



9-2020

### Response to Prof. Ernest B. Hook's Comments On "So-Called Euroasianism"

Dimitry Shlapentokh  
dshlapen@iusb.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [International and Area Studies Commons](#), [Political Science Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

#### Recommended Citation

Shlapentokh, Dimitry (2020) "Response to Prof. Ernest B. Hook's Comments On "So-Called Euroasianism"," *Comparative Civilizations Review*: Vol. 83 : No. 83 , Article 19.  
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol83/iss83/19>

This Letter to the Editor is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Comparative Civilizations Review* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@byu.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@byu.edu), [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

## **Response to Prof. Ernest B. Hook's Comments On "So-Called Euroasianism"**

Dimitry Shlapentokh  
dshlapen@iusb.edu

I was quite pleased by the fact that a professor, a full professor from the prestigious University of California Berkeley, not only read my article, but commented on it. (*Comparative Civilizations Review*: No. 82. 129, 2020) Indeed, millions of articles are published every year, and the vast majority are absolutely ignored.

In order to respond to Professor Hook's criticisms, I believe I need to do the following:

- 1) To provide a short synopsis of my article, "The Twisted Mirror of Perception: Social Science in Service of Political/Ideological Expediency – The Case of Russian Eurasianism." (*Comparative Civilizations Review*: No. 81. 9-29, 2019)

It will help those potential readers who did not read my original article.

- 2) I would not elaborate on Prof. Hook's assertion that I am a "Putinist" and do not see the evil of Putin's dictatorship. The reason for this is simple: the response requires another long, separate letter. And my present response is long enough. At the same time, I would be happy to respond to Professor Hook's statement in a separate letter, of course upon request. Also, Professor Hook as well as others, of course, could find useful information about my views about Putin's regime in my forthcoming book, to be released by Palgrave.
- 3) I will focus on two of Professor Hook's objections:
  - a) I claim that Francis Fukuyama was almost universally accepted in the beginning of the post-Cold War era, and
  - b) I claim that both Gorbachev by the end of his tenure and Yeltsin were viewed quite negatively by the majority of Russians.

Prof. Hook published a critical response to my article on the fate of Eurasianism, the idiosyncratic political/philosophical doctrine which emerged among Russian émigrés in the 1920s. I hold that interest in the creed in the United States and assessment of its influence in Russia has been related not so much to the influence of the teaching in Russia, but to the need of the "market," the general public, political and economic elite, and academia. And this implicitly shows how intellectual output is produced in the West, especially the USA.

Consequently, Western scholars ignored or marginalized Eurasianism when it was quite popular in Russia, plainly because Eurasianism, with its stress on Russian cultural uniqueness and penchant for authoritarian/totalitarian rule, did not fit the prevailing Fukuyamian “end of history.” At the same time, interest in the creed re-emerged in the 2000s and especially after 2014, when American observers started to assert that Eurasianism, or at least such people as Alexander Dugin, became quite influential in shaping Kremlin policy.

It was done at the time when interest in Eurasianism in Russia had declined sharply and Dugin became a political non-entity for the Kremlin.

The reason for such changes in views was, once again, the need of the American public, at least a good part of it – the socio-economic and related political elite. All of them wanted to present Russia as an insane imperialist, pouncing on the peaceful West. Thus, I conclude that many Western, especially American, scholars do not so much study events “as they are,” to paraphrase Leopold von Ranke’s famous expression, but as a “marketable” intellectual product, often decorated with a postmodernist “fig leaf.”

The assumption that American scholars do not engage in abstract detached research but often instinctively look for “marketable” intellectual output, whereas the market could be the public, academia, or government, apparently irritated Prof. Hook and led him to respond to my article, raising several objections. I will limit my analysis to two of them. First, he challenged my assumption that the premise of Fukuyamism was universally accepted. Secondly, he challenged my statement that Gorbachev and Yeltsin were hated by the majority.

Let me start with his first premise. I am a historian, and one of the principles of the craft is to look at a phenomenon from a historical perspective. Timing is often, albeit not always, essential. If I were to state that Fukuyamism is prevailing today, I would definitely be wrong. After Trump’s victory, the rise of “populism” and the statement of Fukuyama himself, who often started to sound quite un-Fukuyamian, one could indeed state that the idea of total domination of the “end of history” is far-fetched.

Moreover, there is one publication in a most prestigious press which elaborates on some ideas that were unthinkable, almost obscene, a generation ago. Jason Brennan published a book entitled *Against Democracy*. The major notion of the book is surprisingly simple: the idea of one-man-one-vote is dangerous. The point here is that the average American is just a primitive, illogical “basket of deplorables,” if one would remember Hillary Clinton’s expression, and their collective decisions could be disastrous. Thus, only a few educated persons should make decisions.

There was hardly novelty in this idea.

