

Towards a Conceptual-Historical Critique of the Essentialist and Teleological Interpretations of Russian History*

Part 2

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Continuing to question some traditional historiographical theses, in this second part, the author discusses the common assertion that “popular” praxis is dependent on naïve belief in the benevolent tsar: on the contrary, the subjects of action adapt their beliefs to their needs. A still very influential historiography considers that illusions, naïve, popular, and false as well as passivity would constitute the plurisecular “mentality” of the Russian peasantry. But mentality is a category that is deficient in the explanation of historical dynamics, especially when it comes to change. Against the verdict “false” applied to the myth of the benevolent tsar, the author explains why a myth is neither true nor false and stresses that it should not be considered as a stage in a history of thought that would lead to a scholarly representation but it is necessary to understand its origin, its logic and the usefulness of its use by human beings, in particular its role in the production of modern political thought. Against the positivist historiography’s disdain for popular metaphors, the author highlights the “truth” of the autocratic system that this linguistic figure expresses and the permeability between metaphor and action. The study concludes by tracing, based on the material analyzed, Russian history’s own path towards a political modernity that by its reality inhibits the existence of any central modernity and situates the moment at which this Russian modernity appears in the light of day.

Keywords: resistance to power, popular/naïve monarchism, positivist historiography, essentialism, teleology, conceptual history

Продолжая подвергать сомнению некоторые традиционные историографические тезисы, во второй части своего исследования автор разбирает пространенное утверждение, что «народный» праксис зависит от наивной веры в доброго царя. По его мнению, напротив, субъекты действия адап-

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тируют свои верования к своим потребностям. Все еще очень влиятельная историография считает, что иллюзии, наивные, народные и ложные, а также пассивность составляют многовековую «ментальность» русского крестьянства. Но менталитет – это категория, дефицит которой проявляется в объяснении исторической динамики, особенно когда речь идет о переменах. Выступая против вердикта «ложный», вынесенного мифу о добром царе, автор объясняет, почему миф вообще не является ни истинным, ни ложным, и подчеркивает, что не следует рассматривать его как этап в истории мысли, который якобы должен привести к научному представлению, а вместо этого необходимо понять его происхождение, его логику и полезность его использования. Выясняется, в частности, его роль в производстве русской политической мысли модерна. Вопреки пренебрежительному отношению позитивистской историографии к народным метафорам, автор подчеркивает ту «правду» самодержавной системы, которую именно эта лингвистическая фигура ставит на вид, и проницаемость между метафорой и действием. В заключении на основе проанализированного материала обсуждается специфика пути русской истории к такому модерну, который своей реальностью подавляет само существование любого центрального универсального модерна вообще, и определяется момент, когда он появляется на свет.

Ключевые слова: сопротивление власти, народный/наивный монархизм, позитивистская историография, эссенциализм, телеология, концептуальная история

From “Naivety” to the Erasure of Historicity

Unsere Wissenschaft arbeitet unter
stillschweigende Vorgebot der *Teleologie*.¹

[Koselleck, 2000, p. 309]

Causal but unjustified explanation. While it is true that the characterization of the popular as naïve is a discriminatory *a priori* that results from thinking and evaluating the past through modern concepts, it is necessary to point out specifically the sterility and cognitive distortions to which this procedure leads. The idea that self-appointment is the *result* of “popular monarchism” has spread². But this thesis should involve a reflection on the relationship between praxis and belief. This causal relationship seems to conflict with the reasoning that, if we take Russian proverbs seriously, points at a *reciprocal* relationship: “Apply Faith to Deed, and Deed to Faith” (*Веру к делу применяй, а дело – к вере*). As Konovalova [Коновалова, с. 98] pointed out the peasant *commensurates* his actions with

¹ “Our discipline works under a tacit precept of *teleology*”, modified translation.

² “Popular monarchism in the tsarist period assumed three main forms: folklore about ‘good’ tsars, popular support for royal pretenders and ‘rebellions in the name of the tsar’” [Perrie, 1999, p. 157].

the sacred and the sin: “the examination of the peasantry’s actions from the ‘moral’ aspect deepens the understanding of the meaning and causes of peasant revolts” as peasants professed that same faith “only in those forms that corresponded to their interests” [Field, p. 212, 209]. Thus, in the well-known case of *samožvanets* Truzhenik (1732), the sources led me to conclude that indeed the action and interests of the *samožvanets* and the villagers drive the beliefs – not the other way around – and that these beliefs and the ritual worked in unison [Ingerflom, 2015, p. 286]. As early as 1930, against evolutionary ethnology, Wittgenstein wrote that when religious notions and rituals “go together, there the practice does not spring from the notion; instead they are simply both present” [Wittgenstein, p. 32]. In recent decades, to explain public behavior, anthropology precisely addresses belief as a praxis rather than making the latter a mere expression of the former [Schmitt, p. 14; Wirth, p. 113–176; Laham Cohen, p. 111–132].

The function of belief. At the same time, this change in the interpretation of the relationship between belief and praxis reopens the question of the very notion of “belief in the tsar”: it is time to leave the recurrent question about the sincerity of belief, not only because of the impossibility of answering³ it but because if the theoretical premises on which this question is based are not overcome, the *function* of that belief is not understood. Indeed, the question “did the people really believe in the inherent goodness of the tsar?” is based on the replacement of the logic of the ancient collective representations by our contemporary way of reasoning, an operation in which, as Paul Veyne has shown in a book with a meaningful title, the *historicity of the notion of truth disappears* [Veyne]. Regarding “collective beliefs”, the relevant question is not whether the actors believed or not: it is about the needs and interests of the believers.⁴ This mechanism operates in those who follow a self-appointed one even knowing him because he is a neighbor [Ингерфлом, 2020, с. 245–246, 408; Ingerflom, 2015, p. 303, 470].

