

**Sovereign Democracy, Populism and Depoliticization in Russia:  
Explaining Regime Stability During the Putin Presidencies**

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*This paper analyzes the discursive basis of the presidency of Vladimir Putin, between 2000 and 2008. While this period has often been characterized as a time of regime stabilization, few studies have tackled the regime's legitimizing strategies. Following a discourse theoretical perspective, the paper is structured along five terms: democracy, populism, depoliticisation, re-traditionalization, and modernization.*

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***Introduction***

After a four-year interregnum of Dmitry Medvedev, Vladimir Putin returned to the Russian presidency in spring 2012, swapping posts with his placeholder. While the legal facade is preserved, the ruling group, a cohesive political elite (Stoner-Weiss 2010, 262), is holding on to power – with devastating consequences for the public image of democracy in Russia, and disillusionment among all those who hoped that the political system would take a more liberal turn under Medvedev. Reassessing the Medvedev presidency and Putin's previous two terms in office, one can argue for a high degree of regime stability and continuity of policies, despite minor shifts of emphasis. Sakwa (2004) has provided a useful triad of concepts to address this regime stability (*normalcy, normality* and *normalization*). This paper, however, proposes a terminology derived from discourse theory. It focuses on the period 2000-2008, paying particular attention to Putin's second term and the politics of "sovereign democracy", but also taking into account the development of the official discourse under Medvedev. The paper shares a view according to which ideas play a crucial role in shaping (post-Soviet) politics (Sharafutdinova 2012). While "sovereign democracy" was always an elite project at best,<sup>1</sup> which quickly disappeared from public debates,<sup>2</sup> and which was even officially abandoned by the regime and declared useless by Medvedev (2006), this paper argues that the

political practices and ideas it denotes represent a fitting summary of the official discourse during the Putin presidencies, especially after 2004, and also of most policies implemented under Medvedev. In short: while being dead as a term, sovereign democracy was still well alive as a practice and as a set of ideas. At least it provides a short-cut to summarize the discursive stabilization process which started under Putin. Hence, while being an “empirical term” it also has an analytical value. As Derek Averre explains:

Although ‘sovereign democracy’ arguably contains nothing new, but is simply the coalescence of certain (...) political ideas evolved over the painful decade and a half since the emergence of post-Soviet Russia, Moscow now feels ready to challenge European values and approaches to foreign policy and claim an equal role in collective leadership and decision making. (Averre 2007, 183)

For Hudson (2009), it is an attempt to underscore Russia's “European intellectual heritage” and at the same time underpin its “civilizational distinctiveness”; Morozov (2008, 152) conceives “sovereign democracy” as the “ideological horizon of contemporary Russia”, while Schulze (2007, 293) points out that the concept reflects the ideas advanced by Vladimir Putin in his addresses to the Federal Assembly; for Okara (2007), finally, the “concept should be viewed as an attempt to formulate Putin’s discourse in the form of a textual/contextual political quintessence of the current era, not as a mere ideological party platform.” Hence, there are good reasons to analyze “sovereign democracy” in more detail. This paper will interpret “sovereign democracy” as a pillar of a discourse aiming at suturing Russian politics, i.e. providing a *discursive stabilization*. Accordingly, the paper offers a reading of the official discourse in the period under scrutiny. The “official discourse” can encompass a wide range of texts. According to the definition adopted here, it includes party programs, speeches by state officials, especially as published in the government gazette *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, and other public statements meant to reflect state positions. However, in order to illuminate the margins of the discourse as well, texts circulated by publishing houses close to the state (like *Evropa*) are also taken into account, as well as publications by and interviews with political pundits.<sup>3</sup> Lene Hansen (2006, 60ff.), paying particular attention to the issue of intertextuality, advances three useful research models to analyze foreign policy, the first one focusing on the official discourse, the second one on the wider policy discourse and the third one on marginal discourses. The approach followed here takes up these models and the associated text categories, but puts the emphasis on the domestic policy discourse. The aim is to unpack the discourse of sovereign democracy as representative for the politics of the Putin presidencies 2000-2008, to elaborate which signifiers it holds together and to place them into the context of the wider political discourse.<sup>4</sup>

### **Analyzing stabilization: discourse theory's contribution**

To achieve this aim, the paper will make use of the terminology provided by Ernesto Laclau (2005a; 2005b). He elaborated three key concepts. The first one is the concept of *discourse*, which he derived from the works of Michel Foucault, but to which he added insights gained from Althusser, Gramsci and Derrida. According to Laclau and Mouffe (2001), discourse refers to a system of signification that inscribes a contingent set of demands.<sup>5</sup> For Laclau (2005) these demands are the smallest unit of analysis. Within a discourse, demands achieve meaning in relation to each other and in relation to a common outside. It is important to note that for Laclau, discourse can also encompass non-discursive domains.<sup>6</sup> The second term Laclau and Mouffe provide is a revised notion of *hegemony*. While Antonio Gramsci sees the supremacy of one social group over the other as not only based on force but also on leadership and consent (*direzione intellettuale e morale*), even claiming that a social group must exercise leadership before gaining governmental power (Gramsci 1971, 57ff.), Laclau and Mouffe refine his concept in a discursive understanding: Hegemony is the expansion of a discourse in an attempt to domesticate more and more signifiers:<sup>7</sup> in this process, a particular identity is universalized, producing an empty signifier that represents all moments of a discourse.<sup>8</sup> Privileged discursive points or signifiers that contribute to fixing meaning in a discourse without taking up such a universal signification are called nodal points or *points de capiton* (Laclau & Mouffe 2001, 112). Thirdly, based on his earlier writings, Laclau (2005) developed a renewed notion of *populism*. What is specific about populism is the double movement it describes: On the one hand, populism attempts to divide the political space, to pin *the people* against an inefficient institutional system, which is unable or unwilling to satisfy demands. On the other hand, it attempts to unite a wide range of particular demands under one name, one slogan, one empty signifier, altering the individual demands to the extent necessary to make them fit into a discourse: populism ties previously dispersed demands into a single “package”. Thus, populism and hegemony are closely related terms. Benjamin Arditi explains that “hegemony is the medium through which populism unfolds and (...) it is often difficult to tell them apart (Arditi 2010, 488).<sup>9</sup> These three concepts – discourse, hegemony, and populism – are deemed crucial to an understanding of the political, i.e. an understanding of politics beyond an analysis of day-to-day political procedures and decision-making. This understanding also goes beyond the simple question of where on its way to democracy a specific country is: it transcends the democracy/non-democracy dichotomy, which has often been deployed in the analysis of Russian politics (Bacon et al. 2007). Hence, a formal political analysis, beyond the issue of democracy, will have priority here. It will be elaborated below that “sovereign democracy” stands for a discourse that displays both *populist* and *hegemonic* features. Also on an empirical level, both concepts are closely linked to each other.

