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Cultural Hegemony, Sobornost, and the 1917 Russian Revolution

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Abstract
This essay is an attempt to develop a more consistent understanding of the success of the Russian Revolution by involving the culturally particular setting in which the revolution happened: namely, the cultural dominance of Eastern Orthodox Christianity, the religion professed by the majority of Russians in 1917. In critiquing Antonio Gramsci's interpretation of the success of the revolution, the paper examines the multiple meanings of the Eastern Orthodox Christian idea of *sobornost* (conciliarity) and the type of collectivism it promotes. It goes on to argue that this experience and familiarity with religious *sobornii*/conciliar collectivism resulted in the formation of a functionally analogous secular political phenomenon during the revolution, namely the workers' councils (soviets), the *sine qua non* of Russian Revolutionary success.

Keywords
Antonio Gramsci, communism, cultural hegemony, Russian revolution, sobornost

Introduction

In Marxist theory, collectivist notions are mostly related to class belonging and class consciousness, while other non-class-derived or -based collectivist outlooks are treated as more or less tangential to proletarian collectivism. In this sense, Marxism is still very much reliant on economic determinism, the view that communist revolutions necessarily and exclusively depend on developed industry and mature capitalist relations of production. The theory has been mostly discarded after the twentieth-century experience of successful communist revolutions in underdeveloped countries, but the Marxist interest in culturally derived, rather than class-derived, collectivist notions and their possible productive interaction and overlap with communist ideas is yet to fully develop. This essay is a small contribution in that direction. It is both a critique of the traditional Marxist explanation of the success of the Russian Revolution as exemplified in the work of Antonio Gramsci, and an attempt to develop a more consistent theoretical framework involving the culturally particular setting of the Russian Revolution, namely, the cultural dominance of Eastern Orthodox Christianity professed by the majority of Russians in 1917. Relying on this critical theoretical framework, the essay moves to an analysis of the multiple meanings of the Eastern Orthodox Christian idea of *sobornost* (conciliarity) and the type of collectivism it promotes, arguing that the experience and familiarity with religious *sobornii*/conciliar collectivism resulted in the formation of a functionally analogous secular political phenomenon during the revolution, namely the workers' councils, the so-called "soviets," the *sine qua non* of Russian revolutionary success.

Cultural hegemony and the Russian Revolution

The success of the Russian Revolution and the subsequent establishment of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, a state which proclaimed Marxism the guiding principle in building its economy, political system and social organization, were probably the most unexpected events in the history of the twentieth century. Initially greeted with great enthusiasm by those on the theoretical and activist left of the political spectrum in Western Europe, over the following decades the first workers' state gradually lost support amongst Western Marxists. In the process, however, it was not just the social, economic, and political practice of the USSR that was subjected to increased criticism, but the Russian Revolution itself which began to be regarded as some kind of an anomalous historical and social phenomenon, with its communist character questioned (Donald 1993: 221–46; Harding 1983: 283–328; Lih 2011: 201; Cliff 1987; Von Laue 1964; Anweiler 1974). For many, the revolution came too early,

industrially underdeveloped Russia was not ready for a communist revolution; for others, the Bolsheviks (and more often Stalin) hijacked and perverted its ideals; for others yet, Russia needed a government of wide cross-party socialist coalition government. Roland Boer (2011) provides a good overview of the various complaints Western Marxists have regarding the Russian Revolution (and every other revolution since 1917), noticing that the only consistent element in these analyses is the inconsistency of the arguments which constantly shift in line with the parameters of what they suggest is the standard of a "true" communist revolution. For Boer, this fluidity of Western thinking about the Russian Revolution is an expression of "unbearable romanticism" born out of endless theorizing about a revolution without the actual experience of one. I certainly agree with his assessment, but it needs to be added that although well intentioned, the constant singling out of real or perceived faults based on theoretical flights of fancy only served to lend a hand to the perpetual negative propaganda and chorus of condemnation coming from the ideologues of capitalism from the first moment they learned about the October events.

Whether or not the Russian Revolution was regarded as flawed in terms of delivering on the promise of communism from the perspectives of shifting Western theoretical paradigms, it is undeniable that it was the only successful revolution from the tumultuous period between 1917 and 1922. In their romanticising of the Russian Revolution, Western Marxists tend to gloss over the fact that there were very strong revolutionary movements in Finland, Germany, Hungary and Italy at the time, but none of them were successful in radically changing the social, political and economic conditions in those countries. Conversely, the Russian movement did revolutionize every aspect of Russian society, even if the "communist" essence of the economic and political system in the USSR did not measure up to the idealised prescriptions of Western Marxists. The greatest irony in their critical engagement with the Russian Revolution, however, is not so much the absence of any experience-based perspective, but an apparent disregard towards the whole legacy of modern Western Marxism, which almost exclusively focuses on ideology, non-coercive forms of dominance and the role of subjective and cultural factors in shaping social totality and practice. This is the same conceptual and methodological framework used for "critiquing" the Russian Revolution, and is a direct consequence of the differing revolutionary outcomes in the West and Russia (Anderson 1979: 42).

