

The Subalterns Speak Out

Urban Plebeian Society in

Late Imperial Russia

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Urban slum areas of today, just as a hundred years ago, house the kind of people who largely evade regular documentation of their lives, and very rarely produce written accounts of their feelings, desires, and concerns. This should present a major difficulty for historians who write about the slum inhabitants of the past, and who, unlike contemporary sociologists or anthropologists, cannot produce their own data by conducting surveys and interviews. Historians have to rely on existing sources, which are authored mostly by the educated middle classes whose values and rationality these sources reflected (as well as biases and misconceptions). This fundamental deficiency of ‘authentic’ or at least first-hand evidence should pose a major problem for attempts to write histories of the lower classes, which makes it all the more surprising that such histories are not only numerous but also often written without any concern for the epistemological and methodological impasse presented by the task.

This unshattered optimism can be explained by the origins of social history in the research of premodern epochs. Historians have long been accustomed to studying social groups and entire societies who were illiterate or had an insignificant number of literate members. The revolutionizing effect produced by Medieval Studies in the mid-twentieth century (associated mostly with the Annales School), which laid the ground for new social history and the anthropological turn in history writing, was based in good part on new approaches to the study of the popular masses that had left only scarce written evidence of their lives. ‘The silent majority’ and ‘the people without history’ have become legitimate topics of study, no less respectable than traditionally celebrated kings, aristocrats, and

literati.¹ The study of muted groups within the medieval communal-based society was continued by historians of the lower (and equally ‘speechless’) classes during the industrial age.² Today, it has become standard to write about all kinds of disenfranchised social groups that left no elaborated self-descriptive narratives that reconstruct their distinctive cultures and even their subjectivity.

Russian history is particularly prominent for this type of scholarship – both because of the heavy impact left on the field by Marxism (with its fixation on the lower classes), and because of the low literacy rates of the pre-1917 population. Many of the generalizations about prerevolutionary workers’ culture and subjectivity have been made on the basis of a single document, which is quite outstanding in all senses – the autobiography of one Semen Kanatchikov.³ Those historians who, in their studies, have analyzed a broader number of written sources produced by workers still dealt with the ‘conscious workers’ or even ‘plebeian intelligentsia’, rather than with the entire social group.⁴ Peasant studies do not have such an authoritative and self-conscious text, which does not preclude scholars from making generalizations about the peasants’ inner self and collective identity on a grand scale.⁵ The underworld or just the ‘gray zone’ social sphere of a late imperial city can be studied on the basis of several dozen newspaper feuilletons written by lower-middle-class journalists.⁶ Criticism of these approaches from within the historical profession usually questions the sufficiency of the analyzed evidence for reaching such broad conclusions. The discussion is framed in terms of the ‘representativeness of sources’, which cannot be definitively resolved in most cases: how many examples (case studies, written testimonies) are ‘enough’ to substantiate a historian’s claim?⁷

The very question of whether those written accounts of mores and deeds of the commoners, produced by educated and usually upper-class observers,

1 Cf. WHITE, 1967; WOLF, 1982.

2 Cf. for classic studies of the proletariat and the peasantry THOMPSON, 1968; SHANIN, 1972.

3 A RADICAL WORKER IN TSARIST RUSSIA, 1986.

4 Cf. STEINBERG, 1992; ID., 2002, Chapter I.

5 Cf. for one of the most recent examples RETISH, 2008. Cf. for criticism of bold discursive generalizations and projections in peasant studies GERASIMOV, 2004.

6 For example, in Odessa: SYLVESTER, 2005.

7 This problem has been particularly acute in Microhistory, which substantiates broad generalizations by the meticulous analysis of just one or several cases. Cf. on the problem of relations between a unique case and the general social norm in microhistorical studies EGMOND/MASON, 1997, p. 2f. et al; GINZBURG, 1993.

are meaningful at all as a ‘source’ is not recognized, and perhaps will not be even understood by many historians. The basic ‘credibility check’ of a primary source implies examining whether the author was an eyewitness or had firsthand access to reliable information, or personal reasons to distort the picture, and also determining the author’s purpose and circumstances of writing down the document. The idea that those different groups of the lower social orders might be completely misrepresented and misinterpreted even by the most sympathetic and scrupulous observers from the ranks of the educated upper classes would strike a historian – and particularly a historian of Russia – as groundless. Why should testimony by an aristocrat or a cleric of the early Middle Ages be seen as a more adequate source on the history of peasants of that epoch than an early twentieth-century newspaper feuilleton by a university graduate on the history of urban slums of the same period? After all, aristocrats lived in castles separated by spatial and cultural distance from the village, while newspaper journalists could dwell just around the corner from a flophouse.

The difference between the two examples is the nature of the social organization and the character of the production of knowledge in the Middle Ages and at the turn of the twentieth century. In the former case, both the ‘silent majority’ and their educated overlords shared a vision of the society as composed of half-isolated communes characterized by a universally recognized set of rights, obligations, cultural norms, and distinctive economic functions. By contrast, Russian society during the late imperial period (as other European societies of the time) was characterized by economic dislocations, intensive social mobility, and a multiplicity of “cultures in flux.”⁸ Social identities in this society are multifaceted and transitional, greatly differing in the ways they are viewed ‘from the outside’ (by the legislator or the police) and are experienced ‘from within’. At the same time, unlike the medieval *litterati*, the educated elite of the turn of the twentieth century belonged to the common public sphere sustained by the circulation of public discourses and engaged in the production of discourses. This is a radically new situation in comparison with the premodern world, where the closest analogue to a modern public hegemonic discourse was theology, equally alienated from the serf and the lord as its subjects, and almost equally embracing both of them as its objects. The modern hegemonic discourses of nation and culture, class and politics structure the ways in which educated members of the public sphere perceive the social reality and navigate through it, but they are alien and all but irrelevant for those outside the public sphere – which means for the absolute majority of the population.

