

## Introduction: Passages

In the 1990s, Russia's experience under its first popularly elected leader, Boris Yeltsin, seemed to follow some inscrutable law of revolutionary entropy. First, Yeltsin launched a program of sweeping policies aimed at dismantling the economic remnants of the old Soviet order, itself destroyed in the political revolution of August 1991. Such "emergency decrees," however, quickly devolved into political strife. As paralysis gripped Russia's infant governing bodies, the next several years brought relentless economic decline, culminating in political fragmentation and the crushing of a motley uprising of extremist legislators by military force in October 1993. On paper, the events of that fall consolidated Yeltsin's presidential rule.<sup>1</sup> In reality, Russian governmental powers remained weak and divided, declining still further in the wake of the President's ill-conceived December 1994 invasion of the Republic of Chechnya on Russia's southern periphery. Although a cease-fire followed Yeltsin's mid-1996 reelection against the unpopular successor of the Soviet Communists, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, violent conflicts between and among various official, "business" (*biznes*), and "mafia" (*mafia*) factions reduced the Russian government to a shell. By the time the ruble collapsed in August 1998—mocking earlier promises of rapid transition to a market democracy—Yeltsin's postrevolutionary government appeared an ignominious failure.

Yet in August 1999, an attack by Chechen separatists against Russian troops stationed in neighboring Dagestan—along with Chechnya, one of sixteen Autonomous Republics of the Russian Federation enjoying a high degree of local autonomy from the federal government—gave a seemingly moribund Yeltsin a sudden opportunity to engineer a successor regime. Unlike December 1994, when Russian armed forces appeared the aggressors, now Russian federal figures appeared in national political discourse as victims. This symbolic reversal proved crucial. On August 9, Yeltsin dismissed then Russian Prime Minister Sergei Stepashin and appointed the little-known former intelligence officer Vladimir Putin in his stead.<sup>2</sup> Within weeks, Putin organized a Russian counterattack against Chechen guerillas. Soon after, Yeltsin designated the new

Prime Minister his successor and chosen candidate in the presidential elections scheduled for March of 2000.

Yeltsin's August appointment of Putin risked little opposition from the Duma, the parliament established under Russia's 1993 constitution. After all, a conflict between the Duma and Yeltsin over Stepashin's appointment as prime minister in May 1999—just four months earlier—had ended in a failed parliamentary attempt to impeach the president.<sup>3</sup> Renewing conflict over the installation of yet another prime minister just a few months before the December 1999 parliamentary elections would have allowed Yeltsin to exercise the powers granted under the constitution to dissolve parliament if it refused to confirm the president's appointment. Deputies of all political stripes feared such an outcome, as it would have denied sitting Duma members the use of their parliamentary offices, communications equipment, financial resources, and other considerable advantages enjoyed by incumbents in the election process.<sup>4</sup> If such circumstances made a renewal of confrontation between the president and Duma unlikely, the renewed Chechen war rallied the population around Putin and silenced, for the time being, parliamentary opponents.

During Putin's first six weeks as prime minister, escalating warfare triggered a sea change in Russian politics as a whole. Four seemingly random bombings of apartment buildings between the fourth and the sixteenth of September—three in European Russia and one in Dagestan—consolidated the new era. Denouncing the murder of over three hundred Russian civilians, Putin blamed Chechens for the attacks and announced plans for an all-out Russian invasion of that republic. On September 23, Russia began bombing Chechnya in advance of the invasion, as Putin vowed to “catch” Chechen rebels “in the toilet and wipe them out in their outhouses.”<sup>5</sup> Exhausted by years of economic and political turmoil, the populace proved an easy target for patriotic appeals to unify behind Putin's fresh political face in defense of the Federation.

With war in defense of the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation now mapping a paradigm of struggle for the future of the “fatherland” (*otechestvo*), the means grew clear for securing Putin's domination of the Russian political field. Given such circumstances, the Yeltsin group organized a new political umbrella, Unity (*Edinstvo*), as a device for electing a plurality of Putin supporters to the Duma. Although the December 19 elections gave Unity only 23 percent of the seats, Putin adroitly arranged a marriage of convenience with Yeltsin's erstwhile archenemy—the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF)—in exchange for chairmanships of various parliamentary committees.<sup>6</sup> It did not hurt that the CPRF strongly supported the suppression of the Chechen independence movement. Putin's bargain thus

cemented a working parliamentary majority committed to giving him maximal maneuverability as a wartime prime minister. Yeltsin's resignation on New Year's Eve of 1999 consolidated the new government, as Putin assumed the presidency and—in his first official act—granted immunity to members of Yeltsin's inner circle from prosecution on corruption charges.<sup>7</sup>

What emerges from all of this is a pattern of Russian high politics remote from the democratic vision that dominated the reform side of the Russian political field in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Indeed, the manner of Putin's rise to the presidency could only develop given the prior political collapse of pro-democracy activists of the late-communist period who helped bring Yeltsin to power.

Consider, for instance, Putin's promotion of his Chechen war policy as “a national example” for solving Russia's myriad problems.<sup>8</sup> During his presidential campaign—waged more as a plebiscite on whether or not citizens of the Russian Federation opposed the idea of Chechen independence than as an attempt to define issues or programs—Putin wrapped perfunctory nods toward the concept of democracy around promises to restore “a powerful state” (*derzhavnost'*) and “a dictatorship of law” en route to victory in the 2000 presidential election.<sup>9</sup>

From the perspective of democratic hopes that waxed in the years following the onset of reforms under the last General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), Mikhail Gorbachev, the ascent of Putin on a tide of war and a promise to rebuild a powerful centralized state seemed a lurch back toward a past of Tsars and Soviet rulers.<sup>10</sup> The term hijacking comes to mind. But, as the old saw goes, appearances may be deceiving, and a more considered assessment of the outcome of Russia's latest revolution requires a careful untangling of the events, movements, and processes leading from the Gorbachev reforms to Putin's election. Let us take a closer look, then, at the heyday of the Russian democratic movement before turning our attention to its intended (and unintended) consequences.

