1 Symbolism and regime change

The essence of regime change is the replacement of one set of rulers with another. But regime change often also involves alterations to the institutional structure of the polity, the replacement of one set of institutions with another set, claiming to be superior to those pushed from the political scene. The more extensive such changes are, the greater the likelihood that the particular instance of regime change will be considered to be a revolution. This sort of change of personnel and institutions can be reasonably quick, with the seizure of power promoting new elites into the apex of the polity who then set about reordering the institutional structure. What takes longer to change, but what must change if a regime radically different from that replaced comes to power, is the symbolism associated with the old regime.

Symbols are a primary means of understanding the world. They simplify complex reality by representing in linguistic, ideational or visual form ideas which cannot be expressed easily or simply. They constitute a form of language which gives expression to principles, assumptions, conceptions and ideas which can be very complex, and thereby through image and allegory can express things simply and give meaning to them more effectively than would be possible through a longer exegesis. For example, the national flag is not merely a coloured piece of cloth associated with a particular country, but a symbol of national identity and meaning which can evoke a whole range of emotions and images in the minds of observers. By simplifying reality in this way, symbols can actually create meaning; in the words of one early student of symbolic politics, man (*sic*) 'reconstructs his past, perceives his present condition, and anticipates his future through symbols that abstract, screen, condense, distort, displace, and even create what the senses bring to his attention'.[1] Symbolic discourse, or the projection of meaning through the coherent arrangement of symbols, is therefore central to understanding the

[1] Murray Edelman, *Politics as Symbolic Action. Mass Arousal and Quiescence* (Chicago: Markham Publishing Co., 1971), p. 2.

present, the past and the potential future, and therefore new regimes will seek to develop a symbolic discourse that will justify and legitimate their positions. However, it is important to realise that symbols can be ambiguous and possess 'layers of meaning',[2] which means that they may be interpreted in different ways by different people at different times. This creates a potential problem of the incoherence of a regime's symbolic programme, of how to ensure over time that the symbols the regime seeks to use remain coherent and consistent. If the symbolic matrix of the regime becomes highly incoherent, it can have significant effects on the regime's capacity to maintain effective dialogue both within its own ranks and with the populace as a whole, as well as on the regime's very stability.

The representational role of symbols projects them into the heart of the functioning of the polity. All regimes invoke and use symbols as part of the way they govern. At a surface level, all regimes associate themselves with the symbols of the state – flag, emblem, anthem – and when a new regime comes to power, those symbols may change. More fundamentally, regimes use symbols in an attempt to legitimate their rule by associating themselves with principles and images which they believe have (or will have) resonance within the society as a whole. Such principles and images are usually linked to conceptions about what it is the society stands for, often themselves embedded in myths about the society's history. By symbolically trying to associate itself with ideas about what the nation means, a regime seeks validation of its programme through conceptions of national authenticity. Of course, in revolutionary situations, the conceptions of what the nation means may be reworked quite fundamentally in the direction of the introduction into the national discourse of abstract principles that were not there before. When this happens, both the symbols which the regime uses and the conception of what the society means undergo significant change. The point is that every regime generates a symbolic programme which seeks to encapsulate the existing symbolic matrices and articulate what both society and regime stand for.

The Soviet Union, which collapsed in 1991, was an unusual political system. At its heart was a formal ideology which, in theory, spelled out the trajectory of development the society was following, its projected end point (communism), and the historic dynamic whereby that end point would be reached. This vision of the present and the future constituted not only the heart of the regime's legitimation programme,

[2] D. Cosgrove and S. Daniels, *The Iconography of Landscape. Essays on the Symbolic Representation, Design and Use of Past Environments* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 2.

but also a clear rationale for the way in which society was organised. The regime was therefore ideocratic in nature in the way that most other regimes of the twentieth century (with the major exceptions being the other communist regimes that were modelled on the Soviet) were not. But even among ideocratic regimes, communist regimes, and in particular the Soviet, were unusual to the extent to which ideological values, assumptions and ways of thinking permeated all aspects of public and private life. It was not just that the political system reflected the values of the ideology but that, because of the totalist aspirations of the regime, every part of the society was closely linked in to the ideology. Throughout almost all of the life of the USSR, communism was the officially avowed teleology, the end point toward which they were working and the fundamental goal which gave meaning to everything else. The organisation of society, in particular collective ownership and the overwhelming role of the state, was explained in substantial part by the attempt to build a socialist society. All policy was rationalised by its contribution to this overriding aim, while the basic legitimacy of the system was grounded in the claim that progress was being made towards the creation of a new type of society, communism.