Finally, it should be underscored that these features of the political do not apply to Russian politics only but rather can be traced in other contexts as well and enable us to understand politics in a different way – beyond, for instance, the framework of democratization. The question, however, arises which specific contents hegemony and populism adopt in specific cases, which nodal points, which empty signifier are produced, and which demands are sutured into a chain of equivalence. Also, the phenomenon of *depoliticization* is not unique to Russian politics, but again, there is a need to empirically analyze the peculiarities which depoliticization assumes in the Russian context,<sup>10</sup> and especially how it relates to populism theoretically. It will be shown that depoliticization represents the flip-side of populism and that neither can do without the other: neither is pure depoliticized post-politics possible,<sup>11</sup> nor is pure populism – or rather: populism always has a depoliticizing dimension. While populism attempts to split the political space into “friends” and “foes”, depicting a clear enemy on the other side of the political barricade, depoliticization in the guise of archi-, para-, and meta-politics (Rancière 1999) offers the tools to keep the “friends” together, to defuse conflicts within the own ranks and amalgamate the diversity which makes up the inside.

### **The rise of a *Russian* democracy: alive and kicking but colonized and secondary**

One of the most surprising aspects of the Russian political discourse during the Putin presidencies is that the concept of “democracy” never disappeared from public debates and official or semi-official sources – despite all the measures that curtailed it in political practice. Democracy remained a nodal point in political and official discourse. A comparison of the demands inscribed in the (pre-election) programs of major Russian parties in 2003 and 2007 reveals a shared display of commitment to democratic values in varying degrees. Even the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) borrows from a democratic rhetoric, although its focus is more on social and national demands (LDPR 2001; 2007). Interestingly, *Edinaya Rossiya*, the “party of power”, propagates a course that borrows both from national-patriotic (for instance as represented by the LDPR, but also by the Russian Communist Party) and liberal-democratic discourses (for instance as represented by *Yabloko*). Hence, it demands the restoration of a “worthy place” for Russia in the world, but also raises demands for freedom and democracy (ER 2003). However, democracy is presented mostly as an attribute of state institutions (a democratic state under the rule of law, a democratic federation, a democratic federal state), while freedom is often linked to the economic realm (freedom of the market, economic freedom) or presented as an individual quality (freely thinking characters, freedom to decide one’s destiny).

What is striking in *Edinaya Rossiya*'s programs, however, is the dismissal of all "ideologies", the effort to present itself as being beyond ideological strife: the party aims at "transcending ideological myths", orienting itself at the "real needs of the country and the people", basing its actions on "practical experience", "common sense" and "scientific knowledge" (ER 2003). Furthermore, it depicts itself as a catch-all party that respects or even integrates all political currents of Russian political life:

The most active part of Russian society mirrors the variety of views and interests; among these are the liberal pathos of freedom, the socialist impulse for justice and patriarchal values. All these ideas are precious, all entail an interior truth. They represent the roots from which Russia has grown and to which Russia sticks (...) and deserve to be protected and fostered. Thus all [political] forces are natural allies which are ready to act in the name of the Russian success. (ER 2003)

In its 2007 program, *Edinaya Rossiya* couples democratic demands with demands for innovation and modernity, advocates a multi-party system and a strong civil society (ER 2007).

To dismiss this democratic rhetoric as mere propaganda would be easy. From the vantage point of discourse theory, however, it would seem more appropriate to interpret this mushrooming of the term "democracy" in political discourse and its colonization by the regime as the symptom of a hegemonic operation, of the expansion of a discourse. Indeed, what seems to be important is that, firstly, the attainment of democracy has been interpreted in the wider political discourse over the last decades as a symbol of progress, of catching-up with the West, and as modernization. Undoubtedly, "democracy" continues to be a marker of progress and of membership in the "developed" world, in the club of "fat cats" (Nikonov 2006). Secondly, by declaring transition to be complete, as Putin did during his tenure,<sup>12</sup> it is implied that a goal has been reached; admitting otherwise would not only imply failure but, ultimately, the necessity for further regime change. This underscores once more the ambivalent role that the signifier of democracy appears to play. Thirdly, and finally, democracy plays the role of a nodal point within the official discourse. Put differently, outside the discourse theoretical framework: the reference to democracy and the centrality it plays in official discourse contributes to giving legitimacy to the official discourse and to the regime as a whole, both internally and externally. This legitimacy is not only gained through retrospective hints to what has been achieved so far, but also by prospectively hinting at a further future democratization: Medvedev (2007) later explained that "freedom is better than unfreedom", hence particularly pointing out the freedom dimension of "democracy".

Ultimately, the present regime is deeply rooted in and indebted to the changes of the 1990s, to which official discourse displays an ambivalence, i.e. struggles to include it: on the one hand, it hails the free democratic choice of the Russian people, which provided the basis for the current regime,<sup>13</sup> while, on the other hand, it condemns the demise of the Soviet Union as the “biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the century” (Putin 2008, 272) and deplores the *bardak* (mess, chaos) that ensued in the 1990s (Surkov 2007b, 59).