## **Democratic Russia and Political Revolution in Moscow**

The principal organization of the Russian democratic movement between 1989 and 1991—Democratic Russia or *DemRossiia*—stood at the crossroads of *longue durée* and political revolution.<sup>11</sup> Gorbachev's embrace of policies of “restructuring” (*perestroika*), “openness” (*glasnost'*), and “democratization” (*demokratizatsiia*) between his confirmation as General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party in April 1985 and the events of 1989 in turn aimed to reverse

a decade-long decline in Soviet economic and technological capacities relative to the core powers of the global capitalist order, in particular the United States.<sup>12</sup> But the rise of DemRossiia over the course of 1989 forced the Soviet leadership to change course.

At the end of the 1980s, elite “rebels” occupying high positions in the Soviet “party-state”—the fusion of party and state institutions that emerged in twentieth-century communist and fascist dictatorships—backed the formation of DemRossiia to capitalize on the political opportunity created by Gorbachev’s calling of semi-free elections to local, regional, republic, and federal-level legislative bodies—the *sovet* or soviets. By uniting under a single umbrella a plethora of voluntary associations, self-proclaimed political parties, pro-reform factions in the CPSU, pro-democracy deputies in various soviets, and opposition candidates, DemRossiia leaders hoped to “seize power at the local level.”<sup>13</sup> A networking process emerged from these organizing efforts, which in the end dismantled the Soviet regime itself.

In organizing networks as a “counterpower” to the Soviet Communist Party, Democratic Russia followed the example of nationalist militants who unexpectedly seized the initiative from CPSU leaders in the republics of Armenia and Estonia of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1987 and 1988. DemRossiia here stepped into the breach opened at the very heart of the Soviet party-state by the reform leadership’s gamble in tolerating dilution of central control over the federal hierarchy of territorial and ethnic soviets—a devolutionary process subsequently known as “the parade of sovereignties” (*parad suverenitetov*).<sup>14</sup>

The historical significance of DemRossiia thus stemmed from two primary sources. First, Democratic Russia emerged as the key network along which the parade of sovereignties moved from outlying federal territories of the Soviet Union to its geographical and urban core, Moscow. Second, DemRossiia served as the key grassroots vehicle for both Yeltsin’s spring 1990 struggle to become chair of the Russian Supreme Soviet and his June 1991 campaign for the newly created post of president of the largest of the fifteen constituent republics of the USSR, the Russian Socialist Federated Soviet Republic (RSFSR). During these campaigns, DemRossiia’s drive to seize power from below converged with splits at the top of the Soviet party-state to empower a counterelite in control of the RSFSR Supreme Soviet, creating a viable contender for power just across Moscow from the seat of the all-Union government itself.

Democratic Russia’s strategy bore fruit following Yeltsin’s spring 1990 rise to Chair of the Russian Supreme Soviet. Now under Yeltsin’s command, the government of the RSFSR—ostensibly subordinate to Soviet legal codes—declared sovereignty over Soviet federal law, creating a dual-power situation (*dvoevlastie*) in the Soviet capital and bringing the devolution of power full

circle. Thus, when conservative CPSU officials—dismayed by the parade of sovereignties and opposed to Gorbachev’s negotiations with Yeltsin over a new union treaty to replace principles first laid down in the Soviet constitution of 1924<sup>15</sup>—attempted to restore centralized party-state control on August 19, 1991, the countervailing power of the Russian Republic served as a rallying point for resistance to the attempted seizure of power. In the days following the coup’s collapse, the Russian government used its revolutionary prestige to sweep the CPSU from power—and with it, the Soviet order a few months later.

As the Soviet Union was dismantled in the fall of 1991, however, Yeltsin abandoned any interest in using DemRossiia as a political base or transforming its networks into a political party. Virtually ignoring the movement’s leaders and organizers in cobbling together a postrevolutionary administration, the new government concentrated instead on securing autonomy from legislative oversight and putting together an alliance of pro-reform officials and technocrats in single-minded pursuit of a top-down strategy of implementing a transition to a market economy through state decrees. Modeled on the policy preferences of “the Washington Consensus”—the neoliberal policy frame championed by the American-dominated development establishment, from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank to neoliberal think tanks and the U.S. Treasury Department—these “shock therapy” (*shokovaia terapiia*) reforms cast democracy as a sort of by-product of the creation of a generically understood market economy.<sup>16</sup>

The embrace of macroeconomic policies imported whole from the international development establishment underscored the postrevolutionary Yeltsin government’s abandonment of both its grassroots political base and democratic institution building. However, the democratic movement’s previous reliance on grassroots “antipolitics”—the notion that if the Soviet power structure could just be dismantled, all would be well—prepared the political ground for acquiescence to Yeltsin’s hypercentralized strategy among democratic activists in the fall of 1991. Indeed, the dream of replicating “the West” on Russian territory as quickly as possible animated the formation and spread of the DemRossiia movement between 1989 and August 1991, creating highly favorable circumstances for simply decreeing the standardized discourse of structural adjustment as a ready-made template, an “elaborate contraption” for Russian policymaking.<sup>17</sup> Thus when the Soviet regime fell, the language and jargon spoken among DemRossiia activists had already congealed into a flexible tool kit of semantic resources used habitually by the Yeltsin counterelite to frame the road ahead and delineate “democrats” from “reactionaries.”<sup>18</sup>

