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Eurasian Geography and Economics

Book review essay: The sleep of reason produces monsters: ethnic conflict and neo-nationalism

Neo-nationalism and universities: populists, autocrats, and the future of higher education, by John Aubrey Douglass, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 2021, pp. xvi and 301, \$49.95 (Paperback), ISBN-13: 9781421441863; \$49.95 (E-book), ISBN: 9781421443201. Free on Project Muse: <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/85165>

Strategic uses of nationalism and ethnic conflict: interest and identity in Russia and the post-Soviet space, by Pål Kolstø, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2022, 294 pp. £85.00 (Hardback), ISBN: 9781474495004; £85.00 (e-pub), ISBN: 9781474495035; £85.00 (PDF) 978147449502-8

W. John Morgan

Reading these books, I am reminded of Francisco Goya's much discussed series of aquatint etchings *Los Caprichos* (The Caprices), published in 1799. The series was a critique, emphasised by sardonic captions, of contemporary Spanish society. In particular, "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters", No. 43 of 80, has been seen as a personal statement of Goya's support for the values of the 18th century Enlightenment, and a symbolic warning of the dangers of human irrationality with its prejudice, ignorance, folly, readiness to intimidate and use violence in following its impulses. By contrast, the university, at least in its modern form, has been considered a bastion of scholarship, an incubator of intellectual discovery, guided

by human reason, leading to universal human flourishing. Yet, the university, and education generally, when under the control of the state or other potentially total institutions, have also been used ideologically, given its influence on the young, and scope for propaganda and indoctrination. There are many examples in modern histories, such as Nazi Germany, the Stalinist Soviet Union, and Maoist China. The concepts of academic freedom and university autonomy have always been and continue to be contested. These two books are warnings of the comparative dangers of neo-nationalism in higher education and politics and society generally. The full epigraph for *Los Caprichos*, No. 43, says: "Fantasy abandoned by reason produces impossible monsters: united with her she is the mother of the arts and the origin of their marvels." This suggests that the imagination is still fundamental to human flourishing and that we should beware of the coldly logical which may also produce monsters. Zygmunt Bauman, whose own early career in Poland was as a Stalinist, commented on this in *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989).

Although curiously not described as editor in the title, the essays collected by John Aubrey Douglass provide international perspectives on neo-nationalism and the contemporary university. A senior research fellow, Center for Studies in Higher Education, University of California, Berkeley, Douglass himself contributes a preface, chapters on neo-nationalism and the university historically and as a conceptual model, and on Trumpian nationalism; and contributes to another chapter. The other contributors comprise academic specialists, two experienced journalists, and a senior academic administrator. Biographical and reference notes are provided, but not separate bibliographies which would have been useful. There is a good index. The book is priced reasonably for a paperback edition and as an e-book. Generously, it is free on *Project Muse*.

The other chapters are by Brendan O'Malley on what he considers the negative effects of Brexit on British higher education; Wilhelm Krull and Thomas Brunette on the

intellectual and institutional challenges for universities in Germany, Hungary, and Poland; Marijk van der Wende on neo-nationalism in the European Union and its universities; Brendan O'Malley, again, on Turkish academics in the era of Erdogan, Turkey being a subject on which he has published previously; Karin Fischer on nationalism and China's universities under President Xi; Bevan E. Penprase and John Aubrey Douglass on balancing nationalism and globalism: higher education in Singapore and Hong Kong; Igor Chirikov and Igor Fedyukin on the role of universities in Putin's Russia. Finally, there are Elizabeth Balbachevsky and Jose Augusto Guilhon Albuquerque on Bolsonaro's Brazilian neo-nationalism and universities. The common theme is indicated by the volume's sub-title: 'Populists, Autocrats, and the Future of Higher Education,' each essay providing a valuable and not overly polemical assessment. Space precludes detailed comments on each. Here, I shall focus on those likely to be of greatest interest to readers of this journal, those by Fischer on Xi's China (Chapter 8), Penprase and Douglass on Singapore and, especially Hong Kong (Chapter 9), and by Chirikov and Fedyukin on Putin's Russia.

