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The Sublime Conventionality of the World: Political Mediatization and Finnish Representations of
the Fall of the Soviet Union

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Apart from the 9/11 attacks, few events in recent world history have taken place as unexpectedly and with such a devastating impact on world politics as the recent fall of the Soviet Union.

However, our understanding of this “sublime” event is conditioned by the ways we imagine and represent it.

In this paper, I will first present some elements of an aesthetic theory of the sublime. I will then, using the case of the fall of the Soviet Union as an example, develop some ideas for an alternative, constructivist theory of the political sublime that will emphasize the relatively stable symbolic aspects of politics. No matter how dramatic an incident, it needs to be analyzed in dialectical interaction with the symbolic structures of world/local politics. It is in the relatively stable symbolic structures of normal political life that the key to an understanding of the political sublime can be found.

Theories of the Sublime

In aesthetic theory, the sublime is understood as a natural occurrence (an earthquake, a violent thunderstorm...) or artistic representation (something of exceptional beauty) that produces in the beholder a sense of overwhelming grandeur or irresistible power, combining fear or terror with wonder. Schiller developed a theory of the sublime in two essays: ‘On the Sublime: Toward the Further Development of Some Kantian Ideas’ (1793), written in an admiring fashion before the Reign of Terror in France, and ‘On the Sublime’ (1803), in which he elaborated a more critical stance toward terror (or politics). The sublime as an aesthetic category seems to provide us with a metaphor that enables us to come to terms with exceptional and unexpected political events¹. In the first essay, Schiller suggests that when the distance between the “frightful object” and the material security that permits us to believe we are “safe” is traversed by a representation of the terrifying

¹ See Charles H. Hinnant, ‘Schiller and the Political Sublime: Two Perspectives’, *Criticism* 44 (2002), pp. 121-138.

object in our imagination, our survival instinct is set in motion. Schiller divides the sublime moment into three parts: 1) realization of an objective, physical power, 2) our subjective, physical impotence and 3) our subjective, moral superiority. These three moments constitute a linear succession that forms, in our minds, the sublime experience.

The advantages of employing the aesthetic concept of the sublime for understanding world events are threefold. First, and paradoxically, the concept enables us to imagine a contradictory process that simultaneously signals the unexpected “end” of a political regime and the “birth” of a new system still in the making. Second, in this reading the sublime is necessarily linked to misfortune and catastrophe, we are able to focus on the symbolic, emotional and physical violence unleashed by the “event”. Similar “events” are always condensed into visual images: the explosions after the planes crashed into the World Trade Center, tanks on the streets of Moscow bombing the White House or the physical demolition of the Berlin wall. Third, by bringing aesthetic theory into politics, we can concentrate on the forms of representations and their limits, on how we deal with the inexplicable and the incalculable. An examination of the relationship between representations and events may enable us to bridge the historical gap between them, a gap which prevents us from “expecting the unexpected”.

However, this aesthetic conception of the sublime also has several theoretical limitations that prevent its development into a political theory of the sublime. First, the aesthetic interpretation of the sublime lays too much emphasis on the psychological impact of an isolated event on an individual witness or viewer, leaving untouched the collective symbolic backgrounds that enable individual representation to occur in the first place. Second, the danger is that while in certain aspects this aesthetic theory goes beyond the ephemeral, it might also reinforce, through an individualizing and psychologizing bias, the mediatization of politics. The viewer as a powerless observer is legitimized and normalized into one of the structural conditions for political communication and action. Third, the sublime is equated with something that is irresolvable.

Between fear and wonder there is no room for dialectical synthesis or any other kind of theoretical (or practical) resolution. The experience of *etwas ganz anderes*, to paraphrase Kant, points to a single event that promises universality and necessity but is incapable of delivering these because it is, by definition, beyond the scope of representation. Lyotard analyzes the sublime as something “subjectively felt by thought as differend”². Aesthetic feeling is the sensation not of a thing or of its representation, but of something quite different, of a differend that cannot be represented. In Lyotard’s interpretation of Kant’s work, this differend is a supplement, something that unites the first and second *Critiques*. Subjective feeling becomes the crucial criterion of the sublime. However, the problem is that unless what is subjectively felt is linked to intersubjective and objective processes, its value for a political theory of the sublime will be limited.

