

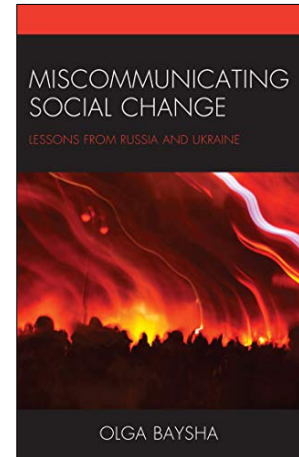
Olga Baysha, **Miscommunicating Social Change: Lessons from Russia and Ukraine**, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, Rowman and Littlefield, 2019, 238 pp., \$80.75 (hardcover).

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Deep into her study ***Miscommunicating Social Change: Lessons from Russia and Ukraine***, Olga Baysha comments that imagining society as divided into two nonintersecting parts leads to confrontation and violence, both symbolic and physical. This observation is at the heart of the conflicts in Russia and Ukraine that she examines. But I would extrapolate them to a worldwide canvas, by no means limited to but having particular relevance for the discursive tactics of color revolution and similar imperial intervention. These are designed precisely to create nonintersecting parts, eliminating the possibility of compromise between what is often a middle-class, youthful, and urban minority, radicalized and energized by the resources and backing of imperial power, and a much larger, unexpected and unprepared majority. Neoliberalism has no monopoly over this experience: While Baysha references the Jacobins and Bolsheviks as well as neocons and neoliberals, she also implicates some of the ostensibly liberating narratives advanced by scholars of modernization and development.



Baysha is an assistant professor at the National Research University, Higher School of Economics, in Moscow, Russia. Her origins lie in the Ukraine, where she also worked as journalist for many years before acquiring her PhD from the University of Colorado at Boulder. Her previous book (*The Mythologies of Capitalism and the End of the Soviet Project* [2014]—which I also reviewed for this journal) compared and contrasted discursive formations (about capitalism) in the final days of the Soviet Union, constructed by contributors to intellectual, progressive publications, on the one hand, and contributors to publications more grounded in working class experience, on the other.

This set her upon an unsettling voyage of discovery into the deeply undemocratic character of what she calls “uniprogressivism,” a mythology or imaginary constructed by self-appointed avant-garde groups who represent themselves as the standard-bearers of a gleaming, modern, and above all Western future. They cut themselves off, irredeemably, from those they fail to inspire, whom they denigrate as a sullen, stupid, homogeneous horde.

There is no possible compromise between the progressive forces (independent, good-looking, smartly dressed, respectable, benevolent, brave, energetic, healthy, joyful, normal, modern, peaceful, future-looking, Western, qualified to instruct others) and their retrograde opposites (dependent on miserable state handouts, ugly, boorish, brainless, boring, joyless, zombie-like, fearful, inarticulate, submissive, abnormal, superstitious, diseased, corrupt, barbarian, violent, rooted in a stale past, outside-the-modern, Russian, in need of instruction and correction, and *sovok*, i.e., very un-cool).

Combative discourse of this kind perpetrates symbolic violence with abandon. Uniprogressive adulation of anti-Putin youth, for example, requires symbolic annihilation of all those youth, the majority, who are not anti-Putin. Uniprogressive discourse entitles its advocates to present themselves as "the people," ignoring the reality of the majority of actual people. In uniprogressive discourse there is nothing good about Putin's Russia, or the previous Soviet Union, even though polls have consistently shown that a majority or near-majority regret the passing of the Soviet Union and consider it to close to an ideal economic model.

Baysha pursues her theme through empirical case studies of (1) the "White Ribbons" social movement for fair elections in Russia (2012) based on analysis of contributors to the progressive *Echo of Moscow* radio station; (2) the Ukrainian Euromaidan (2013 to 2014), based on analysis of Euromaidan activists in their blogs on *Ukrayinska Pravda* (UP); (3) anticorruption protests in Russia (2017), based on analysis of feature articles and opinion pieces about the protests that appeared in *Echo* and *Novaya Gazeta*; and later in the book, (4) discourses of the "anti-Maidan as terrorism" meme, as these played out in Ukraine in three of Ukraine's independent political web sites (UP, *Leviy Bereg*, and *Gordon*).

