
RESETTING MODERNITY: A RUSSIAN VERSION

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RUSSIA HAS NEVER BEEN MODERN, but in another way than, say, France. That is, it was never completely and explicitly modern by conventional Western European standards. It lacked the rule of law and democratic politics. It developed powerful natural and exact sciences, but they were used to achieve a quasi religious, that is, charismatically conceived goal: to build a Communist paradise on earth. However, since at least the early eighteenth century, it always strove to be a modern European country. The last attempt coincided with the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev (2008–2012), whose speechwriters and advisors explicitly referred to reset and modernization as the primary goals of the country under a new, young, and seemingly energetic president. In this short essay I would like to test the high truths of Bruno Latour’s *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns* against this rather mundane reality – the third attempt to make Russia modern, to reset its modernity, that is, to reload it again, but with bugs and mistakes eliminated.

Medvedev used the term “modernization” to distance his agenda from Putin’s, who was seen by many observers, including the heads of other states, as the author of a rather straightforward [ORG]^[1]

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script “you’ll sit for four years in this power seat and then you will give it back to me.” In his September 2009 manifesto “Go, Russia!” Medvedev wrote:

The impressive legacy of the two greatest modernisations in our country’s history – that of Peter the Great (imperial) and the Soviet one – unleashed ruin, humiliation and resulted in the deaths of millions of our countrymen. ... Today is the first time in our history that we have a chance to prove to ourselves and the world that Russia can develop in a democratic way. That a transition to the next, higher stage of civilization is possible. And this will be accomplished through non-violent methods.

[1] For a brief explanation of these abbreviations, which refer to the modes explored in the AIME project, see the glossary in this volume (r·m! 545–49).

The reset thus meant eliminating the bug called violence; persuade rather than coerce, rely on self-interest rather than on command. Modernization thus would mean Russia finally joining the club of the democratic countries of Western Europe and Northern America.

In international relations the novelty of the situation was also captured by the English term “reset.” It was used by the Obama administration to describe the new effort to efface the pile of mounting conflicts between Russia and the West and to re-engage Russia in joint efforts of the civilized world to solve common problems. President Obama and his staff decided to treat Medvedev as if he not only really wanted to build a modern country based on the rule of law, but also as if he had realistic chances of circumventing Putin and achieving it. Vice President Joe Biden was the first to openly use the term, when at the Munich Security Conference in February 2009 he stated:

The last few years have seen a dangerous drift in relations between Russia and the members of our Alliance. It is time – to paraphrase President Obama – it’s time to press the reset button and to revisit the many areas where we can and should be working together with Russia. (Stent 217)

An era of this reset thus ignored the fallout from the 2008 Russian–Georgian war and ushered Russia back into the family of civilized states. The main achievements internationally that followed in its wake were the signing of the new START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty), reducing the number of nuclear warheads and launchers, and US–Russian cooperation on supplying NATO troops in Afghanistan. The term “reset” has become so popular in the parlance of the political class in Russia that the main Medvedev think tank named a section of its programmatic report, calling for a decisive budgetary reform as the main driver of renewal, “Re-loading the

economic model.” (Obretennie budushchego, Strategiya 2012 79; Trans. Kharkhordin)

But, a reader may interject now, the main tenets of the AIME project (An Inquiry into Modes of Existence) or the title of the exhibition at the ZKM | Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe (Reset Modernity) are all about resetting modernity in the entire world, not about reforms to eschew the backwardness of Russian institutions and finally modernize them to this end, thus making Russia a copy of what has already been achieved in France, Germany, or America. Who cares that the Russian elite, together with their US counterparts, were using the words “reset,” “modernity,” and “modernization,” when the goal is to reset that age-old modernist project rather than help someone finally fine-tune its previous version and make it accomplished? If we care about Gaia, if the key choice is “modernize or ecologize,” then resetting modernity is not about helping countries like Russia or Brazil to finally get the old modernity right. The goal is to reset it anew, in full awareness of the multiplicity of modes of existence, some of which old modernity valorized too much and some of which it really tried to trample underfoot.

