has our estimation of the explanatory value of political culture to post-Communist conditions been affected by other developments in social science in the past twenty years, including not only developments in political culture research itself but also some of its conceptual alternatives that place greater emphasis on rational agency and the strategic environments in which individuals make choices?

Each of the chapters in the current volume engages in its own way with whether and how the insights into political culture that emerged in Communist studies may be updated and applied to post-Communist

conditions. Contributors were not asked to agree to a single definition of 'political culture' and readers will note differences across chapters in how authors conceptualise and engage with political culture research. These differences reflect the diversity of opinion within social science generally and within the political culture and post-Communist studies sub-disciplines.

Two very broad political culture perspectives – and two sceptical commentaries on them by Alexander and Pavel Lukin and by Stephen Welch – may be discerned in the chapters here, though each contribution contains considerable nuance and breadth of argument that tend to cross narrow conceptual boundaries. First, there are those (Stephen Whitefield and Jeffrey Hahn) who approach political culture as a *particular form* of individual-level social psychological attribute that can, in principle at least, be measured and tested for its relationship both to *other kinds* of psychological attributes and to overt political behaviour. (The manner of valid measurement and testing, of course, varies considerably across scholars who adopt this approach.) Political culture, from this perspective, has characteristics at the psychological level that make it comparable across countries; the research questions to be addressed, therefore, concern (i) whether political culture in any given context or situation is of empirical weight and (ii) the particular content of any operative cultural commitment. In the context of this book, therefore, these are questions about whether political culture, so understood, 'matters' in post-Communist conditions and, if so, about the kinds of cultural commitment that matter most.

By contrast, the second approach, favoured in this volume by Richard Sakwa, Charles King and Mary McAuley, tends to see political culture as a property of *social collectives* and embedded in the historically conditioned social practices and resources that define social meanings and possibilities of action for institutions and individuals that operate within these collectives. Studying political culture, from this perspective, is precisely to investigate the ways in which historical inheritances, both material and mental, shape the possibilities for change and development in social and institutional practices.

As is often the case, differences between these two positions can be overdrawn. (It is even known in social science and Russian studies for scholars to quarrel over such issues.) As editor of this volume, of course, I have had of necessity to see the value in both perspectives, despite the clear line of reasoning and evidence I bring to bear on the subject of political culture in the rest of this introduction and in my substantive empirical chapter. The desire for peace aside, however, it is important

not to lose sight of the commonalities and complementarities of these two broad approaches. While the first approach focuses on the psychological characteristics of political culture, it depends empirically on the sort of understanding of historically conditioned and socially located beliefs that can only come from the insights provided by practitioners of the second approach. And while the first approach focuses on individuals' attitudinal states, the second arguably can tell us much more about many aspects of the day-to-day practical and complex interactions among individuals within institutions (broadly defined). Therefore, while the next section advances an argument about the study of political culture in post-Communist conditions, – and, to some degree, *against* elements of the second approach – it does so fully cognisant of the need for a range of approaches to understanding complex social realities. Indeed, the book aims to demonstrate the scholarly value of both inter- and intra-disciplinarity.

An argument about political culture and post-Communist studies

Drawing on the first perspective just outlined, this section develops a set of propositions about the concept of political culture, the characteristics of post-Communism, and how the two may interact to affect the value of political culture as an explanatory tool.

The concept of political culture

The first set of propositions concerns the concept of political culture itself. These propositions aim at clarifying the application of the term and how it may be distinguished from alternative approaches explaining political attitudes and behaviour. To repeat: they are not claimed as the only way in which a political culture approach can be described, but they do strike the author as common to much of the classic social science research on the subject as it has developed from Almond and Verba (1963) and others, defensible conceptually, and importantly testable. They raise the general question: to what extent empirically does a political culture approach match up to its distinct theoretical claims?

Proposition 1.1: Political culture is two-sided – operating at the individual and the group level. As a subjective category, it is found in individuals as a set of psychological states and propensities. But to speak of an individual's political culture is conceptually senseless. The concept is only meaningful and useful if it can be observed as a property of a group,

whose members are defined as being of a common political culture by the fact that, as a result of shared political experience or historical conditioning, they also share cultural orientations (cf., Reisinger, 1995).

