Post-Soviet Lessons for a Post-American Century

(PART THREE OF THREE)

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Loss of Normalcy

An early victim of collapse is the sense of normalcy. People are initially shocked to find that it's missing, but quickly forget that such a thing ever existed, except for the odd vague tinge of nostalgia. Normalcy is not exactly normal: in an industrial economy, the sense of normalcy is an artificial, manufactured item.

We may be hurtling towards environmental doom, and thankfully never quite get there because of resource depletion, but, in the meantime, the lights are on, there is traffic on the streets, and, even if the lights go out for a while due to a blackout, they will be back on in due course, and the shops will reopen. Business as usual will resume. The sumptuous buffet lunch will be served on time, so that the assembled luminaries can resume discussion of measured steps we all need to take to avert certain disaster. The lunch is not served; then the lights go out. At some point, somebody calls the whole thing a farce, and the luminaries adjourn, forever.

In Russia, normalcy broke down in a series of steps. First, people stopped being afraid to speak their mind. Then, they stopped taking the authorities seriously. Lastly, the authorities stopped taking each other seriously. In the final act, Yeltsin got up on a tank and spoke the words "Former Soviet Union."

In the Soviet Union, as this thing called normalcy wore thin due to the stalemate in Afghanistan, the Chernobyl disaster, and general economic stagnation, it continued to be enforced through careful management of mass media well into the period known as *glasnost*. In the United States, as the economy fails to create enough jobs for several years in a row, and the entire economy tilts towards bankruptcy, business as usual continues to be a top-selling product, or so we are led to believe. American normalcy circa 2005 seems as impregnable as Soviet normalcy circa 1985 once seemed.

If there is a difference between the Soviet and the American approaches to maintaining a sense of normalcy, it is this: the Soviets tried to maintain it by force, while the

Americans' superior approach is to maintain theirs through fear. You tend to feel more normal if you fear falling off your perch, and cling to it for dear life, than if somebody nails your feet to it.

More to the point: in a consumer society, anything that puts people off their shopping is dangerously disruptive, and all consumers sense this. Any expression of the truth about our lack of prospects for continued existence as a highly developed, prosperous industrial society is disruptive to the consumerist collective unconscious. There is a herd instinct to reject it, and therefore it fails, not through any overt action, but by failing to turn a profit, because it is unpopular.

In spite of this small difference in how normalcy is or was enforced, it was, and is being brought down, in the late Soviet Union as in the contemporary United States, through almost identical means, though with different technology. In the Soviet Union, there was something called *samizdat*, or self-publishing: with the help of manual typewriters and carbon paper, Russian dissidents managed to circulate enough material to neutralize the effects of enforced normalcy. In contemporary United States, we have web sites and bloggers: different technology, same difference. These are writings for which enforced normalcy is no longer the norm; the norm is the truth - or at least someone's earnest approximation of it.

So what has become of these Soviet mavericks, some of whom foretold the coming collapse with some accuracy? To be brief, they faded from view. Both tragically and ironically, those who become experts in explaining the faults of the system and in predicting the course of its demise are very much part of the system. When the system disappears, so does their area of expertise, and their audience. People stop intellectualizing their predicament and start trying to escape it - through drink or drugs or creativity or cunning - but they have no time for pondering the larger context.

Security

Security in post-collapse Soviet Union was, shall we say, lax. I came through unscathed, but I know quite a few people who did not. A childhood friend of mine and her son were killed in their apartment over the measly sum of 100 dollars. An elderly lady I know was knocked out and had her jaw broken by a burglar who waited outside her door for her to come home, assaulted her, took her keys, and looted her place. There is an infinite supply of stories of this sort. Empires are held together through violence or the threat of violence. Both the U.S. and Russia were, and are, serviced by a legion of servants whose expertise is in using violence: soldiers, policemen, prison wardens, and private security consultants. Both countries have a surplus of battle-hardened men who have killed, who are psychologically damaged by the experience, and have no qualms about taking human life. In both countries, there are many, many people whose stock in trade is their use of violence, in offense or defense. No matter what else happens, they will be employed, or self-employed; preferably the former.