An answer to such an interjection would be: Listen, the experience of not-yet-modern countries is important because they might be closer to the new reset modernity than those that have it in the fully developed form. Those who have it in a well-developed form will have to reload all the software, so to speak, while the backward modernizers still have the vestiges of the premodern era flourishing as part of their life. For example, the modes of being of [ME] and [RE] are cherished and are not shielded away from as non-scientific nonsense; [RE] and the audacity it takes for the stone to leap across the abyss of nonexistence to reproduce itself is not an exquisite philosophical truth discovered by Alfred North Whitehead in *The Concept of Nature* and meta-physically systematized by Latour in *Inquiry*, but an

¹ US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton meets with Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov in Geneva on 6 March 2009, where she handed a block with a red button marked “reset” in English and “overload” in Russian to him.

everyday perception, and so on. These vestiges will be then easier to integrate into the new reset modernity, because here some existence has never been modern even in its name. One is not calling upon others to go premodern, of course. Rather, one is saying that a full reload would not be necessary in these cases, or a different type of reload might be needed. For instance, if gift-giving and exchange of favors between friends are still central to these not-yet-fully-modernized bundles of humans and nonhumans, appeals to “diseconomize” the ongoing



² The block with a red button marked “reset” in English and “overload” in Russian.

^[3] Please see also the video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OcdLcHAmw0>.



economization of the economy are easier to understand, because in such bundles one has never lived in the fully functioning allegedly self-regulating system where a meta-dispatcher called the market reigns over everything.

This statement (that modernity reload might be easier or different in not-yet-fully-modernized places) should come with a caveat, the US secretary one month after Biden’s speech: the US secretary of state Hillary Clinton met Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov in Geneva, she gave him a small gift box. It contained a red button emblazoned with the word “reset” on it, in both English and Russian (as she thought). Lavrov looked confused and then laughed: “You got it wrong!” (“Clinton Goofs on Russian Translation”). The Russian word on the button was *perezgruzka*, not *perezgruzka* (what would have been the right term).^[3] The Russian term engraved by Clinton’s assistants meant “overload,” “overcharge,” or a g-force, say, that pilots feel in a too rapidly accelerating military jet. If we are too fast with the thesis stated above, we may get an overload of modernity, rather than its reload.

For example, some would say that after the second swap of places between Medvedev and Putin in 2012, Russia finally decided to abandon its attempts to become the West, that is, to catch up and finish modernization old-style, and instead it is trying now to reset the old modernity worldwide

in its own fashion. After his return to power Putin has not only stopped the rhetoric of modernization with a human face, he also quickly cancelled many initiatives of the Medvedev era. Of course, his power moves might be taken as premodern politics in a postmodern world, rather than moves aimed at resetting the old rotten modernity. For example, even after the 2008 war in Georgia a popular suspicion was that Russia, with its stress on sovereignty, was within the nineteenth century agenda of leaders like Bismarck, and thus premodern. Astute commentators, like Václav Havel, Lech Wałęsa, and Alexander Kwaśniewski, however, noticed the novelty of this alleged return of sovereign Realpolitik. In their words, Russia was “pursuing a nineteenth century agenda with twenty-first century tactics and methods” (Stent 226).

Indeed, warfare in Ukraine in 2014 has been called “hybrid” by both journalists and scholars, and this hybrid character, many would argue, is a novelty rather than a return to worn-out and well-tried premodern tactics (Cullen Dunn and Bobick). Other measures of Putin are also nonmodern, one might argue. In 2013 the Russian state effectively introduced laws on the criminal prosecution of blasphemy, allegedly in the wake of the 2012 Pussy Riot trial when it had found serious difficulties in charging these punk rock (or performance art) ladies with “hooliganism motivated by religious hatred” (Elden). The Pussy Riot assault in February 2012 was itself a result of a widespread feeling that the state was going way too far in supporting official religion, with religion paying the government back with incantations of legitimacy of the powers that be. So, the issues of [REU] came to the fore of contemporary Russian politics, no matter how allegedly secular it is. Also, opinion polls during the arrest and trial of Pussy Riot, which revealed a clear conservative majority, gave Putin a gift, which he could have only dreamed about before, but did not have at hand. The state has discovered a silent majority,

which seemed absent during the street protests of 2011–2012, but which suddenly emerged on its own, and on which the state could now rely! The issue formed a public, but a clearly conservative and non-democratic public that came out of its shadow existence. The tears of Putin during his speech to his supporters at a huge rally on the night of 4 March 2012, when preliminary results of the presidential elections were declared, could testify to the difficulty of forging this public. Since then, the Russian president masters the secrets of [POL] speech well, maintaining the ever-recurring circle in order to ingrain democracy as a habit (as the Inquiry would have it) (343). The fact that many observers would not take it to be democracy by Western standards at all, does not bother him.

