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## **Unmasking the King: The Falsification of the Western Mainstream**

*Abstract.* The mainstream of social sciences is associated with the formation of a normative picture of modern world societies. Thus, the mainstream belongs to whoever has the greatest influence and opportunity to promote and disseminate his views. In this context, it is difficult to separate any description of the social world and its regularities from the establishment of the very rules of its functioning. The current historical weakening of the West and strengthening of non-Western centres of power are redistributing spheres of global influence. While the non-West is rapidly gaining technological and resource autonomy, residual colonial thinking and imaginary global hierarchies remain more stubbornly intractable. A better world inevitably emerges from a conflict in which the parties lose their former illusions about themselves and their place in the world, take stock of their own resources, and adopt pragmatic negotiating positions on fundamental issues. In this context, the goal of socio-political theories is always not only the search for truth about society, but also the value-institutional leadership of the subjects of these theories in the interpretation of post-Western Modernity. One of the key issues in the global transformation of the mainstream of social sciences, cultural and political economic hierarchies is the legitimisation of long overdue changes in which non-Western participants in conflict interactions are increasingly invested. Consistent opposition to the West implies the role not of a habitually humiliated traditionalist opposition, but rather in an active contestation of Western hegemony in the interests of a broader, fairer and more global version of Modernity. Russian society currently has the capability to serve as a system-forming moral and political subject of such a version of Modernity.

*Keywords:* mainstream; West; Modernity; friend-enemy; centre-periphery; binary codes; transitology; legitimation; social change

According to Carl Schmitt's basic political distinction, full validity, autonomy, sovereignty and self-legitimation can be asserted only in the context of being recognised by other subjects as a friend or an enemy (Schmitt). It is just such an attitude that provides the criterion for political recognition by the parties of each other – that is, in terms of their relative equality. Otherwise, a hierarchical gradation of the relative statuses of subjects of political interaction occurs where one of the parties claims universality, generality and normativity, declaring the other to be a criminal and a marginal actor, in relation to whom neither agreements between equals nor conflict interaction in the form of war are possible, but only punishments and sanctions. Such an asymmetry can only be corrected by raising stakes and risks. At one extreme, this may be achieved by declaring a fully-fledged and total war on those who make such a declaration. In any case, the situation is invariably relative and mutually reflexive. A political subject that claims hegemony can *only* be a legislator and designate others as criminals *if* one of the opponents recognises itself as a criminal entity and acts as would be expected of a *criminal*, i.e., in such a way that this does not change this entity's marginal unequal status on a practical and symbolic level. For example, when the counterparty does not declare war, but limits itself to terrorism; does not introduce countersanctions, but limits itself to smuggling; uses someone else's value and conceptual-descriptive dictionary instead of developing its own, etc. Otherwise, such political statuses, assessments and decisions are null and void both in international law and in terms of internal politics. At present, the global world is undergoing a fundamental reconfiguration of friends and enemies, hegemonies and satellites, as well as their coalitions, which trend is associated with a weakening of the West relative to other rising centres of power.

Historically, the rise of Europe/the West to achieve globally predominant influence was fuelled by a combination of advanced military technology, religious upheavals, and the emergence of progressive city-republics (from Venice and Genoa to Amsterdam and the Hanseatic League) in which the social technologies and institutions that came to characterise modern society were pioneered. Initially, the historical situation of capitalism was identified exclusively with the West. More precisely, with the totality of European metropolises whose practices were asserted as normative social

types for the “salvation” of the non-West. This type of society was laid at the foundation of the original European narrative underlying the social sciences, which set out to explain the patterns of the fundamentally new historical situation of Modernity that replaced the class-feudal Ancien Régime. However, it later became clear that the modern norms and institutions of Europe / the West are culturally and *historically unattainable* ideals for all other societies. Moreover, the ostensible practices of reproducing these values and norms in the rest of the world turned out to consist in extensive systems of oppression, exploitation, segregation and double standards, thus representing a systemic ontological denial of the normative self-description of metropolises when as addressed to humanity as a whole. Such an externally imposed and derogatory description of colonies reveals its increasing irrelevance under the conditions of the progressive collapse of Western colonial empires, the strengthening of liberation movements and the ongoing decolonisation of great cultures and world regions comparable to the West in terms of their influence (Go 2024). The problem that arises is that the object or concrete historical society is always ontologically correct. Therefore, the discrepancy that arises between the generalising schemes and reality testifies in the first place to the inadequacy of the theories rather than to the pathology of social facts, as is often asserted by the transitological or modernisation theories that inherit the colonialist discourses that are common to them. However, such contradictions can be seen to arise methodologically only with respect to the ideal type that sets out to replace concrete historical societies.

