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BOOK REVIEW

Bryn Rosenfeld: The autocratic middle class: how state dependency reduces the demand for democracy

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The global expansion of the middle class, documented by World Bank data, has been accompanied by arguments that it will demand better governance and democracy in line with Barrington Moore's observation that "no bourgeoisie, no democracy." According to Acemoglu and Robinson (2006), "almost all revolutionary movements were led by middle class actors" (p. 39). Samuel Huntington (1991) argues that "in virtually every country the most active supporters of democratization came from the urban middle class" (p. 67). Rosenfeld's book tests this argument using data from Russia and other post-Soviet states. Each of the book's eight chapters examines a problematic aspect of the actions of the middle class in authoritarian societies. The methodology is interdisciplinary with an eclectic mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods including interviews, participant observation, field studies, and official data. The book's framework questions modernization and distributive theories of democratization that accord the middle class a central role.

The book's main argument is that the middle class in autocracies is not what its liberal advocates make it out to be. It is often the backbone of the authoritarian regime. The author argues that the rise of a state sponsored middle class may well strengthen authoritarianism and delay democratization. Rosenfeld points to the deliberate creation of and use of the middle class by post-Soviet governments. Using empirical data, Rosenfeld shows that the vast majority of middle class people in several post-Soviet countries are government employees. The share is highest in Azerbaijan (87%) and Belarus (81%) and lower in Russia (59%). Clearly, the public sector continues to dominate the career choices and ambitions of the middle classes of post- Soviet countries.

Indeed, the creation of such classes was an open and declared state policy in Kazakhstan. In 2004, then Kazakh president, Nursultan Nazarbayev described the middle class as

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the part of society "which has something to lose, which does not want a revolution, does not want changes in policy and laws and is a stabilizer and bulwark of the state" (quoted in Rosenfeld 2021, p. 197). A Kazakh social scientist included non-opposition as a criterion of belong to the middle class. "One of the criteria of belonging to the middle class … is that [such a person] never opposes the existing order" (p. 197). The Nur Otan Party in Kazakhstan described it mission in these very terms as well: "our key task is to create a strong middle-class that will serve as the basis for a robust economy and sociopolitical stability" (p. 193).

Consequently, it is safe to argue that the country's middle class is a client of the state. Kazakhstanis not the only post-Soviet country to decide on expanding the middle class. Russia's strategy 2020 aims to expand the size of the middle class to more than half the population. Rosenfeld argues that Russia's plans are similar to those of Kazakhstan, and most of the Russian middle class works in the public sector. Its motives to democratize are thus limited along the lines described as the "feudalization" of the bourgeoisie in reference to the co-option of the French middle class by the crown, which delayed the revolution and thus democracy as claimed by Barrington Moore.

Rosenfeld pays great attention to the causes and features of the 2011–2012 street protests in Russia, but notes that there is no concrete evidence of a middle class role on the issue of democratization in existing peer reviewed scholarship. Securing a better social and economic deal from the regime, and not democratization, appears to have been the goal of middle-class people who participated. The author's findings highlight the importance of co-optation of the public work place, political parties, and legislative assemblies in regime survival. Co-opting the middle class has not been as well studied as the co-optation of capitalists and workers, and it clearly yields benefits to the governments that practice it. It is important to note however, that there is no precise definition of what constitutes the middle class in Russia, meaning that that debates concerning its roles in the protests are bound to be unproductive. Protests in Russia tend to be held by the intelligentsia rather than the private sector middle class. The book also makes the mistake of assuming a measure of higher education for the middle class, but the reality in Russia and other post-Soviet countries is different; there is no necessary relationship between middle class life and education. Many working poor people in the countries of the former Soviet Union are academics, teachers, and scientists.

The book is relevant for public policy because it represents one of the first systematic looks at emerging post-Soviet middle class life. For some of these countries, this particular era represents the first time ever where they had middle classes capable of healthy measures of consumption of goods and services. The book has implications for Mancur Olson's theories as well. Well known for his theories concerning rent-seeking by special interests, Olson argues that small, well-organized groups tend to exploit larger, less-organized groups. Periods of instability and shock tend to remove old elites and unleash innovative transformation of economies and societies. Defeat in World War II removed the German leadership circles and placed new classes and elites in power. Victory in the same war entrenched the British elites. Within 15 years, West Germany had eclipsed the United Kingdom in economic power. Periods of stability and peace tend to entrench ruling groups and lead to the emergence of new interests invested in the status quo. In the long term, this feeds stagnation and hinders economic development. In Russia and much of the former Soviet Union, the populations want stability and economic development. Democracy is a secondary issue at best.

The disinterest in democracy allows the "stationary bandit" or the state in Olson's terms to focus on the development of the economy in order to allow its supporters the ability to

extract rents. The parallel concept in public choice theory is James Buchanan's "methodological individualism," which is applied to the middle classes in this case. To put things in the Russian or post-Soviet context, this book recalls Pytor Stolypin's claim to the Tsar that peace can transform his country, "give me 20 years of peace, both at home and abroad, and you will not recognize Russia." (Pozhigailo, 2011). Perhaps the current Russian and other post-Soviet governments, at least those which can, are attempting exactly this and are using the state-supported middle class to achieve the "at home" side of Stolypin's recommendation. This book has deep policy, political economy, and social implications. It dethrones the idea that the middle class is an agent of democratization and change, and it does so by marshaling a diverse set of methodological approaches to generate interdisciplinary evidence and data. This book is a must read for scholars and policy makers concerned with Russia, the former Soviet Union, and economic transitions.

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