

REVIEW

Stephen J. Collier, *Post-Soviet Social: Neoliberalism, Social Modernity, Biopolitics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), ISBN: 978-0691148304

Stephen Collier's book offers a detailed and insightful account of Soviet social modernity and post-Soviet neoliberal reforms in Russia. In his critical interrogation of the nexus between neoliberalism and the Soviet project of social welfare, Collier draws on Foucault's theorising on biopolitics and governmentality, and, like Foucault, he is dissatisfied with the way in which neoliberalism has been understood by its critics, either as an abstract generalisation or as a fixed set of particular policies and practices. (245-246) Following Foucault, Collier examines neoliberalism "as a form of critical reflection on governmental practice distinguished by an attempt to reanimate the principle of classical liberalism in light of new circumstances." (2) His overall analytical approach, which he elsewhere¹ calls topological, is also inspired by Foucault's later work. According to Collier, the purpose of the topological approach is "to show how styles of analysis, techniques or forms of reasoning associated with 'advanced liberal' government are being recombined with other forms, and to diagnose the governmental ensembles that emerge from these recombinations."²

As the definition makes clear, to be successful, such an approach relies on detailed empirical investigations, and as Collier³ himself explains in a recent interview for "*Theory, Society and Culture*," it involves analysing particular cases and being attentive to their unique characteristics. For Collier's purposes, the case of Russia "provides a good site for revisiting the legacy of an important and distinctive form of social government, and for asking how neoliberal reforms propose to reshape it." (2) Although somewhat atypical,⁴ the Russian case is representative of other post-Soviet cases, and is also decisive as far as neoliberalism is concerned, as the Soviet project served as one of the biggest challenges to which it had to respond. (20) Despite its significance, this case has received surprisingly little scholarly attention compared to the liberal cases. (20) The reasons informing the

¹ In fact, he considers Foucault's "shift to a more dynamic topological analysis of power relations" as the most "novel and important in Foucault's 1978-9 lectures": Stephen J. Collier, "Topologies of Power: Foucault's Analysis of Political Government Beyond 'Governmentality'" *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 26, No. 6 (2009), 98; see 78-108.

² *Ibid.*, 99.

³ Stephen J. Collier, "Foucault, Assemblages, and Topology," interview with Simon Dawes. *Theory, Culture, and Society* blog. March 23, 2011. <http://theoryculturesociety.blogspot.com/2011/03/interview-with-stephen-j-collier-on.html>

⁴ *Ibid.*

choice of the case point towards Collier's more general affinity with Foucault's work, whose genealogies often focused on "hard/least likely, easy/most likely, maximum variation or anomalous/extreme/deviant/outlying or paradigmatic" cases.⁵

In some academic disciplines,⁶ receptions of Foucault's later work often belong to two distinct scholarships, one on biopolitics and the other on governmentality. This is an unfortunate outcome, and something that Collier avoids by using his topological approach, which allows problematising both biopolitics and neoliberalism and exploring their relationship along the lines only briefly sketched by Foucault, i.e. with neoliberalism placed within the horizon of biopolitical governing as well as providing this governing with a specific logic and direction. As Collier explains,

There is no underlying 'logic' of biopolitics but different ways on which the government of living beings is made a problem of reflection and intervention. What is most interesting in Foucault's work—and what I try to develop for the Soviet and post-Soviet cases—is an analysis of the successive *formations* of biopolitical governing, and of the different ways that biopolitics has been *problematized*. (17; original emphasis)

A topological approach also encourages investigations at different levels of analysis; in Collier's book, developments at the national level are examined alongside, and in connection to, local developments in two small industrial Russian cities—Belaya Kalitva and Rodniki. As the main form of socialist urban development, these cities are representative of many others, and therefore provide a useful site for understanding both Soviet biopolitics and post-Soviet reforms. (3-4) Indeed, they provided the author with "insight into critical nodes where fields of power come into contact and are made visible; into singular realities whose intelligibility has to be found in diverse experiences that lie beyond them." (29) In addition, they provided "an ethical orientation to the fate of a curious and preponderant kind of human collectivity, to the apartment blocks, heating pipes, budgets, and people whose lives depend on these mundane systems—and whose modernity has been shattered." (29)

Collier's book is divided into two parts, with the first part offering a genealogy of Soviet biopolitics through the prism of city-building as "the distinctive Soviet form of urban planning" (20) and "a key figure of the Soviet project of social modernity." (2) The second part examines post-Soviet neoliberal reforms in Russia, with a special focus on budget and infrastructure reforms.

The account presented in the first part is an excellent example of a genealogical inquiry, careful and detailed, based on the analysis of numerous policy and technical documents, with the use of original Russian terms which is both appropriate and helpful. Anyone with a direct knowledge of Soviet reality will find Collier's observations to be accurate, and any scholar interested in the issues under consideration will find his analysis to be original and insightful.

