



**Alexander Akhiezer**

## How different are we?

In this reply to Axel Kaehne's article *Russian conceptions of statehood and Western political theory*, Akhiezer refutes some of Kaehne's notions on political theory. Western science has, until now, by and large neglected the socio-cultural rifts that determine Russian attitudes towards the state: The lack of a functioning civil society and an – on the surface at least – strong, coercive state that has been unable to make its aims intelligible to the populace, have led to a reinforcement of antagonism rather than the creation of a more tolerant and diverse dialogue between state and society. Akhiezer maintains that Russia has no liberal tradition to speak of and nor can Russian political philosophy claim to have solved the question "how a state is possible at all" in Russia.

Something quite unusual has happened. Axel Kaehne, of Cardiff University in the United Kingdom, has taken the distinctive ways in which some Russian authors analyse liberal statehood as grounds for a critical rethinking of Western political theory's traditional approach to this subject.<sup>1</sup>

In Russia, the relationship between Russian and Western social science has recently once more been a topic of debate.<sup>2</sup>In this debate it was pointed out, among other things, that the use of methods for the study of social phenomena that were developed in application to Western reality reveals an incompatibility of the conceptions at the base of these methods with Russian subject matter. This is a profound and serious problem. It is also difficult to grasp, since Russian social science was strongly influenced by Western social science from the start, and the system of ideas about Russia that has emerged on this basis looks like a copy of Western history, or rather an ideological image thereof. This tendency intensified after the collapse of Soviet ideology – not least because Russian social science, such as it developed historically, turned out to be incapable to make a realistic forecast on which one could have relied in solving any vital problems, or duly appraise and understand the mechanisms of the two national catastrophes that the country experienced in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Various peculiarities of Russian society and history have, of course, frequently been taken note of by social science in the West, but so far, this has never caused a qualitative change in the latter. One can observe how difficult it is for Western scholars studying Russia to break out of a vision of Russia determined by the historical experience of Western societies. This is unsurprising. As Kaehne writes, Western theories of statehood, even the most general ones, have for far too long "concentrated on often exclusively Western dimensions".<sup>3</sup> Perhaps things would be different if we were ourselves sufficiently concerned with analysing the peculiarities of Russian society and statehood. It is easier to rely on traditional, often profoundly mythical and ideological clichés.

Meanwhile, Western political theory experiences difficulties of its own, as Kaehne writes, and is looking for its "blind spots" in order to reach the desired level of self-reflection. Kaehne attempts to do this by using the experience of Russian political theory. At the same time, he analyses the premises upon which the entire Western system of views on the liberal state and, in fact, on society as a whole is based. The most important of these premises is that "political theorists in the West take the religious, ethnic, and wider cultural diversity of their societies as an irreducible fact",<sup>4</sup> Another one is that of the supremacy of state power: the state is "furnished with capacities that exceed by far the combined power of any societal group or association".<sup>5</sup> All these ideas can hardly be applied to Russia, at least unless substantial reservations are made. This in itself casts doubt upon the universal significance of these theories and perhaps even upon their understanding of significant elements of Western reality which they do not consider sufficiently important. In any case, the extrapolation of Western theories to Russian reality is impaired by their lack of a clear understanding of the socio-cultural rift in Russian society, meaning first of all a cultural rift, the disintegration of the sphere of meaning in the country, a breakdown of communication and other links, and an unpredictable but systematic perversion of the meanings circulating in society, leading to the rise of disorganisation and an increased likelihood of catastrophe.<sup>6</sup>

This extrapolation is also hindered by the fact that pluralism<sup>7</sup> is understood very differently in the West and in Russia. Among the key elements of Russian pluralism, we can single out the following ethical ideals:

First of all, pre-statist traditional culture, which can be called *veche*<sup>8</sup> culture. Its highest value may be expressed as "calm and quiet"; it aims at static reproduction guided by an absolute, unchanging ideal. The dynamics of Russian statehood included a tendency to develop ethical bases for the state out of the *veche* ideal, to interpret the pre-statist *veche* ideal as a statist one. In its turn, the *veche* ideal was composed of an authoritarian one, based upon the model of the paternalistic family, and a collectivist one, based upon the model of the fraternal family.

Secondly, there was a gradual growth of utilitarianism<sup>9</sup>, i.e. people's capability of transforming the world that surrounds them into a set of actual and potential means. Utilitarianism split up into a moderate form, embracing "extensive" values, and a developed form geared to intensive reproduction (entrepreneurship etc).