The ideology was complex and ontological, explaining the society's trajectory through a philosophy of history and a teleology. The ideology was therefore the basic philosophical foundation of the regime, its formal intellectual basis and the core of its legitimation. It provided the basic rationale for the Soviet project, and underpinned the dominant conceptions of social reality in the society. But because of its complexity and philosophical nature, it was not well suited to the day-to-day tasks of communication between government and governed. This role was played by the Soviet metanarrative,[3] a body of discourse which simplified the ideology and acted as a means of mediation between regime and people. The metanarrative was the means of transforming the principles of the ideology into the practice of day-to-day reality for the citizenry. Through its projection of a simplified form of the ideology, and its connection to the daily life of the society, the metanarrative provided a symbolic construction of the society and an explanation for why it was the way it was and where it was going. In this way, it provided the basic definition of the community and its future. It therefore defined what the society and its political system stood for in terms consistent with the ideology.

An important component of the metanarrative was myths. Myths were the narratives which gave substance to the social construction of Soviet

[3] For an extended discussion of this, see Graeme Gill, *Symbols and Legitimacy in Soviet Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

reality contained in the metanarrative. Myth is essentially a socially constructed story about the community and its origins[4] which provides meaning to the members of that community by explaining important aspects of the community and its development. Myths generate social solidarity and identity by creating images of the past which are meant to resonate with the present, linking past and present in a way which gives meaning to the current state of affairs. Such myths may be based on real historical events, or they may rest on mythological episodes like those at the heart of the beliefs of the ancient Greeks in the role played by their gods in human affairs. But what is more important than their historical veracity is that the members of the community believe them. Myths are thus central to the community's understanding of itself and its nature. In the Soviet case, it was the interweaving of a number of myths[5] which constituted the metanarrative.

The Soviet metanarrative was unusual in international comparative terms because of both the degree to which it was formalised in an official ideology which had its roots in a range of exegetical texts, and its all-encompassing nature. Only theocracies matched the communist systems in the extent to which their guiding ideas were said to have a clearly defined textual base, and in the twentieth century there were few such regimes around. But it was the all-embracing nature of the Soviet metanarrative which set it apart from most regimes (although perhaps not from theocratic post-1979 Iran). Because of both the theory of history embedded in Marxism and the teleology at the heart of the metanarrative, all aspects of Soviet society were organically linked with the metanarrative. This organic linkage was reflected in the integration into the metanarrative of symbols from all parts of society. It was the case not only that all policy had to be consistent with, or at least rationalised in terms of, the metanarrative, but also that all aspects of life were to be understood in terms of that metanarrative. Certainly in most societies there is an incentive to frame everything in terms of national conceptions and stereotypes, but the teleological nature of the Soviet metanarrative meant that the failure to have something framed in its terms appeared not only odd, but actually as being opposed to that metanarrative and what the society was seeking to achieve. This wholistic, all-encompassing

[4] On this, see David I. Kertzer, *Politics and Symbols. The Italian Communist Party and the Fall of Communism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 16; Edelman, *Politics as Symbolic Action*, p. 14; and the classic Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science, and Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1954), pp. 100–101.

[5] The most important were the myths of the October Revolution, the building of socialism, the nature of leadership, the place of opposition, and victory in the Great Patriotic War: Gill, *Symbols*.

nature of the metanarrative, allied to the role it played in regime legitimation, meant that it dominated Soviet society.