Overall, the paper would argue that during the Putin presidency “democracy” played such a pivotal role because it was articulated with other signifiers such as modernity, freedom, and development. It was, however, also associated with nationalist demands. Democracy in Russia is depicted as *Russian*, independent, home-grown, and special.<sup>14</sup> In short: a *sovereign* democracy that may imply all sorts of peculiarities, which exempt it from any international comparison or judgment. Since all democracies are deemed to be independent, having their specific histories and trajectories, there simply is no universal standard that could be applied, according to this argument.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, it allows for the establishment of a link to apparently universal norms and to a whole tradition of thought, firmly placing Russia, if not within Western political thought in general, so at least within the “European intellectual heritage” (Hudson 2009). Sovereign democracy thus fulfills this double function, and fixes democracy’s place in contemporary Russia. Internationally, the point of departure for sovereign democracy is the recognition of the world as a dangerous, lawless place, which is fully structured around a ruthless competition:

In this sense we really found ourselves in a chaotic world in which everything has become unpredictable. In this anomic global chaos there is only one law - the law of the strong and aggressive: the super-powers, dictators and leaders of mafia-like and terrorist groups” (Zor’kin 2006)<sup>16</sup>

Often, alluding to the West in general and the USA in particular, this struggle for influence is cast in democratizing terms (Zor’kin 2006). The answer in the official discourse is to underscore the independence of Russia. Nikonov (2007, 23) – who feels the same nostalgia for an idealized Westphalian system as Zor’kin – deduces that “sovereign democracy” means the primacy of international law and an absolute non-interference in other states’ internal affairs.<sup>17</sup> Surkov's reply, instead, is geared more toward increasing competitiveness (Surkov 2007b). To the degree that this implies opening Russia to foreign investment, one could describe official discourse’s Russia as torn between neo-liberal globalization and Westphalian nostalgia.<sup>18</sup>

Another assumption is that democracy is seen as a secondary goal, as a mere correlate of modernization. Hence, a more liberal and pluralistic democracy would only develop in the context

of the establishment of a modern economy and society.<sup>19</sup> This was also a clear message sent by Medvedev in his interview with *Gazeta.ru* and in his article for the *Novaya Gazeta* (Medvedev 2009a; 2009b). It is this pledge to modernization that still lacks concrete materialization and which is the cause of many headaches for opponents: Modernization is a core demand also in counter-hegemonic discourses. Based on interviews conducted in summer 2009 in Moscow and St. Petersburg with intellectuals, NGO-activist and politicians,<sup>20</sup> it can be argued that at least one strand of the counter-hegemonic discourse does not emphasize further *democratization* but rather demands further *modernization*. It blames particularly the current regime for failing to fulfill its promise of modernization. The Medvedev-interregnum can be seen as a phase when this promise gained new momentum: Medvedev's bid for the presidency was linked to the *National Projects*, a modernization program launched in 2005 that achieved few concrete results. The Medvedev-affiliated INSOR<sup>21</sup> think-tank, too, prioritized modernization. The failure to achieve this technocratic modernization can also be seen as reflecting the difficulty of completely disentangling modernization from democratization. It raises the question at which point modernization runs into a dead-end when it is not accompanied by features like rule of law or democratic accountability. As will be seen below, however, it could be argued that precisely the failure to deliver modernization may paradoxically have offered an opportunity for the official discourse to maintain its strength and for the regime to uphold its legitimacy: this is the strategy of *populism in power*.

### **Populism in power and depoliticization: management supersedes politics**

As has been argued above, the official discourse appears to be expansive in nature, incorporating demands from different camps. Additionally, it attempts to divide the political space into two camps. Both can be regarded as features of a populist discourse. In the Russian case, this populism does not come “from below” but “from above”, it is not oppositional but systemic.<sup>22</sup> Another key populist feature is that the official discourse relied heavily on being structured around a *name* (“Putin”), which played at least the role of a nodal point. One could even assume that it functioned as an empty signifier. In these elements we see the characteristics of Russia's populist and hegemonic official discourse between 2000 and 2008.<sup>23</sup> Concerning “Putin” as an empty signifier, it must be underscored that it is not so much *Vladimir Vladimirovich* the person, but rather his *name* (Laclau 2005a, 101ff.; 2005b, 40) that functioned like a brand, standing for a whole set of policies: this can be exemplified in the widely fictional “Putin's plan” in *Edinaya Rossiya's* 2007 election campaign. Denoting the Plan as being “Putin's” apparently delivered sufficient explanation and information about its (putative) content. The message could be that with this plan one does not

merely get a certain set of policies, but also a strong leader, who is “cool” or modern for some, powerful, energetic or typically Russian for others etc.:

Putin’s Plan, in other words, is whatever Putin thinks and wants, and the Russian public seems to know this. In October 2007, a poll reported that the overwhelming majority of Russians could not describe Putin’s plan (...). Yet, an equally large majority was nevertheless confident that Putin had one. Furthermore (...) Russians want the country to be guided by that strategy, whatever it is. (Gaddy & Kuchins 2008, 118)

It also means that one either supports the plan or opposes it. One is either for or against “Putin”. The rift seems to be quite clear but is less straightforward than the theory suggests. Indeed, “the people” are pitted against a bad institutional system (the slow and corrupt bureaucracy), portrayed as delaying modernization, with president and prime minister siding with “the people”. Populism as the attempt to split the political space is also operating on the foreign policy front. A culminating point for this development was the speech delivered by Putin during the 2007 Munich Security Conference. The opposition to Western policies expressed there was also addressed to a domestic audience, again advancing an either-or option, a we-against-them model.<sup>24</sup> Despite the efforts to draw black/white pictures, the rifts are multifarious both in foreign policy and at home. Putin’s name however, has been one of the few signifiers that have evoked strong condemnation or praise, acceptance or negation, and it continued to do so in the 2012 presidential elections.

The function which the brand “Putin” performed became clear at the end of his second term, when the person Putin was elevated to the position of the *national leader*. While the Constitution of the Russian Federation does not foresee such a position, Putin was placed in a position above politics.<sup>25</sup> There are various examples around the world of such allegedly non-ruling leaders with fancy titles: What they share is a declared impartial position that is beyond politics, beyond question and doubt, a position which is not filled through elections and cannot be lost through elections – also stepping down becomes virtually impossible.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, these positions contribute to splitting the political space into two camps: those who support the leader and those who do not.

