

## COLLABORATIVE ANTHROPOLOGY AND PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH IN CENTRAL EASTERN EUROPE AND RUSSIA

*Krista Harper and Julie Hemment University of Massachusetts, Amherst*

In this, our final issue as co-editors of *AEER*, we focus on a topic that is close to both our research interests and our hearts — participatory or collaborative forms of research. Interest in such approaches is growing in the discipline. Whether in the name of “public”, “collaborative”, or “activist” anthropology, more and more anthropologists are advocating forms of collaborative research practice. This issue’s symposium, “Collaborative Anthropology and Participatory Action Research in Central Eastern Europe and Russia,” features articles by teams of scholars from Russia, Hungary, and the United States and explores some of the participatory research projects taking shape in the region.

Hungarian contributors to the symposium are based at the Environmental Social Sciences Research Group (ESSRG, see also [www.essrg.hu](http://www.essrg.hu)) of the Institute for Environmental and Landscape Management at St. Stephen’s University in Gödöllő. ESSRG is part of the international network of “science shops”—institutions providing participatory research support in response to civil society concerns. The ESSRG’s research is interdisciplinary, but the focus on qualitative research, long-term engagement with “knowable communities” (Clifford 1986, Williams 1973), and understanding how people use the natural and built environment and make sense of political and economic shifts speaks eloquently to the anthropology of postsocialist societies. Furthermore, their explicit discussion of participatory action research (PAR) methods is productive to bring to bear on anthropological studies.

The Russia-based contributors are undergraduate students associated with the Center for Women’s History and Gender Studies at Tver’ State University (TCWHGS, see also <http://tvergenderstudies.ru/>). Center faculty have a long-standing interest in forms of community-based research and have undertaken forms of gender-based civic activism in the city since the early 1990s. Student contributors to this issue are participants in a peer ethnography project that resulted from a collaborative community-based project led by Julie Hemment (UMass), Valentina Uspenskaya (director of TCWHGS) and Dmitry Borodin (Department of

Sociology, Tver’ State University).

### **Collaborative Anthropology in Russia**

Opportunities for foreign scholars to undertake collaborative community-based research in Russia have historically been quite constrained. While possibilities for collaboration opened up during the nineties, they were structured by the vexed context of development and democratization interventions. Such forms of collaboration have become more challenging during the last few years, as a result of the new hostilities between Russia and the United States (what Stephen Cohen has referred to as the “new Cold War”). In this environment it seems increasingly important that scholars maintain connections with their Russian counterparts.

The first four articles stem from one such collaborative project undertaken between Julie Hemment and scholars and students associated with the Center for Women’s History and Gender Studies at Tver’ State University (TGU). The project, entitled “Youth organizations, voluntary service and the restructuring of social welfare in Russia”<sup>1</sup> grew out of long-term fieldwork relationships and an earlier participatory action research process conducted with the Center’s director, Valentina Uspenskaya and other local women activists.

This earlier collaboration focused on civil society development and was based in the non-governmental sphere. However, six years after the completion of the earlier participatory action research project, Hemment and her Russian colleagues found themselves in different locations. While Hemment had taken up a tenure track position at the University of Massachusetts, for reasons that had to do both with funding and the newly inhospitable civil society climate of the Putin administration, her colleagues had also moved (back) to the university.

Hemment’s article traces the genesis of this second (university-based) collaborative research and its early phases. At its outset, the project sought to explore the use of community service learning (CSL) methodologies in Russia. The article shows how a

1 This pilot research was funded by a National Council for Eurasian and East European Studies (NCEEER) research fellowship and an IREX short-term travel grant.

research project that began as a dialogue about pedagogy took shape as a comparative interrogation of neoliberalism and welfare state restructuring, with interesting results. In Russia, as in the United States, youth voluntarism and other privatizing initiatives are promoted against a backdrop of economic neoliberalism and concerns about national security. Hemment argues that cross-cultural comparisons of youth civic education projects can enrich our thinking at a time of global *neglasnost* (nontransparency). In sum, Hemment argues that for US-based scholars on the tenure track, CSL can offer an effective framework for achieving forms of collaborative ethnographic projects and can yield important comparative insights.