In so doing, Yeltsin’s immediate advisors in fact returned to a pattern seen repeatedly in Russian cultural history. In this pattern, “[e]very new period—whether the Christianization of Russia or of the reforms of Peter the Great—is

oriented toward a decisive break with what preceded it.”<sup>19</sup> Here, the Soviet period was rejected in toto by a simplified abstraction, “the West.” By such circuitous routes did the discursive contraction of IMF-style neoliberalism wind its way from the global to the local level as an imported substitute for the absence of a politically viable ideology of Russian national identity serviceable for democratic politics.<sup>20</sup> From here it was a short step to the enthusiastic embrace of shock therapy as the reform strategy for consolidating Russian democracy at the end of 1991 despite the fact that, like its counterparts elsewhere, shock therapy had little to do with the nuts and bolts of fashioning democratic institutions. Parallels emerge here between archaic Russian cultural patterns of authoritarian politics and the deep appeal of abstract, “totalistic” theories for remaking Russia anew. For these reasons, the symbolic cast given the rebellion in urban Russia by the projection of a reified notion of the West as model and ideal for the Russian future proved of historic significance in the Russian Federation of the 1990s, despite the absence of any real Western control of the process.

The longing to duplicate Western experience on Russian soil helped prepare the DemRossiia movement for self-subordination to the Yeltsin group, which in turn subordinated much of Russian politics to its own reading of economic reform discourse imported from Western academic and policy circles. Thus, in stark contrast to the Bolshevik movement in 1917, members of Democratic Russia’s *aktiv* (the movement’s leaders and activist core) found themselves quickly shunted aside in the wake of their seeming political triumph of August 1991. In distinction from the strictly economic parameters of neoliberal theory, ongoing grassroots participation in political life (*narodnoe uchastie*), however vaguely conceived, animated the working notion of democracy among the *aktiv*. Grassroots participation thus drove the networking process throughout the DemRossiia movement as a whole. Indeed, this working understanding of democracy embodied the *aktiv*’s vision of building a Russian civil society (*grazhdanskoe obshchestvo*), a vision convergent with the ethos of similar civil society projects in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland in the late 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>21</sup>

But unlike their Czech, Hungarian, and Polish counterparts following the 1989 revolutions in Central Europe, DemRossiia activists after August 1991 found themselves on the sidelines of the government they helped bring to power. Cut off by Yeltsin from mooring defense of government policy in grassroots politics—the would-be incubator of DemRossiia’s civil society project—the narrowly urban and professional networks of the democracy movement quickly unraveled. In their stead, often opaque networks asserted themselves at the center of struggles to shape the course of shock therapy and its

successors in a Russian Federation populated with multiple and overlapping regional sovereignties.

## Feudalization in Postcommunist Russia

As a consequence, postrevolutionary reform rapidly became engulfed in a process of “feudalization”—the privatization of law by regional bodies and economic networks and the de facto ceding of sovereign power to local and sectoral notables by nominal national leaders on the basis of personal ties.<sup>22</sup> Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century historians invented the concept of feudalism retrospectively to capture the enmeshing of tributary economic relations in a highly decentralized pattern of “privatized” local sovereignties dominated by local notables who controlled the means of large-scale violence.<sup>23</sup> In this sense, medieval European feudalization entailed “the passing of public power into private hands” as its distinguishing characteristic.<sup>24</sup>

Parallels between premodern, patriarchal forms of political power, and the Stalinist period in the twentieth-century Soviet Union are common.<sup>25</sup> If we follow Weber and distinguish between centralized (patrimonial) and decentralized (feudal) forms of patriarchal authority,<sup>26</sup> then feudalization here simply maps a limited analogy between historical periods of highly decentralized, “localized” forms of sovereignty, and the devolution of control of the means of violence across large swaths of the former Soviet Union in the late 1980s and its successor states in the 1990s. Indeed, feudalization as process does not necessarily entail consolidation of feudalism as a cosmos of social institutions, which can only emerge as an alternative to centralization over many years.

The concept of feudalization captures aspects of the Russian situation in the 1990s missed by more commonly used notions such as privatization, “mafia-zation,” and state collapse.<sup>27</sup> The devolution of sovereignty, for instance, stems neither from the contracting out of key state capacities like norm enforcement to commercial firms by a central authority that retains ultimate control of the process, nor from the total criminalization or complete disappearance of such capacities altogether. Rather, the implosion of political authority in 1990s Russia resulted in a segmental dissection of sovereignty and the devolution of norm enforcement and control over the means of violence to multiple local and regional networks originating from the Soviet breakup.

Such local and regional networks reorganized “apparatuses” (*apparati*) dominated on a personalistic basis, either coexisting or warring with one another on the basis of arbitrary “deals.” These arbitrary arrangements, in turn, shifted relations between local notables, sectoral interests, and the rump of a central state in the major urban areas on an ongoing basis. At the same time,

“power dealing” remained constrained by normative and political relations with local populations, upon whom authority depended in differing degrees at different times and places. Vadim Volkov perceptively called this a process of “violent entrepreneurship.”<sup>28</sup>

The seeds of feudalization in postcommunist Russia lie deep in Soviet history, as we shall see, but were powerfully augmented by the parade of sovereignties—the dismemberment of central Soviet authority—that made the political revolution of 1991 possible. Over time, the social logic of feudalization relentlessly gutted the administrative capacity of the Russian state, eroded the legitimacy of its officials, starved the coffers of the federal government, and undermined the ruble as a functioning national currency—trends exemplified by two wars in Chechnya and the explosion of barter exchange in the Yeltsin years.<sup>29</sup> Only with Putin’s rise did the Russian government regain the capacity to try and reverse such trends.

