

WHO'S SERVING WHOM? COMMUNITY SERVICE LEARNING AS CRITICAL PEDAGOGY AT A TIME OF *NEGLASNOST'* (NON-TRANSPARENCY) IN RUSSIA¹

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"In the last five years, non-transparency (*neglasnost'*) has become the norm in society. It's no longer clear who orders what, who initiates what. It's very convenient for manipulation.. There's no mass media, anymore and poverty shuts down the idea of civil society. What kind of civil society can there be if everyone is poor? If in Soviet times, we were busy running around trying to buy panty hose, now, we're kept busy running around looking for work... This is the politics of bankruptcy, where the state purposefully makes people beggars, so they are dependent upon them. Then, it sets up programs to help them."

(Valentina Uspenskaya, university professor and civic activist, Tver', Russia, March 2005)

This article describes a collaborative project to explore the potential and use of Community Service Learning (CSL) in Russia. In post-Soviet Russia as in the United States, the rhetoric of civil society and voluntarism circulate. The Putin administration, newly sensitive to Western involvement in Russia, has begun to make inroads into civil society. Encouraged by the Kremlin, Russian politicians have begun to promote forms of voluntarism amongst youth, a process that has accelerated since the so-called "orange revolution" in Ukraine, when thousands of pro-democracy demonstrators (mostly youth) brought down the Yanukoviych government.

This new initiative coincides with a new round of cuts in public spending. Compounding a decade of fall-out from economic shock therapy, the Russian federal government has initiated a series of welfare reforms that threaten to further marginalize already vulnerable populations. In this article, I describe the early stages of a collaborative project that seeks to

interrogate and intervene in these processes, based at the Center for Women's History and Gender Studies in Tver', a provincial city located 170 km outside Moscow.

This project brings me into a new dialogue with a group of university teachers and civic activists, who are on the frontline of these processes. As the quote above indicates, they are deeply concerned about these uncertain, often-contradictory policy shifts and their implications. From their position within a state-run university, Center faculty members feel the effects of economic reforms very acutely. As educators, they are concerned about the way "youth" (*molodezh'*) are invoked in the new civil society projects. During the spring and summer of 2005 when we embarked on this project, the press was full of discussions of two new Kremlin-sponsored youth movements—Moving Together (*Idushchie Vmeste*) and Ours (*Nashi*). The press reported high profile activities—youth camps and rallies—funded by generous allocations from the federal budget. While some Russian commentators were appalled at the resonance with Soviet-era *Komsomol* (Communist Youth League) activity, this nationalist cultural project clearly has purchase amongst a population wearied by the economic and psychological dislocations of the transition period. Valentina's use of the term *neglasnost'* forcibly draw attention to the ironies of the times: *glasnost'* (openness) was a key word of the Gorbachev era democratic reforms that heralded the Soviet Union's dissolution. Now, she implies, Russia is once again in a moment of troubling transition.

In this article I have two main goals: (1) to make the case for CSL as a means of synthesizing alternative cross-cultural collaboration, by tracing the early stages of our collaborative project; (2) to show the critical insights that our discussion of critical pedagogy has yielded. First, in dialogue with recent debates about the scope, scale and obligations of a public

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or socially engaged anthropology (Borofsky 2000; Emihovich 2005; Hyatt and Lyon Callo 2003; Sanday 2003), I argue that CSL offers a means of affecting collaborative ethnographic projects on matters of political importance. I am in agreement with those who have argued that it is no longer sufficient to merely document neoliberalism's effects; rather, we must seek ways to work for social justice with the communities where we conduct our research. CSL provides an effective means of accomplishing this, particularly to scholars on the tenure-track who find themselves struggling with two equally important, yet often conflicting loyalties: toward home institutions and students, and toward research sites and fieldwork relationships. Second, I argue that CSL literatures have the potential to yield important comparative insights. In this article, I show how a 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. I argue that cross-cultural comparisons of youth civic education projects can enrich our thinking at a time of global *neglasnost*'.

Thinking CSL, back in the USA

I was originally drawn to the literature on CSL, because it seemed to offer a means to overcome some of the contradictions of my professional academic life. I am a feminist oriented activist anthropologist located far from the community upon which this professional identity claim is based. Since 1997, my research has been based in Tver'. Between 1997-98 I undertook ethnographic fieldwork amongst women's civic organizations in the city; in the spring of 1998 I worked closely with a group of women activists and teachers in a participatory action research project wherein we worked to set up the crisis center Gortensia. I was able to maintain close connection with the project and my colleagues until 2000 and made several return trips to Tver'. However, since then, I have been rooted at the University of Massachusetts, and my primary obligation is to teach. This new phase of my academic career has given me ample opportunity to ponder the contradictions of trying to achieve a "public" (Borofsky 2000), "public interest" (Sanday 2003), or "activist" (Lyon-Callos and Hyatt 2003) anthropology. I have struggled to find ways to use this base and resources creatively, to forge new forms of collaboration with my colleagues in Russia.

