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How Cult Internet Character Mr. Perestroika Divided N.Y.U.'s Political Science Department

By **NYO Staff**
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In 1996, Adam Przeworski (pronounced something like "Chuvorski") came to New York University from the University of Chicago as one of the biggest names in political science. His mission was to give N.Y.U.'s historically weak and splintered department some direction, attract other established scholars and make the department a national player.

Things went well for a while. According to several renowned political scientists, Mr. Przeworski quickly became the most influential member of the department, drawing bright graduate students and like-minded faculty.

But then on Oct. 15, 2000, Mr. Przeworski and other heavyweights in the field of political science were blindsided by a mysterious character calling himself (or herself) "Mr. Perestroika."

Mr. Perestroika's weapon? A cutting e-mail document called the "Perestroika Manifesto" claiming that a small cabal—or "'coterie' of faculty," as the e-mail put it—"dominate and control" the American Political Science Association (APSA) and its journal, the American Political Science Review . Besides holding annual conventions that help shape the field as a whole, APSA runs the biggest job-placement service in political science. Publication in APSR virtually assures a rare job at a research university.

Mr. Perestroika's e-mail posed a loaded question: "Why are all the articles of APSR from the same methodology—statistics or game theory?"

The vast majority of political-science scholars, Mr. Przeworski included, have long agreed that quantitative analysis—surveys, charts, figures and other hard data—explain politics better than the qualitative theories that once dominated the field, and which armchair experts peddle daily on MSNBC and the Fox News Channel. It's hard to get good jobs or tenure if you don't use quantitative analyses: You need mathematical models and data analysis to get published in APSR , and you need APSR articles to be successful.

"Where is political history, international history, political sociology, interpretive methodology ... ?"

Mr. Perestroika wrote in the e-mail. "Why are FAILED Africanists and Economists allowed to dominate a discipline which has a rich history of intellectual contributions ... ?" And he asked of the alleged quantitative coterie: "When are you going to offer the APSA presidency to [Harvard qualitative methodologist] Theda Skocpol?"

Before returning underground, Mr. Perestroika wrote: "I hope this anonymous letter leads to a dismantling of the Orwellian system that we have in APSA, and that we will see a true Perestroika in the discipline."

A little over a year later, Mr. Perestroika's identity remains a mystery. He is widely suspected to be more than one person—junior professors, graduate students or both. Little effort has been made to uncover his identity. But, strangely, his perspective has had an effect.

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Over the last year, several well-known and respected political scientists, including Yale's Sterling Professor of Political Science Jim Scott, University of Chicago professors Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph (both of whom Mr. Perestroika cited as underappreciated in his manifesto), and Columbia University Professor Jon Elster have endorsed part or all of the Perestroika Manifesto. A Perestroika chat group on Yahoo now hosts 700 members.

Mr. Scott and Mr. Elster were asked to join the APSA council for the first time in their long and distinguished careers, and both say it is because of their Perestroika sympathies. APSA is also chartering a new Perestroika-inspired journal, Perspectives on Politics, which is set to debut early this year.

And in September, Harvard's Ms. Skocpol became APSA president-elect (she'll take office in a year).

Most recently, APSA's annual conference in San Francisco hosted the first national gathering of Perestroika sympathizers, who all wore red buttons in solidarity. "It was absolutely mobbed," said Mr. Rudolph, who attended.

At N.Y.U., where the quantitative methodologists far outnumber the qualitative ones, Perestroika has also had an impact. According to some in the political-science department, the debate has rekindled the dying embers of past intra-departmental flare-ups.

Some observers wonder if the squabbling will hinder the department's chances for a Top 10 ranking by the National Research Council or U.S. News & World Report and weaken Mr. Przeworski's influence.

Currently, however, even Mr. Przeworski's detractors admit that he is still the most powerful person in his department. And Mr. Przeworski gave the impression that he's not losing any sleep over Mr. Perestroika. "I just don't think it's going to have much impact," he told The Transom.

Though Mr. Przeworski agreed that "my department is divided," he called Perestroika "nothing but petty complaints." He pointed out that his own articles have been rejected from APSR, and that he has never cared much for APSA.

"What really matters to me," Mr. Przeworski said, "is what I learn from what someone wrote, and not what methods they used. For me to believe that what they say has any basis, I obviously want it to be logically consistent and have some relation to some fact."

