

**Marlene Laruelle.** *Is Russia Fascist? Unraveling Propaganda East and West.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021. 264 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-5017-5413-5.

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## Whither Putin's Russia? Not Fascism but "Illiberalism"?

A short work of 160 pages (albeit the text is of small font size), consisting of eight chapters with an introduction and conclusion, plus over 80 pages of endnotes and bibliography, Marlene Laruelle's *Is Russia Fascist?* quickly informs the reader of the verdict: no, Vladimir Putin's Russia is not a fascist state. The author acknowledges, however, that there are those who have reached a different conclusion, from American public figures (such as Hillary Clinton and Madeline Albright, former US secretary of states, and Zbigniew Brzezinski, former US national security adviser) to scholars (Timothy Snyder, Alexander Motyl, Vladislav Inozemtsev, and Marcel van Herpen, among others) to Russian dissidents (journalist Anna Politkovskaya, before she was brutally murdered, and chess champion Garry Kasparov) to leaders of besieged Ukraine. Laruelle argues that "fascism" is a term often bandied about to other and delegitimize political adversaries, and she suggests this is what is happening when critics suggest Russia is fascist. As for those scholars who label contemporary Russia a fascist state, Laruelle categorizes them as marginal since they typically do not have formal training in political science; in addition, she snobbishly brushes off some of them

for being public intellectuals. To her credit, though, in chapter 8 she engages with those writers, offering what she regards as a deconstruction of flawed arguments.

So, politically, what exactly is Russia, according to Laruelle? She classifies the current situation as "illiberalism." (It should be pointed out that as head of the Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies at George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs, Laruelle wears many hats, including director of the Illiberalism Studies Program.[1]) "Illiberalism," she writes, "is the only ideology in power in today's Russia, that is, the only ideology directly supported by the Presidential Administration and the government" (p. 26). She seems convinced that "illiberalism" is the new global revelation, what the rough beast is slouching toward as things fall apart.

According to Laruelle, "illiberalism" is not against liberalism as much as it is a manifestation of postliberalism, a "political paradigm that reasserts the rights of a supposed silent majority" by relentlessly insisting on political, economic, and cultural sovereignty. Thus, "illiberalism" eschews globalism's supranational and multinational insti-

tutions, favoring strict nation-state autonomy over international cooperation; promotes economic protectionism; and rejects multiculturalism and minority rights. She adds, “illiberalism” began in the 2000s, a consequence of post-Cold War developments, and is restricted to countries that experienced liberalism. Though insisting that “illiberalism” is not synonymous with “the far right,” Laruelle weakens her overall argument when she admits that “illiberalism” is “recrafted” far-right theorization, what she suggests is a “smoother” political approach that “accepts some principles of democratic representation” (p. 22). (The recrafted argument made me think of David Duke in the 1980s when he attempted to update the Ku Klux Klan by making it more respectable—in his words, “from the cow pasture to hotel meeting rooms.”[2] Duke, by the way, comes up in Laruelle’s work, as he is one of many far-right activists who regards Russia as a potential savior of the white race.)

According to Masha Gessen, whom Laruelle takes issue with, “illiberalism” is a substitute word for what in the past would have been labeled totalitarian or at least authoritarian. “Illiberal democracy” was coined in 1997 by journalist Fareed Zakaria, who applied it to a nation supposedly having democratic elections (the word “supposedly” as a qualifier because in order for elections to count as democratic they must be fair and honest) while at the same time neglecting the liberal tradition of constitutional protections of individual freedom. As Gessen explains, “The obvious issue of ‘illiberal democracy’ was that, once a democratically elected government began curtailing freedom, it was unlikely to continue having truly free and open elections.”[3] If applied loosely, Gessen logically notes, “illiberal democracy” could be applied to the former Soviet Union, where “elections” were regularly held. Certainly, the most casual observer of Russian politics would have to admit that elections in today’s Russia do not meet the ideal democratic norm. Meanwhile, it can be observed that in the United States a Republican Party, under the sway of the “illiberal” Donald

Trump, is at this writing passing legislation placing restrictions on voting under the pretense of election integrity. (Laruelle seems to regard Trump as being in the mold of “illiberalism.”)