8 Cf. FRANK/STEINBERG, 1994.

According to the rigid criteria upheld by social historians–purists of the Habermas model, only 2 or 3 percent of the inhabitants of Russian provincial cities (such as Kazan in the Middle Volga region) belonged to the public sphere at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁹ This figure may be viewed as too low, and there can be alternative methods for assessing the size of the public sphere. It is clear, however, that the majority of the urban inhabitants could not belong to any public sphere in principle, for basic technical reasons. To begin with, only 51 percent of the population of Kazan was literate in 1897, and the rate of literacy was not much higher even ten years later, given the influx of mostly illiterate migrants from the countryside.¹⁰ Furthermore, the cumulative print run of major newspapers in Kazan reached its peak in 1913, with about 25,000 copies at a time of about ten titles being published – for a city that had about 158,000 inhabitants over the age of ten, or 120,000 older than age twenty.¹¹ This means that only 16 to 20 percent of adult Kazanians would have had access to newspapers in principle, which by itself did not make them active participants in the public sphere, but was a *sine qua non* for those who wished to participate in it. It can be added that in terms of formal social status, only 10 percent of the urban population in Russia did not belong to nonprivileged social groups: peasants or petty commoners (*meshchane*).

Thus, 2 to 20 percent of the urban population participated or could participate in the public sphere, having access to public discourses on a regular basis and perceiving reality in discursive categories. For them, “textuality has become a metaphor for reality in general”¹². The rest could be exposed to discourses and the world of ideologies and bureaucratic document-based procedures, but they were not properly socialized into this world, and did not fully interiorize its “geography” and “physics.” At least they did not rely on discourses and textuality in their everyday lives. This majority cannot be identified with a particular class, legal estate, occupation, or confession – or any other categories of modern social discourse. They are most accurately defined in the vaguest terms as the “lower classes” or “plebeian society.” This is exactly the structural situation that

9 When the public sphere is effectively limited to a tiny layer of urban ‘bourgeoisie’ participating in town council elections and formally registered associations of bicycle riders or lawn tennis clubs. Cf. HAUSMANN, 2002; HÄFNER, 2004.

10 Cf. TROITSKII, 1904, p. x.

11 Cf. AMIRKHANOV, 1999, p. 312–320. I have projected the demographic structure of the city population as revealed by the 1897 census on the population of Kazan in 1913. Cf. TROITSKII, 1904, p. 10f..

12 Quoted from ELEY, 2005, p. 43.

is central for Subaltern Studies: “The term ‘subaltern’ [...] is used [...] to refer to subjects, working people, the lower classes: the demographic difference”, as Ranajit Guha put it in the first volume of *Subaltern Studies*, “between the total [...] population and all those [...] described as the ‘elite’”¹³.

The original “subalterns” as conceptualized within the South Asian Subaltern Studies project were subjugated by the alien colonial rule imposed by foreigners, who had imposed their own alien cultural norms, social divisions, and political regime.¹⁴ Today, thirty years later, the condition of subalternity is understood more broadly and at the same time more specifically as a state of alienation from the modern epistemological regime imposed and sustained through hegemonic discourses. Colonial domination has been reconsidered as primarily a discursive hegemony, and as such has lost a formal connection to the actual occupation or colonization of the country by foreigners. The advent of modernity as an elite intellectual and cultural phenomenon could draw a dynamic frontier between the elite of the moderns socialized into the nation of the common public sphere and the subalterns still living in the nondiscursive world of local knowledge, now being conceptualized as “traditions”. This collision could take place in any modernizing society. Thus, back in 2008, a prominent Ottomanist, the late Donald Quataert suggested that workers and peasants of the Anatolian “heartland” of the empire could be productively conceptualized as “subalterns” despite “the centrality of the Turkish state in the minds of many scholars”¹⁵. Recently, Nora Lafi has attempted (if only somewhat cursorily) to reframe the urban history of the late Ottoman period in terms of Subaltern Studies.¹⁶ In the context of Russian studies, Alexander Etkind makes the metaphor of “internal colonization” (based on a somewhat outdated reading of postcolonial theory and subaltern studies) the central theme of the Russian history of the post-Petrine period.¹⁷

The significance of “subalternity” well exceeds the role of yet another fashionable way of ‘repackaging’ the same old empirical material. It is not a new name for the urban poor – it is a recognition of the fundamental difficulty in describing a social sphere structured by absolutely different rules and rationality, and yet closely integrated with the discourse-based modernized part of the community. In the words of Princeton historian Gyan Prakash, “we should

13 PANDEY, 2005, p. 411.

14 Cf. GUHA, 1982.

15 QUATAERT, 2008, p. 379.

16 Cf. LAFI, 2011.

17 Cf. ETKIND, 2011.

understand subalternity as an abstraction used in order to identify the intrac-tability that surfaces *inside* the dominant system—it signifies that which the dominant discourse cannot appropriate completely, an otherness that resists containment.”¹⁸

Inhabitants of urban slums in imperial Russia were not colonized representatives of a different race from exotic islands: as individuals, they participated in the social interactions and hierarchies sanctioned by imperial officialdom as the regime of modern knowledge. They were licensed as petty craftsmen and peddlers, employed as manual workers or shop assistants, drafted into the military or prosecuted as criminals under the imperial penal code and according to the standard juridical procedure. Yet they did not have a common name as a group, nor did they have a common subjectivity or a sense of universal solidarity. Or at least there was no way to frame and express that commonality discursively, even if called “subaltern”: “Subalternity cannot be generalized according to hegemonic logic.”¹⁹ Clarifying this thesis, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak further complicates the seemingly unresolvable conundrum of the subalterns as the “One-That-Must-Not-Be-Named” social stratum, and hence elusive to the point of nonintelligibility: “Subalternity is a position without identity. [...] No one can say ‘I am a subaltern’ in whatever language. And subaltern studies will not reduce itself to the historical recounting of the details of the practice of disenfranchised groups and remain a study of the subaltern. Subalternity is where social lines of mobility, being elsewhere, do not permit the formation of a recognisable basis of action.”²⁰