The key contradiction at the foundation of the social sciences lies in the insoluble duality of the task of self-description of modern society, which is associated, on the one hand, with variable scientific explanations of its patterns, and on the other, with contradictory normative judgments about the common good and the proper state of this society, which are initially presented as exclusively European / Western. On the one hand, one can observe attempts by the mainstream social sciences to imitate *natural science*, simulating principles, criteria and procedures of *pure science* that cannot in any case be applied to the social sciences, while, on the other hand, there is an endless process of struggle for the legitimisation and normalisation of the particular ethical and ideological views to

be applied to global society as a whole. In such a context, it becomes clear that the Western mainstream of social sciences as a set of dominant theories and concepts “should not be perceived as an objective reality determined by the entire course of development of modern civilisation, or even by human nature itself. Liberal political science and neoclassical economics would not have taken shape as the dominant paradigm of social science without the geopolitical successes of British and then American hegemony in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries [which] ideologically elevate to the absolute the rather specific experience of the island and overseas outskirts of the West, which found itself successfully isolated geopolitically and at the same time located at the base of world trade routes” (Derlugyan 2009: 20-21).

Nevertheless, the West, as the undisputed winner of the *Cold War*, was able to free itself for a period of time from the need to prove its moral superiority; thus, it was not immediately noticed that the legitimising grounds for heralding the *end of history* and a *new golden age* had already started to collapse with the first military Western expansions of the 1990s. These military interventions led the collective West towards the deceptive impression that the present state of affairs always be the case. In this instance, it failed to consider the experience of all previous empires and hegemonies, the harbingers of whose decline were not so much their defeats in wars as an increase in their frequency. Wars could indeed be won, but only up to a certain point at which the empires’ forces and reserves began to be depleted. Thus, the presumption that one’s enemy will always be in an extremely humiliated and weak state does not stand up to criticism, nor does the expectation of his willingness to put up with humiliation forever. Since history knows no final victories, the sensible tactic in interactions between weakening hegemonies and rising centres of power is pragmatism based on compromise. However, it is precisely such a balanced and optimal strategy that is initially considered a weakness until the negotiating positions of the habitual hegemonies are adjusted according to a tougher scenario than they had previously experienced. In this context, while Russia is unlikely to restore its global level of influence to one equivalent to the Soviet Union in the foreseeable future, it can certainly no longer remain mired in the decline of the 1990s. A rebalancing of forces and centres of influence in the world is ongoing. And the Russian line of ar-

gumentation, connected as it is with the restoration of the natural area of security, dignity and sovereignty, national interests and the elimination of double standards, certainly seems more convincing to us than the Western aggressive rhetoric about Russia's non-compliance with certain concepts and standards, which the West itself is always ready to neglect in the event of these *immutable rules* contradicting its interests. In the context of resolving the existential questions of the Russian nation, the offensive and coercive rhetoric of the West, associated as it is with the axiomatic monopoly on the interpretation of history, democracy, the market, human rights, international law and the introduction of sanctions cases, is likely forfeit its normative influence. This situation is aggravated by the increasingly random and opportunistic nature of the latest trends and phenomena, interests and practices, ideas and values presented by the West as comprising a generally valid norm. The circumstances of *late or fluid* Modernity (Z. Bauman) are characterised by an eclectic scaling of the local, random, and situational, typically asserting its claims to universal significance with the pretentious prefixes post-, alter, neo-, meta-, hyper-, trans-, etc. However, as hastily conceived and precocious mainstream utopias reveal the limits of their universalisation, overinflated social expectations are quickly followed by disappointment.