In a post-collapse situation, all of these violent men automatically fall into the general category of private security consultants. They have a way of creating enough work to keep their entire tribe busy: if you don't hire them, they will still do the work, but against you rather than for you. Rackets of various sizes and shapes proliferate, and, if you have some property to protect, or wish to get something done, a great deal of your time and energy becomes absorbed by keeping your private security organization happy and effective. To round out the violent part of the population, there are also plenty of criminals. As their sentences expire, or as jail overcrowding and lack of resources force the authorities to grant amnesties, they are released into the wild, and return to a life of violent crime. But now there is nobody to lock them up again because the machinery of law enforcement has broken down due to lack of funds. This further exacerbates the need for private security, and puts those who cannot afford it at additional risk.

There is a continuum of sorts between those who can provide security and mere thugs. Those who can provide security also tend to know how to either employ or otherwise dispose of mere thugs. Thus, from the point of view of an uneducated security consumer, it is very important to work with an organization rather than with individuals. The need for security is huge: with a large number of desperate people about, anything that is not watched will be stolen. The scope of security-related activities is also huge: from sleepless grannies who sit in watch over the cucumber patch to bicycle parking lot attendants to house-sitters, and all the way to armed convoys and snipers on rooftops. As the government, with its policing and law enforcement functions, atrophies, private, improvised security measures cover the security gap it leaves behind. In Russia, there was a period of years during which the police was basically not functioning: they had no equipment, no budget, and their salaries were not sufficient for survival. Murders went unsolved, muggings and burglaries were not even investigated. The police could only survive through graft. There was a substantial amount of melding between the police and organized crime. As the economy came back, it all got sorted out, to some extent. Where there is no reason to expect the economy to ever come back, one must learn how to make strange new friends, and keep them, for life.

Political Apathy

Before, during, and immediately after the Soviet collapse, there was a great deal of political activity by groups we might regard as progressive: liberal, environmentalist, pro-democracy reformers. These grew out of the dissident movements of the Soviet era, and made quite a significant impact for a time. A decade later "democracy" and "liberalism" are generally considered dirty words in Russia, commonly associated with exploitation of Russia by foreigners and other rot. The Russian state is centrist, with authoritarian tendencies. Most Russians dislike and distrust their government, but are afraid of weakness, and want a strong hand at the helm.

It is easy to see why political idealism fails to thrive in the murky post-collapse political environment. There is a strong pull to the right by nationalists who want to find scapegoats (inevitably, foreigners and ethnic minorities), a strong pull to the center by members of the *ancien regime* trying to hold on to remnants of their power, and a great

upwelling of indecision, confusion, and inconclusive debate on the left, by those trying to do good, and failing to do anything. Sometimes the liberals get a chance to try an experiment or two. Yegor Gaidar got to try some liberal economic reforms under Yeltsin. He is a tragicomic figure, and many Russians now cringe when remembering his efforts (and to be fair, we don't even know how helpful or damaging his reforms might have been, since most of them were never implemented).

The liberals, reformists, and progressives in the United States, whether self-styled or so labeled, have had a hard time implementing their agenda. Even their few hard-won victories, such as Social Security, may get dismantled. Even when they managed to elect a president more to their liking, the effects were, by Western standards, reactionary. There was the Carter doctrine, according to which the United States will protect its access to oil by military aggression if necessary. There was also Clinton's welfare reform, which forced single mothers to work menial jobs while placing their children in substandard daycare.

People in the United States have a broadly similar attitude toward politics with people of the Soviet Union. In the U.S., this is often referred to as "voter apathy", but it might be more accurately described as non-voter indifference. The Soviet Union had a single, entrenched, systemically corrupt political party, which held a monopoly on power. The U.S. has two entrenched, systemically corrupt political parties, whose positions are often indistinguishable, and which together hold a monopoly on power. In either case, there is, or was, a single governing elite, but in the United States it organized itself into opposing teams to make its stranglehold on power seem more sportsmanlike.

