Post-Soviet Lessons for a Post-American Century

(PART TWO OF THREE)

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Differences between the Superpowers: Ethnicity

Our thumbnail sketch of the two superpowers would not be complete without a comparison of some of the differences, which are no less glaring than the similarities.

The United States has traditionally been a very racist country, with numerous categories of people one wouldn't want one's daughter or sister to marry, no matter who one happens to be. It was founded on the exploitation of African slaves and the extermination of the natives. Over its formative years, there was no formal intermarriage between the Europeans and the Africans, or the Europeans and the Indians. This stands in stark contrast to other American continent nations such as Brazil. To this day in the U.S. there remains a disdainful attitude toward any tribe other than the Anglo-Saxon. Glazed over with a layer of political correctness, at least in polite society, it comes out again when observing whom most such Anglo-Saxon people actually choose to marry, or date.

Russia is a country whose ethnic profile shifts slowly from mainly European in the West to Asian in the East. Russia's settlement of its vast territory was accompanied by intermarriage with every tribe the Russians met on their drive east. One of the formative episodes of Russian history was the Mongol invasion, which resulted in a large infusion of Asian blood into Russian genealogy. On the other side, Russia received quite a few immigrants from Western Europe. Currently, Russia's ethnic problems are limited to combating ethnic mafias, and to the many small but humiliating episodes of anti-Semitism, which has been a feature Russian society for centuries, and, in spite of which, Jews, my family included, have done quite well there. Jews were barred from some of the more prestigious universities and institutes, and were held back in other ways (for instance, lynching).

The United States remains a powder keg of ethnic tension, where urban blacks feel oppressed by suburban whites, who in turn fear to venture into major sections of the

cities. In a time of permanent crisis, urban blacks might well riot and loot the cities, because they don't own them, and the suburban whites are likely to get foreclosed out of their "little cabins in the woods," as James Kunstler charmingly calls them, and decamp to a nearby trailer park. Add to this already volatile mixture the fact that firearms are widely available, and the fact that violence permeates American society, particularly in the South, the West, and the dead industrial cities like Detroit.

In short, the social atmosphere of post-collapse America is unlikely to be as placid and amicable as that of post-collapse Russia. At least in parts, it is more likely to resemble other, more ethnically mixed, and therefore less fortunate parts of the Former Soviet Union, such as the Fergana valley and, of course, that "beacon of freedom" in the Caucasus, Georgia (or so says the U.S. President).

No part of the United States is an obvious choice for the survival-minded, but some are obviously riskier than others. Any place with a history of racial or ethnic tension is probably unsafe. This rules out the South, the Southwest, and many large cities elsewhere. Some people might find a safe harbor in an ethnically homogeneous enclave of their own kind, while the rest would be well-advised to look for the few communities where inter-ethnic relations have been cemented through integrated living and intermarriage, and where the strange and fragile entity that is multi-ethnic society might have a chance of holding together.

Differences between the Superpowers: Ownership

Another key difference: in the Soviet Union, nobody owned their place of residence. What this meant is that the economy could collapse without causing homelessness: just about everyone went on living in the same place as before. There were no evictions or foreclosures. Everyone stayed put, and this prevented society from disintegrating.

One more difference: the place where they stayed put was generally accessible by public transportation, which continued to run during the worst of times. Most of the Soviet-era developments were centrally planned, and central planners do not like sprawl: it is too difficult and expensive to service. Few people owned cars, and even fewer depended on cars for getting around. Even the worst gasoline shortages resulted in only minor inconveniences for most people: in the springtime, they made it difficult to transport seedlings from the city to the dacha for planting; in the fall, they made it difficult to haul the harvest back to the city.

Differences between the Superpowers: Labor Profile

The Soviet Union was entirely self-sufficient when it came to labor. Both before and after the collapse, skilled labor was one of its main exports, along with oil, weapons, and industrial machinery. Not so with the United States, where not only is most of the manufacturing being carried out abroad, but a lot of service back home is being provided by immigrants as well. This runs the gamut from farm labor, landscaping, and office cleaning to the professions, such as engineering and medicine, without which society and

its infrastructure would unravel. Most of these people came to the United States to enjoy the superior standard of living — for as long as it remains superior. Many of them will eventually head home, leaving a gaping hole in the social fabric.