Mentality or historicity? By reconstructing the function of belief, we recover the historicity of the agents’ behavior, which prevents us from isolating beliefs or ideas from social and political events. Historicity displaces the idealistic approach that attributes to ideas a multi-century continuity until 1905, or even beyond, up to Lenin, Stalin and today.⁵ Naïve-popular-wrong-illusions and consequent passivity would constitute the peasant mentality [Perrie, 1999, p. 67; Федоров, с. 140]. The introduction of the category “mentality” is significant because the assumptions on which it is based and its historiographic practice encourage the denial of

³ “We cannot appraise it” [Field, p. 212]. Perrie concedes that “may not be particularly productive even to rise such questions”, but only because they are “unanswerable” [Perrie, 1999, p. 163].

⁴ “What we have found in the ordeal is not a body of men acting on specific beliefs about the supernatural; we have found instead specific beliefs held in such a way as to enable a body of men to act” [Brown, p. 316–317].

⁵ For a defense of that continuity, see: [Современные концепции аграрного развития, с. 152; Наградов, с. 65; Perrie, 1999; Mamonova].

historicity: it is a category that has a deficit in the explanation of historical dynamics, especially of conflicts that produce *changes* [Chartier]. It is not by chance that the use of mentality is repeatedly accompanied by the adjective “traditional” and the references to “archetypes” or to “archaic” [Мироснов, с. 180, 238]⁶. Even when possible or actual changes in the collective representations of the monarch are not explicitly denied, the use of that category implicitly excludes them from the researcher’s horizon.

What role do ahistorical categories leave for research? As we saw previously, “popular monarchism” is considered the source of self-appointment. However, at the same time, it was attributed a function of depriving the latter, as a concept and phenomenon, of historicity, postulating that ideas adapt to historical changes, but retain their *unchanging semantic core*⁷: as noted above, popular monarchism remained “itself in virtually unchanged forms over some four centuries”, what “suggests that it belonged to a realm of ideas largely independent of mutable socio-economic or political-administrative structures” [Perrie, 1999, p. 167]. Beyond a mere accumulation of cases, what space does this neo-Kantian and idealist history of ideas leave for research? In the case of the naïve / popular / illusory Russian monarchism, there have been justifiably critical responses: a “primitive” treatment, a “superficial attention” [Мауль, с. 30]. The conceptual balance of the studies based on the “naïve monarchism of the masses” has been severe, but it is difficult not to agree with its author: “the matter usually did not go beyond the declaration, since the definition ‘naïve’ seemed to remove the problem itself” [Андреев]. Thus, the invocation of “naïve” and in many cases, of “popular” monarchism replaces and renders useless the hermeneutics of resistance to power by oppressed social sectors. In other words, the ahistorical premises close off the very possibilities of the investigation.

The Myth of the Tsar

Да ведь путь и не назначен...
Если б человечество шло прямо
к какому-нибудь результату,
тогда истории не было бы,
а была бы логика... Libretto нет
[Герцен, с. 35–36]

The “myth of the tsar” or “popular monarchism” corresponds to what traditional historiography used to call “naïve monarchism” or “monarchist illusions of the peasant masses” [Perrie, 1999, p. 156]. Field’s remark on the

⁶ See the association of “mentality”, “traditional” and “naïve monarchism” in the same sentence: [Романов, с. 62].

⁷ Example: with the arrival of Lenin to power, “naïve monarchism” would have turned into “naïve leaderism (*vozhdizm*)” [Костров, с. 3].

parallel between the myth of Christianity and the myth of the tsar suggests that he refers to a myth *strictu sensu* without excluding its use as a quasi-metaphor to point out a mistaken idea [Field, p. 13]. Myth, belief, faith, popular illusions, naïve monarchism, popular naïve monarchism appear as equivalent terms [Ibid., p. 5, 25; Perrie, 1999, p. 156; Шульга, с. 99]. Its diversity is overcome by the adjective “false” – “the myth of the tsar was false” – that, inevitably, reduces understanding to glosses on naivety and illusions. “The myth of the (benevolent) tsar” is an inevitable formula in almost any text on popular resistance in Russian history. When historiography added the direct object “false” to it, the formula acquired the charm of the quickly heuristic pretension: it is transparent, convenient to use, everyone understands it and, most importantly, no longer needs to think and try to understand why for three centuries a people clung to a “false” idea. The adjective “false” prevents the researcher from being surprised. She or he no longer needs to look for a serious answer to the indispensable questions. Why do the people again and again reiterate this form of resistance, even in cases when the peasants know the self-appointed tsar, tsarevich or prophet, since they are neighbors? Why, knowing the risk they run, do they support them and participate in the local riots that end as always, with villages looted by tsarist troops, peasants who only wielded an icon shot at close range or sent to Siberia, rebels impaled ... By adding the term “false”, which functions as an equivalent of “naïve”, historiography recovered the logic of those in power. From Tsar Alexey Mikhailovich warning in the seventeenth century that the people were being deceived by the “diabolical seduction” of the rebels [Крестьянская война, № 93], to the regime’s spokesmen in the nineteenth century, explaining that the people had lost their reason⁸, this logic had already been taken to its ultimate consequences: military repression.⁹ “Naivety”, as we have seen, has no heuristic value and explains nothing. Furthermore, we have seen authors like Field and Perrie expressing reservations about naivety and popular monarchism. These precautions, however, did not prevent the postulate “the myth of the tsar is false” from continuing to circulate. Prisoners of a “false” myth, the people remained in “error”. But, as Wittgenstein wrote, the notion of error is admissible “only

⁸ Melnikov-Pecherskii, a cultivated advisor to the Ministry of the Interior, provided a perfect model for this explanation: “Loyalty to the Tsarist dynasty, *credulity* in the face of chimerical rumors and, perhaps, obscure historical memories have engendered in the people faith in the self-appointed ruler... at the appearance of a self-appointed person everything happens as if *our people had lost all capacity for reflection...* The stories... are so *absurd* and even unnatural that one cannot but regard them as ravings of mad people, but the *Russian people believe* in similar tales, and *the more absurd they are, the more they believe them*” [Мельников, с. 240–241, 249] (the italics are mine). I have talked with renowned Russian historians, who are reluctant to write in these terms, but orally they argue in a similar line.