The very aspiration to grasp the nature of subalterns (even if by means of invalid ‘discursive’ instruments) stems from the broadly shared conviction that such a community is real, at least as a commonality of lived life experiences. We cannot easily grasp this commonality of the ‘plebeian society’ conceptually, but we do not question its reality, as we observe it personally or get a sense of it in the past from reading between the lines of our primary sources. The most indirect, primarily spatial characteristic of this community – ‘slums’ – may work as a fairly all-embracing catchword in some instances, particularly today, but the concept would be of little help in the case of Russian imperial society, for example. In every city there were neighborhoods and whole districts of shacks populated by the most marginal social types, but they were not the exclusive ghettos: people of low socioeconomic status resided all over the city, while certain cat-

18 PRAKASH, 2000, p. 287.

19 SPIVAK, 2005, p. 475.

20 IBID., p. 476.

egories of the modernized could live in the slums (for example, poor students, teachers, or ‘conscious’ factory workers). The fundamental conflict between the vitality of the ‘unspeakable’ collectivity and the impossibility of framing it through generalizations was famously captured by Spivak in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Commenting on the main idea of this text almost two decades later, Spivak explained: “The focus of subalternity in the essay remained the singular woman who attempted to send the reader a message, as if her body were a ‘literary’ text.”²¹

This phrase revealed the disciplinary limitations of the subaltern studies approach as influenced by methodologies developed primarily within text-centered literary studies (which Spivak herself duly acknowledges), and implicitly suggested a way out of the seemingly unresolvable predicament of subalternity. Indeed, the subaltern seems impenetrable for analysis only from the ‘colonial’ perspective of an observer who cannot even conceive of any other mode of thinking except those determined by hegemonic discourses, and cannot proceed beyond merely registering the existence of some ‘dark matter’ within the social universe. (Spivak herself admits the role of her social position and cultural horizon in setting the limits of her analytical perspective.²²) There is, however, reality beyond the public sphere structured by hegemonic discourses, and there are methods of analysis not constrained by the availability of ‘literary texts’ as primary sources. Moreover, the construction of one’s social persona as a representation of certain fixed collective identities scaled down to the level of the individual (e.g., ‘a heterosexual middle-aged sales assistant of Orthodox faith and monarchist political leaning’) is only one possible way of presenting the interaction of a person with the society. Why do social historians not finally make a step from the essentialist structuralism of Newton-age physics to at least the state of the mid-twentieth-century mode of scientific thinking that, for example, accepts the idea of an electron performing simultaneously as a particle and a wave, and never having fixed coordinates but only a different ‘probability of finding an electron at a given place’?

In other words, studying people who existed in the situation preceding the formation of modern social groups (nations, classes, subcultures) as some sort of ‘elementary particles’ should be different from studying individuals who have been formed by and within these groups, and therefore perceive themselves as a function of those collectives. Subalterns as members of a seemingly amor-

21 IBID., p. 478.

22 “In search of the subaltern I first turned to my own class: the Bengali middle class [...]. From French theory that is all I could do.” IBID., p. 481.

phous plebeian society cannot be meaningfully categorized in terms of their fixed ‘state’ (be it ethnicity or occupation), but they can be ‘stabilized’ as coherent social elements by the study of their life trajectories and the choices they make along the way. Subalterns rarely reveal their ‘inner self’ in writing, but taking the idea of perceiving one’s body as a ‘literary text’ seriously opens the way to finally hearing the subalterns speaking out. To understand this ‘body talk’ we need first to decipher a peculiar language of self-description and self-representation composed of individual social gestures as ‘words’, interconnected sequences of actions as ‘sentences’, and stable social practices as its grammar.

The necessary prerequisite for this task is a truly massive array of sources documenting the lives of subalterns, even if, as Gyan Prakash warns, “what historical records present us with are palimpsests of the subaltern, impressions of the subversive force exerted by the ‘minor,’ never the force itself”²³. This is only natural, as there can be no narrative sources consistently depicting subaltern society as a ‘thing’, and we are looking into actions that left traces in historical records, not into ready interpretations of intentions, much less the subjectivities of the subalterns. Actions too can be misinterpreted and misrepresented in the sources, but the chances of compensating for these flaws through the simultaneous usage of alternative sources and their analysis in a broader historical context are incomparably higher than in the case of misinterpretations of someone’s thoughts and intentions. And what kinds of actions of the slum inhabitants other than vital statistics (of births and deaths) have been best registered? Only one: instances of their breaking the law.

Thus criminality (or what was perceived as ‘criminal’ by certain social groups, in certain epochs) offers a unique window on social practices as a particular language of self-expression and self-representation unmediated by traditional institutions and not concealed by dominant public discourses, including those supported by present-day historians and custodians of ‘national purity’. This approach may raise legitimate objections: criminality, a deviant behavior by definition, seems to be at odds with the very idea of typicality of social practices (unless we assume that the lower social strata are inherently criminal and immoral).