In the U.S., there is an industry of political commentators and pundits which is devoted to inflaming political passions as much as possible, especially before elections. This is similar to what sports writers and commentators do to draw attention to their game. It seems that the main force behind political discourse in the U.S. is boredom: one can chat about the weather, one's job, one's mortgage and how it relates to current and projected property values, cars and the traffic situation, sports, and, far behind sports, politics. In an effort to make people pay attention, most of the issues trotted out before the electorate pertain to reproduction: abortion, birth control, stem cell research, and similar small bits of social policy are bandied about rather than settled, simply because they get good ratings. "Boring" but vitally important strategic issues such as sustainable development, environmental protection, and energy policy are studiously avoided.

Although people often bemoan political apathy as if it were a grave social ill, it seems to me that this is just as it should be. Why should essentially powerless people want to engage in a humiliating farce designed to demonstrate the legitimacy of those who wield the power? In Soviet-era Russia, intelligent people did their best to ignore the Communists: paying attention to them, whether through criticism or praise, would only serve to give them comfort and encouragement, making them feel as if they mattered. Why should Americans want to act any differently with regard to the Republicans and the Democrats? For love of donkeys and elephants?

Political Dysfunction

As I mentioned before, crisis-mitigating agendas for "us" to implement, whether they involve wars over access to resources, nuclear plant construction, wind farms, or hydrogen dreams, are not likely to be implemented, because this "we" entity will no longer be functional. If we are not likely to be able to implement our agenda prior to the collapse, then whatever is left of us is even less likely to do so afterward. Thus, there is little reason to organize politically in order to try to do good. But if you want to prepare to take advantage of a bad situation - well, that's a different story!

Politics has great potential for making a bad situation worse. It can cause war, ethnic cleansing and genocide. Whenever people gather into political organizations, whether voluntarily or forcibly, it is a sign of trouble. I was at the annual meeting of my community garden recently, and among the generally placid and shy group of gardeners there were a couple of self-styled "activists." Before too long, one of these was raising the question of expelling people. People who don't show up for annual meetings and don't sign up to do cleaning and composting and so on - why are they allowed to hold on to their plots? Well, some of the "rogue elements" the activist was referring to consisted of elderly Russians, who, due to their extensive experience with such things during the Soviet times, are exceedingly unlikely to ever be compelled to take part in communal labor or sit through meetings with the collective. Frankly, they would prefer death. But they also love to garden.

The reason the "element" is allowed to exist in this particular community garden is because the woman who runs the place allows them to hold on to their plots. It is her decision: she exercises leadership, and she does not engage in politics. She makes the garden function, and allows the activists to make their noise, once a year, with no ill effects. But if the situation were to change and the kitchen garden suddenly became a source of sustenance rather than a hobby, how long would it take before the activist element would start demanding more power and asserting its authority?

Leadership is certainly a helpful quality in a crisis, which is a particularly bad time for lengthy deliberations and debates. In any situation, some people are better equipped to handle it than others, and can help others by giving them directions. They naturally accumulate a certain amount of power for themselves, and this is fine as long as enough people benefit from it, and as long as nobody is harmed or oppressed. Such people often spontaneously emerge in a crisis.

An equally useful quality in a crisis is apathy. The Russian people are exceptionally patient: even in the worst of post-collapse times, they did not riot, and there were no significant protests. They coped as best they could. The safest group of people to be with in a crisis is one that does not share strong ideological convictions, is not easily swayed by argument, and does not possess an overdeveloped, exclusive sense of identity.

Clueless busybodies who feel that "we must do something" and can be spun around by any half-wit demagogue are bad enough, but the most dangerous group, and one to watch

out for and run from, is a group of political activists resolved to organize and promote some program or other. Even if the program is benign, and even if it is beneficial, the politicized approach to solving it might not be. As the saying goes, revolutions eat their children. Then they turn on everyone else. The life of a refugee is a form of survival; staying and fighting an organized mob generally isn't.

The Balkans are the post-collapse nightmare everyone is familiar with. Within the former Soviet Union, Georgia is the prime example of nationalist politics pursued to the point of national disintegration. After winning its independence, Georgia went through a paroxysm of nationalist fervor, resulting in a somewhat smaller, slightly less populous, permanently defunct state, with widespread poverty, a large refugee population, and two former provinces stuck in permanent political limbo, because, apparently, the world has lost its ability to redraw political boundaries. In its current form, it is politically and militarily a client of Washington, treasured only as a pipeline route for Caspian oil. Its major trading partner and energy supplier is the Russian Federation.