⁹ Thus, for example, a landlord of the region of Samara wrote in a letter that even against his own interests, and in spite of treating his servants “paternally”, these “animals”, partly out of mistrust and even more because of a “total numbness of their intellectual faculties” reject all his propositions with the argument that “lacking of lights and not knowing how to read, they do not understand them”. This so paternal landlord concludes that the only solution is to ask the authorities to send the army to make his servants reason [ГАРФ. Ф. 109. III Оудние. Оп. 3. Д. 2124. Л. 17].

if it corresponds to a theory or an opinion”, yet “a religious symbol is not grounded in an opinion” even less so in a theory. The notion of error does not depend on the content of the religious or magical, but on the way, it is approached: “An error arises only when magic is interpreted scientifically” [Wittgenstein, p. 36, 38]. “The myth of the tsar is false” is an expression inscribed in evolutionary ethnology *à la* Frazer whose “representation of human magical and religious notions is unsatisfactory: it makes these notions appear as *mistakes*”. Consequently, Wittgenstein continues, practices related to these notions are presented to us as plausible, and “in the end, so to speak, as foolishness. But it never does become plausible that people do all this out of sheer stupidity”. With regard to practices linked to religious or magical beliefs, “it is nonsense to go on and say that the characteristic feature of these actions is that they spring from erroneous notions”. The practices which Wittgenstein refers to are ritual acts linked to religion or magic. His reasoning is of interest to us because in order to be recognized by the people as an authentic tsar, the self-appointed one appeals to religion and magic: he displays birthmarks on his body supposed to be proper to every monarch, the peasants call upon sorcerers to consult the Moist Earth Mother, etc. These practices are religious and, according to Wittgenstein, “that is why we are *not* dealing with an error here” [Wittgenstein, p. 32, 42].

Daniel Field partially distanced himself from evolutionism when he wrote that the paternalistic view of peasants “is not dead yet, even among historians” and added that explaining the myth of the tsar by the superstition or backwardness of peasants is to pay “incidental tribute to our own rationality and sophistication” [Field, p. 213]. He strongly rejected the anachronistic postulates with which a considerable part of Western and Soviet historiography treats people. However, fighting historiographical paternalism and its “stereotype of the stupid muzhik”, Field underlines the *similarity* between archaic and modern reasoning, but thus, by not defamiliarizing the past, he loses sight of otherness. Thus, evolutionism continues to guide interpretation, because the archaic reasoning is embedded in a *linear* history¹⁰ of thought, occupying a lower rung than that of our understanding [Ibid., p. 9, 14].¹¹ Let us formulate this question: what is it that resists our understanding in self-appointment? The ambition of this question orients the research in the opposite direction to that which seeks to establish the degree of verisimilitude of the discourse of the past from *our*

¹⁰ Against this vision of a linear history with no basis in reality, but which justified colonialism, neocolonialism and the division into exemplary countries and backward peoples, conceptual history proposes a theory of multiple times, which ascribes its own temporality to each element of all historical structures, thus admitting “the contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous, or perhaps, rather, of the nonsimultaneous occurring simultaneously” [Koselleck, 2004, p. 266] which makes it possible to overcome the dichotomy synchrony/diachrony: “Here, too, as in the relation between speech and action in the course of events, synchronicity and diachrony cannot be separated empirically” [Koselleck, 2006, p. 21].

¹¹ Peasant thought would start from “a million illusions and superstitions, including the naïve monarchism of [the masses] without consciousness”, to rise, through “embryonic forms” to “class consciousness” [Рахматуллин, с. 214, 242, 248–249].

truth, as if the latter were sustained by concepts with unlimited retroactive and universal validity and were not *historically circumscribed*. On the contrary, the answer to the question requires recovering the disparity with otherness, understanding the distance between the other and ourselves, the possibility of being surprised and then having the possibility of creating a real abyss in our conceptual language, that is, a space of uncertainty in which we can try to reconstruct the conceptual or non-conceptual and symbolic connections of the peasant discourse of previous centuries.

According to Perrie [Perrie, 1987, p. 2], “the major problem with the myth of the tsar, for historians and others who seek to investigate it, has been its basic *falsity*, for the Russian monarch was not the benefactor of his people, but bore the ultimate responsibility, as head of state, for their exploitation and oppression”. It is welcome to recall the responsibility of tsarism in the face of the authorized falsification of the past in today’s Russia. But is this tangible reality, on which modern reason rests its gaze, that of the myth? This traditional approach to the myth of the tsar is committed to the paradigm of an irreversible progression from myth to logos [Tylor]. In this understanding, myth is considered a component of the primitive mentality always equal to itself, or it is subjected to the categories of a Cartesian and secularized reason, as if these had constituted the mental horizon of all times and all over the world. This conception has been overcome [Vernant, p. 226], but it still reappears here and there, reaffirming that myth would be a stage in the development of the human spirit: yesterday they were illusions, ingenuities, myth, today they are certainties, science, logos. Its character would be provisional, and it is considered, first and foremost, insofar as embodied in its *terminus ad quem* (the position it reaches) – characterized also by its “falsity” – which teleologically implies the passage to the next scientific stage [Nestle]. The function of the adjective “false” is not only to implicitly announce the subsequent arrival of a non-false interpretation. It is also to deny the popular discourse any social value and any possibility of pertinently indicating the real power relations: it means recognizing that this discourse is semantically erroneous and that its pragmatism is non-existent or useless. On the contrary, I am advocating leaving a priori to research the possibility of reconstructing the logic of the peasant discourse of other times and the *truth* that it harbored. This is a basic postulate in anthropology and philosophy, but one that encounters numerous obstacles to its affirmation in historiographical practice. This backlog can be solved if we approach the myth by considering the imposing work of Hans Blumenberg [Blumenberg, 1988], but we will do so by interweaving his theoretical proposition in the very movement of historical research. The basic premise is to distance oneself from teleology, approaching the myth not from its imperfection, understood as conceptual immaturity, that is, from its position of arrival, the position that foreshadows a future scientific maturity, but the other way round, from its *terminus a quo* (the starting point from which the process is directed). It is this inversion that opens the possibility to understand the genuine contribution of the myth and its function without distorting it.