To this, it is necessary to point out that no other types of social actions can be regarded as ‘typical’ in the usual sense when it comes to subalternity, that is, when a sampling of actors or actions is viewed as representative of the entire

23 PRAKASH, 2000, p. 294.

group. As Spivak put it, “The subaltern has no ‘examples’. The exemplary subaltern is hegemonised, even if (and not necessarily) in bad faith.”²⁴

Of no less importance is the focus suggested in this essay on the ways people responded to certain situations, rather than on the situations themselves as communicating a certain preexisting ‘meaning’. It can be a fistfight, church attendance, labor culture, or courting rituals – the question is not which of these activities were more ‘typical’ of the subalterns-members of urban plebeian society, but what choices they made when faced with such an opportunity. Did they reveal any patterns of group solidarity, a coherent moral economy, or rational choice under the circumstances?

Last but not least, the very structure of recordkeeping in the epoch and society we are talking about made criminal behavior grossly overrepresented in documents. The newspapers registered no other episodes of private lives with similar breadth and intensity. The richest archival collections were formed by the police and various courts, and all focused mostly on instances of breaching the law. Nobody cared about documenting the everyday relationships of merchants’ employees of different ethnoconfessional background until somebody committed a crime. The ensuing police investigation documented, *inter alia*, invaluable elements of regular social practices: this makes criminality a good occasion to discuss much broader and more typical aspects of people’s lives. It so happened, that both the authorities and the public were attracted mostly by conflicts; we can use this specific interest to our advantage by preserving a broader focus and remembering that conflicts (and criminality) formed only a tip of the iceberg of complex social interactions we are about to explore.

Without succumbing to the relativization of the ‘criminal’, my research focuses on the responses to a misdemeanor, rather than on its inherent ‘intention’. A closer look at social conflicts identified as criminal can shed light on the process of ascribing meaning to personal confrontations and making sense of cultural and social differences. What becomes ‘the exemplary’ (or ‘typical’) is not the people and the situations they got into, but the social practices they demonstrated in the process of engaging with each other and different situations. To reveal and review the variety of possible responses to a wide range of situations and encounters, a very substantial survey of registered incidents is required. We are speaking about thousands and thousands of cases reported by the police, by newspapers, or described in the court records, which should be analyzed qualitatively, rather than processed quantitatively as statistical aggregations.

24 SPIVAK, 2005, p. 484.

I have pursued exactly this type of research for the past twelve years, which resulted in the book titled *Ethnic Crime, Imperial City: Practices of Self-Organization and Paradoxes of Illegality in Late Imperial Russia, 1905-1917*. Its main protagonist is the elusive and ever-escaping subaltern – urban plebeian society – whose distinctive collective profile is reconstructed indirectly through the multiple imprints it had left interacting with the ‘textual’ and discourse-based modern segment of society.

Because the Russian empire was vast and extremely heterogeneous, any choice of a locality for a case study raises the question of its typicality: does it reflect the realities of Siberia (western or eastern?), the situation in the Caucasus (Northern Caucasus or Transcaucasia?), or in the Western Borderlands (in Poland or in Belarus?), and so on? The fundamental fragmentedness of the imperial social sphere, unmediated by universal (and hegemonic) public discourses, has made the problem of representativeness of examples selected for analysis particularly acute and unresolvable in principle through accumulating any statistically significant number of examples. It is impossible to meaningfully process data from hundreds of loci from all over the vast Russian empire in qualitative analysis (as quantification already implies a certain politics of grouping and agglomeration of facts and actors). As a practical solution to this conundrum, I explore the situation on the ground in four different locations, two pairs of imperial cities that both resemble each other and highlight mutual differences: Kazan (today the capital of the national Republic of Tatarstan in the Russian Federation), Nizhny Novgorod (the most ‘ethnically Russian’ city in the Middle Volga region), Odessa (the Black Sea port in Southern Ukraine), and Vilna (today, Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania). This sampling is as random as it is carefully assorted: obviously, representing only a small fraction of all of the empire’s urban centers, these cities have much in common but also are very different.

Odessa (in Ukraine) and Vilna (today Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania) were located in the pale of Jewish settlement in the Russian empire, the territory where Jews were allowed to reside without special permission (at least, in urban areas). Jews constituted over 30 percent of their inhabitants. No other ethnic group had a bigger share in Vilna, where Poles and East Slavs (Russians, Belarusians, Ukrainians) had approximately the same share. In Odessa, Jews were the largest ethnic minority, while Russians and Ukrainians (often poorly differentiated statistically) constituted a majority. Both Vilna and Odessa became Russian imperial cities in the late 18th century, as a result of Russia’s imperial expansion southward and westward, but Vilna had had a long prehistory as an important political and cultural center of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, while Odessa was founded virtually from scratch as a colonial outpost. Poles

and Jews claimed Vilna as their ancestral town, and the rising Lithuanian nationalist movement challenged them, despite a mere 2 percent of ethnic Lithuanians among the city population. In Odessa, neither ‘Great Russians’ coming from the empire’s internal provinces, nor Ukrainian migrants, nor Jews fleeing from the overpopulated shtetls in the Pale, nor Moldavians coming from neighboring Bessarabia could claim this territory as their ‘ancestral’ land; all newcomers were compelled to adjust to the new terrain, new climate, and new socioeconomic environment.²⁵

Nizhny Novgorod and Kazan were two provincial centers in the Middle Volga region, as much the imperial ‘heartland’ as could be imagined. Still, the specificity of the Russian imperial situation was characterized by the absence of any ethnic or cultural homogeneous ‘center’: almost 40 percent of Kazan province’s population were Tatars. In Nizhegorod province, about 10 percent were non-Russians, while over 6 percent of ethnic Russians belonged to various sects of Old Believers – a very significant factor of social and cultural differentiation, particularly in pre-1905 imperial Russia. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Nizhny Novgorod and Kazan represented two types of Russianness. The former was as ‘ethnically Russian’ as was possible in the Russian empire (slightly yielding only to Moscow with its 95 percent of native Russian speakers in 1897). The latter was a key imperial administrative and cultural center, and in this respect was perceived as the backbone of the Russian state and society (despite its 25 percent non-Russian and non-Christian population).²⁶

25 MINCZELES, 2000; STALIUNAS, 2006; WEEKS, 2006. Cf. for a general survey of Vilnius history (with only cursory treatment of the imperial period) BRIEDIS, 2009. Cf. for Vilnius as a palimpsest-like agglomeration of sites of memory SCHULZE WESSEL et al., 2010. A classic, if somewhat outdated already history of Odessa is HERLIHY, 1986. Cf. for the early twentieth century history of Odessa from the vantage point of radical politics WEINBERG, 1993, and for a history of the “local community” of the educated middle class HAUSMANN, 1998. Since the 1990s, scholars show much more interest not in the history of the city itself but in the ‘Odessa myth’: SYLVESTER, 2005; TANNY, 2011.