And he ecologizes (in the conventional sense of the term)! If Medvedev rarely stressed ecology, Putin made it his trump card or a key political stunt. Thus, he directed the endangered crane in their migration flight using a hang-glider (Amos), helped release Amur tigers back into the wilderness (Reevell), and took care of whales (Parfirt). Please take a look at the official pictures offered by the Kremlin to get a feel for how the very vastness of Russia, and the diversity of its flora and fauna are enrolled by the current regime to vouch for it. Putin was also one of the first in Russia to state publicly the fact that oil and gas economics might be on the wane, and the real struggles of the twenty-first century will be over resources such as fresh water. Hence saving Lake Baikal, for example, with its huge reserves of potable water is of immense importance to Russia and perhaps to earth itself (Parfirt).
To repeat again: I am citing all these examples for one reason. Whether arguments for Vladimir Putin as a nonmodernizer (in the sense of Laour’s Inquiry) are just a joke, and will be clearly knocked down like a straw man, or whether a serious argument could be built with rim that he was part of a real movement to reset the old-type modernity, one should be

wary of such type of accounts for fear of ending up with an overload of modernity rather than with its reload. The reset of modernity should not suddenly be just a setback sending us to premodern condition of faith [REL], simple adulation of the possessed souls [MET], valorizing habit [HAB] and the silent reproduction of fine genes and forces [REP].^[3]

But if one does not want to be sent back to premodern [REL], for example, how could one ensure that one is getting out of the current predicament without falling into the already tried and clearly dysfunctional condition? If Putin is a symbol of premodern life, rather than resetting modernity, as some would argue, how do we distinguish [REL] as part of the life to come from part of the life that was (and then it would be clear that Putin’s use of [REL] is not what Inquiry wants)? Here a point about a recalling of modernity – a metaphor that was proposed in Inquiry (16) next to resetting it, could help us (and perhaps even save us). This image overtly suggests that one should recall modernity like a faulty car by the automobile industry, when producers or users have suddenly discovered a decisive deficiency, and some components of all cars of a particular model have to be replaced. What this image inadvertently implies, though, is that modernity is a machine that can be reset or recalled and refurbished, that is, that dealing with modernity relies primarily on the [TEC] mode of existence.

Reading about [TEC] in Chapter 8 of Inquiry, we learned that its decisive difference from reproduction [REP] is that a tree cannot start over again, its consecutive leaps across the hiatus of nonexistence are a one-way street, so to speak. By contrast, an engine can be reassembled, can jump back over this hiatus, or face it again, as it were. This is starting all over again several times in a row, when an engineer tinkers and by groping tries to go from one obstacle to

the next one in order to resolve the issue, defines this mode of existence (215, 227). The chapter also says that modernity mistakenly takes technicians to be sort of lower-ranking scientists, as though technicians were only implementing ideas preconceived by scientists. So, if we are to restore ontological dignity to beings of technology [TEC], we should establish different transactions with them – only then will the verb “ecologize” become an alternative to “modernize.” An example is given:

... the Letter of Scripture remain silent without the Spirit that blows where it will. This is even truer of the bleached bones of the technical object that are waiting for the spirit of technique to raise them up, recover them with flesh, put them back together, transfigure them – resuscitate them, if the word is not too strong. (231–32)

So resetting modernity, if one treats it in the [TEC] mode of being, is not just about changing some part in the machine, or resetting the software program that runs it; it is about resuscitating the machine, a clearly religious act. Because [REL], as we know from Chapter 11 of Inquiry, is about angels coming down during apparitions to say words that are capable of renewing those to whom they are addressed, to raise and transform them from the faltering into the supported and reinforced ones, to again and again tell them “I love you” and thus resuscitate and save. It is because of this that the [REL] mode of being transforms those addressed into persons. But these words need to be repeated incessantly, it is part of the endless reprise (303, 306–08).
If we follow this account of [TEC] and [REL], we arrive at the following: to reset modernity is to engage in the endless reprise of the words telling modernity that it is truly being loved, and thus – to

[3] The last three modes of existence mentioned are the three most ignored by modernity, as we know from Inquiry (288). Restoring ontological dignity to them, for example, should not be viewed as if from now on they should be practiced in premodern purity.

renew modernity. Of course, so far angels only came down to people and uttered words that transformed those addressed into persons – these very unique persons with proper names. The first attempt at such [REL] words, but addressed to modernity, not to individual human beings, was Latour's book. He told modernity it is loved. He sought to bring spirit to the bare bones of it, and to call it with a proper personal name: not modernity with a small m, but Gaia as a real person. The exhibition at the ZKM | Karlsruhe can be thought as one of the next steps in this endless reprise of addressing modernity with love and saving it as Gaia, which the *Inquiry* project is trying to unleash. But only life will tell whether the words of the *Inquiry* had enough angelic qualities; whether it carries the Word.

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