## **Framing Political Revolution and Its Consequences in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia**

What, then, happened in the urban social world of Moscow between 1988 and Putin’s election? First stands the question of the origins and developmental course of the political revolution of August 1991. As a political revolution, these events entailed the destruction of the institutional foundation, the sovereign backbone, of the Soviet political order.<sup>30</sup> This process in turn shaped patterns of political change and economic devolution in its wake. How, then, to model such processes?

Prominent in accounts of recent Russian events stand notions like “revolution from below” or “revolution from above.” Models framing the Soviet collapse in such terms, however, tend to concentrate either on the political elite or popular opposition to it, at times misconstruing the dynamics of how the situation actually unfolded as Soviet oligarchy fragmented and new social forces emerged at multiple levels. Framing Soviet collapse as a revolution from below, for instance, must somehow grapple with the concentration of emergency powers by Yeltsin’s entourage in late 1991 and 1992, and the launching of post-Soviet economic decrees in the explicit language of a revolution from above.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, Yeltsin’s attempt at revolution from above followed perestroika, the mobilization of Democratic Russia, and the collapse of the Soviet state, rendering the term revolution from above misleading as a characterization of the entire process.<sup>32</sup>

In fact, while grassroots mobilization indeed drove the Soviet collapse, a small number of senior figures in the communist hierarchy encouraged



such mobilization from the beginning, rendering problematic accounts which frame events as driven from either “below” or “above.” At this point, framing Russian developments in straightforward notions such as revolution from below or revolution from above gives way to more multifaceted accounts. But once again, such accounts at times overlook crucial relations of groups networking across different levels of status as the Soviet order disintegrated, such as the symbiotic relation between the antipolitics of the Russian grass roots and the *modus operandi* of elite figures around Yeltsin.<sup>33</sup>

Framing multilevel accounts of Russia’s latest political revolution, then, presupposes careful analysis of networks across levels in urban Moscow, and by extension, across the Soviet Russian Republic and its successor, the Russian Federation. But it also presupposes awareness of the limits of revolutionary models and terminology. Getting bogged down in definitional arguments about revolution detracts from empirical analysis of the case at hand. Take accounts of earlier revolutions, such as Theda Skocpol’s influential 1979 study of *States and Social Revolutions*. In this book, Skocpol differentiates political from what she calls social revolutions in terms of processes that unfolded long after the collapse of autocracies in peasant societies.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, Skocpol herself restricts social revolutions to three cases—France of the late 1700s, Russia in the early 1900s, and China several decades hence—indicating the limitations of the applicability of this model to the political revolution against Soviet power and its aftermath.

Indeed, for good reason, most historical analyses of revolutions tend to be case specific. “Since revolutions are complex social and political upheavals, historians who write about them are bound to differ on the most basic questions—causes, revolutionary aims, impact on the society, political outcome, and even the time span of the revolution itself.”<sup>35</sup> Indeed, framings of revolution in late- and postcommunist Russia can easily mislead. Largely absent from accounts of Russia’s latest political revolution, for instance, lies a basic question difficult to generalize and requiring careful limitation of the applicability of received models of revolution: how did nascent feudalizing tendencies long at work in the late-communist Soviet Union shape the strategic proclivities and internal morphology of the Russian democratic movement?

Assuming a minimalist definition of political revolution along Tocquevillian lines—the destruction of the institutional backbone of a political order—gives sufficient flexibility to account for feudalization as a process both before and after the political revolution itself. But it also throws back on the observer the need to connect postrevolutionary outcomes—defined here as the consolidation of postrevolutionary institutions—with the genealogy of the political revolution itself.

Political revolutions, after all, involve the breakdown of institutions, and a great deal of confusion results from sloppy use of this latter term. The concept of institution marks forms of social life with an obligatory character, from habits and customs to the “invisible hand” of markets to the formal laws of constitutional states.<sup>36</sup> Institutions are obligatory insofar as failure to conform to established ways of doing things either entails some significant “cost” in resources, time, or status or provokes marginalization, sanctions, or even exclusion from the situation in which given institutions are effective. For these reasons, institutions map both onto geographic and social boundaries, and “naturalize” as “common sense,” accepted ways of “getting by and getting along” in stable social fields.<sup>37</sup> Distinctions between tacit and formalized norms mark institutions as either formal or informal, explicit or implicit. In customary situations, no written rules codify expected ways of behaving. Customary knowledge represents instead a tacit dimension of practical knowledge and entails prior socialization in a given way of life and cultivation of an intuitive sense of what’s expected, a feel for the game.<sup>38</sup> Formal institutions, on the other hand, involve the explicit codification of expected rules of behavior.

Refusal to publicly acknowledge the legitimacy of CPSU domination—by, for example, refusing to participate in ritual shows of public obeisance to “the leading role of the Communist Party” at obligatory CPSU youth organization (*Komsomol*) meetings held regularly at Soviet universities—could trigger either the application of any number of sanctions available in Soviet legal codes or simply arbitrary repression by party-state officials.<sup>39</sup> We can thus differentiate formal and informal institutions in Soviet life in terms of their genealogical relation to practices of codification and the actual practices of groups in relation to authoritative figures and pronouncements.<sup>40</sup>

Either too much formality expressed in a plethora of rules and regulations—often called simply “bureaucratization”—or too much informality paralyzes modern organizations by rendering the rules of the game highly opaque to all but privileged insiders, an insight highly germane to the Soviet situation. Too much formality in a bureaucratic setting paralyzes bureaucracies by so limiting the discretion of midlevel ranks in the office hierarchy with various rules and regulations. Officials thus become passive and defer to “others” when the application of rules to practical situations appears unclear or when rules seem to directly contradict one another. Too little formality, on the other hand, simply renders the rules a fiction obscuring the social logic of arbitrary decision-making processes. This is the problem of discretion.<sup>41</sup>