And finally, a liberal-modernist ideal appeared. Thus, three great rifts took shape: between the authoritarian and the collectivist ideal, between moderate and mature utilitarianism, and between the *veche* ideal and the liberal-modernist one. These rifts emerged because in Russian culture, antagonism between these poles predominates over their interpenetration; which, in its turn, can be explained by the fact that the historical development of these ideals was not accompanied by a parallel development of corresponding cultural and institutional mechanisms of interpenetration, of dialogue between the poles of these oppositions. This paved the way to a rift in society.

The historical development of this rift provides the key to an explanation of Russian history. It has been entirely dominated by rifts of various forms. For example, two forms of sacredness and legitimacy took shape in the country, and their antagonism and even mutual destruction prevailed over dialogue.

These types are: sacredness of the archaic type, linked to the *veche* ideal, and Christian sacredness, which inherited the potential of the axial age (in Karl Jaspers' expression), i.e. in fact the potential of the liberal–modernist ideal, albeit in strongly truncated form.<sup>10</sup> Another vivid example of a rift can be seen in the civil war of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which took place between archaic, *veche*–based, pre–statist forces and moderate utilitarianism on the one hand, and mature utilitarianism and liberal–modernist forces on the other hand. The winners were those who were supported by the overwhelming majority, those who commanded the "human factor". The new authorities tried to overcome the rift through mass violence and the annihilation of part of the population, which only sapped society's vital energy, and in the end led to a collapse of statehood in the national catastrophe of 1991.

We may only find a way out of this situation if we learn to overcome the rift through a development of the state and of society–wide, dialogue–fostering liberal democratic institutions based on a corresponding culture.

One of the most important forms of rift to have developed is that between the state and a people self–organized into local worlds devoid of civil society. In the West, the collapse of the state immediately leads to its reproduction by society. Exaggerating just a little, we may say that in the West, the very collapse of the state is a result of society's propensity and capability of replacing it with another state in response to new problems. In any case, in one form or another this idea is at the basis of Western revolutionary doctrines and movements. In Russia, things are different. In its culture, there is a primary belief in the necessity thoughtlessly and radically to destroy the old, an absolute conviction that the ideal novelty – e.g. socialism or capitalism – will instantly or almost instantly appear all by itself.

This cultural difference helps to shed light on the problem of whether there is civil society in the West and in Russia. The answer is obvious. In the West, a collapse of the state is essentially impossible, since society is always ready to rebuild it in one form or another. This is a testimony to the existence of civil society in the West. In Russia, such a collapse amounts to national catastrophe. The mechanism of this breakdown is revealing. In Russia, social cataclysm hardly ever occurs as a result of armed destruction of the existing authorities by an opposition carrying a new kind of statehood. In order to comply with the Western model of revolution, the Bolsheviks invented the shots of the "Avrora" and the storming of the Winter Palace.<sup>11</sup> In a critical situation, the state simply rots like a tomato; it disappears as a carrier of constructive functions. An indifferent society ceases to take any note of state power, to support and reproduce it, and displays all the less desire to protect it at the time of collapse. When, for example, as a result of the two national catastrophes in 20<sup>th</sup> century Russia, the heads of state (respectively, Nicholas II and Mikhail Gorbachev) were discharged of their powers, not one person could be found to protect them. Even the grand dukes didn't support the tsar. This means that in Russia, society (in the European meaning of the term) is unable not only to form a state, but, given particularly critical circumstances, even to reproduce it. Society is not institutionally organized to do so; the state represents no value for the people – at least not to a degree where they would want and be able to create and reproduce it. At most society fights for the new state in order to prevent the old one from being restored. This happened, for example, in the civil war of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when hardly anyone wanted to revert to the monarchy and bring back the landowners. The Whites were unable even to rally around a new ideal of statehood and also mostly fought *against* something. Most of them were republicans. But this idea did not inspire the

millions who wouldn't voluntarily join the White Army and brought victory to the Reds by their sheer number. Indifference to the crisis or even absence of statehood lasts until such time as the lack of any state authority becomes unbearable for every single person. This is well illustrated by the example of the Time of Troubles after Ivan IV's death. Statehood is either restored on the basis of an old kind of statehood, as in 1991, or it is reproduced by virtuosos of demagogy, outcasts capable of impersonating the masses' pre-statist myths and acting the parts of folk cultural heroes, as in 1917. All this means that in Russia, there is no civil society, i.e. no basis for a reproduction of the state. Antonio Gramsci came close to an understanding of this peculiarity of Russian society in his *Prison Notebooks*, when he wrote that in Europe, when the state weakens, civil society saves the day, whereas in Russia, everything breaks down.