In tracing the emergence of what he calls the "Soviet social," (22) Collier considers different stages in the development of the biopolitical project in Russia (i.e. the absolutist-

⁵ Srdjan Vucetic, "Genealogy as a research tool in International Relations," *Review of International Studies*, 37 (2011), 1301; see 1295-1312.

⁶ International Relations is but one example...

disciplinarian stage of the 18th century; the sovereigntist-developmental stage of the 19th; and, finally, the Soviet disciplinary-biopolitical stage). He shows this project to be a site of contestation and conflict among different approaches to managing adjustments between population, production and social welfare (e.g. debates between 'genetic' and 'teleological' approaches to planning in the 1920s).

Having rejected from the outset liberal ideas about the autonomous nature of 'economy' and 'society' that needs to be respected, Soviet authorities envisaged the management of collective life through total planning. (21) City-building represented a significant element of the Soviet project, as it played a key role in both reorganising populations around industrial enterprises and fulfilling the needs of these populations. According to Collier, while the general directions for city-building were laid down in the 1930s, "it was only after World War II that city-building consolidated as an apparatus of transformation." (21) What it meant in practice was the establishment of infrastructure and budgetary systems as mechanisms through which urban life was organised and managed and the emergence of small industrial cities—such as Belaya Kalitva and Rodniki—as the main space for forging the Soviet social. In Collier's opinion, the Soviet social represented a form of modern life with its own 'forms of expertise', 'values and normative orientations', 'institutional and material apparatuses' (e.g. infrastructures, bureaucracies, resource flows), programmatic logic and "patterns of adjustment between populations, production, and social welfare provisioning." (21) Soviet urbanism was characterised by rigid interconnections, centralised utilities and inflexible relations between population and production (102), reflected in and produced by institutional and material apparatuses built around city-forming enterprises. It is these features that, according to Collier, presented one of the most serious challenges for neoliberal reformers.

The second part of the book considers reforms attempted in post-Soviet Russia with a view to diagnosing their nature (i.e. whether they could be called 'neoliberal' in any meaningful sense), and evaluating their impact on the Soviet social (i.e. what their targets were and whether it was a case of destruction, displacement, accommodation or something else). Here, like in the first part of the book, as we follow Collier's genealogical inquiry, a picture emerges that is much more complicated and nuanced than conventional wisdom would have it. The author definitely succeeds in 'making the familiar strange' and remains open-minded to what he will discover (indeed, in the book's introduction, Collier says that some of the findings came as a surprise to him, which, again, is a characteristic outcome of a properly conducted genealogy). His analysis of budget and infrastructure reforms (normally not the most exciting of subjects) is lucid and engaging.

Reform documents of the 1990s, such as the 1991 "Window of Opportunity: the Grand Bargain for Democracy in the Soviet Union," paved the way for a set of policies that most would characterise as neoliberal: "stabilization, price liberalization, privatization, and the freeing of international trade." (129) However, the first-generation reforms did not amount to some coherent neoliberal whole, but rather represented "an ensemble of heterogeneous elements." (139) The economic collapse of the 1990s, the destructive impact of reforms and associated difficulties did not result in the general collapse of Russian small cities, there was no mass exodus and the substantive economy survived. (6-7) Instead, it was the 'second-generation reforms' of the 2000s that targeted the very systems that pre-

served life in small cities, hence Colliers' focus on "budgets, spending norms, pipes, and wires." (8) However, while these reforms had neoliberal features (e.g. decentralisation, marketisation, responsabilisation), they represented selective interventions, often limited by the existing infrastructure and institutional arrangements, and, contrary to a widespread belief, did provide for social protection. Indeed, Collier traces these reforms to such thinkers as Buchanan and Stigler, both of whom acknowledged the reality of the social state and attempted to reconcile it with liberal principles. (23)

In light of the above, as Collier⁷ argues, it is unhelpful to limit neoliberalism to a rigid set of policies and to suggest that neoliberal reforms displace the social state; rather, neoliberalism should be understood as:

first, a critique of the outcomes of the existing norms and institutions of social welfare, on the grounds of their inefficiencies and their inequities; second, a politico-philosophical critique of how norms such as social justice or public value are formulated and how the proper scope of governmental activity is conceived; third, a new programming that establishes a novel pattern of correlation between choice mechanisms and social welfare.⁸

Ambitious in its scope and level of detail, theoretically sophisticated and empirically rich, Collier's latest book makes an important contribution to Foucauldian scholarship. In particular, it helps us appreciate the significance and uniqueness of the Soviet biopolitical project, while suggesting a productive line of inquiry into the nexus between neoliberalism and social modernity. It also encourages us to critically interrogate neoliberal narratives in terms of their history and effects, to appreciate the flexibility of neoliberal reforms and to focus on specific practices in order to understand what makes them neoliberal. (248-249)

Volha Piotukh
University of Leeds
School of Politics and International Studies
United Kingdom
V.Piotukh@leeds.ac.uk

⁷ Collier, "Foucault, Assemblages, and Topology."

⁸ Ibid.