While Soviet communism has often been framed as the most bureaucratic of societies in Western commentary, in fact bureaucracy was only partially developed and arbitrarily applied as a method of social control. The principle

of formal legality (*zakonnost'*) remained subordinate to “party-spiritedness” (*partiinnost'*), the arbitrary *diktat* of party-state functionaries (*apparatchiki*) justified in terms of Marxist–Leninist ideology but in practice more and more serving as an excuse for arbitrary personal rulership.<sup>42</sup> Thus, while excessive promulgation of often contradictory regulations combined with discouragement of discretionary action at lower ranks of Soviet officialdom to repeatedly undermine “efficient” functioning of bureaucracies on their own terms, great latitude to engage in arbitrary rule by fiat was given to higher officials, and all manner of informal trading between enterprise managers and bargaining over planning targets between managers and party-state officials flourished in practice. In this light, the planned economy appears in retrospect as a sort of ideological fiction imposed on a highly informal economic practice.<sup>43</sup>

The consequence was an all-around arbitrariness and authoritarian informality in institutional settings that continues to plague Russian social and political life. As Alena Ledeneva observes, Russian “popular wisdom” expresses this in ironic commonplaces of everyday language:

“Russia is a country of unread laws and unwritten rules.” Or, as they say, “the imperfection of our laws is compensated for by their non-observance” (*nesovershenstvo nashikh zakonov kompensiruetsia ikh nevypolneniem*).<sup>44</sup>

The arbitrariness of apparat domination and the weaknesses of Soviet legality opened Soviet social relations to feudalization, and yet the common trope of overweening Soviet bureaucracy has deeply obscured Westerners’ ability to grasp the arbitrary character of institutional practice in late- and postcommunist Russia.<sup>45</sup> The paradigm of ideal behavior promoted in Soviet law and ideology in fact often had a purely arbitrary relation to actual practices in many fields in Russian society, a fact closely related to the Soviet regime’s long-range policy of atomizing the population and striving to monopolize all avenues of organizational advancement from above through socially closed and institutionally opaque apparat networks. Such realities have long vexed analyses of Soviet institutions, compromising attempts to map the emergence of social movements in contexts marked by the disintegration of these same institutions.

The principle of party-spiritedness (*partiinnost'*)—arbitrary and often highly personalistic domination by party-state functionaries cast in the heroic tones of an impersonal, historical task<sup>46</sup>—captures the dominant principles animating Soviet institutions, as well as noninstitutional networks trying to operate against them in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The political revolution in Russia in August 1991 thus broke the principle of party-spiritedness as an institutional element of daily life in the Soviet Union, precipitating collapse in

the ability of high party-state officials to authoritatively command a minimal probability of obedience in the population writ large. From here, the party-state rapidly unraveled, as the Yeltsin counterelite in the Russian Republic “captured” enough obedience from sections of the populace to carry through with the dismantling of the Soviet party-state altogether in the fall of 1991.

But, as we shall see, the Yeltsin group failed to consolidate an institutional alternative to Soviet power, and in fact was dragged into a protracted, paralytic power struggle from which institutional reconsolidation only emerged at the level of the Russian state itself with Putin’s rise in the fall of 1999. This protracted interregnum deepened the process of feudalization in Russia proper—a process long at work in Soviet political institutions prior to August 1991.<sup>47</sup> The empirical body of this text explains why and how this happened, framing political revolution in Russia in terms of the process of feudalization. That we only retrospectively see the institutional patterns first destroyed and then—after a protracted interregnum—regenerated during this process, is itself a sign of how difficult it is to model human behavior in the relative chaos of protracted institutional collapse.

Such dynamics underscore how what Pierre Bourdieu called “habitus”—the dispositions, skills, quirks, and other forms of habitual behavior inscribed on bodies by socialization and the routines of everyday life—intersects with institutions and patterns of representation in particular fields. Such fields in turn form sites of disintegrating institutional order and emerging alternative networks at given points in time in a revolutionary process.<sup>48</sup> In a revolutionary situation, networks of contending agents and secular processes of institutional disintegration and reformation shape one another across a social formation, changing the array of fields themselves. The very stakes that regulate contention here alter in mid-game, undermining the “fit” between habitus and field that normally stabilize the political order of things and orient the habitus of agents.

In the Russian political field of the late 1980s and 1990s, tensions between the communist past and visions of a democratic future intersected with tensions between global, regional, and local networks. That agents expressed such tensions in sometimes archaic Russian cultural representations requires some knowledge of Russian history in order to interpret them.<sup>49</sup> In such an everyday context, the global reference of “democracy” took on distinctly local, Russian characteristics. This global–local dynamic altered the back and forth of discourse and the practices it referenced through representative characters like the *demokrat* and the “power-nik” (*derzhavnik*), the *intelligent* and the apparatchik. The prominence of *demokraty* in Russian politics at the end of the 1980s thus remained bound to the ways distinctive circumstances shaped

the reception of Western ideas, models, paradigms, and power in late-communist Russia.

The representation of political processes of change in late-communist Russia thus unfolded through “figurational” (“story telling”) dynamics of urban social networks. At the center of such narratives lay the interplay of human agency, institutional disintegration, and the genesis of new, proto-institutional networks.<sup>50</sup> “Stories” of how such developments unfolded linked agents to representations of such processes. Indeed, figurations of experience conveyed agentic conceptions of institutional arrays and varied perceptions of the morphology of social fields across networks.<sup>51</sup> Key here stand references to pools of potential support, “audiences,” and the role of transnational perceptions in cutting through them.