The deeper reason for this is that Russia's population consisted mainly of peasants who only participated in the life of the state through endless levies and wearisome service, while the state itself appeared as a result of the coercive unification of tribes. The tribes quickly disappeared, so that people lost an important institution that had protected them from state authority. This is why for ages, the peasants were convinced that "there is no need for bosses", i.e. that the state apparatus is superfluous. All that is needed is a tsar, as guardian of truth and justice, with only a few servants. Socio-culturally speaking, they extrapolated onto the tsar the experience of archaic totemism that reigned in their pre-statist local worlds based on purely emotional relationships and a barter economy. The powerful stratum of archaic culture that continued to reign over subsequent centuries despite being increasingly subject to the destructive pressure of utilitarianism and the liberal-modernist ideal, continued to play an important part as the state's cultural basis. This society bore little resemblance to Western societies.

Coming back to the premises of Western political theory and the possibilities of using the Russian historical experience to reveal its "blind spots", we should first turn to the question of pluralism. It can be noted that a certain pluralism exists in Russia, too, despite the lack of tolerance of the above-mentioned forms of culture and ethics towards each other. However, the nature of this pluralism in Russian society is first and foremost a diversity of opinions not about the policies to be adopted by a liberal state, but about the very existence of the state.<sup>12</sup> The pre-statist mentality manifests itself in different ways and does not remain unchanged. It is displayed in the regular flashes of mass sedition in Russian history, which have no constructive meaning but are able to make the weak state break down. Seditiousness is always there as a potentiality; it is the hidden disorganising element of everyday life, but only spreads society-wide in special crisis situations. Pluralism in general has a tendency to increase – both in Russia and in the West. In the West, this process is accompanied by a growing variety of institutionalised dialogical relationships, fostering the development of liberal democracy and its concomitant interpretation of culture. In the end, this leads to institutional shifts facilitating dialogue, and to an interpenetration of the various elements of pluralism. Of course, this process has never been absolute, it never attained its ideal, but it did turn into the dominating tendency in society, which in turn has led to the dominance of liberal-modernist culture and the formation of a corresponding super-civilisation rubbing out state boundaries between peoples. This obviously does not preclude pluralism within this culture, or the existence of anti-liberalism.

In Russia, the rise of pluralism leads to different results. The interpenetration of its elements didn't grow sufficiently and was not accompanied by a corresponding reinforcement of tolerance; quite to the contrary, new centres of antagonism and new rifts emerged, causing the tasks of reproducing the state and making it function to be more and more difficult and problematic. Consequently, if in the West pluralism stimulates the development of liberal statehood and tolerance, in Russia, the rift widens, although this does not preclude some part of society becoming aware of the need for liberal statehood. In any case, in this respect there are more differences from the West so far, although there are also some similarities.

As to the idea, so important to Western political theory, of the supremacy of the state as the most important premise for a theory of the liberal state, it is hardly applicable to Russia if formulated in such a straightforward way. The country's history has not been permeated by corresponding mass institutions growing into the thick of the people and linking the people and the state. Even today, during elections, people essentially elect a totem to their taste, corresponding to their mythological and utilitarian expectations; in other words, someone who, as they think, will decide for them and care for them. Society has not learned consciously to choose and to shape opportunities to realise the potential of its own life, or to search for an efficient path that everyone needs to learn how to follow themselves, critically changing the measure of possibility of different kinds of life. Russian opinions about the state mostly extend between two poles: the traditional rejection of the state, and belief in it. The pluralism that the Russian state is faced with includes a certain potential of rejection of the state, of a view of it on the model of a pre-statist institution. Rather than the state being seen by society as a result of its own efforts and creativity, society itself is viewed as a product of the state. This shows that the state has but a frail basis in culture, and consequently that it is weak. It is sometimes asserted that Russia's peculiarity is the existence of a strong state. I believe that this is not quite right. A state which, in the course of its history, literally dissolved into air four times without any outside interference whatsoever; which was unable to resist not only the intensification of sedition but even the mass mood best characterised by the peasant expression "we won't quit the stove"<sup>13</sup>, cannot be called strong. The state struck heavy blows against the troubles whenever it found the support of part of society, but in this it was fierce rather than strong. Russia is not defined by a strong state – not more, at any rate, than it is by sedition. Russia can be understood through the dynamics between stable statehood and sedition. Therefore the above mentioned thesis of a strong state, at any point of its existence, hardly applies to Russian political theory. Things are much more complicated; we need different theoretical premises.

