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## **Book review: Olga Baysha, *Miscommunicating Social Change***

**Review authors: Patrick Sawyer and Alexander Finiarel**

**Olga Baysha, 2018. *Miscommunicating Social Change: Lessons from Russia and Ukraine*. Lanham: Lexington Books (246 pp., hardcover, £65.00 hardback)**

Olga Baysha's recent work *Miscommunicating Social Change* concerns a specific form of postcolonial discourse that continues to dominate in post-Soviet social movements. She calls this discourse the "uni-progressive imaginary," by which she refers to the eurocentric view of the world which envisions "progress" as any transformative social change that brings a country closer to "imitating the West."

The discourse produced by this imaginary divides society into a "progressive avant-garde" of history against an "uncivilized other" which leads to framing social conflicts in hierarchical terms and generating both symbolic and physical conflict (p. 181). In so doing, "progressive forces" are able to target both their compatriots in the opposition movement, as well as bystanders who may be hesitant to join in the protests. Not only does the "uni-progressive imaginary" demonize those located outside of the centers of power, but in employing the West as the unquestionable model for society, it also leads to a "discursive closure" which renders "creative and critical thinking impossible" by presenting a single unchallenged discourse that prevents others from surfacing (p. 181-2).

*Miscommunicating Social Change* revolves around the discourses emerging from protests often read as being pro-western opposition movements in the context of former Soviet states in the 21st Century. Borrowing from discourse theory as developed by thinkers as Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, and Nico Carpentier, Baysha sets about examining three main case studies involving the uniprogressive imaginary in the post-Soviet sphere. She takes as her main case studies the 2012 movement for fair elections in Russia, the 2014 Euro-Maidan and anti-Maidan conflict in Ukraine, and the anti-corruption movement in Russia that was ongoing at the time the book was published, and which subsequently merged with the other protest movements (against unfair elections, political repressions, pollution, etc) in the summer of 2019.

In each case, Baysha points out the common thread in each movement. She points to the embodiment of the uniprogressive imaginary when those who might sympathize with the regime in power are referred to by the opposition as "sovki" (a derogatory term for someone with a "Soviet mentality"), "rabi" (slaves), "anchovies" (someone who blindly follows Kremlin propaganda), or "terrorists" (in the case of the anti-Maidan movement in Ukraine) (p. 183).

By framing popular opposition to the uniprogressive agenda as a question of “fear”, “mental underdevelopment”, and “moral degradation” (p. 183), the pro-democracy movement alienates and undemocratically ostracizes the people from their symbolic representation of “the people”. The imagery proposed by uniprogressive imaginary pictures the Other as an almost inanimate object incapable of acting in their own best interests. In so doing, the Other is, thus, viewed by the pro-Western subject as preventing the inevitable progression of history. In the case of Ukraine, *Miscommunicating Social Change* looks at how uniprogressivism led to a “totalitarian disclosure” which lumped in all anti-Maidan individuals as “pro-Russian separatists” and “terrorists”, and erased any possibility of exploring the views of the moderates.

It would be absurd to claim that this form of discourse is problematic when these movements far from hegemonic, especially when compared to state power, as held by Vladimir Putin or Viktor Yanukovich. But when we observe power relations in an international context, we find that opposition protesters are supported by international actors who also seek to advance this narrative themselves.

Baysha makes it understood that this discourse could not exist without implicating the global community at large. Terms such as ‘modernization’, ‘development’, and ‘progress’ are commonly used, and often play an imperialist role in the periphery countries of the world system, giving value to the ideals that allowed for the West to dominate them in the first place.

Criticism from the West and Western corporate media regarding “modernization” and “democratization” provide “progressive” alternative media in both countries with the justification to demean the opposition as being, in essence, “anti-modern.” From the quotidian framing of Russia and Ukraine as having “backward” regimes to the European and American politicians visiting and cheering on the Euro-Maidan protesters, core countries do not exist as neutral bystanders, but as active propagators of the uni-progressive imaginary.