There has been some discussion about the psychological plausibility that individuals may share psychological orientations in the requisite way (cf., Schull, 1992), and this perspective certainly challenges an inter-subjective view of political culture. Proposed alternatives to the inter-subjective approach, therefore, focus more broadly on sets of social practices, common ways of speaking or behaving that can be recognised at the group level. However, by including too much in political culture, these behavioural accounts end up removing any clear distinction between political culture and other ways of explaining political orientations and behaviour. Either political culture becomes merely (thickly) descriptive or the weight of causation in producing shared attitudes and behaviour is found in political institutions that provide 'rational' and instrumental incentives to individuals to comply for reasons that obviate the need for a cultural approach.

Proposition 1.2: Political culture is concerned with fundamental normative orientations to the world that are in their very nature comparatively stable over time at the individual and group level (Eckstein, 1988). These shared orientations concern the most basic relationships to the social and political world and include views of the role of individuality versus community, equality versus hierarchy, order and stability versus change and innovation, right versus desert, and so on. Such orientations are learned by children under instruction from family, schools and other socialisation mechanisms, and the terms of instruction are frequently by reference to historical foci and ways of organising society – seminal events and (often invented) traditions that form bonds of group loyalty, institutional arrangements that become identified with national histories, and so on. Individuals tend subsequently to take in and process new information in ways that concur with their existing normative commitments. In this sense, political culture may be distinguished from rationalist (or instrumentalist) accounts of how individuals make political judgements. Naturally, people can abandon existing orientations to the world and may in the process acquire new ones, but this generally occurs only in conditions of very significant social and political change at the individual or group level. This does not mean that decision-making based on normative orientations is 'irrational' since these may offer an effective way to achieve co-ordination among individuals who might otherwise lack any mechanism for agreeing to common rules of social

engagement. But it does raise the possibility of groups operating with shared norms 'goose-stepping out of line', as they continue to apply norms that are inappropriate to changed conditions of the world, at least until political or social disaster strikes.

Proposition 1.3: The development of shared cultural orientations requires socialisation and so the groups to which we impute culture must be capable of sustaining the conditions necessary for normative orientations to emerge and be maintained. The sort of groups that may plausibly achieve this must therefore be relatively stable, defined and powerful. Modern states are the most obvious mechanism for cultural transmission but other formal and informal organisations with such capacities can be noted, including national and ethnic groups, local communities, social occupations and classes, educational institutions, religious groups, and others. In so far as membership in these groups may overlap, the relationship among political cultures may be complex, sometimes non-antagonistic and sometimes contested. With respect to political cultures, the modern state has been particularly jealous but its success in cultural homogenisation has been limited and has varied according to state capacity. Even in Communist states, where state capacity was in many ways high, its success in remoulding values was surprisingly limited (Brown and Gray, 1977; Brown, 1984a).

Proposition 1.4: A political culture approach does not maintain that all political beliefs or judgements – and especially in authoritarian states certainly not actions – should be culturally explained. Instead, its focus may be on the extent to which political acts – often carried out by a small elite group – are accepted and complied with, or rejected, by ordinary citizens. But for a political culture approach to be of value, it must hold that a significant range of such compliance/rejection behaviour can be better understood by reference to culture than, for example, by reference to institutional incentives. Importantly, it must also specify the conditions under which compliance for cultural reasons is likely to be the case.

In particular, people often operate and are therefore likely to have recourse to fundamental orientations about how to organise the political world in the following circumstances: when (i) the world is so confusing and information is so scarce that there are no other decision mechanisms readily available (Sniderman, Brody and Tetlock, 1991); or (ii) people find themselves in circumstances of open normative conflict (Rohrschneider and Whitefield, 2004). Conversely, people are less likely to rely on

normative orientations and to make 'rational' calculations in stable and information rich conditions where normative conflict is (comparatively) absent. The extent to which normative orientations are utilised, therefore, varies both across societies and across groups. Social classes differ in the extent to which they have access to and are able to process information, and therefore classes may differ in the extent of their reliance on cultural orientations in making decisions (Sniderman, Brody and Tetlock, 1991). This point, however, must clearly be distinguished from the claim that some groups may advance for the superiority of 'rational calculations', which should be seen as a cultural orientation of that group, one that is often highly contested by others.

