

THE RUSSIAN FIELD: VIEWS FROM ABROAD. INTRODUCTION

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This issue of *Laboratorium* presents a selection of papers that grew out of a conference titled *Russian Field: Views from Abroad*, which took place in Saint Petersburg in May 2009. The idea behind the conference was to invite foreign ethnographers who have undertaken fieldwork in Russia to present their research to an audience of Russian colleagues—in most cases in Russian. The disciplinary background of participants was less important than their use of ethnographic methods in the broadest sense, and thus the conference program featured contributions from anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, oral historians, and even an art historian. The one condition for participation was that the scholars invited should have been trained outside of Russia.

The gathering, organized by the Center for Independent Social Research (CISR), was in part modeled on a conference that had taken place in Tübingen (Germany) ten years earlier, entitled *Inspecting Germany* (see Hauschild and Warneken 2002). Just as that conference had broadened German scholars' understanding of their home country by confronting them with views from abroad, so the foreign researchers gathered in Saint Petersburg would—the organizers hoped—provide their Russian colleagues with new perspectives on aspects of life in Russia that they were taking for granted. In the spirit of the late Harold Garfinkel, who served on *Laboratorium's* advisory board, the foreign presenters were expected to shatter Russians' routine perceptions of what is normal, rendering familiar practices strange and therefore open to discussion and further study.

In one sense, the experiment was doomed from the outset.

What had made the Tübingen conference, and the resulting volume, so original was that confronting foreign views of Germany was a relatively new challenge for German ethnographers. While Germany's modern self-image as a nation has been constructed in dialogue and confrontation with some of its neighbors, especially France, German philosophers, anthropologists, historians, and linguists had become used since the late 18th century to pontificating about the supposedly less advanced

societies of Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas. That engagement proved extremely productive for their understanding of their home country, but it remained the Germans' prerogative to draw the relevant conclusions. Because of Germany's late arrival to the scramble for maritime empire, its situation differed from the classical colonial predicament of Britain and France that has been the main focus of postcolonial critique. Yet the intellectual imbalance was similar: in the 19th and early 20th centuries, the world's most influential academic community found itself squarely on the exporting side of the global marketplace of meaning. Thus the reversal of perspective attempted in Tübingen proved extremely productive: ethnographers from the Global South, or even from industrialized countries with intellectual traditions that are very different from Germany's own, could provide a truly original perspective on practices that had hardly ever been studied by outsiders, from dog-walking and flea markets to the everyday treatment of ethnic minorities. Similar experiments have enriched the study of other former colonial powers or countries that continue to be intellectually and economically dominant. At their best and most constructive, empirical studies of metropolitan societies inspired by Frantz Fanon, the Subaltern Studies Group, or whiteness studies manage to illuminate previously unreflected practices and contribute to these societies' self-understanding.¹ In particular, scholars from traditionally Muslim countries such as Talal Asad (2003) have furnished some of the most incisive analyses of exclusionary mechanisms in Western modernity in recent years.

The Russian case is obviously different: from its inception, the academic study of Russia was driven and organized by foreigners (Poe 2000), or at the very least in constant dialogue with foreign interlocutors. Sustained attempts to nationalize science and create distinctive Russian versions of disciplines such as history, anthropology (ethnology), and sociology began in the early 20th century and continued throughout most of the Soviet period. Yet despite—or perhaps because of—these attempts, Russia remains a peripheral player in the international social sciences, and like most scholarly communities across the world, Russian social scientists continuously import their conceptual apparatus and research questions from the West. This process has been debated under the heading of academic colonization (Csepeli, Örkény, and Scheppele 1996) and continues despite occasional attempts to reverse the flow, as in Dominic Boyer's and Alexei Yurchak's use of the late Soviet term *stiyob* in their analysis of contemporary American culture (Boyer and Yurchak 2010) or influential but infrequent borrowings from early-20th century Russian authors such as Lev Vygotsky or Nikolai Kondratiev. Given these differences, was it foolish to expect anything radically new from Western ethnographers *qua* foreigners? Perhaps not quite as foolish as it might appear.