“Nemo contra deum nisi deus ipse”¹²

The way in which [the myth] pursued the reduction of the absolutism of reality was to distribute a block of opaque powerfulness, which stood over man and opposite him, among many powers that are played off against one another, or even cancel one another out. Not only being able to shield oneself from the other with the one, but seeing the one preoccupied and entangled with the other from primeval times was a benefit to man from their sheer plurality

[Blumenberg, 1985, pp. 13–14]

If we consider that the belief “the tsar is benevolent” emerges from a myth, its non-teleological analysis must start from questioning the type of reality object of the myth and the function of such myth in the world of life. In 1732, serf Timofei Truzhenik claimed to be Tsarevich Alexei. In the face of the peasants' mistrust, he urged them to question the Moist Earth Mother about his authenticity. Several sorcerers were summoned. Having scrutinized the damp earth, they recognized the Tsarevich in Truzhenik. The official discourse claimed that *Heaven* bestowed monarchical dignity. The people took this belief seriously, but they ordered it according to their interests, giving rise to a political fact: they appealed to *another heaven* to assert *another power* through *another* monarchical dignity. We are in the very structure of the myth and its function: the division of powers. Situated in the reality of the myth, Truzhenik acts in it: strong because of his legitimization by the divinity, he presented himself to the authorities demanding to be brought before the empress [РГАДА. Ф. 6. Оп. 1. Д. 187. Л. 60–60 об., 84–85]. The construction and operation of the myth was already perceptible in Razin's insurrection. Allegedly, the uprising began on behalf of the Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich to protect him from his boyars, would-be traitors, and enemies of the people, although the rebels' discourse becomes more complex as they approach Moscow. The reference to the reigning, corporeal and corruptible earthly God and Master (*Gosudar'*) disappears and another Master, his deceased son, Tsarevich Alexei Alexeyevich, is invoked in his place, to whom allegiance is sworn. But this candidate for the throne is so much from Heaven that no one sees him, he is incorporeal, incorruptible (*netlennyi*) (Romans 1 : 23): he will never be exposed. By rendering the Tsarevich's body invisible, the insurrectionists make his sovereign figure lodged in the triple void they had just produced: they ignore the Tsar on the throne, deprive him of a name and create a Master without a body. They resurrect a dead young man in order to have their own sovereign figure. They invent him because they give him another name: “Nechai-tsarevich Alexei Alexeyevich”. He is *another* by the corresponding assignment of the semantic properties of “Nechai” to “Tsarevich Alexei”; *another* because his *other* reality is that of the *revealed* thought and the *revealed* word. The adjective *nechaiannyi* means “arrived earlier than expected”, “the one who was not expected”, “revealed”, like the icon *Unexpected Joy* (*Nechaiannaia radost'*) of the Virgin. By naming

¹² “Only a god can prevail against a god” [Goethe, p. 642].

him, the rebels make the Tsarevich present, but by naming him differently, they elevate his dignity. A non-body-revealed, heaven-sent: rather than with a self-appointed false son of the tsar, it is with *another divinity* that the oppressed confront the earthly God and through him, the heavenly one. The invented figure is a presence-vacant since it reaffirms the myth and at the same time its body is invisible: the divinity is present, it is a world in which the participants take part, they disqualify the tsar on the throne and invent a divine heir who does not incarnate, in order to reserve the possibility that one of them, Razin, without presenting himself as the tsar's son, may occupy the throne. This is an outline of *social representation* instead of the traditional self-appointment. *The myth, by appealing to the confrontation between divinities, raises the experience of social struggles to a level of demands that produces an embryo of modern type of political thought*¹³.

The opposition between two figures from Heaven is not unknown in Russia. Its medieval religious literature admitted the possibility that the throne was occupied by a righteous, authentic, and therefore God-appointed tsar or by a creature of the devil. In official language, the self-appointed ruler is regularly associated with the devil. The people, on the other hand, usually used the tsar – devil opposition [Лукин, с. 46–47]. This conflict is structural in the Christian political theology of autocracy. In the case of the revealed, but not incarnated tsarevich Alexei, we are at the boundary between Christianity and its other, magic, which permeates Razin's entire movement. With Truzhenik, the boundary is transgressed when the villagers summon the sorcerers and interrogate the Moist Earth Mother, the great divinity of the Russian symbolic universe, to grant legitimacy to the one who is challenging the empress. The conflict between divinities is a classic theme of myth studies. We can now think of self-appointment in terms of what Blumenberg called the “fundamental formula of myth in all its figurations”: Goethe's famous apothegm, *Nemo contra deum nisi deus ipse* [Blumenberg, 1988, p. 550]. In a collective culture characterized, according to Toporov's formula, by “hyper-sacralization”, which limits or eliminates the opposition between the divine and the human and makes man no longer the image and work of God but His incarnation and the bearer of divine energy [Топоров, с. 221]¹⁴, and in that pantheistic sense, certainly Christian, but with a very important pagan component, Goethe's apothegm is of great fecundity. Blumenberg understood it as the “original schema of man's liberation from anxiety (fear: *entängstigung*)” [Blumenberg, 1988, p. 551], who incarnates himself in man by calling on other divinities to confront and limit God's omnipotence on his behalf. In the need for rebellion, the myth embodied in self-appointment and Goethe's apothegm are reciprocally recognized. The function and contribution of the myth that concern us here is not only to rise the struggle up to the idea of representation: it is, in the movement itself, to highlight the internal structure of tsarist political theology, discovering the

¹³ For a more detailed analysis of the two episodes, see: [Ингерфлом, 2020, с. 132–152, 225–228; Ingerflom, 2015, p. 177–211, 283–287; Ingerflom, 2013].

