

Wendy Slater's (1999) "Orthodox Ethic" and the Official Ideology of the Academia Cognoscenti

A Review of "The Orthodox Ethic: Thoughts on the Russian Economy from the Nationalist Opposition. *Journal of Contemporary History* 34(3): 383-397

(Review First Published in 2007, revised 2016)

Matthew Raphael Johnson

Johnstown, PA

I have recently read Miss Wendy Slater's (1999) article, which is apparently a piece of her doctoral dissertation, entitled "The Orthodox Ethic: Thoughts on the Russian Economy from the Nationalist Opposition." *The Journal of Contemporary History* (pps 383-397). It is a prime example of the institutionalized stagnation of academia, as it does little but repeat the myths and slogans of official western ideology. But as Miss Slater is likely to be promoted by official sources as the "critic" of Russian nationalism. A response is necessary.

Miss Slater begins by attempting to be fair concerning the economic program of Russian nationalists. The very fact that nationalism in general has been a-economic is important, and thus, research on this topic is equally so. Miss Slater does an abbreviated, albeit admirable, job of providing some basics on this question. However, her treatment of the issue is confused and disconnected, leaving the reader with the impression that Russian nationalist economics is little more than a hodge-podge of neo-Stalinism, Japanese corporatism and Orthodox theology. Of course, this is far from the truth, but it also what a hostile observer might be expected to gather. It must be understood that a tiny group of "semi-criminal" oligarchs has taken over the majority of the Russian GDP under Yeltsin, and Yeltsin was advised by western intellectuals and politicians. Both conservatives and liberals in both England and America supported him, and so

Miss Slater concludes that Russian nationalists engage in a it of a conspiracy theorizing that the west is after Russian natural resources. Now, the question is whether advanced capitalism is predatory or not. If it is, then the conclusion might well be easily arrived at that the west was indeed interested in monopolizing Russia's natural resources, a policy that the Department of State is not adverse to engaging in openly. How this is a "question" in Miss Slater's eyes is a mystery, but is a matter of the public record, rather than some "conspiracy mongering" that "Russian nationalists" are engaging in.

She writes, "National Patriotic writers claimed that the 1992 reforms formed by western economists aimed to 'conquer the economic space of the USSR from the position of western interests.'" (385) Claimed? Is Miss Slater slyly making the claim that western capital was uninterested in Russia's massive oil and gas reserves? This is not a matter of ideological posturing, but of economic fact and reality. Does anyone deny that the west is interested in sources of cheap energy? The very fact that Yeltsin was a westernizer, and gave away over two-thirds of the Russian GDP, plunging the country into dire poverty, should demand that all Russians seek alternatives to both the western and Soviet model. There is nothing specifically "nationalist" about it. This is history, not theory.

Miss Slater, as with all students of nationality in elite universities, label anything that has an ethnic genesis as "myth." This is a common, albeit dishonest, way of stigmatizing all nationalist or ethnic discourse that the elite is threatened by. Miss Slater is no different, using this common academic code term to automatically have the reader believe anything specifically

Russian must, ipso facto, be “myth.” So the young professor writes: “. . .the national patriots drew on older national myths, such as the traditions of mutual aid, philanthropy and artistic patronage of the pre-Revolutionary merchant estate” (384). These are “myths?” And are labeled so without argument? Much as Miss Slater’s argumentation proceeds from a common source, the “everyone at Cambridge knows” style of argument. Of course, these “myths,” again, are a matter of the historical record, and, like any people struggling to redefine themselves after generations of an oppressive and totalitarian system, are valid models to imitate.

The fact that Russians have come out of generations of totalitarianism and the destruction of their ancient heritage is a concept that Miss Slater ignores completely, and this ignorance, whether deliberate or feigned, harms her research. It remains true that nations in the third world, themselves attempting to rediscover ancient traditions after years of colonialism, never had these traditions called myths by the official academics. Apparently, that is reserved for Russians. Yet, certainly, the parallel is present, and Russia, for generations under a foreign and alien system of ideology, are in the same boat as African nations after the 1960s. What remains clear is that the treatment of the two situations is completely different. Russian nationalists are “mythmakers,” while African nationalists were “heroes.” The Russian nation is “myth” but the “international community” is concrete and real.

Laughably, Miss Slater writes the following, after explaining, in painful detail, the terrors of “shock therapy:” “They [the nationalists] accused the Russian government of having plundered the nation’s wealth through corrupt and inequitable economic policies” (385). “Accused,” Miss Slater? Who, if not the state, was behind the phony deals? This was not an accusation, but a statement of historic reality.

Dropping her guard of “academic objectivity,” Miss Slater opens the Jewish question in page 389. It is normal procedure in dealing with any form of nationalism that the System is threatened by to bring in the Jewish question, to force any sympathy of the reader away from the subject matter. Miss Slater seems to place the economic mentality of nationalism in some vaguely favorable light, and then bring up the Jewish question so as to link up legitimate economic criticism with anti-Semitism.

Capital is cosmopolitan by definition, in that it recognizes no bounds of ethnicity or culture, but understands only profit and power. But I think most academics also understand these things, and cannot believe that anyone will take these things seriously. Merely because the west if corrupted does not mean everyone is, and Miss Slater’s cynical ploy is merely a displacement of this corruption. Interestingly, the literature on “dependency theory” never makes mention of the Jewish angle. Yet, views of economic dependence are relevant to the Russian situation, but only here is there an attempt to link it up with the Jewish question. Again, here, there must be a reason for this.