Even those who had the most perfunctory knowledge of history or political thought would state that such an idea has been in circulation for more than 2,000 years, at least from the time of Plato and Confucius. It looks as if it was widely circulated in present-day China. At least this idea was elaborated to me in impeccable English by a young Chinese woman with whom I strolled along by a lake in the summer residence of the Chinese emperors.

The extraordinary nature of the book is the fact that it was published by a leading academic publishing house (Princeton University Press). There is no doubt that at the time when Fukuyama penned his famous essay, the proposal for such a book would be immediately rejected by any Western publisher, more so by such a prestigious one as Princeton University Press.

Jason Brennan is hardly alone in his views on democracy and implicitly on average Westerners, especially Americans. Tom Nichols, a contributor to the prestigious *Foreign Affairs*, lamented that present-day average Americans ignore the views of experts and have become stupid, arrogant zombies. The present-day intellectual and, implicitly, political arrangements are nothing but the road to "idiocracy" and "in such an environment, anything and everything becomes possible, including the end of democracy and republican government itself." (Tom Nichols, "How America lost faith in expertise. And why that's a giant problem," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2017-02-13/how-america-lost-faith-e...>)

Tom Nichols's view on democracy and implicitly the *hoi polloi* is structurally similar to Brennan's, albeit not without a difference: For Brennan, the "deplorable" is still in power and should be replaced by the rule of the enlightened authoritarian elite, for Nichols the elite is still in power. Still, its enlightened rule could be challenged by rising "deplorables."

Yet, with all their differences, both authors implicitly conclude that democracy as it is usually understood is not a workable institution. So, when I state that Fukuyamism was almost totally embraced in the West, especially in the USA, I mean not today or even more so tomorrow, when authoritarianism and, possibly even totalitarianism, could be increasingly in vogue, especially if the economy tanks. However, I am speaking of what was true more than 30 years ago, in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

If Fukuyamism were not the dominant trend, anti-Fukuyamian ideas would be visible and manifest themselves either in publications in leading mass media, books and, last but not least, employment of those who opposed the creed in leading universities, think tanks, etc. And here, the authors of those articles and books, well placed in prestigious positions, could well challenge Fukuyama's statement about American capitalism as the best among all possible arrangements.

They could note that the United States is hardly the promised land from all perspectives. Already by the late 1980s the process of the country's deindustrialization was in full swing and while factories were closing, the statistics faithfully recorded an economic rise. High inflation, often marginalized by statistics, was also underway, making higher education and medical services increasingly out of reach for the majority. And of course in the future, it would affect housing and even food. As a matter of fact the present-day economic troubles could be traced to this time.

Indeed, the current pandemic is a case of just an acceleration of the economic decline, with generations-long roots. One might remember here that the Black Death did not prevent the flourishing of the Renaissance, and the Spanish Flu did not stop the advent of the "Roaring Twenties," despite the fact that both these pandemics led to a catastrophic loss of life. Finally, these observers could well pay much more attention than Fukuyama did to urban ghettos, populated by minorities. Their residents were poor, desperate, criminalized and ready for violence.

The critics of Fukuyama's ideas shall be connected with the view of China. As a matter of fact, the publication of Fukuyama's essay coincided with the brutal suppression of protests in the center of Beijing. The observers could have noted that while these actions were brutal – thousands were killed – it was the only way to save the country from chaos and disintegration, and preservation of its totalitarian skeleton, essential for China's spectacular rise.

There is no doubt that these views circulated, at least in foreign countries. They could well exist in the USA, and if they were indeed spread, those who embrace them could well elaborate on their views on the pages of leading mass media, publishing their monographs with prestigious presses, such as Princeton University, where a similar treatise would be published thirty years later. And, of course, they could have been employed by major universities, think tanks, and government offices. From their position they could argue with supporters of Fukuyama's creed.

The conflict between opposite views propagated by people with the same social status would help to develop social thought in a truly unfettered manner. Is not the USA supposedly a place of the "free market of ideas"? Still, those people who would preach these ideas not only would not be published in leading publishing houses and teach in top universities, but they, most likely, would not have any academic employment at all even if openings were in abundance. They would most likely drive cabs or flip burgers.

The second question in the letter was related to my views that most Russians started to hate Yeltsin and Gorbachev soon after their rise. Prof. Hook noted that my claims are not substantiated, for no public opinion polls indicate the feelings of the majority.

Moreover, he could well note that all Western monographs and countless articles present both of them as heroic individuals and it was suggested that the majority of Russians were quite pleased with them, the liberators from the totalitarian grip.

These, like many other political and historical images, are axiomatic in American political science and public opinion in general. I remember that when Yeltsin died, I was interviewed by local radio about him. Still, when I stated that many Russians had no good feelings about Yeltsin, the interview was abruptly ended. So much for the "free market of ideas."

