

Carbon and cultural heritage

The politics of history and the economics of rent

by Ilya Kalinin illustration Ragni Svensson

“The purpose of your visit?”

“An ethnographic expedition.”

“Right. You’re looking for oil?”

“Not exactly. I’m looking for folklore.”

The exchange offered above as an epigraph is taken from a famous Soviet film comedy, Leonid Gaidai’s *Kidnapping, Caucasian Style* (1966). The speakers are the manager of a provincial hotel and the film’s main hero, Shurik, a student doing ethnographic fieldwork in the Caucasus. Apart from its obvious humor, this characteristic dialog ironically reveals a recurring pattern in relations between the imperial metropolis and the nationally distinct periphery. The dialog illustrates both the character and the function of these relations in concise motifs. The center is not only the focal point of political power, but also a locus of knowledge about the periphery, while the periphery is a source of natural resources necessary to the center. However, my interest here is not in imperial or postcolonial studies, but in the comic effect these lines produce, as if by accident, through the semantic rhyme between oil and folklore – a cultural legacy which constitutes the historical past in the form most tangible to, and representative of, the present. What worked as a completely unobtrusive verbal gag in 1966 has now, in the post-Soviet situation, become a more fundamental metaphor, organizing into a single construction two seemingly unrelated elements: culture (more precisely, the historical past) and natural resources.¹

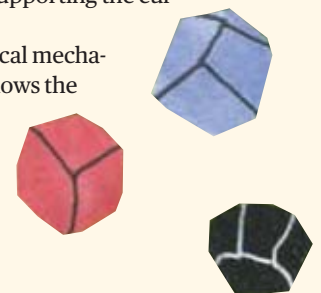
The focus of the present essay is the deployment of this metaphor in the official patriotic discourse of identity dominant in contemporary Russia, in which the sphere of cultural values is perceived, conceived, and described in terms of natural resources. Moreover, insofar as its functioning depends on the reigning system of ideas, the metaphor relies on the same mechanisms that determine the foundations of an economy dependent on resource extraction. As a result, a structural homology emerges between the spheres of material, economic activity and immate-

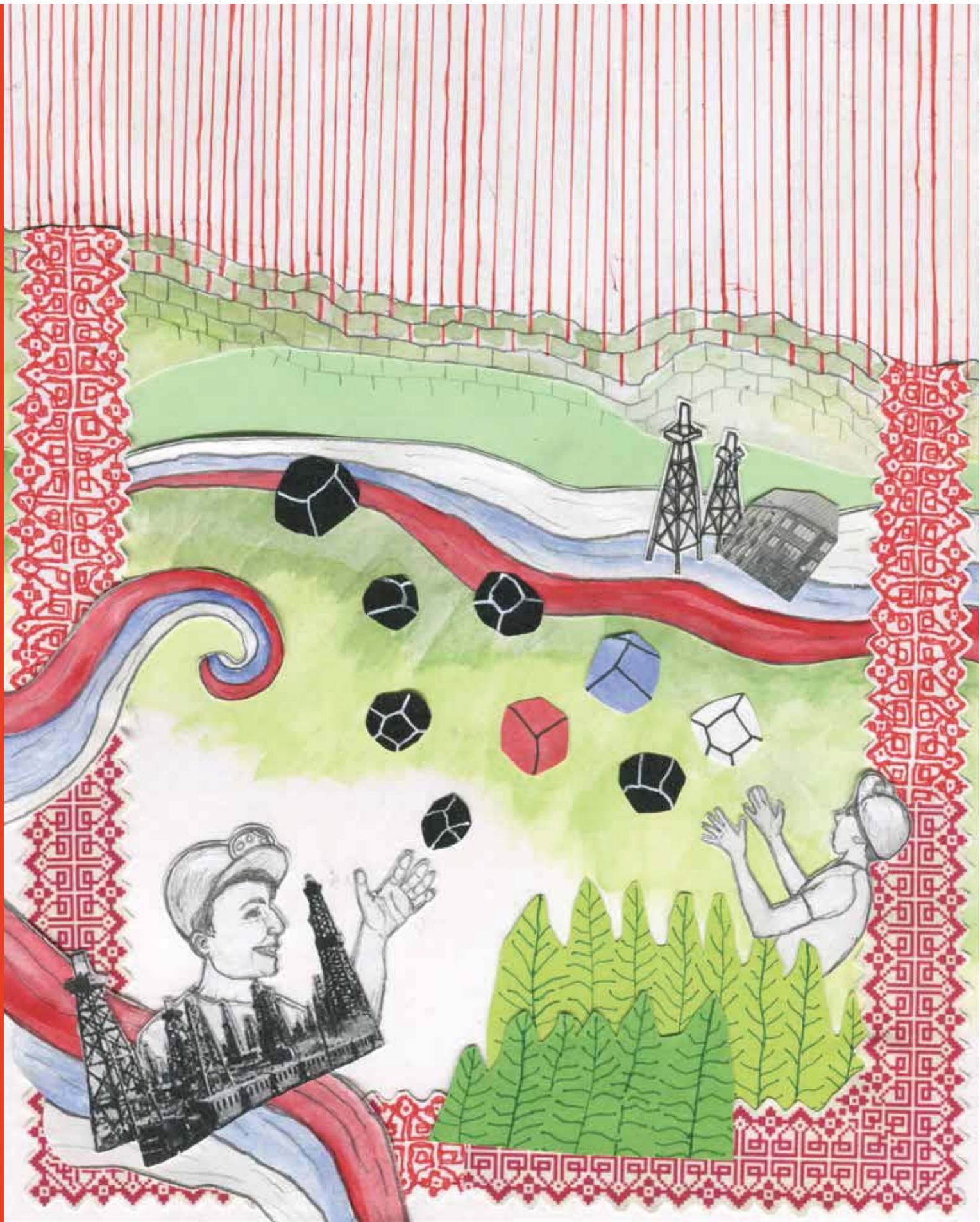
rial, cultural production in regard to relations between labor, commodities, capital, the role of the state, the legal structure, the level of monopolization, the degree of dependence on resources, and so on.²