If certain important postulates of Western political theory may not be extrapolated out of their original context without making an allowance for Russian circumstances, then we need to have a closer look at these circumstances in order to reveal the theory's "blind spots". In effect, the essence of Russian pluralism may not be understood without an analysis of its sources, and that, in its turn, can help to understand the content of pluralism and its significance for the liberal state at different times and in different countries. Here, perhaps, is where we should look for a way to fill one of Western political theory's "blind spots". We need to understand that *what* basis for a state is created by internal cultural diversity depends on whether antagonism or interpenetration prevails between the elements of pluralism. The predominance of antagonism, or even of the desire for mutual extermination, was shaped sometime at the origins of human history. It is by overcoming this

tendency that different bases for the independent emergence of a state are created.

The second "blind spot" should be sought in Western political theory's approach to the question of a strong state, or more precisely, to society's capability of forming it. This is possibly only where the value of life in a state, and mass conscience of personal responsibility for the reproduction of the state, are sufficiently widespread. The historical experience of Russian society is that the masses' loyalty to the state (often personified in the figure of the monarch) vacillates and may not be enforced for any long period of time. There are natural factors working against the state in general and brushing aside the search for elements of dialogue and pluralism.

Kaehne discusses the state's capacity for having its own point of view different from the points of view of the groups it combines and whose interests it tries to co-ordinate. Here we can see another "blind spot". As a matter of principle, the state must be able to generalise, i.e. to rise above the different significant points of view of the groups it comprises. Of course, the need for compromise exists everywhere, but in Russia the state has to tackle a problem which, although ubiquitous, is rarely so pressing. I am referring to the language of the authorities, which in Russia, throughout the country's history, was more abstract and tended towards wider and deeper generalisations than popular culture. The language of the authorities was remote from the language of the archaic peasantry which constituted almost all of Russia's population and was dominated by an emotional-inversional logic<sup>14</sup> which had no need for intellectual abstractions and reduced the historical potential to a mere turning over of tradition, to a simple shift of assessment. This is what the rift between the authorities and the people consisted in; herein lay the difference between the principles and functions of Russian and Western statehood. The former needs to translate its aims, solutions and programmes for action into a language intelligible to the people, who, throughout almost all of their history, were defined by archaic culture. The very aims of statehood were alien to Russian statehood, although the state constantly tried to adjust to the aims of the masses, e.g. the conquest of new territories to provide for extensive reproduction. The problem of a rift in communication between the authorities and the people may not be very pressing in the West, where the results of cultural evolution were digested by all of the people. But without taking into account the mechanism which makes this communication work, one may not understand the mechanism of the existence of the state in any society.

There is another curious thing about this problem. Kaehne is wrong in attributing to the Russian authors he discusses a belief that in Russia, liberal values and a democratic culture need to prevail in society for liberal statehood to be possible. The problem of statehood in Russia lies first of all in the development of mass responsibility for it, a capacity for reproducing it, a change in attitudes to elections and the possibility of a development of liberty and a realisation of constructive private initiative. In the end, the Russian state is tackling a completely different task than liberal states in the West. It manoeuvres under conditions where the masses have an immature state consciousness and immature, utopian demands of the state, a utopian, exaggerated view of its possibilities and an equally utopian (though negative) view of one's own (state-building) capacities. In this situation, it is pointless to dream of a general prevalence of liberal culture. The problem is how to construct a state under these conditions. Russia has a lot of experience in this field. Bolshevism, for example, which was parasitical upon society's underdevelopment, attempted to solve this task by combining ideological

manipulation, an intensification of the masses' hatred, and mass terror. However, this attempt resulted in another national catastrophe.<sup>15</sup> This is why Russian political philosophy still hasn't solved not only the question of *how* a liberal state is possible, but also how a state is possible at all in Russia, given its complex cultural dynamics. Approaches elaborated under conditions of mature Western statehood will be of little help in this. Incidentally, if the existence of a strong state is a postulate of Western political theory, as Kaehne writes, then this means that Western political theory simply has no conscience of this problem.

