



Axel Kaehne

Russian statehood revisited

Reply to Akhiezer

In this final article, Kaehne considers the implications of Akhiezer's critique on the applicability of Western political theory for Russia from his article *How different are we*. The political–theoretical perspective that Kaehne employs can only be of partial and limited value when it comes to the sociological and cultural rifts that exist in Russia, it seems.

In an article that was published in this journal I have attempted to build a bridge between the Western and Russian debate on liberalism. My approach was constructed from the perspective of a political theorist and, no doubt, there are many other viable views on the matter, some of which may yield better results than the one I have chosen. As Akhiezer has taken up the challenge and scrutinised my account of Russian statehood, he found it wanting in many respects and I gladly accept the offer of this journal to give a counter–reply.

Naturally, Akhiezer focuses on the second part of my paper which deals with his account of Russian political order and the prerequisites of liberal statehood in Russia. He correctly points out the many inaccuracies and inconsistencies which my portrayal of his ideas contained. Some of these errors, however, seem to me to be of a profound nature, and I believe that it would be interesting to political philosophers and sociologists alike to look at these mistakes in more detail to distil some theoretical insights from them. I will concentrate on three issues in particular in my reply. One is of meta–theoretical character and concerns the lessons that I have taken away from this exchange with respect to the subject–matter and objective of the philosophical enterprise in which theorists are involved when trying to define the conditions of liberal statehood in Russia. The second issue I will look at relates to the nature of Russian pluralism which Akhiezer argues is fundamentally different to Western societal plurality, an assertion that goes to the very heart of the applicability (and relevance) of Western political theory for Russia. The last, and third, issue flows from the second point and regards the purpose of statehood, a matter that is often rather vaguely described as an argument between an interventionist or laissez–faire liberalism. I will maintain that, although these terms of reference may make sense for a whole range of policy issues that are of crucial importance to the Russian society in transformation, the activist/minimalist framework in which Russian statehood is often discussed (and which Akhiezer rightly touches upon) are of only ephemeral importance for the politico–theoretical perspective. I will try to show why this is the case.

I

Akhiezer's most crucial contribution to a deeper understanding of Russian society in past and present surely lies in his notion of "raskol", a societal rift that produces, so Akhiezer argues, unique conditions which render the application of Western ideas of political order inappropriate. I have emphasised the significance of this interpretative model and also expressed some reservations about the argument. In fact, I have argued that the societal rift Akhiezer conceptualised may increase the usefulness of Western theoretical models for statehood.

Now, Akhiezer objects correctly that his idea of rift [transl. "raskol"] was supposed to denote a marked difference between Russia and the West, not a point of juncture. He bases his argument on the nature of this societal schism which, so he maintains, is dissimilar to the Western idea of societal pluralism. It seems I got him seriously and inexcusably wrong, yet I believe it is worthwhile to take a step back and try to define more clearly what, in meta-theoretical terms, I was trying to do.

First of all, it seems that I am liable to have committed a gross mistake. I have interpreted Akhiezer's idea of "raskol" as a theoretical device which could play a role in a politico-theoretical or philosophical argument. I have (wrongly) assumed that Akhiezer's notion of a societal rift [transl. "raskol"] would provide a good reason for arguing in favour of a liberal form of political order. My argument ran along the long-established lines in political philosophy that took most of its inspiration from the Hobbesian notion of public reason. If a society lacks any agreed idea of the common good or of human flourishing, the state (i.e. political order) must refrain from promoting any particular notion of the common good. Or, to put it in other words, if the heterogeneity of modern societies in religious, ethical, political and social outlooks is an irreducible fact, political orders must not favour any specific one of these worldviews, otherwise jeopardising its liberal credentials.