The U.S. is much more like the Balkans than like Russia, which is inhabited by a fairly homogeneous Caucasian/Asian population. The U.S. is very much segregated, usually by race, often by ethnicity, and always by income level. During prosperous times, it is kept relatively calm by keeping a percentage of people in jail that has set an all-time world record. During less prosperous times, it is at a big risk of political explosion. Multi-ethnic societies are fragile and unstable; when they fall apart, or explode, everyone loses.

Collapse in the U.S.

In the U.S., there appear to be few ways to make the collapse scenario work out smoothly for oneself and one's family. The whole place seems too far gone in a particular, unsustainable direction. It is a real creative challenge, and we should be giving it a lot of serious thought.

Suppose you live in a big city, in an apartment or a condo. You depend on municipal services for survival. A week without electricity, or heat, or water, or gas, or garbage removal spells extreme discomfort. Any two of these is a calamity. Any three is a disaster. Food comes from the supermarket, with help from the cash machine or the credit card slot at the checkout station. Clean clothes come from the laundromat, which requires electricity, water, and natural gas. Once all the businesses have shut down and your apartment is cold, dark, smells like garbage (because it isn't being collected) and like excrement (because the toilet doesn't flush), perhaps it is time to go camping and explore the great outdoors.

So let's consider the countryside. Suppose that you own a homestead and have a tiny mortgage that shrivels to next to nothing after a good bout of inflation, or that you own it free and clear. If it's in a developed suburban subdivision, there will still be problems with taxes, code enforcement, strangers from outer space living next door, and other boondoggles, which could get worse as conditions deteriorate. Distressed municipalities may at first attempt jack up rates to cover their costs instead of simply closing up shop. In

a misguided effort to save property values, they may also attempt to enforce codes against such necessities as compost heaps, outhouses, chicken coops, and crops planted on your front lawn. Keep in mind, also, that the pesticides and herbicides lavished on lawns and golf courses leave toxic residues. Perhaps the best thing to do with suburbia is to abandon it altogether.

A small farm offers somewhat better possibilities for farming, but most farms in the U.S. are mortgaged to the hilt, and most land that has been under intensive cultivation has been mercilessly bombarded with chemical fertilizers, herbicides and insecticides, making it an unhealthy place, inhabited by men with tiny sperm counts. Small farms tend to be lonely places, and many, without access to diesel or gasoline, would become dangerously remote. You will need neighbors to barter with, to help you, and to keep you company. Even a small farm is probably overkill in terms of the amount of farmland available, because without the ability to get crops to market, or a functioning cash economy to sell them in, there is no reason to grow a large surplus of food. Tens of acres are a waste when all you need is a few thousand square feet. Many Russian families managed to survive with the help of a standard garden plot of one *sotka*, which is 100 square meters, or, if you prefer, 0.024710538 acres, or 1076.391 square feet.

What is needed, of course, is a small town or a village: a relatively small, relatively dense settlement, with about an acre of farmland for every 30 or so people, and with zoning regulations designed for fair use and sustainability, not opportunities for capital investment, growth, property values, or other sorts of "development". Further, it would have to be a place where people know each other and are willing to help each other - a real community. There may still be a few hundred communities like that tucked away here and there in the poorer counties in the United States, but there are not enough of them, and most of them are too poor to absorb a significant population of economic migrants.

Investment Advice

Often when people hear about the possibility of economic collapse, they wonder: "Let's suppose that the U.S. economy is going to collapse soon. Why is this even worth thinking about, if there is nothing I can do about it?" Well, I am not a professional investment adviser, so I risk nothing by making some suggestions for how one can collapse-proof one's investment portfolio.

The nuclear scare gave rise to the archetype of the American Survivalist, holed up in the hills, with a bomb shelter, a fantastic number of tins of spam, and an assortment of guns and plentiful ammunition with which to fight off neighbors from further downhill, or perhaps just to shoot beer-cans when the neighbors come over for beer and spamwiches. And, of course, an American flag. This sort of survivalism is about as good as burying yourself alive, I suppose.

The idea of stockpiling is not altogether bad, though. Stockpiling food is, of course, a rotten idea, literally. But certain manufactured items are certainly worth considering.