It was Russian success and defeat in the West that compelled Western Marxists to reassess the somewhat naïve revolutionary expectation implicit in the economic determinism of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century historical materialism based on Marx's claim that "At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the [...] property relations within the framework of which

they have operated hitherto [...] Then begins an era of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure" (Marx 1904: 12). At the beginning of the twentieth century, Western European capitalism as a system of economic relations and means of production was already sufficiently developed, however the social revolution predicted by economic determinism "by default" did not materialize. What became obvious in the wake of abortive Western revolutions and their successful counterpart in economically underdeveloped Russia was that radical social transformation did not exclusively depend on developed industry, and that the role of the human, subjective element of the forces of production had been grossly underestimated. Neither did the assumption prove true that capitalism by necessity creates radical class awareness through workers' relation to the means of production, implied by Marx's words that "it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness" (Marx 1904: 11–12). Despite having a very long and brutal history of struggle with bourgeois forces, the Western proletariat did not demonstrate that it was a class "disciplined, united, organized by the very mechanism of the process of capitalist production" (Marx 1992: 929), which was capable of acting as a self-conscious subject of history towards complete social transformation in accordance with its own interests rather than towards mere amelioration of the already existing economic and political structures. Moreover, by accepting various—and as history later demonstrated—temporary concessions from the bourgeoisie (e.g., parliamentary incorporation of the German Social-Democrats into the new Weimer Republic; negotiations and concessions granted to workers' unions in Italy), the Western proletariat effectively sided with the ruling class in preserving and legitimizing the same exploitative economic relations against which they rose in the first place.

For Marxists, the failure of the revolutions proved demoralising but sobering regarding the limits of economic factors in generating radical social change. The impasse in the workers' movement that followed demonstrated that the class struggle was also happening in the more elusive sphere of subjectivity and its completely immaterial contents such as values, ideals, perceptions of oneself, others and the world, attitudes, practices, expectations, beliefs and effectively everything else that Raymond Williams would much later describe as "lived system of meanings and values—constitutive and constituting—which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming [...] that is to say, in the strongest sense a 'culture'" (Williams 1977: 110). Accordingly, Marxist theory moved focus from economic analyses to investigations of culture and the way its various expressions influence subjectivity and self-consciousness. The era of modern Western Marxism based on critical theory, a school of Marxist thought born out of revolutionary defeat and devoted completely to analyses and critique of cultural forms, had begun.

During the twentieth century, critical theory and its many proponents would greatly contribute to refining historical materialism as a theory of social change, but mostly focused on forms of cultural domination in the developed West. Except for criticism aimed at the type of communism the Soviet Union practiced, Western Marxists never showed an interest in looking at reasons for the success of the Russian Revolution that went beyond the explanation offered by Leon Trotsky at the Fourth Congress of the Comintern (Trotsky 1925), who in the context of explaining the long battle that awaited the Western proletariat in capitalist democracies simply asserted that the weak Russian bourgeoisie was caught by surprise. One of the most significant theories to grow out of Trotsky's explanation and heightened awareness about the significance of subjective forces in revolutionary movements was the theory of cultural hegemony, developed by Antonio Gramsci—the imprisoned leader of the failed Italian movement. Drawing on personal experience, Gramsci claimed that in Western Europe revolutions did not succeed because the economic hegemonic position of the bourgeoisie also ensured their cultural dominance, resulting in the acceptance of their particular values and interests as those of the majority of the population and thereby in "the 'spontaneous' consent [...] by the great masses of the population" for the capitalist system (Gramsci 1971: 12). In other words, in times of crisis when economic antagonism is laid bare, bourgeois relations of production survive primarily because of this ulterior type of hegemony, rather than the formal, coercive powers of the state. Proletarian uprisings can shake and resist the open brutality of the capitalist state, but are powerless against bourgeois "soft power" of values and norms exercised through everyday civil institutions, organizations and intellectuals. This shared pool of values between the Western proletariat and its rulers was, according to Gramsci, the crucial difference between the Russian and the Western revolutions. In an often quoted passage he writes:

> In Russia the State was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous; in the West, there was a proper relation between State and civil society, and when the State trembled a sturdy structure of civil society was at once revealed. The state was only an outer ditch, behind which there stood a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks (Gramsci 1971: 238).

For Gramsci, the two different situations in terms of bourgeois cultural hegemony resulted in different fighting positions for the proletariat. In the West, the cultural hegemonic structure on which the bourgeoisie relied doomed the proletariat and their parties to a long lasting "war of position," replacing deep-seated bourgeois cultural values with new proletarian cultural ideals and norms before they could attempt to seize political power. In Russia, however, where the state was the only mechanism

of control available to the ruling classes, Bolsheviks merely had to topple the state in order to seize power; the "war of position" for proletarian cultural hegemony ensuing only after the overthrow of the state (Gramsci 1971: 236). But this is where Gramsci's discussion, perhaps because it relies too much on Trotsky's explanation about the success of the October revolution, goes astray. It effectively implies that cultural hegemony exists only in bourgeois societies and that Russia, because of its underdeveloped capitalist relations, was in some kind of a cultural vacuum without any cultural values, which the Bolsheviks managed to quickly fill in with proletarian values after the October events and during the civil war, thus ensuring the popular support needed to win the civil war. However, both assumptions are untenable: first of all, because cultural hegemony is not a phenomenon exclusive to bourgeois societies, and second, because Russia was certainly not without any culture or as Gramsci would say, "general direction imposed on [its] social life" (Gramsci 1971: 12), although the source of those dominant, generally accepted values was very different from the West. According to a Marxist periodization of history based on relations of production, at the time of the revolution Russia was at the juncture between feudalism and capitalism. In terms of its intellectual history—which Marxists would assign to the superstructural, subjective social sphere—it was still pre-modern and, as was the case in other pre-capitalist, pre-modern European countries, the dominant source of its cultural values was religion, more precisely Eastern Orthodox Christianity. That source, however, has barely been investigated as one of the possible elements that contributed to the mass acceptance of the ideals of the revolution—the critical revolutionary ingredient, the absence of which, according to Gramsci and many others, doomed the Western revolutions to failure.

