

IN A ZEITNOT: NOTES ON THE STATE OF RUSSIAN ANTHROPOLOGY. *Summary*

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It is hard to accurately assess the current state of Russian Anthropology. When asked about the state of their discipline, anthropologists are likely to bring up the issues of funding and brain drain, salaries and the lack of equipment or access to contemporary texts, workplace disagreements about the politics of academia, the quality of student training, and such—but not the ongoing debates, research problems, concepts, and theories. It would appear that the difficulty lies in the impossibility of an engaged, professional overview of all subdisciplines, research areas, and theoretical schools and directions, into which this once unified academic discipline has become split. In short, the nebulosity of anthropology's subject is part of the problem. The breadth of this discipline, conceptualized as the study of everything "human" allowed for the inclusion of everything but the kitchen sink (and, on second thought, the kitchen sink as well!), all considered as a part of a theorized, holistic whole. However, this "whole" also changed in different ways. Depending on the academic trends, and on subjective preferences and proclivities, anthropologists of different specializations constructed the genealogy of their discipline accordingly, at times linking it to the historical study of societies and civilizations, or inscribing it into the history of the studies of cultures and languages; at other times, turning to the historical research of traditions, beliefs, and mores—each time acquiring a new canon of significant works and formative texts, and also rendering the age of the discipline a fluid, changeable question. Constantly hovering between the poles of history and sociology, biology and psychology, ethnology and cultural studies, tradition and modernity, equality and hierarchy, uniqueness and repetition, unity and plurality, acquisition of knowledge about other cultures and the production of one's own heroic past—Russian ethnography/ethnology/anthropology, like its counterparts in other national traditions, has undergone an identity crisis more than once.

The history of Russian anthropology is probably best written as a social or political history, since it is precisely the political and the social contexts that shaped it, radically transforming the intradisciplinary situation, and fundamentally changing its scope. Indeed, the markers of radical "turns" in the research directions of Russian ethnographers became not academic events per se—like the publication of Propp's "Morphology of a Fairy Tale" in 1928, or the deciphering of the Maya hieroglyphs by Knorozov in 1955—but, rather, the ideological blow-up that took place during the

conference of Moscow and Leningrad ethnographers in April 1929, and Stalin's speech published in the newspaper *Pravda* in June 1950. Additionally, post-WWII ethnography was already centralized to such an extent that even an appointment of a new director of the main research institute could usher a change in research topics.

The shaping of the research fields that comprised the field of anthropological discipline, as well as their hierarchical interrelationship, changed under the strong influence of ideological and party nomenclature factors. Typical examples include the "marxification" of ethnography in the 1930s, or the engagement with the "kolkhoz modernity" at the beginning of the 1950s. The influence of the official leaders on the discipline was not, of course, total and ubiquitous, and it gradually declined in the postwar period—a process that was aided by the wider democratization of science. Nevertheless, the nomenclature factor cannot be discounted, because notable turns in research topics during the last 70 years are connected with the names of Sergey Tolstov (the director of the Institute of Ethnography of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR from 1942 through 1966), Yulian Bromley (director of the same institute from 1966 through 1989), and Valery Tishkov (director of the renamed in 1991 Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of the Russian Academy of Sciences from 1989 to present). During this time the study of ethnogenesis and "primitive" societies (the so-called "ethnography of the archaic") gave way to the newly prioritized studies of socialist modernity, which, in turn, was displaced by the typology of ethnic processes analyzed through the framework of the "ethnos theory," which was finally eclipsed in the 1990s by the research of ethnic identity and conflict and by applied ethnology. During the same time period, the pendulum of disciplinary focus swung several times—from an emphasis on the past and the traditional—to modernity, from theoretical schemas to practical needs, from studies of society to cultural analysis—and back. The main dichotomies that shaped Russian anthropology of the last century were, ultimately, "tradition vs. modernity" and "culture vs. society" (or, alternately, "culture vs. ethnos"). In ethnographic comparative studies, regardless of whether they were evolutionary or functionalist in nature, the concepts of culture and society (in the Russian context, instead of plural "societies" or "cultures" terms like "peoples" and "ethnoses" were generally used), played the role of containers of sorts, or, as Nikolay Nadezhdin had said back in the day, "natural units of humanity" (1847:63–63), filled with content that depended on the specialization and perspective of the ethnographer, and was then used to generate higher-order general theories. Within the context of this overarching opposition of "social" and "cultural", every stage of the discipline's existence was characterized by its own typologies of such "natural categories" in each of those spheres. Examples include the typology of social evolution formations, proposed by V.V. Struve, director of Institute of Ethnography from 1937 to 1940—a "five-part schema" developed on the basis of interpretations of the works of Marx supported by Stalin, or the concept of the cultural-economic types and historico-ethnographic regions proposed in the middle of the 1950s (Levin, Cheboksarov 1955), and the analytical division of ethnic communities into *etnikos* ("ethnos" in the narrow sense of the word) and ethno-social formations, as well as the attempts to connect ethnic formations of different taxonomical levels (tribe-peoples-

nation) to Marxist classificatory systems (Bromley 1981), etc.

