

Johnny Rodin: Rethinking Russian Federalism. The Politics of Intergovernmental Relations and Federal Reforms at the Turn of the Millennium. Stockholm 2006: Department of Political Science.

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Studies of Russian regionalism, alas, are not as popular in the Scandinavian academic circles as they used to be at their peak in the 1990s. Against this background, Johnny Rodin's book seems to be an important – and rather successful – attempt to revive the scholarly interest in a variety of issues pertinent to sub-national politics and center – periphery relations in Russia.

The author's *theoretical background*, arguably, consists of three conceptual approaches rather compatible with each other. *Firstly*, Johnny Rodin explicitly employs the vocabulary of social constructivism, referring to what he calls “ideational approach”, “images of the Other”, etc. This explains why the nature of politics is seen through the Self vs. Other prism – a tradition grounded in the works of Alexander Wendt, Iver Neumann, Ted Hopf and some other prominent authors. Yet, *secondly*, Johnny Rodin reaches beyond social constructivism, trying to combine ideational and institutional change approaches. The author of the reviewed book is interested not only in answering the perennial question of whether ideas matter but,

which is more challenging, in understanding the ways ideas shape the institutional configuration of social relations. *Thirdly*, we can find in this book some indications of a “genealogical” approach rooted, in particular, in a Foucaultian tradition. This move is highly noticeable in Johnny Rodin's pointing to the year 1998 as the “focusing event”, a turning point which involved an accumulation of a critical mass of anomalies and provoked, subsequently, further political changes. Those anomalies, evidently, could be treated as an extreme form of asymmetries – a key concept in Johnny Rodin's conceptual vocabulary.

Indeed, a very important part of his arguments deals with a peculiar interplay of *symmetry* and *asymmetry* as constitutive characteristics of the center-periphery relations in Russia. At first glance, the author tries to convince us that, on the one hand, centralization/unification leads to a specific form of symmetry which could be verbalized in the famous (though extremely controversial) concept of “the dictatorship of law” coined by President Putin. On the other hand, Johnny Rodin makes clear that it was the policy of decentralization that provoked asymmetry, as exemplified by Boris Yeltsin's practice of “bilateral” arrangements between Moscow and the provinces. In the author's interpretation, symmetry is semantically related with cooperation and harmony, while asymmetry, is rooted in specific group politics and, therefore, connotes with fragmentation and rivalry. Seen from this perspective, Russia is moving from region-centered asymmetric federalism to nation-centered symmetric federalism, and Putin's federal reform appears to be a factor of greater symmetry. Putin's regional policy is described as less confrontational, more consensual/concerted/

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planned/formalized/compromised – and, concomitantly, more symmetric.

However, it might be useful to make a step further in order to discern how symmetry and asymmetry are intertwined and intermingled. The *first* way of reasoning in this direction would be to assume that within the framework of Yeltsin-time asymmetric federalism, there was some degree of symmetry since all regions were, to some extent, in the same position and, hence, were equal in being parts of “take as much sovereignty as possible” doctrine. Also indicative are Johnny Rodin’s statements that after 2006 regional leaders gained even more powers, as well as those assuming that there are some elements of decentralization under Putin – could they mean that the current symmetry of today might evolve into a new form of asymmetry of tomorrow?

The *second* pathway of deepening the discussion of symmetry and asymmetry would be to ask whether the implementation of the symmetric federalism concept will imply that Russia is still a federation? Doesn’t the symmetric concept of federalism efface the very idea of federalism as such?

The *third* research track would be to make an attempt at relating to each other the two semantic couples – symmetry/asymmetry and politicization/de-politicization. De-politicization seems to better correspond to the logic of symmetry, with better acceptance of the reform and greater cooperation among different bodies. A de-politicized pattern of power is grounded in a pure economic rationale and does not recognize exceptional moves based upon ethnic specificity. Politicization, on the contrary, seems to be closer to the logic of asymmetry, with more conflicts between the agents involved.

There is, finally, one more important set of questions to be asked: is the system which does not stipulate special arrangements with specific regions more or less effective? More or less conflictual? Does not symmetry constitute a certain hindrance to a variety of experimental and innovative practices? It is from here that I will move to discussing *the nature of Putin’s regime* in Johnny Rodin’s interpretation.

The first impression is that the author gives a number of characterizations of Vladimir Putin: he is depicted as a policy entrepreneur, a policy-maker, or simply a politician. Yet on at least one occasion Johnny Rodin clarifies that Putin is not a policy innovator but rather a policy entrepreneur with a political will.

Yet this statement does not seem to be sufficient, since it leaves open a key question: is Putin a Political Subject (a Sovereign in terms of Carl Schmitt, a Master in terms of Slavoj Žižek), or a mere instrument of an anonymous/faceless/invisible structure? At some point Johnny Rodin seems to be inclined to admit that Putin is simply part of the structure: “Ideas now have their champion”, and later more specifically – “Putin fitted the picture”. In theoretical terms, this reminds of what was called “de-subjectivization” by Slavoj Žižek: the subject posits himself as an instrument of a certain structure. “It is as though the sword itself performs automatically its function of justice” (Žižek 2003: 29). The subject, in other words, instead of intervening in reality, just lets things develop as they are. Rephrasing Žižek, one may assume that Putin is “reduced to the passive observer of” his own acts.