Thus, in lieu of an aesthetic theory of the sublime, I would like here to elaborate some elements for a political theory of the sublime. Rather than an isolated, often apocalyptic event, what is crucial to such a theory is an understanding of the deep structures of International Relations and world politics, of the *longue durée* and the collective construction of symbolic structures and representations that enable us to control others and our environment. Aesthetization reifies the incident into a “sublime” event that violently unleashes itself on helpless subjects, transforming itself into an all-encompassing moment that acquires supernatural structuring power. There is no doubt that an incident like the explosion of the WTC towers is frightening and shocking as such. But it derives even more power more from the symbolically conditioned phantasmatic terror and intense symbolic threat images it triggers.

² Jean-François Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 31.

Analyzing the Fall of the Soviet Union

The symbolic universe that interests us here is the world of Finnish political mythology, and more specifically, the mythology that deals with surrounds the relationship between Finland and Russia. Finland is the ideal case for analyzing the political sublime. A small nation sandwiched between two powerful neighbours, Sweden and Russia, Finns have a long history of collective experiences linked to domination, terror, and danger. For seven hundred years Finnish territory was part of Sweden, and for a hundred years part of the Russian empire. Both the October 1917 revolution that led to Finnish independence and the Second World War, inaugurated by the Soviet Union's violent aggression in 1939 and followed by what Finns refer to as the "Continuation War" in which the Finns agreed to cooperate with Germany, still constitute traumatic experiences that condition Finnish-Russian relations today. Given these historical experiences, it could be assumed that the impact of the fall would be felt more strongly in this locality where extreme danger has been associated with the "East". Finns were close enough to gaze into the abyss and feel the impact of the fall of the Soviet Union, yet far enough away not to experience directly the destruction that followed.³

In Finnish political mythology, Russia has traditionally been "orientalized", presented as something Other. The symbolic and physical threat that Russia poses to Finland is an integral part of the Finnish political order, a threat that was used by politicians such as Urho Kekkonen to reinforce their power. In this Finnish vision, Russia is an all-encompassing "primordial chaos"⁴ and Finland's main concern is national death. Since the Second World War, the trauma of abandonment has haunted Finnish foreign policy decision-making. Given these factors, it hardly comes as a surprise that the chief effect in Finland of the fall of the Soviet Union has been a series of neurotic

³ See for instance Heikki Luostarinen, 'Finnish Russophobia: The Story of an Enemy Image', *Journal of Peace Research* 26 no.2 (1989): 123-137.

⁴ Sergei Medvedev, *Russia as the Subconsciousness of Finland* (Helsinki: Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 1998), 5.

attempts to integrate in the West as soon as possible. Finland's best student – syndrome in the context of the European Union can be seen as part of a process of sublimation whereby the threats posed by the Soviet Union are neutralized. For the Finnish economy, the effects of the fall of the Soviet Union have been dramatic. Trade with the Soviet Union, previously very important, came to a near halt. This reduced the Finnish GDP by several points, when alternative markets for the goods exported to the Soviet Union could not be found. However, eastern trade did not just end suddenly. The evidence indicates that it diminished steadily during the last five years of the existence of the Soviet Union. The slow death of the USSR as a political regime was accompanied in Finland by an economic crisis (1991-1995) and by the process of integration into the European Communities (1991-1995). In August 1991, conservatives unsuccessfully attempted a coup d'état, reinforcing Boris Yeltsin's power position. The USSR was officially dismantled on December 31, 1991. In Finland, the worst-case scenario included a raging civil war and floods of refugees crossing the border. Imagining the worst can also be a survival strategy.