26 Probably because of the restrictions barring foreigners from visiting these cities before 1991, Kazan and Nizhny Novgorod missed the wave of writing histories of Russian imperial urban centers in the mid-1980s and early 1990s. The studies appearing now usually ignore the immediate pre-1917 decade, or focus on specific aspects of urban history (e.g., the history of landscape, of religious groups, etc.). The noticeable exception is presented by the monograph by KÜNTZEL, 2001. Still, even this book is structured as a collection of sketches dedicated to various strata

The similarities and differences between the two pairs of towns, as well as within these pairs, allow us to identify stable elements and important variations within the patterns of ethnically marked conflicts and cooperation in Russian imperial society. The comparative perspective of the study also offers a clue for in-depth interpretations of certain social phenomena, beyond various organicist explanations. For example, the preponderance of Jews in Vilna prostitution, the reputation of Tatars as prone to deadly violence in Kazan, the persistence of Russian ultranationalist (“black hundreds”) organizations – are either explained by some ‘innate’ qualities of those ethnic groups, or most often, are ignored by historians and national activists alike. The comparative perspective on four urban centers relativizes the uniqueness of many ethnically marked practices, and also offers alternative explanations by social context and specific historical circumstances.

The very category of ethnicity, just as all other markers of difference (confession, legal estate, occupation, regional identification, or gender) are used here not as self-referential entities, but as concepts that must be treated differently depending on their usage as categories of practice or categories of analysis. We cannot do without them: just as the educated elite of the modernized society of the past, we rely on analytically produced generalizations to make sense of reality, but this does not imply that we have to perceive our generalizations as normative reconstruction of the past “as it actually happened” (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*). Reconstructing subalterns from the imprints left by their activities, we become engaged in the complex work of translating subalterns’ social ac-

and loci of the Nizhegorod society and presented in isolation from each other: a chapter on the monasteries, another on the Nizhegorod Fair, the next deals with the Sormovo industries, and so on. To this day, the most comprehensive narrative of the history of Nizhny Novgorod at the turn of the twentieth century, written in Russian, belongs to Dmitrii Smirnov (1891-1990), see SMIRNOV 2007. Cf. for a useful survey in English DEHAAN: <http://www.opentextnn.ru/space/nn/?id=542>, 07.05.2013. Despite its primary focus on an earlier (pre-1905) period, the comprehensive survey of the “Nizhegorod civilization” by Catherine Evtuhov offers useful background information on the city of Nizhny Novgorod as well. Cf. EVTUHOV, 2011. Kazan was luckier in getting scholars’ attention, but comprehensive urban studies of Kazan are also rare. A detailed structuralist social history of Kazan during the late imperial period can be found in HÄFNER, 2004. Cf. for a pioneering attempt at studying the history of everyday life in Kazan in the *longue durée* VISHLENKOVA et al., 2008. Cf. for a more conventional narrative of urban history VISHLENKOVA et al., 2007.

tions – through the categories used by the records-keepers of the past – into an analytically construed model. This process can be called the “paleontology of knowledge,” as we have to reconstruct from scattered evidence a species profoundly alien to our world, forsaken and forgotten, that cannot even be theoretically revived in its original form here (as subalternists energetically insist). Therefore, our reconstruction cannot pretend to be a realistic replica of the original, but rather is an approximated model demonstrating our own understanding of how individual fragments and known parameters of the ‘prehistoric’ social body could be meaningfully combined together.

In practical terms this metaphor means that primary sources use all kinds of attributes in describing protagonists of various actions: self-descriptive and formally upheld by bureaucratic procedures, scientific categories and literary clichés. In our translation job we treat them all as categories of practice, that is, as markers of difference that made sense only for a particular cultural context and under specific circumstances. ‘A Tatar’ or ‘a Jew’ frequent in documents produced in all four locations of my study, but these terms are absolutely meaningless and hollow by themselves, outside the specific pocket of local knowledge and the exact circumstances of every usage of the term – and every incident that provoked its usage. For instance, when in January 1908 the police solved the case of a recent “expropriation” attack by revolutionaries on the office of the Kazan city forester, they prepared to arrest the leader, known by the Russian alias “Aleksy.” Aleksy turned out to be the Tatar Aligulla Bililiatdinov, a 26 year old worker wearing “Russian” dress.²⁷ The local nationalist newspaper expressed less indignation about the actual “revolutionary robbery” than about the “imposter,” whom the paper depicted in Orientalist terms as a typical Tatar criminal: tall, dark-skinned, gloomy, Mongoloid-looking, and “of Muhammad’s faith”²⁸. Curiously, before the arrest, the three attackers had been described by five witnesses (who saw them at close range and talked to them) as “representatives of the [Russian] intelligentsia” “judging by the color of their faces and their speech”²⁹. There was no mention of the typical Mongoloid facial characteristics of the leader, or the primitive mores of his two accomplices, who turned out to be twenty-year-old simple Russian workers.³⁰ This example can tell us much about the limits of applicability of even such ‘objective’ categories of practice as Russians and Tatars, or *intelligently* and workers. The question is not whether

27 Cf. KAZANSKII TELEGRAF, No. 4452, 01.01.1908, p. 3.

28 IBID., No. 4453, 03.01.1908, p. 3.

29 VOLZHSKII LISTOK, No. 564, 22.12.1907, p. 3.

30 Cf. IBID., No. 653, 17.04.1908, p. 3.

the witnesses or authors of newspaper reports wrongly understood the concept of ethnicity or class, but how they used the available repertoire of categorizing differences to mark out situational and structural divides in a particular case.