The fact that Johnny Rodin’s book leaves open a number of questions, seems to be natural for this kind of research due to the controversial character of its sub-

ject. Here are some more questions which could be asked for the sake of stimulating further discussion: is federalism an 'empty signifier' which could be filled with different readings? Is it a kind of "elite game" which makes it different from the idea of democracy? The Russian community of political scientists will certainly be eager to get more perspectives on these matters from their Swedish colleagues in the future.

References

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Replik från Johnny Rodin

The federal reforms that were introduced during Putin's first presidential term (2000-2004) surprised me in several ways. Their scope and degree of centralization were far-reaching. All previous attempts of federal authorities during the 1990s to redistribute powers in this way had failed. However, this time around these supposedly controversial policies were accepted, or even hailed, not only by political actors at the federal level, but also by many regional leaders.

As Andrey Makarychev pointed out in his analysis of my dissertation I approached this puzzling development from an ideational perspective. Deriving from a basically moderate constructivist perspective I employed the more concrete theorizing of historical institutionalism (represented by scholars such as Peter Hall, Margaret Weir, March and Olsen, and John Kingdon) to understand the transformation process of intergovernmental relations in Russia. In the end I found that a shift of federal paradigms, which fol-

lowed the political and economic crisis in 1998, constituted an important part of this process. Mr Makarychev notices the similarities of this approach with Foucault's genealogical perspective. This is an interesting observation. Throughout my research process I based my thinking rather on the theorizing of Thomas Kuhn. The connections between Foucault and Kuhn are undeniably interesting. Intriguingly, although they are contemporaries, I cannot find that they refer to each other. This is definitely a topic that could be explored further.

One central difference between the federal paradigm of the Yeltsin era and that of the Putin era concerns the acceptable level of judicial asymmetry. While asymmetry had been part of the *modus operandi* of the Russian federal system throughout the 1990s, it became almost a taboo at the turn of the millennium. The ban of asymmetry was welcomed by a clear majority of governmental actors, which in the end contributed to more harmonious intergovernmental relations. However, I do not claim, as stated by Mr Makarychev, that 'symmetry is semantically related with cooperation and harmony, while asymmetry, is rooted in specific group politics and, therefore, connotes with fragmentation and rivalry'. This is a highly debated issue within federal studies and there is no established theoretical consensus. Rather, it appears to be an empirical question. Therefore, my conclusions concerning symmetry/asymmetry and the level of intergovernmental cooperation apply mainly to the Russian case.

Andrey Makarychev also brings up the interesting point regarding to what extent Putin is a political subject in the terminology of Carl Schmitt and Slavoj Zizek. Indeed, although I do not discuss the issue in those terms I think it is important to

underline that the changes that Russia has gone through since 2000 should not be viewed as the result of Putin's personal power or the power of the current government. Instead, it is the current federal paradigm that is strong. In fact, the paradigm shift that began in 1998 and consolidated in 2000 has permeated many aspects of Russia's political and social life with a conservative emphasis (stronger patriotism, a strong state ideal, restoring Russia as an empire) combined with a rather liberal economic policy. Consequently, provided this political discourse will continue to dominate Russian politics Putin will simply be replaced by a person with a very similar political approach in the presidential election in 2008.

Slutrepplik från Andrey Makarychev

Indeed, Johnny Rodin's comments seem to confirm that the question of why the Putin's regime was so successful in reinstalling the mechanisms of centralization is of core significance for his research. This policy of recentralization is semantically expressed through a number of normative concepts like "political consensus", "pro-Putin majority", and some others that constitute the kernel of a "unitary discourse" of power, to put it in Foucaultian terms. In political terms, the success of recentralization efforts could be explained by Putin's skillful usage of two key arguments: firstly, the governors' fear of further popular elections which, as many of

them deemed, were too risky for their future careers, and secondly, the widely spread belief that electoral procedures are deeply corrupted and easily manipulated.

Yet, in my mind, one step further has to be taken at this juncture, namely in the direction of finding out the nature of consensus associated with the incumbent President. Is it a "rational" consensus justified by references to some sort of "ultimate knowledge" of governance, or, perhaps, it is a "political" construct that presupposes the division of the political sphere into those who are "in" and who are "out". My argument would be that Putin's consensus is a bordered phenomenon in a sense that it enacts the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion widely practiced by the Kremlin. The key analytical problem is that these mechanisms are very ambiguous and function in a rather uncertain way – for example, Putin never goes public with his reasons or explanations when he nominates somebody for the governor's position. This policy of "constructive ambiguity" seems to be intentionally designed for leaving open as many options for the federal center's regional policy as possible.

Yet the interplay of inclusion and exclusion may turn into an even more interesting question since, as Johnny Rodin rightly assumes, Putin is to be replaced by his successor rather shortly. Does it mean that the system constructed by Putin will inevitably exclude its founder for the sake of self-preservation?