Depoliticization is the flip-side of populism. Such depoliticizing instances and attempts to introduce *management* as the key procedure in politics abound in Putin’s Russia. Makarychev (2008) has delivered a convincing first conceptualization of this phenomenon in the Russian context. All dimensions of depoliticization as described by Rancière (1999, 61ff.) can be traced in contemporary Russian politics (archi-, para-, and meta-politics).<sup>27</sup>



**Metapolitics** designates a form of government that tries to legitimize itself by pointing at (economic) efficiency, objective (national) interests and a declared rebuttal of any ideology. The official discourse presents Russian politics as guided primarily by economic necessities. Political conflicts are presented as economic, technical questions. A prominent example is the import-ban on Polish meat in 2005 or on Georgian products in 2006. Georgian wine, Putin (2006a) declared, contained elements that represented a health-hazard. Note here how the foreign policy discourse was pervaded with a language referring to health, purity and hygiene of the population, giving the argument a biopolitical touch.<sup>28</sup> Even more emblematic was the conflict with Ukraine on the transit of resources. In this case, Russia pleaded for a “market-based relationship” between the two countries: in this context, official discourse did not contain any hints at the Russian dislike of Ukraine’s European course. Instead, the stress was on the efficiency of the relationship.<sup>29</sup> Technocratic and economic semantics abound concerning domestic politics as well (Gaddy & Kuchins 2008; Makarychev 2008). Everything seems to be *manageable* and follows an economic rationale, which “permeates the entire discourse of the Putin presidency, whereby even governmental mechanisms and the operation of the state are subjected to the logic of economic efficiency. (...) It is this rationality of neo-liberal governance that attracts liberal conservatives to (...) Putin” (Prozorov 2005, 135). Concerning this economic rationality, however, a paradoxical process took place during Putin’s tenure: on the one hand, economic liberal reforms continued, for some observers even at an unprecedented pace (Prozorov 2005; Zweynert 2010); on the other hand, protectionism grew, as did the role of the state in key economic areas. This return of the state as a key economic player seems to be a major departure from the regime’s otherwise liberal economic policies but it is consistent with official discourse, according to which the state ought to supervise economic activities and take care that economic success benefits the entire country.<sup>30</sup>

**Para-politics** aims at a de-antagonization of politics, at the inscription of oppositional demands and the co-optation of dissidents. The regime and *Edinaya Rossiya* followed this strategy: they took some programmatic elements from the liberals (particularly in the economic realm), some from the left (wages), and some from the nationalists (Russia as a great power). This game was pushed so far that at a certain point, some (oppositional) parties became redundant: SPS dissolved and transformed itself into a party close to power: there was no longer a need for an economically liberal party. Cooptation also worked on the personal level, for example on oppositional figures like Nikita Belych. Mariya Gaydar sharply attacked him, only to join him in the Kirov administration shortly thereafter.<sup>31</sup> Another part of the liberal opposition was not “cut in”, but rather placed outside the political discourse, considered to be extremists, a “fifth column” or agents of external forces.

Surkov, for instance, presented them as parties of an “oligarchic revenge” (Surkov 2007a, 59), i.e. as those who want oligarchs back in politics, like in the 1990s. In many other political texts there are references to foreign sponsors financing movements, parties, or NGOs in Russia. This fear became particularly accentuated in official discourse after the Color Revolutions, particularly after the Ukrainian case.<sup>32</sup> If depicted in this way, this engagement with liberal parties would correspond to Žižek’s concept of Ultra-politics (Žižek 1999), however, the prevailing approach was that of co-optation.

The Putin-presidency was a veritable “catch-all” presidency. This became particularly visible during the presidential elections 2004, when competing candidates openly acknowledged that they could not represent demands that were not already covered by Putin himself. Sergey Mironov even claimed that “We all want Vladimir Putin to be the next president (...) I sincerely believe election opponents can both be – and not be – adversaries. I am not an adversary of Putin“ (quoted in BBC News 2004). For the same elections, Zhirinovsky and Zjuganov refrained from participating and presented as their parties’ candidates Oleg Malyshkin and Nikolay Kharitonov, respectively. During the 2008 presidential elections Putin’s favourite Medvedev presented himself as candidate of multiple parties and assumed, again, a *super-partes* stance bridging the “legitimate extremes” represented by his contenders: the “nationalist” Zhirinovsky, the “communist” Zjuganov, and the “democrat” Andrey Bogdanov. Para-political depoliticization and populism are hence mutually dependent: populism demarcates inside and outside and depoliticization is the means to keep the inside together, including at its margins. Put differently: they determine what form of opposition is legitimate and which is not?<sup>33</sup>

Para-politics hence points straight to a political discourse’s quest for hegemony, its expansion by incorporating demands from other, competing, discourses. On a theoretical level, one could argue, we thus have a very close kinship between para-politics and hegemony: In order to become hegemonic, a political discourse will feature para-politics, while at the same time establishing a strong antagonism to an outside, for instance by attempting to found a new *arche*, a community without ruptures or cracks. Re-traditionalization, also in popular culture, fits into a series of attempts to achieve this goal.

### **Re-traditionalization as archi-politics**

Re-traditionalization as **archi-politics** becomes palpable in the centrality of the state and state harmony which are strongly framed in a nationalist terminology in official discourse. The Russian

state and the Russian nation are presented as a unity, making opposition to the state an opposition to the nation itself.<sup>34</sup> This immediately raises questions concerning what it means to be regarded as “Russian”. The long dispute around the concepts of *russky* (Russian in an ethnic, cultural sense) and *rossiysky* (Russian pertaining to the state) continues. While under Yeltsin, efforts were made to establish a civic understanding of Russian nationality, the path taken in the official discourse under Putin is much more ambiguous (Malinova 2007). On the one hand, *rossiysky* is understood more and more as a “politically correct” term, while *russky* is introduced in more and more spheres that previously pertained to the *rossiysky* domain. As such, *Edinaya Rossiya* celebrated days of *russky* political culture, and there were more and more hints at a *russky* state. On the other hand, attempts are made to conceptualize *russky* in an “open” way. For instance, Isaev (2006) asserts that anyone can claim Russian identity: it is a question of individual choice.<sup>35</sup> However, this assimilating embrace appears as imposed on all ethnicities who are Russian citizens: Not only can everybody become Russian in this sense but everybody *should* do so in order to enjoy all rights and privileges of citizenship. Other publications in the wider official discourse point in the same direction (Kholmogorov 2006). Hence, *rossiysky* fulfills the function that was previously filled by the term *sovietsky*, and the meanings of *russky* and *rossiysky* conflate in *russky*, which increasingly carries both cultural and political connotations.