Shortly after arriving at UMass, I was drawn into discussions of CSL. CSL is widely embraced across college campuses in the United States, and is regarded as a crucial part of a liberal public school

education. It is a pedagogical movement that has its conceptual roots in the civil rights movement. It gained traction on campuses as scholars of the sixties and subsequent generations confronted crises and contradictions of the (mostly) urban US, such as the gulf between privileged universities and the resource-starved, often minority communities they are situated in (Stanton, et al. 1999). It is now embraced on campuses as an effective form of experiential learning that enables students to achieve personal growth. Some are primarily committed to it as part of a "critical pedagogy" that encourages students to reflect on structural inequities and work towards social change; others regard it as a powerful means of overcoming youth alienation and fostering civic values and engagement (Benson and Harkavy 1996).

But there is a tension here; over the last decade, CSL won mainstream acceptance that causes many of its practitioners disquiet: in the context of neoliberal restructuring, CSL threatens to become the same individualizing strategy that it mobilizes against. Service learning is often a thinly disguised means of engaging students in charity work, projects that accept the status quo and evade the challenge of thinking critically (Morton 1996). Anthropologist Susan Brin Hyatt insists that the new popularity of CSL needs to be understood in the context of structural change. In the context of the cutting back of the Keynesian welfare state, service learning is a "strategy of governance, a technology for the production of neo-liberal citizens" (Hyatt 2001). Via service learning, student-volunteers take on the responsibilities of the retreating welfare state. Many CSL practitioners wrestle with this problematic. In what are to me the most compelling discussions of service learning, scholars engage in a doubly reflexive move: they interrogate the promotion of CSL and voluntarism at the same time as they engage their students in community-based projects. For example, Susan Hyatt argues that for all its problems, service learning offers students the opportunity to gain first-hand experience of the struggles community-based organizations face. It offers "at least the potential for encouraging a re-politicized and culturally critical perspective on such widely professed values as 'self-help' and 'empowerment.'" (Hyatt 2001:6)

It was this double imperative - the dual and simultaneous commitment to engagement and critique - that drew me to CSL. I saw in it a way to bring the threads of my research and pedagogy together, and to stay true to my commitment to socially based research. Informed by these critical discussions of CSL and its complicity with neoliberalism, yet committed to what CSL can enable, I returned to Russia in 2004-5 to initiate a dialogue with my long-term colleagues: teachers and civic activists associated with the Center for Women's History and Gender Studies in Tver'.

The Center for Women's History and Gender Studies

The Center for Women's History and Gender Studies in Tver' stands on the cusp of the divide between the community and university. Founded in 1999, it has non-governmental status, yet exists as a university program, affiliated with the Sociology and Political Science department at Tver' State University. It emerged from a project of long-term civic activism. The center sprang from *Zhenskii Svet* (Women's Light), an independent feminist-oriented women's group that was founded in 1991 by Valentina Uspenskaya, a professor in the department of Sociology and Political Science.

Zhenskii Svet was an unusual project. Inspired both by western European and Russian histories of feminist organizing, its primary orientation was towards education and consciousness-raising. At a time of massive societal upheaval and ideological collapse, when people were desperately re-visioning past choices and scrambling to make sense of a confusing present, Valentina offered the history and tools of the international women's movement and feminism via the group. This feminist orientation set it apart from most societal groups; for complex reasons that have to do with the Soviet Union's complex history towards gender equality, most Russian people regard feminism with suspicion; it is disparaged by many as a "western" import, irrelevant to Russian women.

The *Zhenskii Svet* project gained traction in the early nineties, as the realities of economic dislocation were felt. I came to understand the group to be a work of critical pedagogy. Although university based, and originally comprised of former students and colleagues, *Zhenskii Svet* was open to the public. Its participants were doctors, engineers, teachers and unemployed women. Against hierarchical models of learning, Valentina's vision was that *Zhenskii Svet* would be a "roundtable of equals", where members brought their own themes to discussion. Her goal was for the group to stimulate women to become involved in forms of civic activism.

Indeed, it was the catalyst for a number of local community-based projects. By the mid nineties, the gendered effects of marketization were being felt; women struggled with the new expectations and norms of the post-Soviet labor market.

In response to these new circumstances, *Zhenskii Svet* participants ran free classes in computer skills for unemployed women, and seminars in women's health and psychology.

I joined *Zhenskii Svet* in 1997 at a moment when many of the group's participants were beginning to reevaluate their activism. The *Zhenskii Svet* women had always been committed to independence; true to

their oppositional relationship vis a vis the socialist state, they preferred to organize informally without state support. However, as their own economic circumstances became more precarious, many began to question this commitment. The women began to look both to local and international powerbrokers for sources of financial and organizational support: the city and municipal administration, and the international foundations and agencies, which supported NGOs as part of their broader commitment to "democratization".

In the spring of 1998, we began a participatory project to discuss the group's future. Ultimately, this mutual learning process became a project wherein we scrutinized and strategized the possibility of working with international agencies. It resulted in the formation of two institutionalized projects--Gortensia, a crisis center for women victims of domestic and sexual violence and the Center for Women's History and Gender Studies.

Both projects were independent and non-governmental, yet worked in partnership with local and international powerbrokers. Valentina articulated this new approach as a "strategy of involvement" (*strategiia vovlecheniia*)-- a strategy of engaging local officials and prompting them to do what she considered was their job.

Until it was forced to shut down in early 2004--the casualty of shifting political winds in both Tver' and donor nations--the crisis center worked together with the Gender Studies Center in an example of university-community partnership.