The conditions of post-Communism

The second set of propositions concerns the conditions of post-Communism in Russia and many other states of the former Soviet that are of relevance to the points just made about political culture. As is the case in many fields, there can be disagreement about exactly what these conditions are, and indeed whether a common set of conditions exists at all (cf., King, 2000 and this volume), and so it is necessary to consider competing propositions. It is also important to note that these conditions may have changed in the now significant period of time that has elapsed since the Communist system and the Soviet Union collapsed.¹

Proposition 2.1: Russia and the other states of the Soviet Union have been involved in systemic change that relates to the economy, politics and state structures. In some of the new independent states, such as the Baltic countries, the outcome of this transformation has been the emergence and to a large degree the consolidation of democracy. In other states, the outcome of the transformation is – depending on viewpoint – still in process and certainly not consolidated, or alternately, has resulted in the emergence of an amalgam in varying degrees in different states of corrupt pseudo-market plutocracy and state authoritarianism. (Scholars have advanced a number of more succinct terms for this amalgam. See the discussion in Brown, 2001a.) In all cases, however, the Communist system with its distinct and comparable set of institutions and official ideology has largely collapsed – though in some countries and situations there are clear institutional legacies – with profound effects on the discourse of politics and most of all on how individuals engage in their daily lives.

Proposition 2.2: One important element in this systemic change has been the challenge posed to individuals and the new states by the collapse of the Soviet Union, with which many Soviet citizens strongly

identified. The newly independent states have emerged in conditions of varying availability of agreed post-Soviet national and state identities and many of them have lacked institutional capacities. While Russia and Russians have had some advantages in meeting this challenge because Russia was the clear successor state to the Soviet Union, Russians were also most likely to identify themselves as Soviet, and in part as a reflection on this, a large diaspora of Russians live outside Russia's borders in the newly independent states. The policy of the Russian state towards the newly independent states may have sent mixed messages to Russian citizens about Russia's 'historic space'. On the one hand, Russia has been willing to accept both EU and NATO membership and association for some states; on the other hand, it has continued to use hard and soft power in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in pursuit of its regional interests.

Proposition 2.3: Communist power notoriously operated to destroy civil society and even to 'atomise' individuals by inhibiting the organisation of social classes or local communities' homogenisation (Ossowski, 1963; Wesolowski, 1979; Connor, 1988). However, while there was a significant upsurge in civil society activity in the Gorbachev period, in many states including Russia a combination of economic and political pressure in the post-Soviet period has led to diminished social mobilisation (Lang-Pickvance, 1998), and greater organisation control by the state (Shevtsova, 2004). The decline in media independence may have abetted this tendency. At the level of social classes, the character of development is more difficult to ascertain. Certainly, a new Russian 'middle class' has to an extent emerged and social class appears to have become more important in shaping interests and even political behaviour in the 1990s, though this trend may have been stabilized subsequently (Evans and Whitefield, 2006). Class or occupational organisations such as trade unions or professional associations, however, have remained weak.

Proposition 2.4: The conditions of post-Communism, therefore, involve social, economic, political and national flux such that at all levels of life individuals have experienced great uncertainty, instability, confusion and in many cases fear – of economic hardship and unemployment, crime, medical failure, social disorder, displacement, repression and even war. The extent of this, naturally, has varied across countries and, importantly, over time. While the outcome of the transition has in many cases not been the establishment of democracies, in many states – though not all – economic, social, and political relationships and institutions have stabilised. Indeed, much of Putin's popularity may be

attributed to his success in stabilisation by comparison with the on-going conflict that was endemic to the politics of his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin (Whitefield, 2005a).

