

# **Pepsi, Pensioners, and Peter the Great: Performing Temporality in Russia**

**Melissa L. Caldwell, Harvard University**

In a downtown Moscow metro station, there stands a fast food kiosk where hungry commuters can stop for a quick hot dog or taco. A sign hangs overhead, announcing that "A new generation chooses Pepsi" (Novoe pokolenie vybiraet Pepsi). One morning in early December 1997, after passing through this station, I arrived at my fieldsite, a university stolovaia (cafeteria) that has been converted into a soup kitchen for several hours a day, only to discover that someone from Pepsi-Co, Inc. had made a donation to the soup kitchen and that we, the volunteers, were distributing bottles of Pepsi and Diet Pepsi to the pensioners, refugees, and other low-income Muscovites whom we serve. Although some recipients recognized the Pepsi logo, most asked us to explain what was in the bottles: "Is it water?" "Is it vodka?" Others asked us if the liquid was for drinking or for eating. Still others asked us about the rest of the labeling on the bottles: information and rules to win tickets to an upcoming Spice Girls concert. Were these individuals the members of the "new generation" that Pepsi marketers envisioned?

A few weeks later, in downtown Moscow, between the Central Telegraph Office and the elegant, new Manezh Mall built for the 850th celebration of Moscow, I passed an elderly woman begging on the sidewalk. With a small icon set up in front of her, the woman was kneeling on a flattened cardboard box sporting McDonald's logos. More recently, an advertisement for Pizza Hut appeared on American television. Moving from images of St. Basil's and other historical scenes from Moscow, the commercial featured former leader Mikhail Gorbachev and his granddaughter sitting at a table in one of the Moscow Pizza Huts. After acknowledging Gorbachev, three customers compete to bestow the proper recognition on him. A young man declares that they should recognize Gorbachev for putting Russians on the edge with his reforms. An older man replies that they should recognize Gorbachev for putting them on the edge of chaos. Finally, an older woman interjects that they should recognize Gorbachev for putting them on the edge---of their pizzas. Gorbachev, meanwhile, sits and graciously accepts the attention.

Poor pensioners drinking bottles of Pepsi and contemplating their chances to see the Spice Girls, an icon on the golden arches, and the virtues of capitalism extolled by mention of a communist leader: although jarring, each of these vignettes provides an example of the multiplicity of temporalities currently in existence in Russia. Metaphors of old and new, past and present, tradition and modernity, and continuity and change circulate throughout the food practices of individuals, as well as through the food-related discourses of the general media. Mary Douglas has argued that "if food is treated as a code, the messages it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed.... Food categories therefore encode social events" (Douglas 1975:249). Thus, the ways in which Muscovite producers and consumers use food practices provide a lens for exploring temporal patterns of Russian social life.

Consumption theorists have described many ways in which individuals organize and perform their social lives through food practices. Social categories and values may be expressed through the social codes and meanings inherent in food-related activities (Douglas 1975; Lévi-Strauss 1974; Tambiah 1969), or through the performance of these activities (e.g., Bourdieu 1984; Douglas 1994[1966]; Dumont 1980; Goody 1982; Harris 1985; Ohnuki-Tierney 1993; Watson 1987). The parameters that define and limit these varied practices, codes, and meanings are understood to be predetermined by the larger cultural systems (Bourdieu 1974, 1984, 1990, 1991). In most cases, this process of predetermination occurs through the sedimentation of a social group's past experiences into the cultural system (e.g., Bourdieu 1974; Campbell 1992; Clarke and Koptev 1992; Douglas 1994[1966]; Douglas and Isherwood 1979; Lotman 1990; McCracken 1988). Precedence, history, and memory are the standards guiding social meaning (Appaduari 1988; Handler 1988; Handler and Linnekin 1984). Not all consumption theories, however, proceed from the past or the previous; Wilk (1990, 1994), for example, has described scenarios in which individuals are concerned with future social meanings through consumption performances.

The underlying thread in these analyses is the understanding that social meanings are bound up with temporal systems. The negotiations of individuals through consumption practices reveal larger cultural systems of time. In this article I will look at current food-related consumption practices in Moscow to consider how Russians discuss and experience time in their everyday lives. In particular, I will explore questions of how individuals create, organize, and experience classifications of temporality.