But unity goes beyond an all-inclusive *russky*-embrace. The most striking feature is the depiction of Russian history as characterized by a *meaningful* continuity. This is particularly done by resurrecting parts of the temporarily lost Soviet iconography. The 70 year long episode of Soviet rule over Russia found its way back into Russian historiography as a respected part of Russian reality. The Soviet past was reclaimed and declared to be *russky* again. “Not everything was bad” – a view widely shared in public opinion – is also inscribed in official discourse. This is also important, considering the highly increased significance of May 9 as a public holiday since 2005 (Mijnssen 2009). The victory over fascism has again become one cornerstone of Russian state identity, and this victory ultimately was a *Soviet* victory. The renewed importance of May 9 also reasserts the role Russia wishes to play in the so-called *near abroad* and in Eastern Europe: Concerning the near abroad, the commemoration of May 9 means reestablishing the bonds with the other former Soviet republics under Russian leadership.<sup>36</sup> Regarding Eastern Europe, May 9 points at Russia as its liberator from fascism, thus disregarding the local, more ambivalent or even opposing interpretations.<sup>37</sup> The re-traditionalization, and revitalization of Soviet iconography can also be found in popular culture and advertisements (Morris 2005).<sup>38</sup>

Thus nationalism also plays a role in Putin's Russia, however its role is by far less important than in other post-Soviet republics: Goode (2012) correctly assumes that in other cases in the post-Soviet space, material sources of power are seldom sufficient to secure compliance – in the Russian case, in contrast, not only are there some material resources which at least provided an economic basis for the regime in the urban centers but additionally, nationalism and economic success are tied together in official discourse: “sovereignty” is declared to be a “synonym for competitiveness” (Surkov). Put differently: “Economic success serves to buttress Russia's claim to a leading position in world politics. It not only garners the respect of the world's leading states and perhaps places Russia among them, but it also enables Russia to play the desired pre-eminent role in the post-Soviet space” (Müller 2009, 334). This, however, does not exclude nationalism as independent of economic considerations – despite being the primary form of nationalism in “sovereign democracy”. There remain clear attempts to co-opt national symbols and demands. An example is the renewed symbiosis between State and Church in Russia.<sup>39</sup> Tellingly, Polyakov (2007) also includes a contribution by Metropolitan Kirill. The most recent event highlighting the tight relation between the Russian Orthodox Church and the State is certainly the “Pussy Riot” case. The key element, which provoked the scandal, was the double blow the “Punk Prayer” delivered both to Church and the State. It used a religious language to attack not only the State in general, but “Putin” in particular. With the Church increasingly being a key symbol of Russian culture in general, and the “Prayer” being staged at its heart, in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, it could be interpreted by the State and the Church as an attack on the nation as such. Hence, it could only draw severe legal consequences, if the State was to play its part as guarantor and protector of the Church and the nation.<sup>40</sup>

On the one hand, the overall aim is to establish a “legitimate” nationalism, *within* the official discourse. Thus, for example, “the (...) party of power (...) monopolizes the right to xenophobia” (Gudkov 2009, 182) and the use of national symbols. On the other hand, official discourse condemns oppositional nationalism and claims that it wants to shift Russia “two steps back”; those nationalists are depicted as “isolationists, because I do not want to discredit the term 'patriots' (..) They are almost Nazis (*nacisty*)” (Surkov 2007b, 59). Hence, the true patriots are sitting in the Kremlin and their legitimate nationalism is strongly permeated with economic claims.

### **Conclusion and outlook: populism from above and modernization**

Modernization has a long tradition of being a demand articulated in official discourse. The achievement of (Western-like) welfare has always been an element of the democratic discourse in

Russia (Lukin 2000). Especially between 2003 and 2007, it became a keyword of the Russian economic debate (Zweynert 2010, 550). Under Putin, and even more so under Medvedev, the demand for modernization was thus quickly re-appropriated: Modernization was widely employed and increasingly applied to various political fields: “Literally everything is being modernized, from the institutions of civil society to medical infrastructure”, however, under Medvedev, the concept of modernization assumed “the character of a slogan or fashion and presented itself more as a short-term political project rather than a long-term strategy for national development” (Devyjatkov & Makarychev 2012). Under both presidents, more importance was attributed to modernization than to democratic reform, echoing demands already formulated in the 1990s to copy the “Chinese model”. However, modernization rhetoric is at odds with the lacking modernization reality, especially outside major cities. Since Putin has failed to deliver modernization, oppositional demands are more vividly voiced around the signifier of modernization (e.g. Mitrokhin 2010), with the regime being increasingly measured against its modernization promises. At first glance, this could represent a major weakness of the regime and translate into demands for a politically more competitive system that could deliver the modernization the current regime has only been promising. Paradoxically, among others, these demands were in part translated into demands for an even firmer ruler, who truly delivers what he promises, in short: for another, more benevolent, more efficient, less corrupt “Putin”. Hence modernization is largely free of democratic connotations, not only in official circles, as Devyjatkov and Makarychev (2012) argue, but also among some of those who assume a critical stance towards the regime.<sup>41</sup> In some interviews conducted by the author, it even became clear that the interviewees would be willing to accept less democracy if only modernization began. Opposition in Russia can be as undemocratic as the regime that is in place. Claims for modernization and democracy do not necessarily go hand in hand, not even among critics of the regime.<sup>42</sup>

To some, Medvedev represented a new reformer able to deliver a push for modernization. Presenting himself as technologically up-to-date, proficient in the use of new media, he certainly represented the more modern face of the regime. Some even claimed that he fought a secret war against the hardliners (Yurgens 2009). Medvedev thus appealed to the young urban middle-classes but also to those oppositional forces inclined toward conservative modernization: In a populist fashion, modernization offered an opportunity to construct “a people” and pit it against an institutional system, of which, however, Putin and Medvedev claimed not to be a part. Indeed, as polls have shown during Putin's tenure, the presidential office enjoyed the highest approval figures among all government institutions (Stoner-Weiss 2010: 260f.). After Putin's change of office, the

premier received favorable ratings, too.<sup>43</sup> The operation, hence, that “Putin-Medvedev” performed, was preserving an apparent divide within the institutional system: Putin-Medvedev who fight for modernization, on the one hand, and a corrupt bureaucracy, ministries, the parliament etc. delaying the process, on the other hand. This appears like a *populism from above*, a populism which is not oppositional but systemic. It introduces an additional dividing line to the split between the people and the institutional system: between the “bad institutions”, which are not responsive, and the “good institutions” (in the Russian case: the president) that side with the people.