Popular support for the Russian Revolution has always been difficult to understand. Even the Bolsheviks struggled to explain how and why they managed to attract the Russian masses to their side. When the civil war began in March 1918, Lenin claimed that the success of the Russian Revolution was dependent on the German revolution (Lenin 1972: 95–96), while in 1920 when it was clear that the German revolution was not happening, he called it a miracle made possible by the solidarity and the sympathy that soldiers sent by foreign powers felt for the Russian workers (Lenin 1965b: 496). In 1922, Trotsky also failed to clarify the concrete tactics the Bolsheviks had employed to muster popular support among the mostly uneducated peasants who, by his own admission were the decisive factor in winning the civil war by providing "food supplies, horses, and force of arms" (Trotsky 1925). He mentioned that the war was also a "political process" and that "by being resolute in our actions we made the peasant masses understand that there was only one choice open to them—the choice between the revolutionary proletariat on the one side, and the officers of noble birth at the head of the counter-revolution, on the other"

(Trotsky 1925). What this "political process" was and how they actually "made them understand" remained unexplained. There were no concrete, practical directives that could be utilized by the Bolsheviks' European comrades, as Gramsci noticed while trying to understand the elusive dialectics of cultural forms and sketch a strategy for the Western version of "war of position," well aware that revolutions do not succeed unless the ideals they promote correspond with the ideals of the majority of the population (Gramsci 1971: 236). Western historians, on the other hand, mostly referred to economic reasons, a very rational explanation as the promise of land did play a big role in gaining the support of peasants during the civil war. But that still does not explain the attraction the Bolsheviks' communist ideology had for many otherwise incompatible strata and substrata of Russian society between October 1917 and March 1918, when according to Lenin the revolution was "one continuous triumphal march" (Lenin 1972: 90, 94, 99).

Questioning the strictly economic reasons behind this mass acceptance does not mean ignoring their importance. But given that Russia's cultural values at the time of the revolution were still for the majority of population not in the mould of the Enlightenment's insistence on reason and rationality, religious views and values cannot be neglected. Religion, after all, is not a phenomenon that can be limited to one or another social sphere or neatly boxed off, as the now largely discarded theory of secularisation believed would be the case with the advance of modernisation. Religion is, indeed, a form of total social praxis and can control and direct not just what and how people think, but also how they behave and what they consider alien and unacceptable or familiar and warranted. As such, it can be either an ally or an enemy. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber claimed an unintentional economic alliance between the particular Calvinist conception of the world—along with its practical norms—and early capitalism (Weber 1930). So, it is perhaps not impossible to suggest that Orthodox Christian views and values aided the revolution, even if people outwardly rejected them. If even Lenin, the avowed atheist, unconsciously colluded with Orthodoxy by naming *What is to be Done*? after Chernyshevsky's utopian novel, today regarded as a "successful melding of *au courant* European theories with Russian, especially Orthodox, religious, values" (Katz and Wagner 1989: 15), then it is not unreasonable to assume that Orthodoxy also served as a familiar semantic background on which ordinary people relied while interpreting and understanding the Bolsheviks' communist ideals during the revolution.

Communism as a type of social organization with common ownership over means of production rests in many ways on principles of collectivism or worldviews emphasizing the relational, social nature of human beings and their interdependence. So, let us look then from the perspective of Weber's notion that the religious can transform itself into the

secular and Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony as the "general direction imposed on [its] social life" (Gramsci 1971: 12), and cultural values and norms as guides directing the spontaneous response of the masses to extraordinary situations at some of Orthodoxy's underlying collectivist and relational principles and practices which assumed a secular character and form once in contact with the Bolsheviks' ideas.

Orthodoxy and collectivism

The existence of collectivism in Russia as a very strong—both practical and intellectual—cultural tradition even before the arrival of the Bolsheviks' collectivist philosophy has not escaped the attention of historians interested in the Russian Revolution (Stites 1989: 205–206; Smith 2008: 71). Often discussed are peasant land communes, the so-called *mir* and *obshchina*, the communes formed by the nineteenth-century populists and the so-called *artels*, student and workers' cooperatives (Bartlett 1990; Magagna 1991; Zelnik 1971). Also mentioned are various philosophers and social and political thinkers with strong collectivist views, such as Alexander Herzen, Nikolay Chernishevsky, Alexander Bakunin and others. However, except in the context of nineteenth-century Russian nationalism and Slavophilism (Duncan 2002: 22), the religion professed by the majority of Russians, Orthodox Christianity, has never played a big role in these discussions.

There are various motivations and reasons behind this surprising disregard, but most of them find their scholarly justification in the claim that Orthodoxy was a religion of priests which never made deep inroads among the peasants, who practised the so-called dual faith, *dvoeverie,* a combination of Christian ritual and pre-Christian paganism. For obvious reasons, this view was perpetuated by Soviet historiography, but it also held sway among Western historians, sometimes leading to some very strange conclusions. Stites, for example, claimed that the peasants' ability to combine faiths helped the Bolsheviks in their quest to eradicate religion (Stites 1989: 122).