Unemployment went up from 3 per cent in 1991 to 16 per cent in 1993. In three years, 450,000 jobs disappeared. For Finnish political and economic elites, the slow death of the Soviet Union opened a window of opportunity to integrate more firmly into the West. As the Treaty of Friendship, Co-operation and Mutual Assistance became part of history, a variety of political and economic constraints evaporated into thin air. Following Sweden, Finland applied to join the European Communities on March 18, 1992, just two and a half months after the official dissolution of the Soviet Union. Some politicians and business leaders had been well aware of the disintegration that had started in the Soviet Union, but had not wanted to make the information public for fear of jeopardizing the very lucrative trade between Finland and the Soviet Union. Everything then happened very fast. Just ten months earlier in January 1991, then-President of the Republic Social-Democrat Mauno Koivisto had advised the government led by Centrist Prime Minister Esko Aho that Finland should attempt to join the European Trade Area and not the

European Communities. Ministers were not allowed to speak of European Union membership.⁵ Little by little, however, a consensus formed among political and economic elites. The victory of the agrarian, EU –critical, Centre Party in the parliamentary elections of 1991 was the political key to major political transformations. A campaign of Westernization centred on EU –membership crystallized in the press and among the political and economic elites when Sweden suddenly informed the world it would seek EU -membership. The consensus of the elites in such a small country explains the strategy’s success. The price was the absence of public discussion concerning the country’s future. The elite’s priority was to re-integrate Finland as soon as possible in Europe and the global economy, an orientation that had also prevailed before World War II. Former Minister of Justice Hannele Pokka describes in her memoirs how EU -membership was “decided” in the government: “The Prime Minister informed us that the decision had been made. ‘About what?’, asked the ignorant ministers. ‘We have decided that an account will be given’, answered the Prime Minister. ‘About what?’ ‘EU –membership’. The final decision concerning EU –membership had been made on the quiet”.⁶

Throughout history Finland has been a buffer state, between Russia or the USSR and the West. Finns could do what they wanted as long as they remained loyal to their eastern neighbour, whether imperial Russia, the USSR or Putin’s Russia. Despite Finland’s integration into Europe and the global economy, habits of thinking and doing that have taken hundreds of years to develop continue to condition Finno-Russian relations after the sudden collapse of the USSR. For instance, Finlandization is still practiced, especially in historical and journalistic treatment of the issue of Karelia, a part of Finland that the USSR annexed after World War II. According to some journalists, *Helsingin Sanomat*, Finland’s largest daily (nearly 500.000 copies printed, with about a million readers in a country of 5,2 million inhabitants), applies a form of “internalized

⁵ Risto Uimonen, *Nuori pääministeri* (Helsinki: WSOY, 1995), 167.

⁶ Hannele Pokka, quoted in Ilkka Ruostetsaari, *Valta muutoksessa* (Helsinki: WSOY, 2003).

Finlandization”⁷ in its editorial decisions concerning news on Russia. This internalized Finlandization has led *Helsingin Sanomat* to streamline its reporting with official Finnish foreign policy.

The relatively stable historical relationship between Finland and Russia provides the bedrock on which unexpected events are interpreted on both sides. The crucial distinction is not between the explicable and the inexplicable, as an aesthetic theory of the sublime would have it, but in the different ways of defining the relationships between the two. Definitions of the politically-taken-for-granted will shape the form the inexplicable can take. Defining how Finnish foreign policy should anticipate future developments is, of course, a major object of struggle between different interest groups. For Finnish foreign policy regarding Russia, expecting the unexpected has for a long time been the norm. Thus for instance the current war on terrorism plays into the hands of certain interests, even in Finland where a terrorist attack is, even according to experts, very unlikely, and this policy already anticipates and sublimates certain types of individual or collective violent actions.

The relevance of an aesthetic theory of the sublime is limited as it cannot take into account processes such as the fall of the Soviet Union that require analysis of the dialectical relationship between events and historical contexts.

A Political Theory of the Sublime

What advantages does a constructivist concept of the political sublime and of the process of sublimation offer to social theory and the study of international politics? First, and paradoxically, the sublime historical encounter enables us to highlight the symbolic building blocks of a political order. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*, as the French say. The fall of the Soviet Union

⁷ Martti Valkonen, *Suomettuminen jatkuu yhä* (Helsinki: Tammi, 1998).

came as a surprise to most of us partly because of the symbolic status of the Soviet Union as a key building block of the global political order of the moment. Imagining a world without the Soviet Union was impossible because it would have contradicted the collective belief that constitutes institutions like the Soviet Union. The process of sublimation, that is how various agents and interests transform the ordinary into the extra-ordinary or the ontic into the ontological, enables us to examine how certain historical events are constructed as being sublime, the cornerstones of a new political order in the making. The process of sublimation thus takes place before *and* after the celebrated historical encounter or, more precisely, its audiovisual objectification.