The uni-progressive imaginary, as described in *Miscommunicating Social Change*, emphasizes the “supply” side of anti-opposition ideas (state media, political talking points, etc). The author points out that more often than not, there is no mention of the complex “demand” side of any human being’s thought process, which allows liberals to take the leap to considering the Other as ‘hopeless’. Despite the many imperfections of the Soviet Union, a consistent majority of the Russian population continues to harbor positive sentiments for past times because of the “web of values that allowed Soviet people to live full lives” (p. 97).

This “web of values” held dear by the so-called “sovki” allowed for the creation of institutions to look after the well-being of citizens while avoiding the extremes of wealth inequality found in the capitalist world. Contrast this to the 1990s, when “shock therapy” reforms instituted by Boris Yeltsin, considered part of the introduction of “freedom” by liberals at the time, was discredited in

the eyes of the majority of the Russian people, who saw their economic security replaced almost overnight due to “soaring inflation, skyrocketing prices, massive unemployment, and rampant crime” (p. 98).

From the point of view of an ex-Soviet citizen observing pro-Western slogans used by the opposition and derogatory words employed to demonize a society which they remember with nostalgia, there is little wonder why many would be hostile to the liberal movement.

In all three of Baysha’s case studies, uni-progressivism undermined democracy instead of expanding it as these movements had intended. By placing the West as the uncriticizable model for what a country should strive for, uni-progressive discourse becomes a tool for symbolic and political domination over the “underdeveloped” Other, closing off any alternative intellectual discourse.

*Miscommunicating Social Change* argues that uni-progressivism is something that democratic social movements in the post-Soviet countries should absolutely avoid. She writes:

It is necessary to make the solid and impermeable frontiers between the self and the “other” porous, which will allow the activation of a diversity of positions, the forging of connections between former enemies, and the creation of alliances across borders. This, in turn, will pave the way for working out mutually acceptable terms of co-existence and reducing the chance of violence, whether physical or symbolic (p. 184).

This position, however, is not without its limits. As the experience of the Euro-Maidan in Ukraine demonstrated, a complete “dissolution of boundaries”, or “total pluralism” (p. 184), in order to create a popular front can lead to the cooptation of the movement by radically nationalistic and neo-fascistic forces, as with Svobodna and Pravy Sektor in Ukraine. Once this takes place, symbolic violence can ultimately transform into physical violence.

Russian citizens were also affected by the Ukrainian conflict and the discursive closures that occurred on both sides. The liberal opposition welcomed the Euro-Maidan as the event that “liberated” Ukrainians from an outdated, Soviet-like, corrupt regime dependent on authoritarian Russia, bringing it closer to becoming a “normal” European country.

Pro-government forces within Russia tried to portray Euro-Maidan as an example of western intervention that drowned the country in chaos and blood. The state then used this threat as an excuse to restrict the laws concerning demonstrations, making it possible to render any meeting illegal.

It was not only the post-Crimea annexation euphoria that stabilized the political situation in Russia for a time but also the fear of revolution and a new political crisis that came with the Ukrainian conflict. While this fact almost always goes unnoticed by the media and researchers, Baysha points out that many post-

Soviet people are afraid of changes and revolutions, do not really sympathize with liberal ideas, and feel nostalgic for the Soviet times.

What *Miscommunicating Social Change* sorely lacks is an analysis of Russian pro-government discourse. It appears that this discourse is constructed through an interplay of colonial and anti-colonial discourses.

When the Russian government needs to apply repressive measures, it either states that the exact same measures are a “normal practice” commonly applied in the West, or, when these exceptional measures transgress ordinary laws, that without them Russia would be colonized by the West. The opposition is usually depicted by pro-government media as agents of the West. Or perhaps Russian politics do not actually exist independently from the West. The West is both used as a positive example for repressive measures and a negative one when certain actions of protesters need to be demonized.

