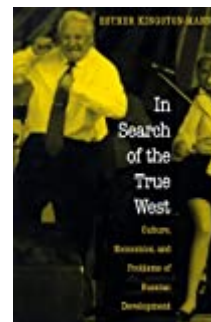




Esther Kingston-Mann. *In Search of the True West. Culture, Economics and Problems of Russian Development.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999. xiii + 301 pp. \$39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-691-00433-4; \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-03187-3.



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Is Russia in the West?

What is the essence of Western economic thought, and how does it relate to Russia's experience? Russians have asked this question since the late eighteenth century and their quest is the subject of Esther Kingston-Mann's latest book. In addressing it, she exposes the unwieldiness of reducing widely varied experience to a single idea of "the West;" she also demonstrates that Russian thinkers were not just observers of, but also participants in, a long discussion about peasant agriculture and its place in economic modernization.

What most interests Kingston-Mann is the peasant commune, and she has unearthed a mountain of writing on this subject. She surveys the works of such well-known figures as August von Haxthausen, Alexander Herzen, N. G. Chernyshevskii, A. I. Chuprov and Donald MacKenzie Wallace. Others she examines are less well known, such as Emile de Laveleye, professor of political economy at the University of Liege; 1860s dissident N. Bervi; Marx's Russian translator N. F. Daniel'son; historian of England, Paul Vinogradov; and the early twentieth-century Danish-born official, C. A. Kofoed.

She locates the beginnings of the Russian debate on

development in the 1760s. For Kingston-Mann this debate had two primary characteristics. First, it centered on the question of peasant proprietorship; second, it was colored by a search for lessons to be learned from West-European authorities. Over the years, this search led Russians to many thinkers who would not finally wind up within the West's classical liberal canon. She summarizes English, French and German debates on the relative merits of private property as opposed to communal land tenure. Although there were important differences between the two, both German and English ideas about agricultural modernization fit the general rubric of "repressive modernization" (p. 34). Russian modernizers drew from both the "light and shadow" of the West. "With a few notable exceptions," she writes, "the most enthusiastic advocates of Western economic ideas and agricultural methods were zealous defenders of surveillance and coercion as economic stimuli and as guarantors of domestic peace" (p. 60).

This early period is not Kingston-Mann's strongest. While her analysis of the late nineteenth-century thinkers rests on deep familiarity with the collected

works of her subjects, the works of several early nineteenth-century figures she summarizes (August von Schloezer, Ludwig von Jakob and N.S. Mordvinov, misidentified as A.A. Mordvinov) do not appear in the bibliography. Not surprisingly, her reading of them is much less nuanced and, in some cases, simply wrong.

The most significant case in point is her treatment of Mordvinov, a state official and economic writer, cast here as an “Anglophile *par excellence*,” an admirer of English agriculture and private property, who saw no incompatibility between serfdom and agricultural progress. This picture is incomplete and yields a misleading understanding of this key figure in Russia’s early development debate. His biographer and many of his own works attest that serfdom was, in many ways, simply irrelevant to Mordvinov’s interests, which focused not on agriculture but on the development of manufactures and banks.[1] In fact, Mordvinov eschewed universalism and did not espouse borrowing blindly from the tiny maritime state whose history was being elevated to the status of a model even as he wrote.

The point here is less to defend Mordvinov than to suggest that Kingston-Mann may be conflating too much in her effort to build an interpretive edifice. Well-taken is her point that anglophile defenders of property rights were not necessarily proponents of peasant freedom (her references to American slave-holders are appropriate here). On the other hand, the best examples of “repressive modernization,” may have been those, like A. A. Arakcheev and his emperor, who are less easily cast either as consistently anglophile or as political economists.

Kingston-Mann is much more in her element once her narrative hits mid-century. She is keen to make the point that in the post-Emancipation debate on modernization, key analysts of the Russian commune rejected the universalist claims of classical political economy and challenged assumptions about the evils of communal tenure. They were drawn to the work of Wilhelm Roscher, a founder of the school of historical economics, which stressed the need for empirical and comparative studies and challenged classical schemes that identified English history as the model for all [2]

The Russian commune figured centrally in a European debate on the core of economic theory. “In the 1860s and 1870s,” she writes, “educated Russians were both observers and participants in a high-stakes struggle whose outcome determined whether historical economics or neoclassical liberalism would dominate economics and economic policy-making in the modern world. Although

the ‘historians’ were defeated, their failure was not a foregone conclusion” (p. 112). Historical economics encouraged mid-century Russians to undertake an intensive study of peasant communal agriculture. Best known among the Russian historical economists is Alexander Chuprov, whose chief contribution as a Moscow University professor was to launch an army of *zemstvo* statisticians to gather empirical data on peasant households and communes.

