



Alexei Elfimov. *Russian Intellectual Culture in Transition: The Future in the Past.* Münster, Hamburg, London: Lit Verlag, 2003. 209 pp.

THE RUSSIAN INTELLIGENTSIA NOW

At least since the *Vekhi* collection of the beginning of the twentieth century, ‘intelligentsia-bashing’ has been a popular strategy in the self-reflective practices of Russian intellectuals. In this respect Alexei Elfimov’s scathing critique of the current, post-perestroika, ‘paradigm’ of Russian intellectual discourse in the humanities is hardly new. However, the author’s principal target is less the more familiar ‘organic’ (‘literary’ or ‘philosophical’) intelligentsia, and more the somewhat narrower, and traditionally less prominent, field of the humanities and social sciences *academe*, although he clearly also dwells more broadly on the ‘organic’ intelligentsia’s influence on post-Soviet society and culture.

Elfimov debunks the current Russian humanities scholarship above all for its distinctly backward-looking and absurdly uncritical obsession with ‘cultural restoration’ and ‘revival of the past’, for its utter lack of concern with the needs of the present Russian society, and for its conservative unreceptiveness to progressive cultural

and intellectual developments. Elfimov links this fetishisation of the past to what he describes as the Russian intelligentsia's traditional disdain for 'the present moment' and 'modernity' as such, explicitly echoing similar criticisms voiced already by Chaadaev in the early nineteenth and Berdyaev in the early twentieth century. Elfimov is, however, more interested in tracing the roots of the recent Russian scholarly infatuation with 'cultural restoration' to the contradictory status of the *Soviet* academic community, and especially in the latter's search, from the 1960s onwards, for a more secure moral and intellectual identity in which it would avoid an overtly interested association with state bureaucracy and ideology while remaining inescapably bound to these.

Elfimov discusses the unusual institutional expansion of the discipline of history as the principal umbrella-science of the Soviet humanities, and, in this context, he points out the important disjuncture that occurred between, on the one hand, the understanding of history as a discourse of cultural continuity and inheritance, and on the other, a normative form of history that was used in Soviet ideology specifically to justify historical discontinuity and the cultural autonomy of the post-1917 era. While the latter discourse gradually became enclosed within the narrow framework of bureaucratised academic historiography, the former was the one that took on the role of the intelligentsia's true (nostalgic) search for its own (as well as the nation's) 'authentic' cultural and moral identity, which inevitably referred back to the 'forgotten' pre-Revolutionary times, and especially its aristocratic heritage. Elfimov reveals a similar sort of development in Soviet architecture with its shift, especially in the late 1970s and 1980s, towards the policy of conserving and restoring 'historic' buildings, which were seen as objects invested with 'culture' simply by the fact that they belonged to the pre-Revolutionary past, regardless of their actual aesthetic value or historical significance.

As regards the 1990s, Elfimov especially ridicules some of the academic intelligentsia's unsuccessful attempts to achieve political prominence in the post-Soviet era and to emulate various pre-Revolutionary trends by reviving the 'good old' traditions and institutions, such as high-culture clubs, salons and literary societies, yet failing to achieve anything resembling the cultural authoritativeness and social prominence that it craved and that it associated with Imperial times.

Elfimov also argues that post-perestroika institutional reforms, allegedly intended to 'revitalise' the old Soviet academic structures, failed miserably, primarily because of a reluctance by the political establishment to eliminate the conservative 'old guard' *nomenklatura*, who are still dominant in the post-Soviet academe, especially at the bureaucratic level, and who continue to determine the fate of the humanities and the social sciences. According to Elfimov, it is this

‘old guard’ who are the most keen to maintain the conservative paradigm of ‘cultural restoration’ and who resist the most progressive trends from the West, such as the various critically-oriented post-modernist methodologies. Elfimov also shows how some apparent disciplinary ‘innovations’ that occurred in the post-Soviet era were in actual fact mere mirages of change. He especially debunks the new discipline of ‘culturology’, which he portrays as a flaky ‘philosophy of culture’ that achieved surprising success in post-Soviet Russia mainly because it was taken over by the former *nomenklatura* academics who used it as a substitute for disciplines such as ‘Marxist philosophy’ and ‘scientific communism’. Finally, Elfimov dwells throughout his book on how absurd the academe’s ‘restorative’ attitudes ended up being when they started filtering into general public discourse (that of the mass media or state officialdom, for example), where they became their own most revealing caricatures.

The main questions that Elfimov poses in this book (how intellectual identities in the Russian humanities and social sciences have changed in the past couple of decades and what exactly has impeded the development of a more critically informed and progressive discourse in these disciplines) are indeed of vital importance to the (self-) understanding of contemporary Russian scholarship. Judging by his introduction, Elfimov seems to have been perfectly aware that in order to answer these questions convincingly he would have needed to carry out a thorough socio-anthropological study of the Russian academic field in this key transitional period (1980s–90s). However, for some reason, Elfimov consciously eschewed a serious approach of this sort, and instead decided to go for the ‘soft’ option of mostly venting his exasperation with the current state of the Russian humanities through this ‘critical reflection’, rather than by writing an ‘anthropological monograph’ proper, as he himself puts it.

Yet somewhat annoyingly, Elfimov still maintains that his endeavour is a ‘scholarly work’ of a cultural-anthropological kind, albeit of modest proportions. For sure, the book provides a sustained intellectual argument, discusses its own ‘methodology’, provides systematic footnoting, a name index, and a decent bibliography, while the text is studded with frequent (if at times rather spurious) references to the theories of Foucault and Bourdieu. And yet Elfimov’s argumentation is quite obviously directly involved in the current politics of the field, and for that reason all too easily slips into an oversimplistic and biased polemic.

The main problem lies not in the fact that the author has an axe to grind, but that he simply fails to support properly his otherwise interesting and most often valid points. Although he claims to be focusing primarily on the academic environment, his argumentation is based almost entirely on textual examples from the general press, from his

own observations, and from interviews with a handful of scholars who seem to hold a view identical to the author's about the present (sorry) state of the Russian humanities and who are cited extensively in support of the author's own critique (almost in the way a journalist, rather than an ethnographer, might use quotations from respondents). This unfortunately leaves Elfimov's otherwise important claims wide open to counter-debunking, especially by those 'old guard' scholars that he himself rightly criticises, yet who would no doubt leap at the opportunity to expose (with little effort) the wobbly and 'unscientific' architecture of his critique. Even more regrettable is the fact that Elfimov has simply missed the opportunity to write a truly enlightening and profound, rigorous and objective study of such an important topic as the culture of Russian humanities academe at this crucial transitional juncture. The present book offers but a vague and somewhat disappointing promise of such an enterprise.

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