In this article I will attempt to reveal the constant conceptual, metaphorical pattern that determines how the contemporary Russian politics of history and the normative policies of identity based upon it see their object, their tasks, and the means by which those tasks might be accomplished. At the same time, the conceptual metaphor which identifies the past with natural resources, and which forms the foundation of the official discourse under examination, can be explored beyond the limits of simple discourse analysis.

THE CONCEPTUAL FRAME in which the historical past is conceived as a resource for national and state construction – that is, for modernization³ – appears at a number of different levels. It can be found at the level of the Russian economy’s functioning, at the level of the political order, and at the level of elite interests, the reproduction of which depends on the maintenance of the given political order. In the present article, the economy based on the extraction of fossil fuels and other mineral resources, and the phenomenon of rent as one of the foundations of such an economy, provide a political-economic context for an analysis of the particular conceptualization of reality that is characteristic of official Russian historical discourse. The material I analyze derives primarily from the speeches of important government figures.⁴ However, the central arguments and rhetorical topoi I will be describing are characteristic of the entire discursive space of Russia, which is oriented towards supporting the current elite and its political course.

The particularity of any metaphorical mechanism consists in the way in which it allows the subjects of discourse to structure and generate reality, grasping it as something objective and external.⁵ Analyz-





ing such a mechanism permits us to reconstruct these processes, revealing how reality is discursively produced. Because the metaphor realizes the speaker's desire, it carries his fingerprints. In other words, the metaphor represents a certain form of evidence which allows us to postulate how the subject thinks and looks at things. By retracing in reverse order the chain of symbolic equivalences through which the metaphor endows the subject with discursive power over the reality he produces, we can approach the set of conscious and unconscious motifs that determine his image of the "objective" reality with which he identifies.

The concept of metaphor I am using here has implications far beyond those of a simple rhetorical device, even one that plays a significant role in organizing the space of official discourse in post-Soviet Russia. My task is to discuss the fundamental similarities in the functioning of spheres that would seem to be absolutely distinct – or, more precisely, the similarities in the collectively held conceptions of how these spheres function. This is why the equivalence between cultural heritage and natural resources captured in this metaphor is not so much a decorative poetic trope as a social-cultural symptom; it is more an economic than a rhetorical phenomenon. The question may arise here as to what this symptom expresses – that is, what "objective reality" of material or immaterial production it expresses, or what perception of these productive processes on the part of those involved in them (whether as producers or consumers of the finished product). However, from the perspective that interests me, this question is largely irrelevant.

The historical past as a resource

A noteworthy example of this political-economic symptom is a small text titled "Global Shame and Disgrace", published in the fall of 2012 in the financial newspaper *Vzgliad* ("View").⁶ Its author, Olga Tukhanina, who calls herself a "provincial housewife", originally published the text on her personal website under the more eloquent title "The Historical Klondike".⁷ The tone of the piece makes it impossible to decide whether it is a parody written by a liberal who wants to expose the paranoia of patriots, or a direct expression of patriotic paranoia masked as a liberal parody. But this is not important. What matters is that this text insistently, obsessively reproduces the symptomatic association of natural resources with the historical past. And with this as its central metaphor, the article's basic thesis appears in an alarmist tone:

The world has a debt to us. And the debt is such that it can't be repaid even over several centuries. For, in the twentieth century, the United States and Europe stole all of Russia's victories and the goodness of life. The thieves must be punished, and justice must be done.

The author goes on to explain how this historical injustice can be redressed:

History today is – how can one put it? – something like a natural resource. We don't just have mineral deposits and gas and oil around us, deep in the earth. Under our

feet there is the entire ocean of our thousand-year history. The upper layers are literally oozing with it.⁸

Many a recognized master of political metaphor – such as Vladislav Surkov, Gleb Pavlovsky, Sergei Kurekhin, or Aleksandr Prokhanov – might envy the author's emotional frankness. It is no surprise at all that, immediately after identifying the historical past with mineral and fossil fuel deposits, the author encounters the problem of who should have the right to profit from their extraction.

This example of "naïve" discourse circulating in the Internet is a good demonstration of how Russia's historical past is being transformed into the black gold of Russian history. The merit of Tukhanina's essay lies in the fact that it consistently moves through the entire metaphorical chain which represents, in a compressed form, the core of Russian historical (and more broadly, cultural) politics today. The hitch is that, in showing the metaphorical links in this chain, the author has no intention of problematizing them, but only makes the chain longer and more solid. The concerned housewife only needs to be consoled that others have long since "looked into this business". It has become a fixation both for the state and for those authorized to speak on its behalf.