The second aspect of the sublime and the process of sublimation that should be noted is the condensation of the historical event into powerful visual images following the aesthetic register in which the concept of the sublime has developed. This factor highlights another key feature of the social construction of reality and memory, its embeddedness in the physical world. However, while the visual aspects of the sublime might enable us to focus on the immediate effects of powerful images on individuals, they may, through their violent impact on our bodies and senses, also distract us from analysis of the institutional and symbolic aspects of the sublime. A loud explosion or noise immobilizes, for a few seconds. The physical shock hides the more insidious forces of symbolic violence the encounter carries within. Physical violence and shock find their logical equivalents in the fable of humanity in its infancy, the *omnium bellum contra omnes*, where terror produced by humans, not nature, forms the basis of social interaction.

Third, in a constructivist theory of the political sublime the physical detachment that the aesthetic sublime presupposes is transformed into a symbolic and/or institutional complicity in the social world: we are always, to varying degrees, implicated in the process of sublimation. Unlike the case of a thunderstorm and the terrified individual observing it, there is no strict separation between object and subject. On the contrary, historical encounters are always individualized to varying degrees, whether we like it or not, and they receive their social power

from the union between the subjective and the objective. If detachment is impossible and social reality is never just “out there”, the solidity of the phenomenon or incident observed depends on the resonance it finds in subjective evaluations and perceptions and in the objective norms and conventions that regulate social interaction. Because it is internalized, soft power is familiar and therefore legitimate⁸. Exactly for these reasons, it is the hardest power of all. It makes victory possible without battle. In the words of Lao Tzu, “the softest thing in the world dashes against and overcomes the hardest”.⁹

While symbolic reality might not have the same material properties as physical reality, it has very similar effects. Institutional order is not negotiated. Like physical reality, its materiality is manifest in the fact that it forces itself on us, without asking for our consent. In contrast to physical reality, however, it does not always start and end in a clearly defined temporal and spatial span. The plasticity of symbolic reality is also evident in the way concepts refer to other concepts in more or less structured semantic universes that do not necessarily have direct links to physical reality. In a fundamental sense, symbolic reality forms the matrix through which physical incidents acquire their religious, economic or social meanings. This institutional and symbolic reality is then the central aspect of political reality and of a political theory of the sublime, not a mere appendix to physical events. The symbolic performance of the physical events will depend on factors such as the myriad political strategies and struggles taking place at a given moment and the political weight of the events as legitimizers/delegitimizers of the interests behind these strategies and struggles. Because symbolic realities often clash, the symbolic efficiency of events such as the tanks rolling through the streets of Moscow in August 1991 varies synchronically and diachronically. If an interpretation reinforces a solidly established and shared conception then this interpretation will reinforce the likelihood of certain actions. Thus, an event can reveal the fragility of the symbolic

⁸ For an analysis of internalized patterns of behaviour see Niilo Kauppi, *The Politics of Embodiment: Habits, Power and Pierre Bourdieu's Theory* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2000).

⁹ Lao Tzu, in *Philosophes taoïstes. Lao-tseu, Tchouang-tseu, Lie-tseu* (Paris : Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1980), XLIII.

order in place and can spur concerted actions from a variety of agents and groups. Interpretations of the visual events can then differ significantly. However, with technological advances such as developments in audiovisual media nobody can dispute that these events did in fact take place. The battleground has shifted from first-degree interpretations of the links between words and physical events to second-degree interpretations of words and their status in symbolic universes. The protagonists of these symbolic universes are permanently engaged in multiple classification struggles over the correct interpretation of reality. Classification struggles intensify as the unpredictability of reality increases.