¹⁴ Ivan Timofeev made it explicit: sacralization permeates the *physical* body of the tsar without being limited to his monarchical dignity [Тимофеев, с. 33].

isomorphism between autocracy and self-appointment. The former gives rise to the latter. But when the myth is attributed to being wrong because in *reality* the tsar was ultimately responsible for the oppression – something we can *prove* – it is not perceived that the myth *shows*, does not prove, because the reality enunciated by the myth is *another kind of reality*¹⁵. The reality that is the fruit of causality, subject to constant revision by future *experience*, comprehensible in *our common sense*, is alien to the myth¹⁶. The interrogation of the Moist Earth Mother as the non-bodily presence of the heaven-sent tsarevich is *neither true nor false*, because such appreciations can only refer to the act of thinking, reflexively, weighing intuitions and experiences, seeking *proof in order to convince*¹⁷. None of this occurs in the myth which, once declared, can only become factually real, but in word, a word that tells the truth, not the truth-object of a thinking that seeks to prove it, but as factual data: “Mother Earth has spoken”, “Nechai is here with us”. It is what is revealed and venerated. Thus, “the major problem with the myth of the tsar” is not, as Perrie writes, “its basic falsity”, but its “traditional approach”, “vom mythos zum logos”. The judgment of the falsity of the myth rests only on a prejudice: the myth would be a way of thinking superseded and replaced by another, more correct way of thinking, the logos. To invoke the myth’s falsity regarding the Russian people is to reject the possibility of not thinking the myth teleologically, of not interpreting it as a stage in the history of the ideas or the theory.

The Metaphor

A given metaphor may be the only way to highlight and coherently organize exactly those aspects of our experience. <...> Metaphors... play a central role in the construction of social and political reality. Yet they are typically viewed within philosophy as matters of ‘mere language’

[Lakoff, Johnsen, p. 156, 159]

As Usenko writes, self-appointment in the seventeenth century was a “norm, not a pathology” [Усенко]. Within the autocratic structure, built on patrimonial domination, mystification and transcendent legitimacy, the identity of the individual, of the serf as well as of the tsar, was posed. The question of the current identity in the seventeenth century was, as Lukin

¹⁵ Myth is understood here as “what is real and belongs to the realm of facts (in words, of course!). <...> Speech which gives indications about reality, or notes something that, once declared, can only become real: it is speech which objectively informs or functions as authority. <...> True speech of what is revealed,” whereas the *logos* refers to “speech as it is weighed, carefully considered, in that it is meant to convince” [Otto, p. 26–27]. I am interested in emphasizing the creative role of action in the possibility for human beings to move between myth and logos, a movement that does not exclude their simultaneity.

¹⁶ This strangeness is not always taken into consideration in historiography: “In defiance of *common sense* and *experience*, the peasantry apparently believed that the tsar was their patron and benefactor” [Perrie, 1999, p. 161]. The italics are mine.

¹⁷ Veyne came to the same conclusion about Roman myths: “Myth was a *tertium quid*, neither true nor false” [Veyne, p. 40].

[Лукин, с. 33] showed, “whose are you?” (Чей ты?) and not “who are you?” (Кто ты?). We can conclude that by making “I belong to” the principle of identity, *autocracy made impossible an “I am” that is not an “I am the tsar”*. Lukin notes that “the statement *I am the tsar* was a massive epidemic in the seventeenth century”, the “tip of the iceberg” (in an epistolary exchange with the author of this article) of a “self-appointment in an embryonic state” which the authorities took so seriously that even drunkenness was not a mitigating factor [Там же, с. 112, 122–137, 140]. These expressions whose massiveness Lukin identified in the sources, are disregarded by Perrie: “the phenomenon that Pavel Lukin describes as *narodnoe samozvanchestvo* (popular self-appointment) involved *only a metaphorical* use of phrases such as ‘I am the tsar’ in order to express one individual’s superiority over another”.¹⁸ This disregard of what the people were saying through the metaphor is based on the conviction that the metaphor would be reduced to a pure enunciation “in order to express one individual’s superiority over another” without political significance, as would be demonstrated by the fact that, despite the massiveness of “I am the tsar”, “no self-appointed person had appeared within Russia” between 1613 and 1669 [Perrie, 2019, p. 859, fn. 9]. I believe that Lakoff and Johnsen are right – see the epigraph – and I would be surprised if the first two Romanovs, in those years that followed the Time of Troubles, thought that the massiveness of this metaphor was an unproductive matter of “mere language”. Lukin’s theme, and what interests us most, is a culture of collective representations of power within which the metaphor functions and acquires meaning. To deny the potentialities of metaphor because they were not immediately embodied is to substitute the theme of collective representations for that of individual vicissitudes of the self-appointed. Moreover: the political culture articulated on self-appointment is not reduced to the self-appointed or to the emergence of false tsars¹⁹. This culture, whose genealogy, as shown by Boris Uspenski, can be traced back to a century before, did not disappear suddenly in 1613 to reappear abruptly in 1670. Even if we were to accept the causal and obligatory relationship between the metaphor “I am the Tsar” and the factual history, the absence of false tsars between 1613 and 1669 within Russia does not prove the political sterility of the metaphor: in that period, there were Russian self-appointed acting in territories bordering with Russia [Лукин, с. 107; Чистов, с. 66–67; Ингерфлом, 2020, с. 120; Ingerflom, 2015, p. 167], and a year later, in 1670, the Razin insurrection broke out, which at its peak raised the banner of the false tsarevich Alexey, and from 1671 onwards new self-appointed appeared. The pragmatic potential of

¹⁸ That claim of superiority over others is not so insignificant: it is what animated most self-appointed people.

¹⁹ During that period, rumors circulated claiming that the Charters and decrees were forged or that the tsar was dead; there were frequent declarations of allegiance to Dmitri in the years 1620–1650, ignoring the reigning tsar or in opposition to him; false sons of high officials of the court appeared, like that of the *okol'nichii* Ivan Basmanov in 1627, or false emissaries of the tsar in 1665. There were those who called themselves neighbors, friends, jesters, brothers, and sons of the tsar (sometimes without indicating which tsar they were). See: [Ingerflom, 2015, p. 165; Лукин, с. 116–117; Kivelson, p. 190–192; Мордовина, Станиславский].

metaphor has been highlighted by the most detailed studies on this figure of speech, but this does not mean that the translation into action is immediate²⁰.