The Russian oil corporation Rosneft, nationalized in every sense of the word, was able to stop what Tukhanina calls the "sly fellows" and "peddlers" of Russian oil in time by gobbling up the remains of the company Yukos, which had been destroyed after the arrest of M. Khodorkovsky. The future also belongs to another state corporation – "Rosistoriia", or "Russian History Ltd.", which will end the "orchestrated attacks" on the Russian past and finally establish control over this resource which is so important for Russian modernization.

ON SEPTEMBER 12, two days after the republication of Tukhanina's text in *Vzgliad*, Putin met with "public representatives" to discuss "the issue of the patriotic upbringing of youth". It remains to be ascertained whether one of the president's speechwriters is behind the "provincial housewife", or whether he merely read her text before sitting down to write the presidential address that opened this public meeting. In any case, the parallels are plain to see – both in the metaphorical symptom and in the paranoid-obsessive certainty that a threat is present:

As our own historical experience has also shown, cultural self-consciousness, spiritual and moral values, and ethical codes are a sphere of fierce competition, at times an object of open informational confrontation. I'd rather not say "aggression", but "confrontation" is precise – and it is, precisely, a sphere of well-orchestrated propagandistic attacks. And this is no phobia, I am not inventing anything here, this is how it really is. At the very minimum, it is a form of competitive struggle. Attempts to influence the worldview of entire peoples, striving to subject them to one's will and bind them to one's own system of values and ideas – this is an ab-

solute reality, just as much as the struggle for mineral resources that many countries encounter, including our own country.⁹

The fundamental political economy of state-corporate capitalism, trying to establish a political identity by the appeal to historical traditions of statehood and the national idea (“spiritual braces”, in Putin’s terms¹⁰), is quite eloquently revealed here in the sphere of historical politics, which is called upon to access the resources of the historical past that are necessary for the production of tradition and national identity. By that production I mean the conscious efforts of the political elite and the state structures under its control to impart a specific historical consciousness to society by controlling the production and circulation of historical knowledge. The appropriated and thoroughly interpreted past allows the political elite to base its legitimacy not only on electoral results, but also on the right of inheritance, on an image of historical choice, rooted in tradition. In one way or another, this kind of politics instrumentalizes historical knowledge, using it as an argument both in internal political struggle and in foreign policy.

HOWEVER, THERE IS ANOTHER possible perspective from which to describe these deformations of historical knowledge and collective representation of the historical past – a perspective of political manipulation. In addition to political instrumentalization, which is inscribed in the logic of reproducing the elite in power, historical politics (and more broadly, all cultural politics) has an economic dimension – and one that goes beyond the financial costs and infrastructure necessary for politically instrumentalizing the past. I am referring to the mechanisms for capitalizing the historical past as state-sanctioned knowledge about this past; that is, the mechanisms of symbolic exchange between those who form ideas about the historical past and those who use them, and the mechanisms of access to the production of those ideas and the extraction of some form of profit from their distribution.

Switching from a discussion of historical politics to the language of economics can reveal a political-economic substrate, more fundamental than mere current events, which determines how the historical past circulates in the present. This substrate is revealed most clearly in the symptomatic metaphor (or symptomatic discourse that uses the metaphor) of limited natural resources, which refers sometimes to conscious and sometimes to unconscious ways of perceiving the historical field and to the procedures necessary for extracting relevant meanings for the present.

The metaphor emerges as a conceptual symptom of state control over the production of cultural values and historical ideas. The symptom’s structure is based on the logic of the development and controlled distribution of natural resources. In

this sense, the production and dissemination of historical ideas can be described by the economic model of a diversified holding company in which the mother company (in this case, the state) places orders and issues licenses for the development of historical resources by other companies (the media, the Academy of Sciences, the school system, institutions of high and mass culture, and NGOs close to the state, such as the Geographic, Historical, and Military History Societies). In return, these institutions pay for the right to use the resources and to distribute goods produced from them. The form of payment is their political loyalty and the ideological characteristics of the products they supply.

The expansion of the capitalist economy into the sphere of culture has long been recognized.¹¹ The production of immaterial goods is steadily growing, crowding industrial labor into the margins. One of the leading theoreticians of cognitive capitalism describes this transition to a “knowledge economy” thus: “[T]he products of social activity are no longer chiefly crystallized labor but crystallized knowledge”.¹² However, when it comes to the production of politically useful historical knowledge, the issue is less the expansion of production and more the expansion of the resource base.

RUSSIAN HISTORICAL POLITICS is realized through a “knowledge economy” in which the product of public activity (a specific kind of state patriotism and national identity based on the “continuous tradition of Russian statehood”¹³) is not crystallized knowledge but a crystallized resource – that is, the historical past capitalized for the benefit of the ruling elite. Moreover, the goal of this state mobilization of the past is not to extract economic profit, as in the “capitalist mobilization of culture”,¹⁴ but to invent tradition, national unity, and political loyalty. The past contains within its depths “historical Russia” and “the unity of Russia’s historical destiny”, and serves as a natural resource for the invented tradition of “united Russia”. The providential meaning of this concept consists in Russia’s role as the “civilizing core” around which other peoples have gathered, and in the development of the surrounding resources, the most important of which has been, and still is, land: “The settlement of huge territories, which occupies the entire history of Russia, has been the collective endeavor of many peoples”.¹⁵

The historical past as a limited resource

The perception of the historical past as a resource automatically activates a chain of assumptions, the traces of which can be found in the speeches of the state’s leaders and which filter through the discursive capillaries of the official politics of history. These assumptions include the following:

1. *Work on the past has an instrumental character* because the production of historical ideas serves more goals than mere historical knowledge. Ulterior goals may be the confirmation of state sovereignty, the unity of the nation, the political legitimacy of the ruling elite, and so on. Thus the past, appearing as a horizon of symbolic legitimization for the elite and its political program, turns out to be the only plan for the future:



Essentially, we ourselves and our future are the result of the Great Patriotic War. [This is] the future of our children.¹⁶

Schools and universities, essentially, create new citizens, forming their consciousness. They pass on the memory of generations, values and culture, and they determine the ideas and vision of the future that will move society forward through several decades (Vladimir Putin).¹⁷

2. *History can only have one indivisible subject* – namely the people unified by a strong state – and therefore only a representative of the state can grant the right of access to the riches of the national past. Only the state has the monopolistic privilege of controlling the use of this resource. Attempts at unsanctioned access are blocked as falsifications of history and informational warfare:

Of course, in every science there can be different approaches, but this is probably also because there are fewer and fewer people who participated in the war, who saw it with their own eyes. And so this vacuum, this gap – either through ignorance or even intentionally – is filled by a new way of seeing and understanding the war.... Essentially, we find ourselves in a situation where we must defend the historical truth or even prove facts again that seemed absolutely self-evident not so long ago. This is difficult, and sometimes, one must admit, it is even abhorrent. But it must be done ... we will not allow anyone to raise doubts about the heroic achievement of our people.¹⁸

3. *The historical past is understood as a substance* that fulfills the task of patriotic education, like a museum; historical knowledge is not produced, but inherited, and used to support political stability. At the same time, national identity today has become completely synonymous with such an inherited tradition, which is conceived as a stable and unchanging set of values that must be preserved and protected against any transformation.

The preservation of identity and modernization (development) are understood as two intersecting processes taking place at different levels of the social mechanism. Identity is believed to lie at the deepest foundation of social life, as its core, rooted in the past and immutable (another instance of the symptomatic metaphor of mineral resources located in the depths of the earth). Modernization meanwhile emerges as a technological, infrastructural, and administrative upgrade of a maternal foundation defined as “national and spiritual identity”. Yet modernization cannot and must not touch identity. Connecting identity with modernization turns out to be impossible, since that would make identity mutable, flexible, and multiple; that is, identity would function not according to the

substantive logic of a resource, but according to the symbolic, constructive logic of capital. Identity and modernization are thus ordered in accordance with the reductive formula of dogmatic Marxism as base and superstructure. The base contains the resources (in the economy, the mineral resources; in cultural politics, the resources of the national tradition) and the superstructure is realized through the modernization of technology for the exploitation of those resources. In other words, modernization serves only to perfect the mechanisms for explicating the fixed and immutable depths of identity. It is a closed system, excluding any fundamental changes:

We must completely support institutions that bear traditional values and have historically proven their ability to pass them on from generation to generation.¹⁹

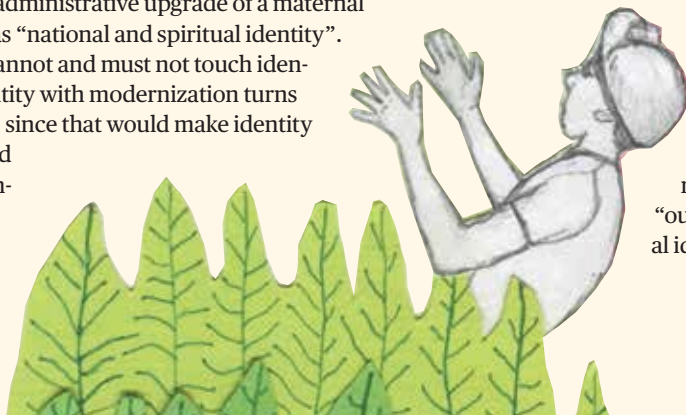
We must not only persist in our development but also preserve our national and spiritual identity, lest we lose ourselves as a nation. We must be and remain Russia.²⁰

4. *The rhetoric of a struggle for symbolic resources*, in which the state strives to reduce discussion of the historical past, reproduces the logic of a zero-sum game in which not everyone can win. Equated with inherited tradition and immutable identity, the historical past is perceived as a perhaps large, but limited quantity – i.e., as a limited resource – which is not enough for everyone. In this model, the past appears not as an effect of historical knowledge and experience, but as the totality of a historical legacy. And since it is our inheritance, it is essential that we protect it from others – illegitimate heirs who might try to take advantage of it without regard for “state interest” and “Russian prestige”.²¹

It is very important to be more than just interested in history – we must know it.... It is necessary first of all for our future, and hence for the future of our country. We must preserve historical memory – the memory of all of us.²²

The competition for resources is growing ever fiercer. And I want to assure you, respected colleagues, and emphasize: this is not only competition for metals, oil, and gas, but primarily for human resources, for the intellect. Who will burst forward, and who will remain an outsider and inevitably lose their independence, depends not only on the economic potential, but primarily on the will of each nation, on its inner energy, on what Lev Gumilev called passionarity.²³

The key mechanism in this great industry of the production, preservation, and dissemination of historical ideas consists in maintaining control over access to the resource of the historical past (conceived as “our historical memory”, “national and spiritual identity”, “traditional values”, or “the inner



energy of the nation”). The historical past must be capitalized exclusively for the purpose of national and state construction, the agenda of which is completely controlled by the ruling elite. By this logic, the future depends on memory of the past, and modernization depends on the “inner energy” that is condensed in tradition. To be victorious in international competition, one must understand the scarcity not only of natural resources but of symbolic resources as well. These must also come under the control of the state. Publishing a mandatory history textbook for the schools, a single historical doctrine, is an example of precisely this logic of struggle for the past as a limited resource.