From hundreds of similar cases we can compose a more or less detailed map of such divides and group solidarities that may coincide or not coincide with categories of difference employed in the sources. This is a dynamic map, like satellite weather images: group boundaries shift in time, and local knowledge circulates through migrations and partial access of the subalterns to the mass media. How should we perform the next step of our ‘paleontological’ reconstruction and translate the assembled catalogue of qualities and features into a coherent model of the plebeian society of subalterns living inside and outside urban slums? Unfortunately, we can rely only on the same concepts of ethnicity, confession, occupation, and so on, only this time we should work with them as categories of analysis: analytically elaborated, with explicitly defined connotations and parameters of applicability. The task is to explain, *how* that society worked, not *what* it looked like as a totality. None of the analytical categories we use can cope with the task individually, but there is no need to invent elaborated hybrid mega-models. Instead of “strategic essentialism” of self-fashioning by national and other modernized groups,³¹ and the “realism of the group” as practiced by nation-centered social sciences,³² the new imperial history takes as its departure point the principle of “strategic relativism” of the imperial situation: the impossibility of unquestionable belonging to only one particular social hierarchy or group.³³ Thus, the only accurate way to outline a social persona in this situation of the absence of absolute hegemony of any ‘hegemonic discourses’ (at least over the plebeian society of subalterns) is to reconstruct it as a composite and multifaceted one.

This is not exactly the hybridity so much celebrated in postcolonial studies, which is envisioned in accordance with what Ernest Gellner called “Modigliani’s map,” when multicolored blocks of different sizes and shapes (but with clear boundaries and internally homogeneous) form a giant mosaic of cultural (and social) diversity. These blocks are located on the same plane and are grouped according to clear departments.³⁴ In the department of “peoples,” this diversity is represented in the case of the Russian Empire by “Jews,” “Ukrainians,” “Tatars,” and “Russians”; in the department of “social structure,” it fea-

31 Cf. SPIVAK, 1987, p. 205.

32 Cf. BRUBAKER, 1994, p. 3-14.

33 Cf. GERASIMOV et al., 2009, p. 20.

34 Cf. GELLNER, 1984, p. 139f.

tures “nobles,” “peasants,” “petty commoners,” and so on. As it becomes increasingly clear from modern historical and anthropological studies, “poverty,” “Russianness,” “slums,” and “youth” do not belong to four different and separate ‘planes of diversity’ (thus forming isolated spaces of social differentiation and hybridization), but combine to produce universal composite social identities. These hybrid identities formed in different times from different components with different characteristics are the main protagonists of new imperial history as pursued in my study.

Looking from this vantage point, the task of reconstructing the composite social sphere of the plebeian society appears to be very different from assembling a priori assigned blocks (class/confession/gender/nationality, etc.) in a certain way. Rather, we have to envision this society as differentiated into groups that are distinguished only when (or every time) certain criteria of otherness become relevant in the context of a specific situation, when these criteria are actually used for marking groupness. In the first case, the matrix of differences is imposed by the researcher, and is more or less sensitive to the nuances of the past, from the outside. In the second case, differences are recognized as such and registered only if they are actually manifested in practice, in a specific situation. Ideally, these differences should be described in the analytical language of contemporary social sciences and interpreted within the framework of a contemporary theoretical model, but it is equally important to avoid anachronistic ascriptions of today’s criteria of groupness to motivations of the actions of people in the past.

The best illustration of the dynamic nature of sociocultural hybridity and relativism of criteria of groupness (both as a category of analysis and a category of practice) can be found in the strange case of a fraudulent check cashed by a stranger in August 1906 at the Kazan Merchant Bank. Someone withdrew the handsome sum of 8200 rubles (equivalent to three annual salaries of an upper-middle-class civil servant or professional) from the bank account of the wealthy Tatar merchant Akhmet Khusainov (1835-1906).³⁵ The police failed to crack this case, which resembles an Agatha Christie mystery: in the seemingly patriarchal firm, every employee close to the head of the business was under suspicion.³⁶ Ethnicity played a prominent part in the logic of the investigation, but proved futile in the end. The missing sum was discovered by a Jewish law-

35 Akhmet was the eldest of the three Khusainov brothers, a successful entrepreneur worth several million rubles by the time of his death. Cf. SHAIDULLINA, 2010.