While acts are important, they cannot help to understand the meaning of the metaphor. Let us imagine that indeed between 1613 and 1669, all traces of self-appointed tsars disappeared. The significance we attribute to the metaphor does not depend on its embodiment in acts but on the theoretical premises with which we approach it. In order to unravel the signifying potential of metaphor, it is appropriate to tackle it, as with the myth, not from its *terminus ad quem* – the alleged absence of self-appointed – but, on the contrary, from its *terminus a quo*, the initial moment furthest from the final position it reaches. When the metaphor shifts the identity of the tsar to its enunciator, the operation is not incidental, but part of the process of understanding the living world. The widespread diffusion of this transfer into metaphor registers a double perception – “to be free and not to be the property of another, I have to be tsar” and “anyone can be chosen by Heaven”. Here too, the human being responds to the “original schema of man’s liberation from fear” and, as he can, that is, metaphorically, limits the power of the tsar by reminding the world of his entirely intrinsic need for rebellion. Certainly, the metaphor can be considered a non-conceptual form of intelligibility, but we should not dismiss it as if it were not yet sufficiently conceptual; that would divert our attention from *another* mode of understanding the world or, as in the case of the myth, allow us to consider it only as something provisional, prior to a future scholarly understanding. The alternative to this teleology is historicity. Could such a metaphor have been possible in the previous century? If we think that before the Time of Troubles (early seventeenth century) such a generalization was probably impossible, what does its temporality tell us? If we shift attention from the focus on the enunciator of the metaphor to the constellations of collective and historically dated representations, that is, to the context that situates the metaphor, we open the way to another story. Here lies the relationship between metaphor and myth. The enunciation of the former is significant as it takes up the fundamental core of the myth: the division of powers, the limitation of absolute power. It is understandable that autocracy considered it dangerous. In turn, metaphor and action are not mutually exclusive. In fact, there is *permeability* between them. On the theoretical-interpretative level, and this is what is fundamental for the researcher, the historical truth of metaphors is pragmatic as a “*vérité à faire*”²¹ : “To the historically trained eye, they [metaphors] therefore indicate the fundamental certainties, conjectures, and judgments in relation to which the attitudes and expectations, actions and inactions, longings and disappointments, interests and indifferences, of an epoch are regulated” [Blumenberg, 2016, p. 29].

²⁰ “Metaphors may create realities for us, especially social realities. A metaphor may thus be a guide for future action. Such actions will, of course, fit the metaphor. This will, in turn, reinforce the power of the metaphor to make experience coherent. In this sense metaphors can be self-fulfilling prophecies” [Lakoff, Johnsen, p. 156].

²¹ In French in the original. La *vérité à faire* is the truth that is potentially and intrinsically present in the metaphor but will become evident later.

What Truth Does Self-Appointment Express in Autocratic Russia?

There is nothing to tell the people about their situation of oppression. They feel it better than we do. <...> The people are not fools.

Letter (1873) of Serguei Golushev, founder of the populist Oremburg group
[Революционное народничество, т. 1, с. 161–163]

Let us return to the dialogue between Kliuchevskii and Foucault²²: the type of resistance, for instance, the exchange of the true and the false, lays bare the type of autocratic domination, one of whose fundamental and long-lasting strategies was mystification: disguising the false as the true. I disagree with the thesis according to which episodes of self-appointment threatened the regime [Field, p. 23; Perrie, 1999, p. 164]. Except for the possibility opened by the Razin insurrection, which was quickly closed with his defeat, self-appointment did not threaten the autocratic order. It seriously undermined neither transcendent legitimacy nor the relations between the dominant and the dominated²³. When the people disqualified a particular tsar, they were talking *about the person, not the system*. The rulers knew this²⁴. *Samozvanstvo* did not threaten the direct relationship with Heaven. Such resistance could separate God from the monarch, but not from the form of government. *Samozvanstvo* expressed a fracture: power, owned by God and deposited in a *symbol* called “Tsar” [Успенский; ЖИВОВ, Успенский] was distanced from the concrete tsar who was obliged to fulfil the impossible: to prove by deeds that matched popular expectations that he was the true chosen one. In the wake of the Time of Troubles and then Peter the Great, self-appointment signaled two novelties: the weakening of the tsar’s sacredness and a collective reception of the first emperor’s decision on the succession that made the throne an available place, within the reach of anyone. It was shifting sediments that ended up uncovering the Achilles heel of the autocracy when, in 1831, Nicholas I arrived in a village that had risen in revolt. Upon seeing the sovereign, the peasants knelt down before him. But when the emperor demanded the ringleaders be denounced, the accusation that crystallized centuries of mystification spontaneously burst forth from the ranks of the prostrate: “Isn’t he one of them in disguise?” The tsar was naked. De-sacralised, he appeared for what he really was: a landowner disguised as a tsar, a self-appointed ruler [Эйдельман, с. 201]. From Ivan IV, claiming to be an “heir” to the Augustus, identifying himself with a Holy Fool, staging an exchange of his throne with the heir to the Great Mongolian Khan, presenting himself as a superior abbot, through a world turned upside down by Peter I dressed as a peasant or disguising

²² See Part I of this article: [Ingerflom, 2023, p. 691].

²³ In 1765 Kremnev, a false Peter III, promised to distribute serfs in case of victory. A participant in the Pugachev revolt: “If we had succeeded, today we would be lords with our tsar and the lords would be under the subjugation in which they hold us” [Сивков, с. 105, 134].