There were four major vehicles through which the Soviet metanarrative was expressed.[6] First, the language of political discussion and debate. In public discussion, leaders' speeches, official decisions and documents, and the mass media, the basic categories of analysis and understanding of the metanarrative were generated and promulgated. The result was that public discourse was dominated and shaped by the basic conceptions of the ideology, which meant that the public language that people had to use to get by in the system was that of the metanarrative. It became the dominant form of discourse in the society, with the logic of its concepts, values and symbols constituting the public sphere within which people had to function. Second, the visual arts, particularly painting and political posters. As official control over the production of artwork expanded, reflected in the notion of socialist realism, this became a major medium for the projection of symbols and images linked to the underlying conceptions of the regime. Third, the physical environment. Central here was the reconstruction of Moscow with the aim of turning it into a model socialist city, representing all that was good about the Soviet experience. The capital appeared as the material representation of the Soviet aim, and therefore as a physical symbol of the metanarrative. Fourth, ritual. The development of rituals in all walks of life – birth, marriage, death, entry into the army – not just the regime's feast days, provided an interactive format for the playing out of the metanarrative. Combined, these four modes of expression ensured that the metanarrative dominated the Soviet public sphere and profoundly affected the diminished private sphere of life in the USSR. Importantly, the principal mode of expression of the metanarrative through these means was symbolic; in all four areas, the discourse was through symbolic representation whereby particular terms, images, structures and actions embodied the basic principles and categories of the metanarrative. Through its domination of the public sphere in this way, the metanarrative was clearly central to the continued existence of the Soviet regime.

But the metanarrative was not simply something handed down from on high. Although the top Soviet elite was the principal force shaping the metanarrative and its development,[7] especially given the control it was able to exercise over the means of mass communication (and therefore its capacity to project across the society as a whole and to exclude

[6] Gill, *Symbols*, pp. 6–16.
[7] Officials at lower levels of the Soviet structure could also be instrumental in shaping the metanarrative: Gill, Symbols, p. 19.

alternative visions), it was neither alone in this nor did it do it in a vacuum. Given the ambiguous character of symbols and the consequent possibility of people interpreting them differently, the dialogue within society could never be just a monologue from elite to populace. The only way an elite-driven metanarrative can gain intellectual dominance in society is if there is some connection between that metanarrative and the values of the populace as a whole. This means a form of mediation between elite and popular values in which at least part of the popular values is co-opted and incorporated into the metanarrative. Traditional popular symbols and values can be taken up and given new life and meaning, a new signification can be given to existing cultural phenomena, and traditional concepts and images can be reinterpreted in a new way, thereby embedding the elite narrative in traditional culture. The reverse can also occur, whereby elements of the elite culture can be given meaning and power through their association with the more popular-value culture. In practice, both processes generally occur,[8] creating an overlap between the two while rooting elite culture in the mass culture.

This overlap was also relevant to the way in which the mass of the populace were not simply passive receivers of the message from above but active shapers of the form the metanarrative took. They could help shape that metanarrative through the decisions they made about what to accept and what to reject of the message projected by the regime, with popular resistance to aspects of the metanarrative likely to shape the way it developed in the future. Similarly, through its own interpretations of parts of the metanarrative, the populace could be the root of innovation and change in that metanarrative; the way each individual interacted with the official culture could change that culture, at least for the individual and those in the immediate vicinity. James C. Scott's notion of the people turning official language into a 'hidden transcript',[9] taking it over and using it for their own purposes as a mode of subaltern resistance, shows how the shape of the metanarrative can be affected by the mass of the populace.

Given the nature of the Soviet metanarrative, the usual problems created by the need for a change in the symbolism of the regime when

[8] This is facilitated by the fact that the elite culture usually is shaped in part by the established values in the society. On culture and values playing the part of a 'generative mechanism' or 'cultural memory', see Ju. M. Lotman and B. A. Uspenskij, 'The Role of Dual Models in the Dynamics of Russian Culture (up to the End of the Eighteenth Century)', Ju. M. Lotman and B. A. Uspenskij, *The Semiotics of Russian Culture* (Ann Arbor: Department of Slavic Languages and Literature, University of Michigan, 1984, ed. Ann Shukman), p. 28.