At the present time, the necessary and overdue revision of the foundations of the West's cultural dominance is being overtaken by the rapid weakening of the West's military, technological and economic edge. This was predictable, since an exit from the semantic system of the hierarchical nomenclature of a number of interconnected concepts of the mainstream can be achieved only through by obtaining a view of it from the outside, which presupposes the development of alternative value-institutional coordinates and consolidating narratives. However, the problem that arises here is that "...even the most ardent opponents of the unilateral dominance of the historical West in world affairs" are unable to formulate their claims without relying on the basic values of democracy and human rights. Moreover, in the Russian context, reference to a Western norm continues to represent an almost compulsory element of any political decision, including those that are harshly criticised by the West. This fact indicates a critical degree of Russia's normative dependence on the West..." (Morozov 2013: 54-55). For as long

as the peripheries in the global distribution of resources and technological chains are dependent on the centre, the reasons for their backwardness can be interpreted in the Western mainstream of social sciences as purely *internal*, i.e., generated by their own defects, as well as their historical, cultural, political inferiority, according to which cultural differences from the West are interpreted according to a *discourse of backwardness*. At the same time, the reasons for underdevelopment that go beyond the periphery and are rooted in the peculiarities of the asymmetric structure of the world system itself remain outside the theoretical mainstream's field of vision since undermining the legitimacy of its centre as an achievable model.

Paradoxically, societies in the centre and periphery of the capitalist world system are increasingly discovering similarities in the terms of the directions of social change under the influence of common general background processes of urbanisation, secularisation, individualisation, democratisation, industrialisation, automation, robotisation, etc. (Derlugyan 2015). Variations in their effect on different countries are explained primarily by the historical non-simultaneity of these processes, which are gradually covering the entire world. In parallel, peripheral societies can be observed to be moving towards democracy, while *model markets* and *mature democracies*, for economic reasons, are strengthening internal protectionism, becoming imbued with populist and nationalist sentiments, and thus losing their previously developed potential for value-institutional universality (Fishman 2019). It is rare to hear arguments against the proposition that democracy is better than its absence; the idea that the market and competition can be an effective instrument for promoting the good of the people is similarly the subject of almost universal agreement. In openly declaring themselves to be democracies, most modern societies thus turn their focus onto the corresponding values, institutions and procedures. However, the centre-periphery structure of the world system generally saddles attempts to consolidate the hierarchical differentiation of democracies with negative adjectives (illiberal, authoritarian, hybrid, partial, façade, limited, etc.), resulting in an emasculation of the concept of democracy itself. Democracy becomes an empty signifier, either not applicable to any real society, or only applicable according to specific value criteria asserted by the small set of selected societies that form the centre of the world economy in the form of liberal democ-

racies. In the latter version, the figure of a hegemon, a progressor and an interpreter emerges, who begins to deny the democratic or market character of most non-Western societies, claiming that they are archaic, underdeveloped, and undemocratic: “Some subjects appropriate the right to speak on behalf of liberalism/market/democracy and the Modernity that generalises them, while others are artificially excluded from the framework of the liberal consensus. The specified intellectual focus is realised through social science classifications based on the binary principle, when the entire diversity of possible classifications is reduced to one opposition – norm/deviation; according to scientific modality, this becomes isomorphic to the dichotomy of truth/error. As a result, humanity, historically fully involved in capitalism and the narratives of liberalism, market and democracy that legitimise it, finds itself in a paradoxical situation in which, from the point of view of Western hegemony, the overwhelming majority of humanity finds itself outside of Modernity” (Martyanov 2021: 115).

The global decline of the Western mainstream is increasingly falling into the trap of the universal recipe of modernisation theory, according to which the *trajectory of progress* can be achieved through institutional copying of specific historical models of the market and democracy, which de facto demonstrate the exhaustion of development potential in Western societies. Therefore, the transitological terminology intended for *backward societies* in the format of *facade, illiberal, authoritarian, blocked democracies*, together with *limited, imperfect, oligarchic markets* etc., can increasingly be redirected to the Western societies themselves, which have taken on progressor functions: “While the era of American dominance is passing, it is resisting according to the old, well-known project-narrative canons. Both within Western societies and beyond, opposition to the “liberal” world order is declared autocratic, fascist, and subject to overthrow in the name of a better future” (Tsygankov 2022: 12).