In the first, journalist, and U.C. Berkeley research associate, Karin Fischer surveys the relationship between nationalism and higher education in modern China, especially under Xi Jinping. It is a familiar story, examined in many research articles and monographs. The chapter does review this literature in detail but gives an account of the themes, points at issue, and likely directions. Beginning with the famous patriotic demonstration of Chinese students on May 4, 1919, Fischer reminds us that universities, as institutions and through outstanding individual scholars, have contributed fundamentally to modern China. Relationships with the state were, however, always difficult, and aggravated when the Communist Party came to power in 1949. The Party demanded loyalty to each shift in its political and ideological programme. This conflicted with what universities and academics believed to be the application of disinterested reason to knowledge acquisition and dissemination. The chapter

traces the well-known points of fracture, the Hundred Flowers Campaign, 1956-1957, the Cultural Revolution 1966-1976, and the Tiananmen Square protests and their aftermath, 1989.

The chapter's fresh contribution is the account of the Communist Party's relationship with China's universities under President Xi, described as "...the most authoritarian leader since Mao Zedong" (161), a leader who, through constitutional adjustments and internal Party control, can stay in power indefinitely. Xi recognizes that universities are essential to providing the innovation and knowledge that enables China's global power. This is the good news in that universities are encouraged and supported to compete internationally. Their prime purpose is to serve China's national aims and objectives as determined by the Communist Party's leadership. The bad news is that this means ever stricter control over curricula, research priorities, and university autonomy through the ubiquitous Communist Party secretary, relations with foreign universities and academics, international publishing opportunities, and academic freedom, including repression of dissident scholars.

Many examples are given, including the educational implications of the persecution of the Uighur minority, attempts to influence foreign partners, such as universities recruiting Chinese students, and soft power exerted through the Confucius Institutes. Such activities are often met with an obligingly supine response, although governments, notably in the United States, are now reacting against them. China, says Fischer, is in tension between its aspiration to develop a world-class higher education system and insistence that rational enquiry, intellectual exchange, and academic freedom give way to a national-patriotic ideology directed by the Chinese Communist Party and State, by which reason is put to sleep until required. Given other discontents, such as posts allocated according to political conformity rather than intellectual merit, and growing economic and social inequality generally, this might lead to another moment of fracture.

Similar issues are apparent in the Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong. Yet, this paradoxically already provides China with a world-class higher education system. As Penprase and Douglass point out, China's new National Security Law for Hong Kong is a clear threat to the autonomy of the SAR's universities. They cite Amnesty International which says that offences under the law are "...so broadly defined they can easily become catch-all offences used in politically motivated prosecutions with potentially heavy penalties" (218). The Law has also been used to choose university governing bodies. Penprase and Douglass conclude: "Where once there was a hope of two separate university systems between Hong Kong and Beijing, that seems on the brink of dissolution" (218). The consequences will be "...a flight of talent from the Chinese city-state and a real decline in the vitality of its universities" (218). It would have been helpful if the comparative experience of Macao, the second of China's Special Administrative Regions, had also been considered. Unfortunately, it is not even mentioned in the index.

Igor Chirikov and Igor Fedyukin tell a similar story about Russia of tension between high aspirations for the quality in the interests of state power and political influence internally and internationally; and the intellectual closure of the system in favour of a national-patriotic ideology. Chirikov, senior researcher at the Center for Studies in Higher Education, U.C. Berkeley, and Fedyukin, a doctoral graduate, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, historian of Russian education, and director of the Center for Russian Imperial History, Higher School of Economics, Moscow, are themselves products of the short-lived international educational co-operation that followed the Soviet Union.

