Soc (2009) 46:546–548
DOI 10.1007/s12115-009-9263-0

BOOK REVIEW

Olga Shevchenko, *Crisis and the Everyday in Postsocialist Moscow*

Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009. $24.95. 241 pp. ISBN-10: 0253220289; ISBN-13: 978-0253220288

Dmitri N. Shalin

Published online: 29 August 2009
© Springer Science + Business Media, LLC 2009

Perestroika turned out to be a boon for Western social scientists who found in the former Soviet Union fertile ground for empirical research and theoretical reflection. Gorbachev's glasnost and Yeltsin's postsoviet reform produced several notable ethnographies which shed light on the interplay between cultural tradition and change. What we have learned from these studies is that perestroika brought in its wake plenty of unwanted consequences (Kazimierz and Poznanski 1992), that the oppressed minorities could be reluctant to give up communist slogans (Grant 1995), that the culture producers accustomed to state subsidies were unprepared for the market realities (Baigell and Baigell 1995), that political freedom does not necessarily spur artistic creativity (Cushman 1995), that vintage rhetoric persists long after the institutions supporting it have crumbled (Ries 1997; Ledeneva 1998), and that the habits of the heart acquired under socialism haunt soviet citizens even after they move to the West (Remennick 2007). Building on this research tradition that explores "how cultural categories and cognitive classifications both shape and impede social change" (p. 10), Olga Shevchenko imaginatively extends the work of her predecessors, adding a few theoretical wrinkles of her own.

Fieldwork for this study took place in Moscow where the author interviewed and reinterviewed 33 individuals between 1998 and 2000. Personal connection and referrals by friends and relatives generated "a theoretically modified snowball sample" (p. 180) comprised by Russian citizens with only common-sense knowledge of society's working. Conversations were tape-recorded with the respondents' consent, then transcribed verbatim and translated into English. The researcher took contemporaneous notes to spotlight the individual's behavior and the context of each interview session. In addition to in-depth interviews, the database for this study includes less structured exchanges, observations in public places, the surveys and mass media accounts, and discussions with a dozen Russian scientists and policy experts. The result is a sweeping panorama of everyday life that covers work, leisure, private life, and public (dis)engagement in postsoviet Russia. The fact that the research sample excludes people outside Russian capital and features a disproportionate number of better educated Muscovites limits the findings' reach, but the author is aware of this limitation and makes proper adjustments.

Reflected in the book's title, the key issue of this study is "crisis"—a theme well known to social scientists. Kai Erikson's *Everything in Its Path*: *Destruction of Community in the Buffalo Creek Flood* is a classic example of the research tradition exploring disasters and crisis management. However, Shevchenko doesn't unequivocally commit to this conceptual framework. The havoc that the collapse of the soviet regime brought in its wake differs from the intense and relatively short-lived disaster that befell the residents of Buffalo Creek. Perestroika set in motion a crisis that not only permeated all existence but also stretched over a decade, and as the author points out, "a chronic crisis may become the very essence of a community's identity" (p. 3). Beleaguered soviet citizens managed to turn postsoviet distempers and discontents into a resource, using an elaborate network of laments, disclaimers, and behavioral gambits to claim a lofty status as survivors perpetually balancing on the brink of total collapse. Paradoxically, this crisis mindset enabled them to "achieve trust through affirmation of universalized mistrust" (p. 10).

D. N. Shalin (✉)
Department of Sociology,
4505 Maryland Parkway, Box 4555033,
Las Vegas, NV 89154-5033, USA
e-mail: shalin@unlv.nevada.edu