An important part of the Western mainstream is comprised of transitological and modernisation discourses intended for the non-Western world, which are aimed at the intellectual legitimisation of Western hegemony. Such discourses set out to expose the flaws and ahistoricity of non-Western societies to showcase the virtues of Western equivalents in terms of serving as a universal ideal/model. With regard to Russia, the “axiom of transitology” was

applied to universalise a political theory that treated its subject as lacking her own logic of historical and socio-cultural development. Therefore, a “Russian political science”, based on the logic of differences, gaps, “specialness”, “one’s own path”, is simply unthinkable here” (Martyanov 2007: 35-36). In the intellectual foundations of *transitological concepts*, a well-disguised colonialism continues to dominate, reinforced as it is by the racial theories of Orientalism and anthropology. If the original colonialism of the Kipling type in its pure form assumed that “West is West and East is East” and that the civilisational difference between them will therefore remain forever, then the collapse of the colonial system introduced significant adjustments to this discourse of eternal superiority. Western social sciences have begun to suggest the historical possibility for non-Western societies to reach the same level of development as Western ones if the latter are taken as the only model and institutionally copied. And when many non-Western societies quite rapidly reached the military, economic, and cultural level of influence of the West, it turned out that the heuristic and legitimising potential of the transitological and modernisation concepts was historically exhausted. This occurs especially frequently in those cases where non-Western societies have achieved significant developmental successes despite the indicated theories and advice of Western experts. For example, the rising *Asian Tigers* used protectionism instead of free trade, which was disadvantageous to them, appropriating technologies and violating intellectual property rights in exactly the same way as many European countries had previously done during a previous period of rapid development (Chang 2018). However, the main problem with mainstream concepts of progress consists in the long-term and persistent underdevelopment of significant parts of the world. Theories that were sufficient for describing the processes occurring in the politics and economy of the West turn out to be impotent when explaining the effects of underdevelopment and failures of institutional transitions and transplants. From a comparative perspective, the selective nature and excessive reductionism of the Western mainstream is revealed in terms of its refusal to acknowledge the global connectivity of humanity, which does not require control by a small pool of societies at the centre of the capitalist world-system.



This ideological asymmetry has dealt a tangible blow to the Western mainstream, depriving it of the protective layer of trans-logical and modernisation concepts that are increasingly repudiated by the non-Western world. In losing the properties of *ideality*, Western societies have thus joined the *general series* of societies in the globalised world to experience approximately the same problems, threats and challenges along with a lack of any obvious value-institutional advantages for coping with them. As a result, the West is losing its characteristics of a *universal community*, becoming instead a *particular* or *special* example, which becomes progressively inapplicable for scaling up to apply to the world as a whole. From a comparative inter-country perspective, the possibility of direct transfer of the particular historical experience of the West is also increasingly unsupported.

The construction of global normative hierarchies implies a reliance on fundamental social, economic, and cultural advantages. Previously, the West could speak on behalf of *civilisation* by invoking the *burden of the white man*, who was the coloniser of *undeveloped lands*, the *subject of progress*, etc. However, in post-colonial times, this resource, when generalised in a monopoly on *exemplary Modernity*, ceases to possess any normative power. All the fundamental differences imagined at the dawn of the emergence of social sciences, which dealt primarily with European realities, turn out to be imaginary: in the current global context, there are more value-institutional similarities than differences between the methods of reproduction in Western and non-Western modern societies. In the context of the universally implemented basic values and institutions of classical liberalism representing original utopia of Modernity, the functional modes of the economy and the public sphere, the legitimisation and rotation of elites, the mechanisms and rituals of popular participation, the value preferences of citizens, etc., do not demonstrate any striking differences in a comparative inter-country context. Thus, the assertion of an *equal right* to speak on behalf of Modernity by all participants in global interaction negates the historical privileges and advantages of Western societies that previously used the instrumental resources of rhetoric about democracy and the market, modernisation and progress to legitimise their colonial and/or exclusively national interests.