Chapter Six offers an illuminating reading of Russian efforts to capture the essence of Marx. Kingston-Mann’s Marx is one heavily engaged, in the later part of his life, with the problems of peasant agriculture in general and with Russian agriculture in particular. Economist K. D. Kavelin, in particular, attracted Marx to the study of Russia’s communes. Kingston-Mann asserts that Marx’s 1880s writings take seriously the data of *zemstvo* statisticians. Marx also engaged in a dialogue with Russian Marxist N. F. Daniel’son, whose study, *Outlines of the Post-Reform Economy*, deplored a view of progress that assumed the destruction of communal tenure as a precondition for the development either of capitalism or industry, while asserting that, “we must graft scientific agriculture and modern large-scale industry onto the commune,” (p. 139). Marx praised the first volume of this work when it appeared in 1880 and encouraged Daniel’son to continue working along these lines. Kingston-Mann’s Marx is an interesting fellow, who was (alas, too late) inching away from universalism and determinism under the influence of Russian writing on the commune.

Despite the efforts of historical economists, by the turn of the twentieth century tsarist officials and “orthodox” Marxists alike had latched onto various tentacles of the triumphant Western economic beast, at whose heart beat the conviction that communal agriculture was an impediment to progress. Kingston-Mann’s juxtaposition of Stolypin and Lenin is not unprecedented, but it is powerful. “While the triumph of inaccurate economic assessments which then went on to become the basis for policies that disastrously failed may well testify to the superior power of ideas,” she writes, “this is not the kind of triumph to which progressive-minded reformers or revolutionaries were likely to lay claim,” (p. 179).

The conclusions Kingston-Mann draws from her wide reading of nineteenth-century European economists deserve attention. Russians may be “outsiders within Western culture,” but their experience contributes to “a more inclusive picture of the West,” (p. 195). Western experi-

ence includes that of communal agriculturalists as well as that of capitalist farmers wedded to individual tenure, and Western economic thought includes “neo-classical, historical, and socialist perspectives” (p. 187). In the second half of the nineteenth century, Russian thinkers were frontline participants in the European debate about economic development, who influenced the thinking of others just as they were shaped by them.

Kingston-Mann does not put the implications of her study as starkly as she might: Russia did not “borrow” from the West, because Russia was in the West, and the West was in Russia. Many will reject this formulation in the present as they have in the past, because their understanding of what the West, itself, is, is so narrow that it is simply wrong. The West is not only “light,” but also “shadow;” and, sometimes, the light comes from the eastern part of the West.

Only one other complaint comes to mind. Kingston-Mann casts the subject of her intense interest – the question of land tenure and peasant agriculture – as the central question in the debate on economic development. However, at all points in the nineteenth, and certainly in the twentieth, century, industrialization and trade were questions important to an equal number of thinkers and policy-makers. It would have been interesting to know at least a little bit about how agricultural questions fit into what is indisputably a bigger picture.

Still, Kingston-Mann has wrestled a vast amount of political economic literature into submission. Much can be learned from her skillful handling of this complex material. Her book deserves a wide reading, and if it gets it,

scholarly meetings in the Russian history field may be a little livelier for the next few years.

Notes

[1]. Readers may also be surprised to see Mordvinov portrayed as the architect of the notorious military colonies, for which the tsar and Count A. A. Arakcheev, whose estate practices Alexander admired, are usually held responsible (p. 70). A closer reading of the biography from which this conclusion is drawn reveals that Mordvinov’s preoccupation in 1810 was the state budget and the military crisis, and that among several ideas to reduce the size and expense of the army was both “a variant of the military colonies which Alexander I had already been pondering,” and a proposal to replace recruitment obligations with a recruitment tax that could be used to hire foreign mercenaries. See Helma Repczuk, “Russia’s Would-be Reformer: N.S. Mordvinov, 1754-1845,” Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1960, p. 262 and N. S. Mordvinov, “Vykup ot rekrutstva,” V. A. Bil’basov, ed., *Arkhiv Grafov Mordvinovikh* (St. Petersburg, 1901-1903), vol. 4, pp. 487-491.

[2]. There is a substantial literature on the “German historical school of economics,” whose contours are not universally accepted. For a recent example, see Heath Pearson, “Was There Really a German Historical School of Economics?” *History of Political Economy* Vol. 31, No. 3 (Fall, 1999): 547-562.

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