THE NATIONALIZATION of the historical past by the state (or its privatization by the elite) would seem to contradict the unexchangeable character of the object itself. How can one trade what belongs to everyone? What cannot be traded on the market cannot be capitalized. It has no owner, no value, no element that can become someone’s property. In this respect, the historical past and memory of the past are a public heritage which cannot be appropriated by the state or by any group that speaks and acts on the state’s behalf. However, the unexchangeable, non-capitalist character of this immaterial object may be deformed if someone manages to co-opt it and establish a right to control access to it. In such a case, even though those privileged to extract a profit from the resource have invested no labor of their own, the resource is now capitalized, transformed into a commodity that brings income exclusively through the distribution of licenses granting access to it. This dialectic of the capitalization of the public heritage has been extensively described by André Gorz:

Things that are not produced by human labor and, to an even greater degree, that are not producible, together with those things that are not exchangeable or intended for exchange, have no “value” in the economic sense. This includes, for example, natural resources, which cannot be produced, cannot be made into property, cannot be “valued”. In principle, this is also true of any common public heritage (for example, the cultural heritage) which cannot be distributed among property holders, cannot be exchanged for something else. Of course,

one can take possession of natural resources or public cultural legacies.

It is simple enough to privatize access to them, declaring one’s right to that access. In this case, the public heritage turns into a pseudo-commodity, guaranteeing an income to those who sell access to it.²⁴



The irony of the capitalization of the historical past and cultural memory in Russia is that they are being privatized by the elite under the guise of nationalization. The resource cannot be produced, but its distribution can be controlled, and this “pseudo-commodity” can be exchanged for the political loyalty of those striving to remain or to become a part of the ruling elite. Strictly speaking, access rights to the historical past serve not only as a commodity exchanged on the market of political loyalty, but also as a kind of glue holding the ruling coalition together. Moreover, control over the privatized past not only promotes the stability of the dominant coalition, but also allows it to dominate the market for historical ideas.

This hegemony over collective historical ideas – at the level of their production (the academy and the upper school system) and at the level of the infrastructure for their distribution (from the schools to television) – forces society to consume precisely what is brought into the market in the form of certified state knowledge, labeled with the trademarks “historical truth” and “our memory” to give the product a symbolic surplus value.

The same thing happens in the capitalist sphere of immaterial production: not only commodities are consumed, but also brand names that confer a special identity on their bearers by symbolizing a style of behavior and way of life (indeed, the brand name constitutes the chief value of the commodity). Of course, in the case of historical politics, the goal is not the production of economic value, but the reproduction of political domination. By producing and consuming certified historical ideas, institutions and individuals acquire the corresponding national, cultural, and political identity, which refers back to the brand name – in this case, that of the Russian state, “historical Russia”, demonstrating the historical choice of that identity again and again:

For the rebirth of national consciousness we need to unite the historical eras and return to an understanding of the simple truth that Russia did not begin in 1917, nor even in 1991: we have a single, uninterrupted thousand-year history, and relying on this gives us our inner strength and the meaning of our national development.²⁵

Any attempt to form a different understanding of history or to suggest different ways of revitalizing national consciousness is considered an internal threat motivated by something other than intellectual interest.

Rent and the past

The effort to establish monopolistic control over access to the historical past²⁶ and to extract political and administrative dividends from this control can be described as the economic phenomenon of rent – that is, income regularly received from capital, land, property, and not connected with entrepreneurial activity.

The mechanism by which rent is received always results from a conjuncture of economic interest and political power, since it requires maintaining control over access to different types of resources. Larger or smaller social groups may possess such

control, but in every case it is political power that ensures the privilege of such possession, and in return that power receives the support of those whose rents it protects. (In volumes 3 and 4 of *Capital*, in analyzing land ownership and ground-rent, Marx describes in detail how the political and economic orders are coordinated.) As regular income that does not require the direct investment of labor, rent is a highly attractive mode of earning money.

IN CONTRAST TO INCOME received on the competitive market, rent income is in one way or another always connected to limits on access to the resource concerned, and thus it is more predictable, persisting as long as political power guarantees privileged access. The current Russian state-corporate economic system involves a political elite that has succeeded in monopolizing not only power, but also most property. As a result, the task of reproducing the monopoly on access to economic resources coincides with the task of reproducing power. The same coupling of power and property obtains in regard to the attempt to monopolize access to the historical past and turn a common heritage into a symbolic resource for the reproduction of the elite.

Russia is a “natural state” as described by North, Wallis, and Weingast (2009) in their analysis of the way different regimes organize access to resources. They classify social orders in two types: natural states, in which access to resources is restricted, and open access societies.²⁷ Open access societies function on the basis of competition initiated by open access to different types of resources (land, labor, capital, and organizations). In a state with restricted access, “the political system ... manipulates the economic system to produce rents that then secure political order”.²⁸ Such states are stable because access to privileges and rents stimulates the reproduction of the coalition of elites, who mutually agree to recognize one another’s privileges in order to avoid the losses that might result from a struggle to redistribute access to the productive resources. The transition to open access is blocked for the same reason, since the resulting political struggle and economic competition would inevitably destabilize the dominant elite, undermining its stable reproduction.²⁹

This self-reproducing mechanism of rent and spheres of limited access is not only manifested in the manipulation of the economy by the political system, however. Political stability based on the control of privileges distributed within the elite must also be supported by manipulation in the sphere of symbolic production. In a state forced to rebuild, complete, or revise the structure of political and national identity, a special importance accrues to the production of historical ideas and, accordingly, to the historical past, which is used as a resource for that production. Inscribed in the same logic of stabilizing the elite, the state’s historical politics emerges as an instrument for controlling access to the resource and generating political rent – that is, generating loyalty in those who receive such privileged access (and with it the license to produce historical knowledge) and support among the masses who consume the licensed state product.