In this way, Russian politics is defined by colonial thinking on both sides. Russian liberals use the West as an example of what Russian society should aspire to be, whereas the Russian government uses the West as both an example of what is “normal” and a constant threat.

In order to pursue meaningful policy, either side has to overcome colonial thinking and denounce the coloniality of the opponent. Baysha’s analysis of oppositional media shows the coloniality of Russian liberals, who fail to understand their compatriots’ needs and desires, giving the opposition a tool that could help it to recognize its own mistakes and understand that in pursuit of democracy it acts and thinks in undemocratic ways.

An investigation of pro-government media could encourage meaningful criticism the Russian government in a way that is understandable to the majority of the population. In order to do that, the opposition needs to find issues, such as the Soviet social security system, for example, that are actually appealing for Russian, and make the country more “progressive” than the West.

Luckily, the opposition seems to have learned from their mistakes. During this summer’s protests surrounding the banning of certain independent candidates for the Moscow state Duma election, opposition forces managed to attract tens of thousands of people every week. More than half of Moscow’s population sided with the protesters for the first time in many years (Kommersant 2019).

The analyses of the posts of opposition leaders and oppositional media headlines in August showed an encouraging trend: the uni-progressive imaginary was absent in the majority of cases.

Another unfortunate thing about Baysha’s book is that she only analyses publications from the traditional liberal media (*Novaya Gazeta* and *Ekho Moskvy*) making it hard to compare to what extent the oppositional discourse has changed. Nevertheless, less than five per cent of articles in *Novaya Gazeta* and a couple of articles at *MBKh-Media*, *The Moscow Times*, and *BBC-Russia* used uni-progressive discourse (in the last two cases they were used by their

guests who were either political scientists or opposition candidates) (Olshanskaya 2019, Radchenko 2019, BBC-Russia 2019).

On the news website *Meduza* and on Alexey Navalny's blogs, this discourse was absent. Lubov Sobol, one of the key oppositional candidates in the Duma election, used hierarchical rhetoric only once, calling the protesters "the best people of Moscow" (2019). Only one of the influencers, Ury Dud, who supported the protests, made use of the uni-progressive imaginary in his posts (2019).

Several members of the opposition, mainly Russian feminists, criticized the hierarchical structure that liberals create when describing themselves and those who do not participate in protests. On her Twitter account, Nika Vodwood, one of the most well known Russian feminists today, criticised the way in which *Novaya Gazeta* (Aramyan 2019) painted a heroic portrait of Egor Zhukov, a student of one of the most prestigious Russian universities, the Higher School of Economics, who was facing trial for allegedly participating in massive "riots."

Vodwood's critique points out the hierarchy created between Zhukov and other protesters, which resulted in the validation of his toxic anti-feminist views and an unequal share of public attention to the cases of other protesters, though they were facing the same accusations for the same actions. She pointed out that it is the action, not the person, that matters in such cases. Darya Serenko, another renowned Russian feminist and artist-activist, supported these statements, writing an article in which she criticized the romanticization of the protests, the idealization of the victims of the system, and the blame placed on those who did not participate (2019).

Only *Ekho Moskvy* still holds to uni-progressive rhetoric, which was present in half of their posts. However, even their rhetoric seems to have moved away from colonial discourse. *Ekho* speaker Yulia Latynina is famous for her extremely liberal views, which would be considered as right-wing conservative in the West, proving Baysha's point that Russia's old-school that liberals still use uni-progressive discourse have become outdated and cannot keep up with the times themselves.

Nevertheless, Latynina noted last year that "the Kremlin is not strong, Europe is weak" and that "the regimes that did not modernise began to survive because Europe became weak and started to flirt with them" (Latynina 2019). Such disappointment in the West could make even hard-core Russian liberals like Latynina finally overcome uni-progressive discourse and potentially even make them listen to their compatriots.

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