The weakening of the normative monopoly on Modernity and failure of attempts to restore it are expressed in the compensatory intensification methods used to apply forceful pressure on adversaries. This can be seen in the transition from blackmailing individual sovereign countries to attempts to limit opportunities and coerce increasingly influential individual corporations and individuals in independent non-Western societies around the world. Attempts on the part of Western states and their alliances to continue their military, economic, and cultural expansion include extraterritorial application of their legislation. Such attempts to interfere in the internal affairs of other states include exerting control of other states' elites and technology, as well as manipulations of the global financial system in which the dollar/euro function as a dual reserve currency. Thus it is increasingly clear that the legal framework of non-market competition and vulgar rhetoric of sanctions, while presented as a struggle for peace and universal rules, or the market and democracy against autocracies, are in reality only a struggle to preserve Western hegemony. Such strategies are becoming an increasingly unconvincing cover for actions that, if committed by individuals, would qualify as elements of criminal behaviour such as blackmail, coercion, pressure, corruption, threats, collusion, abuse of a monopoly position, terrorism, extremism, etc. Attempts to control *free* global markets and resource flows by non-market and non-economic methods exclusively in the interests of the West initiate a negative consensus of leading non-Western countries, which are actively consolidating against such *viral management* (Mallard, Sun 2022). In the context of the realignment of the radical asymmetry of centres of power, demands for a return to legal certainty and multipolarity of international relations, linked by the limitation of double standards and mutual recognition of sovereignty and areas of influence by leading powers, are becoming louder.

Mainstream descriptions and methods of legitimising social orders, according to which some societies and classes represent a resource base for others – and in which the logic of *political realism* and the rhetoric of a *self-regulating equitable market* are not constrained by any morality – are becoming less convincing against the backdrop of strengthening non-Western actors, approaching capacity limits of global markets, and the transformation of the principles of class

interaction when justifying the criteria and volumes of access to the distribution of public resources (Fishman et al. 2019). Critics of the mainstream discover that market communications, no matter how *natural* or *universal* they are made to seem, are carried out according to rules that were developed outside the economic field. This occurs despite the claims of the economic mainstream not only to autonomy, but also to the authoritative definition of *universal laws* of social development (Efimov 2016: 135-149). Moreover, the Western version of the neoliberal political economy mainstream, which is associated with the *uncritical scaling of the market metaphor to all kinds of social facts, actions and institutions*, also had quite pragmatic tasks beyond pure science, as conditioned by the West's desire to "persuade postcolonial states around the world to follow the path of capitalism and stay away from communism" (Poskett 2024: 13).

Abstract divisions into *bad power over* (domination) and *good power for* (realisation of good goals), negative *freedom from* and positive *freedom for*, existential contradictions between *to have* or *to be*, and all similar all-encompassing binary oppositions, are in fact instrumental. They are intended to prove the moral superiority of the subject of the statement, who thus hypocritically asserts himself to be on the side of the privileged member of the opposition. This superiority is always relative, since other participants in the discussion can no less convincingly set out their moral priorities in a diametrically opposed way. As a result, understanding the *common good, universal values, democracy, freedom, justice, state interest, institutional rules, signs of progress* and other concepts involves an endless process of *interpretation* that can support different hierarchies of value preferences. Outside of such a legitimising context, power and influence are always one and the same: the realisation of the structural capabilities of subjects to act in their own interests, regardless of who, how, and according to what axiological (moral) perspectives these actions and their consequences will be subsequently interpreted. Thus, interpretation will always be potentially multiple and contradictory depending on the number of stakeholders involved and the vital importance of the decisions to be carried out.

