VIEWS FROM WITHIN: ETHNOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVE ON POST-COMMUNIST CULTURE AND SOCIETY

A NOTE FROM THE GUEST EDITOR

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The essays gathered here represent a selection of the papers presented at the ninth annual Soyuz conference, held at Columbia University in New York on February 11-12, 2000. The theme of the conference this year was "Views from Within: Ethnographic Perspective on Post-Communist Culture and Society," and it featured twenty-four presentations by anthropologists representing research from the Balkans, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Russia. The conference was organized by SOYUZ (the Research Network for Post-Soviet Communist Cultural Studies) and sponsored by Columbia's Department of Anthropology, the Harriman Institute, Columbia's Graduate Student Advisory Council and the Columbia Graduate Alumni Association.

While the conference was organized with an emphasis on ethnographic perspectives on "culture and society," it is interesting to note the recurring centrality of politics and the undiminished role of states in the various post-communist contexts addressed here. For the most part, states appear in these papers in the guise of a glaring absence, with research concentrating on the ways in which individuals and social networks or agencies are assuming responsibilities previously monopolized by states. Brian Shott, for example, examines the role of money traders in the black market currency exchanges of Macedonia. The newly minted currency in Macedonia preceded the appearance of reliable official exchange sites and thus unofficial currency markets, ironically dominated by ethnic-Albanians, cropped up in the streets of Skopje. Similarly, Armine Ishkanian and Sarah Phillips examine the role of non-governmental organizations in Armenia and Ukraine respectively. Both papers emphasize trends in which NGOs, typically staffed and directed by women, are assuming responsibilities in areas where contemporary states have been negligent. These two papers not only offer important perspectives on the future of social services in these countries. They also suggest that the burgeoning arena of NGOs in these countries serves as a space in which existing gender norms and western feminism are brought together in ways that promise to challenge not just the authority of the state, but also the conventional male monopoly on political power.

The inadequacy and absence of post-communist states was also evident in studies of variously constructed communities that operate in spite of, or in conflict with officially cultivated national cultures. In Croatia for example, Daphne Winland argues that while the Tudjman regime's "democratic deficit" includes a raft of ethnonationalist legislation and propaganda, the politics of everyday life are dominated by locally specific cultural logics, memories and practices. Thus, regional specificities are more immediately meaningful markers of identity and allegiance and state-sanctioned fictions of an ethnically "pure" Croatian nation are undermined.

Moving far afield from Croatian identity politics, Amy Ninetto's paper addresses the responses of Russian scientists to drastically decreased funding and emphasizes the persistent salience among Russian scientists of the idea of an "international scientific community." Instead of a unidirectional "brain drain," Ninetto finds Russian scientists reaching beyond national borders in a practice of "shuttle migration." Short trips abroad enable Russian scientists to tap into foreign markets for wages, scientific supplies and publications, and to bring all of these back to Russia to sustain their research communities at home. Again, the state figures in as an absence and the research concerns the means by which people make do despite that absence.

Getting by with resourcefulness and improvisation figure centrally in nearly all of the papers included here. Three papers in particular address specific rhetorical devices used for representing the turmoil that characterizes post-communist worlds. David Ransel's study of three generations of Russian and Tatar women hinges on oral testimonies that reveal a range of emotional reactions to the historical conditions and constraints that have shaped the women's' lives. One interesting finding is Ransel's suggestion that different generations expressed different degrees of coherence and acceptance in their appraisals of their lives, and the suggestion that those appraisals will change as post-Soviet developments continue to present new contrasts with the past. Sergei Oushakine's paper similarly focuses on the question of coherence as he examines what he describes as the lack of a distinct linguistic style and linguistic sensitivity among the first post-Soviet generation. Oushakine points to a range of examples that foreground the symbolic failures surrounding efforts to articulate an emergent coherence in the post-Soviet era. At both the individual and national level he finds a paradox in which neither a nostalgic retreat to the old nor optimistic embrace of the new adequately represent the present state of "permanent transition." In her study of preservation specialists at a Czech national heritage site, Veronica Aplenc observes that this professional community has resisted, to a certain degree, the compulsion to revise

communist-era histories. While Oushakne points to failures surrounding articulations of the new, Aplenc finds a persistence of socialist rhetorical style, in which politics are avoided and historic sites are primarily interpreted as apolitical art objects.

The most visible aspects of post-communist society were addressed in papers on crime, homelessness and "New Russians." Tova Hojdestand's work among the alcoholic residents of the Moscow train station in St. Petersburg concerns the social norms through which this utterly disenfranchised population constitute a community for themselves. Like an allegory for the ills of contemporary Russia, gathering empty bottles to claim the deposit is the main source of income for this community. At the other end of Russia's economic hierarchy are the so-called "new Russians," discussed in Jennifer Patico's paper. To many Russians, the new rich are at least as unsavory as the homeless people living in train stations. Patico's paper examines the semiotic and behavioral codes through which this new class is both recognized and reviled, thus providing insights to an emergent mythology in Russia. Rachael Stryker's work, which offers valuable lessons both practical and theoretical, focuses on orphaned or abandoned Russian children who are adopted by US couples, and the problems of adaptation these families face, when the children's behaviors conflict with the new parents' expectations. While many aspects of adoptive families' difficulties have been psychologized by social service and mental health professionals, Stryker offers an alternative *socio-cultural* explanation which emerges from her ethnographic fieldwork in Russia and the US. Finally, Maya Nadkarni's account of the "Whisky Robber," a Hungarian bank robber who became a media sensation, examines the conflicted perceptions of crime, wealth and morality in post-communist Hungary. Widely known throughout Hungary because of his ravenous appetite for media coverage, the "Whisky Robber" serves a cipher through which popular attitudes and mythologies about emergent capitalism are projected and tested.

As a group, these papers depict the vast scale of the changes taking place throughout Eastern Europe. They offer detailed renderings of relatively discrete communities (grouped variously by age, profession, gender, ethnicity) engaging in specific modes of accommodation and transformation. The rubric of "transition" includes myriad processes such as the reappraisal of histories and traditions, renewed efforts to maintain existing and to build new communities, and the emergence of popular narratives and mythologies to naturalize the new. Further research of the kind presented here will be crucial in tracking these ongoing changes in the post-communist world.