Political culture and post-Communism

How, then, might the conditions of post-Communism just outlined impact on the value of the concept of political culture to post-Communist Russia and the FSU? Are these conditions that would lead us to believe that the propositions about political culture developed above are more or less likely to apply than was the case under Communist Party rule? And what might be hypothesised from the conditions of post-Communism about the impact of political culture – by comparison with more narrowly ‘rational’ calculations – on the political attitudes and behaviour of Russians and other post-Communist citizens?

The answers to these questions, both theoretically and in the existing empirical literature, do not point in a single direction. But the points made above suggest ways in which cultural commitments might be of greater – and indeed also lesser – relevance to our understanding of the judgements and behaviour of Russians and other citizens of post-Communist states. Again, it is also important to take into account how the consolidation of the post-Soviet order may have impacted on the importance of cultural factors in explaining political attitudes and behaviour.

Arguments for the importance of political culture in post-Communist Russia and the former Soviet Union

In general, where political judgements are rooted in fundamental normative orientations, political culture explanations are likely to be of great value.

First, there is considerable evidence that Russians, along with citizens throughout the post-Communist world, see politics in highly normative terms and that political parties tend to frame political competition as about system-level differences, in particular in terms of the value of markets and democracy *per se* (Rohrschneider and Whitefield, 2004).

Second, the value of political culture accounts may be increased when competing norms are rooted in differing ‘fundamental foci of loyalty and identity’ associated with state structures that instantiate these competing norms. In Russia and Ukraine particularly, system level issues are linked to judgements about the very political and historical space that citizens inhabit (Whitefield, 2005b); what do they make of the Soviet past or the independence of the new states; with which state – old or new – do they identify?

Third, there is considerable evidence that citizens in post-Soviet Russia and other states hold strong and varied social identities. (This point is compatible with the fact that they are socially and politically disorganised and hold only weak partisan attachments – though these latter have grown somewhat over time.) Among these clear and strong identities are class, ethnic/national, and local attachments. People self-identify as workers, entrepreneurs or intelligentsia, as Russians, Tatars, Ukrainians, and others, or as from Crimea, West Ukraine, Moscow or St Petersburg. Weak formal organisation, therefore, may not have had as negative an effect on the capacity for socialisation of identities as might have been expected. Moreover, there is some evidence that these sub-national identities are also connected to fundamental normative orientations.

There may be competing explanations for why normative orientations should be so important. For some commentators, this may be a response to the difficulties of calculating ‘pay-offs’ in conditions of great uncertainty; alternately, it may be because of the very fact that system-level change is at stake, with major consequences for the operative norms of political and social institutions. Either way, however, in the strength of importance to fundamental normative stances, post-Communist citizens and parties differ from their counterparts in developed democracies where sectional, distributional, and incrementalist politics tend to dominate in both individual judgements about politics and parties’ electoral strategies. Where parties fail to provide cues about how to calculate pay-offs – as is the case with weak parties in Russia and many parts of the FSU – citizens may be even more likely to fall back on traditional beliefs about political and economic outcomes, and therefore, to relapse into conformist patterns of political behaviour.

Moreover, some evidence over time suggests that the strongly normative bases to citizens’ judgements have remained predominant (Rohrscheider and Whitefield, 2004). Indeed, it might be argued that because the operative means of deciding about political issues is about the value of different ways of organising political and economic life, self-interested ‘rationality’ is less likely to be a useful explanatory concept because it is precisely one of the norms that is being contested.

Arguments against the importance of political culture in post-Communist Russia and the former Soviet Union

Even if it is conceded that citizens in post-Communist Russia and the former Soviet Union have strong normative commitments that are related to national and sub-national identities, this is very far from making the case for their explanatory value to many important political

and social issues. One value of the political culture approach is in linking orientations to attitudes and political behaviour. For this, however, the evidence in post-Communist states is much weaker because intervening conditions that might aid in establishing these linkages are largely absent. Most obviously, many post-Soviet citizens may simply have much more pressing immediate interests that mean that they cannot afford to make judgements or act upon their normative beliefs – ‘first comes the food, then come the morals’. Alternately, citizens may have strong and contested normative orientations, but face the problem that they simply do not know how to apply them or how to act upon them in such new conditions. Norms may be useful in confusing circumstances, but that should not lead us to forget the confusion.