36 Cf. NATIONAL ARCHIVE OF THE REPUBLIC OF TATARSTAN (NART), f. 79, op. 1, vol. 2, del. 805.

yer, Alexander Bat, who was auditing the firm's finances in March 1907, after the death of its head. Two of the late merchant's Tatar assistants (or rather confidants), who had vague duties, were in charge of keeping the checkbook and the personal seal of Akhmet Khusainov, but these respected gentlemen were beyond the suspicions of Mr. Bat. He suggested that the clerk Mukhamet-Valei Saidashev (also a Tatar) had the opportunity to steal a check when he was summoned to the main office: on his meager salary of 35 rubles a month, in the fall of 1906, Saidashev made a few expensive purchases, and then moved to Semipalatinsk (in present-day Kazakhstan).³⁷

The director of the Kazan Merchant Bank, the ethnic Russian Boris Sapozhnikov, defending the bank's reputation, suggested that the check had been accepted because it was authentic: what else could explain how for more than half a year nobody had noticed the misappropriation of such a considerable sum? Sapozhnikov declared that after so long a time neither he nor his employees would recognize the person who had cashed the check but suggested that he was dressed like a Russian, had a "French beard," and did not look "like a Tatar"³⁸. The only person fitting this description was Mukhamed Davletshin, one of the confidants of the merchant Khusainov, looking after the checkbook. As it turned out, on his small salary of 50 rubles a month, Davletshin had the means to pay for his wife to live in a spa in Grozny, and in the fall of 1906 he loaned more than 1000 rubles to another employee. Davletshin spoke Russian without an accent and lived with his Russian lover in Kazan in a predominantly Russian neighborhood.³⁹ Naturally, Davletshin denied all accusations (he claimed that he had won the money gambling) and pointed out that while the Russian signature on the check in question was quite typical of Khusainov's, the second, Tatar signature was very different and had been done by someone unable to write in Tatar (i.e., in Arabic script). There was a Russian capable of doing the forgery – the accountant Kliucharev, who for some reason did not request statements from the bank for six months, which was a direct violation of his duties and resulted in the overly late discovery of the missing money.⁴⁰ The investigation reached a dead end after interrogations of a dozen people had uncovered no decisive evidence to put forward official charges. The very date of the crime received two interpretations: August 11, 1906, was Friday, the Muslim holiday. Some saw this as proof that the perpetrator belonged to the Tatar "circle" around Khusainov,

37 IBID., II. 1-2.

38 IBID., II. 14-16 ob.

39 IBID., II. 34-37, 39.

40 IBID., I. 39 ob.

who had cunningly arranged a perfect alibi for himself.⁴¹ Others perceived it as revealing a “Russian trail” of evidence. The real problem was the meaninglessness of ethnic markers as self-explanatory codes of social practice: what kinds of patriarchal relations end up in a fraudulent financial scheme? What does someone’s “Tatariness” mean if a person has a Russian lover, gambles, and probably steals from his brethren? How can a Russian steal if the checkbook and the seal are kept by two Tatar confidants of the boss? It is quite possible that the entire affair was a collective enterprise, requiring the cooperation of both Russians and Tatars.

The “Khusainov affair” proves that analytically constructed social identities (and even those consciously interiorized by historical actors) are fairly independent from actions and individual choices. This disconnection between the static social persona and dynamic behavior is characteristic of the “subaltern” and nondiscursive plebeian society.

In the situation of composite and fluid social identities, the only stable element appears to be not any fixed ‘proportion of hybridity’ but the general trend of actions and life choices. Thus, scholars debate the degree of integration and emancipation of Jews in Odessa at the beginning of the twentieth century, and the exact meaning of Jewishness. Leaving the question of the essence or the correct definition of Jewishness aside, I suggest focusing instead on what possible difference the alleged Jewishness made in the actions of people, and under what circumstances. My study of Odessa revealed the involvement of Jews in criminal violence and murders on a massive scale, contrary to the old and recent myths about Jews being prone to ‘peaceful’ white-collar crimes. Jewish gangsters murdered scores of people in cold blood, but what is really important is not the brutality of Jewish thugs, but their choice of victims. In over a thousand cases that I have reviewed, not a single Gentile was murdered by Jews in Odessa.⁴² In light of the studies on ethnic gangsters in the United States,⁴³ this fact can be interpreted as an indicator of important mental mapping. Despite the outstanding record of Odessa Jews as pioneers of emancipation and integration into the larger society,⁴⁴ it appears that they did not cross one important psychological boundary between ‘us’ and ‘them’, as can be seen in the extreme (and thus even more important) case of choosing victims ‘of our own kind’. There was one telling exception to this rule, though: Jews who were members

41 IBID., I. 2.

42 Cf. GERASIMOV, 2010.

43 Cf. COHEN, 1999; ROCKAWAY, 1993.

44 Cf. ZIPPERSTEIN, 1985.

of revolutionary anarchist gangs killed Gentiles, when attacking under the cover of revolutionary slogans. Quitting the sphere of the subaltern isolation from hegemonic discourses and acting on behalf of the future common revolutionary nation, they overcame the invisible and probably unconscious barrier of their self-alienation. However deviant and violent, these social practices allow us to trace the dynamic intergroup boundaries and see their dependence on mental mapping and ideological contexts.

Social practices *were* the universal language binding the urban plebeian society together, substituting for the virtually unavailable discourses. Nobody briefed a recent migrant about the rules of behavior in town: he or she picked up this nonverbalized wisdom by literally rubbing shoulders with more experienced peers, by getting punched for every mistake, and negotiating a new arrangement through close physical contact, including violence. The nonverbal and very ‘bodily’ foundation of social practices eventually created a developed metalanguage of self-expression and self-representation of individuals and social groups – we just need to learn how to read this language. On the basis of thousands of documented cases I identify several key strategies, or social practices that helped to communicate meaning within the plebeian society, and structure it, sustaining social order in the unstable and unruly milieu of recent migrants to the city slums.

One practice can be identified as “the middle ground” – to use the concept elaborated by Richard White in his classic study of the intercultural communication and conflict in the North American Great Lakes region.⁴⁵ As he put it:

“The middle ground is the place in between: in between cultures, peoples, and in between empires and the nonstate world of villages. [...] People try to persuade others who are different from themselves by appealing to what they perceive to be the values and the practices of those others. They often misinterpret and distort both the values and the practices of those they deal with, but from these misunderstandings arise new meanings and through them new practices – the shared meanings and practices of the middle ground.”⁴⁶

Thus understood, the middle ground is not literally a particular “place” or a “process” (unlike frontier), but rather a state of relationships and dialogue of actors attempting to bridge the deep cultural gap and social divide. We can see this practice at work in all four of the principal locations of my study and particu-

45 Cf. WHITE, 1991.

46 IBID., p. x.

larly in Kazan, where neither Russian, Orthodox Christian population, nor Tatar Muslim community had means and guts to impose their own norms and values on the other. Hence they had to negotiate and seek a compromise, creating a new common reality of “creative misunderstanding”.

