

CAN WE TALK ABOUT POST-SOVIET SCIENCE?

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The authors of this essay have the background of a Soviet education. Aimar Ventsel began his studies during the Soviet era, at what was then Tartu State University. Natalia Struchkova graduated from Yakutsk State University, defended her thesis in Ulan-Ude, and continued to work and teach according to Soviet era programmes and methodology. Therefore, both authors have extensively read academic works from the Soviet period during their student years and after. The academic writing that is widespread in Russian and in many post-Soviet countries where the academic language is still Russian, differs substantially from the so-called Western writing. These differences cause misunderstandings between colleagues, but more importantly form a bottleneck affecting the publication and circulation of academic texts. This essay addresses the tensions between different forms of academic writing; a conflict not only of style, as is sometimes argued (Napol'skikh et al. 2014). One problem we both know about is the difficulties Russian humanitarian and social scientists encounter when planning to publish in Western journals. Difficulties accompanied with this process go beyond the lack of sufficient English language skills – language is the least of their problems. It seems that “these people cannot write”, as one editor of a respected academic journal remarked in a private discussion with Aimar Ventsel.

REFLEXIVITY

The programmatic task of anthropology as a discipline is to “understand cultures” (Geertz 1973). However, academic debates point to the conclusion that inside the discipline there is no general consensus about what that means. The polemics around the topic of how an anthropologist understands their field, and data collected in that field, is as old as anthropology itself. The discussion around, and criticism toward, “one-way ethnography” that tends to eliminate

diversity (cf. Clifford & Marcus 1986: 10; Spencer 1989) increased with the spread of the postmodernist approach. So-called modern anthropology was accused of simplification in studied cultures; of a tendency for scholars to have only one explanation of studied processes (cf. Coombe 1991). The postmodernists' argument was, and is, that by analysing their data, modern anthropologists usually knew too little to make sophisticated generalisations, or that the ethnographer is like a trickster: they do not lie, but do not tell the truth either (Crapanzano 1986).¹ With the post-modern school, there has developed the so-called reflexive anthropology, which argues that behind any anthropological analysis is also the personality of the scholar – their education, their own culture, and so forth, i.e. “there is no objective observer” (Jenkins 1994: 443). The understanding and practices depend on knowledge, as stressed by Pierre Bourdieu (1999 [1977]). In short, the ethnographer describes what he knows (Clifford 1986: 8). The anthropologist is a social agent, who is engaged in the construction of social reality of the studied group; they are the representatives of the ‘gaze from afar’, but while doing this they are the ‘product of a national education system’. Besides the educational and cultural background of the scholar, their work is also affected by their position in the studied community, i.e. in the field. And, last but not least, the research of the anthropologist is influenced by what Bourdieu calls the “anthropological field” or the scholar’s position in the “professional universe”, and of the publication, teaching, censorship, etc. politics of his or her institution (Bourdieu 2003: 282, 283, 285). In short, the personal experience of the scholar in and outside of the field very much determines the outcome of their academic research (Ochs & Capps 1996). This approach is summarised in the subtitle of the classic book by Clifford and Marcus, *The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986).

Reflexive anthropology raises the issue of relationships between scholars and the people under study. In this essay we are interested in another kind of reflexivity: how foreign and ‘domestic’ academic styles differ from each other in a post-Soviet context.

We live in a world where the term ‘international science’ means publications in high-ranking Anglo-American academic journals. In order to appear in such journals, one has to deliver the text not only in spotless English, but one has to follow certain rules of writing: how to structure the article, how to argue, which works of other scholars to cite, etc. These aspects of academic writing vary in different academic traditions, and some methods of argumentation and analysis of ‘other’ traditions might be unacceptable to the Anglo-American way of writing articles. Therefore, scholars from ‘other’ traditions – including the former Soviet Union – encounter difficulties. The relationship between the ‘international’ and ‘domestic’ traditions can be described as a power relationship:

in most post-Soviet countries, financing of universities and personal careers currently depends on the number of articles published in the 'right kind of journals', i.e. journals indexed in Web of Science or Scopus. These journals are predominantly in the Anglo-American 'international' tradition. While Western scholars are barely interested in featuring in 'Eastern' journals, then the interest from the other side is disproportionately high. Adopting an Anglo-American style does not always go smoothly. Notwithstanding that many non-Western scholars have difficulties in understanding the principles of that particular style, it also means that the huge variety of academic styles is not available for the readers of English language publications to become familiar with.

