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Social history methodology and contemporary Russian political science

Abstract: Interdisciplinary relations bring a large variety of instruments to the researchers. Some fruitful methodological approaches may be obtained by specialists in political science from social history. Social history describes different spheres of society's life (including political one) in order to show their close linkages and interdependence. Some of social history studies give us much valuable information and inferences concerning politics. That is why methodological approaches of social history should be carefully explored in order to understand what advantage they could provide to political studies.

Key words: social history, methodology of political science, Russian political science

What is social history? This is a branch of history which was institutionalized after World War II under the influence of French historians. It may be considered a reaction to the traditional history that is the history of political and military events and political and military leaders.

Fernand Braudel (one of the main figures in social history) did not like traditional event-based narrative. He said that events (political events either) were like ripples on the surface of history ocean. And one should not explore ripples if he wants to explore ocean. One should explore the depth. So historians should explore slow changing structures – social institutes first of all.

Nevertheless, so-called *new social history* appeared in the 1960s. It explores not only social structures, but culture, mentality, political events and so on.

One of the modern definitions determines social history as a branch of history that includes history of ordinary people and their strategies of coping with life. So strategies and practices became the main object of the new social history.

Braudel wanted social history to combine different knowledge of different kind in order to construct what he called a *total history*. But it was

difficult to reach this goal and now social history is often described as a set of different subfields such as demographic history, ethnic history (including black history), labor history, women's history, gender history, history of the family, history of education, urban history, rural history, etc.

In Russia social history became popular about twenty years ago (a little bit after *Alltagsgeschichte* – everyday life history), though the expression *social history* has been known for more than a century. Not so often, but sometimes Russian social historians write about political sphere, political events, political culture and political institutions and trends.

Many of those social historians in Russia were inspired by *Sheila Fitzpatrick* and her books on Soviet Union social history in 1920s–1930s. *Stalin's Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village after Collectivization* (Oxford University Press, 1994) and *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (Oxford University Press, 1999) and their Russian translations were popular among specialists. *Fitzpatrick* described behavior patterns, practices, strategies and showed their dependence of the political situation in the Soviet Union. Some conclusions were arguable, but the methodology was fruitful.

In the late 1990s, first studies of Russian social historians appeared. First of all, a yearbook *Social History* must be mentioned. In 2008 for example, they published a special issue – a number of articles under the common title *Social History and Politics*.

One of the articles is devoted to African students in the Soviet Union in 1960s. The soviet authorities wanted these Africans to become agents of influence in their native states. The author uses archive records to describe the life-style of foreign students in the USSR and analyzes their experience, notably race relations and political cooperation with Soviet authorities. He claims that “the Soviet ambition to ‘win the spirits and the souls’ of African youth apparently failed” (*Socialnaya*, 2009, p. 343).

Another researcher analyses the significant increase of the communist party in 1920s after the death of Lenin. She shows that the increase affected political culture level in local party organizations (it lowered) and led to the appearance of new models of political behavior. The local party organizations became more dependent on the higher party authorities.

Some historians use a microhistory method. One of them is *Oleg Leibovich* from Perm (a city that lies north-east of Moscow). Several years ago he published a book under the title *In M-city*. “M” means Molotov – this is a former name of Perm. *Leibovich* studied in detail several cases of city's life from 1940s and 1950s using records from the local archives:

the citizens' appeals, the records of state and communist party organizations, the statistics.

For example, he studied a case of city-gang with members from wealthy *nomenklatura* families. Or another example – story of a journalist who wrote critical articles about local authorities. Author focused on those little deviations in the official narrative, in the private appeals, in the mass media, in the behavior of officials and citizens that witnessed global changes in social and political life in the Soviet Union.

An interesting moment is that Russian social historians write about political sphere more often when they explore the 20th century. And the situation is the same in Europe, though European social historians traditionally prefer to explore late Middle Ages and early Modern period. For example, we can take a famous book of *Reinhard Sieder, Social history of the family* (1987). Sieder does not mention politics in the parts devoted to the periods before the 20th century. And the situation is quite different in the parts devoted to the 20th century. Even titles of these parts reflect political influence: *Global economic crisis and unemployment* or *Family in times of national-socialism* and so on. Why is it so? It is obvious that in the 19th century and earlier politics did not influence changes of social life, social structure and private life in such a dramatic way as it did in the 20th century. Bulgarian novelist *Angel Wagenstein* defined the situation in the 20th century in one of his books in the following way: "I by myself have never taken interest in politics, but politics had interest in me." Ordinary people had to find new strategies of coping with life according to dramatically changing world and living conditions.

What common features can be found in the abovesaid and other contemporary social history studies?

Firstly, all of them are based on original sources including archive records, statistics, and even materials which could not be considered reliable (that is, private documents, interviews containing data on people's awareness level, attitudes and expectations). Exploring official records, social historians try not only to find out facts, but to explore style of the documents to obtain extra information on the author, circumstances of the document creation and so on.