Tellingly, Dmitry Medvedev delivered his most important and clearest pledges for modernization to rather critical media (Medvedev 2009a; 2009b), claiming to take oppositional demands for modernization seriously. This can be seen as an attempt by which these demands are domesticated in the official discourse: As in the case of democracy, the demand for modernization, too, had to be kept firmly within the discourse. Similarly, Medvedev promised reforms after the 2011 Duma elections once more, in an attempt to appease the young, middle-class, and urban electorate. As mentioned above, though, modernization has to precede democratization: Only a renewed economic basis, the argument goes, allows for more democracy and freedom. Until then, it seems, democratization would only play into the hands of Russia's enemies. Despite the depoliticized understanding of modernization, it does fulfill a political function and the appeal to modernization is a political act, as Chantal Mouffe describes in a different context: “To use ‘modernization’ in such a way is no doubt a powerful rhetorical gesture which allows (..) to draw a political frontier between ‘the moderns’ and ‘the traditionalists or fundamentalists’, while at the same time denying the political character of their move” (Mouffe 2005, 88).<sup>44</sup>

Paradoxically then, not fulfilling promises, and portraying the “good institutional system” as the only one able to deliver results, seems to be a recipe to secure power – at least temporarily. In the long run, the demand for modernization could hence be the Achilles’ heel of the official discourse's hegemony. It could drop out of the official discourse and become a nodal point in the counter-hegemonic discourse, especially if the presumed dividing line between the “good” and the “bad” institutional system gets blurred or collapses. The vague meaning of modernization makes it even more suitable to play the role of the empty signifier, which holds together the whole oppositional discourse. Demands change over time and both the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses must incorporate them. For example, the demands for stability and security, so important after the troubled 1990s, have become less important, and new demands are being raised. “Sovereign democracy” must prove itself versatile enough to include these new demands: The same answers

that granted the official discourse success for such a long time may be insufficient for the future. The losses of *Edinaya Rossiya* in the 2011 Duma elections show that no hegemony and no stability can last forever. Stability always carries a seed of instability, and disappointment with the status quo is rising: “No democracy and no modernization” is clearly not an option for the Russian electorate, in the long-run. On the one hand, the 2011/2012 election cycle showed that some of the old demands, for stability, security and for keeping the *Arche* together, still mobilize a substantial part of the population, particularly in face of the absence of candidates who represent a real alternative. “Putin” seemed to work well as a name suturing these demands. On the other hand, the 2011/2012 election cycle also showed that “Putin” and what he stands for might be losing thrust and that the hegemony of the official discourse displayed first rifts. This also explains the regime’s resort to more repressive measures. As can be seen in the wave of protests that followed the elections, “Putin” started increasingly to play an analogous but opposite role: The slogan “Russia without Putin” shows that in this case “Putin” unites an opposition which otherwise lacks almost any common ground. “Modernization” could be such a common ground if it drops out of the official discourse.

## Notes

1. The founding texts of sovereign democracy were written by Vladislav Surkov (2007a; 2007b), but its roots can be traced back to speeches held by Surkov in 2005 at the economic forum of *Delovaya Rossiya* and in 2006 at United Russia’s Center for Party Personnel Training. Later, Valery Zor’kin’s “Apology of the Westphalian System” (Zor’kin 2004, reprinted in 2006) also came to be seen as a core text. Some round-table discussions that included representatives from various parties attempted to add some substance to the murky term (Dobrynina 2006; Zakatnova 2006), and the publishing house *Evropa* published a series of anthologies on the topic.
2. (Non representative) polls conducted by *Ėkho Moskv*y show the low level of acceptance of sovereign democracy among the populace (*Ėkho Moskv*y 2006) and even the political (regional) elites (Tarusin 2008, 46ff.) The last nail in sovereign democracy’s “coffin” was put by Dmitry Medvedev, who dismissed the need for putting adjectives in front of the word democracy, thus explicitly contradicting one of Surkov’s premises (see below).
3. The definition adopted here would agree with Sharafutdinova (2012, 19), and include the “political technologists” in official discourse, however, from the theoretical perspective adopted, it does not ascribe to them the power to “construct the discourse” - rather, it would encourage to invert the relation: also the “political technologist” is an identity position which the discourse offers.
4. This paper summarizes main results of the author’s Ph.D. thesis (Casula 2012) and is based on research conducted between 2008 and 2011 at the University of Basel. The author would like to thank Andrey Makarychev and Klaus Müller for their valuable suggestions.
5. “We will call articulation any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice. The structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice, we will call discourse” (Laclau & Mouffe 2001, 105). Later, Laclau clarified that discourse “is the primary terrain of the constitution of objectivity as such.” (Laclau 2005a, 68)
6. It cannot be overemphasized that this concept of discourse does not deny the existence of “objects (..) externally to thought, but rather the different assertion that they could constitute themselves as objects outside any discursive condition of emergence” (Laclau & Mouffe 2001, 108). Laclau stresses that by “discourse (...) I do not mean something essentially restricted to the areas of speech and writing, but any complex of elements in which relations play the constitutive role” (Laclau 2005a, 68), hence also “an action is what it is only through its differences from other possible actions.” (ibid.)
7. At least this is one aspect of hegemony, which this paper would like to stress: “Now (...) we can define hegemony as the expansion of a discourse or a set of discourses, into a dominant horizon of social orientation and action by means of articulating unfixed moments in a context crisscrossed by antagonistic forces.” (Torfing 1999, 101)