The1990s in Russia were marked by a resolute eschewing of civil engagement. The contempt for politics and the political elite comes across in this statement by a 34 year-old Muscovite: “How can I take our politics seriously? For me it’s just a collection of idiots and swindlers, and if I ever look at them, it’s the same way I look at animals in the zoo” (p. 146). Life in the postsoviet era is focused on the family, on the private sphere where respondents contrive to achieve a precarious sense of normalcy. Shevchenko points to “the household-centered logic of postsocialist life” (p. 6), by which she means a concerted effort to insulate one’s private existence from the chaos dominating the political scene. Looking closely at the refuge that family life affords to the postsoviet citizenry, the researcher discerns a gap between the ubiquitous crisis rhetoric and notable strides many respondents made during the Yeltsin’s tenure. While they lament the harsh market realities, they willfully gloss over the new appliances and computers acquired in recent years and prominently displayed in their private apartments. Money woes are great, but they do not stop those interested from traveling abroad—a luxury available to few soviet citizens. The high social mobility observed by the author—three quarters of the respondents interviewed for this study changed their jobs during its course—belies the perception of stagnation and stifled opportunity the respondents sought to project. The tendency to foreground one’s miseries—*pribedniatsia*—may be a throwback to the socialist past when the fierce competition for scarce goods hinged on the ability to justify one’s special needs to the government bureaucrats. The urge to conceal one’s success and consume inconspicuously coexisted in Yeltsin’s Russia with the widespread conviction that others did even worse. “Mass belief that one’s success was always atypical,” according to Shevchenko, “pointed to the fundamentally a priori nature of crisis framework” (p. 46).

This is not to deny the heavy toll that the political and social upheavals extracted from the survivors of the communist regime. The author pays close attention to the deskilling process and its devastating impact on workers unable to find application to the professional knowledge acquired in the planned socialist economy. Drawing on Bourdieu, Shevchenko describes “the postsoviet hysteresis of habitus” (p. 59) manifested in the increasingly obsolete set of skills which once allowed the agent to get ahead but which no longer secures customary income and dignity and may instead occasion derision and outright sanctions. The “lack of fit between his former cultural capital and the skills he perceived to be essential for the success in postsocialist economy” (p. 51) robs the worker of the sense of personal worth, inclines him to depression, and sends some searching for desperate schemes of improving his lot. One interesting example of the discontent in socialist habits cited in the book is the crossword puzzles craze among the members of Russian intelligentsia who find in this seemingly trivial pursuit a chance to prove to themselves and to others that their wonted intellectual capacities remain intact. It is not clear, though, if Russian intellectuals grew more enamored with this pastime in the postsoviet era or simply carried over their old habits into the new cultural habitat.

The author’s key insights are that the “cultural logic of the 1990s matters because it informed the responses to the political, economic, and social changes that followed,” that “the strategies through which individuals navigate the crisis... inevitably transform and reproduce it,” that “post-socialist gains had no name (and thus no value)” (pp. 172, 10–11, 37). This inference is consistent with those of her predecessors, particularly with Nancy Ries’s pioneering study *Russian Talk.* Ries, who did her fieldwork in Russia between 1989 and 1995, concluded that the “national story of victims, villains, and saviors, performed through litanies, has been a discursive mechanism that facilitated authoritarian social relations” (Ries 1997, p. 120). There were of course new developments in the Yeltsin’s latter years spotlighted by Shevchenko—more “emotional disengagement,” a wider “array of mutually contradictory practices,” and even greater “selectivity with which the crisis rhetoric used evidence” (p. 10, 45).

What sets the present work apart, and what I found especially appealing in this ethnographic journey, is the author’s methodological reflections. Consigned to Appendix I, these reflections may escape a casual reader, and that would be unfortunate, for they evince the theoretical sophistication and keen awareness of the dilemmas confronting the participant observant engaged in ethnographic research. Any aspiring ethnographer would benefit from the author’s take on the gap “between the lived reality of everyday life and the discourse about that life” (p. 182), the need to identify “the rules for omitting particular events from narration” (p. 185), the problem of “[i]ntegrating discourses and practices into a single analytical framework” (p. 10), the difficulty of “pinpointing the logic governing [the] presentation of self” (p. 185), the dangers awaiting the researcher vested with the “power to define and speak for her subject” (p. 187), and the “dilemma of charting a middle course between going native and remaining detached, between being a participant and remaining an observer, [which] is something all ethnographers have to resolve” (pp. 189–190). From this appendix the reader learns that the author was born in Soviet Russia where she had lived first 23 years of her life before emigrating to the US. Her parents and brother who still live in Moscow stood ever ready to offer feedback on her research. As the author tells us, she was “sharing much of the cultural competence” with her subjects, although her relationship with the informants was complicated by “the distance and self-

estrangement conferred by academic training and a long experience of living in another culture" (p. 189). The author understands the predicament that her background and cultural competence posed for her, the fact that "my exploration into the forms of everyday life in Russia could be interpreted as an attempt at self-ethnography insomuch as this exploration was fueled by my appreciation of the affinities between my own modes of thought and actions and those of my subjects" (p. 189).

