

Double Ruins, Diplomatic Solutions?

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This paper is based on the premise that the title of the conference is best understood in the conditional sense as in "as if there were a way out of the ruins." I will argue the necessity of thinking about two ruins, not one: the first is that of the American university, and the second is the one located in Russia. I want to argue that we who are in the former place for all or most of our time, and who only visit that latter place for shorter or longer stays, need to think about these two places together, in the same breath, as part of the same dilemma. I am not referring to any need to "bridge the gap" between these places, as if it were simply a matter of bringing more of "them" here and finding ways to send more of us over there. This was an imperative of not so long ago, and it remains important, it is just that it is no longer the kind of practical task to be solved now. Today it is more a matter of stepping back and asking what kind of scholarly project might be put in motion that could with time generate the power to act upon those various forces that have established these endemic ruins. I will begin by briefly suggesting how the contemporary American university is "in ruins."

First a necessary note of caution. The claim that the American university is in ruins is of course a hyperbolic construction, and I should make clear that I do not mean to suggest that the physical and emotional suffering of millions of Russians is on par with or equal to the intellectual and practical confusion of tens of thousands of reasonably well-fed and sheltered academics on this continent. On the other hand there is my conviction that both these ruins share some of the same history, and that genealogical research into one of these subjects must sooner or later encounter the other. Again, do not try to see a causal argument from history in what I am going to say: the Russian ruins were not "caused by" the crisis in American universities, nor did the crisis in American universities come into being as a consequence of the long collapse of the Soviet Union, which, after all, we might date to 1968 or thereabouts. And yet there is some sense in which these two phenomena should be examined together, so that the present might be better understood and some kind of orientation to the forces guiding these ruinations might be shaped. So what do I mean by the crisis in American universities today?

This is certainly an immense topic, but I would like to make two general points. The first is that there is a disconnect, which nearly every university teacher I know remarks upon and struggles to negotiate, between their assumption that the classroom is a site for intellectual experience, growth, challenge, exploration, productive confusion and disenchantment, and students' assumptions about the meaningfulness of their time in class. This sentiment is stronger wherever evidence for the immediate utility of the subject is weaker; this means that classes in the social sciences and humanities are places where this disconnect is to be experienced in the most intense way. This mismatch between teachers and students can be explained in many ways, but it seems to me that one source of this lies in the fact that students are already saturated with so many fragments of ideas received in every context of socialization that they cannot recognize the university as providing something different than that which the media provides.

It would be nice if we could then criticize the media and other pseudo-educational experiences and celebrate the university as providing an alternative kind of experience, but this would be missing the fact that one dimension of the university is in the direction of media spectacles and the need for constant publicity. The result for students is a seamless kind of flow between the world and the university, instead of the constant making and remaking of the experience of crossing the border between the two, with all the anxiety such entries and exits from national spaces have.

The only place where media is as yet not allowed is the classroom; as yet there are no "Microsoft Lecture Rooms" at the University of Michigan, there are no seminar rooms with the Nike swoosh behind the table or above the blackboard, although we should brace ourselves to react to this event when it comes. We can still say that classrooms are places where some teachers seek a fundamental autonomy from the mediasphere.

The problem is that the intellectual operations that students bring to the classroom are more and more out of synch with the kinds of operations teachers see as necessary for the creation of critical thought. This is evidence not only of the failure of high schools to provide the kind of intellectual and experiential foundations for thinking about the world (although that may be a part of it). Teachers must constantly grapple with the fragments, with the pieces of thought, with the haphazard and randomly interrupted currents of impressions that are rarely brought into to any kind of focus in order to be seen as a (temporary) whole. Universities have

extended this problem by becoming in the last three decades so socially and culturally heterogeneous and market driven.