[9] James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance. Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

a regime changes were significantly greater than normal. With both the ideational principles and the material structures of the society justified and suffused by the Soviet metanarrative, when that metanarrative was displaced, it became a question not only of what was to replace it but also of how the principal structures of Russian society could be justified. In principle, this could have been achieved through the generation of another metanarrative but, given that the post-Soviet regime has sought assiduously to avoid formal ideologies and that it lacked the sort of totalist control enjoyed by its Soviet predecessor, such a solution was unlikely. But the regime could not exist in an ideational vacuum, especially in light of the Soviet experience. A structure of symbolic values was needed if the new regime was to gain legitimacy and project a sense of the essential worth of the society. The growth of symbols was crucial if the post-Soviet regime was to explain the collapse of the Soviet experiment and why the post-Soviet regime deserved to replace it. Given that the populace as a whole had known only the Soviet Union and retained many of the values they had imbibed during the Soviet period, and given that many seemed even twenty years later to look nostalgically towards the Soviet past, it was imperative that the new regime generate and project a symbolic narrative to justify its existence.

It was not only that the all-embracing nature of the Soviet metanarrative meant that when it was gone the gap it left was significant, but also that the unique nature of the circumstances of the change in regime demanded a response. A decade before it disappeared, the Soviet Union had seemed to be an impregnable superpower. While there were weaknesses in its structure and performance, for most people the collapse of the system did not seem to be imminent. Most Soviet citizens, while they may have complained about various aspects of their lives, had little sense that the regime which had seemed so solid for so long was in danger of collapse. And, unlike in the West where the collapse could be, and was, easily explained in terms of the fundamental deficiencies of the system, for those who lived within it and had experienced it as a functioning structure, its demise came as a major shock. Both the fact and the speed of its demise were unexpected given its perceived stolidity and demonstrated capacity to survive. In such circumstances, with the disappearance of something that to many had seemed all-enduring, some sort of credible explanation for this that transcended the ubiquitous conspiracy theories was needed.

This would have particularly been the case if, as Serguei Alex. Oushakine has argued,[10] many Russians experienced the Soviet collapse

[10] Serguei Alex. Oushakine, *The Patriotism of Despair. Nation, War, and Loss in Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).

as extreme personal trauma. For some people, the socialist system had been psychically linked to their own persons and to the shaping of those persons; they saw themselves as both created by and in turn helping to create socialism in the USSR. Their way of being was defined by the socialist experiment in the USSR, and therefore its collapse had dramatic implications for their own sense of who they were. Even for some who were not as psychically engaged and for whom the impact of the collapse was not psychic in nature, trauma could nevertheless be the result through drastically changed personal circumstances. For those Russians cut off from historical family roots by the emergence of independent states, plunged into penury by economic reform, and with their long-standing values cast into question by the collapse of the socialist ideal, these changes could trigger both personal trauma and a loss of a sense of community, something which could reinforce that trauma.[11] Where this sort of response was present, there was a clear need for a new narrative that could make sense of what had happened and give direction for the future.

Adding to the pressure for explanation was the nature of the regime change. The break-up of the USSR and the emergence of independent Russia was not a case of the replacement of an incumbent elite by an oppositionist one, but the replacement of a federal elite by an already established republican one. The new rulers of Russia were not outsiders who drove the incumbents from power but another group of insiders who displaced the federal authorities. This means there was significant continuity between Soviet and post-Soviet elites, represented most graphically by the person of Boris Yeltsin. This created the unusual situation where a change of regime and whole social system seemed momentous, alongside significant continuity in the elite. The result was a potential legitimation crisis in two ways. First, how could this apparent paradox of major systemic change along with limited elite change be explained? And, second, if the Soviet system had been so bad that it collapsed, how could those who had been implicated in its running remain in power? Some sort of narrative was needed to answer these questions.