¹ For a recent example in which a Kenyan anthropologist provides an ethnography of his U.S. colleagues, see Ntarangwi 2010. Russian-raised or Russian-trained researchers now participate in this wave of reverse ethnography. Although their work so far has mostly focused on "ethnic" themes such as Russian-speaking immigrants in Western countries (see e.g. Darieva 2004, Lakizyuk 2007, Roberman 2007), they are also slowly beginning to venture into comparative ethnography (e.g. Pachenkov 2008).

The concepts most often imported into the Russian social sciences are those derived from the study of Western countries, as attested by the spread of catchwords such as civil society, modernization, or gender². Yet by the 1980s, Western ethnographers started making original contributions to the study of Russian society by focusing on phenomena that had been overlooked both by their Russian colleagues and by those Westerners interested mostly in political and economic macro-processes. Caroline Humphrey, who began her fieldwork in Buryatia as early as 1966, described everyday life at a collective farm in that region, beyond Cold War ideological clichés, in a case study that was originally published as early as 1983; Michael Burawoy and Kathryn Hendley (e.g. 1992) were interested in the sociology of industrial labor in provincial Russia at a time when this was perhaps the least fashionable topic among their Russian colleagues; and in what is perhaps the best example, Nancy Ries uncovered some of the mechanisms underlying everyday conversations in perestroika-era Moscow in her *Russian Talk* (1997). In each of these cases, and a number of others, it was precisely their solid Western ethnographic training, coupled with a focus on what seemed most alien and exotic to Western observers and most bland to Russians, that allowed these authors and many others to offer unexpected observations and influence further studies by Russian authors.³ Daniel Bertaux's study of intergenerational social mobility, Teodor Shanin's peasant studies, a large Helsinki-based research project on social change and cultural inertia in Russia, Jürgen Feldhoff's work on industrial sociology, and Hilary Pilkington's research on youth cultures are but a few examples of research projects with a strong ethnographic component that were conceived by foreign scholars in cooperation with Russian colleagues and later gave rise to independent studies carried out by Russian ethnographers.⁴

In more recent times, the ethnographic study of post-Soviet realities, in both Russia and the other successor republics of the USSR, has proliferated across disciplinary boundaries. English-language anthropologists have produced a sizeable literature on the postsocialist condition that integrates the Russian field into the overall experience of the neoliberal wave that has transformed countries from Mongolia to Cuba and from East Germany to Vietnam from production-oriented planned economies to capitalist, consumption-oriented societies. Often ignored by Anglophone authors, no less sophisticated studies of individual countries have

² See Hann and Dunn 1996, especially the introduction and the chapter by Steven Sampson, for a highly relevant distinction between Western realities and Western models.

³ Another work worth mentioning here is *The Eye of the Whirlwind* by the Norwegian social anthropologist Finn Sivert Nielsen, a study of meaning-making, everyday life, and the weakness of the Soviet state in early-1980s Leningrad that was completed in 1986 but only published in 2003 (in Russian) and 2006 (in English). Presented by the author with only slight exaggeration as "the only anthropological field study ever to be carried out in a Soviet urban context," that book did not prove as influential as those cited due to its late publication date, but has achieved a degree of fame among scholars of, and in, Saint Petersburg.

⁴ Berto, Semionova, and Foteeva 1996; Shanin, Nikulin, and Danilov 2002; Gronow, Haavio-Mannila, Kivinen, Lonkila, Rotkirch 1997; Šeršneva and Feldhoff 1998; Pilkington 1994.

emerged out of long-standing traditions of Russian/Soviet area studies in France, Finland, the Netherlands, and the German-speaking countries⁵. However, ethnographic methods are also increasingly being adopted by political scientists (e.g. Allina-Pisano 2007 and, more generally, Schatz 2009), and even the literary discipline of Slavic Studies has recently seen calls to engage with the disciplinary apparatus of anthropology (Platt 2010).

Despite some cross-fertilization, in particular between anthropology and ethnographic sociology, there remain significant interdisciplinary differences in perceptions of the Russian Field and the extent of its specificity. Yet in addition to this divide between research perspectives, there are important generational differences in approaches to the unity of Russia as an object of study. They, too, are highly relevant to this issue.