In his analysis of the political-economic ethos of the bourgeoisie, Immanuel Wallerstein highlights the phenomenon of rent as

an opening for the intrusion of political will into the principles that regulate economic activity (in fact, Wallerstein finds in rent a bourgeois aspiration to imitate a traditionally aristocratic economic mode). His broader understanding of the resources that allow the collection of rent provides further justification for applying the concept of rent to the historical past. In Wallerstein’s words, “rent is the income that derives from control of some concrete spatio-temporal reality which cannot be said to have been in some sense the creation of the owner or the result of his own work (even his work as an entrepreneur)”.³⁰

We can recognize the historical past of Russia as such a “spatio-temporal reality” over which control is established to generate rents although it in no way results from the labor of its owner. “Historical Russia”, in the view of the Russian political elite, belongs only to those who are prepared to produce historical knowledge in the framework of official historical politics, that is, those who recognize the right of the elite to license that production. In other words, “the single, uninterrupted thousand-year history of Russia”³¹ (Putin) and “our memory”³² (Medvedev) belong only to the true patriots of Russia, and since only Russia’s political elite issues licenses for such patriotism, it is not difficult to deduce who really owns the trademark. Indeed, many would like the counterfeiting of this brand to be prosecuted under Russian law. Of course, the ownership referred to here is only a claim made by the dominant elite, but to the degree that this claim is supported by political power, it is a reality, since a high degree of control over the most powerful institutions for the production of historical ideas and the channels for its dissemination is already established. At the same time, the intensity of historical politics and the attention that the political elite gives to questions of history are growing, which suggests that the elite still considers the current level of control insufficient.

IN THIS SENSE, the income from ownership of one resource or another does in fact require a certain kind of labor – not to produce the resource, but to manage it. And since the claim of monopolistic control is always accompanied by the threat of losing it – and by a particular sensitivity to the imagined possibility of such a threat – the labor of efforts to maintain control takes on an increasingly intensive character. The logic of maintaining control is suicidal and wasteful: however much control is already established, ever-greater efforts are necessary to preserve it. In the end, the costs of maintaining control begin to exceed the profits derived from monopolistic access. It is entirely possible that precisely this logic will reveal the limits of the current political-economic system’s stability.

But let us return to the historical past. A certain kind of “work” is necessary, after all, in order to receive rents. This effort is not only related to maintaining the required level of control, that is, limiting access to various privileges and rents. As Wallerstein writes, “rent = the past, and rent = political power”.³³ In other words, rent demands a guarantee from political power that control will be maintained, and rent can only be collected, to the benefit of a specific social group, because of work performed in the past, that is, by our ancestors. This past work can be com-

pared to the seizure or acquisition as private property of various assets (land, real estate, enterprises, stocks, and so on), which are then inherited by virtue of a right protected by the state. In the case of historical politics, the historical past is treated as such an asset – that is, as the totality of labor invested by our common ancestors, regardless of their social, confessional, cultural, ethnic, or political belonging. It is hardly possible to measure the proportion of the inheritance belonging to specific groups' descendants.

THE HISTORICAL PAST belongs to everyone. Even the elite that has taken on the role of its management affirms this fact in its rhetoric. However, verbal constructions such as “our past”, “our memory”, and “our legacy”, which suffuse the official discourse of historical politics, have not an inclusive but an exclusive character, which is related to the likewise totalizing yet exclusive construction “united Russia”. The right to call the common past “ours” belongs only to those who have been certified to speak on behalf of this past and to reveal its historical meaning. The two factors highlighted by Wallerstein as the foundation of rent turn out to be two sides of the same coin: income from rent derives from work done in the past, but political power is required in order to capitalize that work in the interests of a specific group. Historical politics is a mechanism for managing the past, that is, for performing certain procedures that make it possible to privatize the common past in the interests of the ruling elite while at the same time hiding its historical meaning: (1) the past is conceived as a natural resource over which the ruling elite must establish control; (2) limited access under that control effectively transforms the common inheritance into the private property of a specific group – the members of the elite and those who serve them; (3) once transformed into private property, the historical past is capitalized: it becomes an asset that allows the owners to collect political rent, both from those who produce certified historical knowledge and from those who consume it.

Organic resources and the technology of work on the past

There is a dimension to the metaphorical concept of “the historical past as a resource” which goes far beyond the limits of historical politics in contemporary Russia, and even beyond the limits of historical politics anywhere. This dimension is inscribed in the general type of rationality that lies at the foundation of the modern relationship to the past and is embodied not only in forms of cultural identification, but also in technological innovations. I am referring to the characteristically modern dialectic of tradition and modernization, the impetus into the future and the invention of antiquity, the transcendence of the past and its utilization, in which energy is extracted from the past to fuel progress. The industrial, economic, political, and social breakthrough of the modern age was tied to the modern appearance of technologies that made it possible to liberate the energy condensed in the past.