N.Y.U.'s political-science department has never been a peaceful place, but things got nasty about six years ago. At that time, the department was neatly divided between quantitative and qualitative methodologists. The two sides had never gotten along well, but the real fighting started when the hiring committee—which was relatively balanced—tried to fly the late A.F.K. Organski, a professor at the University of Michigan, out for an interview. Mr. Organski was a big name in the field, thanks to his book *The Stages of Political Development*—which took an old-fashioned, qualitative tack. So Steve Brams—a veteran quantitative methodologist in the department who, according to colleagues, was friends with dean Duncan Rice—allegedly approached him and told him to stop the interview. It apparently worked; the dean refused to pay for Mr. Organski's trip to New York—an unprecedented affront to the hiring committee.

The political-science chair at the time—the late Barbara Hinckley—was furious, both at Mr. Rice and Mr. Brams for bypassing her authority. She called a meeting at which the entire department (with one exception) voted to censure Mr. Brams. Though the vote had no practical implications, "the dean went ballistic," said Bertell Ollman, a professor who sided with the department against Mr. Brams.

The dean, Mr. Ollman said, "insisted that the department withdraw the censure vote." They refused. "At which point, he removed Barbara and put the department in receivership"—i.e., under university control—"and set about rebuilding it with Brams as the main adviser about how it should be structured."

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A number of professors left the department for more pastoral pastures, and Mr. Brams—who was on break and could not be reached for comment—started replacing them with respected quantitative sympathizers such as Russell Hardin (who became chair), Bernard Manin (a political theorist) and Mr. Przeworski.

"Like a number of departments in that situation, as N.Y.U. aimed to move up in the rankings, that meant hiring high-tech"—i.e., quantitative—"people," said one prominent political scientist familiar with the situation. Those number-crunchers now comprise roughly two-thirds of the department. The rest—save for Mr. Ollman and two or three of his colleagues—are scattered around different area-studies institutes affiliated with N.Y.U.

Mr. Ollman is not pleased with the situation. "It's very much the elimination of politics from political science," he said. He also alleged that the findings of these quantitative methodologists "are tremendously trivial."

He gave an example: "There was a guy who came for a job interview from Columbia. His subject was veto power: When do Presidents use their veto power?" At a department meeting to decide whether to hire him, "someone spoke up; I think it was [Bernard] Manin He says, 'I read this guy's book, and as far as I can see, in his conclusion there are two points One is that Presidents tend to use their veto power more when the other party is in control of Congress. The other is that Presidents tend to use their veto power more if they've already expressed opposition to the bill earlier. This seems kind of obvious.'

"After a few moments of silence," Mr. Ollman said, a few of Mr. Brams' friends spoke up: "They said, 'These are things we only thought we knew before. But this guy has proven it.'" N.Y.U. offered the job to the Columbia researcher, but he got a better offer from Princeton.

"That's pathetic," Mr. Ollman said.

In these post-Perestroika times, however, Mr. Ollman didn't have to swallow his disgust. He went to the Perestroika conference at APSA and organized three meetings to talk about the changes in the field with other department members. He even forged alliances with the two political conservatives in his department. "We disagree about a lot of things," he said, "but we see eye-to-eye on this because we all want to talk about politics."

Mr. Przeworski even attended one of Mr. Ollman's meetings. "It wasn't really about anything," he said.

Mr. Ollman thinks the Perestroika Movement will eventually take root at N.Y.U. "It'll be much harder to change in the short run—but in a while, maybe 10 years even, N.Y.U will change," Mr. Ollman said.

It could happen sooner if, under Ms. Skocpol's leadership, the APSR changes its outlook and starts accepting more qualitative papers; or if next year's Top 10 rankings (U.S. News ' come out in February) reflect a Perestroika effect.

"The cachet of formalism has been shaken," Mr. Rudolph said of N.Y.U. "They've spent a fortune to get big [quantitative] names, and they haven't gotten the results they would have liked in terms of their standing in the discipline. If they drop in the rankings, the administration will put pressure on the department to hire people who will help raise their profile."

— Ian Blecher

Miss Millennium's Destiny

On the afternoon of Dec. 13, film editor Dede Allen stood at the podium in the New York Hilton's Grand Ballroom and accepted the New York Women in Television and Film's Muse award. Ms. Allen had begun her career as a messenger for Columbia Pictures but had gone on to edit such films as *Dog Day Afternoon* and *Reds*, breaking Hollywood gender barriers along the way.

As Ms. Allen thanked the crowd for her honor, another show-business hopeful was looking for purchase at a press table near the back of the ballroom.

Miss Millennium Heather Schmid had ignored her lunch to give a breathless multimedia presentation about her past 24 hours in New York.