²⁴ Alexandre II explained to Bismarck, that “throughout the interior of the Empire the people still see the monarch as the paternal and absolute Lord set by God over the land; this belief, which has almost the force of a religious sentiment, is completely independent of any personal loyalty of which I could be the object” [Lieven, p. 142].

prince Romodanovsky in the garb of a tsar and another of his own in that of the patriarch, the historicity of practice produced a *truth*, that of the people. The prostrate peasant of 1831 synthesized the multi-secular collective memory. The addressee of the accusation was a concrete tsar, present before the people, but unlike Alexei Mikhailovich who by his mere appearance disarmed the rebellion [Kivelson], Nicholas I was reduced by the people to his physical body and deprived of charisma. There is isomorphism between the peasant's words about the landlord disguised as tsar and a political culture forged by the court. Contrary to the well-known idea of naivety that the historiographical tradition still ascribes to the peasantry, the *muzhik* of 1831 illustrated the popular competence to manipulate Russian political culture, putting the self-appointed villager and the reigning tsar on an equal footing: did they not both claim to have been appointed from Heaven? Here the significance of self-appointment, that "chronic illness" diagnosed by Kliuchevskii, unfolds to its full extent [Ключевский, т. 3, с. 27]. The reference to "false" is generally understood as applying to people who were on the lower rungs of the social ladder. But the people included the tsars, legitimate according to the rules of the monarchy, in the category of "false", making self-appointment a *norm* of Russian political history. The historical truth that self-appointment as a factor unearths in the autocratic regime, and at the same time, as an indicator expresses, is that the *auto-crat* on the throne and the ragged *self-appointed ruler* are both *self-appointed*. They were interchangeable. To the tsar who pretended to be a theophorus, the kneeling peasant hurled a "disguised!" that anthropologised him.

Decentering Political Modernity²⁵

Caminante, son tus huellas el camino y nada más.
Caminante, no hay camino: se hace camino al andar.

Al andar, se hace camino.²⁶

Antonio Machado. Campos de Castilla

In Western Europe, modern basic political concepts were constructed by registering "the dissolution of the old society of orders or estates, and the

²⁵ The reader will have to forgive me for not going into the details of the debates on modernities in relation to Russia, which have already been described by Michael David-Fox [David-Fox]. When I evoke here political modernity in Russia, I am referring to the attempts, successful or not, of a radical transformation consisting above all in (a) transferring *sovereignty* from the monarch to the people and (b) establishing the political *representation* of the people. These attempts have taken place in Russian history. The term "modernity" is justified because, I insist, these are structural changes with respect to previous ways of conceiving the government of human beings. Against the tradition, reinforced by the colonialist pretension of the North American theory of modernization, which considered the Western modernization, as if it were homogeneous, as the example to follow, new conceptions emerged such as alternative, multiple, entangled modernities... Their meaning is clear: there is not only one modernity and the path towards it is not unique. If I use the term *decentered*, it is to underline that the purpose is to remove modernity from the *center* in order to be able to "measure" the changes first of all with respect to what these changes displace or replace *in Russia itself*.

²⁶ "Wanderer, your footprints / are the path, and nothing else / wanderer, there is no path, / you make the path as you walk. / As you walk you make the path".

development of the modern world” [Koselleck, 2011, p. 8]; a period between 1750 and 1850, which Koselleck called *Sattelzeit* or *Schwelienzeit* [Koselleck, 1996, p. 69]. The elaboration of these concepts was premised, on the one hand, on the abandonment of the Aristotelian paradigm and, on the other, on the Hobbesian presentation of politics as a science. Some of these modern concepts are conveyed by ancient signifiers “albeit with altered meanings”; alongside them, the social and political language includes “keywords and slogans” [Koselleck, 2011, p. 7]. In Russia, the shift of the philosophical-political paradigm and “the dissolution of the old society” occurred later. Modern politics only became widespread with the 1905 revolution. But it would be a mistake to limit ourselves to noting the chronological difference. According to Koselleck, the modern fundamental political concepts of the Germanic and Latin linguistic areas have two functions – an indicator of a historical structure and an active factor in it. Furthermore, these concepts, given their semantic complexity, are polysemic [Koselleck, 2004, p. 85–87]. Now, we have seen that self-appointment, as a keyword of the autocratic political structure, that is, before Russian political modernity, also possessed these two functions and recorded events and phenomena with different meanings. In other words, in a clear example of coexistence of different temporalities which thus overrides the synchronic/diachronic alternative, we are facing a linguistic-conceptual device *prior to modernity*, but *similar to the logic of modern concepts*. Its specificity lies in its archaic, religious language, often referring to magic and paganism, which conceals this similarity from the eyes of those who reduce the genesis of modernity to the philosophical and secularized thinking of the Enlightenment. The Russian conceptual device *decenters and pluralizes* the political Modernity, its gestation as well as its outcome, both through its logical-conceptual device and its factual history. This same history offers us another specificity: the role of the people. In the seventeenth century, when the country had no intellectuals, it was the Cossacks, the peasants and the old ritualists persecuted by the Church and the court who, in the un-conceptual language of myth, religion and magic, conceived social representation as a legitimizing source of power and put it into practice in the conquered cities. In 1905 it was the proletariat and the peasantry who invented the soviets, thus generalizing political modernity and forcing Tsarism to grant for the first time a constitution, which, *de jure*, put an end to autocracy.

Russian political modernity takes its own paths, oblique, *discontinuous*, with a different rhythm which we have become accustomed to owing to an idyllic vision of Western becoming, disproved by the religious phenomena of the last third of the twentieth century. In the nineteenth century, self-appointment established itself as an important theme in literature and historiography. Its recurrence is remarkable in 1917.²⁷ In the

²⁷ In March 1917, delegates of the Soviets explaining the revolution to the soldiers were denounced as “self-appointed” [РГВИА. Ф. 2421. Оп. 2. Д. 137. Л. 25]. The same accusation was hurled against those who controlled prices on the Odessa market: [Утро России]. It was rumoured that a self-appointed, faux-Kerensky, would come to convince the soldiers to continue the war: [Wildman, p. 106].