The three articles that follow by Belov, Karmalskaia and Artushin, (all fourth year undergraduate students in the Department of Sociology at TGU who have been part of the research team since 2005), are reports from the pilot research project that ensued. By the fall of 2006, the collaborative project had transmogrified into an ethnographic investigation of Tver'-based youth organizations. Its goals are twofold: to examine the shifting terrain of these new youth organizations by studying them ethnographically, and to record and analyze the views of the youth who volunteer in them.

In undertaking these interviews, the authors engage with their peers. Indeed, they themselves have been occasional participants or at least close observers of the movements in question, which recruit and undertake outreach within the university. Their proximity to these issues and the access to activists their positionality affords provides valuable insights into the meaning of belonging in these movements.

Belov and Karmalskaia's pieces focus on *Nashi* (Ours), the most controversial of the Putin-era state-supported youth organizations. *Nashi* has attracted a great deal of international media attention and notoriety for its high profile mass rallies and pro-Putin campaigns. It has primarily been represented as an ideological training ground for "Putin's generation", young people who are presumed to share the views of the (now former) President and his team. Against these dominant media and scholarly accounts, these papers give insight into considerable contestation amongst the youth who participate in the organization.

Belov's research focuses on the anti-fascist aspects of the organization's activities; in so doing, he takes us to the heart of one of the most striking paradoxes of this very controversial organization. *Nashi* claims an anti-fascist orientation as central to its identity (indeed, its full name is the Anti-fascist democratic youth movement); and yet the very name of the organization, "*Nashi*" (Ours) makes explicit the exclusionary logic by which it operates. *Nashi*'s "anti-fascist" campaigning takes place at a time of increased public consternation about the rise of fascism amongst youth in Russia. Certainly, xenophobia and hate crimes

appear to be on the increase in the Russian Federation. However, the term "fascist" is frequently deployed in ways that are expedient to political elites as his material makes clear.

Karmalskaia's research focuses on the attitudes of youth movement participants toward state demographic policies. Stimulated by her concern about the aggressive pronatalism articulated by *Nashi* ideologues, she sought to interview participants in the movement to assess the extent to which they upheld these views. In Russia, as in some other European nations in recent years (notably Italy), the declining birth rate has become an ongoing concern of the state. Politicians, demographers and actors within the Russian Orthodox Church all share the concern that the Russian nation is "dying out" and demographic "alarm" (Krause 2005) has reached a crescendo. This has led to increased forms of state intervention and the extension of benefits to stimulate the birth rate. Pro-state youth organizations have supported these policies by organizing high profile pro-natalist campaigns, most notoriously at the *Nashi* Summer camp at Lake Seliger in July 2007. Here, young couples were encouraged to get married and procreate on-site in especially designated love tents.

Although her respondents express deep concern ("alarm") about the issue, Karmalskaia's interviews reveal a diversity of opinions concerning the question of what should be done. Indeed, her research yields insight into considerable contestation amongst *Nashi* activists and supporters. Far from being in accord with the state policies she describes, her informants articulate wide-ranging critiques of them. Strikingly, they are extremely critical of some of the measures recently adopted by the Russian state – for example, the extension of financial incentives ("maternity capital") to women who give birth to second or subsequent children. Furthermore, she locates a gendered dimension to interviewee responses, where women are particularly concerned by recent moves to restrict the right to abortion. In part due to difficulties accessing *Nashi* movement activists (research took place at a very sensitive time in the organization's history; by the fall of 2007 it had fallen out of favor with Moscow's political elites and was losing their financial support), Karmalskaia widened the field to include youth participants in two other political organizations: The Communist Youth Union of the Russian Federation (*Soiuz Kommunisticheskoi Molodezhi Rossiiskoi Federatsii*) and The Active Youth Union (*Soiuz Aktivnoi Molodezhi*), a recently founded Tver'-based youth organization. The result? Against her expectations, she finds that youth activists regardless of their movement affiliation express extreme skepticism about state demographic policies.