While not seamless (Hemment 2007), this collaboration enabled a great deal. Students worked at the crisis center as volunteer-interns, gaining valuable experience with computers, counseling and working with members of the public. Several sociology students wrote undergraduate theses on domestic violence, offering socially useful research to the city and the center. And the traffic moved in both directions; crisis center staff gave lectures at the Gender Studies Center on domestic violence and some of the counselors subsequently entered the university to undertake graduate studies based on their applied work. This university-community partnership was rare in Russia. In my experience, independent societal organizations rarely find common cause with universities. Although many of the first civic groups (women's groups, ecological groups) that set up in Russia during the late eighties and early nineties were university-based -- founded by students or faculty -- they didn't directly engage the resources of the university. As the Soviet Academy of Sciences began to dissolve in the early nineties and the university became increasingly more impoverished and beleaguered, many teachers and researchers quit. For a lucky few, NGOs offered a more certain career path. It appears that international funding often inadvertently pushes civic activists away from local, community-

based issues. Despite foundations' intention to support the development of broad-based networks of civic associations and groups under the auspices of civil society aid, they have created a narrow stratum of professionalized and transnationally-oriented NGOs (Abramson 1999; Richter 1999; Sampson 1996; Wedel 1998).

Today, the Gender Studies Center occupies an interesting location. Marked as "Western" due to its feminist orientation, it has been tolerated by the university administration largely due to the international resources it commands. Between 2001-2005, it received substantial and sustained support from the Ford Foundation and several grants from other agencies, including the Russian Ministry of Education. This permitted it a certain leeway. Valentina has always used her university base to undertake community-based projects; these initiatives have taken place under the radar of the university administration. Yet this security and this freedom may be short-lived. Our project began at an anxious and vulnerable time for the Center for Women's History and Gender Studies, since it was approaching the end of a third two-year grant cycle with the Ford Foundation. In December 2005, Center staff learned that the Ford Foundation grant would not be renewed and they have been unable to secure sustained support since then. The center is unlikely to be able to locate local sponsors in either the private sector or local administration. Indeed, their commitment to gender equality and feminism put center staff on a potential collision course with the new discourses of "patriotic education" and "loyalty" (to the state) emanating from the political center. This is another crossroads period; the political winds are changing and the Center's future is uncertain.

Our discussions of CSL have led us into a new phase of our collaboration, a new phase of the political "conversation" (Gibson-Graham 1994:220) we began in 1997. CSL offers us something of both practical and analytic significance. First, CSL literatures and techniques can assist teachers develop and legitimize their commitments to socially engaged scholarship. Although not formalized in any programmatic way, Valentina and her colleagues have long engaged her students in community-based work; as she has always said of her scholarship, "There's no point if it doesn't have a community basis." Like their US-based counterparts, Center faculty members are explicitly focused on fostering civic values and engagement. They too have broad, transformative goals; via feminism and gender studies, they seek to transform the worldview of the youth who are their students and empower them to imagine alternative futures. In addition to offering specific models and techniques for affecting critical thinking through service learning, the CSL literature can legitimize the existing political and community-based work of the center. The literature makes the case for the pedagogical value of this work in a way that teachers there have not fully formulated;

this may be of strategic use to my colleagues as they dialogue with potential sponsors: the university administration, and international donors. Second, the CSL literature has led to some interesting findings. In this next section, I show how the situation in Russia has much in common with some of the issues raised by the critical CSL literature in the United States.

Voluntarism at a time of state centralization and welfare state retrenchment

The concepts of voluntarism, social capital and civil society have circulated in Russia since the early 1990s, when western European and North American foundations arrived to undertake the project of democratization in postsocialist states. These concepts made up a suite of democratic values that accompanied neoliberal economic restructuring. In the ideological vacuum left by the dissolution of the USSR, policy makers and development workers unhesitatingly exported solutions from liberal democratic contexts to formerly socialist states. In Russia, as in the United States and Western Europe, the "problem" was seen to be a deficit of civil society and social capital (Putnam 1995). In Russia, as in the United States, foundations promoted the notion of civil society, here, meaning an independent sphere between state and the private sphere, consisting of informal associations and groups, as a "rehabilitative strategy" (Hyatt 2001:208).

That is to say, policy makers and development workers believed that civil society would resolve social ills such as crime, low political participation, and have positive effects, instilling civic values in politically disengaged populations. In Russia this rehabilitative strategy has had an added twist. Interventions did not merely target "the poor", as in the U.S. (Goode and Maskovsky 2001; Susser 1996). In the aftermath of communism's "collapse" and discreditation, the rehabilitation envisaged involved the entire population, generations "spoiled" by state socialism (Wedel 1998). International civil society aid has sought to transform purportedly dependent and politically passive Soviets into active citizens, savvy consumers, claimers of rights and defenders of their interests (Hemment 2004).

A robust critical scholarship has traced the trajectories of the Western-led project to democratize postsocialist states: scholarship has focused on moments of ill fit, collision and conflict as concepts have arrived and interacted with local cultural logics and realities (Hemment 2004; 2007; Kalb 2002; Richter 1999; Sampson 1996; Wedel 1998). Like much of the literature within urban anthropology in the U.S., this postsocialist scholarship has drawn attention to the ways rhetorics of empowerment, transparency, and participation displace attention from structural issues and the economic. This was the terrain of the earlier collaborative research project I conducted with participants of *Zhen-*

skii Svet. Our (new) discussions about service learning revealed a new landscape.