The influence of the political/ideological context and the nomenclature factor pertained, however primarily, to the “dominant trajectory” of the disciplinary efforts, which in turn shaped the discourse of the virtually single disciplinary journal. Research specializations of small collectives and individual scholars can hardly be accurately represented in such a simple schema, although that has been attempted. We may recall the now-forgotten classification, proposed by Ernest Gellner, which divided Soviet ethnographers of the end of the 1970s into “Ethnocists,” “Ideologists,” and “Primitivists” (Gellner 1977:208)—a taxonomy to which Caroline Humphry subsequently added a fourth category—“Typologists” (Humphrey 1984:312). Gellner clarified that “Ethnocists” primarily searched for ethnic differences and studied their reproduction under circumstances of socio-economic transformations; “Ideologists” devoted their studies to the global history of human development, and “Primitivists” focused on the studies of classless societies, and their transition into class divisions. Dutch historian Wim van Meuers (2001) proposed dividing Soviet ethnographers into “hunters” (practice-oriented reformers, dedicated to concrete, applied studies) and “gatherers” (scholars focused on studying the past and engaged in generating scholastic theories).

The fall of the Soviet Union and the economic challenges of the first post-perestroika decade led to the weakening of interregional academic ties; strong ties with anthropological research centers in former Soviet republics have not been re-established to this day. Simultaneously, the process of the decentralization of the discipline was taking place; as a result, almost three dozen new departments and at least ten new journals appeared in Russia, featuring “ethnology,” “ethnography” or “anthropology” in their names. New research centers were born, ones with capacity for the supervision of MA and PhD students, and professional accreditation. At the same time, engagement and exchange between ethnographers from, for instance, Moscow, Kazan, Krasnodar, Novosibirsk, Petersburg, Tomsk, Tyumen and Vladivostok (and, mutual knowledge about research being conducted in these places) became episodic and optional. “Homegrown” academic advisory boards and regional journals not only facilitated the growth of staff in these new institutions, but also compounded the general fragmentation of the discipline. The financing structures of regional research centers led to their increasingly narrowing focus on their “own” region; only rare staff members in these research centers that had been educated during the Soviet era continued non-regional or supra-regional research.

It is interesting to compare the 20-year old analysis of the state of the discipline with a contemporary one. For instance, in his 1990s works, Valery Tishkov (1992, 1995, 1998), had linked the crisis of the discipline with deprofessionalization, low ethical standards, and internal lack of freedom within academia, the “gatekeeping” attitude of its members, their conservative focus, their “objectivist positivism” and “methodological didacticism,” the desire to preserve one’s own “symbolic power,” the lack of an attractive image of the discipline in Russia, its provincialism and isolation from the “global community of ethnologists and anthropologists” (1992:5–9). Additionally, he noted the lack of funds for fieldwork, and the absence of field

infrastructure, as well as the issues of the health and age of researchers, which further limited the possibilities for fieldwork (1992:10), disapprovingly noting that “at the moment not a single worker of the 300-person Institute or a single PhD student... lives with an ethnic group.” All these factors, in his opinion, led to the “emergence of narrowly specialized “armchair scholars” and “compilationists” (ibid. 10) and the lack of reflexivity, self-awareness, and “political engagement in scholarship” (ibid. 16–17). Three years later, the same author, in an article entitled “Post-Soviet Anthropology: Not a Crisis, but Something More Serious” added to his list of the factors playing a role in the disciplinary crisis the inertia and ineffectiveness of institutional structures of post-Soviet academia (or, rather, its elite and bureaucracy), the growing economic polarization within it, nationalism and ethnocentrism of academic institutions on the level of the republics, the methodological chaos reigning in the social sciences, yet again an absence of self-awareness and reflexivity, the continued fixation on studies of ethnogenesis, a lack of contemporary textbooks, the low level of student training, shortage of adequate departments, an extremely slow adoption of the new methods and issues in anthropological studies of society, and the preoccupation instead with the study of “ethnoses as social organisms, of interethnic relations, and processes” (Tishkov 1995:90).

