

## "NEW RUSSIAN" SIGHTINGS AND THE QUESTION OF SOCIAL DIFFERENCE IN ST. PETERSBURG

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"They have money, so they think they can do anything they want." So commented a St. Petersburg art teacher in the fall of 1998. That day, I was talking with a group of his colleagues about what they thought of the New Russians: the *nouveaux riches* of the 1990s, dubbed "New Russians" in the Russian media and in the popular imagination. New Russians were characterized by money and stupidity, one teacher had said, while yet another colleague said that they were involved in "speculation," which had been illegal under socialism and has since become legal. "They have their own fashions. We laugh at them all – they aren't worth envying," one of them went on, as listening teachers murmured their agreement. New Russians aren't simply wealthy, someone clarified, for wealthy, smart businessmen do exist. Rather, the New Russians are people who are "limited:" security guards (*oxrana*), for instance, and people who wear not black jackets, but green or raspberry-colored ones.

These comments are representative of the characterizations of New Russians I heard over the course of my year (1998-99) of fieldwork on consumer practices and ideologies in St. Petersburg, and are by now well familiar to any scholar of contemporary Russia. Imputed New Russian traits typically include lack of intelligence, "culture," and education; immodest and conspicuous taste, often represented by the brightly-colored (especially "raspberry" or maroon) jackets they are said to favor; and lack of proper respect for others. Such stereotypes are mirrored and co-produced by the media (e.g. *Peterburg-Ekspress* 1998, 1999) and are the subject of myriad popular *anekdoty* or jokes (Krylova 1999).

Yet perhaps the most telling moment of the conversation that day came a bit later, when an elderly teacher entered the room and was invited to sit down with us for tea. Someone told her that I had been asking about the New Russians. How would she define them? The answer: "I would say, not ours" (i.e., "our people" – *Ja by skazala, ne nashi*). The remaining teachers commented in agreement, seeming to find this last definition the

most concise and accurate one offered so far.

That final word suggests just how significant are the criticisms less privileged Russians lodge against their "New" compatriots. For in defining these others, the teachers were also articulating some of the social standards to which they felt they adhered, highlighting values that were salient in their daily lives. That is, by distancing themselves from the behavior and choices they described as characteristically "New Russian," they were also, predictably, constructing an idea of their own social value and cultural legitimacy. Nancy Ries (1997) identified a similar phenomenon in Moscow in the early 1990s, observing that

[a]lthough new ways to be Russian have developed in the post-Soviet environment, these are still widely disparaged by those who identify themselves with a mystical concept of Russianness. In part, of course, this is because such discursive strategies allow people to defend, justify, and extol the value of their own identities and their lower socio-economic status in the face of the self-valorizing stories of the Moscow *nouveaux riches*. (27)

This disparaging attitude towards the wealthy, expressed in anecdotes, epithets, and stereotypes, is still an important practice of selfhood and social critique in St. Petersburg today. But rather than looking further for the essence of or even an aggregate definition of the "New Russian" as my informants presented it, I focus instead on the fact that precisely *who* should be called a New Russian was not always clear in their everyday application of the term. Was an *intelligentnyi*, or relatively intellectual, cultured person, who had become a successful businessman truly a New Russian? Was it possible to gain much material wealth without engaging in the morally suspect, often criminal activity usually assumed of New Russians? Here I discuss how these questions were addressed by one family in St. Petersburg, and suggest that their disagreements and uncertainty about what or who constituted a New Russian might best be understood in terms of their ambivalence about

their positions in contemporary society, and in relation to the connections they understood to exist between material prosperity, morality, and their own future possibilities.

### The N. Family

The N. family lived in a former communal apartment in the Petrograd Side area of St. Petersburg. (1) Ivan and Larisa, both in their early 40s, had lived there since their marriage about twenty years ago; but only recently (just before the financial crisis of August 1998 and after their neighbor in the apartment had died) had they finally been able to buy the last room of their four-room apartment. Their children, a fourteen year-old boy and sixteen year-old girl, attended the same English-language specialization school where both parents worked. Ivan was an English language specialist by education, who had worked in other capacities before coming to work at this school several years ago. Larisa was a chemist who had come to work at the same school after jobs in her specialization had dried up, teaching public safety and other courses and holding class teacher responsibilities. Though their salaries were low – especially after the ruble depreciation of August 1998 – they were stable and paid on time. (2) Also, the fact that their school was a very good one with high-quality English instruction gave Ivan and Larisa incentive to continue working there: for though it was technically a public school, entrance was not exactly open, and Ivan had told the administration that he had two children whom he would like to bring with him before he accepted the job. Though their daughter Vera had recently graduated and was entering university, son Misha had one year left before he would take the comprehensive exams that were the condition for continuation into the tenth grade; and since he was not an exemplary student, his parents felt that at least one of them must remain there on faculty to ensure his admittance. Though many English teachers at that school earned extra money through private tutoring (often significantly more, in fact, than their official salaries), Ivan attracted few such students. As the financial crisis dragged on, with only meager salary raises that did not keep up with inflation, the material situation of the N. family worsened.