More recent studies have strongly challenged the accuracy of this view, for both methodological and theoretical reasons. Some have pointed to the error of categorizing everything that is not part of the explicitly Christian tradition as pre-Christian or pagan (Wigzell 2005; Levine 1993). True, there were many local customs and beliefs in Russia that were not explicitly Christian, but so there were and still are in other Orthodox countries and this diversity does not indicate paganism; it is rather the result of the way in which faith has been understood by the Orthodox Church. Once it discovered Aristotle, Western Christianity dived into a paradox of trying to rationalize its faith by forever expanding its theology into categories and numbers of sins, sacraments, different levels of hell,

heaven, and everything in between, culminating in the Inquisition's persecution of local beliefs and practices. Orthodoxy—although proudly claiming to be orthodox (right belief)—was much less prescriptive concerning everyday life, and its theology kept within the decisions of ecumenical councils. Regardless of whether it originated from a hoary past or arose from within the Christian context, if the local practice or belief did not undermine the ecumenical dogmas there was no need to condemn it. Once this understanding of faith is taken into account, the question of non-Christian elements in Russian popular religion becomes completely irrelevant. And as multiple new studies with more nuanced approaches to religious phenomena demonstrate, there was no dual faith in Russia (Freeze 1990; Shevzov 1994; Chulos 1995; Rock 2007; Herrlinger 2007; Heretz 2008). Both peasant and working class Russians were deeply Christian, but in a way that is Orthodox not Western Christian.

Equally flawed is the general theoretical framework of these theories which posit that Orthodoxy was a thin veneer over a solid core of pagan belief. As Heretz (2008: 8) notes, such a framework derives from a distinctly Protestant understanding which makes a strict distinction between essential and superficial elements of religion; between knowledge based on the written word requiring thinking and intellectual effort and therefore somehow more spiritual and worthy, and knowledge involving the senses and therefore an ephemeral way of learning about god (such as ritual practice, images, decorations, buildings, etc.). Teachings of a religion, however, can be communicated equally efficiently without too many words or exegetical efforts. Russian believers did not need expositions on the theological arguments, such as those used by Gregory Palamas in the fourteenth century against the epistemological rationalism of Barlaam of Calabria regarded by the Orthodoxy as ecumenical truth, in order to know that people can be in the presence of the divine even in this world and that the senses are an inevitable part of that knowledge. Icons made of plain wood and paints, but endowed with miraculous, divine powers taught them that important Orthodox dogma, even if only intuitively. Nor did they need lectures on the multiple semantic trajectories implied by the word *sobornaia* (catholic, universal, church) from the Nicene Creed in order to understand that in Orthodoxy the universality of the Church is primarily about a community of believers and shared belief, rather than its institutional aspect. That knowledge was gained experientially through collective participation in various church rituals, but also by moulding church life according to the community's needs. Vera Shevzov, for example, writes that church buildings were the central point of community life, spatially expressing "collective belonging" and that "if a community decided to build a church, virtually nothing could stop them" (Shevzov 2004: 57). Similarly with participation in rituals, the "collective keeping of sacred time among believers, however, was not an automatic process in which believers reflexively conformed to an imposed standard calendric

rhythm. Lay believers actively contributed to its setting and often assimilated established feasts that made sense in their local worlds" (Shevzov 2004: 131). In the context of these new studies and their findings it is perhaps not irrelevant to ask whether the village commune, the usual suspect behind Russian collectivism, would have survived at all if the Orthodox Church was less ritually—and in the Western sense more theologically—orientated and if it understood its universality in strictly institutional terms.

The aforementioned erroneous theoretical and methodological premises of the traditional understanding of Orthodoxy in Russia are, however, only a modern expression of the centuries-old conflict between Western and Eastern Christianity, arising from the eleventh century schism and the way that theological dispute and Orthodox Christianity have since been treated in Western discourse. The dominant pattern has been to view Orthodoxy as an insignificant and, often because of its mystical tendencies and accent on ritual, inferior version of Catholicism; the official reason for the split, the *filioque* clause (the unilateral interpolation of the words "and from the son" into the symbol of faith from the Nicene Creed by the Roman Catholic Church),[1] being considered a mere squabble between otherwise theologically very close cousins. The truth, however, is that this seemingly unimportant addition was just the tip of the iceberg concerning fundamentally different ecclesiastical and theological cultures which had already developed between Rome and Constantinople by the eleventh century (Olson 1999: 304). One of those differences, which on a deeper level was also behind the *filioque* clause controversy, referred to the proper interpretation of the collectivism and universalism implied in the words "catholic church" from the Nicene Creed. This difference needs to be explained in more detail as its Orthodox version underpins many other Orthodox collectivist peculiarities, such as deciding on doctrinal truth and its confederated organization, which I believe were translated into secular forms during 1917, helping the Bolsheviks into power and acceptance of their ideology.

The meaning of "catholic" in Orthodoxy

The word "catholic" (*katholikos*) for the Byzantines did not just mean a universal church as the institution which in a spatial or phenomenal sense spreads throughout and embraces the visible world. It also had

[1] "We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father (and the Son), who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified." Words added by the Roman Catholic Church are in parentheses. The Orthodox and the Oriental churches never accepted the change and maintained the symbol of faith without the "and the son" phrase.