Akhiezer now correctly notes that I have missed a crucial aspect of his account of Russian statehood. The history of the Russian state is one of attempting to forge a stable foundation out of pre-statist ideals that continue to be predominant amongst the Russian population. Society and state are thus rarely "speaking the same language". They subscribe to different ideals of order, as it were and the question of how to bridge this gap is the conundrum the political order has failed to address successfully in Russian history. Seen in this light, Akhiezer's notion of raskol runs seemingly deeper than my concept of plurality, and the requirement for viable liberal Russian statehood that he identifies (correspondence of a statist ideal) appears to precede any of the requirements that I have tried to identify for a liberal Russian political order (i.e. the abstention of the state from promoting any particular religious, political or social doctrine). How could I have misinterpreted Akhiezer so immensely?

Well, quite honestly, I have taken his account for what it is not: a political theory. And here is the meta-theoretical lesson I have learned from this. Political theory is concerned with formulating justifications of political orders. It asks for the conditions under which most people would be prepared to live in a given political order which necessarily, in the modern world, must infringe upon some of the rights and liberties that they are invested with qua being human being. Liberal states must limit these infringements to an absolute minimum, and it is the degree to which they may engage in the limitation of rights and liberties that liberal political theory aspires to clarify. The question that political philosophy posits is then: which restrictions of liberties and rights

are justifiable within a liberal political order? The answer to this question must differ in any society. Minimum of state intervention does not equal minimum, as it were. Russians may prefer the state to have an active role in the economy which, in turn, may have ramifications for their rights and liberties in the economic sphere. But these are questions of policy, not strictly matters for political theory. Akhiezer's idea of *raskol*, however, is not a point usefully employed (as I erroneously tried to do) in vindicating liberal Russian statehood. It describes a sociological reality in Russia, most appropriately termed perhaps a divergence between different forms of sociality.

My attempt to wed a sociological account of Russian history with political theory was bound to fail since I neglected the largely descriptive nature of the former, while trying to forge out of it a justification for liberal statehood in Russia. My endeavour was normative in nature (providing a justification), while Akhiezer's account is descriptive. So much for the meta-theoretical lesson I learned.

II

The second mistake I committed is just as instructive for political theory as the first point outlined above. Akhiezer's objection to my identification of "raskol" with societal heterogeneity and using it for a vindication of liberal statehood points to the different character of Russian and Western pluralism. In nuce, this is the problem of how to establish a political order in the face of inexorable religious, political and social diversity. One of the foundations for a viable justification of political liberalism has always been that liberal political orders are uniquely suited to accommodate this diversity. Akhiezer's point raises serious doubts about this. Yet, these doubts do not relate to the function of diversity within the theoretical argument liberals formulate. As Akhiezer notes, Russian pluralism is of a different category altogether. Hence, the argumentative construction as such remains in tact, yet is rendered largely irrelevant to Russia since, as Akhiezer argues, the real battlefield lies somewhere else. Russian statehood requires a political sociality (or statist ideal as he may want to put it) and Akhiezer disputes that this exists in Russia.

On the contrary, Russian norms and values are of pre-statist [transl. *dogosudartsvennyi*] character, something that would prohibit the very inception of politics. I hesitate to call this divergence of worldviews discrepant political cultures since pre-statist ideals aspire to distinctively *non*-political forms of organisation. Political theory has no vocabulary for this lack of political aspiration. The Hobbesian hypothetical framework of a "state of nature" (which may come to mind) implies a marked insufficiency, a shortcoming to be rectified, intimating at the necessity to escape this pre-political stage. Contractarian political theories are thus as inadequate to describe genuinely non-political politics (what Akhiezer calls "immature state consciousness") as any other political theory.

The issue of weak Russian civil society is intricately linked with this problem of pre-statist popular ideals or non-political politics. As Akhiezer remarks, the disintegration of any political order in the West engenders the emergence of a new round of politics. Pointedly put, politics originates in communities which have a distinct feeling for the necessity of political arrangements transcending mere communal interaction. Hence, Western politics (almost) cannot cease to exist. In contrast, so Akhiezer argues, any Russian political order is somehow alien to communal self-organisation. This is an immensely valuable point that many Western political theorists (mostly of the Rawlsian mould) often fail to

notice. The question, however, is: how *non*-political can any form of communal self-organisation be in the context of a modern Russian society?