Another practice can be called “patriarchality” (in the sense of both archaism and male domination). The social practice of patriarchy did not imply that social relations and motivations of people employing this practice were actually “patriarchal”: naive, archaic, irrational, and completely male-controlled. Rather, it was a sustained attempt to keep the isolation of the subaltern society from penetration of the modern public sphere of public discourses. This was particularly important in Vilna, where this integration implied mobilization into one of the competing powerful nationalist projects (Polish, Jewish, Russian, or Lithuanian), with potentially devastating consequences for the urban community. These consequences were fully realized in the 1930s and 1940s, with the dismantling of pseudo-archaic patriarchy and subalternity.

The social practice of patriarchy employed in Late Imperial Russia sustained parochialism that did not allow for generalizing and institutionalizing the categories of belonging (to a national community) and otherness (of aliens). It also sanctified authority defined in nonnational categories of seniority, male domination, and formal office-holding. Up to a certain point, this practice was capable of accommodating elements of urban modernity that equally downplayed the importance of nationality – be it the union movement or commerce. Balancing between these two often-overlapping cognitive modes in the social practice of patriarchy, Russian late imperial society managed to accommodate the challenges of modernity surprisingly well, at the cost of a relatively low level of mobilization of intergroup confrontation.

The persistence of violence in the urban plebeian society allows us to treat it as the third fundamental, albeit morally and legally intolerable, social practice in its own right. As such, violence is anything but ‘senseless’, as has been shown by the modern anthropology of violence.⁴⁷ Violence served as a marker of belonging to a common social space and, more rarely, as a stigma of otherness. Even in the latter case, this was not about the indication of ultimate alienation, but, so to speak, of ‘a second-choice voting’. It may sound paradoxical, but violence can communicate even friendliness, albeit only in a most awkward way, as the following episode shows. In September 1908, in the Bolshoi Fontan seafront neighborhood of Odessa, a Jew, Nutovich, met his Ukrainian neighbor, the shopkeeper Stetsenko, on the street. Because of their prehistory of heated argu-

47 Cf. BLOK, 2001.

ments, this time Stetsenko picked up a stone and smashed Nutovich in the face with it. Formally (and actually) this was a hate crime, but it was also something more: a gentile shopkeeper used the last argument to induce his Jewish neighbor to become his customer, not to ban him from his shop, as can be assumed from a general outline of the incident.⁴⁸

In the subaltern plebeian society, violence as a social practice was multifaceted, playing the important common role of a communicative medium. As such, it was excessively “expressive,” spoken in the body language of injuries, rape, and mutilations, but it was the only alternative to the verbalized communication based on borrowed discourses with built-in explanatory schemes. It was mostly an extreme way to express one’s individual position, and as such is invaluable for a study of social arrangements beyond the normative groupings into ethnicities, confessions, legal estates, or classes. The language of violence tells the story of intensive contacts and spontaneously emerging power fields of social solidarity and confrontation across the conventional map of social composition. The social practice of violence did not have the constructive potential of the middle ground or even of patriarchy, the latter being more about sustaining the status quo and stability of a heterogeneous social milieu. On the other hand, rarely employed in the course of politicization of ethnicity as collective action with a single uniform target and goals, in late imperial plebeian society, violence did not fully unleash its destructive force capable of splitting communities or mobilizing one group against another. This would change once the former subaltern society became integrated into the political nation by imposing a normative discourse, or rather an ideological canon. Then, habitual tolerance to violence and the low threshold for its unleashing brought about truly gruesome consequences.

The subalterns from Russian plebeian society were capable of rationally processing information and making informed decisions, only they did it by using different cognitive mechanisms, and different concepts of rationality. This is an important lesson that the Russian imperial situation can teach scholars thinking about subalternity: whenever a suspicion arises that someone in the society “cannot speak” (in any sense of the word), it is a sure indicator that the observer cannot listen. The vast majority of those, who did not succeed in mastering even the basics of the elite discursive sphere (or perhaps did not want to), could be perceived as ‘dumb’ – but only by those, who identify themselves with the elite stratum of the educated society. Paradoxically, in the absence of any universal public sphere, the diverse social milieu of the subaltern plebeian society was

48 Cf. ZVERSKOE IZBIENIE, 1908, p. 2f.

fairly coherent and predictable to migrants from different localities, representing different ethnoconfessional groups, regions, or subcultures. What they all had in common as the universally recognizable basic element of the ‘primary modeling system’ was their body (both physical and social) and its functions. As a medium, the emerging ‘secondary modeling system’ of the plebeian society used not words, but semiotically meaningful social practices.

The Bolshevik revolution removed the entire layer of the elitist (middle-class) ‘patrician society’ with its hegemonic discourses, just as some activists of subaltern studies would recommend as a solution against isolationism of subalternity. This move, however, did not make the former plebeian society less autistic or more interventionist in its dealing with public discourses (suffice it to reread the prose of Mikhail Zoshchenko or studies of amateur correspondents of Soviet newspapers). Thus, the Russian case defies the rigidly structuralist or post-structuralist reading of the subaltern: it is not a caste, and not a stigma, and the ‘space of difference’ that subalterns inhabit cannot be imagined as completely isolated and unreadable to Others. Subalternity is rather a social condition and epistemological stance that can be changed or exchanged for a different one.

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