Vol. 3 (2015) stasis No. 2

qualitative connotations referring to the teachings adopted by the ecumenical councils, regarded as eternal truth shared and held in common by all believers, irrespective of time, space, or any other difference. The unilateral addition of the words "and the Son" to the creed without having the change discussed and approved collectively by the gathering of all apostolic bishops, as was done by the local Toledo council in the sixth century, divided this timeless, unceasing and limitless union of believers spatially, temporally, but most importantly in terms of the eternal truth they were supposed to have in common. Among other things, such division also meant a loss of the eternal, universal and all-embracing collectivist character of the Church and for the Byzantines this was simply unacceptable. The *filioque* clause also went against the teaching on the role of the Holy Spirit in human affairs, which also developed from the universalist and collectivist connotations of catholicity. Namely, in Christianity the Holy Spirit is the only guarantor of truth in doctrinal matters, but it is working in that capacity only through the consensual agreement of all apostolic bishops at ecumenical councils. In a sense, the council's collective and universal character is both sign of and agency for the Holy Spirit's presence, which in turn ensures divine origin and therefore the absolute, eternal truthfulness of the council's decisions. Because of this exclusive connection between the Holy Spirit and ecumenical councils, decisions by a gathering of local bishops—as was in the case of the *filioque* clause—could not be regarded as absolute truth and therefore worthy of becoming a "truth shared by all."

On the surface this discussion about the Byzantine understanding of a universal church, the role of the ecumenical councils, the working of the Holy Spirit and absolute truths might sound like a typically medieval splitting of theological hairs, but from the time of the official schism onwards, Western and Orthodox Christianity developed markedly different positions regarding questions of authority regarding theologically sanctioned truth. The West turned towards individualism, first by acknowledging decisions of non-ecumenical councils as universal, then by acknowledging the decisions of the Pope as universal, which Protestantism finally, with its multiple truths, only brought to its logical conclusion. Thus, the initial "truth by all" turned into "truth by one," finally ending in "truth by everyone." Orthodoxy, on the other hand, continued to understand the word "catholic" in its conciliary, collectivist and universalist form and it is often claimed that it is this particular word that is its heart and soul (Bulgakov 1988: 60–1). In this context it is not superfluous to mention that even today the ancient *filioque* clause fault line inherently divides Europe in terms of individualism and collectivism. According to cross-cultural psychology research, all countries with Orthodox Christian heritage maintain strongly collectivistic views and their populations are more likely to think in terms of interdependence, groups, and relationships, whereas almost all European countries with either Catholic or Protestant

heritage have individualistic social outlooks in which the individual norms and needs eclipse that of the group (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov 2010: 95–7).

In Russia the word catholic was translated as *sobornaia,* while its collectivist connotations found expression in the principle of *sobornost*. Etymologically, the noun *sobornost* comes from the verb *(so-)brat* which means "to gather together," "to unite," "to assemble together," "to come together." Other derivatives include the noun *sobor* which means "gathering," "assembly," "church building," "harmony," "concord," and in a significant semantic overlap with the famous soviets it can also mean a "council." Putting all those meanings together, *sobornost* could be translated as the state of being together. Theologically, though, it is not easy to explain the characteristics of this state of togetherness given that its semantic universe has not stopped expanding since Aleksey Khomiakov, a lay theologian from the nineteenth century, who in his polemics against Westernising influences articulated the Orthodox understanding of the word *katholikos* from the Nicene Creed (Khomiakov 1864). *Sobornost* appears in all sorts of discussions, whether about views on god, humans, nature or the Church, testifying in the process that collectivism and an emphasis on relational rather than essentialist understandings of the world are important features of Orthodoxy. In line with this relational vision, *sobornost,* although linguistically a condition, conceptually signifies certain dynamism. If one were to sum up all of its trajectories, it could be said that *sobornost* is the Orthodox way of reconciling (or attempting to reconcile) the eternal opposites of one and many and their multiple derivatives such as identity and differences, or authority and freedom. *Sobornost* tries to find a middle road by allowing the necessity of oppositions on one level, but denying it on another. Perhaps its best formulation comes from Sergey Bulgakov, who wrote that *sobornost* is the "I" grounded in the "we" (Bulgakov 1988: 65).

In Russia, the exact meaning of *sobornost* was intensely debated in the decades before the revolution within the context of the reform intended to reverse changes in the Church structure introduced by Peter the Great (Shevzov 2004: 27–53). Although nobody disputed its centrality to the Orthodox vision, opinions about the implied collectivity of *sobornaia* were divided. On one side were the advocates of a microecclesial, more episcopocentric vision with hierarchal overtones, clerical representation of the Church and differentiation between the union of clergy and that of the laity, which was also more in line with the already existing Petrine organization of the Church (Shevzov 2004: 40–47). On the other side were advocates of macroecclesial interpretations and a fundamental restructuring of the existing Church order, for whom the parish was the basic ecclesial unit; the collectivity of *sobornost* being interpreted as a self-governing, egalitarian, interdependent communion between clergy and laity (Shevzov 2004: 36–40). Between these two trends—one more inclined