I have had a chance to observe quite a few companies in the U.S. from the inside, and have spotted a certain constancy in the staffing profile. At the top, there is a group of highly compensated senior lunch-eaters. They tend to spend all of their time pleasing each other in various ways, big and small. They often hold advanced degrees in disciplines such as Technical Schmoozing and Relativistic Bean-counting. They are obsessive on the subject of money, and cultivate a posh country set atmosphere, even if they are just one generation out of the coal mines. Ask them to solve a technical problem — and they will politely demur, often taking the opportunity to flash their wit with a self-deprecating joke or two.

Somewhat further down the hierarchy are the people who actually do the work. They tend to have fewer social graces and communication skills, but they do know how to get the work done. Among them are found the technical innovators, who are often the company's *raison d'être*.

More often than not, the senior lunch-eaters at the top are native-born Americans, and, more often than not, the ones lower down are either visiting foreigners or immigrants. These find themselves in a variety of situations, from the working visa holders who are often forced to choose between keeping their job and going home, to those who are waiting for a green card and must play their other cards just right, to those who have one, to citizens.

The natives at the top always try to standardize the job descriptions and lower the pay scale of the immigrants at the bottom, playing them against each other, while trying to portray themselves as super-achieving entrepreneurial mavericks who can't be pinned down to a mere set of marketable skills. The opposite is often the case: the natives are often the commodity items, and would perform similar functions whether their business were biotechnology or salted fish, while those who work for them may be unique specialists, doing what has never been done before.

It is no surprise that this situation should have come about. For the last few generations, native-born Americans have preferred disciplines such as law, communications, and business administration, while immigrants and foreigners tended to choose the sciences and engineering. All their lives the natives were told to expect prosperity without end, and so they felt safe in joining professions that are mere embroidery on the fabric of an affluent society.

This process became known as "brain drain" — America's extraction of talent from foreign lands, to its advantage, and to their detriment. This flow of brain power is likely to reverse direction, leaving the U.S. even less capable of finding ways to cope with its economic predicament. This may mean that, even in areas where there will be ample

scope for innovation and development, such as restoration of rail service, or renewable energy, America may find itself without the necessary talent to make it happen.

Differences between the Superpowers: Religion

The last dimension worth mentioning along which the Soviet Union and the United States are in stark contrast is that of religion.

Pre-revolutionary Russia's two-headed eagle symbolized the monarchy and the church, with a crown on one head and a miter on the other. Along with its somewhat holier manifestations, such as its iconography and its monastic tradition, the Russian church was as bloated with wealth and ostentation, and as oppressive, as the monarchy whose power it helped legitimize. But over the course of the 20th century Russia managed to evolve in a distinctly secular way, oppressing religious people with compulsory atheism.

The United States, uncharacteristically for a Western nation, remains a fairly religious place, where most people look for and find God in a church, or a synagogue, or a mosque. The colonies' precocious move to leave the fold of the British Empire has made the U.S. something of a living fossil in terms of cultural evolution. This is manifested in some trivial ways, such as the inability to grasp the metric system (a problem considered mostly solved in England itself) or its distinctly 18th century tendency to make a fetish of its national flag, as well as in some major ones, such as its rather half-hearted embrace of secularism.

What this difference means in the context of economic collapse is, surprisingly, next to nothing. Perhaps the American is more likely than not to start quoting the Bible and going on about the Apocalypse, the end of times, and the Rapture. These thoughts, need I say, are not conducive to survival. But the supposedly atheist Russian turned out to be just as likely to go on about The End of the World, and flocked to the newly opened churches in search of certainty and solace.

Perhaps the more significant difference is not between the prevalence and the lack of religion, but the differences between the dominant religions. In spite of the architectural ostentation of the Russian Orthodox Church, and the pomp and circumstance of its rituals, its message has always been one of asceticism as the road to salvation. Salvation is for the poor and the humble, because one's rewards are either in this world or the next, not both.

This is rather different from Protestantism, the dominant religion in America, which made the dramatic shift to considering wealth as one of God's blessings, ignoring some inconvenient points rather emphatically made by Jesus to the effect that rich people are extremely unlikely to be saved. Conversely, poverty became associated with laziness and vice, robbing poor people of their dignity.