If an “illiberal” regime might accept “some principles of democratic representation,” it must inversely have some elements of authoritarianism. Long ago, Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. observed (in *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* [1949]) a similarity between fascism and communism in terms of their totalitarian structure: a single leader, a single political party, a single infallible ideology, a single mass of dedicated followers, and a secret police force. In both systems, he observed, there is contempt for freedom, whether it be political, cultural, or intellectual. Rather than ask whether or not Russia is fascist, it may be more practical to consider to what extent Russia retains some Soviet legacies—in the explanation of Gessen, “a recurrent totalitarianism, like a recurrent infection; as with an infection, the recurrence might not be as deadly as the original disease, but the symptoms would be recognizable from when it had struck the first time.”[4] Since Laruelle states that “the majority of fascist regimes were not totalitarian in practice,” because “total” has to mean totality, then it needs to be asked if Russia is at least authoritarian (p. 142). And it needs to be asked if the use of the term “illiberalism” is, intentionally or not, an unwise mainstreaming of authoritarianism.

Also, if “illiberalism” is a category restricted to countries that experienced liberalism, it needs to be asked if it is accurate to equate the Boris Yeltsin era with liberalism. As Lilia Shevtsova accurately observes, “Yeltsin embarked on a course of ‘revolutionary liberalism’ from above in a style characteristic of many authoritarian rulers.”[5] If done in authoritarian fashion, does it still count as liberalism? Russia’s modernization during the Soviet period has been described as a misdevelopment and the same could be observed about Russian liberalism in the immediate years following the end

of communism.[6] This is an important point since Laruelle in her book is strict about using terminology in a correct manner. Laruelle does not dispute that contemporary Russia has authoritarian aspects. In fact, deep into her book she suggests that the country is an “anocracy,” a regime somewhat closer to democracy than to autocracy. She candidly states, “Obviously, public freedoms have been curbed over the past decade, the electoral options offered by political parties are limited, opponents are hampered in their expression, and the media are increasingly controlled.” Even so, she emphasizes that ideological diversity is permissible; I would add, anything is permissible unless it is regarded as a threat to the Putin regime. Laruelle further notes that there are “only about 54 political prisoners”; I wonder to what degree citizen self-censorship has kept that figure low (p. 143). (The fact that there is nonchalance about a “small” number of political prisoners says something about the so-called postliberal era. But since China has more political prisoners, by comparison Russian autocracy is presented as mild.) Of course, the possibility of death by polonium-laced tea, carried out by agents of a new secret police, can serve to deter dissidents.[7]

The author’s tone makes it obvious that she seeks not to rationalize Russia’s shortcomings but to strive for clarity of categorization. Laruelle is largely correct when she states that “the tendency to accuse everyone who challenges liberalism of being a new fascist has dramatically obscured our understanding of today’s Russia as well as the current transformations of the world order and Western domestic scenes” (p. 10). (At the same time, when “illiberals” resort to branding liberals and progressives as “a bunch of socialists” they are engaging in a similar pattern of distortion.) Yet, in a practical sense, it makes little difference if Laruelle says “illiberalism” and certain of her critics say “fascism.” All are nonetheless agreeing that Russia is authoritarian to some degree or another. That being the case, this debate seems largely semantic. Laruelle is quite technically correct, but

her clarifications do not change the less than ideal situation occurring in Putin’s Russia and such academic sophistication may end up serving to “re-craft” Putinism as a legitimate alternate brand of governing. It is probably best to categorize Putin as a “personalist autocrat” and skip the sophistry about postliberalism.[8]

Laruelle suggests that the question of fascism is a difficult task because, in contrast to liberalism and communism, there has not been a clear consensus on definition. Ambiguity is convenient for denying a charge, but the author singles out the work of Roger Griffin (*International Fascism: Theories, Causes, and the New Consensus* [1998]), which suggests that fascism is “a revolutionary form of nationalism” (p. 12). Yet she goes on to express misgivings of framing fascism “within the more generalized phenomenon of nationalism,” perhaps because she is consciously aware of the nationalistic aspect of “illiberal” actors (p. 13). In concord with Aleksandr A. Galkin, she instead emphasizes “the primacy of a myth of regeneration ... as *the* driving engine that makes a vision of the world and society ‘fascist.’”[9] Laruelle goes on to offer a narrow definition that renders Russia non-fascist: “I define fascism as a metapolitical ideology that calls for the total destruction of modernity by creating an alternative world based on ancient values reconstructed with violent means” (p. 13). In the book’s conclusion, she is more emphatic: “Talking of ‘Russia’s fascism’ cannot withstand scholarly inquiry. Obviously, the Russian regime has no ideology of racial destruction or domination that would allow for a parallel to be drawn with Nazism. Nor does it display an ideological doctrine forcibly inculcated in the population, successful mass mobilization around a utopian project of regeneration, a high level of repression, or dictatorial functioning. Not only is Putin neither Hitler nor Mussolini, he is not even Pinochet” (p. 158).