One evening, Ivan recounted having recently seen a New Russian at the market (*rynok*) buying some expensive fish. He asked to buy all of the fish the merchant had, and then inquired whether it was possible to buy the very crate in which all the

fish were displayed there. The merchant agreed, and the man took the fish away to his car. Though Ivan seemed to present this as a striking example of the excessive luxury of the New Russian, who could buy so many fish for his own consumption (to be cooked, probably, by his wife), Larisa suggested that perhaps the man worked at a café or restaurant. No, Ivan said, he obviously wasn't that kind of person. Rather, he was someone who, say, worked at a bank; it was visible from the kind of face he had. I asked him how he could see this, concretely, and Larisa remarked that she didn't how he could either. Ivan cited his clothes: he wasn't wearing a raspberry-colored jacket, but a black raincoat. "And not one of Chinese manufacture, like the one I have," Ivan went on, but a very good one. (3) Also, he finished, the man was well shaven, and looked like he did some kind of relatively intellectual work. While Ivan had on previous occasions referred to New Russians as mainly "bandits with primitive thinking, guns in their pockets, and raspberry-colored jackets," he had also acknowledged (then, and again in this story) that not all of them were bandits or stupid -- though he had been quick to point out that he believed that a really "pure" business that completely avoided mafia connections was an impossibility. (4) Now, Ivan apparently referred to such a relatively intelligent, respectable New Russian, whom he nonetheless represented as a type of person clearly set apart from himself, by virtue of their differences in profession and consumer possibilities if nothing more.

On another occasion, Ivan called upon similar criteria of profession and wealth, but he and his wife were not altogether agreed on where the term "New Russian" could be legitimately applied. Their daughter Vera had started dating in the past year, and one of her boyfriends had come to the apartment to meet the family. His father is wealthy, a pilot, Larisa explained to me over tea one night. He has an expensive foreign car, she went on, and when his son, Vera's boyfriend, had come to visit them, he had brought a "gentleman's set:" sausage, champagne, bananas, and chocolate. But when Larisa then called the boy's father a "rich New Russian," Ivan took issue: a New Russian, he said, is a banker or a businessman. (5) He (the boyfriend's father) is a pilot, which, Ivan claimed, just happens to be a profession in which people have earned a lot of money in recent years. Larisa did not contest this argument; and though the label "New Russian" is usually construed pejoratively, I knew from previous conversations that the boyfriend had made a favorable enough

impression on her. His family's undeniable prosperity, as concretized by the expensive foreign car and the "gentleman's set," seemed to be enough of a reason for her, in this case at least, to call the boy's father a New Russian, though her husband disagreed.

In a third and final example, the family argued about an alleged New Russian even closer to their family. Daughter Vera spoke happily of how her Aunt Tanya was planning to take her along to England the next time she went. Turning to me, Ivan asked: have I told you about my cousin who is a New Russian? He reminded me of this relative, a Moscow doctor who had established a pharmaceutical company with colleagues a few years ago and was now starting a second company. Vera quickly objected to her father's choice of words: he shouldn't call Aunt Tanya a New Russian, she insisted, because that meant someone who was daft and had a lot of money, while Aunt Tanya was smart and had made money through her hard work and efforts. Besides, Vera and her mother pointed out, Tanya and her husband owned just a Zhiguli (i.e., a Russian rather than an imported car). This time it was Ivan who did not protest, but let this objection to the attribution of New Russian identity stand.