## Categories of Temporality

One of the most evident aspects of temporality in Moscow emerges in local categorizations of the progression of time, particularly in relationship to issues of historicity. Herzfeld (1991), Handler (1988), Handler and Linnekin (1984), and Lass (1994) have all described cultural systems in which events understood as being of "the past" reappear in moments in "the present." In such cases as the retelling or physical commemoration of the past in the present, different temporal moments may be understood as coexisting. This coexistence occurs frequently throughout Moscow. Striking examples come from every kassa (cash register) between November 1997 and March 1998. On January 1, 1998, the ruble was devalued so that 10,000 rubles became 10 rubles. During the last few weeks of November and December 1997, most kassas sported signs announcing that registers were calculating prices in the "old" currency system. In many shops, prices were listed at both the old and the new rates. With the devaluation on January 1, all prices were supposed to be computed in the new system. The change was not without complications, however. In the days immediately preceding and following the new year, there were numerous warnings and rumors about Moscow consumers who were charged the wrong (i.e., exorbitant) prices for their New Year's meals because banks and credit card companies could not accommodate the change. In one McDonald's restaurant on New Year's Day, crew members calculated amounts with pen and paper and made change by hand because the cash registers could not handle the new system. In addition, as more new notes gradually enter circulation, individuals are increasingly negotiating the old and new currencies, albeit with some confusion. On one occasion a store clerk and I helped each other figure out the equivalency between old notes and new coins. Moreover, during the last three months, signs in kassas have changed from announcements that prices were computed in the "old" system, to announcements that prices were computed in the "new" system, to announcements that prices were computed in both the "old" and the "new" system. Thus, simply to buy consumer goods such as food, Muscovites continually move back and forth between temporal categories such as the past and the present, the previous and the current.

This movement between the past and the present also becomes evident in the names and images associated with consumer products. A new brand of vodka features the likenesses of old rulers such as Catherine the Great, while a billboard for Peter the First cigarettes sports a picture of the cigarette carton, complete with a double-headed eagle, and the large caption "NEW"

(Novye). In a marketing flyer distributed by the company Sovprom, the line of vodka known as "Staraia" is described in this way: "By creating the label 'Staraia,' the company 'Sovprom' has made a step toward the practical rebirth of the best qualities of old Russia. All those things that seem to be irrevocably left in the past, all those things that can render more healthy and improve contemporary life--return with the label 'Staraia'" (author's translation of Sovprom marketing brochure, 1997). The image suggested by this description is that by drinking this vodka, consumers can once again enjoy all the benefits of the past. The marketing brochure for Cristall distillery takes a slightly different, but related, angle: by introducing their products with a brief 1,000 year history of the production of alcoholic drinks in Russia, Cristall marketers suggest that the past provides legitimacy and authenticity in the present (Cristall marketing brochure, 1997). Meanwhile, a marketing brochure from the Dovgan' food company focuses on training and attracting children and young adults as the consumers and directors of the future (Dovgan' marketing brochure, 1997).

In these examples, cultural images of the past, present, and future exist simultaneously. Consumers can make choices according to the past, partake of the past, or even be the future. Temporal categories are no longer distinct; instead they are ever-present as consumers invoke them in contemporary activities and then move between them. A Russian couple in their late twenties confirmed this idea when they explained that Russian-style beverages are gaining in popularity. The couple argued that in previous times, when Russian beverages were prevalent and Pepsi-Cola and Coca-Cola were new, people started drinking Coke and Pepsi because these beverages were "new" and stopped drinking Russian beverages because they were "old." Gradually the traditional beverages disappeared from the market. Now they are returning and, according to these two individuals, Russians favor them over American colas because the "old" tastes are now "new," and what had been the "new" tastes are now "old."

Finally, at a recent Maslenitsa festival at Victory Park in Moscow, a Russian vendor urged a customer to try the authentic Russian blinis for sale at her table. While the customer watched, the woman poured batter into her electric griddle and cooked the blinis until they were perfectly round and golden brown. At the same festival, a woman dressed in a traditional costume--complete with a string of cookies around her neck--posed for a photograph by asking a young Russian girl--dressed in t-shirt and jeans and holding a cup of tea in a disposable cup--to stand with her. The woman claimed that this would provide a degree of Russian authenticity. At

first, the actions of these two women seem at odds with the images of authentic tradition that they are trying to convey. How can real blinis come from electric griddles? What is the significance of a modern Russian girl for the image of a traditional Russian woman? Yet it is the very coexistence of these temporal categories that provides circumstances in which images of the past can emerge and coexist with images of the present. Events, experiences, and meanings that are culturally assigned to temporally distinct categories become the material for performances of the present.