This may not sound like a description of ruins, but I'm getting to that. The ruins come into view as we combine this problem of the social context of higher education with the centrifugal forces that have been tearing apart apparently stable fields of intellectual inquiry. The positive spin on this is to call it natural, inevitable, and to sanctify it with the term "interdisciplinary." A more genealogical approach would argue that interdisciplinarity is no doubt many things, but in part it is the result of the erosion of national purpose that lay within the core of most disciplinary identities as they took shape in the 1950s. In other words, the specifically American nature of the knowledge produced by and for universities is almost gone. Until the last decade or so the national mythology was a part of the genetic codes of the disciplines; the pieces of myth indispensable to the conduct of the Cold War were essential to the problems of departments and fields. These are the discursive practices Edward Said identified nearly two decades ago as being the post-war version of the Orientalizing project. He suggested that even those disciplines most removed from the construction of America's place in the world shared the aura of connection to America's national vision of social order. These are all too familiar: the infallibility of scientific expertise; the intolerance of other cultures' ways of organizing life and meaning; the persistent redefinition of problems in terms of the practical and the theoretical, etc. It is apparent today, though, that disciplinary knowledge is increasingly disconnected from those deep currents of "national purpose." "Deconstruction" and each of those linguistic, reflexive, and cultural turns were significant quakes that jolted loose English and anthropology, sociology and history, from their ambition to justify the standing of America in the postwar world. And all the reactive attempts to re-center knowledge on American foundations has only revealed the weakness of the national mythology, and the naked manipulation necessary for any display of American sentiment.

Of the many consequences of this process, the one that deserves special thought is that of the identities of disciplines that have traditionally specialized in the study of other cultures, nations, or places. The platform of national purpose provided these disciplines with a firm foundation, and the disciplines in turn provided a channel of national vision on to the external world. In the case of anthropology there are the obvious optics of culture and personality work

that assisted the war effort during WWII, the area studies model that helped during the Cold War, and the more practical channel provided by the development projects of the 60s and 70s. This is no place to take a stab at describing the problems of the discipline of anthropology as the next millennium dawns. Suffice it to say anthropology and anthropologists can no longer simply assume the relevance of their place in the pantheon of the liberal arts; that some people might imagine it is no longer necessary to have anthropology departments in the future; that what has made these disciplines special in the past can now be incorporated into the curricula of schools of business, public health, or engineering. In other words, it is worth thinking about how we as anthropologists of Russia and the former Soviet Union who feel a connection to traditions of Marxist, humanist, and/or post-modern criticism might react to the demand to justify our relevance within the university of future.

Thus the ruins become visible when we stop to consider the entire palette of relationships that teacher/scholars/writers have with the social world that sustains them and within which they are supposed to play a significant role.

II.

Now to the other ruins. And here I will be even briefer. I will play off a recent account of Russia's trials and tribulations published last summer in *The American Prospect* by the political philosopher Stephen Holmes, entitled "What Russia Teaches Us Now."¹ I want to highlight not only the article's description of Russian society, but also the dilemma that such an article presents for those foreigners who feel some connection to Russia as a society in a state of normalized upheaval.

Holmes is worried most of all not about Russia, but about Liberalism, and Russia's plight presents us with a lesson we should learn about Liberalism. He argues that there simply is no liberal society in Russia today because there is no effective state that can support the infrastructure of liberal forms of life. Liberal societies, he writes, depend on a strong, efficient state with the power to do the minimal but necessary things that liberal publics demand: the enforcement of contracts, the supervision of the physical safety of its citizens, the collection of taxes and the operation of impartial courts, etc. In Russia, by contrast, there is a "grave crisis of

governability...an incoherent state tenuously connected to a demoralized society" (Holmes 32).
He supplies a familiar list of horrors:

Symptoms of internal disarray are ubiquitous: prison outbreaks, railroad bandits, soldiers begging cigarettes in public places, packs of dogs on the streets of provincial cities, unrepaired oil leaks...The debility of the Russian state not only inflicts suffering on Russians, but also is the source of new specters haunting the West: more Chernobyl-style meltdowns, over-the-counter sales of nuclear know-how to rogue states, the proclaimed technical and financial inability to liquidate existing weapons, shamefully maintained oil tankers, a contagious disease crisis that may eventually threaten Europe, organized crime activity metastasizing alarmingly abroad, the inability of the central government to live up to its obligations (as in the case of NASA's space station), a questionable command-and-control system, and lack of coordination among the defense and foreign ministries on questions vital to neighboring states (Holmes 31).