In the aftermath of 9/11, the priorities of international donor agencies have shifted. Donor states find themselves preoccupied with other missions in regions of the world deemed more strategically important, such as setting up NGOs and microcredit schemes in post-Taliban Afghanistan and Central Asia. Democratization aid to postsocialist states, which peaked in the mid-nineties, began to peter out in 2001. Many of the agencies, which were pivotal in promoting NGOs and civil society development have scaled back their budgets, or moved out of Russia altogether.

As donor agencies begin to withdraw from the project of civil society development, Russian politicians have moved to appropriate the terrain and the concept. Beginning in 2001, President Vladimir Putin began to use the language of “civil society” (*grazhdanskii soiuz*) and to launch his own civic initiatives as part of a new and aggressively anti-western nationalist cultural project.

There has been a visible trickledown. Voluntarism is a newly fashionable theme amongst Russia’s political elites. In Tver’ as other regions, local politicians and influential members of the administration, who were notoriously slow to support the activities of independent groups and voluntary associations during the nineties, are now making political capital by launching charitable and philanthropic projects. As part of his electoral campaign, the new governor Dmitry Zelenin (a Muscovite) set up a charitable foundation in his name. This organization, now renamed the “Good Start Foundation” (*Fond Dobroe Nachalo*), and headed by his wife, collects monies from local businesses and puts them into campaigns for the needy (the elderly, orphans and disabled children).

Youth have emerged as a particularly important site of these civil society interventions. Since the “orange” revolution in Ukraine, youth have been targeted for involvement in not only political, but also in volunteer-run civic projects. This move towards targeting youth is very visible at the national level. In 2001, President Putin founded a youth organization Moving Together (*Idushchie Vmeste*). Their high profile activities—large scale centrally orchestrated youth rallies, reminiscent of Soviet era *Komsomol* activities, but involving youth wearing Putin T-shirts—have captured the attention of both the independent Russian and international media.

In spring 2005, another Kremlin-sponsored youth group, *Nashi* (Ours) appeared. I was very much aware of this activity in the summer of 2005, when national newspapers reported that a series of high profile *Nashi* youth camps took place in the Moscow and Tver’ regions. Thousands of youth from all over the federation were bused in to attend these camps, funded by generous allocations from the federal budget. Once

again, youth participants were given branded gifts - T-shirts with the *Nashi* logo on front, and the Russian national anthem on the back.

This activity is visible at the regional level, too. In Tver’ *oblast’*, as other regions, local politicians and influential members of the administration have begun to set up youth-oriented associations. Since he came to office in 2004, the governor of Tver’ region has launched a long-range program to encourage forms of youth voluntarism: *Vazhnoe Delo* (Important Business).

These new, controversial civil society organizations are promoted at the same time as existing ones are cut off. Over the last few years, the Putin administration has shut down independent media organs. Newspapers and TV stations are often collateral in his pursuit of powerful political foes, oligarchs turned media moguls who have dared to transgress the new social contract – you may make money, but not waves.

As has been reported widely in the international media, independent NGOs are under attack. The Putin administration has signaled its hostility to independent NGOs, extending sanctions to groups it deems political. It has reserved especial disdain for NGOs that receive foreign funding. When I was in Tver’ in July 2005, I read press reports of a meeting between President Putin and human rights activists wherein he announced that he would not tolerate foreign money being used to finance the political activities of NGOs. Between 2004-2005, Putin introduced new legislation that threatened to have profound implications for NGOs; one bill that proposed amendments to the tax code, another that sought to give authorities increased powers to monitor the activities and finances of NGOs.

Some NGOs have been closed for reasons of Russian “homeland security” – a Russian Chechen rights group was recently shut down due to its purported support for “terrorist” Chechen separatists. In this environment, many NGOs find their existence threatened.

These changes take place against a backdrop of increasing social insecurity and a new round of liberalizing reforms that threaten to cut public spending. Ironically, given the extent to which he has rhetorically distanced himself from the market-oriented policies of the nineties, President Putin clearly intends to intensify the social welfare reforms that were initiated by his predecessors. In January 2005, new federal legislation took effect with sharp social consequences: the “monetization” of benefits (*monetizatsiia*) – that is, the replacement of social benefits with cash payments for vulnerable members of society, and the introduction of fees for formerly free services.

In the context of rising prices and galloping inflation, this is a much less secure entitlement. This legislation gave rise to extreme social discontent and the first large scale protests since Putin assumed office;

in response, these reforms were slightly muted, or “softened”. Another contentious set of federal policies concern housing reform. Rates for utilities (heat, water) have increased dramatically in the last few years.

Benefits that guaranteed large families free housing have been taken away. A law was under discussion during the spring of 2004 that would allow occupants of state owned housing who cannot pay their bills to be evicted. This legislation would represent a direct violation of a Soviet era social contract. Entitlement to housing was hard won under the soviet system and families often waited for a generation or more before the state gave them apartments. Although some of these reforms have been scaled back in response to popular protest, this uncertain restructuring has led to increased social anxiety in a population already vulnerable from a decade of fall-out from economic shock therapy.

