

# LABORATORIUM: AN INVITATION AND NON-MANIFESTO

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As its English subtitle indicates, *Laboratorium* is a Russian review of social research. It is not, however, primarily a journal of Russian Studies. To the extent that it addresses an international audience, its central task is to help integrate research on and from Russia into a global conversation about social reality and the disciplines that study it. It hopes to bring a Russian accent to a discussion of larger issues while offering a home to students of Russia as well as a platform for scholarly debate that does not focus exclusively on that country. Why this should be of interest to sociologists, anthropologists, historians, political scientists, geographers, social psychologists, and economists who do not specialize in Russian area studies is one of the questions I will try to answer in the English version of my introduction, which also sketches some of the debates and institutional configurations against whose background *Laboratorium* is being launched. Summarizing the internal controversies that have accompanied the journal's creation, I will argue that *Laboratorium* is most likely to succeed if it addresses two closely connected problems. In the Russian case, the most pressing task is to create a platform for professional, interdisciplinary communication centered on sociology; internationally, it is to bring together social scientists working on Russia and the former Soviet Union outside the traditional area studies framework dominated by literary studies, history, and (post-)Sovietology. Along the way, I will present some of the papers featured in this issue and some of *Laboratorium's* plans for the future, and, finally, try to identify some potentially fruitful areas of debate.

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What comparatively little international attention social research in Russia has attracted in recent years has often had little to do with substantive arguments and debates, and much more with institutional conflicts and clampdowns.

In 2003, Iurii Levada, the long-term director of the state-owned All-Russian Center for the Study of Public Opinion, was dismissed from his post in what was widely seen as direct political interference. (Levada and his collaborators went on to found a de facto successor institution, the Levada Center, headed by Lev Gudkov since the founder's death in 2006.)

In 2007, undergraduates at Moscow State University's sociology department—Europe's largest in terms of student numbers—launched an initiative called the OD Group to protest against conditions there. Their demands initially concerned the overpriced cafeteria and exaggerated security and surveillance procedures, but quickly focused on Dean Vladimir Dobren'kov, whom they accused of corruption, plagiarism, incompetence, and anti-Semitism. These events are discussed in depth in Alexander Bikbov's paper and in the debate on Michael Burawoy's theses on public sociology, both in this issue. (Despite an animated debate in Russia and large-scale international resonance, most of the OD Group's activists were eventually dismissed from the university, or left of their own accord, while Dobren'kov has remained in charge of the department.)

In February 2008, the European University at Saint Petersburg—Russia's best postgraduate social science institution—was closed by court order. This was ostensibly due to fire safety regulations, but few observers

doubted that the clampdown was in response to an EU-funded political science project that included seminars for election observers. (Following a massive international outcry, the university was allowed to reopen less than two months later.)

Whether these events—and others that garnered less international attention—were in any way similar, connected, or even expressive of larger tendencies is a matter of controversy. Be that as it may, however, they are relevant to the enterprise that is *Laboratorium* in at least three respects.

First of all, the idea for our journal, in part, grew out of the ongoing debate about the state of the social sciences in Russia, and of sociology in particular. Some argue that this debate spilled over into Russian mass media, and was reflected internationally, before there had been any serious discussion within the professional community. One of the aims of our new journal is to provide a platform for such professional debate among social scientists, both in Russia and abroad. This is reflected in the pilot issue of *Laboratorium*.

Secondly, the renewed international interest in the Russian social sciences in the wake of these developments provides an excellent opportunity to redirect attention to the content of social research in and on Russia by presenting authors whose work is relevant to international conversations yet little known to English-speaking audiences. While some research originally published in Russian is presented in specialized journals of translation, such as M. E. Sharpe's *Russian Social Science Review and Sociological Research*, language barriers still constitute an obstacle to a two-way dialogue involving Russian scholars. Perhaps this is most regrettable in the case of authors belonging to my own generation—those born in the 1970s and trained exclusively in the post-Soviet period. Among other important scholars, the present issue features work by sociologists of science Mikhail Sokolov and Alexander Bikbov as well as a contribution by Nikolay Mitrokhin, a historian of late Soviet Russia and sociologist of religion. Some authors whose work has contributed to bringing sociological and anthropological methods to the study of Russia in the English-speaking world are involved in *Laboratorium* as members of the editorial or advisory board, including Oleg Kharkhordin, Serguei Oushakine, and Alexei Yurchak.