During most of human history, energy

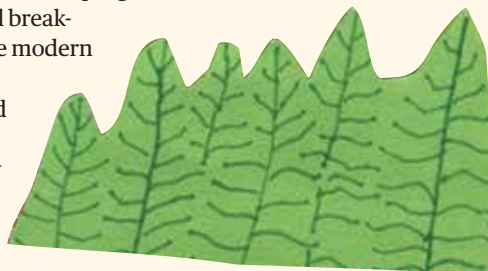
has been derived, in the main, from renewable natural resources, fed by the sun itself. Usable energy only accumulated over relatively short spans of time. The situation changed radically at the beginning of the nineteenth century:

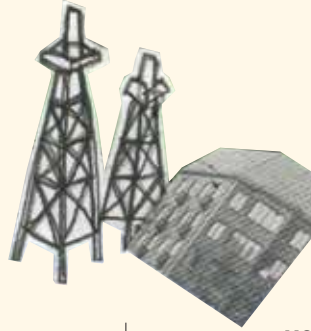
From around 1800, however, these organic supplies were steadily replaced with highly concentrated stores of buried solar energy, the deposits of carbon laid down 150 to 350 million years ago, when peat bog forests and marine organisms decayed in a watery, oxygen-deficient environment that interrupted the normal process for returning carbon to the atmosphere as carbon dioxide. Instead the decomposed biomass was compressed into the relatively rare but extraordinarily potent accumulations of coal and oil.³⁴

In his book *Carbon Democracy*, Timothy Mitchell describes the political metamorphoses of democratization and counter-democratization of the nineteenth through twenty-first centuries, revealing the connection between these processes and the characteristics of the dominant natural resources in the economic systems of each period. The technology of extracting coal and the infrastructure for transporting it made the world economy dependent on the labor power engaged in these fields, and this forced capital to make concessions to workers. The transition to new sources of energy gave big capital an opportunity for revenge, since the extraction and transportation of oil and gas required fewer people and made the infrastructure of fuel extraction and transportation more flexible and less dependent on the people working in those fields.³⁵ While the technological leap forward in the past two centuries depended on the development of technologies for turning the past, concentrated in natural resources, into energy, the political order based on those technologies depends in many ways on the ability to control access to the dominant resource of the given moment.

HOWEVER, WHILE THE TECHNOLOGICAL and economic modernization of the nineteenth century, based on the transition to an energy source accumulated over millions of years, led to a transformation of the political order, we must also note that this transformation took place simultaneously with a revolutionary change in attitudes to the historical past. The transition to coal, concealed in the depths of the earth, coincided with the age of Romanticism and its unprecedented interest in the historical past, in which sources of cultural identity were sought. The transition to the new source of energy, the enormous concentration of which was connected with the extended period of its accumulation, coincided with the emergence of the concept of “the historical and cultural heritage” – that is, the concentration of the past in monuments of material and non-material culture.

In both cases, the driving force was the possibility of extracting energy from these concentrated sources. Coal became an energy source as a result of





new technologies for extracting deep coal deposits and the invention of the steam engine, and the past thanks to the new cultural instrumentalization of the past in the formation of nations. Thus the process of modernization, including nation-building, was linked to the rise of new technologies for working with the past, both in the form of inherited natural resources from prehistoric times and in the form of a historical legacy unexpectedly acquired by descendants in search of a rational justification of their identity and the boundaries of their community.

IN THIS NEW HISTORICAL EPOCH, post-Soviet Russia – like many other Eastern European states that have had to rebuild their political identity while also dealing with an incomplete process of modernization during the formation of the nation – is in fact reproducing a situation from the age of Romanticism. The past must again supply answers to the questions posed by the present. The problem is that this present is different, and the questions addressed to the past in the epoch of the nation's birth, which are now resounding again in the Russian media, seem more and more anachronistic. Despite the universalist pathos, phrases such as “spiritual braces”, “the national will”, and our “single, uninterrupted thousand-year history” cannot conceal the private interests of the Russian ruling elite who stand behind them, compensating for the emptiness of quickly invented traditions with such rhetorical distillations, and the political weight of those who have taken on the responsibility of preserving and protecting “our memory”.

There is another difference that separates the current situation from the era of two hundred years ago – this one a political-economic distinction. In the early 19th century, while there was a fierce struggle over scarce mineral resources, there seemed to be enough historical “resources” for everyone – both for conservatives and for revolutionaries. Public discussions between these competing groups at times spilled out onto the barricades, while the state was only one of the players on the field, and hardly the most influential. Contemporary thought, however, is obsessed with the idea of limited resources. This obsession gave rise to efforts to control and restrict access to all available resources.

The irony is that this same obsession with the idea of the resource, which continues to be justified by means of the usual conceptions of limited material resources, plunges the economic order, and the political regime which supports it, into the model of a zero-sum game, obstructing the productive development of the common good. This is why the resource state always anticipates a shortage even in times of abundance, predicting the threat of a resource crisis, which it tries to forestall by tightening control and restricting access.³⁶ The same model is involved: oil, gas, “the will of the nation”, “historical memory”, “a thousand-year history” – all of these resources are defined ambivalently by official discourse. The discourse affirms the abundance of natural and cultural riches inherited from our ancestors, yet at the same time asserts the need to protect them from internal and external enemies, since global competition for resources (energy, human, and cultural) is described as an external threat that must

be resisted. And that resistance itself is seen as occurring not through an increase in welfare or the growth of capital, but through the maintenance of resources – more precisely, through fierce control over access to them.