The concept of “transnational demonstration effect” captures how relative perceptions link the global to the local through vectors of social networks.<sup>52</sup> Outside the West or Japan as contemporary geopolitical centers such effects often map the impact of external organizational and technological practices on behavior among groups perceiving their own society as relatively deprived, “backward,” or oppressed in relation to an external reference—even in the case of a global power such as late-Soviet Russia. Such perceptions signal a disposition among peripheral and semiperipheral elites and middle groups to selectively mimic and adapt techniques predominant in core regions in order to build up technological, organizational, and economic capacities and thus realize either greater autonomy or greater integration with “the developed world,” or both. By orienting dispositions in this manner, transnational demonstration effects serve institutional isomorphism on a transnational scale—what George Ritzer recently called “grobalization”<sup>53</sup>—as demonstrated in the whole-scale mimicking of Western patterns of industrial organization by Bolshevik leaders in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>54</sup>

And yet, political constellations, media representations, network relations, and the cultural context in which agents socialize always mediate such transnational perceptions, focusing attention on state–society relations in modeling patterns of revolutionary change. Such processes unfold nationally in reaction to sovereign powers, although local, regional, and transnational dynamics may figure prominently in their development.<sup>55</sup> The national focus stands particularly true of revolutionary processes, which aim at changing the very institutions of state power and thus often challenge received notions of nationhood and citizenship. Here, social movements situate agency and its figurations in relation to fields in which they manifest as patterns of mobilization and networking. Identifying and tracking how such noninstitutional patterns of networking linked pre- and postrevolutionary phases of Russian

development from the late 1980s to the late 1990s presupposes careful tracking of the political processes through which such networks formed and developed. So long as we remember that habitus relates to field through both institutional and noninstitutional patterns, some Russian social movements of the late 1980s can be identified as preinstitutional networks capable of developing sustained challenges to Soviet power.

## **Rethinking Processes of Political Change in the Soviet Order**

How, then, to model preinstitutional networks as social movements that generate revolutionary challenges to political authority? Two recent trends in social movement theory have revived “classical” questions of how social movements generated institutional outcomes in the rise of the modern West, and in so doing have offered a way forward for dealing with the Russian situation from the late 1980s through the 1990s. First, the political process approach arose in the last decades of the twentieth century in response to various functionalist, psychologistic, and utilitarian theories of protest and rebellion that emerged in the postwar period stripped of both historicist and Marxian elements, as well as any way of accounting for the semiotic dimension of social mobilization or any sense of the historical contingency of systemic processes of change, according to their critics.<sup>56</sup> At the center of these tensions lies the interplay of human agency and institutional change.

By foregrounding the interaction of agents in networks, questions of how political processes engender social movements intersect with questions rising from the second relevant tendency in social movement theory, namely “identity theories” of such movements.<sup>57</sup> Such theories emphasize the cultural context of agents active in social movements as central to both interpreting and explaining how such agents behave. Conflicts

are always conflicts of identity: actors attempt to push others to recognize something they themselves recognize; they struggle to attain what others deny. Every conflict which transgresses a system of shared rules concerning the distribution of material or symbolic resources is a conflict of identity. The central question is why has the theme of identity become such a central issue?<sup>58</sup>

Bringing political process and identity models of social movements together means contextualizing political processes in relation to the figurations of historical situations that agents express in order to understand how such movements attempt to change them.<sup>59</sup> Such contextualization begins with identifying two initial conditions of political processes of social movements present in all known historical situations in which movements form:<sup>60</sup>

- changes in political opportunities, which disorganize a previously stable (institutionally secure) political field; and
- a perceptual shift mobilizing a critical mass of oppositionists in such a destabilized political field.

We can now apply this “identity oriented political process model” of social movements to situations of institutional disintegration of political orders. Splits at the top fire perceptual shifts among “outsiders” and trigger the formation of social movements and, by extension, revolutionary processes. Here, use of framing techniques, control of media instruments, access to various audiences, and orchestration of political spectacles—rallies, demonstrations, protests—mediates the course of events, all of which must be historically contextualized.<sup>61</sup> Agents evading, challenging, and defending established political institutions frame processes of mobilization to themselves, to their opponents, and to larger audiences by bringing processes of mediation into play.<sup>62</sup> At this point, representations of political support—such as perceived views among segments of the “Russian people” (*narod*) at the end of the 1980s—may become “virtual” figures in a social movement.<sup>63</sup> Such representations link groups in networks through patterns of identification and interest.

The social geography of networks (mapped in terms of their internal patterns of social closure, their spatiotemporal extensiveness, and their degree of enmeshing in vertical lines of power and status) figures centrally in how the struggle for position feeds back into secular patterns of political change. As we shall see, the ability of Moscow networks to successfully “steer” this complex process figured centrally in the history of Soviet institutional breakdown and the subsequent long interregnum that followed. As polarization and breakdown of authority deepened at the top of the Soviet party-state, the complexity of network interactions increased rapidly. Institutional cohesion thus buckled as organizational controls waned and the fluidity of the situation accelerated in chaotic ways. The “tipping point” into a revolutionary situation appears here retrospectively as the full disintegration of the Soviet party-state as an institutional order during the failed coup of August 19–21, 1991. And with full institutional disintegration, a full chaotic state arrived, determined by the contingent, processual ensemble of a staggering array of factors.<sup>64</sup>

