



SELF-DETERMINATION
AND THE EMPIRE OF ROUTINE
MARK R. BEISSINGER

Mark Beissinger is Professor of Politics at Princeton University, where he teaches courses on nationalism, state-building, imperialism, and social movements, with special reference to the Soviet Union and the post-Soviet states. He has taught previously at Harvard University (1982–88) and the University of Wisconsin-Madison (1988–2005). Among his publications are: *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State* (2002); *Beyond State Crisis? Post-Colonial Africa and Post-Soviet Eurasia Compared* (2002); *The Nationalities Factor in Soviet Politics and Society* (1990); and *Scientific Management, Socialist Discipline, and Soviet Power* (1988). – Address: Princeton University, Department of Politics, 130 Corwin Hall, Princeton, WJ 08544-1013, USA.

We are all subjects of an empire of routine, the external responsibilities imposed on us that govern our livelihood. In this respect, scholars are a particularly anti-imperial lot. They relish the license to wander beyond the walls of the familiar, to possess the sovereign will to follow paths of their own choosing. This is, after all, how the boundaries of knowledge are challenged and remade. The Wissenschaftskolleg bestowed me with such an opportunity, liberating me for a year from the empire that normally dominates my life and providing me with the freedom to reconnoiter, write, reflect, and yes – even to make mistakes. I can only express my gratitude to the Kolleg for allowing me this ultimate luxury of self-determination.

I devoted the initial two months of my liberty to intensive German language instruction. This had not been my original intention, and I ended up canceling a two-week trip to Kazakhstan in order to participate in the language program. In the end I was grateful that

I had. While I never learned German well enough to use it professionally (a situation I regret), the language course gave me enough of a passive base to understand what was happening around me and to engage in everyday discourse.

I used the remainder of my precious Wiko freedom to write four articles, to make significant progress on a book manuscript, to deliver several lectures, and to participate in a number of conferences. My Wiko year thus proved to be very productive. The book manuscript I worked on while at Wiko revolves around what I call “post-imperial empire” – that is, empires in a world in which, according to predominant international norms, empires are not supposed to exist. I argue that international norms of sovereignty and self-determination have shaped the meaning and practice of empire in the modern era, ultimately transforming the notion of empire into a pejorative, altering the persona of empire’s constituent units, changing the behaviors that we identify as imperial, and affecting the ways by which states go about practicing large-scale foreign domination. This is a story largely missed in purely structural approaches to empire. These fundamental changes over time in what empires are as a practical category of politics should affect the ways we think about empire in the analytical realm, pushing us toward a relational approach to the study of empire and forcing us to think about empire not only as simply a structure, but also as a practice, a claim, and especially a reputation. The project deals primarily with the cases of the Soviet Union and the United States as two post-imperial states that nevertheless developed widespread reputations as empires, despite their denials of this label as applied to themselves. I trace how fear of being labeled an empire structured the ways these states went about asserting control over politically and culturally distinct societies and the specific practices and claims that nonetheless earned these states widespread reputations as empires.

Unfortunately, I did not complete the book during my stay at the Kolleg, though I did publish two articles drawn from material that will appear in the book, wrote drafts of several chapters, and developed much of the critical thinking that has gone into the project. This included an extended analysis of the secular shifts in modern politics that transformed empire from a practice centered around conquest, a claim made by rulers to legitimate control, and a matter of prestige into a practice centered around hierarchical subordination and arbitrary power, a claim made by those opposing a particular rule, and a reputation that states deny and seek to avoid. During my stay at Wiko I also began analysis of a database (compiled off-site while I was at Wiko) of more than two thousand articles from the world press raising accusations of empire, imperialism, or colonialism against contempo-

rary states or international organizations. The idea is to explore systematically how people speak about empire today and the characteristics they associate with the phenomenon.

A second project I worked on while at Wiko concerned the phenomenon of modular political action. I define modular political action as action based in significant part on the emulation of the prior successful example of others. Modular phenomena challenge some of the fundamental assumptions of social scientific inquiry – specifically, the assumption of the independence of cases, which is presupposed in both case-based and quantitative approaches. In previous work I demonstrated how the cross-case influence of one nationalism upon another was critical to the processes of mobilization that brought about the collapse of the Soviet state, with each successful example lowering the structural requirements for action by subsequent groups. In an article completed while at Wiko, I developed these arguments further to lay out an approach to the study of modular political phenomena more generally, focusing on the trade-offs between structural facilitation, the power of example, and institutional constraints and using the spread of democratizing revolutions among the post-communist states from 2000–2005 as empirical examples. A related article (also written while at Wiko) explored why attempts to export democratic revolution – embraced today in some American policy circles – might lead to unanticipated and sometimes deleterious effects for democratic development.

The staff at the Wissenschaftskolleg was wonderfully supportive throughout my stay – in particular, the library services, the restaurant staff, and the reception. And even without conscious reflection, colloquium and lunchtime discussions, working group proceedings, and conversations on the tennis court or at cocktail receptions came to be reflected in my work in subtle ways. As for the empire of routine, its omnipotence of course could not be entirely transcended. It inevitably extended its tentacles into my Wiko stay, and all of us eventually had to succumb to its seductions. But I returned to the United States in a very different situation than when I left for Berlin in Fall 2005 – due largely to the glorious year of self-determination Wiko provided me.