MOREOVER, THE POSSIBILITY of a shortage which the state might not be able to overcome has other implications which reach beyond its negative aspects. To be more precise, the negative aspects of such a possibility spread in general to the economy, the national welfare, and the everyday lives of regular citizens, yet the political elite itself has learned to extract a profit from the constant threat of a resource crisis, including a crisis of symbolic resources.

The reproduction and exaggeration of this threat motivates the intensification of control and thus creates the opportunity for the further reproduction of the elite, relying on its privileged access to resources. The presence of a threat allows the elite immediately to put into action the discourse of national security, whether in reference to separatism, “manifestations of extremism”, social protests, or “attempts to falsify history”. The conceptual figure of the threat allows the elite not only to justify political consolidation and national unity, but also to privatize the profit from spheres placed under its control, namely the spheres recognized as “strategic to national security”.³⁷ It is clear that, in Russia, the processes and institutions for producing historical knowledge and working with the past also fall within the sphere of national security. ✖

references

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- 2 Simon Kordonsky has written on the structural isomorphism between the different spheres of a state that is organized like a corporation for the extraction of natural resources: “The resource-based organization of the state is fractal; that is, on any given level it reproduces its basic structural characteristics. Each fragment of the state structure, including the people, is a resource for another fragment. And the state gives each of these fragments the ‘task’ of being a resource. In other words, they must be useful from the perspective of achieving the great goal of the state, which can be concretized even at the level of an individual person.” S. Kordonsky, *Resursnoe gosudarstvo* [Resource state] (Moscow: Regnum, 2007), 14.
- 3 On the use of the historical past as the current horizon of modernization, see I. Kalinin, “Nostalgic Modernization: The Soviet Past as a ‘Historical Horizon’”, *Slavonica* 17 no. 2 (2011): 156-167.
- 4 These are primarily presidential addresses to the Federal Assembly and

other speeches directly related to the themes of patriotic education, nation-building, and the memory of the war in which historical problems are organized in accordance with the discourse of modernization.

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- 6 O. Tukhanina, "Vsemirnyi styd i sram" [World-wide shame and disgrace], *Vzgliad* [The view], September 10, 2012, <http://www.vz.ru/opinions/2012/9/10/597431.html>.
- 7 See <http://tuhanina.ru/2012/09/10/istoricheskij-klondajk/>.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 V. V. Putin, "Meeting with public representatives on the issue of the patriotic upbringing of youth", <http://pda.kremlin.ru/news/16470>.
- 10 The term "spiritual braces" (*dukhovnye skrepy*) has become a commonplace in Russian political rhetoric over the past several years. "Braces" in this usage presents the image of the structural elements that hold together the beams of a large building such as a church, for example. See V. V. Putin, "Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly", December 12, 2012, <http://pda.kremlin.ru/news/17118>.
- 11 This thesis was embodied in the idea of the "culture industry" as early as 1947 by Adorno and Horkheimer in their book *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. See the chapter "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" in Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. G. Schmid Noerr, trans. E. Jephcott, 94-137 (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2002).
- 12 Gorz A. *L'immatériel: Connaissance, valeur et capital* [The immaterial: Knowledge, value and capital] (Paris: Galilée, 2003), 41.
- 13 The conception of the continuity of Russian statehood was most clearly developed in the process of preparations for the 2012 celebration of the 1150th anniversary of "the birth of Russian statehood". See, for example, "Zasedanie po voprosu podgotovki k prazdnovaniiu 1150-letia zarozhdeniia rossiiskoi gosudarstvennosti" [Meeting on the issue of preparing for the 1150th anniversary of Russian statehood], <http://state.kremlin.ru/face/12075>.
- 14 See A. Kustarev, "Kapitalizm, kul'tura, intelligentsiia" [Capitalism, culture, intelligentsia], *Neprikosnovennyi zapas* no. 88 (2/2013).
- 15 V. Putin, "Rossiia: natsional'nyi vopros" [Russia: the national question], *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, January 23, 2012, www.ng.ru/politics/2012-1-23/1_national.html.
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- 17 V. Putin, "Meeting with public representatives on the issue of the patriotic upbringing of youth", September 12, 2012, <http://pda.kremlin.ru/news/16470>.
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- 19 "Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly", December 12, 2012, <http://pda.kremlin.ru/news/17118>.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Between 2009 and 2012, there was a special state institution in Russia that tried to control work with the historical past, "The Commission for Counteracting Attempts to Falsify History and Damage the Prestige of Russia".
- 22 D. Medvedev, "O Velikoi Otechestvennoi voine, istoricheskoi istine i o nashei pamiati".
- 23 "Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly", December 12, 2012.
- 24 A. Gorz, op. cit., 43.
- 25 "Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly", December 12, 2012.
- 26 Naturally, I am not referring to a total monopoly but to the effort itself to establish control over all spheres which are in one way or another subordinate to the state, depend on it, and seek to receive various privileges from it.
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- 28 Ibid., 18.
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- 30 I. Wallerstein, "The Bourgeois(ie) as Concept and Reality", in *Race, Nation, Class*, ed. E. Balibar and I. Wallerstein (New York and London: Verso, 1991), 146.
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- 32 D. Medvedev, "On the Great Patriotic War, Historical Truth, and Our Memory".
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