The Western normative mainstream is simultaneously not only the language of science, but also the language of power, transmitting the ideas of the Western ruling class about a *normal society and*

*the good for it, as well as the natural hierarchies necessary for its stable reproduction.* Therefore, the fundamental decolonisation of continents and countries, cultures and peoples is inevitably linked to a critical revision of the place assigned to them by the West in its cultural-colonialist hierarchies. Moreover, mainstream Western theories exist not so much to understand the non-Western societies to which they are applied as to fit them into certain classifications in relation to *civilised societies* that serve as a target model. In such a context, an appeal to *universal norms/rules* and the *common good* is often nothing more than an additional resource for exerting pressure on opponents when making decisions concerning the distribution of resources and the legitimisation of political decisions. According to such an ideological perspective, the differences between specific, simultaneously coexisting societies are exaggerated by the Western mainstream in order to justify the moral, political, technological and other types of superiority of some societies over others. The criteria chosen for constructing basic binary oppositions are either ideologically biased, or subjective (expert opinion (Ivanov 2015)), or frankly secondary, such as those associated with the transient effects of historical non-simultaneity. At the same time, the West carefully avoids critical reflection on itself, forming something like a *blind* or *white* spot on the global research map of the social sciences. Any kind of close attention will easily discover in Western societies all the same vices and shortcomings that they discern only externally, but not in their own internal reality. It is obvious that the discovery of the *naked emperor* negates his authority and superiority, as well as his right to present certain truths to others as indisputable.

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The technology used in constructing binary oppositions (market/plan, civilisation/savagery, reason/emotions, progress/backwardness, democracy/totalitarianism, modernity/archaism, competition/monopoly, extractive institutions/inclusive institutions, freedom/slavery, etc.) and subsequent identification with their privileged members in order to justify one's ideological and moral superiority is finally discredited in the situation of a general crisis of the usual metaphors and value hierarchies of the Western mainstream. They become a Procrustean bed of alternatives, in which the supposedly impersonal, natural and self-regulating laws

of the market and democracy are opposed to an evil political dictatorship/hegemony. It is obvious that no markets or democracies *are equitable* in themselves due to their reliance on an initially illegitimate pyramid of power; since any power presupposes hierarchy and asymmetry, “the dilemma masks and does not allow us to understand that markets are the same social constructs as [coercive – *author’s note*] hierarchies” (Orekhovsky 2020: 25). Moreover, being constructs, they presuppose in each specific case diverse and historically changing non-market conditions of their existence.

In a context of global turbulence, conventional explanations of social change are unable to cope with the growing shortcomings of market-liberal democracies as the ideal type of modern Western mainstream society under whose auspices all normative regulatory solutions are to be proposed. In the post-Western field of social sciences, topical discussions are unfolding on a wide range of issues: from the interpretation of progress, freedom and justice, or the comparative value of different cultures and traditions, to the scope of individual rights and responsibilities of citizens, the privileges of various ethnic, sexual, religious, and regional minorities, etc. A similar position arises in terms of the variable relationship between (self-)appointed and elected elites, civil liberties and responsibilities, individual and collective priorities, the dynamics of interaction between the majority and minorities, labour and capital, etc.

The exhaustion of the explanatory potential of the concepts and narratives of Western-centric socio-political thought, which are oriented toward a legitimisation of the perfection, universality, and ahistorical nature of a number of Western societies, determines the productivity of the search for development-capable categorical alternatives, including in Russia. The interconnected hierarchies of power, social knowledge and value systems of social regulation in a modern society can only change in a coordinated manner. Currently, there is a slow reassembly of the global conceptual vocabulary of the social sciences, which, in place of the rhetoric of free markets, fair competition and liberal democracy, increasingly involves approaches to the social regulation of modern societies based on the manifest realities of those societies themselves. Such discourse may refer to the ever-growing role of the state in the production and distribution of knowledge, technology and available resources (Mazzucato 2021), the limits of capitalism (Wallerstein 2013: 26-27) or

the transformation of the social structure of the *labour society* (Martianov 2016). Here, the key issue becomes the description of the new regularities, mechanisms and resources of this society, as well as its subjects, who determine the corresponding value-institutional hierarchies.

It is clear that the subjects of new languages for describing society will simultaneously lay claim to a changing picture of the world and its normative social order, along with a consolidation of social practices, institutions and structures that are better aligned with the changing national and global reality, to ultimately construct the coordinates of a renewed social reality based on effective principles of social consensus.

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