historiography of the USSR, similar questions to those raised about Tsarist Russia arose, for example, whether the belief in Stalin the good-tsar, prisoner of the new boyars was sincere. According to Perrie, for whom the continuity in history and, more particularly, that of popular monarchism in the USSR is an important issue²⁸, “it seems clear that there are definite parallels to prerevolutionary popular monarchism” [Perrie, 1999, p. 166]. The presentification of the past in the USSR is real, but continuity as a heuristic category is not a rigorous instrument in the humanities [Ингерфлом, 2018]. Some mechanisms of domination and resistance from the past were revived in the USSR and after 1991²⁹, but were they “parallel”? Did they go in the same direction and thus possess the same historical significance? Did the emancipation of modern politics from the religious sphere and its universalization in Russia through the revolutions of 1905 and 1917, however fragile, not fundamentally affect the significance of the resistance to domination?³⁰ During the campaign for the Constituent Assembly, a pamphlet written by a priest explained that the Romanovs were Germans, from whom God had taken the throne and “handed over all the state power to the Duma. Let us live without the tsar-man, let us keep the tsar-God” [Михалев, с. 9–10]. Thus, the death of Peter II in 1730 became an active factor in 1917. The updating was possible because there was no empty space between the two dates. It had been filled by the constant reference to the interruption of the Russian line of the Romanovs, to accuse subsequent monarchs of being self-appointed. The updating included the religious legitimation of power. But updating *does not mean continuity*: in his pamphlet the priest depersonalized God-delegated power to signify that time had come for popular representation in the Duma. In March 1917, the Moscow Soviet reissued a 1913 pamphlet, *Dom Samozvanovykh*, (combines *Samozvan*(nykh) and (Roma)*novykh*), something like “The House of the Self-Appointov”, which explained that “pretending to be Romanov is nothing but self-appointment... they are not Russians, but Germans. <...> We had self-appointed tsars before who occupied the Russian throne under a name that was not theirs. Nowadays all the members of the Tsar’s family are self-ap-

²⁸ “The issue of continuity between tsarist and Stalinist authoritarianism”, “unchanged forms” of popular monarchism “over some for centuries” [Perrie, 1999, p. 164, 167]. A misunderstanding occurs when it is reproached to me that in my book, I didn’t manage to “make a convincing case for any kind of continuity or even any analogy between the tsarist and the soviet experiences of *samozvanstvo*” [Perrie, 2019, p. 862]. I did not even try: I recurrently affirmed that *it is not about continuity but about historicity*, that the permanence of the same signifier does not indicate semantic invariance, that this is an illusion, and what must be recovered is, on the contrary, *discontinuity*: [Ingerflom, 2015, p. 25, 35, 226, 437, 441–442, 466, 492, 501].

²⁹ From the claim to possess a sacred physical body to the presidential display of a hairy torso, via the cult of personality, the *mechanism* for securing domination, and not only symbolic, is similar. As resistance can also be similar: in 1919, in Krasnoyarsk, a red commander distributed a “Manifesto of Grand Duke Nicholas Nikolaevich” announcing that he had appointed Lenin and Trotsky as ministers and called on the peasants to rise “For the Tsar and Soviet Power” against Kolchak [ГАРФ. Ф. 149. Оп. 8. Д. 15. Л. 15].

³⁰ “Our Master Kolka [Nicholas II. NdA] is of no use. We will *elect* a Master out of our midst for three years, like the *starshina volostnoi*” [Ниякий, с. 98].

pointed. And if it were necessary to find a Russian surname for them, the one that would suit them best is Self-Appointov. <...> The misfortune is not that our Self-Appointovs... came from abroad... Under the *real* Romanovs, the Russian people suffered. <...> The evil is in the Tsarist *power* itself” [Блеклов, с. 7, 9, 13–17] (the italics are mine). The old denunciation – self-appointed – is updated in a *modern conceptual network*: it relegates the “real tsar” to a secondary role in order to question the *regime*. As the philosopher would say: “the same is not the merely identical. In the merely identical, the difference disappears. In the same the difference appears” [Heidegger, p. 45].

It also appears in the Soviet conception of politics. Russian populism (*Narodnichestvo*) and Leninism conceived power respectively as the representation of popular and class sovereignty. This immanent conception of legitimacy later came into crisis since it was founded on “laws of the history” just as independent of the popular sovereignty as the Holy Spirit had been. Nevertheless, Soviet power could not eradicate the principle of representation. In the resistance of the oppressed, “the same” happened, the difference included: it was no longer “*Peter* is the Antichrist”, but “Soviet *power* is not the power of God but of the Antichrist” [Fitzpatrick; Viola]. The adversary is the *power*, still legitimized by God, but already abstract, which did not exclude identifying Stalin with the Antichrist. If the power is that of the Antichrist and those who wield it are his servants, how can they be designated in the Russian conceptual tradition? As “the self-appointed who do nothing but talk about elections, who tell us all the time that we are eligible, even though in reality there are no *elections*, and they elect themselves” [Голос народа, с. 262]. The Antichrist was no longer the negation of the messianic promise but the Other of political modernity. In 1930, an assembly of 273 workers’ delegates from factories in Moscow and Podolsk declared Stalin “unrecognized *self-appointed* leader of the proletariat”, who “is represented not by his chosen ones but by self-designated people” [Без ретуши, с. 275–276]. Stalin was a self-appointed ruler, not because he was not appointed by God but because he was not *elected* by the working class. The keyword self-appointment thus became a modern concept, which does not imply a false Stalin, but the demand for representation. Representation not only political, but also social: an order different from both the autocratic and the liberal. Self-appointment became a concept, an *indicator* of socio-political *changes*, in particular, of the order that violated both representation and popular sovereignty and an active factor of this new configuration, present in the language of resistance.

The paradigm shift was radical and established an epochal discontinuity of historical dimensions: the representation and the popular sovereignty replaced the incarnation of God and the *samovlastie/self-power/autocracy* of the Master (*Gosudar*). From the physical body of the monarch to the political body of the social Republic. From keyword to concept, the self-appointment is present in both orders, without

continuity, but with historicity: its meaning changed radically. “There is something absolutely specific in historicity: precisely that power of erecting something new during the recovery of the inheritance received” [Castoriadis, Ricœur, p. 58].

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