The government lacks resources and purposes, and...incumbents are more keen on harvesting kickbacks and insider giveaways than on solving public problems.

While not especially oppressive (with the important exception of Chechnya), the government is fragmented, unaccountable, and seemingly indifferent to the plight of its citizens. Social services atrophy and life expectancy plummets, while ordinary Russians, expecting nothing from politics, eke out a living on their own. The defeat of liberal reforms is most clearly visible in the wall of indifference separating state from society. Corrupt incumbents, uninterested in oppression, live in a separate world from depoliticized citizens. Moscow, a sparkling enclave that misleads foreign observers, also symbolizes the total disregard of the Russian rich for the Russian poor. (Holmes 33).

These citations are taken from only the first three pages of the nine page article.

Anticipating some objections, I should make clear that this account has its problems. Holmes is not a Russian or Soviet specialist. He is a student of the history of Liberalism. He describes Russian society in order to remind the readers of *The American Prospect* of the importance of the state in governments constructed on liberal principles, a fact that the currently popular critique of American "big government" overlooks. In other words, his generalizations about Russia could be read as being culturally insensitive, ethnocentric, and partial. Such a criticism raises its own problems, however, but I want to defend the utility of Holmes' descriptions to my interests because he creates in the reader who has something more than a casual interest in Russia an immense discomfort. It is this discomfort that I would like to now highlight.

As I mentioned above, this bleak picture is no doubt too simple. On the one hand, we might react: What student of Russian history could ever seriously think that Russia will become a liberal state like the liberal states of the West? And on the other hand, we hear as we read the article a little voice reminding us that it will take time to make Liberalism real in Russia; if we wanted, we could reassure Holmes that Russia will build liberalism like Merrill-Lynch builds its reputation: one investor at a time. But there is yet another voice we can hear that questions the very framework of Holmes' worldview, and in particular his assumption that liberal institutions came primarily from liberal ideas, that Russia is yet another place where political ideas are simply being put "into life," as the old Soviet phrase had it.

A number of obvious questions should be addressed to the article. There is our hunch that the picture Holmes paints needs remixing, recoloring, redrawing; we could productively ask: How might an anthropologist supplement this article? What kind of cultural knowledge could adjust this image of ruins? What is Holmes missing by not being on the ground, in the language and culture, near the people?

I would not dispute the fact that this description leaves out a great deal, but I would still argue the relevance for thinking about the big picture within which the Russian ruins are evolving. And this big picture must include at least some reference to the realms of governmentality within which daily life is lived. It would, I fear, be a serious mistake to assume that the level of daily life explored by anthropologists could somehow show that the macro analyses of systemic social breakdown are simply wrong. But at the same time we cannot simply celebrate the more spectacular sides of the contemporary Russian spectacle, assuming

that culture (whatever that is) always pulls through, as for example the culture of the woodland tribes of native Americans is pulling through in the casinos of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. And on the other hand it is difficult to imagine any non-Russian anthropologist arguing for the rightness of some form of Russian nationalism as a legitimate strategy for coping with the devolution of society.

One response to this question of the placing and placement of anthropological knowledge in the complicated intellectual terrain of post-communism might begin by answering another question: Is the most compelling task faced by Russians the construction of the Russian state so that it can establish and guarantee liberal rights? This is certainly the implication of Holmes' article. Another approach, more congenial to an anthropological sensibility, might be to set aside establishment of liberal rights that descend from the 18th century, or rather to leave them to the political scientists, and to focus instead on the amorphous, evolving nature of the personal and cultural interactions that constitute democracies. At first glance this might look like I'm setting aside the 18th century only to be able to take it up again, but I am speaking of democracy here as something to be rethought in particular settings of culture and identity and not as procedures to be legislated. This means thinking about those ideological constraints that prohibit the emergence of cultural forms around which democratic processes might coalesce.