Thus, a Russian is less likely to consider sudden descent into poverty as a fall from God's grace, and economic collapse as God's punishment upon the people, while the religions

that dominate America — Protestantism, Judaism, and Islam — all feature temporal success of their followers as a key piece of evidence that God is well-disposed toward them. What will happen once God's good will toward them is no longer manifest? Chances are, they will become angry and try to find someone other than their own selves to blame, that being one of the central mechanisms of human psychology. We should look forward to unexpectedly wrathful congregations eager to do the work of an unexpectedly wrathful God.

The United States is by no means homogeneous when it comes to intensity of religious sentiment. When looking for a survivable place to settle, it is probably a good idea to look for a place where religious fervor does not run to extremes.

The Loss of Technological Comforts

Warning: what I am about to say may be somewhat unpleasant, but I'd like to get the issue out of the way. Most of the technological progress of the 20th century resulted in a higher level of physical comfort. Yes, that's why we caused global warming, a hole in the ozone layer, and a mass extinction of plants, fish, birds, and mammals: to be somewhat more comfortable for a little while.

We all expect heating and air-conditioning, hot and cold water, reliable electricity, personal transportation, paved roads, illuminated streets and parking lots, maybe even high-speed Internet. Well, what if you had to give up all that? Or, rather, what *will* you do *when* you have to give up all that?

Most of our ancestors put up with a level of physical discomfort we would find appalling: no running hot water, an outhouse instead of a flush toilet, no central heat, and one's own two feet, or a horse, as the main means for getting around. And still they managed to produce a civilization and a culture that we can just barely manage to emulate and preserve.

It doesn't take a crisis to make public utilities go on the blink, but a crisis certainly helps. Any crisis will do: economic, financial, or even political. Consider the governor of Primorye, a region on the far side of Siberia, who simply stole all the money that was supposed to buy coal for the winter. Primorye froze. With winter temperatures around 40 below, it's a wonder there's anyone still living there. It's a testament to human perseverance. As the economic situation degenerates, events seem to unfold in a certain sequence, regardless of locale. They always seem to lead to the same result: unsanitary conditions. But an energy crisis seems to me by far the most efficacious way of depriving one of one's treasured utility services.

First, electricity begins to wink in and out. Eventually, this settles into a rhythm. Countries such as Georgia, Bulgaria and Romania, as well as some peripheral regions of Russia, have had to put up with a few hours of electricity a day, sometimes for several years. North Korea is perhaps the best Soviet pupil we have, surviving without much electricity for years. Lights flicker on as the sun begins to set. The generators struggle on

for a few hours, powering light bulbs, television sets, and radios. When it's time for bed, the lights wink out once again.

Second in line is heat. Every year, it comes on later and goes off sooner. People watch television or listen to the radio, when there's electricity, or just sit, under piles of blankets. Sharing bodily warmth has been a favored survival technique among humans through the ice ages. People get used to having less heat, and eventually stop complaining. Even in these relatively prosperous times, there are apartment blocks in St. Petersburg that are heated every other day, even during the coldest parts of winter. Thick sweaters and down comforters are used in place of the missing buckets of coal.

Third in line is hot water: the shower runs cold. Unless you've been deprived of a cold shower, you won't be able to appreciate it for the luxury that it affords. In case you are curious, it's a quick shower. Get wet, lather up, rinse off, towel off, dress, and shiver, under several layers of blankets, and let's not forget shared bodily warmth. A less radical approach is to wash standing in a bucket of warm water — heated up on the stove. Get wet, lather, rinse. And don't forget to shiver.

Next, water pressure drops off altogether. People learn to wash with even less water. There is a lot of running around with buckets and plastic jugs. The worst part of this is not the lack of running water; it is that the toilets won't flush. If the population is enlightened and disciplined, it will realize what it must do: collect their excretions in buckets and hand-carry them to a sewer inlet. The super-enlightened build outhouses and put together composting toilets, and use the proceeds to fertilize their kitchen gardens.

Under this combined set of circumstances, there are three causes of mortality to avoid. The first is simply avoiding freezing to death. It takes some preparation to be able to go camping in wintertime. But this is by far the easiest problem. The next is avoiding humans' worst companions through the ages: bedbugs, fleas, and lice. These never fail to make their appearance wherever unwashed people huddle together, and spread diseases such as typhoid, which have claimed millions of lives. A hot bath and a complete change of clothes can be a lifesaver. The hair-free look becomes fashionable. Baking the clothes in an oven kills the lice and their eggs. The last is avoiding cholera and other diseases spread through feces by boiling all drinking water.

