



## BOOK REVIEW

### **Marlene Laruelle (2018). Russian Nationalism: Imaginaries, Doctrines, and Political Battlefields. London: Routledge.**

*Elena A. Stepanova*

Institute of Philosophy and Law, Ural Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences,  
Yekaterinburg, Russia

In her book, Marlene Laruelle – the Director and Research Professor at the Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies (IERES) at the George Washington University (Washington, DC) – discusses the multilayered and multifaceted nature of Russian nationalism as (1) a way to imagine the nation, (2) the set of doctrines and ideologies, and (3) a political movement. She begins with a review of Western scholarship on Russian nationalism as a independent research field with the following main directions: nineteenth-century Russian political philosophy with its special attention towards the so-called “Russian idea”; the revival of Russian nationalism in late Soviet times; the “dual”-nature nationalism in the post-Soviet period with fluctuations from being an indicator of reactionaries rejecting democratic changes to a form of official state policy. The conducted study allows Laruelle to make the following conclusions: first, “the Western – in particular US – field of Russian Studies has been deeply molded by the state of the US–Russia relationship”; second, “in Western discourses, Russia’s evolutions tend to be systematically interpreted in terms of what they mean for Russia’s place on the international scene and its relationship with the West”, thus missing the interpretation of Russia as “a conglomerate of diverse groups and institutions with largely decentralized voices and agendas”; third, “the study of ‘Russian nationalism’ is still marked by a prism of Russian exceptionality”, thus missing the comparative perspective; fourth, “priority has always been given to the ideological content of ‘Russian nationalism’ over its social construction”; fifth, studies often “aim to produce an easy, unidirectional mapping” of nationalism, thus losing sight on its polyphonic nature; finally, “Russian nationalism” is mainly seen as a political ideology, thus missing that nationalism is also expressed “in the intellectual, cultural, and communication

worlds”, as well as in “banal nationalism” of “folk culture, everyday habits, and routines grounded in common sense” (pp. 6–8).

In accordance with the title, the book contains three parts. In Part I (“Nationalism as imperial imaginary”) Laruelle focuses on several features of the imaginary realm of Russian nationalism – cosmism, geographical metanarratives and alternate history – which could not be considered as typical characteristics, especially in comparison with “traditional” research stereotypes such as Russian socio-cultural exceptionality proclaimed by past and present Russian scholars. Laruelle provides a comprehensive analysis of Russian cosmism as a common ground for post-Soviet Russian nationalisms (p. 34), starting from its roots in German Romantic philosophy of the nineteenth century through the concept of All-Unity (*Vseedinstvo*) and the Russian intellectual tradition of the Silver Age, to Nikolai Fiodorov’s and Konstantin Tsiolkovskii’s cosmic utopia of the 1930s. In addition, she considers cosmism as a specific form of occultism, although with some major differences:

Cosmism awaits the re-animation of humanity into a single universal organism – and the conjunction between two adjectives, single and universal, is a sign of totalitarian thought – whereas occultism sketches a world of awakening filled with multiple, diverse, specific individualities, each one of which has, via different paths, formed its consciousness of the harmony of man and the cosmos” (p. 31).

Such a statement, although attractive by itself, seems to be under-elaborated; it is worthwhile to note that the chapter devoted to cosmism looks slightly alien to the following chapters devoted to geographical metanarratives and alternative histories. There Laruelle stresses that, for many centuries, the territorial size and location in space have served as the justification of Russia’s mission in the world; however, today’s resentment about the diminished space of Russia compared with imperial and Soviet past becomes “a fundamental driver of these present-day narratives” (p. 38). Laruelle gives prominence to three types of such narratives: first, Russia as a specific continent (Eurasianism and Neo-Eurasianism), which is aimed at rejecting “Atlanticist” domination and stating that Russia–Eurasia is the only possible driver of today’s multipolar world; second, the unique relationship between the Russian nation and the cosmos (Cosmism), which legitimizes the idea about the cosmos as a natural extension of the Russian territory (which looks rather unsubstantiated); third, the Arctic region as a potential fore-post for twenty-first century Russia (Arctism), which is seen as a crucial element in the revival of Russia’s great-power status. Laruelle emphasizes several common traits of these three narratives: their proponents derive ideas from the underground counterculture of late Soviet times. These ideas are built, on one hand, on resentment and, on the other, on keeping promises of better days ahead. The narratives not only rest on the assumptions of previous intellectual traditions, but also receive an updated version: “Eurasianism is presented as an example of multipolarity and regional economic integration; Cosmism has been rebranded by linking spatial conquest with Russia’s

need for modernization and high technology; and Arctism applies to both new quests for energy resources and the concern with preserving the planet's fragile ecosystems" (p. 50).

Laruelle argues that alternative interpretations of history – so-called “memory wars” (about 1941–45 Great Patriotic War in particular) – and constant rewritings of pre-revolutionary and Soviet history are widespread in today's Russia as a means of understanding the present through the past. Alternative histories indicate the decline of the Marxist historical metanarrative, which has resulted in the revolt of alternate historians against academic specialists and their exclusive right “to draw the line between truth and lies” (p. 55), as well as in the attempts to diminish the trauma caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union; that is why alternative histories are closely linked to conspiracy theories concerning the struggle against Russia led by internal and external enemies. Analyzing in depth the past and present alternative histories, such as various nationalist historiographies, the “Jewish question”, the “New Chronology” movement, etc., Laruelle highlights their commercial nature and notes their “indirect influence on the university milieu”, in particular, such academic disciplines as culturology, geopolitics, ethno-politology, and others (p. 66). Commenting on the Russian public's perception of the alternative histories, Laruelle mentions a particular sensitivity towards the postmodern question of personalizing the historical narrative, which results in the “right of each individual to create his own national and world history” (ibid.) as a form of symbolic compensation for the post-Soviet trauma.