### **The Management of Time**

Different conceptions of temporality also emerge when individuals talk about and demonstrate how they organize time to plan their eating practices. A geologist at the Russian Academy of Sciences told me that one of the most important food changes that has occurred during the last 10 years is the appearance of instant foods. Before instant foods, much of the planning for fieldwork in remote areas revolved not around the research project but around the acquisition, transportation, and storage of food for several months; much of the fieldwork time was then devoted to long hours of preparing the foods. Instant, portable, and available foods have transformed the ways in which researchers conduct and experience fieldwork. A young wife told me that because she works and has little time to cook, she relies on many instant foods. She and her husband even invested in a microwave so that she could heat up kasha more quickly.

This theme of speed also appears in larger images. Two of the most common advertisements on television are for instant soups: in the Knorr cup-of-soup commercials, busy office workers, laborers, mothers, and students take a quick snack break to the jingle of "An instant and it's ready" (*Raz i gotova*); while the Maggi soup mom can, in a matter of moments, prepare a nutritious and hearty meal for her children, an elegant and romantic dinner for her husband, or an impressive culinary masterpiece for unexpected dinner guests (in this commercial, her husband's coworker or boss). For these individuals, plans do not have to be made in advance; meals can be much more immediate. Thus, time is seen as a commodity, to be used either sparingly or rapidly; and food is the means by which time is marked.

But not all Muscovites mark time so rapidly or instantaneously through food--as examples taken from the soup kitchen illustrate. In the soup kitchen system, the recipients of the meals--primarily Muscovite pensioners--are registered for one of three soup kitchens that are

funded, organized, and directed by the Moscow Protestant Chaplaincy, an international, Protestant religious community. These recipients, known as "guests" within the system, are eligible to eat at their respective soup kitchens five times a week, Monday through Friday, except for when the soup kitchens are closed for holidays. This organizational structure provides almost daily opportunities for guests to eat; in fact, for many guests, a meal at the soup kitchen is the only meal of the day. At the particular soup kitchen with which I have been working, guests work with this daily schedule and carefully contemplate and strategize individual, personal temporal systems by which they eat their meals. Although the meals are called "dinners," they are available only between 9:30 am and 10:50 am, and between 11:30 am and 12 noon. Thus many guests eat their main meal at times that may be more culturally appropriate for breakfast. Guests also have the option of taking their meals home with them. By removing meals from the soup kitchen and eating them at a different time, or even by stretching the food into several meals, these guests actively construct temporal meal schedules that may be different from those followed by their fellow guests and those proposed by the directors of the soup kitchen.

In addition, the temporal order for serving the guests varies according to whether they are eating "now" or "later." Guests who eat in the soup kitchen are usually served, as volunteers see them, before those guests who take their food away. Frequently guests sit with friends and combine their meal tickets, which they present in exchange for a meal, so that an entire table is served at once, thereby creating a social group whose members share a temporality distinct from that of others. Meanwhile, guests who take their food away line up at a table with their containers and are helped on an as-available basis by the volunteers. Whereas guests who eat at the tables are generally less concerned with strict sequential order, those guests who stand in line generally guard the order. On one occasion, a new guest who did not know the system accidentally broke into the head of the line. Whereas the volunteer who helped him was excused, he was scolded severely by the people behind him in line. Other guests, however, rework the temporal system in different ways. Some individuals take meals at the table, thus ensuring that they will be served first, and then transfer the food to their own containers to take home for later, thereby speeding up the first part of the process and delaying the second part. Others delay the entire process by standing in line with their containers and then carrying their containers to the tables and taking an additional meal there.