First, post-Soviet citizens are confronted with a range of practical issues that have arisen in the course of the transformation since 1991. These include issues that are relatively central to the politics of established democracies, such as tax and welfare policy, environmental regulation, foreign policy choices, crime and punishment issues, and others. Even if fundamental normative orientations may be the best way that Russians are able to make judgements about such complex issues, this does not mean that they are able thereby effectively to make sense of them. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that Russians have found many such issues not only confusing but increasingly so (Whitefield, 2003).

Second, organisations at various levels (parties, civil society and even the state itself) may be essential to developing citizens’ understanding of policy issues, but these have failed to work effectively in post-Communist Russia (Ryzhkov, 2004; Sestanovich, 2004; Fish, 2003) and other states. Organisations are most effective in helping citizens to relate norms to political outcomes when they are able to relate policies to the concrete interests of their constituents – and indeed it might be argued that until concrete interests are at stake, the trade offs that are inherent in policy choices will necessarily remain abstract and difficult for ordinary citizens. The link that is found in developed democracies between economic interests and specific policy choices appears lacking in many parts of the former Soviet Union – but this may be less because norms are so important and more a consequence of the weaknesses of organisations that are vital to developing coherent policy perspectives.

Third, the particular cultural orientations that have emerged, for example, in Russia from historical foci of identification may simply not be adequate to a range of new issues. There is evidence, for example, that public attitudes towards issues such as the death penalty, abortion, pornography, and homosexuality are much more likely to be understood

and structured by underlying normative orientations in Catholic societies in the post-Communist world – and of course in all Western societies since the emergence of the new politics of the 1960s – than they are in Russia where religious and recent political traditions are quite different (Whitefield, in preparation). In other words, Russian political culture historically may have simply failed to supply normative bases to aid citizens in integrating and responding to some issues that have emerged in post-Communist conditions.

Overview of the volume

Naturally, each of the propositions developed above about the concept of political culture, post-Communist conditions, and the possible explanatory value of political culture in such conditions may be subject to debate and legitimate disagreement. And indeed, the book shows the liveliness of the debate about these issues.

The first contribution by Alexander and Pavel Lukin poses a set of sceptical questions about many applications of political culture research that have relied upon certain assumptions about the authoritarian character of Russia's history. These questions apply equally to those who look at survey research to assess whether Russia has developed a 'democratic' political culture and to those who see in elements of Vladimir Putin's policies the heavy hand of Russia's authoritarian political culture and traditions. Drawing on recent Russian historiography, Lukin and Lukin argue that attempts to simplify Russian history and to sharply distinguish the country's development from other European states where democracy has been consolidated are highly problematic, and that contemporary authoritarianism, whether rooted in political culture or institutional interests, is not easily explained by the weight of Russian history.

This does not mean, as Richard Sakwa, Charles King, and Mary McAuley argue, that contemporary institutions operate unconstrained by historical cultural legacies, only that – following Lukin and Lukin – these legacies need to be explicated and clearly linked to the choices made by present day actors.

Historical cultural constraints may take a number of forms, which does not imply the absence of choice or contingency; as Richard Sakwa argues, 'there is always a choice of traditions from which to choose'. In his discussion of the problems of Russia's current efforts to deal with the economic and technological challenges posed by the West – which sort of effort has been ongoing in Russia over centuries – Sakwa points to the

ways in which historical legacies of governance and understanding have given rise to a 'third way' under Putin that entails a 'partial adaptation' which melds 'radical neo-liberal adaptation and reactionary traditionalism by forging a modernising traditionalist consensus'. The implementation of this 'third way', however, points to contemporary mechanisms that in many aspects reproduce central elements of Russia's political power structure.