Beyond these few names, however, there is a wealth of social scientific research to be discovered, particularly perhaps outside Moscow and Saint Petersburg. Both in Russia and internationally, perestroika and the collapse of the Soviet Union created intense expectations for social scientific insights with universal relevance, findings that might then be integrated into the global edifice of social research. Few such insights have been forthcoming, partly perhaps because research agendas have continued to be defined by questions shaped during the Cold War or by attempts to apply Western theories to the Russian “case” without systematic feedback on how that “case” challenges and transforms the theories.

Nevertheless, a plethora of more or less prolific, more or less institutionalized, and more or less interdisciplinary and internationalized subfields have developed in the study of Russia. Economic sociology, the study of gender and sexuality, of religion, inequality, social movements, elites, education, legal culture, ethnicity and nationalism, public space and everyday life, youth, generations, public health, drug use, prisons, sports, the media, migration, the military and police, urban development and rural reform, to name just a few, have attracted the attention of both Russian scholars and foreign social scientists working in Russia. Some of these areas are now institutionalized to the point where they have their own journals and regular conferences; others are represented by a small number of authors. All experience difficulties due to the crisis of Russian higher education and research discussed in this and future issues of *Laboratorium*; most are criticized, as the case may be, for being too Westernized, not Westernized enough, overly fanciful, not imaginative enough, too politicized, or not mindful enough of political constraints. Most importantly, perhaps, the quality and methodology of empirical research often leaves much to be desired. Nevertheless, the range of subjects now covered in the study of Russia is in stark contrast to the relatively narrow list of questions with which both Soviet and foreign scholars approached Soviet society, and some of the work done in Russia is no less sophisticated than the best exemplars of social research elsewhere. One of the tasks of *Laboratorium* is to pull some of these disparate fields together and make them engage each other and their counterparts in other countries.

It is perhaps indicative of the state of social research in and on Russia that there is not a single textbook, in any language, that would bring together up-to-date findings on all aspects of Russian society. English-language surveys of post-Soviet Russian politics abound, as do multivolume Russian-language textbooks on the history of sociology, but even the most ambitious collective works on Russian society are extremely selective (thus, Iadov 2005 discusses a range of Western classics and the “Russian mentality,” but leaves out prisons, the military, urban and rural sociology, demographic change, and other crucial areas). The field of gender studies is now highly developed in Russia, but is ignored by most experts on nationalism and ethnicity; the study of everyday life is hardly integrated with rural sociology, and so on. Furthermore, Russian “cases” are still rarely included in large-scale international research projects, and US, British, French, German, or Japanese social scientists are much more likely to know research in their field done in these countries than similar studies undertaken in Russia.

There are important exceptions, to be sure. Michael Burawoy includes a Russian case study in his discussion of social transformations, along with examples from Zambia, the United States, and Hungary (Burawoy 2009). Laurent Thévenot has co-ordinated a project of comparative cultural sociology in Russia and France (Thévenot forthcoming) which follows a similar project comparing France and the United States (Lamont and Thévenot 2000). Most international specialists in any of the fields enumerated above, however, would be hard-pressed to name any Russian colleague whose work they have read. The conceptual apparatus of Sovietology has been updated or at least reframed through the introduction of terms such as Eurasia, postsocialism, and transformation, and anthropologists such as Caroline Humphrey or Katherine Verdery have done important work in bringing a comparative perspective on social change to the study of Russia and other postsocialist countries. Yet the study of Russia and other post-Soviet or postsocialist societies under these headings still relegates them to an area that remains exotic to most “mainstream” authors in the global metropolises of social research. It is only by overcoming language barriers and engaging in systematic comparative research that includes Russia and countries both inside and outside the East European, Eurasian, post-Soviet, or postsocialist realms that research from Russia may be reintegrated into international social science, and different segments of social research within Russia may be integrated with each other. To facilitate and indeed organize such exchanges is one of the tasks of *Laboratorium*.

Another task is to identify methodological common ground. This may turn out to be the most difficult endeavor. Judging by the papers published in this issue, but also by more general tendencies in the international social sciences, theories of fields and positions more or less directly inspired by Pierre Bourdieu may well be the lowest common denominator in much social research. Beyond the use of that vocabulary, Russian authors striving to elaborate a critical social science often adopt a stance that links attitudes and opinions more or less directly to identifiable “positions” held by those espousing them. The rather trenchant exchange between Mary MacAuley and Victoria Schmidt in this issue is a case in point: Schmidt’s critique of MacAuley relies largely on certain assumptions about the limitations on social knowledge imposed by an author’s position as an “expert”; MacAuley, in contrast, defends the possibility of scholarly autonomy irrespectively of any such status. Whether this type of debate expresses differences between Russian and Western cultures of scholarly critique or different methodological outlooks is a moot point; what is clear is that *Laboratorium* will continue to search for other methodological traditions around which to organize such exchanges.