8. "This operation of taking up, by a particularity, of an incommensurable universal signification is what I have called hegemony. And, given that this embodied totality or universality is (...) an impossible object, the hegemonic identity becomes something of the order of an empty signifier, its own particularity embodying an unachievable fullness." (Laclau 2005a, 70f.)
9. Arditì further argues that "there is a continual slippage between both theoretical constructs [hegemony and populism] and between these and politics" (Arditì 2010, 493): Previously, he had convincingly shown that "the specific difference that populism introduces vis-à-vis hegemony is the division of society into two camps to produce a relation of equivalence among demands and construct a frontier or antagonistic relation between them. This is why populism can be said to be a species of the genus hegemony." (ibid., 492)
10. For example, the way the European Union handles its financial crisis is full of depoliticizing moves, because an economic rationale (presented as necessity) supersedes any (political) debate about economic options.
11. "[P]ure post-politics (...) is inherently impossible: any political regime needs a supplementary 'populist' level of self-legitimization" (Žižek 2009, 268).
12. "I want to be quite clear in saying that we do not and should not fear change. (...) But it is time to say firmly that this period is over and there will be neither revolution nor counter-revolution." (Putin 2001; 2008, 80)
13. "We do not think that we have been defeated in the Cold War. We deem that we ourselves have overcome our totalitarian state structure. Nobody has defeated us." (Surkov 2008, 122)
14. "Russia is a country which has achieved democracy thanks to the will of its own people. It embarked on this path on its own (...) and it will decide by itself, by which means the (...) the realization of the principles of freedom and democracy will be secured." (Putin 2008, 281)
15. Surkov argues in this vein, explaining that "many societies have once conceived themselves as democratic and have, at the same time, curtailed the rights of women or ethnic minorities or (...) traded in slaves. So were these then democracies like today? And if not, how is it possible not to add adjectives [to the term democracy]?" (Surkov 2007b, 396f.)
16. This view echoes in part certain strands of the U.S. foreign policy discourse in the 1990s (Casula 2010).
17. While on the NATO intervention in Libya, for example, Russia abstained in the Security Council, concerning Syria, Russia reverted to an absolute "no" to foreign intervention.
18. Official discourse's relation to globalization is hence highly ambiguous: On the one hand, it depicts Russia as well integrated into the world system, at least as an "energy super power" (Orlov 2006), and as a full member of the WTO, in short: as an economic global player. Politically, on the other hand, the Westphalian sovereignty is idealized, especially when Western powers intervene or threaten to intervene in other countries' affairs. The latter implies a demand for clear political, cultural and normative boundaries. In a different context, Coward (2005, 858) has criticized the opposition between a politically globalized and a fragmented world system, stating that the "principle problem of being intellectually shackled to such a binary opposition is the manner in which it rests on largely mythical or fictitious suppositions. As Justin Rosenberg has made clear, the supposition of a modern, pre-globalised inter-state system based upon 'constitutional separateness' – the so-called 'Westphalian system' – is itself a fictional, or mythological, understanding of world order contradicted by the various de-territorializing and transversal forces that have characterized the development and propagation of the European nation-state form".
19. This argument should not sound unfamiliar to all those acquainted with classic modernization theory: it is, in a nutshell, Martin Seymour Lipset's classic argument.
20. The use of interviews for discourse analytical approaches is disputed: but is not to be excluded per se, cf. Der Derian (2001).
21. Institut sovremennogo razvitiya, Institute of Contemporary Development.
22. By stating this, it is by no means excluded that the Russian opposition also employs a populist political form. The Motto "Russia without Putin", for example, also is populist in style, attempting to split the political space in a pro-Putin and an anti-Putin camp.
23. But it also reflects the idea of populism as a basic operation of all politics (Laclau 2005a), not only in Russia.
24. "Incidentally, Russia – we – are constantly being taught about democracy. But for some reason those who teach us do not want to learn themselves. I consider that the unipolar model is not only unacceptable but also impossible in today's world. (...) What is even more important is that the model itself is flawed because at its basis there is and can be no moral foundations for modern civilization." (Putin 2007)
25. Edinaya Rossiya's head Boris Gryzlov explains: "The role of Putin as national leader [*nacional'ny lider*] will be faithfully guaranteed by Edinaya Rossiya and its parliamentary majority. All activities of the party in the parliament and the regions will be steered towards supporting the course of our national leader. (...) Contemporary Russia is Putin. And Russia without Putin, is a headless and passive country. A Russia with which one can do as one pleases. Russia as a prey. (...) Vladimir Putin remains national leader independently from the post he assumes." (Gryzlov 2007)
26. Hence, Putin could change post – from president to premier and vice versa – but not the position of national leader, which almost assumed characteristics of a title.
27. Žižek (1999) adds ultra- and post-politics, which can also be found in the Russian political discourse: "In post-politics, the conflict of global ideological visions embodied in different parties which compete for power is replaced by the collaboration of enlightened technocrats (...); via the process of negotiation of interests, a compromise is reached in



the guise of a more or less universal consensus. Post-politics thus emphasizes the need to leave old ideological visions behind and confront new issues, armed with necessary expert knowledge and free deliberation that takes people's concrete needs and demands into account" (Žižek 1999, 198). Ultra-politics, in contrast, leaves no room for symbolic conflict; it denotes a "militarization of politics" (ibid., 190). Obviously, all forms of depoliticization are not mutually exclusive. Cf. also Marchart (2010).

28. Another instance of a biopolitical argument is made with reference to the "preservation of the people" (*sberezhenie naroda*), a locution first introduced by Solzhenitsyn, to which official discourse came back again and again since 2006. The argument goes that the Russian people has suffered so much in the past that it must be considered almost an "endangered species". This argument is closely related to another theme of the discourse: the "demographic catastrophe" that allegedly threatens the survival of Russians: "Political commentators judged the demographic theme as a brilliant way of appropriating one of the Communists' favorite topics. Communists and harsh nationalists have for a decade deplored what is called 'the ongoing genocide of the Russian population', and often blamed it on western influence, be it in the form of sexual permissiveness or imported drugs. Putin's rhetoric was notably free of any inflammatory, xenophobic rhetoric. (...) the problems were presented as mainly economic, and the solution, more money from the state" (Rotkirch et al. 2007, 351f.).

29. "I would like to congratulate Gazprom and your Ukrainian partners on reaching these agreements. Undoubtedly, resolving difficult issues concerning gas will have an impact on all levels of Russian-Ukrainian relations. Regarding the energy sector, it is not only important that the Russian initial position on calculating the price for our gas is recognized as just. Something else is more important, namely the fact that our relations are of a new quality – they are transparent, market-based relations between partners. They allow us to work effectively together not only in the Ukrainian market, but in the markets of other countries as well" (Putin 2006b).

30. The strength of the state is that it is in the position to organize the work of the private economy in such a way that the results are not only beneficial for itself but for the country as a whole" (Valery Fadeev quoted in Garadzha 2006, 141). Andrey Kokoshin concurs: "By far not all (...) entrepreneurs are able to found 'locomotives of national success' without an active and powerful support of the state. The central role of the state is conducive to the competitiveness of Russia as well as of her friends and partners" (quoted in Garadzha 2006, 96).