Part II “Nationalism as a doctrine” begins with an analysis of Aryanism as an alternative attempt to prove Russia's full identification with Europe. Laruelle considers Aryanism as a form of “white” racism very similar to the ideology, which has spread in Europe and the United States. She also explores some types of neo-paganism and esoteric practices, which have become quite popular in Russia in recent decades. Considering various far-right doctrines and their promoters, Laruelle focuses on the most famous of them, namely, Aleksandr Dugin as “the main manufacturer of a neofacism *à la russe* that is both within and outside the circles of power” (p. 95), whom she characterizes as the aggregator of doctrines from diverse origins, particularly, esoteric Nazism, Traditionalism and the European New Right (p. 96). Following an in-depth analysis of Dugin's ideas, Laruelle raises two important questions: Is the promotion of fascism in Russia being successful? Can Dugin be considered a mainstream thinker? She gives negative answer to both these questions and notes that Dugin has succeeded in promoting Russia's great power and its leading role in Eurasia, interpreting the Soviet Union's messianism, and referring to conservative values as Russia's own identity; “but he has failed to anchor new ideological toolkits – be they esoteric Nazism, Guénon's and Evola's Traditionalism, or the German Conservative Revolution – in Russian public opinion or in the minds of decision-makers” (p. 124). However, in spite of labelling Dugin as a marginal figure, the chapter devoted to him is the longest in the book. The final chapter of Part II analyses the phenomenon of *Izorskii Club* – a large group of Russian and foreign conservative experts, where Laruelle indicates its three main contexts: planting government/oligarch sponsored think tanks, defence of so-called traditional values, and aggressive nationalism.

Part III – “Nationalism as political battlefield” – describes three main actors of political Russian nationalism in three generations: classic far-right groups; National Democrats supporting the European-inspired populist ethnonationalism; and the resurgent militia groups connected with the expansion of “Novorossiia”, as well as the actors’ ambivalent relationship with state powers due to the unclear legal definition of “extremism” and Kremlin’s intention to consider “everything related to Russian nationalism as a potential rival for legitimacy, and therefore as something it should bring ‘under control’” (p. 171). Characterizing changing faces of the far-rights – Russian National Unity (*Russkoe natsional’noe edinstvo, RNE*), National Bolshevik Party (*Natsional-bolshevistskaia partiia, NBP*), skinheads (*britogolovye*), anti-migrant movement, etc., Laruelle underlines that all of them display typical fascist elements: the cult of the leader; the white racism; the celebration of violence; the belief in a widespread plot against Russia that unites enemies of all kinds; the exaltation of military and paramilitary actions, and doctrines calling for a reactionary revolution, etc. (p. 156). Nevertheless, she concludes, “yet one critical feature has remained relatively stable over time: a direct embrace of historical fascism or national socialism systematically provokes rejection from the Russian public and therefore marginalizes those who claim it” (p. 170).

The next chapter of Part III is devoted to the popular political activist Alexei Navalny along with other National Democrats (*Natsdems*) who combine pro-Western liberal narratives with ethnic nationalism and virulent xenophobia – the characteristic, which may look confusing for Western audience (p. 174). Laruelle proves that Navalny does not see any contradiction between democracy and nationalism because, for him, the term *russkii* has a civic, rather than ethnic, connotation. Nevertheless, his position concerning the annexation of Crimea remains ambiguous, as well as framing North Caucasians (Chechnya in particular) as archaic and alien to Russian culture, and the call for the introduction of a visa regime with the Republics of Central Asia in order to control the migration. Thus, “his stance and actions may be labeled democratic, but not liberal. He believes in democracy as a form of government..., but his liberal convictions are less easy to capture... Navalny considers that *demos* – the citizenry – should also be *ethnos* – the primordial group” (p. 189). In general, Laruelle concludes, National Democrats “have failed to offer a concept of civic belonging to the nation that does not reproduce the classic clichés of Russian nationalism. They do not know how to articulate a liberalism that is founded on individual rights and a nationalism that believes in essentialized collective identities” (p. 191).

The final chapter of Part III explores the concept of Novorossiia (the self-name of parts of the Eastern Ukraine) as a “live mythmaking process”, which is characterized by the convergence of three competing but partly overlapping paradigms. The first paradigm is “post-Soviet” labelled by Laruelle as “red”, since it emphasizes the memory of the Soviet Union “in promoting a large unified territory, great-poweriness, opposition to the West, and a socialist mission” (p. 197). The second paradigm is motivated by political Orthodoxy traditionally symbolized by “white” colour (in reference to the White movement of 1918–1921), in which Orthodox Christianity is seen “as a civilizational principle that makes Russia a distinct country

---

with strong religious values that should shape the theocratic nature of the regime” (p. 201). The third paradigm (labelled as “brown”) is borrowed from the European fascist tradition and claims that Novorossiia will be the battleground “where Aryan supremacy could defeat Europe’s decadence, and where young people could be trained in urban warfare to prepare to overthrow the regimes in power across Europe” (p. 208).

In the book, Laruelle limits herself to studying nationalism as an ideological doctrine and as a political movement, which is not directly sponsored by the state. Thus, she argues, “the Russian state cannot be termed ‘nationalist’”, although interacting with various state actors at many levels (p. 9), and nationalism could hardly be interpreted as the mainstream ideological trend. Laruelle provides a detailed and accurate depiction of the events, which have taken place in Russia over the past twenty years. In general, the readers of the book might enjoy not only its content, but also its form. The structure of the book represents a perfect harmony: the title contains three concepts, the book has three parts each divided into three chapters, and in most of them three main arguments are discussed.