It seems safe to assume that the creature comforts to which we are accustomed are going to be few and far between. But if we are willing to withstand the little indignities of reading by candlelight, bundling up throughout the cold months, running around with buckets of water, shivering while standing in a bucket of tepid water, and carrying our poop out in a bucket, then none of this is enough to stop us from maintaining a level of civilization worthy of our ancestors, who probably had it worse than we ever will. They were either depressed or cheerful about it, in keeping with their personal disposition and national character, but apparently they survived, or you wouldn't be reading this.

Economic Comparison

It can be said that the U.S. economy is run either very well or very badly. On the plus side, companies are lean, and downsized as needed to stay profitable, or at least in business. There are bankruptcy laws that weed out the unfit and competition to keep productivity going up. Businesses use just-in-time delivery to cut down on inventory and make heavy use of information technology to work out the logistics of operating in a global economy.

On the minus side, the U.S. economy runs ever larger structural deficits. It fails to provide the majority of the population with the sort of economic security that people in other developed nations take for granted. It spends more on medicine and education than many other countries, and gets less for it. Instead of a single government-owned airline, it has several permanently bankrupt government-supported ones. It spends heavily on law enforcement, and has a high crime rate. It continues to export high-wage manufacturing jobs and replace them with low-wage service jobs. As I mentioned before, it is, technically, bankrupt.

Both in the former Soviet Union and in North America, the landscape has fallen victim to a massive, centrally managed uglification program. Moscow's central planners put up identical drab and soulless buildings throughout its territory, disregarding regional architectural traditions and erasing local culture. America's land developers have played a largely similar role, with a similarly ghastly result: the United States of Generica, where many places can be told apart only by reading their highway signs.

In North America, there is also a pervasive childish idiocy that has spread desolation across the entire continent: the idiocy of the traffic engineer. As Jane Jacobs cleverly illustrates, these are not engineers of the sort that solve problems and draw conclusions based on evidence, but "little boys with toy cars happily murmuring *'Zoom, Zooom, Zooooom!'*" [*Dark Age Ahead*, p. 79] The landscape that makes them happy is designed to waste as much fuel as possible by trapping people in their cars and making them drive around in circles.

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It can also be said that the Soviet economy was run either very well or very badly. On the plus side, that system, for all its many failings, managed to eradicate the more extreme forms of poverty, malnutrition, many diseases, and illiteracy. It provided economic security of an extreme sort: everyone knew exactly how much they would earn, and the prices of everyday objects remained fixed. Housing, health care, education, and pensions were all guaranteed. Quality varied; education was generally excellent, housing much less so, and Soviet medicine was often called "the freest medicine in the world" — with reasonable service achievable only through private arrangements.

On the minus side, the centrally planned behemoth was extremely inefficient, with high levels of loss and outright waste at every level. The distribution system was so inflexible that enterprises hoarded inventory. It excelled at producing capital goods, but when it came to manufacturing consumer goods, which require much more flexibility than a

centrally planned system can provide, it failed. It also failed miserably at producing food, and was forced to resort to importing many basic foodstuffs. It operated a huge military and political empire, but, paradoxically, failed to derive any economic benefit from it, running the entire enterprise at a net loss.

Also paradoxically, these very failings and inefficiencies made for a soft landing. Because there was no mechanism by which state enterprises could go bankrupt, they often continued to operate for a time at some low level, holding back salaries or scaling back production. This lessened the number of instant mass layoffs or outright closings, but where these did occur, they were accompanied by very high mortality rates among men between the ages of 45 and 55, who turn out to be psychologically the most vulnerable to sudden loss of career, and who either drank themselves to death or committed suicide.

People could sometimes use their old, semi-defunct place of employment as a base of operations of sorts, from which to run the kind of black market business that allowed many of them to gradually transition to private enterprise. The inefficient distribution system, and the hoarding to which it gave rise, resulted in very high levels of inventory, which could be bartered. Some enterprises continued to operate in this manner, bartering their leftover inventory with other enterprises, in order to supply their employees with something they could use or sell.

What parallels can we draw from this to employment in the post-collapse United States? Public sector employment may provide somewhat better chances for keeping one's job. For instance, it is unlikely that all schools, colleges, and universities will dismiss all of their faculty and staff at the same time. It is somewhat more likely that their salaries will not be enough to live on, but they may, for a time, be able to maintain their social niche. Properties and facilities management is probably a safe bet: as long as there are properties that are considered valuable, they will need to be looked after. When the time comes to dismantle them and barter off the pieces, it will help if they are still intact, and one has the keys to them.