This need for explanation created an opening for the new regime to respond through the generation of a new narrative integrating an understanding of the past with an explanation of the present and future. And while a complex, all-embracing metanarrative along Soviet lines integrating myths and symbols from all areas of life was unlikely, a more limited symbolic narrative giving meaning to the recent past and present

[11] Oushakine, *Patriotism of Despair*, ch. 1.

was a possible response. If such a new symbolic narrative was to emerge in post-Soviet Russia, its initial impetus and direction had to come, like the Soviet metanarrative before it, from the political elite. It was this group which was most sensitive to the need for legitimation, at both the systemic and personal levels, and which was best placed to articulate such a vision. If a coherent narrative was to emerge, the elite needed to take the lead and give it an intellectual foundation and focus.

However, as with the Soviet metanarrative, this did not occur in a vacuum. Any elite drive to generate a post-Soviet narrative had to be conditioned by the values, perceptions and actions of non-political elite actors. Unless an elite-derived narrative had popular resonance, its ability to both explain the Soviet collapse and provide a basis for future development would be significantly compromised. In post-Soviet Russia the gaining of this sort of popular resonance was complicated compared with the Soviet period by the pluralisation of Russian society that had accompanied the Soviet collapse, and the resultant proliferation of social forces able to feed into the process of narrative development. This significantly complicated the emergence of a coherent, post-Soviet, Russian narrative.

In seeking to develop such a narrative, the political elite could not start from a blank sheet of paper. All members of the elite had come from within the interstices of the Soviet system; they all carried the effects that system had had upon their politically formative years. Some attention therefore needs to be given to the Soviet legacy, and this is done in Chapter 2. In Chapter 3 the focus is upon the way successive leaders have sought to frame Russia's past, present and future. What sorts of visions are to be found in the presidents' speeches, and have they articulated a clear future for the post-Soviet polity? Chapter 4 looks at the sorts of symbolic representations of politics and political life that are embedded in the institutional structure and how it works. The symbolism of the political system and how it works, or the institutional culture, is an important contributor to any narrative that seeks to render legitimacy to that system, so its symbolic representation can be seen as an indicator of the sort of narrative that is taking shape. This is particularly important given the attempts by various figures, especially Yeltsin, to differentiate the post-Soviet from the Soviet era. In Chapter 5 the focus turns to the public arena, and in particular the way that the past is being presented. A particular aspect of this is the Soviet era and, within that, the figure of Iosif Stalin, because it is against this Soviet era that the contemporary regime must be measured. Chapter 6 looks at the way in which the architecture of Moscow has changed since 1991. During the Soviet era, Moscow was seen as the model socialist city with

architectural forms meant to reflect that ideological value. With the post-Soviet era, the question arises of how those classic Soviet architectural forms have been treated and whether there is a discernible post-Soviet pattern to urban development. Does the creation of material culture in the form of the urban development of Moscow convey a clear message about the nature of post-Soviet Russia? The Conclusion discusses the difficulties of finding a post-Soviet narrative.

These four different areas that would potentially feed into a post-Soviet narrative – presidential rhetoric, institutional culture, public arena and the material culture of architecture – are not the only possible arenas of symbolic growth. Art and literature, the theatre, home and working life, and organised sport are some of the other areas of life that could help to produce a post-Soviet narrative. But they are less important in this regard than those focused upon in this book in the sense that, if we were to conclude that a coherent narrative had emerged, it would have to be reflected in presidential rhetoric, institutional culture and the public arena, and, given the symbolic importance of Moscow for the Soviet metanarrative, any response to that metanarrative would be likely to be reflected here also. Given the nature of post-Soviet Russia, with no all-powerful Soviet-like centre ensuring co-ordination between all areas of life (and thereby generating a metanarrative), it is by no means clear that a dominant political narrative would find expression in those less-important areas of life noted above. But, if the regime sought to construct a narrative that through symbolic expression would underpin its existence and development, it would be reflected in the arenas of life with which this book is primarily concerned.