Kaehne's conclusion is that "we will need to continue the debate which he [Hobbes] started more than 400 years ago"<sup>16</sup> and that we need to enrich "a debate that for far too long has concentrated on often exclusively Western dimensions."<sup>17</sup> In this connection, I would like to repeat something I've already written about. In its dynamics, as a result of its internal rift, Russia allows us to see what is impossible to discern in societies of a comparatively harmonic type. Russia may be regarded as a simultaneous display of several strata of history. It is perhaps a unique object of study for political science, sociology, and history. But these hidden riches may only be seized in a process of constant discussions between scholars studying different types of societies and seeing this object from different points of view and different historical perspectives. Therefore I think that we, in Russia, should make an effort to participate in this general debate.

Read the rest of the debate:

Axel Kaehne

[Russian Conceptions of statehood and western political theory \(en\)](#) [\(ru\)](#)

In the first of a three-part-series debate, Axel Kaehne asks how concepts of liberal statehood can be defined with regard to Russia. And how do such concepts shift the parameters of Western political theory?

Axel Kaehne

[Reply to Akhiezer \(en\)](#) [\(ru\)](#)

In this last part of the debate, Kaehne considers the societal schism between Russia and Europe.

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<sup>1</sup> Axel' Kene, "Rossijskie koncepcii gosudarstvennosti skvoz' prizmu zapadnoj politicheskoi teorii" [Axel Kaehne, Russian Conceptions of Statehood and Western Political Theory], in: *NZ* No. 3(23)/2002, p. 49–54

<sup>2</sup> See *Pro et Contra*, Nos. 4/2000 to 2/2002.

<sup>3</sup> Kene [Kaehne], *op. cit.*, p. 49

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52

<sup>6</sup> See Aleksandr Akhiezer, *Rossija: kritika istoricheskogo opyta* [Alexander Akhiezer, *Russia: A Critique of Its Historical Experience*]. First edition: Moscow, 1991 (in three volumes). Second edition: Novosibirsk, 1997–1998 (in two volumes)

<sup>7</sup> Akhiezer's use of the word "pluralism" differs from the most common Russian (and English) understanding of this term, in that it denotes the co-existence of different cultures and value systems in society, rather than a political system providing for compromise between these cultures and systems. In other words, it helps to substitute "plurality of views" for "pluralism" in most cases. [Translator's note]

<sup>8</sup> Popular assembly in medieval Russian towns [translator's note]

<sup>9</sup> See E. N. Yarkova, *Utilitarizm kak tip kul'tury: konceptual'nye parametry i specifika Rossii* [Utilitarianism as a type of culture: conceptual parameters and Russian specificities], Novosibirsk, 2001

<sup>10</sup>

See Aleksandr Akhiezer, "Specifika rossijskoj političeskoj kul'tury i predmet politologii (Istoriko–kul'turnoe issledovanie)" [Alexander Akhiezer, "The specificities of Russian political culture and the object of political science (An historical–cultural study)"], in: *Pro et Contra*, No. 3/2002, forthcoming

- <sup>11</sup> Two events that were part of the official Soviet account of the October Revolution. [Translator's note]
- <sup>12</sup> See Akhiezer, *Rossija...* (op. cit.)
- <sup>13</sup> Stoves used to serve as bedsteads during the long, cold winters. In Russian folklore, the peasant lying on his stove is a symbol of laziness and inactivity. [Translator's note]
- <sup>14</sup> Reference to a theory popular among Russian philosophers of history, whereby Russian history has followed a binary dialectic, with people's views of social and political phenomena shifting only from "good" to "bad", leaving no room for intermediate shades of opinion. In some versions, this is due to the absence of a purgatory in Russian Orthodox cosmogony. [Translator's note]
- <sup>15</sup> See A. S. Akhiezer, A. P. Daydov, M. A. Shurovskij, I. G. Yakovenko, E. N. Yarkova, *Sociokul'turnye osnovaniya i smysl bol'shevizma* [The socio–cultural foundations and meaning of Bolshevism]. Novosibirsk, 2002; A. S. Akhiezer, A. P. Daydov, M. A. Shurovskij, I. G. Yakovenko, E. N. Yarkova, "Bol'shevizm – sociokul'turnyj fenomen" ["Bol'shevizm as a socio–cultural phenomenon"], in: *Voprosy filosofii*, Nos. 12/2001, 5/2002.
- <sup>16</sup> Kene [Kaehne], *op. cit.*, p. 54
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49

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