The shared cultural competence or lack thereof is a long-standing issue in the anthropological literature. It has been rendered more relevant in recent decades when the increased number of "natives" learned the social science skills and began to explore their own cultures. Yet, the issue is by no means unique to the participant observers crossing the cultural barriers and national divides. Samuel Heilman used his native competence as an observant Jew when he conducted fieldwork in the US and wrote dissertation under Erving Goffman's guidance that would eventually be published as *Synagogue Life* (Heilman 1976). In his memoir recently posted in the Erving Goffman Archives, Heilman describes the ethnographer's dilemma in similar terms:

> The standard thinking in anthropology and field work in those days was that you are a stranger and you go someplace else and you learn to become a native. You learn to become a native in a relatively short time. Natives can never learn to become sociologists, field workers. Setting me to do this dissertation was standing things on their head: you can take a native and train him to be a sociologist, train his eyes on things that were native to him and see them in a different way.... That was the standard point of view. It is easier for Margaret Mead to learn about Samoans than for a Samoan to learn what Margaret Mead [was doing]. That wasn't true, as it turned out. One can make a very strong argument that you can get a Ph.D. in 5 years but becoming a native takes a lifetime. It is easier to teach a native to get a distance from the life he or she leads than vice versa. (Heilman 2008)

There is no escaping of the cultural competencies that we acquire in our formative years and that inform our perception when we look for meaning in faraway cultures. That is true of Margaret Mead's inquiry into the coming of age in Samoa where she had discerned the free-wheeling spirit she longed for in her native America. The same can be said about Samuel Heilman's mentor Erving Goffman whose struggle to lift himself from the obscurity of Canadian Manitoba to international stardom is reflected in his numerous publications (Shalin 2007, 2008). Olga Shevchenko's quest for meaning in postsoviet Russia reflects the same personal imperative. And so does the perspective of the present reviewer whose Russian roots must have sensitized him to particular aspects of the fine study under review.

All ethnography is self-ethnography, in some respects. All brands of sociological imagination are autobiographic. I only wish Olga Shevchneko moved beyond identifying this personal tangent of her ethnography and rendered explicit what she has discovered about herself in her native land. Perhaps this is the task for the future.

Further Reading

Baigell, R., & Baigell, M. 1995. *Soviet dissident artists: Interviews after Perestroika*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Cushman, T. 1995. *Notes from the underground: Rock music counterculture in Russia*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Grant, B. 1995. *In the Soviet house of culture: A century of Perestroikas*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Heilman, S. 1976. *Synagogue Life: A Study in Symbolic Interaction*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Heilman, S. 2008. Remembering Erving Goffman. *In Bios Sociologicus: The Erving Goffman Archives*. UNLV: CDC Publications, http://www.unlv.edu/centers/cdclv/archives/interactionism/goffman/heilman_08.html.

Ledeneva, L. A. 1998. *Russia's economy of favours: Blat, networking, and informal exchange*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Poznanski, K. Z. (Ed.). 1992. *Constructing capitalism: The reemergence of civil society and liberal economy in the post-Communist world*. Boulder: Westview.

Remennick, L. 2007. *Russian Jews on three continents: Identity, integration, and conflict*. New Brunswick: Transactions.

Ries, N. 1997. *Russian talk: Culture and conversation during Perestroika*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Shalin, D. 2007. Signing in the flesh: Notes on pragmatist hermeneutics. *Sociological Theory*, 25, 193–224 http://www.asanet.org/galleries/default-file/Sept07STFeature.pdf.

Shalin, D. 2008. *Goffman's biography and the interaction order: A study in biocritical hermeneutics*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Boston, August 1, http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/2/4/1/1/9/p241199_index.html.

Dmitri Shalin is professor of sociology and director of the UNLV Center for Democratic Culture at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.