"We went to six events last night," the blond 22-year-old said earnestly to the bleary-eyed reporters who sat on either side of her. She was trussed up in a white silk Bebe blouse with corset strings in front and back. Her slim, black pinstriped pants bore the same label. Her newly manicured nails were painted in an eye-blinding color that she called "orangey pink."

Ms. Schmid hails from Marlborough, Conn., and received an undergraduate degree in vocal performance from Boston University in 1999. She trained as a classical opera singer and in July of 2001 was selected as Miss Millennium by a private company called Millennium Productions. The ceremony was held in Edmonton, Alberta, in the largest mall in Canada. Now her Miss Millennium business card reads "Pop Diva."

Ms. Schmid spends most of her time performing regularly at the MGM Grand and Venetian hotels in Las Vegas and on a nationwide mall tour. She plays occasional Manhattan dates at the Mercury Lounge. At one of these mid-December gigs, she was "discovered" by Aubrey Reuben, who spent 30 years as an assistant principal in the public schools before becoming a freelance photographer, frequently for the New York Post. Mr. Reuben, who has long functioned as a kind of W.R. Wilkinson for clueless starlets, has been squiring Ms. Millennium through the social morass and photographing her encounters.

"He calls me his bodyguard," Ms. Schmid said, rolling her eyes in mock frustration, "because I have a good body."

She reached into one of several envelopes of Mr. Reuben's photos. "Here's me with Elaine from Elaine's," said Ms. Schmid, showing off a snap of herself with the restaurant owner Elaine Kaufman. "Her food is amazing! And it's so great how she just schmoozes with everyone who's famous."

Ms. Schmid flipped through more pictures and pulled out one with her and comedian Joan Rivers, whom she'd also met at Elaine's.

"I walked into the restaurant, and she looked up and said: 'Look at you, you're gorgeous!'"

In another photo, she posed with a middle-aged blond man and a dread-locked black man. "That's those guys, Seigfried and Roy, right?" she asked The Transom, quickly flipping past the picture.

Probably not. But one of them did bear a resemblance to Nick Ashford from Ashford and Simpson.

"Yeah, right—Ashford and Simpson. You're totally right!"

Ms. Schmid and Mr. Reuben had celebrated Frank Sinatra's birthday at Patsy's with "some C.E.O.'s from the Hearst company," met Miss U.S.A. at an ESPN party, saw Michael Feinstein perform with Liza Minnelli at the Regency Hotel, attended publicist Susan Magrino's 40th birthday party, and had been to a celebrity art auction at the new American Folk Art Museum with Jewel, L.L. Cool J, Angie Harmon and "Jason Seahorn, who is some football guy." She had pictures of herself with all of them.

Ms. Schmid's publicist, David Salidor, later explained that her ride on the New York social circuit was part of a plan to get her signed with a New York record label. "Part of the plan was to get her to events like that to try to get a grasp of the business," said Mr. Salidor by phone, explaining that "we're trying to develop her into an Alanis Morissette or a Willa Ford."

As Ms. Schmid introduced herself to the rest of the press table, one cranky columnist asked if she spelled Millennium with one or two n's. She replied that her Web site featured both spellings because, though she believed it was two n's, "some people really swear by that one-'n' spelling."

After listening briefly to another of the afternoon's honorees, actress Phylicia Rashad, speak to the audience, Ms. Schmid declared: "I'm really into women's issues." She said she's worked extensively against domestic violence for the National Organization of Women.

"All my music has a really strong feminism aspect. It's meant to move the body and soul," she said. "Sometimes that comes off as a dominatrix sort of thing, but it's actually about creating your own destiny."


Destiny has been a big topic for Ms. Schmid, ever since she ventured to the top of a Sri Lankan mountain.

"There was this beautiful hotel and we went inside, and there was this old guy, a Sufi, and he called me 'Heather' even though he shouldn't have known my name," she explained.

"He said, 'Heather, gifts have been given to you for a very specific purpose. You have an important role to play with your music. You will bring your music to the greatest stages of the world. Follow your heart, stay away from negativity, get out of a negative relationship'—that totally happened, by the way, as soon as I got home—'you'll get a big modeling opportunity'—that totally happened, too—'and follow your spirit.'

"He was speaking in parables," Ms. Schmid said. "But I knew that what he was saying was true."


– Rebecca Traister

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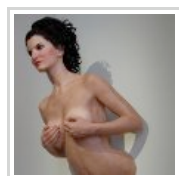



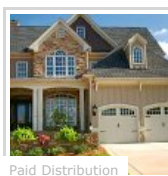


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