Vol. 3 (2015) stasis No. 2

toward rule from above, the other from below—it was the latter that prevailed in June 1917 with the new Synod formed in the wake of Tsar's abdication. Of course, in the context of these two visions of *sobornost* and their multiple trajectories into issues about the true meaning of community, organization of the Church, modes of governing, roles of clergy and laity, hierarchy and egalitarianism, the main question is where the masses stood on the understanding of *sobornost*. The best answer, perhaps, is that they did not have to decide on either because they already lived both. As Shevzov's discussion on the management of the parish church illustrates, the parishioners already had a strange symbiotic relationship with their priests in which nothing was either completely the domain of the laity nor was it entirely in ecclesiastical hands. The boundaries between church and lay issues and the authorities were constantly blurred, although without a complete loss of identity, and the way they functioned was through an intricate web of interrelationship in which none was either completely autonomous from or dependant on the other. The Church, for example, had the authority to appoint parish priests who were regarded and valued by the parishioners as their spiritual guides, teachers, preachers and authority in liturgical matters. But, on the other hand, they did not shy from vociferously denouncing them before the diocese and aggressively campaigning, most often successfully, for their replacement (Schevzov 2004: 80–94). In a sense, parishioners respected and acknowledged the specific role of the priests and the Church in community life, but they were also intuitively aware that they are constitutive of the Church and that without them it would not exist.

To believe in a *sobornaia* church as stated in the Nicene Creed—the most used profession of faith during Orthodox liturgy—thus acquires many meanings. It could mean to believe in a Catholic Church "in the original sense of the word, in a Church that assembles and unites" (Bulgakov 1988: 61). *Sobornia* in this case evokes the function of the Church not in an institutional sense, but as the community of all past and present believers, diverse and different from each other and on their own, but who are united together with each other by the sameness of the belief and love they hold in common (Khomiakov 1864: 4–5). In this sense *sobornost* could be regarded as a version of trinitarianism, another very distinctive feature of Orthodoxy. As God is three distinct yet co-existential and consubstantial persons, *sobornost* means that all believers approach God as different persons, but that they are all united by and share in the same principle of love, which also makes them dependant on each other.

The adjective s*obornia* thus primarily signifies a qualitative relationship between believers, although in liturgical practice or on a phenomenal level, quantity also matters. Following the verse from Mathew 18:20, "where two or three come together in my name I am in the midst of you," which in Russian uses the word *sobirat* to translate "to come together," a priest cannot perform the liturgy on his own; he needs the presence of at

least another believer in order to start the service. In other words, the Orthodox *sobornost* necessitates a relationship between "othernesses" to manifest itself as an overarching unity, as a condition that cancels distinctiveness without destroying it.

To believe in the *sobornaia* Church can also mean that one believes in a conciliar Church, in the sense mentioned in the context of the schism—that is, in a Church of ecumenical councils (Bulgakov 1988: 61). *Sobornost* in this context deals with the governing principle in deciding on questions of dogma and the way authority and freedom interact, as the two prisms through which truth is reflected. In this case, the principle of *sobornost* provides the solution to questions of whether the truth is in one or in many and whether the way to it is through authoritarianism or individualism. The Orthodox answer to these questions is that the truth is neither according to one, nor according to everyone, but according to all and that such "truth according to all" reveals itself through unanimity (Lossky 1952: 35), through accord reached once different opinions are presented and debated by the ecumenical council of bishops (Bulgakov 1988: 60). In contrast to Roman Catholicism which, according to Orthodox theologians, kept unity but lost freedom, while Protestantism kept freedom but lost unity (Lossky 1952: 37), the institution of the ecumenical council is a synthesis of authorities and preserves both unity and freedom of opinion (Lossky 1952: 35).

However, reading Bulgakov's very long and complex explanation of how this works in practice (Bulgakov 1988: 54–60), *sobornost* as an organizational and governing principle in many ways resembles Lenin's formulation of democratic centralism (Lenin 1965a: 443), or rather it resembles the way the democratic principle was meant to be exercised in the Soviet Union. Discussion is allowed, but once an agreement is reached it is compulsory for everyone not just to accept the agreed, but also to actively enforce it at the grassroots level, because the collective nature of the decision proves its worthiness, or as Bulgakov says in the context of the Church, its truthfulness (Bulgakov 1988: 65). In an imitation of Carl Schmitt's famous statement that "all significant concepts of the modern theory of state are secularised theological concepts" (Schmitt 1985: 36), I would suggest that the way democratic centralism in the Soviet Union was meant to work in many ways reflected how the principle of *sobornost* functions in the Orthodox Church. Everything seems to be going in a circle, but that circle is not necessarily a vicious one. The collectiveness of the decision makes it external to the concrete persons involved in the process and thereby also the standard of its merit. In Orthodox Christianity the collectiveness of the council's decision externalizes itself into the Holy Ghost, while in the Soviet Union the collectiveness of the party's or Soviets' decisions externalised itself in the people.

Let me now move to the Russian Revolution and the secular form into which the principle of *sobornost,* with all of its dialectics between one

and many, sameness and diversity, authority and freedom, was translated. This, of course, does not mean that the new form was identical to the Orthodox *sobornost*. True to the Orthodox tradition, which never engaged in prescribing its teachings to the smallest detail, *sobornost* only provided the seed from which new meanings relative and relevant to the new historical context would emerge.

Sobornost and workers' councils

The usual narrative of the Russian Revolution is that the February revolution saw the tsar's abdication and formation of a Provisional Government which eight months later was overthrown in an armed uprising led by the Bolsheviks. The events and atmosphere in the tumultuous period between these two revolutions are often skimmed over, although during this time three Provisional Governments were formed and dissolved; the Bolsheviks rose from a party with marginal influence to a party wielding such authority that there was hardly any resistance to the armed overtake of the government in October (at least in Petrograd, the seat of state power); and finally, in this period the famous soviets, the councils of workers, soldiers, and peasants, which later became the organs of government and gave its name to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, were formed across the vast territory of Russia.