Within a discursive formation that outwardly celebrates democracy as a virtue whose flowering is conditional upon Westernization, the author identifies how these social movements subverted the very possibility of a democratic public sphere through their discursive and physical closure of democratic space.

For a majority of Russians in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet Union and the introduction of capitalism (with the active intervention of Western "experts" and financiers) terms such as "democracy" and "freedom" came to be associated with degradation and poverty, as the public wealth, rights, and facilities accumulated over decades by the Soviet Union were siphoned off overnight to Russian oligarchs and their Western enablers. Amid this turmoil were nurtured discourses of democracy that were antagonistic rather than agonistic, that revealed the dark underbelly of Enlightenment thought, its preening confidence in a self-regarding rationality, and foolish expectation of singular, linear, constant improvement. Shutting out the majority ("theydom") to advance the radical minority ("wedom") these discourses adopted tactics of dichotomization, homogenization, essentialization, universalization, normalization, moralization, and dehistoricisation. They adopted material form through providing or denying access to spaces and other such concrete practices.

Though Baysha avoids saying so, naivety and wishful thinking is a consistent feature of uniprogressive discourses. Euromaidan activists talked of the Association Agreement with the European Union (ultimately rejected by Yanukovyich) as a magic carpet on a divine breeze that would transport them to a European wonderland of civilizational advance. The European Union enjoyed such godlike command in this vision that nobody thought to question by what right European Union and U.S. representatives assumed they could come to Kiev, dictate what must happen, and rally Euromaidan forces to revolt against an elected government that would shortly stand for reelection. Knowing that they represented a minority of the population overall, Euromaidan activist discourse nonetheless persuaded its progenitors that such was their civilizational superiority they could assume the authority to stage a coup d'état even when this required collaborating with undemocratic and thoroughly "not nice" neofascist nationalist movements who gloried in their Nazi lineage.

The perpetrators of this coup d'état, a national minority, declared their Donbas opponents were aloof Russophone "separatists" who wanted to be outside of a Ukraine that had no room for "internal others." In fact, citizens of the Donbas were federalists who aspired to greater autonomy within Ukraine. Federalism was not even the *main* demand: their foremost concern was rejection of the policy of cutting economic ties with Russia. But the new Ukrainian nationalists in Kiev preferred stigmatization and delegitimization of their opponents with the negative but actually nonexistent status of "separatist." Recognition of their opponents as federalists would have allowed them into the same discursive space as Euromaidan, opening a channel for political negotiation. For precisely that reason, Kiev nationalists applied the term "separatist" since the new republics of Donbas could then be presented as a threat to the national security of Ukraine. As threats, these separatists could now be deemed "terrorists" whose existence justified a military arsenal of response strategies.

Baysha notes that Euromaidan radicals, thinking and acting within the limits of the possible established by nationalistic imaginary, were unwilling to communicate with anti-Maidan others. To be anti-Maidan was to be terrorist. The consequences of such discursive tactics were anything but democratic. The totalitarian tendency to marginalize and silence forces and voices of anti-Maidan was exacerbated by international mainstream media who consistently valorized what they deemed to be "progressive struggles" in the former Soviet states.

If Baysha's study could have been usefully amplified, it would have been with respect both to the role of the international press and to further elaboration of the methodologies, covert and overt, employed by Western states and propaganda agencies to destabilize the former Soviet Union for the purposes of Western capitalistic expansion, control over Eurasia, and further containment of China. Her book nonetheless should be essential reading for Russia specialists and students of nationalist and social movements everywhere.

Reference

Baysha, O. (2014). *The mythologies of capitalism and the end of the Soviet project*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.