Economic Collapse in the U.S.

A spontaneous soft landing is unlikely in the U.S., where a large company can decide to shut its doors by executive decision, laying off personnel and auctioning off capital equipment and inventory. Since in many cases the equipment is leased and the inventory is just-in-time and therefore very thin, a business can be made to evaporate virtually overnight. Since many executives may decide to cut their losses all at once, seeing the same economic projections and interpreting them similarly, the effect on communities can be utterly devastating.

Most people in the U.S. cannot survive very long without an income. This may sound curious to some people — how can anyone, anywhere survive without an income? Well, in post-collapse Russia, if you didn't pay rent or utilities — because no-one else was paying them either — and if you grew or gathered a bit of your own food, and you had

some friends and relatives to help you out, then an income was not a prerequisite for survival. Most people got by, somehow.

But most people in the U.S., once their savings are depleted, would in due course be forced to live in their car, or in some secluded stretch of woods, in a tent, or under a tarp. There is currently no mechanism by which landlords can be made not to evict deadbeat tenants, or banks be prevailed upon not to foreclose on nonperforming loans. A wholesale reintroduction of rent control seems politically unlikely. Once enough residential and commercial real estate becomes vacant, and law enforcement becomes lax or nonexistent, squatting becomes a real possibility. Squatters usually find it hard to get mail and other services, but this is a very minor issue. More importantly, they can be easily dislodged again and again.

Homelessness

The term "loitering" does not translate into Russian. The closest equivalent one can find is something along the lines of "hanging around" or "wasting time," in public. This is important, because once nobody has a job to go to, the two choices they are presented with are sitting at home, and, as it were, loitering. If loitering is illegal, then sitting at home becomes the only choice.

The U.S. and the Soviet Union were at two extremes of a continuum between the public and the private. In the Soviet Union, most land was open to the public. Even apartments were often communal, meaning that the bedrooms were private, but the kitchen, bathroom, and hallway were common areas. In the U.S., most of the land is privately owned, some by people who put up signs threatening to shoot trespassers. Most public places are in fact private, marked "Customers Only" and "No Loitering." Where there are public parks, these are often "closed" at night, and anyone trying to spend a night there is likely to be told to "move along" by the police.

After the collapse, Russia experienced a swelling of the ranks of people described by the acronym "BOMZh," which is actually short for "BOMZh i Z," and stands for "persons without a definite place of residence or employment." The *bomzhies*, as they came to be called, often inhabited unused bits of the urban or rural landscape, where, with nobody to tell them to "move along," they were left largely in peace. Such an indefinite place of residence was often referred to as *bomzhatnik*. English badly needs a term for that. Perhaps we could call it a "bum garden" — it is as much a garden as an "office park" is a park.

When the U.S. economy collapses, one would expect employment rates, and, with them, residency rates, to plummet. It is hard to estimate what percentage of the U.S. population would, as a result, become homeless, but it could be quite high, perhaps becoming so commonplace as to remove the stigma. A country where most of the neighborhoods are structured so as to exclude people of inadequate means, in order to preserve property values, is not a pleasant place to be a bum. Then again, when property values start dropping to zero, we may find that some of the properties spontaneously re-zone

themselves into "bum gardens," with no political will or power anywhere to do anything about it.

I do not mean to imply that Russian bums have a good time of it. But because most of the Russian population was able to keep their place of residence in spite of a collapsing economy, the percentage of *bomzhies* in the general population never made it into the double digits. These most unfortunate cases led short, brutal lives, often in an alcoholic haze, and accounted for quite a lot of Russia's spike in post-collapse mortality. Some of them were refugees — Russians ethnically cleansed from the newly independent, suddenly nationalistic republics — who could not be easily reabsorbed into the Russian population due to Russia's chronic housing shortage.

Communal Survival

Russia's chronic housing shortage was partly caused by the spectacular decline of Russian agriculture, which caused people to migrate to the cities, and partly due simply to the inability of the government to put up buildings quickly enough. What the government wanted to put up was invariably an apartment building: 5 floors, 9 floors, and even some 14-floor towers. The buildings went up on vacant, or vacated, land, and were usually surrounded by a generous portion of wasteland, which, in the smaller cities and towns, and in places where the soil is not frozen year-round, or covered with sulfur or soot from a nearby factory, was quickly converted into kitchen gardens.