When I arrived in Tver’ in March 2005 to undertake the first phase of this project, I found my teacher and activist friends and colleagues urgently debating these topics. The law on monetization had just taken effect; they were outraged by its implications and deeply concerned by the new political climate. Over the last months, several local community based projects had been shut down – the *oblast’* (regional) human rights commission, a hospice, as well as the women’s crisis center Gortensia that a group of us had worked to set up in 1998. The people I spoke to saw these closures as both economically and politically motivated. While the immediate cause of several closings was financial – organizations were shut down when they were unable to pay increased rental payments – people saw this as enabled by the new political climate. When I asked Valentina, director of the Center for Women’s History and Gender Studies whether these sharp cuts in financing for social programs were federally or municipally mandated, she told me that she didn’t know. This was the question that elicited the comment I excerpted at the beginning of the article, and her formulation of *neglasnost’*.

This then is the terrain of our collaborative project. Our project so far reveals a complex political economy and a paradoxical terrain. Putin’s policies ostensibly mark a break with the liberalizing/neoliberal policies of the 1990s and yet, in the sphere of social welfare at least, he is advancing more of the same. The Putinist cultural project (as exemplified in youth policies) can also be viewed as a response to post 9/11 geopolitical shifts and U.S. hegemony. It gives rise to interesting borrowings- where concepts, terms and models that circulated during the immediate postsocialist period are appropriated by Russian political elites for diverse ends.

As international foundations withdraw from Russia, I consider it all the more important that scholars of NGOs and civil society remain engaged and find

ways to lend their energies to the communities where their research is based. Youth offer a particularly interesting window onto these processes; youth have been newly politicized as a site of intervention by the Russian state. During the Soviet period, youth embodied both the hopes and fears about the new society; they were simultaneously viewed as the vanguard of the construction of communism, and as bearers of vestiges of the old, bourgeois order (Pilkington 1994:54). As such, they were targets of state policy and moral education (*vospitanie*) via the *Komsomol* (Communist Youth League).

During the perestroika and immediate post-Soviet period, youth were regarded as “a social metaphor for a collapsing society” (Pilkington 1994:90). In the last couple of years, particularly since the “orange” revolution, the significance of “youth” has been reconstituted. Once seen as apathetic, apolitical, problematically self-interested, and embodying the negative elements of transition to a capitalist economy, youth now represent something different: a potential site of radical political activity to be captured, or contained. Center Faculty are deeply concerned about the nationalist-patriotic discourses emanating from the new Kremlin-backed youth movements; in ways that recalled the Soviet era youth organization, the *Komsomol*, Russian politicians offered “voluntarism” as a means by which to morally educate youth (*vospitivat’*), here, cast as a “patriotic education” (*patrioticheskoe vospitanie*). Their own pedagogy reveals a different set of preoccupations, as the following reveals.

Community-based and experiential learning at the Center for Gender Studies

During my stay in March 2005, Valentina invited to one of her classes to meet some of her undergraduate sociology students who were presenting the results of a critical sociology project that she described as “a kind of community service learning”. The project was stimulated by local politics: the sharp cutbacks in social spending and retrenchment of the non-governmental sphere. Strategically timed to take place before International Women’s Day, it sought to elicit women’s views on these policies. Students were invited to put one question to women passers-by: “What would you like to ask our mayor, if you met him?” Valentina explained that she had devised this assignment after speaking to one of the progressive municipal deputies, who was combating these cuts virtually single-handedly, and suffering some abuse in the local media for her pains. Her instructions to the students were to take fieldnotes after each interview and to reflect on the experience, the responses and what it taught them.

Four of her 35 freshmen students had elected to undertake the project. As their peers watched, Dima,

Volodya and two young women Katya and Ira came to the front of the class. The students spoke of their initial nervousness, internal struggles as they approached people on the street for the first time, and of their learning curve; they also communicated their shock and dismay at the vehemence of women's responses, some of which were too crude to report. After their presentation Valentina congratulated them and informed the rest of the class that with the students' consent, she planned to present the results of this research at a round table, in a gesture of solidarity to the local deputies who were fighting cuts in social spending.

While those at the back of the class sat unmoved, engaging in resistance strategies familiar to me from my own large-class teaching (eye rolling, dozing, chatting), the students in the front few rows were clearly electrified--both by the subject matter and by her pedagogical style. The way she moved around the classroom, engaged and interacted with students articulated a very different form of pedagogy than was practiced by most university teachers. The assignment--an elective--was designed around the idea of student as independent, self-directed learner. It required them to take initiative and encouraged them to think critically about local politics and political economic issues. Finally, it invited them to imagine themselves as subjects in a very distinct ways, to enact a project of engaged citizenship.

Debating these changes through CSL: the seminars

On 5 March 2005, a group of thirteen teachers and activists gathered to discuss a series of readings on CSL I had sent in advance. I selected four texts that communicated the history and background of CSL in the US, and combined the critical angle and commitment to community-based learning that I felt best encapsulated our shared goals.

As I walked into the room, I was gratified to see that most of the Gender Studies Center faculty members had come: Lena, the former manager, Irina, a professor of history, Natalia, the acting director of the department of Sociology and Political Science, Anna and Dmitry (Borodin), two doctoral students who have taught in the center since its inception, and several others. In addition, there were three former staff members of the crisis center Gortensia: Oktiabrina, the director, Natalia, the former office manager and Sveta, one of the psychologists. As I busied myself laying out the pastries, cookies and fruit I had bought for the occasion, we worked out a division of labor. Anna agreed to take notes during the meeting and to tape and transcribe our discussion; we decided to place these materials together with the translated articles in a file in the Center's library. After I had briefly outlined my own

conception of the project and the profile of CSL at UMass, we began to talk about the texts.