Since Putin’s Russia is not out to totally destroy modernity by resorting to large-scale viol-

ence, a label of “fascist” or “fascistic” cannot stick. And by rejecting the “general phenomenon of nationalism” as an essential component of fascism, Laruelle renders the current Russian nationalism as insignificant to the question of whether or not Russia is fascist. While it is true that the banality of Soviet life largely rid the Russian soul of utopianism, it should be questioned whether new reincarnations of fascism must have utopian ideals. Certain earlier visions of capitalism had utopian ideals, such as was expressed during London’s Great Exhibition of 1851 and its Crystal Palace. Famously, Nikolai Chernyshevsky, in *What Is to Be Done?*, appropriated the Crystal Palace as a utopian symbol!<sup>[10]</sup> Yet, by and large, contemporary capitalists are not utopian as Prince Albert was when he suggested that free trade would culminate with lasting world peace, it would be untenable to argue that capitalism is not capitalism unless it has utopian characteristics. But Laruelle insists that a utopian feature is “the lowest common denominator of fascism” (p. 145). (Yet others argue that Nazism lacked utopian ideals or “a vision of the future.”<sup>[11]</sup>)

Some readers might regard the nuance of Laruelle as nebulous. Easy is the academic exercise showing how a current reality does not perfectly square with an earlier form. Change is always a part of any continuity; it seems a given that today’s fascism would not exactly match yesterday’s fascism. The prefix “neo” (as in neofascism) implies evolutionary change. Karl Marx would probably have denied that Marxist-Leninism and Maoism are Marxism, but they are nonetheless brands of Marxism. If an “illiberal” society may have “some principles of democratic representation,” then it stands to reason Russian may have some elements of fascism. An eclectic reality, which is likely in a postmodern or post-postmodern culture, probably needs acknowledgment. But Laruelle, seemingly shrugging her shoulders, suggests that fascistic features are “a cluster” in many societies, even “appear[ing] in a pluralistic, even

democratic system” (p. 143). This argument is similar to a current right-wing debating tactic, when they turn the tables and label liberals as fascists. While it is a good exercise for political science to come up with definitional precision, Laruelle could be charitable by better conceding that those who regard Russia as fascist are simply noting the same shortcomings that she brings up in her book. Regardless of the name being applied, more important is what is being named.

In chapter 2, Laruelle concedes a past Russian “cryptic fascination with Nazi Germany,” noting how the marginalized, such as *zeks* and their Nazi tattoos or punk rockers and their disdain for Soviet conformity, sought counternarratives (p. 33). Even the mainstream culture enjoyed the television series *Seventeen Moments of Spring* (1973) with its romanticizing of Nazism. And then, too, there was the rebirth of the Black Hundreds, a Nazi-like fringe group.<sup>[12]</sup> But under Putin, she points out in chapter 3, there was a revamping of the cult of World War II, what Russians refer to as the Great Patriotic War. Since much of modern Russian identity is anchored in this cult, an anti-fascist social consensus, she suggests it is illogical to think Russia would then head in the direction of fascism.

In chapter 4, the author examines how critics have equated Russia with Nazism. She argues that in recent years Central and Eastern European countries have rewritten their national narratives by using the Soviet Union as a scapegoat to cover up their collaboration with the Nazis and their implicit support of the Holocaust. Ukraine has made the Ukrainian famine of the 1930s a type of holocaust (Holodomor as the famine is called, literally “death by hunger”) carried out by the Stalin regime, yet Ukraine has not fully addressed its past collaboration with the Nazis or even how some Ukrainians helped carry out attacks against the “kulaks.” Some compared Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea with Hitler’s annexations prior to World War II, but Laruelle controversially frames

Putin's land grab as the throes of postcolonialism, simply a former colonial power dealing with messy legacies. Interestingly, while Laruelle argues that Russia does not have a singular ideology imposed from above, Gessen states, "Crimea was [what ended up being] Russia's ideology"—in other words, a return to a great Russian past.[13]

In chapter 5, the ideological plurality of the Putin regime is explained to underscore why Russia cannot be called a fascist nation. In chapter 6, the "clusters" of fascism in Russian society are examined, but they are viewed as having nothing to do with the ruling government and, paradoxically, their existence attests to the existing ideological pluralism. In chapter 7, the author rationalizes Putin's cultivation of foreign extremists of the far right as nothing but Moscow's campaign to have influence abroad; but the far right's enthusiasm toward Russia might mean that those set of political actors see something about Russia that Laruelle with her myopic definitional system has either discounted or failed to fully recognize.