Thirdly, the events I mentioned at the beginning of this introduction are an occasion to subject the social sciences in Russia to rigorous scholarly examination. It is perhaps fitting to start a new review of social research with an analysis of the conditions underlying such research in Russia and contrasting it with modes of scholarly organization found elsewhere. If nothing else, this should go some way toward explaining the peculiarities of intellectual styles found in the Russian social sciences, thereby facilitating cross-border exchanges.

Sokolov’s article analyzes the economy of scholarly attention in Russian sociology, drawing mainly on examples from the United States for contrast; Bikbov’s work is a comparison of the evolution of Russian sociology in comparison with France. It enters into a dialogue with the paper by Brice Le Gall and Charles Soulié on the French university system; both grew out of a Russian-French seminar held in Moscow in 2007.

Paired articles such as these are one of the ways in which *Laboratorium* intends to integrate Russian authors into an international dialogue. The debate on Michael Burawoy's paper represents another model. Burawoy's concept of public sociology has already been a subject of debate among Russian sociologists, but it was only available in translation, in the form of his presidential address to the American Sociological Association. The article published in this issue was written specifically for *Laboratorium*; the paper and some of the responses to it grew out of a seminar held in Saint Petersburg in 2007. At our request, Burawoy specifically discusses the Russian case in his typology of sociologies. The largely bilingual reviews section features a debate on Mary MacAuley's *Children in Prison*, a book written in English but published in Russian and for a Russian audience. In all these cases, we publish both Russian and English versions of the texts, and rather than mechanically translating each paper, we strove to adapt the translations to their respective audiences. It is our hope that Russian-speaking, English-speaking, and bilingual readers will all feel that they are reading original work.

In the pilot issue, almost every article, including discussion pieces and book reviews, is published in both Russian and English, either in full translation or in an abridged version. We do not have the resources to continue this practice in subsequent issues. However, *Laboratorium* will accept submissions in both Russian and English. In addition to abstracts, we will publish extended summaries of each article in the other language.

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Laboratories come in different shapes and sizes. A large building filled with shiny tools and worn-out test tubes, a fieldworker's notebook, a computer program used for statistical data mining—each of these can be a site of experimental research. As an overworn metaphor would have it, the twentieth century, and Russian/Soviet history during that period in particular, was itself a giant social experiment—although in terms of scholarly insights garnered from it, that mountain may perhaps be said to have given birth to a few mice at best.

Scientists tend to profess that a laboratory is a place where clearly defined methods are employed under strictly controlled conditions to yield positive knowledge. Studies in the sociology of science suggest that this may not be a very precise description (Latour and Woolgar 1979). A laboratory is an experimental milieu that produces provisional results out of a plethora of elements that do not initially present themselves as either scientific or unscientific. It is only at the end of the process that science is cleansed. Test tubes, sampling techniques, and laboratory reports are declared legitimate methods employed in the search for scientific truth; interpersonal relationships, hierarchies, psychological and emotional factors, issues of institutional design and funding, the unconscious, everyday, routine aspects of the scientist's life are relegated beyond the boundaries of "method," into the realm of the unscientific. At best, they are considered to be background conditions with no direct impact on scientific "knowledge." Discussed in hallways and memoirs, they are excluded from published reports on scientific findings, lest the author be accused of unprofessionalism and transgression.

The same holds true of the social sciences (Becker 1988:5)—a term that is less fraught with connotations of positivism in Russian, which refers even to the humanities as "humanitarian sciences." As evidenced in the pilot issue, one of the tasks of *Laboratorium* is to take more than a furtive peek at the laboratory of social research and to discuss how its organization differs across national and disciplinary contexts.

*Laboratorium* has been conceived as an interdisciplinary journal of social research: our editorial board comprises sociologists, anthropologists, and historians, and some of us work closely with economists and political scientists. This diversity is an asset, but it has also led to a good deal of healthy disagreement on our journal's tasks and the editorial policies best suited to accomplish them. One basic principle of that policy, and a distinctive trait of *Laboratorium*, will be to voice such disagreement publicly, thereby countering the widespread tendency to relegate candid discussion of interdisciplinary and interinstitutional controversies to hallway talk. Although they differ in emphasis and organization, the Russian and English versions of this

introduction present no more than my personal interpretation of the temporary compromise we have reached in our debates, and set out the principles I intend to pursue as an editor. To bring them into sharper focus, I would first like to delineate some of the alternatives proposed in the course of these debates, and discuss how they relate to the institutional peculiarities of both the social sciences and journal publishing in Russia, and to the structure of Russian Studies internationally.