31. Belych explained: "When you have nothing at all, when you cannot even get close in the elections, when all your paths are being cut off, then you just can't have a political party. (...) There should be no fighting for the sake of fighting. There should be results, a change in the situation of the country" (quoted in Levy 2008). And Mariya Gaydar, although declaring that Belych sold his soul to the devil (Russia Today 2008) and describing his move as a "criminal agreement with a criminal state" (quoted in Ekspert 2008; 2009) at first, later explained her change of mind by stressing that her new job "is not a political post (...) My work is limited in time, and on a social basis, for which I am not remunerated (Gaydar 2009). Interestingly, both politicians explain their decision by stressing their result-driven, apolitical approach.

32. Putin himself deplored in 2007 that "there has been an increasing influx of money from abroad being used to intervene directly in our internal affairs. Looking back (...), we recall the talk about the civilizing role of colonial powers during the colonial era. Today, 'civilization' has been replaced by democratization, but the aim is the same – to ensure unilateral gains and one's own advantage and to pursue one's own interests" (Putin 2008, 409f.). Others accuse "foreign (...) structures to pump money into Russian politics since the 1980s (...) It is known that the Colour Revolutions have been paid with Western money" (Polyakov 2007, 70). The Colour Revolutions posed a huge challenge for relations between Russia and the West (Saari 2009); Nikonov (2004) even speaks of the most serious crisis.

33. The party of power "has the right to designate those that are to be considered enemies at any given moment: Chechen separatists, international terrorists, the instigators and leaders of 'anti-Russian' (...) revolutions of various colours, etc" (Gudkov 2009, 182).

34. "The Russian political tradition is impossible outside the idea of the state. The well-known sociological fact that emigrated Russians almost never established a diaspora hints at the impossibility of forms of self-organization outside the state (...). The liquidation of the Russian state literally means the liquidation of Russian national identity" (Polyakov 2007, 482f.) – for a similar line of thought see also Surkov (2008, 83). The state, the strong Russian state through its identification with the nation as a whole is thus elevated to the role of a fetish, untouchable, almost sacred, and the state officials become the ministers of this state-centered religion. To mind also comes Gramsci's famous expression: "In Russia the state was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous" (Gramsci 1971, 238).

35. "Being Russian is not determined by [references to] blood and soil but through language and culture. (...) In Russia, he is Russian, who declares himself as such. In Russian culture there is not one argument which would allow one to question such a claim. Whoever says 'I am Russian', to him it is impossible to say 'no' on cultural grounds" (Isaev 2006, 8). Given the centrality attributed to Russian language, Giorgio Agamben's considerations on this issue come to mind: "We do not have, in fact, the slightest idea of what either a people or a language is (...) The simple correspondence between these two facts defines modern political discourse (...) The relation between Gypsies and Argot puts this correspondence radically into question in the very instant in which it parodically reenacts it. Gypsies are to a people what Argot is to language. And although this analogy can last but for a brief moment, it nonetheless sheds

light on that truth which the correspondence between language and people was secretly intended to conceal: all peoples are gangs and Coquilles, all languages are jargons and Argot.” (Agamben 2000, 64ff.)

36. Because in the War “all peoples and all Republics of the Soviet Union suffered their irretrievable losses. Grief came to every house, to every family. Therefore May 9 is a holy day for all countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States” (Putin 2005).

37. “The Soviet period is not a ‘black hole’ in Russian history, the Soviet Union was not ‘the empire of evil’, quite the opposite: Putin says it (...) indirectly: The break-up the Soviet Union was the biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century; for the Russian people this was a real drama. (...) The soldiers of the Great Patriotic War were soldiers of freedom” (Garadzha 2006, 85). Again, the brand “Putin” plays a pivotal role in establishing historical continuity: “In the collective consciousness, Putin became the symbolic chain that linked Soviet times to the present day, healing or at least easing the trauma of the masses that had been caused by the changes under Yeltsin and the collapse of Soviet power. People did not expect the president to bring about renewal or a fresh program, serious change, or consistent modernization, but rather a ‘routinization’ of the rupture” (Gudkov 2009, 174).

38. While this paper agrees with Sharafutdinova (2012) that the new discourse “reintegrated Russia's communist past”, it would humbly disagree that “any negative elements” have been displaced “onto an external Other – the West – depicted as Russia's main foe” (Sharafutdinova 2012, 27). Instead, it can be argued that in official discourse there is an ambivalence in the signifier of “the West”, which can have positive and negative connotations, starting with a clear differentiation between Europe and the U.S.: to the former many ties are highlighted, prominently in culture and commerce. Especially regarding the importance of May 9, the fight against fascism was fought along with Western allies. Thus “the West” emerges as a quite ambivalent Other, hinting at the possibility of populism failing to neatly divide the political space.

39. “Conservative version of Russian nationalism, which is becoming the Kremlin’s new mainstream, is closely related to Orthodox Christianity. Religion is being upgraded to be a centerpiece of Russia’s national identity” (Trenin 2013,13). Trenin (2013) even claims that “traditional ethics are being adopted as a foundation of Moscow’s foreign policy”, including the Syria crisis (Trenin 2013,13ff.).

40. “Vladimir Putin and his ally Patriarch Kirill are seeking to pick up the mantle of defenders of Christian faith, not so much against other religions, which are treated with respect, but from ‘blasphemers’ at home, like the Pussy Riot punk group and the ‘godless Europeans’ next door” (Trenin 2013, 13f.).

41. Quoting Trenin (2010), Devyatkov and Makarychev (2012) call this approach conservative modernization, i.e. one imposed by authoritarian means. Both authors maintain that the modernization discourse that dominates in Russia is a mixture of a depoliticized understanding (focusing on technological innovation) and of the recognition of the compatibility of modernization with authoritarian power relations.

42. Devyatkov and Makarychev (2012) explicitly name “systemic liberals” like Inozemtsev (2010).

43. This has been interpreted by Schröder (2007) as a primacy of trust in persons over trust in institutions.

44. The well-known May Day Manifesto of 1967-68 comes to mind, which underscores that “modernization (...) is the ideology of the never-ending present. (...) human society diminished to a passing technique. No confrontation of power, values or interests, no choice between competing priorities is envisaged or encouraged. It is a technocratic model of society, conflict-free and politically neutral, dissolving genuine social conflicts and issues in the abstractions of ‘the scientific revolution’, ‘consensus’, ‘productivity’” (quoted in Williams 1994, 202).

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