Published before Russia's further aggression against Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the chapter begins with a plain statement: "Russia is one of the international leaders of the neo-nationalist movement" (220). Vladimir Putin, Russia's President, is said to flaunt this "...as a personal projection of Russia's power and influence" (220). This has deep roots in

Russia's Soviet past (and indeed that of Imperial Russia, as Dr Fedyukin knows). It is an important point as international relations specialists sometimes fail to take this into account. The question is: "How has Russia's version of neo-nationalism influenced the behavior and status of Russia's universities?" (221). The authors remind us that limits to academic freedom, international exchange, and a nativist agenda are characteristic of autocratic regimes, and long before the present global wave of neo-nationalism. Universities should be considered according to both historical and contemporary circumstances.

The chapter provides an excellent summary and comments on the tensions of contradictory policies in higher education with the end of the Soviet Union and especially during Putin's effectively twenty-two-year rule. Fundamentally, this is between modernization and ideological and political control by the state. The financial consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic reinforced state control over universities, with a visible return to Soviet structures and practice. The aim, as in Xi's China, is to mobilize universities and education generally in support of the Russian state and those who possess it. This means state capitalism and a national-patriotic ideology that rejects Western values which are said to threaten Russia's cultural and political integrity.

These issues are examined in sections on Institutional Autonomy and University Governance, Academic Freedom and Civil Liberties, Talent Mobility and Immigration, Universities and International Engagement, and finally, The Future of Russian University Autonomy? A simple structure gives the reader a clear picture of the condition of Russian universities and higher education generally. It says that by 2012 "...universities lost their autonomy and rectors became, for all practical purposes, appointed officers fully accountable to the ministry" (225). This was before the Russian leadership "...turned in 2013 toward a neo-nationalist posturing at home and abroad" (226). Secondly, although it is much more difficult to track: "Still, the assault on academic freedom in Russia is obvious and dramatic."

How this occurs is described, with examples, including a renewed emphasis on a *vospitanie* or moral education, and essential indoctrination in what are claimed to be traditional Russian values. Thirdly, International students are important in forming pro-Russian national elites who will support Russian interests (231), something that echoes Soviet soft power. Since 2015, the recruitment and state subsidy of international students have reflected geopolitical priorities. Market recruitment of students has also taken these into account. On the other hand, the emigration of academics and highly qualified people is a major problem. Their motivation is a mix of economic and political reasons, especially the loss of intellectual freedom and the weakening of the rule of law. A similar story is told about universities and international engagement, with again echoes of Soviet policy. There is an aspiration to improve the global standing of Russian universities and to make them competitive in the interest of the Russian state. But this is accompanied by stricter ideological monitoring of international partnerships and access to funds received through foreign Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs).

The public protests in Moscow and other cities in the summer of 2019, in which many students and faculty members participated, didn't change the reality of such political controls. Indeed, they persuaded the state that they should be tightened. The constitutional referendum in 2020 allowed Putin to stand for president for two more terms, meaning that the higher education policies described will continue. The authors conclude that Russian universities will become increasingly isolated internationally and controlled by the state. This was before the invasion of 24 February 2022 which has aggravated Russia's drift into the sleep of reason of intellectual as well as political and economic autarchy. There is more on this in the second book reviewed.

The edited collection of essays by various hands, often the outcome of a conference or other meeting, is now a regular feature of academic publishing. The merit is that it focuses

attention on an issue that commonly concerns the contributors and allows various and perhaps differing perspectives to be seen. The drawback is that the essays may vary considerably in quality of scholarship and writing, perhaps included only by being part of the original event. The monograph by contrast presents detailed scholarship for the benefit or challenge of fellow scholars and a sophisticated general readership.