In the stories above, as in New Russian *anekdoty*, wealth, business, criminality, stupidity, and extravagance are persistently interlinked. Yet while these connections can be clear, exaggerated, humorous, and unequivocal in jokes, they may not be so inextricable in everyday life. In the N. family's conversations, acknowledgment that wealth and material success do not *necessarily* imply moral transgression and lack of culture coexists with "New Russianness" as a pejorative and persuasive, if somewhat vague, category of social difference. From one perspective, the N. family seemed more or less to agree that New Russians were wealthy, sometimes but not necessarily businessmen and bankers, sometimes but not necessarily stupid and/or immoral. Yet it is significant that they found it worthwhile to identify New Russians *justly*. For labeling people "New Russians" involved a certain degree of denigration and distancing, and was debated with particular care when specific individuals (including, but clearly not only, those known personally to the family) were implicated. In the course of these discussions, family members highlighted particular elements of the loosely agreed-upon constellation of New Russian traits and de-emphasized others. In the process, they were exploring the nature of the links between

wealth, labor, and honesty, among other aspects of social life.

I propose, then, that recognition, or rather articulation, of New Russianness constitutes a sort of ongoing social question that is never quite decided. In its most archetypal expression, the New Russian is clearly an object for ridicule and derision: the raspberry-clad, dim-witted bandit of so many anecdotes. The teachers of whom I spoke in the beginning of this paper claimed that such people were "not worth envying." Yet was Ivan's cousin a New Russian? Was she to be admired and/or envied, or did her success automatically make her morally questionable? And what of the fish buyer in the black raincoat, pegged by Ivan as a New Russian and a banker? Was their wealth in and of itself, or their involvement in business, enough to set them firmly into a different category of persons, one into which the N.'s never imagined they would fall? Ivan, in his "raincoat of Chinese manufacture," had the cultural capital of high education, knowledge of English, modesty and good manners on his side. However, the connections his family envisioned between material capital and the *lack* of such cultural capital, crystallized in their contested New Russian sightings, were rather uneasy and inconclusive. Perhaps they point to the family members' ambivalence as they assessed their own places in society, identifying reasons for their material disadvantage and looking into an uncertain future.

By the fall of 1999, Larisa's status at the school was declining. Most of her previous courses and responsibilities had been taken away from her. Though she had been told the previous spring by the administration that these activities simply were no longer going to be conducted at the school, a new employee appeared to fulfill those roles in the fall. Meanwhile, Larisa had been assigned a new set of classes with which she had little experience, as well as fewer hours, both of which reduced her salary considerably. She felt that she was being pushed out of the school, and resented how the matter had been handled. Over the summer, she had looked for a new job, but she had not found a more attractive option. Ivan took on extra work that fall, teaching several hours per week at a second school and giving lectures at the state university. He had also done some translating work over the vacation. Yet by the middle of October, Ivan still had not received any payment for most of these new jobs.

Now Larisa had a new idea for a job scheme, formulated with a friend and former colleague who

was similarly unsatisfied with his work situation. They had realized that the key was to identify an unfilled niche in the market that would draw on their specific qualifications, and they had several friends who were all teachers with various areas of expertise. What if they were to create an after-school daycare group, where children would be given decent homemade food, there could be clubs (*kruzhki*) such as drama and music, and the teachers would see that they completed their homework, with Ivan providing English tutoring, and so on? Nothing of this sort existed, Larisa said, and there was a need for it since people who worked at banks, for example, worked until about 8 o'clock at night. Of course they would need a space right away, and finding the capital to start would obviously be a problem; but they could get some children of New Russians, and she thought it might even be possible to go directly to a firm and offer the service to their employees, setting things up right on the premises. Ivan had heard the idea before, and listened with some interest; but in the end he dismissed it, saying again that he did not believe that it was possible to get into business honestly. I had heard statements similar in spirit from Larisa, more than once in the previous year of our acquaintance; she had spoken of the "spiritual rules" (*duxovnye pravila*) that were inevitably overstepped by anyone who had acquired significant wealth. But she did not echo the thought this night. Instead, she and I briefly discussed the idea that by working through another firm, one might be able to avoid direct involvement with criminal protection (falling under the firm's "*krysha*" or protective "roof" instead of acquiring one's own).