There is a generational evolution on perceptions of the Russian Field that mirrors the integration of increasing numbers of Russians into global processes—or at least international ones, since intellectual exchange between Russia and non-Western countries remains sporadic at best. The idea to organize a conference on the Russian Field was most enthusiastically received by older foreign colleagues—many of them immediately began to reminisce about the peculiar conditions of doing empirical research in Soviet Russia, which perhaps provided the most colorful, and the most intellectually productive, experiences of their entire professional biographies. For the generation that came of scholarly age before perestroika, in the era of systematic surveillance, formidable travel restrictions, and interminable kitchen debates, Russia's alterity was, and is, a given. That is precisely what makes the Russian Field so fascinating. Younger ethnographers have more reason to question Russia's specificity. For a number of reasons, however, not least the desire to focus on views of the Russian Field by researchers active today, the conference organizers decided not to include papers on the Soviet period.

With the easing of travel restrictions since the second half of the 1980s, scholarly biographies have become much more diverse, and there are now many scholars who would be hard-pressed to give a simple answer to the question of whether they are studying the Russian Field as foreigners or locals. These include Russian-trained sociologists or anthropologists who have achieved professional success abroad; Russians who have undergone additional training in ethnographic methods in the West following a Russian education in the humanities and social sciences or unrelated fields; authors fully or partly raised in Russia but wholly educated in the West; those whose professional biographies have oscillated between Russian and Western institutions; those trained in Russia but frequently holding visiting fellowships in the West; and those born and raised in Western countries, but who have perfected their mastery of the Russian language and academic culture to a degree that makes them fully-fledged participants in Russian scholarly debates. Incidentally, all of

⁵ See Rogers 2010 for a useful discussion of the English-language literature on postsocialism. Concerning studies from non-Anglophone countries, in the context of this introduction, suffice it to mention a few examples related to Russia: Alapuro, Liikanen, and Lonkkila 2004; Favarel-Garrigues 2007, Gdaniec 2005; Gessat-Anstett 2007; Lonkkila 2011; Visser 2010.

these types of biographies are represented among the members of *Laboratorium's* editorial and advisory boards; all of them were represented among participants in the Russian Field conference; and in each category there are those who routinely publish their findings in both Russian and Western languages. Not that restrictions on doing fieldwork in Russia have disappeared entirely: one participant, Gilles Favarel-Garrigues, was unable to attend the conference because he was refused entry to Russia due to his work on policing economic crime, and one of the authors of this introduction was detained by the authorities near Nizhnii Novgorod the previous year while engaged in participant observation at an anarchist tent camp. Yet such clampdowns are a far cry from Soviet restrictive practice; in fact they are similar to what might happen to empirical researchers in other parts of the world, including Western Europe.

Approached thematically, there are those who go to Russia to study the unusual: that which they do not find in their own societies, such as communal apartments or Soldiers' Mothers. Others focus on things that are familiar from their societies of origin yet take on specific forms in Russia: democracy, civil society, the Self. Not least—but by no means only—as a consequence of the above-described generational shift, there is now less of the former and more of the latter. The Russian Field is becoming a collection of Russian cases. As in all ethnographic research, cross-cultural estrangement remains a useful tool; but it can no longer be assumed that the cultural boundaries to be crossed are those between Russia and foreign national cultures. As in any other case, the boundaries may just as well be those of age, social milieu, and manner and degree of inclusion in processes of international mobility. Thus our preliminary conclusion is that there is no single Russian Field today, and yet the impulse of making the foreign gaze productive for an understanding of the familiar remains as productive as ever. Beyond enhancing Russian researchers' understanding of their own country, this dialogue will also, we hope, prompt them to think more about the larger international and theoretical relevance of their findings from Russia, a line of thinking which has been notoriously weak in the Russian social sciences (Gabovich 2008; Gabowitsch 2009).

This brings us to a final point worth mentioning before introducing the papers selected for this issue: why are there no non-Western authors, no papers by scholars of Russia from India, Japan, Nigeria, or Brazil? Certainly not for lack of trying: indeed, the conference call was circulated as widely as possible in international networks. Yet there was not a single non-Western application: whether this was for purely logistical reasons, because of non-Western countries' weak integration into research networks, or for some other reason, we don't know. However, integrating non-Western views of Russia, and perhaps especially those from former Soviet republics and Soviet satellites in the developing world, remains an important objective for internationalizing the Russian scholarly community's research agenda.