Drawing on the chapter by Benson et al, we spent some time discussing the history of CSL in the United States, Valentina and some of her junior colleagues emphasized that the origins of CSL lay in the progressive social movements of the sixties. All of them have extensive experience of either studying or teaching in American institutions of higher education. As Valentina explained, "The second wave women's movement was connected with the student democracy movement, the anti-militaristic movement and the anti-racist movements. Courses on race [in the U.S.] were first demanded by students -- who wanted their education to reflect the real problems of society". As they discussed this topic, I saw them drawing a parallel to their own situation. Center faculty consider the Gender Studies Center it to be a progressive, transgressive institution that challenges dominant paradigms. In their commentaries, they positioned themselves as an enlightened and Europe-oriented avant-garde against both Soviet parochialism and the new nationalist xenophobia that is beginning to express itself.

I was struck by the richness of the comparative discussion. These Russian university teachers have a lot in common with their U.S.-based counterparts. On the frontline of privatizing educational reforms, they daily encounter the contradictions of a shrinking public sector. Some of the topics they raised echoed discussions I have with North American colleagues: low pay, an eroding infrastructure and the challenges of dealing with students who are encouraged to view themselves as consumers and approach their education with a sense of entitlement. However, in Russia, these contradictions are exponentially more acute. University teachers work for below-poverty level salaries and encounter students who are often far wealthier than they themselves. This leads to some morally challenging situations: as gatekeepers to university entrance, their services are increasingly sought by those wealthy enough to afford to engage them. In addition to tutoring, they are expected to advocate for their clients at admission. But beyond noting these similarities, what was most exciting to me was that this discussion marked a shift in stance. We spoke as peers and colleagues, facing similar challenges, as we encountered privatizing reforms within education. It was a revelation to some of the teachers to learn about the fraught history of U.S. institutions of higher education and the sense of crisis described by some authors (Benson and Harkavy 1996). Russian people no longer idealize "the West"; fifteen years of transition have left a majority feeling disenchanted. Still, engaging critical materials that described the contradictions of U.S. social life from within was powerful. As Irina, a history professor put it, "one absolutely clear tendency unites us--the crisis of the university. The university isn't fulfilling

its important function--its connection with the community (*obshchestvennost'*)."

We spoke from our different vantage points of the challenges of making connection with NGOs. Once again, the comparison was instructive. I explained that while at UMass it was easy to find non-profits to work with--an on-campus office dedicates itself to this task of liaison—it was extremely difficult to make these partnerships meaningful. In Tver', it was hard to gain access to NGOs. First, there are relatively few of them. Second, they are beleaguered, as I've described; many have been forced to shut down. Third, there is no tradition of voluntarism or working with universities. As Valentina put it, "the problem is for us that there is no social order (*sotsial'nyi zakaz*). Existing agencies don't approach us with requests for student volunteers". This was confirmed later when I met with a group of social work students. Many of them said they would gladly undertake their practicum in non-profits, but there were no such placements.

We spent some time discussing the new philanthropic and voluntarism promoting organizations that had been recently set up in the city—the *Fond Dobroe Nachal* (Good Start Foundation) and *Vazhnoe Delo* (Important Business). The participants expressed a good deal of confusion about their status, role and purpose. Consistent with Valentina's formulation of *neglasnost'*, nobody knew much about them. They heard that federal and regional funds had been made available; they had heard rumors, yet the details of these "non-governmental" projects remained mysterious to university teachers and civic activists alike. Lena, the Center's office manager, added that she was sure they would not be interested in collaborating with the university, since they were "purely applied". Valentina explained that she had learned of the governor's youth organization during the New Year; as she and I were discussing this project on email, she learned that a "center of the voluntary movement" was being created. The participants laughed – what kind of a "movement" was this?

Out of this seminar, we began to draw up a sense of the scope of work already conducted and to map out a plan for future action. Our project took shape around two main themes and objectives. First, to investigate the restructuring of social welfare provision in Russia by examining these youth voluntary organizations ethnographically; second, to engage these organizations, using the literature and methodologies of CSL as a wedge to forge a more critical kind of community-based learning. In this next section I describe our first encounters with the two organizations we then selected to focus on: The Center for Voluntary Assistance and the Good Start Foundation. As we approached these two agencies, we returned to a strategy we had synthesized during our earlier participatory project – what she called "the exploitation" of my foreignness (Hemment 2007). As she put it then, "doors

will open for you, but never for me, they [members of the municipal administration] love foreigners".

The Center for Voluntary Assistance

The Center for Voluntary Assistance was set up immediately after the Tver' Social Forum, organized by the governor in the fall of 2004. This forum, locally celebrated as one of the first of its kind in Russia, sought to bring together the representatives of three sectors – local government, non-governmental organizations and the business community- in an attempt to work together to resolve some of the region's most acute social problems. The Center was established to execute the Forum's number one priority: the formation of a long-term social plan, "*Vazhnoe Delo*" (Important Business), which would assist the needy by engaging youth in the provision of voluntary assistance. The Center's director, and the initiator of this project was Viktor Ivanovitch Smirnov, a former city deputy, now retired and living on a military pension. I made an appointment to visit Smirnov, explaining that I had been referred to him by several local civic activists. I arrived to find that his fledgling organization was clearly in flux. He had just moved into new premises, the office was bare, staffed by one student volunteer.