One of the peculiar features of social research in Russia—and of sociology in particular—is the dominance of opinion polling, often coupled with functionalist explanations and presented in a highly normative style. One of the responses to this has been what may be viewed as an over-insistence on the quantitative/qualitative divide as a methodological shibboleth in the social sciences. The main driving force behind *Laboratorium*, its institutional base and its generous sponsor, has been the Center for Independent Social Research in Saint Petersburg, the foremost among Russian institutions specializing in qualitative sociology. Some suggested turning the journal into a platform for the network that has grown up around the Center, comprised of sociologists from a number of Russian nonprofit institutions and specialized university-based centers. As Mikahil Sokolov argues in this issue, the distinguishing mark of this network is that it looks to the West for methodological inspiration, funding, and recognition, unlike other colleagues who are more invested in the traditional infrastructure of Russian universities and the Academy of Sciences. Others thought it would be promising to link *Laboratorium* to the Convention of Independent Sociological Centers, whose declaration we publish in this issue. Many stressed that they would like to publish only research performed using qualitative methods, thus countering the dominance of quantitative work, especially opinion polling, found in other professional journals. By attracting international authors, *Laboratorium* may then have aspired to become a global forum for the discussion of qualitative research, akin perhaps to the Berlin-based multilingual online journal FQS. Others objected that by defining the journal's profile methodologically, we would needlessly alienate those numerous authors who see no point in stressing the opposition between qualitative and quantitative research. Instead of a platform for interdisciplinary exchange, we would have been left with a vehicle of intradisciplinary isolation. One of the suggested alternatives to a methodological definition was to focus on certain thematic subfields within sociology, following the successful models of Russian journals such as the Moscow-based *Economic Sociology*, or the *Journal of Social Policy Studies* based in Saratov.

All these suggestions have left their marks. The thematic principle, in particular, is crucial to the way we view interdisciplinary cooperation. *Laboratorium* has no overall theme or thesis, and in that sense, this introduction is not a manifesto. However, at least every second installment of the journal will be guest edited by specialists in an interdisciplinary subfield or geographic area who will be given one to two years to put together a thematic issue. These will usually be teams of at least two scholars working in different countries and/or disciplines. Thematic plans for the near future include an issue on the South Caucasus edited by Tsypylma Darieva (Berlin) and Viktor Voronkov (Saint Petersburg), a comparative look at Latin America and the post-Soviet countries edited by Mariana Heredia (Buenos Aires) and Olessia Kirtchik (Paris/Moscow), and an issue on the sociology and anthropology of waste put together by Tatiana Barchunova (Novosibirsk) and Josh Reno (London). Such thematic issues will not only allow us to bring together scholars from diverse backgrounds who study similar objects, but will also provide guest editors with opportunities to implement different visions of interdisciplinary cooperation.

Qualitative research will be an important, though not exclusive, focus: a more important selection criterion is whether a paper presents original empirical data embedded in a larger context. Work that makes extensive use of quantitative data is appreciated as long as it does not limit itself to quantitative analysis—the papers by Sokolov and Le Gall/Soulié in this issue may serve as examples of a successful methodological synthesis. Speculative texts completely divorced from empirical data are less welcome, however, since one of the aims of *Laboratorium* is to create a professional platform for the discussion of empirical social research, in contradistinction to social and political punditry.

This brings us back to the question of *Laboratorium's* disciplinary profile and different perspectives on interdisciplinarity. Frequently in Russian debates, as Vera Sparschuh observes in a book review published in this issue, "it seems as if the terms 'social science' and 'sociology' are used synonymously." It may seem from my introduction and the first issue's table of contents that this is also the case here. That is not the intention, however, and this brings us to the peculiarities of the Russian journal landscape. To be sure, there are several established Russian journals in each of the social science disciplines, including, for sociology, *Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniia* (Sociological Research), *Sotsiologicheskii zhurnal* (Sociological Journal), and *Zhurnal sotsiologii i sotsial'noi antropologii* (Journal of Sociology and Social Anthropology), as well as publications of individual research institutes, such as the Levada Center's *Public Opinion Herald*. Yet the most successful post-Soviet journals in the humanities and social sciences in Russia follow a different model: founded by specialists in order to revitalize their discipline through contact with adjacent fields and colleagues abroad, they have evolved into platforms for exchange on a range of thematic areas built around a disciplinary "core." These journals include *ab imperio* (history), *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* (literature), *Logos* (philosophy), *Pro et contra* (political science), and *Antropologicheskii forum* (anthropology).