Miss Slater seems to take aim at the idea that Russian merchants in Moscow in the 19th century were different from those in the west. Of course, without argument, she claims that this is merely “myth.” Yet, the reverse is true. Miss Slater assumes the western theories of “universal humanity,” motivated by the same monetary goals throughout the world, is indisputably true. Russians were different, and they were different due to specific structural constraints, constraints that led to differential behavior. She also has never learned that those Christians who dominated Russian trade during this time were Old Believers, living a very different life than the rest of Russia and are totally impenetrable to the urban, pampered, secular elites such as the young Miss Slater.

The lack of a truly urban spirit and the organization into guilds made the Russian 19th century merchant very different from his western counterpart. Nicholas I organized the merchants

into guilds owing taxes and other services to the state. Therefore, their motives were public rather than private. And it is also true that Orthodox provided a very different set of moral goals than the Protestant and decayed Catholic theologies of the west. To think that this set of goals made no difference in behavior is to stretch credulity. The Old Belief believed only in communal profits rather than individual gain. Usury was forbidden. Miss Slater's professors told her that all people are motivated by the same things and thus behave identically. She writes, "It was, of course, pure fantasy to claim that Russian capitalists and entrepreneurs were intrinsically more honest than their western counterparts" (392). The structure of the Old Belief ends this stupid assertion fairly quickly. Her silliness is uttered without argument, but with the "of course," the "everyone at Cambridge knows" argument.

Miss Slater gets nasty on page 394: "lacking [Bulgakov's] philosophical and theological approach, however, it became simply a nostalgia-ridden invocation of a mythical era of Russian pre-capitalism and merchant philanthropy." Of course, all her intellectual honesty has been thrown out the window, and she shows herself to merely another cog in the machine of the official western ideological apparatus. Apparently, Miss Slater does not realize that merely because no one at the ideologically conformist Cambridge University or UCL does not challenge her baseless accusations does not mean those of us out here in the hinterlands won't.

Miss Slater: Old Russia was organized very differently than western Europe in the 19th century. Her communes, artels and merchant guilds suffice to prove that her social priorities were radically different from the west. The very fact, which you admit, that Russia really did not form a true bourgeois prove without a doubt that Russian values, whatever their origin, were different from those of the west. Therefore, there is nothing intrinsically wrong in approaching Old Russia for guidance after the traumas of Bolshevik mass murder, oppression and Yeltsinite impoverishment. Russian economic growth under these constraints was substantial, her taxes low, and her peasants owners of the land. This is, as a matter of historical record, far better than the western record at the same time.

Russia pioneered, during the reign of Alexander III, the idea of factory legislation and protection of labor before the wildcat strikes of the west forced their governments to do the same. Miss Slater's arrogant, condescending and cynical tone does little more than cover up the reality of the situation in Russia and her distinctiveness to the west. It is certainly not a scholarly critique. To repeat, her lack of reference to the Old Belief as the essential element in non-Jewish commercial trade of the late 19th century shows her incompetence in this field.

It is true that some Russian nationalists have seen an economic model in Japan after World War II, though Miss Slater distorts the reasons why. In general the Japanese case shows a nationalist government controlling investment without actually owning the means of production. Japan proves that the libertarians are wrong in that the state can create economic growth and assist the more rational distribution of investments. Miss Slater mocks this approach by claiming that Japanese defense budgets have been small, and therefore, Russia cannot imitate them. Miss Slater does not realize that, first, the reality is that Japan has had substantial military investments since World War II (something China has regularly pointed out), and second, that such a limited amount of investment does not force Russia away from this model. The argument makes little sense.

Miss Slater concludes by saying, again in her common, nasty tone, apparently acceptable by peer reviewers only when nationalists are getting attacked: "It was fallacious to claim that Russia's economic traditions fostered beneficent, paternalistic, capitalism and it was fantastical to suggest that these traditions can be revived" (397). Of course, no arguments are used to back this up. Shame on her dissertation committee for letting this nonsense pass. These are assertions, not arguments. Apparently, Miss Slater, nor the Cambridge dons who let this silliness pass realize

Russia's system of productive artels, merchant communes and guilds, or even Alexander III's factory legislation.

Slater is typical of the neo-liberal intelligentsia of the west. Her work is shoddy, and is made up of hysterical accusations and claims without argument. She loathes Russian nationalism and national tradition, and thus calls them "myths." She says nothing original, but merely repeats the slogans of official ideologists and her professors. She dismisses the righteous anger of Russians who have seen the work of their hands stolen by a group of oligarchs who now are financing anti-Russian agitation abroad.

She does not seem to realize the pain Russia has been put through in her 20th century existence, and thus is baffled that anyone can seriously seek an alternative to western economic forms. Miss Slater seems to have no functional knowledge of the Russian tradition or of her history, but has been pushed through the system because she faithfully repeats the slogans of the elite-funded academics at Cambridge without variation. This also proves the fraud of academic "peer review" that such unsupported arguments get accepted and published. Miss Slater seems to have a knack for telling what the elite want to hear. But unfortunately, this is the state of Russia studies, and little more is to be expected in the future.