Smirnov was very direct, businesslike and had the air of someone who was accustomed to getting things done. His speech was peppered with the terms of voluntary-sector promotion (civil society, third sector) and he spoke rapid fire about the activities of the new organization and his work to date.

He told me that he has long been involved in voluntarism and youth activities; he founded the Tver' Association of Young Travelers in 1992, when it was first possible to set up non-governmental (*obshchestvennyi*) organizations. It was a club with an interest in sports, tourism and ecology and it also published newspapers for young people. There was a youth theater too, until they lost their premises, but they still organized concerts in children's hospitals and teach child invalids computing skills. He told me that in previous years, he had been able to use his influence as a deputy to win resources from the city budget to support various programs, such as free summer camp for kids. However, he told me that this support has ceased since the arrival of the new mayor, who was less inclined to support such programs. More recently, they had received support from private foundations, including an Open Society grant in support of the rights of the child. A recent grant was from NOKIA, the Finnish mobile communications company, under the rubric Making Connections.

As we sat, he pulled out a pile of glossy, plastic-bound posters, full of photos that highlighted, advertised and celebrated the activities of volunteers

(complete with NOKIA logo). The posters portrayed high school-age youth engaged in clean up projects in the forest, teaching “invalid” children how to use computer software, and holding concerts in a children’s hospital. One project named *Put’ Domoï* (the Way Home) was based in an institution for young offenders: youth volunteers came and spent time with them, motivated them to think about their future and what they were going to do when they got out. When I asked him how many people were involved, he told me that up to 1000 kids take part in their activities, via 18 clubs in the *oblast’*; most of the participants are school children, although there are some university students also.

Smirnov explained that the newly formed Center’s two main goals were to simultaneously provide support to local needy populations and to “activate” (teenagers and college-aged) youth. I learned that thus far, the Center had devised two main campaigns: a project to arrange trips and excursions for the elderly, invalids and sick children and a project called “National Cuisine”, which organizes events designed to bring together diasporic populations in the city (Armenians, others). Long-term, it sought to accomplish Vazhnoe Delo’s directive: to attract and encourage youth into voluntarism, to serve as a resource center for youth groups, and to act as a “community foundation” which would create a structure to support this activity.

I was impressed by the scope and scale of what Smirnov had achieved and by the depth of his commitment. He was no newcomer to this topic and realm and clearly, he was driven and passionate about supporting youth; he talked a lot about trying to work out opportunities for them to travel abroad on various projects. I was also intrigued by the curious fusion that *Vazhnoe Delo* represented. In many ways, the *Vazhnoe Delo* project was reminiscent of the *Komsomol*, the Soviet-era communist youth organization. It focused on relatively prosperous elite youth, providing them with opportunities at the same time as it groomed them as future “leaders”. Like the *Komsomol*, it envisioned a project of moral education (*vospitanie*) via a form of “societal work” (*obshchestvennaia rabota*), here, renamed “voluntarism” (*volonterstvo*). However at the same time, Vazhnoe Delo was clearly bound up in a very contemporary neoliberal form of welfare state restructuring, where the responsibility for meeting social needs is increasingly met by members of the “community”. The projects it envisaged were unambiguously charity projects, in Keith Morton’s terms, palliatives that reinforce, rather than challenge the structural causes of social marginalization and disenfranchisement (1996).

As Valentina and I later contemplated these projects, she raised another, related issue about *Vazhnoe Delo*. The project was clearly pitched toward a specific subset of youth; she asked “but are they interested in the youth that gather in my doorway?” She

was referring to the young people -mostly of college age, though sometimes much younger - who hang out in the entrance of her apartment block all day, drinking beer, smoking, leaving litter and intimidating residents and their guests. As a resident of the city center, she was daily frustrated by the situation. She understood it to be symptomatic of the times: the kids have nowhere to go. Clubs and associations were being shut down and they could not afford to frequent the expensive bars and cafes that now proliferate in the city. As I contemplate her words now, I see another figure of “youth” emerge: the *bezprizorniki*, orphan, homeless youth, who have featured prominently in Soviet youth discourses since the 1920s. These “lost” children proved to be a stubborn problem for Soviet planners and officials and a cultural problem, too; this continues in the postsocialist period (Pilkington 1994:62).

The Good Start Foundation

The second organization we selected to work with is the charitable foundation set up by the governor during his election campaign. As I’ve stated, this organization has resources and a mandate to assist low income people in the *oblast’*, engaging volunteers in their projects. Valentina and I went to visit the director of the foundation in March 2005. This investigation took place on a different basis. The president of the Good Start foundation is the governor’s wife, however it is run by an old ally of ours, Elena Mikhailovna. Elena Mikhailovna was the former mayor’s assistant, and she had worked closely with us during the early stages of the crisis center project, advising us and assisting us as we made our way through the labyrinthine process of registering as a non-governmental organization. Although originally assigned to work with us by the mayor, she went beyond the call of duty to extend warmth and sympathy to us, and she was devastated when the crisis center shut down.