In many respects, observers of Russia continue to channel Nikolai Gogol, asking, "And where do you fly to, Russia? Answer me!"[14] *Is Russia Fascist?* is a work that offers a worthy contribution to the ongoing conversation and debate about how to define contemporary Russia and project where it is heading. Regardless of what a reader might think about "illiberalism" as an answer, Laruelle offers many good analytical insights. Her command of the facts of recent Russian political history is solid and is to be taken seriously. As I read her overall argument dismissing the idea of Putin being a fascist leader, I imagined the leaders of the politburo of the World War II era being brought back to life and given a glimpse of the current regime occupying the Kremlin. Would they agree with Laruelle's assessment or would they see *some* elements of fascism?

Notes

[1]. Laruelle's professional profile can be found at her website: <https://www.marlene-laruelle.com/>.

[2]. Roger Chapman, "White Supremacists," in *Culture Wars: An Encyclopedia of Issues, Viewpoints, and Voices*, ed. Roger Chapman (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2010), 2:614.

[3]. Masha Gessen, *The Future of History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2017), 384. Considering Laruelle's apparent scholarly disdain for public intellectuals, it is ironic that the term "illiberal" was coined by a journalist and that it would lead to her opportunity of presiding over a new academic cottage industry.

[4]. Gessen, *Future of History*, 434. Here Gessen is explaining the viewpoint of Lev Gudkov.

[5]. Lilia Shevtsova, "Russia's Post-Communist Politics: Revolution or Continuity?" in *The New Russia: Troubled Transformation*, ed. Gail W. Lapidus (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 9. During the Yeltsin era Russia certainly did not reach a mature state of liberalism. The shelling of the Parliament building sticks out. The war in Chechnya sticks out. The lack of rule of law in the economic sphere sticks out. The bureaucratic corruption sticks out. The tailored constitution pushed through by national referendum sticks out. The handoff of the presidency to Putin during that New Year's Eve sticks out. The instability of the period explains why the desire for a strong leader was embraced by many Russians, but according to what Laruelle presents in her book there are different reasons for the emergence of "illiberalism."

[6]. On misdevelopment, see Steve D. Boilard, *Russia at the Twenty-First Century: Politics and Social Change in the Post-Soviet Era* (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace, 1998), 4.

[7]. See Luke Harding, *A Very Expensive Poison: The Assassination of Alexander Litvinenko and Putin's War with the West* (New York: Vintage Books, 2017).

[8]. For an excellent analysis of this categorization, see Timothy Frye, "Russia's Weak Strongman," *Foreign Affairs* (May/June 2021): 116-27.

[9]. Aleksandr A. Galkin, "Fashizm: Kornii, prizanki, formy proiavleniia," *Politicheskie issledovaniia* 2 (1995): 6-15.

[10]. See Andrew M. Drozd, *Chernyshevskii's What Is to Be Done? A Reevaluation* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 141-70. Also, see my "Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Eastern Orthodoxy, and the Crystal Palace," in *Historic Engagements with Occidental Cultures, Religions, Powers*, ed. Anne Richard and Iraj Omidvar (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 35-55.

[11]. Gessen, *Future of History*, 434. Again, this is the viewpoint of Gudkov.

[12]. See Walter Laqueur, *Black Hundred: The Rise of the Extreme Right in Russia* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993). Laqueur traces this movement prior to the Bolshevik Revolution and anchors it in the Slavophile movement, which arguably could be regarded as having utopian features. Though this is fringe, it is nonetheless a "cluster" and its "neo-Slavophile" ideology is ready-made for the utopian aspect Laruelle insists is a necessary ingredient of fascism (p. 173).

[13]. Gessen, *Future of History*, 434. Again, this is the viewpoint of Gudkov.

[14]. Nikolai Gogol, *Dead Souls*, trans. Andrew R. MacAndrew (New York: Signet Classic, 1961), 278.

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