

HATRED AND INTELLECTUAL SNOBBERY

Steven Fish



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■ *What factors contribute to the masses' hatred towards the elites? Are there any safety-valves for its release? Do democratic systems have any advantages over authoritarian regimes in this respect?*

Certainly in democracies there's a lot of resentment towards elites and especially political elites on the part of ordinary people or the masses. But it's more fluid, more changeable. Once the elections are held and a new party comes to power, even the people who did not support the new party coming to power feel like, 'Oh, well, at least we have some power over the composition of government.' So, for example, in the

United States there's been a palpable change in anti-elite sentiment since the November 2010 elections. That anger has gone down substantially and the reason is because there was a huge change in power: the Republicans recaptured control of the House of Representatives. Now, obviously in the case of Egypt, where you've got a dictator who holds most of the cards and has held power for decades after decades, there's not that kind of safety valve, there's not that same kind of opportunity for the masses to make their opinions known. What's more, in such a regime you also see a greater fusion of economic and political power and you get much more hatred against the elites as a result.

■ *When we talk about the classes that dislike the elites, which classes are we talking about? Are we talking about poor people, the middle-class, or other social groups?*

It depends on the situation. In the case of somewhere like Egypt or most of the Arab world I think that most of the resentment against the regime emanates from the poor, who form the majority of the population in such countries. In Iran, where the regime does actually enjoy the support of some portions of the lower classes, probably the most or the clearest source of resentment against the regime comes from the middle class who feel that they are being completely marginalized by the regime. This is true in Russia as well, of course. Ultimately, however, I think that Putin is much more popular than the rulers in either Iran or Egypt. So when we talk about resentment against him we're actually not talking about a large part of the population like in Egypt, but rather probably not more than half of the population, perhaps less. And I think in Russia, probably like in Iran, the most intense resentment comes

from the middle class. The new middle class feels like it's being cut out. Putin's regime seems to be building a kind of socio-economic bargain that involves allowing an oligarchy, Putin's own oligarchy, to acquire enormous wealth with its families and its cronies. Putin has done a reasonably good job of managing resentment among the poor: he has raised pensions very consistently, and he's been quite good to the poor and pensioners. So what I see emerging in Russia is more of a kind of alliance between the richest people in the elite and the bottom half of the population. It's the middle forty or forty-five per cent of the population that I think is becoming increasingly resentful against 'Putinism.' There were occurrences of macho-ethics, you know, the man on horse-back and all the stuff he does. It's increasingly embarrassing but not for ordinary people. It's embarrassing for the middle-class who have been increasingly cut out; this class of people have not, since the financial crisis, been getting the most from Putin's economic programs.

■ *The elites in Russia seem to be hating people in return, and have a contemptuous attitude towards lower class Russians. What is the reason for this and how widespread is such an attitude amongst the elites worldwide?*

The further away ordinary people seem in terms of their life-style and culture from you as a member of the elite, the more contemptible they become in general. So, for example, in many countries in South America where socio-economic inequalities are far greater than they are in Russia or anywhere in Europe, in US, and for that matter in the Arab world, the manner in which a lot of members of the upper class look at lower classes is almost sub-human. When you talk to upper class Brazilians or Argentinians about

poor people in their country it sometimes hard to believe that they are actually talking about fellow human beings. And I think part of the reason is just that the poor are so degraded: they don't have basic education or any of the basic things that the upper class takes for granted, and as a result they also appear as a threat, as a physical threat.

Now, in Russia this phenomenon is interesting because you have perhaps less open contempt for the poor – contempt on the basis of economics or life-style on the part of the elites – and more contempt based on a kind of intellectual and cultural criteria. A lot of intellectuals who are not rich and are not even part of the elite take part in this. So, **when I'm in Russia I am always impressed by this fact that whenever I spend time with intellectuals or academics, they always refer to 'they', 'narod' like some kind of strangers.** And when they talk about

likely to ultimately be destructive. Let's call that hot rage. But there's such a thing as cold rage too, which is a kind of constructive anger that can help people mobilize against injustice. It's ultimately not based on hatred of the elites *per se* but rather on a desire to lift up one's fellows and one's own class.

Those motivated primarily by hatred will usually resort to violence at some point, often without provocation, and their actions will of course be destructive. We saw this with the Iranian revolution in 1979 where the most hateful, most resentful elements in that revolutionary movement took power and started killing people; and of course, what resulted was the formation of a brutal dictatorship. That's hot rage, that's a kind of hate-based movement. But a lot of what we've seen in Egypt recently and a lot of what we've seen in Iran against the regime is not motivated so much by hatred. There's in fact a spirit of forgiveness

I'll point to several factors. One is that most Russians who are 30 years or older remember very well that the 1990's were times of great economic decline in Russia. And people, I think erroneously, associate democratization with economic decline simply because the Stalinist economic model was bottoming out at the same time Russia was undergoing democratization. No matter what kind of regime was in place in 1990's there would still have been a terrible economic decline. Then Putin comes to power, and shortly after the economy starts to recover, to the extent that people now associate Putin and his regime with an improvement in their standard of living. So, I think a part of the reason is that people simply tend to identify his rule with objectively better economic conditions. Another reason is that they tend to identify him with Russia's reassertion of its rightful place as a great power in the world.

I think another reason is that the opposition in Russia tends to be populated by the kind of intellectual snobs that we referred to earlier, who refer to ordinary people with some contempt themselves. When I was doing research in Russia in the 1980's, 1990's, and then in the previous decade, I couldn't help but notice how often leaders like Grigory Yavlinsky and other leaders of the Yabloko or Egor Gaidar spoke with contempt when speaking both privately and publicly about ordinary people. **There's a certain kind of intellectual snobbery among the opposition in Russia that is not very endearing to ordinary people.** This is not the case for everybody but it is true for a lot of people.

Another fault with the opposition is that most of its leaders are completely out of touch with ordinary Russians. For example, Gary Kasparov is a brilliant chess player but knows absolutely nothing about politics. For an organizer of opposition you need someone with a current touch like Yeltzin or like Putin or like Clinton. ■

Yulia Netesova exclusively for Yaroslavl Forum

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'narod' they don't mean themselves; when they talk about 'ljudi' it includes themselves but when they talk about 'nash narod' it means 'them': everybody but us – the intellectuals, the very well educated people. This is not something that you get in the United States where there's a great deal of intellectual populism. In the States, as you know, we don't even call ourselves intellectuals. If I were to call myself 'intellectual' to most Americans, they would just slap me or think that I was being snobbish. In Russia, of course, this behavior is more acceptable, and there's really a great deal of snobbery towards the unwashed masses in Russia.

■ *Do you think this kind of hatred towards the elites can actually bring some positive constructive change in the affected societies?*

The crucial question is whether its violence or reformist. Any hatred that expresses itself in violent form is

among many ordinary people towards the leaders of the regime. They are rather motivated by the desire to overturn the old system. For example, in the Czech Republic in the late 1980's, Watzlav Havel clearly disliked the old elite very much and disliked the Communist system, but his primary motivation was not hatred, his primary motivation was a desire to rectify injustices. So, when he came to power he didn't start shooting leaders of the Communist Party, he in fact welcomed those who had joined him into the fold and allowed others to enjoy comfortable retirement. That kind of thing allows a country to have a much better start than any hate-based movement. I think that's fairly clear.

■ *Why do you think the Russian opposition is unable to garner any massive support today? Why has hatred also spread to groups that actually oppose governmental power and the system?*