The quality of construction always looked a bit shabby, but has turned out to be surprisingly sound structurally and quite practical. Mostly it was reinforced concrete slab construction, with ceramic tile on the outside and hard plaster for insulation on the inside. It was cheap to heat, and usually had heat, at least enough of it so that the pipes wouldn't freeze, with the steam supplied by a gigantic central boiler that served an entire neighborhood.

One often hears that the shabbiest of these Soviet-era apartment blocks, termed "*Khrushcheby*" — a melding of Khrushchev, who ordered them built, and "*trushcheby*" (Russian for "slums") — are about to start collapsing, but they haven't done so yet. Yes, they are dank and dreary, and the apartments are cramped, and the walls are cracked, and the roof often leaks, and the hallways and stairwells are dark and smell of urine, but it's housing.

Because apartments were so hard to come by, with waiting lists stretched out for decades, several generations generally lived together. This was often an unpleasant, stressful, and even traumatic way to live, but also very cheap. Grandparents often did a lot of the work of raising children, while the parents worked. When the economy collapsed, it was often the grandparents who took to serious gardening and raised food during the summer months. Working-age people took to experimenting in the black market, with mixed results: some would get lucky and strike it rich, while for others it was lean times. With enough people living together, these accidental disparities tended to even out at least to some extent.

A curious reversal took place. Whereas before the collapse, parents were often in a position to provide some financial help to their adult children, now the opposite is true. Older people who do not have children are much more likely to live in poverty than those who have children to support them. Once financial capital is wiped out, human capital becomes essential.

A key difference between Russia and the U.S. is that Russians, like most people around the world, generally spend their entire lives living in one place, whereas Americans move around constantly. Russians generally know, or at least recognize, most of the people who surround them. When the economy collapses, everyone has to confront an unfamiliar situation. The Russians, at least, did not have to confront it in the company of complete strangers. On the other hand, Americans are far more likely than Russians to help out strangers, at least when they have something to spare.

Another element that was helpful to Russians was a particular feature of Russian culture: since money was not particularly useful in the Soviet era economy, and did not convey status or success, it was not particularly prized either, and shared rather freely. Friends thought nothing of helping each other out in times of need. It was important that everyone had some, not that one had more than the others. With the arrival of market economics, this cultural trait disappeared, but it persisted long enough to help people to survive the transition.

Smelling the Roses

Another note on culture: once the economy collapses, there is generally less to do, making it a good time for the naturally idle and a bad time for those predisposed to keeping busy.

Soviet-era culture had room for two types of activity: normal, which generally meant avoiding breaking a sweat, and heroic. Normal activity was expected, and there was never any reason to do it harder than expected. In fact, that sort of thing tended to be frowned upon by "the collective," or the rank and file. Heroic activity was celebrated, but not necessarily rewarded financially.

Russians tend to look in bemused puzzlement on the American compulsion to "work hard and play hard." The term "career" was in the Soviet days a pejorative term — the attribute of a "careerist" — someone greedy, unscrupulous, and overly "ambitious" (also a pejorative term). Terms like "success" and "achievement" were very rarely applied on a personal level, because they sounded overweening and pompous. They were reserved for bombastic public pronouncements about the great successes of the Soviet people. Not that positive personal characteristics did not exist: on a personal level, there was respect given to talent, professionalism, decency, sometimes even creativity. But "hard worker," to a Russian, sounded a lot like "fool."

A collapsing economy is especially hard on those who are accustomed to prompt, courteous service. In the Soviet Union, most official service was rude and slow, and

involved standing in long lines. Many of the products that were in short supply could not be obtained even in this manner, and required something called *blat*: special, unofficial access or favor. The exchange of personal favors was far more important to the actual functioning of the economy than the exchange of money. To Russians, *blat* is almost a sacred thing: a vital part of culture that holds society together. It is also the only part of the economy that is collapse-proof, and, as such, a valuable cultural adaptation.

Most Americans have heard of Communism, and automatically believe that it is an apt description of the Soviet system, even though there was nothing particularly communal about a welfare state and a vast industrial empire run by an elitist central planning bureaucracy. But very few of them have ever heard of the real operative "ism" that dominated Soviet life: *Dofenism*, which can be loosely translated as "not giving a rat's ass." A lot of people, more and more during the "stagnation" period of the 1980's, felt nothing but contempt for the system, did what little they had to do to get by (night watchman and furnace stoker were favorite jobs among the highly educated) and got all their pleasure from their friends, from their reading, or from nature.

