Book Review


Christopher Marsh’s latest book, Unparalleled Reforms: China’s Rise, Russia’s Fall, and the Interdependence of Transition, is an ambitious attempt to both chronicle and account for the different paths of political and economic change taken by the People’s Republic of China, beginning in 1978, and the USSR-turned-Russian Federation, beginning in the late 1980s. This book is an exercise in comparative politics in the very best sense: the author has selected two cases in which numerous similarities are juxtaposed with profound differences in national culture, history, policies, and results of policies. As such, the prospects for scholarly knowledge and understanding to be significantly expanded are very good. Marsh succeeds in a manner that is likely to spawn similar attempts to understand the efficacy of reform projects not only in Russia and China, but also in other geographically proximate countries (e.g., Central Asia and Mongolia).

The value of the book is underscored by the paucity of works comparing reform in China and Russia, despite the fertility of intellectual soil from which meaningful, deeply informed comparison might usefully occur. This is especially so given the approach taken in Unparalleled Reforms, wherein the author undertakes his comparative analysis from the perspective of seeking to understand the manner and degree to which China and Russia’s reform efforts were mutually interdependent. That paucity is traceable in large measure to the scarcity of North American scholars who have advanced research capability in both the Russian and Chinese languages, and who are deeply learned in those countries’ cultures and histories and thoroughly familiar with contemporary scholarship on comparative political analysis. Fortunately for the scholarly community, Marsh possesses all of the above, and accordingly brings a wealth of insight to his readers. As such, Unparalleled Reforms appears destined for long-term noteworthiness in that it represents a truly pioneering effort, and for which the scholarly community will long remain indebted.

Given the size of the topic and the book’s length (less than 200 pages), it is remarkably insightful and concise. Although the bulk of the book’s contribution is found, of course, in the seven substantive chapters, I found even the several-page preface to be succinctly insightful. By mentioning Foucault’s concept of an “archive” of essentially distorted understandings of other cultures serving as a poor substitute for thoroughly grasping the underlying realities of those cultures, Marsh gives his readers a hint of the deep insights offered throughout Unparalleled Reforms. Marsh succeeds, in fact, in summarizing a broad array of scholarship in an engaging readable manner. Unparalleled Reforms calls not merely for a quick read, but close study by a wide readership, and not only by those already well versed in either Russian or Chinese political studies.
The main theme of *Unparalleled Reforms* is that a much greater degree of interdependence existed between the Soviet/Russia and Chinese reform efforts than has hitherto been acknowledged (or worse, even recognized) by Western scholars. This shortcoming, according to Marsh, significantly truncates our depth of understanding of the political and economic transitions that have occurred, for better or worse, in both the People’s Republic of China and the USSR-turned-Russian Federation. Marsh succeeds in making his point in a manner that will help subsequent scholarship to not neglect this important dimension of political change.

There are several points made in *Unparalleled Reforms* that will be scrutinized closely by scholars; in my judgment, however, this will not undermine its overall soundness and usefulness. First, the author’s claim that contemporary comparative politics typically does not take due account of international factors is arguably exaggerated (cf. pp. 7, 16, 25, 27, 28, and 122, among others) and is one with which many comparative political scientists simply will not concur. Having said this, one must nonetheless agree with Marsh that most (if not all) of the “transitology” literature unwisely either marginalizes or neglects altogether the interdependent character of regime transitions during the 1980s and 1990s: “lesson-drawing [from other countries’ experience with reforms] may have fundamentally altered the dynamic of reform, a point that has remained almost entirely overlooked in the literature on transitions” (4). This point, to me at least, seems fair enough and in fact warranted. Another questionable assertion is the statement that “[o]verall, however, Russia has made significant strides over the past decade toward the consolidation of democratic governance, development of a market economy, and the strengthening of nascent civil society” (81). Perhaps this is so in comparison with China, which is very likely what Marsh intends this statement to mean. Most scholars today would probably agree with the assessment offered later in the book, namely that much of the recent (i.e., since 2001) post-Soviet political transformation has pushed Russia in an increasingly authoritarian direction and not a liberal democratic one (e.g., “democracy in Russia is in retreat and the country seems to be backsliding once more into authoritarianism,” [159]). It should be emphasized, however, that pages 80–95 provide an accurate, succinct, and incisive assessment of Russia’s political transformation since 1991. Here, Marsh does an excellent job of pulling together a strikingly large volume of information and draws reasonable, sober conclusions from it. Finally, one must wonder about the statement that Gorbachev “was abandoning the tenets of socialism in rapid succession,” whereas “Chinese socialism was being ‘reassessed,’ not necessarily abandoned” (60). This is a very minor point, however, and probably more semantic than substantive. In any case, his synopsis of the two reform projects in comparative perspective in the heart of *Unparalleled Reforms* (Chapter 3: From Reform to Crisis: “Unparalleled Reforms,” pp. 59–62), are precisely on target.

In the final analysis, however, *Unparalleled Reforms* has so much to offer that it seems almost disporting to pay much attention to the several questionable statements cited above. His main theme is well taken: that the reform efforts of these two influential countries (and by extension, all reform efforts to a greater or lesser degree), simply must be considered in light of reform efforts undertaken elsewhere, and to that degree, such “transitions” are necessarily interdependent to a degree hitherto largely unacknowledged. *Unparalleled Reforms: China’s Rise, Russia’s Fall, and the Interdependence of Transition*, again, is a
pioneering, highly intelligent work by a remarkably multitalented scholar. As such, it will be useful for scholars who have long worked in the fields of Russian or Chinese political studies as well as for undergraduate students. Reluctant as one is in resorting to stock phrases in academic reviews, it must nonetheless be said of this work: it truly fills a significant gap in our understanding of the profound and broad-ranging political and economic changes in two of the most unquestionably significant countries of the world. As such, it deserves a wide reading by students of Russia, China, and indeed all engaged in the study of comparative politics.

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Erratum

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