The subject of the study of public opinion has some personal importance to me. I am a historian by training and interests, albeit I became more interested in more recent events by the end of my academic career – I am 69 now. Still, my late father, Vladimir Shlapentokh, a professor at Michigan State University for almost 40 years, pioneered in the study of public opinion in the USSR. (He also published a dozen books and countless articles in the USA.)

As in the beginning of my letter, I noted that time is quite important to the study of a phenomenon. For present-day Russians in their 20s and 30s, not only Gorbachev but Yeltsin also are the stuff of their parents and grandparents. They could not compare Yeltsin's Russia and even more so Gorbachev's USSR with the pre-*perestroika* Soviet regime.

When I noted that most people hated Gorbachev and Yeltsin I meant people of my age range, 50s through 70s and above, those who could compare Gorbachev's and Yeltsin's era with the late/pre-Gorbachev Soviet periods.

Life in the late Soviet Union was hardly pleasant for the majority of Soviets. The problem was not the absence of "liberties" and "democracy" (of course free from the "perversion" of "populism") but for another, more mundane reason. The food supply was not adequate – meat was in great shortage in most provincial cities – living quarters were crowded and consumer goods, such as clothing, were often of low quality; at least these clothes were often made without any concern for fashion.

It was these problems which concerned the vast majority of Russians, especially those who lived in the provinces, where the supply – of course centralized by the state – was much scantier than in the capital and, possibly, a few other big cities. While the lives of most ordinary Russians were hardly glamorous, the West, especially the USA, was perceived as a place of riches, glamor, and all conceivable pleasures, mostly, of course, sensual ones. A few Soviets, mostly highly-positioned figures, who visited the West in official positions and were treated accordingly by their also well-placed hosts, also brought this glamorous vision of the West.

They also might have informed their interlocutors back in the USSR that the average Westerner, especially the average American, is quite friendly to strangers and always smiles, quite different from the grim-looking Soviet bureaucrats and average Soviets in the crowd.

Thus, the West and related capitalist democracies were indeed viewed by many average Russians in the context of Fukuyamism, long before the publication of his essay.

It was not surprising that quite a few cheered at the emergence of Gorbachev, the smiling, affable leader who promised to lead Soviets, if not to full-fledged American capitalism to at least “socialism” in a Bernie Sanders fashion. They were as excited as most émigrés who first saw the contours of skyscrapers in Manhattan.

Still, soon enough, the excitement was short-lived. It was not because Gorbachev’s reforms and “openness” and “*perestroika*” (restructuring) slowed its course. Actually, with each year, there was more and more “openness.” The results on the ground were, however, hardly pleasing. Soviet food supermarkets were hardly well-stocked, especially in the provinces. Still, they became almost empty as “openness” progressed. Finally, they would be stocked again. Still, the prices, including for staples, rose to unbelievably high levels, at least in relation to the average Russian salary.

Moreover, increasingly, even formally working people did not receive their salaries and had no place to go besides being criminals. Indeed, crime, including violent crime, became increasingly a part of daily life. Prostitution also became pandemic. All of these processes intensified considerably when Yeltsin came to power. In addition, not only did the USSR fall apart, but millions of ethnic Russians, actually any Russian-speaking folk, became a peculiar new edition of *Sudetendeutsch*, and discriminated against in many post-Soviet republics. In addition, NATO forces moved closer to Russia’s borders. What should have been the feeling of the majority, those whose views were often ignored by Western media?

Of course, these people have nothing but revulsion toward both Gorbachev and Yeltsin. And many of them, those who are in their 70s and who remember well the late Brezhnev’s Russia and the USSR, transformed the past into an almost ideal society. They have rediscovered, retrospectively, the goodness of late Soviet rule: absolute job security, the stability of prices for staples, miniscule payments for rent and utilities, free higher education and medical services, etc. All problems were forgotten.

To understand the feelings of these people one needs to be engaged in Gallup polls. One might add here that polls, even in the United States, are not always reliable when the pollsters, like many intellectuals, are more concerned with production of “politically correct” results rather than studying reality, as I noted in my article. One could remember the recent presidential campaign.

Donald Trump, the Republican contender, was clearly not just a misogynist but a rapist. His obscenity violated all political taboos. All the pundits were sure that such a person could not be elected as president. Thus, practically all polls predicted Trump's defeat. Still, he was elected.

I clearly do not agree with Prof. Hook's statements. Still, I understand that the major problem with my article was not so much my statements that a) Fukuyamism was the dominant creed, at least in the USA in the late 1980s and early 1990s and seen as universally applicable, and that b) hatred of Gorbachev (in the later years of his tenure) and Yeltsin was widespread. Not even my alleged "Putinism" was the reason for this rancor.

The reason, most likely, is different. I asserted that quite a few Western, especially American, scholars, in a way American intellectuals in general, do not so much study a phenomenon as it is but produce "marketable" products for "peer-reviewed" scholars or the broader public at large. Prof. Hook clearly does not accept this notion. Still, even critics are important, for they provide a framework for intellectual discourse and development of social thought.