One way of mapping political agency in this chaotic situation is to explain how habitus constrained or “bounded” behavior in relation to widely shared figurations—stories of what it meant to be a Russian—among agents living through such a turbulent experience. The political process of Soviet institutional disintegration here steered the reorientation of habitus to the figurations of political entrepreneurs attempting to organize political alternatives as “proto-institutions.” In reconstructing these developmental sequences, we

face the twofold task of first tracing how agents framed the experience of state breakdown as they struggled to influence the course of events, and then integrating agentic perspectives into analyses of changing patterns of social closure, latent network resources, and habitus in key institutional domains undergoing disintegration.<sup>65</sup>

Orienting the selection of evidence along two main analytic lines—a change in the array of prior, institutionally stable, political opportunities, and a perceptual shift favoring rebellion—frames the analysis, which can then be contextualized by interpreting identities and their figurations.<sup>66</sup> But that is all it can do. In this sense, a political process approach contextualized in terms of specific historical identities and their figurations maps an initial strategy for going about the reconstruction of how a relatively stable political order might unravel, rather than a predictive theory. It represents a Weberian “ideal type” model par excellence.<sup>67</sup>

Indeed, the identity oriented political process model remains preliminary, as the identification of two necessary conditions for social mobilization to be possible at all is in no way sufficient for explaining either its onset or its subsequent development into a political revolution proper. To do this, the model requires additional analysis of the historically unique conditions in which political revolutions mature, including tracking the contingent relation between agency and historical circumstance through the chaos institutional disintegration begets.

## **Mapping Perceptual Shifts in Russian Political Processes**

Once a political order tips over into the chaos of institutional disintegration, the contingent play of political entrepreneurs and their immediate networks emerge as the causal locus of the revolutionary process. Such an assumption follows from comparative history, as in all known historical situations, some embedded network, or array of networks, emerged out of such processes as the center of some new institution-building project. How agents disposed to act in particular ways and situated in particular networks adjust and improvise in the face of this contingency are thus assumed to eventually settle the outcome, in the sense of stabilizing the formation of some new political order. Perceptual shifts here steer the ways networks both mobilize material resources and orchestrate symbolic displays of power through spectacles of political representation. And analysis of such displays requires accounting for the “double narrativity” of social processes: how the observer frames events in social-scientific terms, while at the same time mapping agentic representations



of these same events into the disintegration and eventual reformation of political institutions over time.<sup>68</sup>

How, then, do we organize “interpreting” the double narrativity of semiotic orders and the “meaning” of signs and representations as agents adjust and improvise in relation to the course of events? A whole range of supplementary interpretive strategies may serve here, ranging from the phenomenological analysis of interaction, to the content analysis of texts, to the genealogical analysis of discursive genres, to the objectivistic analysis of interests as “channels” of agency, and the signs and representations deployed to express and disguise them.<sup>69</sup> Relations between elites and grass roots, on the one hand, and status and class distinctions, on the other, can easily mislead, as a grass roots may appear relatively high in status at the outset of political mobilization and then suffer collapse in economic terms, as in Russia between 1988 and the mid-1990s. Indeed, more initially passive groups may quickly move to the center of political events, with consequences central to grasping the process of change.

The concept of habitus proves crucial here for mapping who “leads” and who “follows” in periods of institutional disintegration. Habitus theorizes behavioral contexts as apparently “given” due to socialization and routine. What happens, then, if institutions disintegrate, if habitually expected routines of getting by and getting along collapse? In effect, the “game” is destroyed because its institutional parameters disintegrate.

In the Soviet Union between Spring 1989 and December 1991, habitual behaviors such as deferring to the Communist Party leadership disintegrated. At some point, agents in Moscow ceased having to worry about “voting” for the CPSU in order to keep their job, attending Party meetings, and so forth. Once a critical mass of people realized they could vote against Communist Party candidates in elections and defy apparat directives in other ways, the Soviet state rapidly disintegrated, that is, disintegrated as a set of political institutions obligatory in everyday life.

Although some Russians may have initially reacted to such institutional disintegration with elation, many others responded only at length, and then with great distress, to this very disintegration. The initial period of denial Bourdieu called “the hysteresis effect”—people continue to behave habitually as if the disintegrated institution is still there.<sup>70</sup> This is one of the reasons habitus is such a stabilizing force in social life. But the disintegration of institutions in fact leaves many individuals confused and highly susceptible to “movement entrepreneurs,” those who improvise stopgap solutions in the form of shifting network arrangements to manage the generalized social distress caused by institutional disintegration.

In such situations, those few figures who manage to steer improvised networks that establish alternative behaviors as obligatory begin to spontaneously engineer new, successor institutions by “capturing” habitus and reorienting it in altered directions. This is what happens in a political revolution: the disintegration of previous political institutions generates a chaotic situation, which persists until some networks manage to reestablish alternative, proto-institutions and then consolidate them as such, thus capturing disoriented persons in webs of alternative practices that consolidate as “habituation” of a critical mass of the population to new behavioral contexts. Eventually, this process generates minimally stable alternative political institutions. The whole period in Russia between August 1991 and Putin’s assumption of the presidency on December 31, 1999 tracks a very painful process of reinstitutionalization of just such a political establishment.

At times, the concept of interest as a stereotype of disposition and motivation for bracketing interpretive difficulties can be deployed here, in line with precepts used routinely in a broad range of sociological schools.<sup>71</sup> Assuming, for instance, that figures like Mikhail Gorbachev had interests in controlling high political offices in the revolutionary situation that emerged in late-Soviet Russia seems straightforward enough. More “entrepreneurial,” proto-institutional behavior, however, demands broadening interpretive frameworks to account for the genesis and developmental history of patterns of networking that appear highly “risky” in relation to disintegrating institutions.