This sort of disposition may seem like a cop-out, but when there is a collapse on the horizon, it works as psychological insurance: instead of going through the agonizing process of losing and rediscovering one's identity in a post-collapse environment, one could simply sit back and watch events unfold. If you are currently "a mover and a shaker," of things or people or whatever, then collapse will surely come as a shock to you, and it will take you a long time, perhaps forever, to find more things to move and to shake to your satisfaction. However, if your current occupation is as a keen observer of grass and trees, then, post-collapse, you could take on something else that's useful, such as dismantling useless things.

The ability to stop and smell the roses — to let it all go, to refuse to harbor regrets or nurture grievances, to confine one's serious attention only to that which is immediately necessary, and not to worry too much about the rest — is perhaps the one most critical to post-collapse survival. The most psychologically devastated are usually the middle-aged breadwinners, who, once they are no longer gainfully employed, feel completely lost. Detachment and indifference can be most healing, provided they do not become morbid. It is good to take your sentimental nostalgia for what once was, is, and will soon no longer be, up front, and get it over with.

Asset Stripping

Russia's post-collapse economy was for a time dominated by one type of wholesale business: asset stripping. To put it in an American setting: suppose you have title, or otherwise unhindered access, to an entire suburban subdivision, which is no longer accessible by transportation, either public or private, too far to reach by bicycle, and is generally no longer suitable for its intended purpose of housing and accumulating equity for fully employed commuters who shop at the now defunct nearby mall. After the mortgages are foreclosed and the properties repossessed, what more is there to do, except

board it all up and let it rot? Well, what has been developed can be just as easily undeveloped.

What you do is strip it of anything valuable or reusable, and either sell or stockpile the materials. Pull the copper out of the streets and the walls. Haul away the curbstones and the utility poles. Take down the vinyl siding. Yank out the fiberglass insulation. The sinks and windows can surely find a new use somewhere else, especially if no new ones are being made.

Having bits of the landscape disappear can be a rude surprise. One summer I arrived in St. Petersburg and found that a new scourge had descended on the land while I was gone: a lot of manhole covers were mysteriously missing. Nobody knew where they went or who profited from their removal. One guess was that the municipal workers, who hadn't been paid in months, took them home with them, to be returned once they got paid. They did eventually reappear, so there may be some merit to this theory. With the gaping manholes positioned throughout the city like so many anteater traps for cars, you had the choice of driving either very slowly and carefully, or very fast, and betting your life on the proper functioning of the shock absorbers.

Post-collapse Russia's housing stock stayed largely intact, but an orgy of asset stripping of a different kind took place: not just left-over inventory, but entire factories were stripped down and exported. What went on in Russia under the guise of privatization, is a subject for a different article, but whether it's called "privatization" or "liquidation" or "theft" doesn't matter: those with title to something worthless will find a way to extract value from it, making it even more worthless. An abandoned suburban subdivision might be worthless as housing, but valuable as a dump site for toxic waste.

Just because the economy is going to collapse in the most oil-addicted country on earth doesn't necessarily mean that things will be just as bad everywhere else. As the Soviet example shows, if the entire country is for sale, buyers will materialize out of nowhere, crate it up, and haul it away. They will export everything: furnishings, equipment, works of art, antiques. The last remnant of industrial activity is usually the scrap iron business. There seems to be no limit to the amount of iron that can be extracted from a mature post-industrial site.

Food

The dismal state of Soviet agriculture turned out to be paradoxically beneficial in fostering a kitchen garden economy, which helped Russians to survive the collapse. At one point it became informally known that 10% of the farmland — the part allocated to private plots — was being used to produce 90% of the food. Beyond underscoring the gross inadequacies of Soviet-style command and control industrial agriculture, it is indicative of a general fact: agriculture is far more efficient when it is carried out on a small scale, using manual labor.

Russians always grew some of their own food, and scarcity of high-quality produce in the government stores kept the kitchen garden tradition going during even the more prosperous times of the 60s and the 70s. After the collapse, these kitchen gardens turned out to be lifesavers. What many Russians practiced, either through tradition or by trial and error, or sheer laziness, was in some ways akin to the new organic farming and permaculture techniques. Many productive plots in Russia look like a riot of herbs, vegetables, and flowers growing in wild profusion.