Guests must also plan both for the present and for the future when they come to the soup kitchen. On a daily basis they must bring both a card that entitles them to a meal, and a spoon with which they eat their meal. Although most guests remember these items, some guests have difficulty; for them, the process of planning for the present from one day to the next becomes problematic. Once guests have presented their meal cards, they must tell the person distributing meal tickets the number of days for which they want tickets. They are entitled to receive tickets for the current day and for the next day, but not for any days more distant in the future and not for days already past. Guests who take their food away can minimize the time they spend collecting food by taking away meals for two days at a time. Although guests who eat in can also minimize this temporal investment, they must be more concerned with planning when they will be hungry. If they eat tomorrow's meal today, what will they eat tomorrow? Even guests who eat only one day at a time demonstrate their concern with the future. A number of guests ask on an almost daily basis "Will [the cafeteria] be working tomorrow" (*Zavtra rabotaet?*).

Sometimes, however, guests have some food resources of their own and collect extra tickets that they hoard for a future time when the soup kitchen is serving an especially good meal or is giving out an extra food item, such as the oranges that are distributed every Friday (see Verdery 1996 for discussion of hoarding practices and temporality in Romania). The soup kitchen director tries to prevent this hoarding for a distant future time by changing the colors of the tickets every day. This introduces an element of chance into the temporal schema of the soup kitchen: although guests collect tickets for the future, they are never certain when they will be able to use the tickets they have saved. Their future, then, is unknown and beyond their direct control.

Despite the careful efforts of guests to plan for the present and the future, these plans are occasionally thwarted by realities. On one occasion, guests were given a special treat: a plate of sliced carrots in addition to the normal meal. Most guests who take their food away bring only enough containers for the number of meal items and so were short a container for the extra dish. Although some guests combined the carrots with another dish, others refused to mix foods and either left the carrots behind or ate the carrots in the soup kitchen, thereby changing their meal patterns. And, finally, those guests who collect meal tickets for future possibilities run the risk of being discovered by the director and having all their tickets confiscated, thus losing what they had banked for the future.

The volunteers and soup kitchen workers also affect the temporal system of the soup kitchen. The American and European volunteers speed up the movement of time by rushing briskly around the cafeteria, delivering meals, clearing tables, and sometimes generating laughs and criticism among the Russian guests and workers for their speed. By speeding, these volunteers increase the amount of time available for guests to eat. In contrast, the director of the soup kitchen, an African man who supervises the guests, the volunteers, and the cafeteria workers, frequently allows long lines to develop at the table where he dispenses meal tickets. When an American volunteer chided the man for being slow, he responded that he did not need to hurry because Russians love to wait in lines. Thus, this individual decreases the duration of available time by playing with stereotypes about Russian temporality and withholding available time from the guests. This withholding of time from the guests also emerges in the activities of the cafeteria workers. One of the Russian workers has on several occasions bustled through the cafeteria, sternly demanding that guests hurry up and finish their meals, while another worker tells the volunteers that it the time is over and herds them out the door--while guests are still eating. Yet another worker tries to close the soup kitchen a few minutes earlier than the day before.

The temporal patterns by which the guests eat and receive their food are also distinct from the temporal patterns by which the volunteers, the workers, and the students who use the cafeteria eat their meals. Between 9:30 and 10:50 am, the cafeteria is open only for the guests. Between 10:50 and 11:30, the cafeteria is open only for the students and faculty of the university in which the cafeteria is housed. Guests who arrive during this time are not allowed to enter the cafeteria and must sit on chairs in the hallways. Between 11:30 and noon, guests, students, and faculty eat together in the cafeteria--but from different menus, trays, and dishes, and usually at different tables. Precisely at noon--or earlier if the woman who tries to close early is successful--all of the food for the guests is put away and the meal tickets are locked up. In theory, guests who arrive late are not allowed to be fed. Nevertheless, on the rare occasions when guests do arrive after the noon deadline, they usually still receive meals. In most cases, the guest apologizes profusely to the soup kitchen director and blames public transport; in turn, the director gives a stern warning that the guest should plan better next time and then gives the guest the necessary tickets, admonishing that this is the last time that an exception will be made. Thus,



through this exchange about the organization of time--being late and planning for the future--the director and the guest negotiate and alter the temporal boundaries for eating.