In many aspects, the relationship contains similar aspects to the researcher-informant relationship. Russian and foreign anthropologists who study Russia share more or less the same field, often even the same field site. However, no-one can claim they overall see the same things or that their interpretations of field data are similar. To go back to the postulates of reflexive anthropology, the experiences that both foreign and Russian scholars have are different. These experiences are different because the proponents are products of different national schools and their position in the field is different. And a different position is caused not only by differences in the size of research budget. Foreign and Russian scholars have a different position in the existing institutional setting. Moreover, people's openness and attitude toward the scholar is very different. It is not unusual for informants to tell different stories to Russian and foreign scholars, presuming that there are things Russian scholars know anyway or foreign people do not need to know. Surprisingly this dualism has caused little discussion in the discipline. There are attempts to define what the difference is between East and West in anthropology. Sometimes these attempts are accompanied with Westerners teaching to Easterners how to be a 'real' anthropologist (e.g. Hann 2003). There are also a few voices who argue that Westerners do not fully recognise their eastern counterparts (Kürti & Skalník 2009). Reading this, one gets the impression that this level of ethnography is as one-way as it is on the level of the scholar-informant, i.e. Western scholars are dominant and their Eastern colleagues dominated. According to our experience not everything is so simple, and problems do not flow in one direction. There is more to it than the obnoxious and arrogant foreign scholars who come and teach Russians / Eastern Europeans how to be engaged with 'real' anthropology, on the one side, and the humiliated, offended, and undervalued Russian / Eastern European scholars on the other side. As noted by Kürti and Skalník (2009: 4), in the Eastern European tradition, scholars sometimes spend their entire time in trying to understand particular processes and culture complexes, which is often dismissed by foreign scholars as leading to "unnecessarily de-

tailed knowledge” or even as “naive navel gazing” (ibid.). From the other side, scholars dismiss the knowledge of their Western colleagues as too superficial and non-professional. As can be concluded by the relatively broad discussion in various academic journals years ago, many Eastern European scholars feel that their work is not sufficiently respected, read, and quoted by their Western colleagues (Buchowski 2004; Hann 2005a). Conflicts can also appear between the different factions within the Eastern European academic world, as was demonstrated by the hot discussion between ‘constructivists’ (i.e. scholars following a Western template) and ‘essentialists’ (people who argue that they maintain the Russian academic tradition) in Russia in 2014 (Napol’skikh et al. 2014). Notwithstanding these debates, the voice and approach of Eastern Europeans is often clouded behind the line of the ‘language hegemony’ (Kürti & Skalník 2009), which often prevents the scholars of former socialist countries from publishing in a way that their work is accessible for a foreign audience.

When switching from general to particular, the post-Soviet anthropology shows, first and foremost, a certain historical focus. As mentioned by Hann in the foreword to Ventsel’s book, *Reindeer, Rodina and Reciprocity: Kinship and Property Relations in a Siberian Village* (Hann 2005b), this is probably due to the fact that in the Soviet Union ethnography was part of the studies in history, reduced to the so-called ‘supplementary science’ of the historical research (see Slezkine 1991 about that development). Another common feature of the post-Soviet style is a reliance on the so-called classic theorists, not only native but often also Western (e.g. Levi-Strauss, Malinowski), i.e. authors that were broadly translated in the Soviet Union.

The collapse of the Soviet Union also marked a certain change in local anthropology. New nations were faced with a globalising world, leaving one that had collapsed and not knowing their place in the changed world. In local humanitarian and social sciences this transformation was reflected by a change in focus. On the one hand, scholars sought answers in how to define ethnic, cultural, and religious identities in a changed socio-political situation, and what direction their people should take in order to develop and establish a modern state. On the other hand, questions linked to the maintaining of cultural heritage and traditions became of importance. Scientific theories were applied to tackle the issues of historical dynamics in the transformation of native traditions, defining factors that affect such processes and attempting to foresee the future, or how to adapt traditional values and the concept of culture in the new modern environment. One big question was and still is: what are those traditions that are essential in the maintaining and developing of peoples’ identity.

Contrary to history, the anthropology and culture studies of post-Soviet countries did not discover a massive amount of new historical records from once closed archives. Most of the ethnographic and folklore data were freely

accessible during the Soviet period. More important was the new perspective on these records, finding new theories and ideas on how to connect such knowledge with new social, cultural, and political processes. In many cases, as is also demonstrated in this volume, already existing publications were re-valued and received another meaning and place in a new national research tradition (look at the chapters discussing the place and importance of Gabit Musrepov in Kazakh culture).

The aim of this special issue was to present a collection of Kazakh authors to an English reading audience. The Kazakh academia is too big to squeeze into one book or book series. Therefore, we acknowledge that the result gives only a limited overview of the questions, methods, and approaches that Kazakh scholars work with and on. This, however, should not deter the reader, and hopefully some of the chapters will inspire some to look for, and find, other works from scholars of the region.

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NOTE

¹ The postmodernist approach is critical to modernist approaches but has had little success in creating the concept of a 'real' approach (Clifford 1986).

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