Among the many events that took place in this period, the rise of the Bolsheviks and the formation of soviets are usually credited as the key factors for the success of the October revolution. However, while there are many works that discuss these two events, especially the rise of the Bolsheviks, there are not enough works explaining the reasons for the enthusiasm and the readiness with which the Russians accepted the idea of soviets as governing bodies. From this historical distance and in the current atmosphere of global pessimism and social helplessness, the incredible speed and enthusiasm with which the majority of Russians engaged in self-organization seems truly incredible, especially given the primitive means of communication they had at their disposal. Only a month and a half after the February revolution the first All-Russia Conference of Soviets (of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies), with the aim of laying the groundwork for the First All-Russian Congress of Soviets, was organized. The conference was attended by 600 delegates representing some 139 workers' soviets and a number of soldiers' soviets (Anweiler 1974: 122). From that point on soviets spread like wildfire across Russia and by June it was already possible to organize the first Congress with representatives from almost 400 various soviets (Anweiler 1974: 123).

So what were these soviets which Russians so enthusiastically embraced and what was their function in the period between February and October 1917? The first soviet in 1917 (Petrosoviet of workers and sol-

diers) was formed in Petrograd after the abdication of the tsar and its immediate role was to prevent any attempt at a counter-revolution and to cooperate with the Provisional Government which it helped form, but with which, as the time passed, often clashed regarding the political course the country was to take. Lenin tended to compare them with the Paris Commune (Lenin 1964a: 38–39) and that is certainly the way they functioned in the so-called period of "dual power," but the ideational base, from which the mostly uneducated Russian workers, soldiers and peasants drew inspiration to engage in self-organizing through the formation of soviets was certainly not the example of the Paris Commune. It is more likely they were guided by their own cultural experience and that the inspiration for the soviets in particular came from, if not completely then at least partially, the Orthodox ideas and practical renditions of *sobornost*.

Many parallels can be drawn between soviets and *sobornost*, but perhaps the most striking is regarding the soviets' organization and structure reflecting the aforementioned meaning of *sobornaia* as the Church that unites different individuals, but who come together because they share something in common and have a common goal. The way the Petrosoviet and the soviets that followed in its wake were structured and organized seem somewhat chaotic and are for many a bit of a puzzle (Wade 2005: 64). On one side, they resemble trade unions because their names listed only certain professions (workers, soldiers and peasants), on the other they were unlike unions because within those broad categories of occupations they did not distinguish between more specialized lines of work. They were also not strictly working class organizations; as well as workers, soldiers, and peasants, they also included people who were not workers such as representatives of different political parties, sometimes government employees, members of the so-called intelligentsia, and so on (Anweiler 1974: 106–10; Keep 1976: 120–21). They could have a regional character, but could be also factory or occupation based. At the first Congress of Soviets, for example, there were 1090 delegates representing 305 combined soviets of workers', soldiers', and peasants' deputies; 53 combined regional, provincial, and district soviets; 21 organizations from the army; 5 navy and 8 army logistics organizations; out of the 777 delegates who declared their party affiliation there were 105 Bolsheviks, 285 Esers (Socialist Revolutionaries), 248 Mensheviks, 32 Mensheviks-Internationalists, 10 Mensheviks-Fusionists and 24 belonging to other factions and groups (Kovalenko 1955: 370–71). In other words, the structure of soviets seems very anarchic, and it is very hard to establish the common underlying criteria for their formation. But that is only on the surface. In my view, they are simply the political expression of the Orthodox principle of *sobornost* and their structure is not chaotic or anarchic, but *sobornaia*. It reflected the experience Russians had of *sobornost*, which in everyday life manifested itself through the aforementioned complex interface between

the Church, its priests and the common believers. As the examples from Shevzov indicate, that interface was never simply a condition, an uncomplicated mutualism without any tensions (Shevzov 2004: 80–94). It was more of a process, but one in which differences were allowed and respected as long as they were underlined by and orientated towards a common goal, whether that goal was strictly religious, like liturgical worship or related to non-ecclesial matters, such as the welfare of the community. It could be said that the *sobornost* inherent in Orthodox liturgy, which provides the central point around which people gather with the same purpose, overcoming in the process their differences without annihilating them, was in the context of the revolution transformed into soviets; it provided the seed for a political liturgy which brought together different people and associations united by a shared idea and a common goal, the concern for the working class and the interest in improving its conditions.

The soviets of 1917, however, were not the first mass workers' organizations that reflected aspects of *sobornost*. Their historical precedent was an association with 10,000 members which existed in St. Petersburg in 1905. Formed and run by an Orthodox priest, Father Georgy Gapon, it included, significantly enough, the word *sobranie,* one of the linguistic derivatives of *so-brat,* as part of its name. The organization was called Sobranie ruskih fabrichno-zavodskih rabochih g. Sankt-Peterburga (The Assembly of the Russian Factory and Mill Workers of the City of St. Petersburg) and was responsible for the petition signed by 250,000 people that in 1905 demanded radical political and social changes. The petition was carried in a massive procession similar to Church processions, with icons and religious banners. However, its inherent message that the tsar and workers should stand together, was not understood by the tsar and the event ended in bloodshed.