## Conclusion

In his study of the New Russian man and woman as imagined by youths in Siberia, Serguei Oushakine (1999) has pointed out that such representations do not necessarily have much or anything to do with first-hand experience; nonetheless, they are significant because they "define, frame, and finally constrain the social, political, economic and cultural expectations of the young generation and its perception of available options" (5). Similarly, I have argued that everyday references to New Russians inform – and inform us about – speakers' evaluations of the moral content of particular lifestyles and life paths, shedding light too on the type of people they understand themselves to be. Larisa and Ivan's discussion of a prospective job plan was part of this greater, ongoing conversation about what morally acceptable and personally worthwhile

paths might, after all, lie before them. ...Or might not, as when Larisa's new idea was challenged by Ivan in one more application of the business = dishonesty formula that is part of the logic of New Russianness.

In other words, constructions of social difference such as the insistent but unstable category of the New Russian are part of the framework through which people will continue to contextualize, legitimate, and sometimes question their own positions and trajectories. As such, the image of the New Russian constitutes a critique of post-Soviet society as well as undercutting that very critique. In reference to *anekdoty*, Anna Krylova (1999) has cogently described how New Russian discourse decries systemic injustices.

The post-Soviet *shutnik* [joke teller] implicitly counterpoises his/her civilized behavior, moderate spending habits, and erudition in history, geography, literature, theater, and music to the new beneficiaries of the post-Soviet economy...[and]...implicitly [offers himself] as much more deserving of the benefits of the new society (261-262).

However, as the N. family's deliberations illustrate, the indeterminacy of the New Russian category (or perhaps more accurately: its extremity in its most classic and condensed form, which limits its applicability to daily realities) leaves open the ongoing question of to what extent less privileged subjects may be, by their own reckoning, personally accountable for their circumstances – or at least capable of ameliorating them through means yet to be explored, such as Larisa's envisioned daycare program.

This is an important aspect of what we can get at ethnographically about emergent structures of material inequality and social distinction in the former Soviet Union: how individuals, families, and other groups engage in conversations -- and ultimately decisions -- about what should reasonably be expected of them, how responsible they are for their own statuses, and the moral implications of types of activity, often perceived concretely through material wealth, its expenditure, and its display.

## Acknowledgements

Research for this article was supported in part by a grant from the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), with funds provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the US Department of State, and the US Information Agency. Additional

research and write-up support was provided by a PEO Scholar Award and a James McCracken Fellowship, New York University. None of these organizations are responsible for views expressed here.

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## Notes

1. All informants' names have been changed.
2. The teachers' 1998-99 official monthly salaries averaged in the area of 1000 rubles per month. The purchasing power represented by this amount changed drastically when the exchange rate fell from about 6 rubles to the U.S. dollar in August 1998 to 24 rubles by early 1999.
3. Goods produced in China are among those many people in St. Petersburg consider shoddy. Clothing and other items from China as well as Korea and Turkey are widely felt to be of lesser quality than both domestic (Russian) and European ones, but they are generally more accessible by price.
4. This is a common association, as demonstrated by the results of a survey published in a St. Petersburg market research journal (Bezgodov and Sokolov 1999). Respondents were asked to

complete the statement: "To be successful in business in Russia, it is necessary to..." Among the most common answers were "break the law" (14.2%) and "violate moral norms" (10.9%). The only more popular answers were "money, start-up capital" (16.6%) and "connection, acquaintances, patronage/protection (*pokrovitel'stvo*)" (15%). Other responses included: 9.7% have a good mind, creative abilities; 7.6% knowledge, skills (*navyki*), experience; 6.7% change life in Russian society; 5% adjust, "*krutit's'a*"; 4.7% work; 3.5% strength, boldness, energy; 2.7% honesty, decency (*por'adochnost'*); 2.7% desire, will, determination (*tselestremennost'*); 2.3% power, patronage/protection of power; 2% cleverness; 1.8% commit a crime; 1.3% luck/success (*udacha*).

5. Though it can not be fully explored here, it is significant that the "New Russian" as a stereotype was almost always represented as a man, as many of the informant descriptions noted in this paper attest. In a recent study of the "new Russian man" and "new Russian woman" as they were constructed in essays by 178 young people in Barnaul, Siberia in 1997, Serguei Oushakine (1998) found that New Russian women were understood to be either successful businesswomen or the wives of New Russian men. In the course of my fieldwork, I seldom heard women referred to as themselves New Russians, but rather as the wives or girlfriends of New Russians (an exception is described in this article, however). This may be related to the fact that being a New Russian implies not only wealth, but also particular activities (including crime) and displays (raspberry jackets, shaved heads, heavy gold jewelry) that are associated more with men than with women and very strikingly differentiate New Russian men from other Russian men.