Mary McAuley also deals with historical cultural constraints in a chapter that takes issue with what she sees as the inadequacies of both narrow rational choice institutionalism and narrow survey-based political culture research to explain the failures of post-Soviet institution-building. Quoting North (1990), she argues that material and cultural constraints 'embodied in customs, traditions, and codes of conduct ... not only connect the past with the present and the future, but provide us with a key to explaining the path of historical change'. These constraints are closely analysed to develop an understanding of the ways in which the Russian judiciary responded to efforts at reform since 1991 – ways often unanticipated by reformers who failed to take such cultural constraints seriously.

Charles King, in his chapter, develops the concept of 'culture-as-context'. Again, rejecting the psychological approach to political culture discussed above, King regards culture as a 'host of context-specific relationships, interactions, and institutions'. Thus, he takes the focus away from the individual agent and puts it on the communal conditions 'that may create and enhance perceptions, beliefs, and values but whose primary power lies in conditioning social action'. Taking post-Communist Eurasia as his comparative case, King investigates examples of political mobilisation that led in some circumstances to violence and in others did not and roots the differences in the variety of 'ensemble of texts' available to actors in different contexts.

Drawing mainly on evidence from experimental psychology that shows the malleability of attitudes under different measurement conditions, Stephen Welch sounds another sceptical note in his assessment of the value of attitudinal surveys as vehicles for the study of psychological states, including ones that are purportedly 'cultural' in character, that may be meaningful for political or other forms of action. These points serve as cautionary tales to survey practitioners like Jeffrey Hahn and myself and, of course, to readers of our chapters, though we argue that at least some of the force of Welch's criticism can be dissipated by use of a range of standard procedures in the best survey research, including

that undertaken for this book: careful questionnaire design and sampling to minimise bias; multiple measurement and reliability tests for key concepts; retests for stability of results; verification of concept validity against external measures and predicted consequences, and so on. As editor, however, I find it both ironic and refreshing that the preponderance of contributions to this volume stands as such ready evidence against the very 'disciplinary normalisation' about which Welch is rightly concerned.

The chapter by Whitefield utilises a narrower concept of political culture, conceived of – following Brown – as a set of 'fundamental normative orientations, including the historical foci of loyalty and identification that are shared by members of communities'. In line with the theoretical concerns addressed in the previous section, the chapter attempts to compare the relative impact of cultural versus alternative instrumental bases for state identity choice, and it provides statistical evidence that points in both directions; to the critical value of cultural orientations in initially shaping such choices, and to the importance of instrumental considerations for marginal changes over time in these choices. The chapter, therefore, shows both the extent and limits of one view of political culture for post-Communist conditions.

Jeffrey Hahn uses both surveys and focus groups to investigate how citizens of Yaroslavl' view local and national democracy and how these views have evolved since Hahn first surveyed opinion there in 1990. Using these longitudinal data, he is able to consider the extent to which the authoritarian tendencies evident in Putin's policies are reflected in a shift over time in the democratic values and assessments of Yaroslavl' citizens. Against the current of much of the literature, Hahn argues that citizens remain committed to a form of democracy, albeit one that is supportive of 'trustee leadership'. He also notes that these democratic commitments are for the most part unconnected with economically instrumental factors and thus, Hahn also infers support for the value of political culture in explaining Russians' attitudes to many aspects of democracy, though the character of these cultural commitments differs significantly from expectations of authoritarianism.

Given that the intellectual impetus for this book was found in the Brown and Gray (1977) and Brown (1984a) volumes, it is fortunate and apposite that Archie Brown should contribute the concluding chapter. Brown has continued to work on political culture over the years and his conclusion develops further his own (and our) understanding of the value of this concept in post-Communist Russia. His chapter demonstrates once again how important it is to consider political culture from a

multi-disciplinary and multi-methodological perspective, to treat political culture as part of a range of explanatory factors, including 'institutions, interests, leadership, power, and ideas', and to avoid the excesses of cultural (or other forms) of determinism in social science.

Note

1. Archie Brown has also, correctly in my view, pointed out that as a result of Gorbachev's policies the collapse of the Communist power preceded the collapse of the Soviet Union.

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