The extra-ordinary power of a thunderstorm and the extra-ordinary power of an event like the appearance of tanks on the streets of Moscow thus have very different characteristics. In the first case, the sublime refers to the impact a “natural” event has on an isolated individual. In the second case the impact is not psychological but rather social and symbolic. More than in the first case, we are then talking about symbolic power and violence directed at symbolic universes and their constitutive meanings.¹⁰ The political sublime as a founding moment that is retroactively constructed touches on the social and cultural status of physical events, conditioning their interpretation and even the actual sequence of events through the perceptions and (always) retrospective evaluations of the participants and observers. As such, the physical event has little meaning. The event without the historical circumstances is equivalent to a word without a context. The meaning of the event will be formed through the multiple struggles over symbolic classification that will follow the conflicting definitions of the event. In the case of the bombing of the White House in Moscow or the images of the tanks rolling down the streets of that city, these incidents might have to be linked to interpretations concerning the state of the political order at the time. For instance, these events indicated the fragility of the new regime, which was also visible in the struggle between parliamentary and presidential authority, embodied by Parliament Spokesman

¹⁰ For a philosophical account of constitutive rules see John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995).

Ruslan Hasbulatov and war hero Aleksandr Rustkoy on the one hand, and President Yeltsin on the other hand. The transformations under way led to contradictions between a constitution dating the Soviet times and a new political reality.

One of the problems a political theory of the sublime faces is the lack of metaphors that adequately describe political transformations. Interpreting the Fall leads us to a series of aporias. To what degree can this event be an event in the first place, as it is, paradoxically, still taking place? It was never a Fall in the strict sense of the term, either, although the metaphor of the Fall enables us to grasp some of the event's complexity through a religious metaphor. Similarly, calling it a historical process minimizes the sudden, violent impact it had on the individuals living it, and the destabilizing effect it has had on our understanding of politics and habits of thinking. The collective aspect of the "event" is underlined by the fact that nobody saw it coming or, if somebody did, that nobody took it seriously. Finally, the crumbling of the former Soviet system continues to have incalculable political, economic and symbolic effects. Perhaps the Fall was no fall at all. Perhaps it was just a stumble.

In conclusion

Sublimating the fall of the Soviet Union into a single, physical event and analyzing this process through the apocalyptic lens provided by images of physical destruction prevent us from analyzing the links between the physical event and the symbolic universes through which we interpret them: the front stage and the back stage to use Erving Goffman's terms. Giving priority to an aesthetic theory of the sublime reinforces an individualistic and psychological interpretation of historical encounters which is disconnected from deeper and more gradual historical developments. It also prioritizes the media discourse that lives on this disconnection and the Big Bang theory that attributes to violent actions ontological superiority and performative efficiency compared to the

modest and weak routines of the ontic *Lebenswelt*. Exceptional events are seen as causes rather than effects. Through this political act par excellence, aesthetic theory separates the sublime (aesthetics) from terror (politics), what is kept at a distance from what comes physically too close. Through this split it simplifies to an extreme the complex individual and collective modes of engagement within the world. Furthermore, aesthetic theory elevates to the status of theoretical *a priori* sublime pleasure as derived from extreme experiences that are exceptional and often inexplicable. Via this detour, aesthetic theory legitimizes and normalizes violence and political atavism (the infancy of humanity reflecting the true, unchanging nature of human beings, for instance).

From the perspective of a constructivist political theory of the sublime, what should awaken our awe and wonder are not the seemingly revolutionary effects of an isolated event, but rather the relative stability of the political world in which we live. In the case briefly studied here, imperialist reflexes still condition Russian foreign policy, adaptive reflexes those of Finnish foreign policy. Finnish attitudes toward Russia and Russian attitudes toward Finland form the invisible structural basis upon which observers and participants format visually powerful events. Although the mutual non-aggression pact and, more generally, the symbiosis between Finland and the USSR significantly modified the image Finns had of themselves and of their eastern neighbour, Russophobia and traditional images of Russia have not disappeared. They have merely taken different forms. This invisible and familiar mental infrastructure and its routines are relatively stable due to the regularities that the constant symbolic interaction between the parties creates and sustains. In Taoist dialectics the weak are strong, what is small is large, and the ordinary is sublime.