Thus, in the beginning of the 1990s, one of the leaders of Russian anthropology outlined, as the chief underlying reasons of the disciplinary crisis, ideological factors (conservative perspectives of the scholars and the academic leadership), structural factors (underfinancing, and the lack of faculties to train a new generation of researchers), demographic factors (the aging of the existing scholars), and specifically academic factors (outdated disciplinary scope, lack of balance between fieldwork and “armchair” anthropology).

The structural realities of how research is organized—and financed—interferes with the development and improvement of field methods not only in Russia, but in other countries as well: the conservative politics of many anthropological funding institutions supports the inclusion of observation as the primary method of anthropological fieldwork, and proposals based on new experimental methods are usually not funded, due to the under-informed and overcautious academic bureaucracy; what ends up being funded is usually limited to what the academic bureaucrats can understand. In case of Russian anthropology, this state of things is compounded by the fact that critical revision of field methods is virtually nonexistent.

I have already discussed the low level of philosophical reflexivity in Russian ethnology and anthropology (Sokolovskiy 2009). The situation with methodological reflexivity is just one example of it: if in the past 10–15 years, the field of philosophy and methodology of history has seen several dozens of theoretically innovative publications, the Russian anthropologists’ attitude towards the methodology of their own discipline can be called apathetic at best—for several reasons. A significant part of the older cohort in the field, because of their past aversion to the ideological dictionary of Soviet Marxism, never developed an inclination towards methodological reflexivity, and tends to associate any discussions of a philosophical nature with a

top-down party line (an “older generation” of anthropologists is rapidly growing—in the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology RAS, the average age of the Candidate is now 49, and of a Doctor—67!). Another reason lies in the decline of the standards of university education. In other words, it is as if ideology, demographics, and the crisis in higher education colluded to destroy what little was left in our theoretical “backpack”.

These obscurantist tendencies unfold against the backdrop of the persisting prestige of fieldwork, yet the demographics of anthropology as a field today (the average age of practitioners has never been this high) contribute to the growth of “armchair” scientists, as fieldwork becomes increasingly difficult with each year for the older generation. As a result we see the growth of publications that do not require lengthy trips and a break from the urban comforts. Previous division of the field between “fieldworkers” and “theoreticians” has been further complicated by the incursion into anthropology the representatives of “border” fields in which fieldwork was never central (historians specializing in gender and social history, political scientists writing on the subjects of nationalities, policy, multiculturalism and tolerance, researchers of indigenous and minority rights, demographers and geographers specialized in census and cartography analysis, etc.). To substantiate this assertion, below I present statistics pertaining to book publishing of the last decade (see Table 1 below).

Table 1. Topics of books published by the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology RAS, based on the Institute’s annual reports.

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	Σ
Physical anthropology (including medical anthropology)	3	3	3	6	4	4	7	2	3	5	40
Ethology	-	-	-	3	3	1	-	2	-	-	9
Teaching and reference (general works, textbooks, encyclopedic works)	10	9	6	9	7	9	6	4	6	6	72
<i>Studies of material culture</i>	2	2	2	1	-	1	-	2	1	-	11
<i>Spiritual Culture Studies</i> (social-normative culture, cosmology, spiritual heritage, rituals, customs, festivities, folklore)	1	3		3	2	3	2	5	5	3	27
Museum studies	1	-	-	-	1	-	-	1	-	-	3
Ethnic and social history	1	1	1	1	4	2	3	4	1	6	24
Ethnosociology and sociology of culture	-	-	1	-	-	2	1	4	1	-	9
Ethnodemography and Paleodemography, Historical Demography, Ethnogeography, Cultural Geography	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	1	7	1	21
Ethnoecology	2	1	-	1	1	-	-	2	2	-	9
Ethnoarchaeology	-	1	-	1	1	-	3	1	2	4	13
Ethnopsychology and Psychological Anthropology	-	-	-	1	-	1	1	1	-	-	4

Table 1 (continuation). Topics of books published by the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology RAS, based on the Institute's annual reports.