The accuracy of Akhiezer's observation on the archaic or pre-statist ideal of the Russian population notwithstanding, political theorists would argue that even in the remotest Siberian town some aspects of *political* structure do matter at some times besides and beyond merely communal forms of self-organisation. Somewhere along the lines, there will be conflicts of interest or conflicts of views which require an appeal to principles (such as adjudication) that inevitably must transcend the preconceived traditions and arrangements hitherto governing a given community. I believe that this is a result of the growing interdependence of this world, an inescapable universal fact of life, something which is surely more urgently felt in urban areas, yet still of some relevance to lives lived anywhere in the world, be it in Teheran, in Omsk, or somewhere on the American plains. A point which would help to recover the normative territory for political theorists in Russia.

So, I do not dispute the validity of Akhiezer's argument on the different nature of pluralism and the pre-statist orientation of the Russian population at large. In fact, I believe that his criticism is enormously useful insofar as his comments elucidate the different theoretical scope which political theory and sociology occupy. I have been mistaken in taking his explanatory model as having normative (i.e. politico-theoretical) implications. Yet, we should not conclude from my error that the plurality argument, as political philosophers have formulated it, has no relevance to Russia whatsoever. It applies to forms of social, political or religious polities irrespective of the resistance by the Russian population to politics. Incidentally, an attitude in which Russians are not quite as unique as many protagonists of this argument seem to suppose given that Vaclav Havel's "moral politics" stride a similar path.

III

It is now easy to understand why I believe that the dichotomy *laissez-faire* versus activist statehood (or "liberal vs. social-democratic") has little purchasing power within the theoretical debate on political liberalism. I agree with Akhiezer that the problem of Russian statehood is to translate its activities into a cultural mode (or language) that is understood by, or appeals to, the wider Russian public which has for long preferred non-statist arrangements [transl. *do-gosudarstvenny*]. Akhiezer notes the extent to which utopian demands are made on the state as a result of this "immature" [transl. *Nesrelyi*] state consciousness in Russia. I entirely agree with this characterisation. And I should add, it has quite considerably argumentative force in favour of state interventionism as opposed to American *laissez-faire* capitalism whose mindless ad-hoc imposition on Russia has gone so disastrously wrong.

Yet, these are political arguments. For political theorists who are concerned with vindicating a liberal political order these dichotomies of strong vs. weak state are less pertinent. They are simply something to which the political philosopher can contribute precious little. What political theorists can and ought to do, however, is to specify the character of a liberal political order, be it of interventionist or minimalist extent. And here, Michael Oakeshott's argument still stands.¹ Since any political order is necessarily coercive in the modern world to a certain degree, liberalism hinges on the abstention of the state from promoting any particular version of the good life (be it Orthodox Christianity or Protestantism, heterosexual or homosexual practices, or favouring the parachuting club over the chess club). This does not prohibit

state intervention; rather it identifies the *conditions* of state interventions, or as Western political philosophers often put it, the rules of conduct.

In this respect, Akhiezer and I were engaged in two different enterprises. His was a sociological analysis of Russian society in past and present, whereas I have tried to glean some normative insights from his account for political theory. I am grateful that his criticism has allowed me to see my mistake in merging two theoretically widely divergent endeavours and hope that the debate has been as instructive to Russian political philosophers as it has undoubtedly been to me.

Read the rest of the debate:

Axel Kaehne

[Russian conceptions of statehood and western political theory \(en\)](#) [\(ru\)](#)

In the first of a three-part-series debate, Axel Kaehne asks how concepts of liberal statehood can be defined with regard to Russia. And how do such concepts shift the parameters of Western political theory?

Alexander Akhiezer

[How different are we? \(en\)](#) [\(ru\)](#)

Akhiezer's answer to Kaehne's article *Russian statehood and Western political theory* looks at the sociocultural rifts that permeate Russian society and the implications for political theory.

¹ Michael Oakeshott. *On Human Conduct*. Oxford: OUP 1991

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