In a sense, Pål Kolstø offers a combination of these. Professor of Russian and Post-Soviet Studies, University of Oslo, he is a well-known academic, publishing in journals and, as an editor and contributor, to essay collections. The book comprises a brief preface, nine chapters, tables, figures, black and white illustrations, a comprehensive bibliography, and an index. The core is provided by revised versions of eight of Kolstø's previously published essays. These are introduced by a fresh theoretical chapter on the unifying theme of nationalism and ethnic conflict in Russia and other post-Soviet states. Kolstø notes the sophistication of definitions of 'nation and nationalism,' but says: "In this book, I simply accept that nationalism has become a ubiquitous feature of politics in the modern world" (2), with state leaders and what he describes as "ethnic entrepreneurs" using its rhetoric for specific political agendas. This is the book's focus, how nationalism has been used as a political strategy, by whom, and for what purposes, with the former Soviet Union "...an ideal place for studying these processes" (3).

Chapter 1 on Nationalisms and Interest-Driven Identities: Theoretical Perspectives, considers classical and recent writing on ideas, identities, and interests in nationalism, in general, and in the Soviet Union in particular. It is a helpful review of the perspectives of culturalists, instrumentalists, and modernists, with a substantial section on applying instrumentalism to the Soviet Union and its successor states. It then considers two nationalist strategies and their use in achieving specific political objectives. These are "...the construction of boundaries between ethnic/national groups, and the creation and manipulation

of national symbols” (3). Their role in any society has, says Kolstø, began with the work of Durkheim. This does not mean that they always result in consensus and unity. Symbols are important as boundary markers especially when demonstrated through rituals. The conclusion is that: “Nationalism is mobilisation to promote the interests of an identity group, the imagined community of ‘the nation.’ These interests may be material or immaterial” (28).

True, but hardly original. There are eight further chapters in which Kolstø reviews the literature, from a consistent instrumentalist perspective. I shall focus on his conclusions.

Chapter 2 considers: Competing with Entrepreneurial Diasporians: Origins of Anti-Semitism in Nineteenth-Century Russia. It is a familiar account, but one that makes a convincing case that economic interest factors were more important than most histories of anti-Semitism in Russia have recognised. Chapter 3 is on Nationalism, Ethnic Conflict and Job Competition: Non-Russian Collective Action in the USSR under Perestroika. It argues for the importance of socio-economic structures in shaping ethnic identity and agency. Job competition is the key example, with individuals adopting “...more or less rational strategies to enhance their life-chances.” The use of reason becomes unreasonable. Chapter 4 considers: ‘The Concept of ‘Rootedness’ in the Struggle for Political Power in the Former Soviet Union in the 1990s.’ The focus is the claim to political hegemony by titular indigenous populations in post-Soviet states with Russian minorities. This may have been reinforced by a perhaps surprising acceptance that Soviet forms of ethnicity were supported by content and that this should continue.

Chapter 5 considers: ‘*Antemurale* Thinking as Historical Myth and Ethnic Boundary Mechanism in Eastern Europe.’ This identifies historical myths said to support ethnic and national cultural identity, specifically, that of the *antemurale* or rampart used to identify the boundary between Christian and Ottoman; and also, between Western and Eastern Christianity. This concept or, if one prefers it, myth is of historical importance and has been

much discussed. As Kolstø sees it, it is not cultural differences in themselves that "...drive the mythogenesis, but concerns about power and power relations" (111). Chapter 6, one of the book's most interesting and timely chapters, considers: 'Imperialism and Ethnocentrism in Russian Nationalism.' Kolstø comments that, under Putin, Russian nationalism became central, but as an example of how political leaders can use nationalist or 'patriotic' sentiment for their own more specific purposes. He considers the possibility of the Russian Federation as a patriotic nation-state, with the ideology of Eurasianism identifying a geopolitical sphere of influence. However, this has taken extreme form in the irrationalism of Aleksandr Dugin, a turbulent nationalist philosopher or rather ideologue, an Alfred Rosenberg of contemporary Russia. It is seen in the increasing aggravation of attitudes towards Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea, the fomentation of separatism in Donbas, and (since the book was published) open and brutal imperialist aggression: a monstrous common nightmare. Kolstø describes this as not only a watershed in modern European history but also "...a major barrier to Russia's nation-state transformation" (139). However, Putin now claims Russia to be something different, a cultural civilization-state, and a potential leader of new world order. This is sometimes forgotten, although not I am confident by Kolstø when considering now the consequences of the war against Ukraine.