All of these publish high-quality research in both their "own" discipline and neighboring fields, allowing scholars to communicate across established boundaries of disciplinary hierarchies. These are also the periodicals that have arguably achieved the greatest international visibility. First of all, they publish work by Russian authors who participate in international debates—indeed, many of them have studied abroad, are regularly awarded international fellowships, or are even permanently based at foreign universities. Secondly, these journals regularly translate relevant work from foreign languages. Thirdly, they are either bilingual, publishing papers in both Russian and English, or make efforts to have selections from their journals translated into English and thus made accessible to an international audience. Many of them organize conferences and seminars, and some have their own book series, allowing them to circumvent the limitations imposed by more traditional publishing ventures housed at various institutes of the Academy of Sciences, and to make up for the lack of university presses that are common in the English-speaking world. To some degree, this explains why some of the best work in sociology is published in journals ostensibly affiliated with other disciplines, or in periodicals aimed at a general educated audience, such as *Otechestvennye zapiski* or *Neprikosnovennyi zapas*.

Even though some existing Russian periodicals—above all, perhaps, the Journal of Sociology and Social Anthropology—are open to an interdisciplinary dialogue involving sociology, there has been no attempt so far to build a journal along the above lines around a sociological "core." My ambition is for *Laboratorium* to become such a journal.

I would like to stress once more that this is by no means a unanimous view of what *Laboratorium* should try to accomplish. Given the lack of powerful and representative professional associations in Russian academia, disciplinary boundaries are often so fluid that emphasizing their existence is seen as a futile task by many, including some participants in the debate on public sociology published in this issue. The question is further complicated by the fact that Russian authors trained or working in France will have a different view of the relationship between, say, sociology and anthropology, than colleagues with a US or German background. These complex relationships merit prolonged and systematic discussion, and thus a forthcoming issue of *Laboratorium* will be devoted to the problem of interdisciplinarity.

Seen from the perspective of Russian Studies in the West, the problem presents itself differently. Russian area studies has traditionally been an interdisciplinary endeavor, defined by geography rather than method. Yet, most professional associations devoted to the study of Russia or the postsocialist world—such as the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies and its smaller European cousins—are clearly dominated by certain disciplinary outlooks. The more traditional area studies are organized around history, literary and cultural studies, and, in some cases, political science; the more recent Soyuz Research Network for

Postsocialist Studies is formally an interest group within the American Anthropological Association. Not only do sociologists interested in Russia lack such institutions, they also face greater problems of legitimacy within their home disciplines, since sociology has arguably become a more nationalized discipline than any other branch of the social sciences. An American, French, or Swedish sociologist needs to provide no justification for a study drawing exclusively on cases from his or her own country, but might have to overcome considerable skepticism when proposing a study of Russia that is not comparative in its outlook or relevant to his or her country's foreign policy. By providing a platform where foreign scholars studying Russia will find an informed audience as well as a resolutely comparative outlook, we hope to help them build disciplinary legitimacy. This is especially important as there is now a new generation of sociologists raised in Russia yet trained abroad at either the undergraduate or graduate level.

One of the conditions of such legitimacy is the systematic use of double-blind peer review. In Russia, formalized peer review is a practice far less widespread than in English-speaking countries, and not generally seen as a reliable mechanism of quality control. Many of the above-mentioned journals do not employ it, partly because it slows down the editorial process, but mostly because the organization of academic life in Russia does not usually afford scholars either the time or strong incentives to review their colleagues' work, for reasons discussed in Mikhail Sokolov's article in this issue. The use of peer review in a Russian journal is thus more controversial than it would be in a purely English-language periodical, especially since an article's relevance for career advancement is conditional upon a journal's inclusion in the Ministry of Education's official list of recognized publications rather than its adoption of peer review. We are nevertheless committed to the procedure, not only to ensure *Laboratorium* the international recognition that requires it, but also to counter the inevitable biases of our editorial board. An effort will be made to have each paper reviewed by authors from at least two countries and representing at least two disciplines. This will ensure not only rigorous quality control, but also allow us to draw on a much larger pool of reviewers than would otherwise be possible. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those who have already taken time to provide comments on papers accepted for publication in this and future issues, or rejected based on the reviews. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to all those working in our laboratory, and especially to those volunteers who have helped transcribe, translate, and edit English versions of the texts—Philippa Hetherington, Eric Swinn, and Anthony Zannino. Special thanks go to Theresa Liu for last-minute proofreading assistance.

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