Each one of the five research papers featured in this issue takes in-depth empirical study in a particular segment of the Russian Field as a point of departure for making claims that have a larger relevance, not just for the study of Russia but to their discipline as a whole. Ivor Stodolsky's exposition of what he calls multi-lectic

anatomy is perhaps the most ambitious in this regard. Using the work and audience perceptions of Saint Petersburg artist Timur Novikov as a case study, Stodolsky develops a method for modeling cultural phenomena and their impact that bears some resemblance to classical versions of structuralism while being especially attuned to contemporary forms of popular culture. Although his method was partly developed in critical dialogue with anthropological theories of *strob* (ironic distancing) derived from the study of Soviet and post-Soviet culture, it is completely independent of the Soviet context. His triad of Raw, Cooked, and Packaged cultural artifacts is likely to see interesting applications outside the Russian Field in the future.

Each of the other papers in this issue may be said to take a theory of supposedly universal relevance and test its assumptions against empirical data found in the Russian context.

Meri Kulmala, a political ethnographer, addresses widely held Western theories of how civil society interacts with the state, in general and specifically in the Russian context. Against the liberal and the statist model, which despite their significant differences assume that the two entities are completely distinct and separate, she argues that there are numerous interconnections and overlaps between the two. This is perhaps a case where both the subjects studied—Russian Karelians concerned with the welfare of disadvantaged groups—and the ethnographer who studies them have profited from a transnational, in this case Finnish-Russian, perspective: both as a practice and as a theoretical model, the close cooperation and partial identity between civil society organizations and the state is well-known from the Scandinavian context. By focusing on this feature and suggesting that its implications may be relevant to Russia as a whole, Kulmala contributes to developing a more nuanced understanding of Russian society, some of whose geographical margins may indeed no longer be understood outside their interaction with neighboring countries.

Katharina Klingseis, who brings ethnography to cultural studies and more specifically to the study of fashion, finds that the differences between Russian and West European uses of dress outweigh the similarities. Russia today may be one of the best places to study the social functions of glamour since, unlike the post-1968 West, glamorous dress and behavior remain ubiquitous here and may indeed have become more prevalent in the post-Soviet social transformations. Russian women's emphasis on outward markers of femininity may look strange and uncannily conformist to emancipated Westerners; yet the stricter formal rules that continue to govern post-Soviet outward appearances, Klingseis's argument seems to imply, also provide some of the freedom inherent in all rigid yet generally accepted frameworks of behavior that were swept away by the Western cultural revolution's calls for unfettered authenticity. In this case, the study of the Russian Field may serve to bring some of the peculiarities of West European societies into sharper relief and question their claim to universal validity or evident superiority.

Julia Lerner focuses on another feature of contemporary Western societies that is often assumed to have at least potential universal validity: the therapeutic emotional style that makes the Self and its problems the centerpiece of public

discourse directed at individuals. Building on the sociological literature that shows this style to be a product of what Eva Illouz has called emotional capitalism (Illouz 2007), Lerner shows that the conditions under which it is imported into Russia are very different from those that governed its earlier development in the post-industrial capitalist societies of the West. Most notably, Russian culture lacks a concept of “Self” that could be subjected to therapeutic discourse and practice. Unlike in the West, where a certain form of psychological cant has become a staple of mainstream culture, in the Russian case the therapeutic culture featured in numerous TV programs and other mass media is developing without being embedded in a shared psychological knowledge. Like Klingseis, by illuminating the conditions that make an ostensibly similar phenomenon have different effects in the Russian context, Lerner sheds light on what makes that phenomenon—in this case, therapeutic culture—so special in a Western context.

Finally, Anika Walke’s micro-ethnographic analysis of a single oral-history interview contributes to a reflection about socially-imposed and internalized boundaries on what may be said in private and public. By tracing the legacy of Soviet-era taboos in women’s autobiographical narratives, Walke reflects on the effects of communist morality on the marginalization of women’s experiences, and in particular experiences of sexual violence. She then discusses how the specific boundaries of the acceptable in the Soviet context differed from, or reinforced, much more universal processes of exclusion of women.

The papers presented in this issue show that the study of contemporary Russia by ethnographically-oriented social scientists from abroad has long ceased to be a mere branch of area studies. In more and more ways, the ethnography of the Russian society is informing discussions of relevance to the world at large. Beyond the much-discussed peculiarities of postsocialism, the Russian Field remains a rich reservoir of topics and a testing ground for the universal validity of Western theories.

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