Suppose you have a retirement account, or some mutual funds. And suppose you feel reasonably certain that by the time you are scheduled to retire it won't be enough to buy a cup of coffee. And suppose you realize that you can currently buy a lot of good stuff that has a long shelf life and will be needed, and valuable, far into the future. And suppose, further, that you have a small amount of storage space: a few hundred square feet. Now, what are you going to do? Sit by and watch your savings evaporate? Or take the tax hit and invest in things that are not composed of vapor?

Once the cash machines are out of cash, the stock ticker stops ticking, and the retail chain breaks down, people will still have basic needs. There will be flea markets and private barter arrangements to serve these needs, using whatever local token of exchange is available; bundles of $100 bills, bits of gold chain, packs of cigarettes, or what have you. It's not a bad idea to own a few of everything you will need, but you should invest in things you will be able to trade for things you will need. Think of consumer necessities that require high technology and have a long shelf life. Here are some suggestions to get you started: drugs (over-the-counter and prescription); razor blades; condoms. Rechargeable batteries (and solar chargers) are sure to become a prized item (Ni-MH are the less toxic ones). Toiletries, such as good soap, will be luxury items. Fill some shipping containers, nitrogen-pack them so that nothing rusts or rots, and store them somewhere.

After the Soviet collapse, there swiftly appeared a category of itinerant merchants who provided people with access to imported products. To procure their wares, these people had to travel abroad, to Poland, to China, to Turkey, on trains, carrying goods back and forth in their baggage. They would exchange a suitcase of Russian-made watches for a suitcase of other, more useful consumer products, such as shampoo or razor blades. They would have to grease the palms of officials along their route, and were often robbed. There was a period of time when these people, called "*chelnoki*," which is Russian for "shuttles," were the only source of consumer products. The products were often factory rejects, damaged, or past their sell-by date, but this did not make them any less valuable. Based on their example, it is possible to predict which items will be in high demand, and to stockpile these items ahead of time, as a hedge against economic collapse. Note that *chelnoki* had intact economies to trade with, accessible by train - while this is not guaranteed to be the case in the U.S.

A stockpile of this sort, in a walkable, socially stable place, where you know everybody, where you have some close friends and some family, where you own your shelter and some land free and clear, and where you can grow most of your own food, and barter for the rest, should enable you to survive economic collapse without too much trouble. And, who knows, maybe you will even find happiness there.

Conclusion

Although the basic and obvious conclusion is that the United States is worse prepared for economic collapse than Russia was, and will have a harder time than Russia had, there

are some cultural facets to the United States that are not entirely unhelpful. To close on an optimistic note, I will mention three of these.

Firstly, and perhaps most surprisingly, Americans make better Communists than Russians ever did, or cared to try. They excel at communal living, with plenty of good, stable roommate situations, which compensate for their weak, alienated, or nonexistent families. These roommate situations can be used as a template, and scaled up to village-sized self-organized communities. Big households that pool their resources make a lot more sense in an unstable, resource-scarce environment than the individualistic approach. Without a functioning economy, a household that consists of a single individual or a nuclear family ceases to be viable, and people are forced to live in ever larger households, from roommate situations to taking lodgers to doubling up to forming villages. Where any Russian would cringe at such an idea, because it stirs the still fresh memories of the failed Soviet experiment at collectivization and forced communal living, many Americans are adept at making fast friends and getting along, and generally seem to posses an untapped reserve of gregariousness, community spirit, and civic-minded idealism.

Secondly, there is a layer of basic decency and niceness to at least some parts of American society, which has been all but destroyed in Russia over the course of Soviet history. There is an altruistic impulse to help strangers, and pride in being helpful to others. In many ways, Americans are culturally homogeneous, and the biggest interpersonal barrier between them is the fear and alienation fostered by their racially and economically segregated living conditions.

Lastly, hidden behind the tawdry veneer of patriotic bumper stickers and flags, there is an undercurrent of quiet national pride, which, if engaged, can produce high morale and results. Americans are not yet willing to simply succumb to circumstance. Because many of them lack a good understanding of their national predicament, their efforts to mitigate it may turn out to be in vain, but they are virtually guaranteed to make a valiant effort, for "this is, after all, America."