History of Anthropology (bibliographies, biographies and memoirs, publication of archival documents and classical works, translations of foreign classics, social science studies)	5	4	4	7	6	3	1	7	1	1	39
Studies of religions	6	2	3	4	2	7	4	3	2	2	35
Social and Cultural Anthropology (general works, textbooks, research into social structures, anthropology of professions and subcultures)	-	1	2	4	1	3	3	2	3	7	26
Visual Anthropology	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1	2
Gender Studies	5	1	4	5	3	4	4	2	5	6	39
Political Anthropology and Ethnopolitics											
<i>Studies of multiculturalism, cultural diversity, tolerance, xenophobia, and racism</i>	1	9	4	6	8	3	6	6	4	4	51
<i>Studies of national politics, nationalism, ethnicities, identities, ethnic formation processes</i>	9	7	13	5	8	8	6	3	3	5	67
Study of ethnic conflicts	4	2	2	6	2	1	3	3	1	1	25
Economic Anthropology	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	2
Legal Anthropology	3	1	2	1	-	1	-	1	-	-	9
Σ	54	48	50	66	55	55	52	57	48	52	537

A third of the published books (including single-author and multi-author monographs, anthologies of articles, encyclopaedic and reference publications—in other words, works that are the results of many years of preparation and labor—do not depend on new field data, and, in the best case scenario, are either based on field materials of past years, or are grounded in other types of materials altogether. If we add books on political anthropology and ethnic politics, disciplinary history, ethnic and social history, as well as textbooks and encyclopaedic publications, and the majority of works in historical demographics, religious studies, and gender studies that were based on sources that had nothing to do with fieldwork, then the historical-archival and “armchair” publications would constitute more than half of the whole body of work. The rise of “armchair” case studies, combined with a dwindling stream of fresh field data, can only produce an ever-increasing scholasticism of anthropological concepts. New field data necessitates young researchers, whose age and health are adequate for meeting the challenges of fieldwork, while combating scholasticism requires the development and nurturing the institution of critique (its practice today is such that critical reviews in Russian anthropological journals can be counted on the fingers of one hand). Also necessary are ongoing knowledge transfers of cutting-edge methodologies in social research, most importantly to students. But so far we can observe the following picture: the beloved object of our ethnographers—traditional culture—is vanishing before our very eyes; shoes woven from bark, harrows

and plows, spinning wheels and the woolen peasant skirts—the days of these objects of close ethnographic attention have long been numbered. The chase for authenticity of a reconstructed culture leads to weak knowledge of the contemporary culture. This purism around “tradition” maps neatly onto all forms of nationalism. At the same time, the everyday material culture of modernity (radio, television, telephones, and other tools for remote hearing, viewing, and acting) that obviously affects the behavior and thoughts of the ethnographer’s field subjects is, for some reason, excised from the range of legitimate subjects for the discipline of anthropology. This happens because *ethnic* culture remains the privileged object of inquiry for us, and new technologies do not “fit” with the visions of Russian (meaning peasant) culture.

This focus on ethnic particularities forces Russian ethnographers to narrow down and filter the everyday life that they observe; the fixation on tradition impedes the descriptions of innovations, and, in fact, the very canons of description and analysis, developed as a part of the ethnographic trifecta “food-shelter-clothes,” and reflecting the methods of comparative ethnography of the 19th century, do not allow for the description and analysis of the transformation of contemporary material culture. The slow drift of the subject does, of course, contribute to the increasingly divided identity of our discipline and its community, as it splits into conservative foundationalists, who call themselves ethnologists and ethnographers, and radicals-reformers, who prefer to call their discipline anthropology, and who self-identify as anthropologists. While in the departments of old universities the students get to hear about “the main difficulties of separating the ethnos from other social categories” (Kuropyatnik 2010), or “the specifics of the ethnological perspective on the development of societies” (Semenov 2006), in new programs students are learning the basics of medical anthropology, and anthropology of work (Professions.doc 2007; Yarskaya-Smirnova, Romanov 2004).

Applied anthropology, which could be expected to generate new momentum for developing the discipline, has been assimilated to the structures and agencies of the state, and thus, in a sense, emasculated. Even research focused on such relevant for Russia topics like tolerance, xenophobia, and racism became incorporated into one or another campaign by the government, wherein the bureaucrats determined research directions, and controlled the selective publication of the output. The dependency of the Russian Academy of Sciences on state financing is a double-edged sword: on one hand, it keeps social sciences from being obliterated, but on the other hand, it effectively arrests new directions in research, and provincializes their fields of research as they become subservient to the political and bureaucratic apparatus and its immediate interests. The solution of this problem in the case of Russian anthropology specifically and social sciences in general lies in the diversification of funding sources. However, Russian policies directed at marginalizing foreign funds that support social research limits such diversification, and forces the next generation of young researchers to search for greener grass beyond Russian borders.

As a result of this nexus of circumstances, Russian anthropology finds itself in a real *zeitnot*—the elder generation of researchers is on its way out, and the younger generation is emigrating or changing professions, instead becoming economists, lawyers, and administrators. Another decade and a half of these dynamics, and it will no longer be relevant to write about the disciplinary crisis of anthropology—one will only be able to study the details of its demise.

Authorized translation from Russian by Veronica Davidov