Recognition of the possibility that agents may risk “social death” in relation to extant institutions needs here to be foregrounded. For Bourdieu, social death entails refusal to play the game as institutionalized, as developed in his analysis of artists and novelists in the cultural field of nineteenth- and twentieth-century France, and his conception of the latter as “the economic world reversed.”<sup>72</sup> The apparent “irrationality” of behavior in such fields arises from any number of sources, from the reifications of the sociological observer herself to a whole range of agentic dispositions.<sup>73</sup> The possibility of risking social death is homologous in Bourdieu to notions like transcendence, moral responsibility, and ethical principle in a large variety of social thinkers who reject a strictly strategic-determinist vision of human nature. Take Jürgen Habermas’ conception of “communicative action,” activity oriented to following the unfolding dialectic of argument and its implicit truths for its own sake, regardless of strategic consequences.<sup>74</sup> To pursue the imperative of truth in settings strategically subordinated to maintenance of a field of power, such as the Soviet Academy of Sciences for most of the Soviet period, is to risk social death in this field, as many dissident Soviet scientists found out.

Bourdieu thus built an escape valve into his otherwise relentless focus on strategies, stakes, and interests in social life by differentiating between

economic and symbolic interests, recasting Weber's distinction between material and ideal interests in order to emphasize that symbols are emergent properties of "reality" and thus are "materially" efficacious in their own right.<sup>75</sup> Economic interests concern the need of agents for economic goods and organizational resources in order to get by and get along in particular institutional contexts. Symbolic interests concern the need of agents for a minimal degree of continuity between individual identity and social rules of the game as a requisite of getting by and getting along within given institutional orders.<sup>76</sup> The question of whether a symbolic interest manifests largely as habitual conformity, as strategic positioning in a field, or as an occasional proclivity to risk social death in disregard of immediate strategic considerations remains empirical. A willingness to risk social death, for instance, figured prominently in shaping the reputation of Brezhnev-era Soviet dissidents who survived repression and ended-up willy-nilly as moral authorities in the field of *intelligentsia* politics in the early days of perestroika—figures such as Andrei Sakharov, the dissident physicist and human-rights activist who emerged from internal exile as a virtual saint of pro-democracy activists in the late 1980s.<sup>77</sup>

All of this sets up the mapping of material and symbolic interests onto networks and institutional fields. In doing so, common terms applied to Western market societies, namely, cultural and social capital can be generalized to more status-oriented societies by framing them as subtypes of broader categories of "assets." Conceptualizing social and cultural capital as subtypes of cultural and social assets generalizes this typology by historicizing their range of applicability. The terms cultural and social assets not only aid recognition of sometimes highly misrecognized forms of power in circumstances where markets are either absent or secondary. They also enable the adaptation of concepts formed in a contemporary market context to nonmarket situations like the Soviet order, what Max Weber called status-oriented social worlds.<sup>78</sup> When combined with the above considerations on the explanatory limitations of the identity oriented political process model of social movements, such adaptation leads directly to the trajectory improvisation model of political revolution.

## **The Trajectory Improvisation Model of Political Revolution**

In pursuing economic and organizational resources or engaging in political activities, agents depend on their extant social ties and rely on accumulated skills and embodied mastery of local habits, customs, and traditions in realizing any implicit (*habitus* generated) or explicit (deliberately formulated) course of action. Strategic agency is thus socially embedded in terms of its "external" (positional) expression in networks and social roles, and its "internal" (bodily)

expression in habitus and deliberation. Social and cultural assets situate such agency in strategic relation to negotiated trajectories through social space.

The concepts of cultural and social assets adapt a conventional economic conception of capital, namely, capital as a property asset secured by custom or law, to map assets or advantages that cannot be fully alienated (fully disembodied) through either customary or market exchange.<sup>79</sup> So long as agents are disposed or motivated to play a given social game by its implicit or explicit rules, the concepts of social and cultural assets make intelligible the strategic options available to situated agents at particular points along such trajectories.

A skill embodied as habitus, as disposition, remains inscribed on the body, exemplifying cultural assets. Such assets are either certified in various emblems of professional competence such as tertiary degrees; or affirmed by more arbitrary distinctions eliciting deference to signs of prominence in the arts, letters, or sciences; or both. By contrast, social assets map tangible advantages deriving from degrees of relative access to webs of connections such as “old boy” networks socially closed to outsiders. The insider–outsider boundaries of networks arise from nontransferable shared experiences and the cachet of mutual recognition and identity. A “subspecies” of social assets particularly significant for the analysis of Soviet-type societies—political assets—delineates control of, or access to, positions in a party or state (or party-state) hierarchy as well as the authority wielded by “charismatic” political figures among followers and admirers.<sup>80</sup>

Where social space remains institutionally stable, the typology of assets allows us to conceptualize pursuit of economic and symbolic interests as a strategic disposition to maximize assets by striving to attain, maintain, or enhance institutionally secure positions, with agents striving to convert various assets one to another in pursuit of this end. The typology of assets thus gives rise immediately to the conversion problem, the problem of parlaying economic into cultural resources, cultural into social resources, social into political resources, and so forth as situations change over time and particular assets undergo “devaluation.”<sup>81</sup>

As should be clear from the limit case discussed above, the possibility that human beings may diverge from expected patterns of habitus and motivation implicit in the typology of assets by downgrading some strategic considerations or even risking social death at various times should be recognized. Use of the typology of assets to analyze human behavior thus in no way entails acceptance of the proposition that agents’ professed beliefs, statements, and identifications can be reduced simply to their strategic utility for deploying some potential asset in a given field at a given point in time. Someone may well profess Christianity or communism for strategic purposes, but absent