Only after the guests have eaten and left do the volunteers eat. The volunteers are primarily American and European expatriates and African students and refugees, and although all are eligible to eat lunch--from the students' menu, not from the soup kitchen menu--at the invitation of the soup kitchen program, it is usually only the African volunteers who choose to eat lunch. Their meals, then, are temporally distinct from the meals of both the guests and the other volunteers. This temporal feature of the meals is even more significant because many of the African volunteers have insufficient resources in Moscow and depend on the meals at the soup kitchen. Thus, they too must plan when they will be hungry. Although several African volunteers serve every day, others only serve when they are in need or when there might be special food items (fruit or candy) left over. The soup kitchen director further influences these temporal patterns of hunger by planning daily schedules for the volunteers and determining which individuals can come--and eat--on which days. There is some flexibility in the system and occasionally hungry individuals who do not help serve are allowed to eat. On several occasions, however, these individuals arrived before the noon break and were required by the soup kitchen director to wait in the hallway until the guests' lunch period was completed and the volunteers' lunch period had begun.

Finally, the temporal systems of the larger administrative levels move at different tempos as well. The soup kitchen coordinators and cafeteria administrators set menus, determine amounts, and budget finances according to a two-week period, so that the meal schedules of the guests are determined in advance. In practice, however, these schedules change on a daily basis according to product availability and the management of financial resources. Similarly, the fundraising committee members who procure the monetary and other donations to run the soup kitchen programs oversee the system on an even more expansive time frame. Because these individuals are concerned with receiving enough money to support the soup kitchens several months into the future, their activities in the present are directed at managing hunger in the distant future. In addition, these volunteers influence the passage of calendrical time by determining which holidays will be marked with food. At one meeting, committee members decided which dates during the spring and early summer would be marked as special food days in the soup kitchen. Although the decisions of these individuals usually coincide with larger

Russian conceptions about which days are holidays--such as Easter or May Day--the committee members have on occasion created a holiday calendar that differs from the locally constituted calendar. In 1998, the holiday for Men's Day was not marked with food--much to the surprise of many guests who asked about food gifts for the male guests. Women's Day, however, was marked with the distribution of candy bars for both the women and the men of the soup kitchen--thus prompting surprise from many of the male guests. In addition, the soup kitchen was closed for one day to celebrate Women's Day. On Men's Day, the soup kitchen did not close for the holiday. When guests asked why the soup kitchen was open for Men's Day, the soup kitchen coordinator responded that it was simply an ordinary day.

## **Conclusion**

Even the recipients of these food services are moving at different speeds and according to different schedules, so that different tempos and different conceptions about the relationships among the past, the present, and the future are simultaneous within the same community. In the soup kitchen, as in the other situations that I have outlined, food practices are both the markers of time and the repositories of time. In their everyday food-related activities individuals spend time, organize time, and collect time. Yet, as these examples demonstrate, temporal practices can vary widely among individuals. If these practices are understood as different forms of cultural capital, temporalities can be seen as indicative of different social systems. Nevertheless, in contrast to the paradigms outlined by theorists who have described social systems (e.g., Bourdieu 1984; Clarke and Koptev 1992; McCracken 1988), these differences can not be decisively correlated with social differences among Muscovites. Despite negotiations among individuals from different temporal systems over such instances as the definition of days for celebration or the definition of appropriate processes of eating or cooking, there are difficulties with assigning these differences to completely separate social realms. A number of informants have explained that differences among individuals are simply the cultural fodder for the emergence of a singular and indisputable Russianness: "We act as we have always done."

Food practices provide a window for exploring how Muscovites understand and construct a larger cultural system that accommodates the performance of difference or variation. I would suggest that this supports a rethinking of Douglas's thesis that it is the categories themselves that are significant for social relations. Instead, social relations must be understood through critical

examinations of both the processes that guide, regulate, and legitimize these categories and the ways that individuals negotiate, enforce, and perpetuate these processes. The boundaries for categories are far more fluid than Douglas, Bourdieu, and others envisioned. Moreover, critical examinations of the processes underlying this food-time-identity paradigm present means to evaluate and understand the ways in which Muscovites experience and negotiate the larger sociopolitical changes that characterize current realities in Russia--such as the juxtaposition of American fast food culture with poor, elderly Russians. In particular, a perspective of Russian temporality as multiple and simultaneous permits further understandings and analyses that can accommodate the very diffuse and seemingly unrelated activities of Russians today.

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