Secondly, social historians have their own interest in the above said documents. They are looking for deltas and gaps, gaps between the situa-

tions, deeds, thoughts that are reconstructed on the document base and the situations, deeds and thoughts that were normal at this time at this place. Of course *norm* is a rather loose concept. Sometimes we cannot be sure whether we know what the norm was. Or we cannot be sure that our knowledge of norm is true, is reliable.

Thirdly, social historians try to explain the found gaps, try to understand what they mean. Every gap is potentially supposed to be a manifestation of a still unknown social, cultural or political phenomenon. Sometimes it is so, but sometimes this gap is not systematic, it is a single or rear event. Unfortunately, rear or single events are often represented by the researches as systematic. For example, many people in Russia think that great Russian writers – *Dostoyevsky*, *Tolstoy* and others – expressed in their novels ideas that were typical for the Russian society of those times. But in fact it was not so. Thus we have a methodological problem of the frontier between the microhistory level and the macrohistory level. What evidences do we need to say that this fact or this point of view or this strategy is systematic? Sometimes historians use statistics, quantitative methods (which were especially popular in the 1960s) to prove that this situation or this way of behavior was not rare.

As the result of the *gap analysis* we can update our knowledge of ideas, strategies, social and political institutes, their functioning and evolution. We can obtain new models of interdependence of the institutes or new explanation of the well-known facts and so on. All these models and explanations in social history are aimed to take into consideration as much as possible: social, political, economical, cultural and other aspects.

Sometimes historians try to compose a *total history* of some period. But this is a titanic work as one can see by the example of *Fernand Braudel's* opus magnum *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean world in the age of Philip II*. Similar book of about twelve hundred pages *Social history of Russia of imperial period* by *Boris Mironov* from the Saint Petersburg University was published a decade ago in Russia.

Fourthly, it is obvious that an attempt to construct *total history* of some period or simply to analyze one case in a manner of *total history* gives us two corner-stone questions.

The first question is: “What depends on what? What influences what?” Whether political sphere is more important than cultural or whether (according to *Karl Marx*) economic sphere determines all the rest and so on. *Sheila Fitzpatrick*, for example, writes a lot about family policy of the soviet government in the 1930s and about the impact that the policy had on

the families and matrimonial behavior (Ficpatrik, 2001, p. 172). But she does not mention that the matrimonial behavior caused birth rate decline and by this way influenced the government policy. The government had to take into account what people did and what people thought about family. So it was a case of interdependence, but not only of one-way dependence. But *Sheila Fitzpatrick* did not want to show this interdependence. Her aim was to show how totalitarianism had been determining people's lives.

Although methodologically the idea of interdependence in the social sciences seems to be obvious, not many authors use it in their research. It is easier to find causes and consequences than to admit the fact that they are interacting.

If one still wants to speak in terms of causes and consequences, it is better to do it this way: structures and processes are causes and consequences of the events, decisions and deeds (Krom, 2010, p. 107). It means that structures and processes (or procedures) determine human deeds and these human deeds in their turn lead to changes (or deltas) in the structures and processes.

The second corner-stone question is how to design a research, how to organize material in the book or in the article, taking into consideration the interdependence approach. If politics influences social life and social life influences politics, from what point should we start to describe this interdependence? Should we start with politics or with social life? To say the truth, social history has no answer to this question. There is no common or general approach. Research design, order of the materials in the paper are set depending on the studied case, the social history subfield, purposes of the research and individual preferences of the researcher.

So, as it is seen, social history has a number of methodological problems. But in contrast of many other fields of research, social historians (Russian as well) realize these problems and try to solve them both in theory and in practice. They are very active and productive in producing new approaches and testing them on the material of different subfields. Moreover, these efforts seem effective due to the fact of usage qualitative and quantitative methods. All this may be of benefit to the contemporary political science, especially in the way of combining political history and the history of social, cultural and other spheres.

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Metodologia historii społecznej i współczesna rosyjska nauka o polityce

Streszczenie

Relacje interdyscyplinarne oferują badaczom szeroki zakres instrumentów. Specjaliści z zakresu nauk politycznych niektóre pożyteczne podejścia metodologiczne mogą zaczerpnąć z pola historii społecznej. Historia społeczna opisuje różne sfery życia społecznego (w tym sferę polityczną) by pokazać ich bliskie powiązania oraz wzajemną zależność. Niektóre studia z zakresu historii społecznej dostarczają nam wartościową wiedzę oraz ważne wnioski dotyczące polityki. Podejścia metodologiczne wypracowane przez historyków społecznych powinny podlegać uważnej eksploracji, w celu ustalenia korzyści, jaką mogą one przynieść w ramach badań politologicznych.

Słowa kluczowe: historia społeczna, metodologia nauk o polityce, rosyjska nauka o polityce