This has been noted for its use of symbolism such as the notorious 'Z' of the Russian invaders (not in the Cyrillic alphabet). Chapter 7 considers: 'The St. George Ribbon and the Immortal Regiment: New Symbols and Rituals in Russian Regime-Legitimation.' These are symbols of deep and long-standing significance in Russian military history and patriotism. They arouse genuine collective memory and emotion among the Russian people. This is why they have been appropriated instrumentally by the Putin regime. Kolstø considers the St. George ribbon to be both an internal badge of regime support and a symbol to the outside world of Russia's cultural neo-imperialism. Those who wear it are with us, those who do not

are against us. This is illustrated in Chapter 8 which considers: ‘Collaboration Between Nationalists and Liberals in the Russian Opposition, 2011-2013.’ This was an inevitably short-lived alliance of liberals and nationalists, using the symbol of a White Ribbon, denoting ‘pure’ rather than ‘dirty’ politics. It failed in as much as the Putin regime was increasingly able to appropriate to itself the legacy of the patriotic symbol of the Orange-Black St. George ribbon. This attracted the nationalists and revealed the liberal supporters of the White Ribbon to be a minority. The final Chapter 9 considers appropriately: ‘Crimea Versus Donbas: Russian Nationalist Reactions.’ The motives behind the Putin regime’s policy are shown to be complex, influenced by the fractious irrationalism of nationalist politics internally and likely international reactions. The chapter focuses on the former and it is important if still alarming, to be reminded of the irrational extremes of Russian nationalist opinion. Writing before 24 February 2022, Kolstø concluded that “...with his Crimea gambit, Putin had provided an object lesson on how to use nationalism against nationalists” (217). Earlier, Marlene Laruelle is cited as describing the Donbas as “...a Pandora’s box that the Kremlin has been struggling to close” (215). This is followed by another analogy: “The Kremlin regime might...end up like the sorcerer’s apprentice who knew how to make the broom fetch water—but not how to stop it” (216). It seems to me that this is the situation in which the reputedly cold and calculating Vladimir Putin now finds himself.

Kolstø’s book provides persuasive evidence of the strategic use of nationalism and ethnic conflict following the Soviet Union. A back-cover endorsement describes it as a compelling instrumentalist contribution to the study of nationalism and important developments in Eurasia, written in what is considered to be clear, engaging prose. I am in no doubt about the scholarship, but find the book’s chief defect to be a prolixity that obscures rather than clarifies. It is the weight of the evidence rather than its cogency that persuades.

That said, it is a detailed and timely book which contributes much to our understanding of contemporary Russia, its post-Soviet neighbours, and the conflicts between them.

Given the condition of our overcrowded and resource-depleted planet, the use of reason and common endeavour to cope with humanity's problems seems obvious. Yet humanity is in so many ways failing in this. The books reviewed provide many examples of such failure together with opportunities for reflection: What is happening to internationalism and rational rules-based world order? What is happening to globalization, once seen by many as an economic panacea? Are they being replaced by neo-nationalist power struggles over territory and resources, exploited instrumentally by politicians in pursuit of their power and ideological goals? For example, Russia's aggressive war against Ukraine has, amongst its many enormities, potentially catastrophic implications for international food security. Again, is education an instrument of reason or a means of indoctrination? The fundamental question may be whether post-modern and post-truth perspectives have so challenged what it is to be human in an increasingly threatening world that self-interested reaction is now as likely as common human flourishing. These books are valuable contributions to understanding this dangerous tension.

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