Valentina and I made an appointment to visit with her, explaining the contours of our new project on youth voluntarism. The foundation is situated in a handsome, recently renovated building. Elena Mikhailovna met us graciously and showed us into her cozy, well-furnished and outfitted office; I noticed a picture of the governor and his family, in casual postures with their children hung on the wall. Elena Mikhailovna asked about our new project and seemed a little disappointed to learn that it was just beginning. Still, she told us that she would be happy to collaborate with us.

As we perched on the cream-colored couch drinking tea, Elena Mikhailovna told us about the projects that they had already undertaken. She explained that the foundation runs three main campaigns; the first is “Kind Hands”, a campaign to gather resources for local orphanages. Local people are urged to donate fabric and materials, and to donate their time by mak-

ing children's clothes. The second is "Charity Crew", a project that sends volunteer-doctors to rural regions and to provide free health consultations for them, and also sends volunteers to do odd jobs for elderly folks who have no support. The third project is "Healthy Future", a scheme to bring doctors to local orphanages. After talking to us about each of them, she passed us a series of booklets and brochures that depicted these activities. One glossy booklet consisted of a series of portraits of the governor's wife meeting with volunteers and clients during some of their campaigns, while another brochure advertised the work of the foundation. As I flicked through the pages, I realized with surprise that they were published in both Russian and English.

Our discussion wove back and forth, between recollections of the crisis center project, our ally the former mayor who died in 2003, to expressions of concern about the contemporary mayor and his hostility to the non-profit sector. And as it did so, Valentina and I fell back into a rhythm and division of labor we had established during our former collaborative projects. She prompted me to ask certain questions, while she provided follow up. I watched the way she negotiated the invitation to involve her students: again, the "strategy of involvement" she's articulated before and which I have written about (Hemment 2007). It emerged that Elena Mikhailovna was actively seeking youth volunteers and urged Valentina to get her students involved. Valentina said that she was interested in the possibilities for collaboration; in fact she had a group of sociology students who could begin immediately, but she wanted to understand the kind of work they could do. She told Elena Mikhailovna that they are sociologists, she wants them to base their projects in the real contemporary problems of the city, but would they be welcome here also to collect data about the Good Start Foundation? As I listened, I understood that Valentina was trying to communicate that she did not want her students to end up "sewing baby clothes" (here, an equivalent to "stuffing envelopes"). Rather, she wanted them to have the scope to collect data and engage in forms of critical learning.

Conclusions

In tracing the contours of this project, I make the case for CSL as a means of synthesizing alternative kinds of community-based research interventions suitable to what we might conceptualize as a "post-development" phase of the "post-post socialist" (Sampson 2002) period. By post-development, I mean to signal both the partial withdrawal of donor agencies from postsocialist states, and the project of critique and imagining that scholars of development have urged us to undertake (Escobar 2000). International democratization assistance to Russia, which peaked in the mid-

nineties, has been dramatically scaled back as donor priorities have shifted. At this uncertain juncture, it is crucial that scholars do not abandon the project of critique or the terrain of the Russian nongovernmental sphere. We need to continue both interrogating the processes of civil society formation, and lending our energies to civic activists who are on the frontline.

CSL has enabled a new phase of collaboration with Russian colleagues. In addition, it offers something to them that may be of strategic value - a vocabulary and set of publication venues that I hope will lend legitimacy to existing community-based endeavors. This is all the more crucial as foundations withdraw; as I have stated, since we began this project, the Ford Foundation cut back its higher education programs funding, leaving the Center for Gender Studies without financial support.

Our discussion of CSL has facilitated a critical comparative investigation of the restructuring of social welfare provision, citizenship and neoliberal governance that will be of interest beyond the specific locality where it is enacted. The terrain it has uncovered provides further evidence of the interplay of "old" and "new" that characterizes the postsocialist period (Burawoy and Verdery 1999; Gal 1994; Grant 1999; Ries 2002). Here, the symbols and mobilizing strategies of the new organizations recall Soviet era cultural formations, at the same time as they are animated by the individualizing logic of neoliberalism. Youth, once again, are at the forefront of these projects, a fact that should give us pause as we design our own service learning initiatives. At a time of transition, where the significance of youth is (once again) being reconstituted, this project accesses young peoples' understandings of voluntarism, politics and social responsibility and how they envision their own lives, roles, and civic responsibility.

Our next steps are to continue with this simultaneous project of scrutiny and involvement, engaging Tver' State University students in these youth-oriented projects. Beyond the obvious resonance with Kremlin-sponsored youth organizations, we want to learn more about the new organizations that have been set up in Tver'. Our goal is to try to forge new, informed types of partnership with these two organizations and others like them, using CSL literature and methodologies as a wedge to forge a more critical form of community-based activity. What potential for partnership is there and how might we be able to engage these organizations? Can we engage university students in critical projects where the parameters might shift and insights from CSL literature can be brought in? We are proceeding with a pilot project, using Valentina's freshman class as an incubator. Our pilot project so far has revealed that youth are well aware of the tensions in the project. In these times of *neglasnost*, a project such as this offers students - and the ethnographer - a venue and context to discuss these insights, and

through so doing, offers an opportunity to see more clearly.

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