The interview material also points to the racialized dimensions of demographic alarm (Krause 2005). Further, it also provides insight into the

emergence of new forms of exclusion, whereby the poor or socially marginal are pinpointed as less deserving and desirable (*which* births do state policies seek to promote?) In sum, linking back to the overall goals of the collaborative research project, this material sheds light on the ways welfare restructuring is giving rise to new forms of inequality and new citizenship regimes. As Michele Rivkin-Fish has put it, "Current pronatalist debates and policies suggest that relations between the state, market, and family in Russia are a site of experimentation and flux, even an arena where new modes of governance are being formed" (2008).

Artiushin's research took him to a rather different terrain of youth activity – the determinedly apolitical realm of youth football (soccer) fans. Pointing to increased interest in soccer amongst Russian youth and the proliferation of fan clubs, he identifies the emergence of a nascent "fan movement" (*fan-dvizhenie*) in Russia. His interviewees provide sardonic commentary on the state of Russian politics, including state-run youth movements. In concluding, he raises the intriguing possibility that this "would-be movement" will form fallow soil for future ideological indoctrination or recruitment by political elites.

### Participatory Action Research in Hungary

In the past four years, scholars at the ESSRG in Hungary have launched an ambitious program of interdisciplinary research on sustainable community development, with an emphasis on carrying out participatory action research (PAR) in Hungarian municipalities. We are very pleased to present some of their innovative projects in this issue.

Bodorkos, Balázs, Bela, and Pataki's article on community-based sustainability planning in northern Hungary serves as a model for how researchers are integrating ethnography and PAR methods into applied, interdisciplinary research on sustainable development. Through individual interviews and community discussions with residents of an economically depressed rural area along the Tisza River, the research team elicited people's hopes for a revitalized local economy and uncovered conflicts with the management of a new national park and concerns about young people's perceived disconnection from the natural landscape. These research activities led to a community-based planning forum and a nature protection event for young people planned by local teachers and experts from national parks.

Bodorkos, Pataki, and Merö's article on women's role in preserving heirloom bean species explores how gender roles and identities intersect with agricultural biodiversity in a remote rural region in southwestern Hungary. The research team conducted focus group

interviews and participant observation with women farmers to learn how gendered practices of gardening and cooking have resulted in unique, local varieties of beans that have been selected, preserved, and passed down across generations. The team brought together elderly women farmers, local schools, and community groups to plan a festival celebrating beans as part of the region's heritage and to raising awareness of agricultural biodiversity.

Kelemen and Balázs contribute an essay reflecting on their experience teaching the first graduate course in PAR methodology to be offered at one of Hungary's premier universities. Hungarian academe has an outstanding reputation in the traditional social sciences, but PAR approaches have only recently appeared on the scene. Despite a growing trend toward university-community partnerships and strong initial interest on the part of students, the teaching team encountered difficulty in engaging students in non-traditional classroom activities, such as group projects, hands-on activities, and trips to field sites. Although the graduate students are prepared for traditional, lecture-oriented pedagogy, the instructors struggled to create an atmosphere of active learning and reflection on methods in practice.

Although these methods may pose new challenges to researchers, they offer the potential to address the power differentials between "East" and "West" and social science and society; as such, we consider they hold great potential.

Clifford, James (1986) On Ethnographic Allegory. In *Writing Culture*, eds. James Clifford and George Marcus. Santa Fe, NM: SAR press.

Krause, Elizabeth (2005) A Crisis of Births: Population Politics and Family-Making in Italy. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Rivkin-Fish, Michele (2008) "Demographic and Reproductive Politics in Contemporary Russia: Gendered Inequality Amidst Shifting Forms of Governance," paper presented to the 2008 SANA/AES Meetings, April 4, 2008 Wrightsville Beach, NC

Williams, Raymond (1973) *The City and the Country*. Oxford: Oxford.