Forests in Russia have always been used as an important additional source of food. Russians recognize, and eat, just about every edible mushroom variety, and all of the edible berries. During the peak mushroom season, which is generally in the fall, forests are overrun with mushroom-pickers. The mushrooms are either pickled or dried and stored, and often last throughout the winter.

Recreational Drug Use

A rather striking similarity between Russians and Americans is their propensity to self-medicate. While the Russian has traditionally been single-heartedly dedicated to the pursuit of vodka, the American is more likely than not to have also tried cannabis. Cocaine has also had a big effect on American culture, as have opiates. There are differences as well: the Russian is somewhat less likely to drink alone, or to be apprehended for drinking, or being drunk, in public. To a Russian, being drunk is almost a sacred right; to an American, it is a guilty pleasure. Many of the unhappier Americans are forced by their circumstances to drink and drive; this does not make them, nor the other drivers, nor the pedestrians (should any still exist) any happier.

The Russian can get furiously drunk in public, stagger about singing patriotic songs, fall into a snow bank, and either freeze to death or be carted off to a drunk tank. All this produces little or no remorse in him. Based on my reading of H. L. Mencken, America was also once upon a time a land of happy drunks, where a whiskey bottle would be passed around the courtroom at the start of the proceedings, and where a drunken jury would later render a drunken verdict, but Prohibition ruined all that. Russia's prohibition lasted only a few short years, when Gorbachev tried to save the nation from itself, and failed miserably.

When the economy collapses, hard-drinking people everywhere find all the more reason to get drunk, but much less wherewithal with which to procure drink. In Russia, innovative market-based solutions were quickly improvised, which it was my privilege to observe. It was summer, and I was on a local electric train heading out of St. Petersburg. It was packed, so I stood in the vestibule of the car, and observed rainbows (it had just rained) through the missing windowpane. Soon, activity within the vestibule caught my attention: at each stop, grannies with jugs of moonshine would approach the car door and offer a sniff to the eager customers waiting inside. Price and quality were quickly discussed, an agreed-upon quantity was dispensed in exchange for a fistful of notes, jug to mug, and the train moved on. It was a tense atmosphere, because along with the paying customers there came many others, who were simply along for the ride, but expected

their fair share nevertheless. I was forced to make a hasty exit and jam myself into the salon, because the freeloaders thought I was taking up valuable freeloading space.

There might be a few moonshine-makers left in rural parts of the United States, but most of the country seems to be addicted to cans and bottles of beer, or jugs, plastic or glass, of liquor. When this source dries up due to problems with interstate trucking, local breweries will no doubt continue to operate, and even expand production, to cope with both old and new demand, but there will still be plenty of room for improvisation. I would also expect cannabis to become even more widespread; it makes people less prone to violence than liquor, which is good, but it also stimulates their appetite, which is bad if there isn't a lot of food. Still, it is much cheaper to produce than alcohol, which requires either grain or natural gas and complicated chemistry.

In all, I expect drugs and alcohol to become one of the largest short-term post-collapse entrepreneurial opportunities in the United States, along with asset stripping, and security.

["The United States is the wealthiest nation in the history of the world, yet its inhabitants are strikingly unhappy. Accordingly, we present to the rest of mankind, on a planet rife with suffering and tragedy, the spectacle of a clown civilization. Sustained on a clown diet rich in sugar and fat, we have developed a clown physiognomy. We dress like clowns. We move about a landscape filled with cartoon buildings in clown-mobiles, absorbed in clownish activities. We fill our idle hours enjoying the canned antics of professional clowns. We perceive God to be an elderly comedian. Death, when we acknowledge it, is just another pratfall on the boob tube. Bang! You're dead!"

-- *James Howard Kunstler,* Home from Nowhere

For the red-blooded nationalist yahoo in each of us, reading Dmitry Orlov on post-industrial collapse is like looking into a funhouse mirror, where the image of American fantasy is reflected on the grim surface of Russian experience. Dressed in infantilizing logo-rich imports, an obese diabetic holds a Coke in one hand and a yellow "United We Stand" flag in the other. Male or female, this person stares at the mirror for a while, looking for Super(wo)man — the righteous pirate modeled on Teddy Roosevelt, or the puritan-hedonist who urged us all to "be faithful" to Bush. But where is the heroic born-again consumer today, and who is this gigantic toothless infant? — JAH]