We can find some assistance here in William Connolly's description that at the heart of democratic forms of life as they have appeared in the West is an agonistic discursive conflict between identity and difference.² The democratic political and social systems that derive from Western European roots somehow acknowledge the problem and have evolved elaborate ideological mechanisms to control it: Difference is spun off as Otherness, and Otherness then congeals around Identity, and the cycle goes around again with the splintering off again of Difference. This language may be foreign to some, but it is simply shorthand for referring to the fact that modern politics is increasingly and inevitably a politics of identity. For Connolly, this fact means that a reinvigorated political life within and between states requires that individuals come to understand their own subjectivities as a product of situated plays of identity and difference.

I would like to highlight one point that Connolly emphasizes about this condition of contemporary democracy. This is his questioning of the sufficiency of the idea of sovereignty as defining the way that individuals can relate to the world. He points out that the most important

social issues no longer exist within the neat confines of states; more and more are our social issues inherently inter-and trans-national. He suggests that we "supplement and challenge structures of territorial democracy with a politics of nonterritorial democratization of global issues." Many anthropologists are experts at living a nonterritorial life, although the creation of a non-state diplomacy that would seek to tunnel beneath both states and worldwide financial institutions to connect with other collectivities in other states is of course a problem beyond any single field or discipline.

III.

And here I will bring this paper full circle by suggesting that one way to bring together the dilemmas of teachers before students and of anthropologists before Russian society is to return to the concept of diplomacy. I certainly do not mean diplomacy in the old sense of interstate governmental relations, but rather in the very broad sense of practices of language that shape our understandings of the world.³ This is the broad sense of the term developed by Costas Constantinou. Is it possible to somehow address the university's ruins by reconstituting and greatly expanding the vision of what diplomacy is and what it does by unpacking the ideas and practices that constitute the contemporary diplomatic negotiations of global capitalism; by showing students how they exist in the world as diplomats, as experts in both practical theory and theoretical practice; and by creating new contexts where configurations of identity/difference can act on each other in mutually advantageous ways. This means mobilizing diplomatic resources and making selective commitments to others in a common diplomatic project. This is of course a vague formulation. It is in part a product of feeling caught between two significant ruinations. I would like to end by at least placing on the table the possibility that SOYUZ might want to expand its role from facilitating largely North American scholarly connections to participating in a kind of diplomacy that might contribute to the reshaping of both classrooms and formerly "classless" societies.

To begin with the obvious: such a diplomacy might be organized around pedagogical initiatives that could involve the internet, although we would have to be aware of the ability of the kind of diplomacy I'm talking about to be absorbed into the channels of "connection" already naturalized by Microsoft and other mass media conglomerates, and to realize the differing modes

and meaning of access to technology here and there. In a larger sense, however, it is not so much one more channel by which to connect a group of Russians and a group of Americans that is necessary, as a kind of interaction not solely marked from the outset by "CULTURAL DIFFERENCE," by the problem of representing America to Russia and representing Russia to America. Perhaps some kind of publishing venture could be started by Soyuz dedicated to the anthropological illumination of the contemporary cultural conditions that various groups in both places are struggling within. (For example, Americans might seek to illuminate the condition of living in a society where pre-adolescents commit murder at the playground because their girlfriends broke up with them.) How can new "diplomatic channels" be used in order to develop in both groups a sense of the struggle to lead a life with integrity, however that may be defined? How can both groups that enter into negotiation (using both here as a shorthand for what are of course collections of backgrounds, traits, histories, and problems, not "Russians" and "Americans") establish interests *in common*, that is, how can transnational publics take shape outside the always present channels already created by consumption?

Perhaps the effort should be focused more on developing curricula about one's own country, but with the collaboration of the other side's scholars and teachers, who would know what kinds of questions are most compelling, interesting, or prone to misunderstanding. What would an anthropological curriculum about American society and history look like, anyway? How should we teach our own dilemmas to students from another culture? And how should we prepare ourselves to read and think about their dilemmas? Perhaps these are the kinds of questions upon which a new practice of diplomacy might found itself.

Notes

1. Stephen Holmes, "What Russia Teaches Us Now", *The American Prospect*, July/August 1997, pp. 30-39.
2. William Connolly, *Identity/Difference* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).
3. Costas M. Constantinou, *On the Way to Diplomacy*. Borderlines, Vol. 7 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).