Bloody Sunday was the catalyst for the first Russian Revolution and is increasingly regarded as the key event that undermined the monarchy beyond any repair and decisively pushed Russia towards the events of 1917 (Sablinsky 1976: ix). The significance of Gapon and his Assembly in directing the course of Russian history towards 1917 has been largely dismissed by Soviet historiography, claiming that they were an extended hand of the state. And true enough, Gapon founded the organization with the blessing of the police, but in doing this he was no different from Lenin who, determined to reach Russia after February 1917, accepted money from the Germans. Like Lenin, Gapon was determined to have a true mass workers' organization and the only way to do that in Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century was with the formal blessing of the police. The brutality with which the Cossacks attacked the procession on Bloody Sunday testifies that Gapon's Assembly and its affairs and activities, although formally under the auspices of the state, were free from police interference and that the imputation that he was an agent provocateur was baseless.

After Bloody Sunday Gapon's Assembly was banned and Gapon had to flee Russia, but in the autumn of 1905 the first workers' organization calling itself a soviet was formed, namely the St. Petersburg's Soviet of Workers' Deputies, which included many of ex-members of Gapon's association (Bonelli 1983: 90). This soviet, which in the period that followed would become a powerful organ of workers' government capable of closing and opening shops and factories, strongly reflected the *sobornaia* organizational matrix of the Assembly. Until the founding of the Assembly, the major form of workers' organizations was along occupational lines, but those organizations never managed to have more than a few hundred members. The Assembly, however, had a very wide and versatile membership. Every worker, irrespective of their occupation or gender, could become a member and participate in the activities of the organization. Its program was also broad and aimed at improving the cultural, educational and living conditions of workers (Sablinsky 1976: 85–118). Political activism was not officially on the agenda, but in practice, the widely defined program and membership allowed a greater interaction between workers from different industries and a much wider and diversified audience for the ones who belonged to various socialist parties. One of its leaders, Aleksey Egorovich Karelin, who was to become a delegate in the St. Petersburg's Soviet of Workers' Deputies in 1905, was actually a Bolshevik and it is ironic that he was thrown out of RSDP because of his membership in Gapon's Assembly given that it was precisely this organization that provided the blue print for the later soviets and by extension the Bolsheviks with an access to power in 1917. It is often forgotten that the October takeover was not achieved under the slogan "All Power to the Bolsheviks," but "All Power to the Soviets." The triumphal march of the revolution from October 1917 to March 1918, mentioned by Lenin (1972: 94), was not the achievement of the Bolsheviks alone, as later Trotsky and Soviet historiography claimed. It was made possible by the trust people placed in the soviets and their inherent *sobornost,* which served as the experientially recognisable cultural milieu against which they interpreted the communist ideas propagated by the Bolsheviks.

Conversely, there is no doubt that in forming the Assembly, Father Gapon was guided by the principle of *sobornost*. While in exile, all his efforts were aimed at reconciling members of various Russian left parties, notoriously divided internally and between themselves. He advocated the formation of a supra-party, the "Revolutionary Combat Committee" that would unify all revolutionary elements and even organized a founding conference, but the idea of unifying for the purpose of aiding the revolution fell on deaf ears (Sablinsky 1976: 296). To the party intellectuals sitting in the audience, his suggestions—in which there were no references to class struggle, Marxism, material productive forces and other catch words from the vocabulary of the Second International—seemed like mumblings of an uneducated *muzhik* (Sablinsky 1976: 297). It would take

them another twelve years to understand that revolutions require unified will and unified action from both common people and their leaders to succeed. Lenin also had an ambiguous attitude towards Gapon. In some articles he refers to him as an honest Christian socialist (Lenin 1962: 106), in others as a patriarchal priest (Lenin 1964b: 237). According to the memoirs of Nadezhda Krupskaya, in 1905 Lenin was captivated by Gapon as someone who had a deep understanding of the feelings of ordinary people. When they met, Gapon persuaded him to alter the Bolshevik agrarian policy, but Lenin thought he still had a lot to learn about revolutionary struggle (Krupskaya 1925; 1989: 74).

Gapon was certainly no intellectual and even less a theoretician of the revolution, but he was deeply aware that only through the coming together of the majority of the population can revolution happen. In 1906, after the failure of the St. Petersburg armed uprising and before he was murdered, he effectively predicted the revolutionary role the soviets would play in 1917. Arguing for a formation of a single labour union in the Program for the New Assembly, he wrote,

> Workers have to declare their own state in the bourgeois state and have their own elected government, publish their own laws and build on their own assets—both material and spiritual. We will not follow the parties, we will self-mange, self-rule, we will not seek foreign, always selfish, monetary support, we will form our own proletarian fund. We will not give our children to bourgeois schools. We will make our own schools of free thought. We will be a single union of workers, which has the authority—the material and spiritual. And only then will we be powerful… (Gapon 1909: 3).

The Bolsheviks never acknowledged the possible contribution Gapon and his Assembly made towards radicalising Russia. This does however raise pertinent questions about whether Lenin, the tireless polemicist and factionist, ever read these lines and whether they were in the back of his mind or it was the unconscious workings of the *sobornost* principle when in July 1917 he decided to proclaim the famous slogan "All power to the soviets" (Lenin 1977: 155–56), snowballing Russia toward the October revolution.

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