

On Being Human in the Inhuman World Remembering Vladimir Yadov¹

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In the 1960s, the Laboratory of Concrete Social Research in Leningrad was a hotbed of the newfangled sociological science fighting to secure a niche in the ideologically implacable discipline known as “historical materialism.” Would-be sociologists sold empirical research to the authorities on the premise that sociology has tools to investigate the progress toward communism, that it can spot and publicize favorable trends consistent with the predictions of Marxist-Leninist philosophy. Vladimir Yadov was among the discipline’s brightest stars spearheading the revival of Russian sociology decimated by the Bolshevik revolution and Stalin’s purges. The pioneering study *Man and His Work* Yadov published with his colleagues and a solo monograph on the *Methodology and Methods of Sociological Investigation* propelled him to the forefront of the emergent scholarly field.

I was a third year student at Leningrad State University when my mentor, Igor Kon, brought me to Yadov’s laboratory in 1968. For the next eight years I took part in the work of its seminar, first as a college student, then as a Ph.D. candidate and a research associate. Intellectual hothouses, such seminars sprang up around the country in big cities, led by the likes of Yuri Levada, Igor Kon, Georgy Shchedrovitsky, and other pioneers of sociological research whose liberal views, familiarity with foreign literature, and open-door policy attracted budding intellectuals and made an indelible impression on the generation of young social scientists.

Yadov stood out among his colleagues by his unselfconscious manners and indifference to the privileges of rank. His willingness to look beyond the official dogma was refreshing. It made no difference to him whether he was talking to a third year student or an established scholar. I remember him explaining to me some nuance of personality theory while his officemates patiently waited for their turn to address the luminary. What mattered was the contribution to the common cause, which at the time encompassed the study of value orientations and attitudes toward work among soviet laborers and engineers. Contrary to expectations, these attitudes didn’t always accord with theoretical predictions, as workers evinced little enthusiasm for party exhortations to work selflessly for the bright future and much interest in the material rewards of their jobs. By the end of the sixties, the spirit of empirical sociology began to grate on the communist party ideologues, and after the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia in a bid to extinguish the Prague Spring, soviet sociology with its liberal aspirations fell on hard times. Yadov labored to save his team and research division, then part of the Russian Academy of Sciences, but eventually he was driven out and his group disbanded. At all times, Yadov bore himself with dignity, refusing to denounce his colleagues under mounting pressure or ditch his humanism under inhuman conditions.²

In 1975, I emigrated from Russia and settled in the United States. My contacts with Yadov were not restored until Mikhail Gorbachev embarked on the campaign of reform in 1987. Those were heady days for Russian social scientists straining to make up for the lost time.³ Soon after Gorbachev called for glasnost and perestroika, sociologists purged from their discipline were brought back to lead the newly formed research organizations such as the Institutes of Sociology, National Center for Study of Public Opinion, and kindred institutions whose personnel eagerly embraced the cause of reform. Yadov, who by that time moved to Moscow, quickly emerged as an acknowledged leader in his field.⁴ His colleagues elected him president of the Russian Sociological Association and director of the Academy of Science Institute of Sociology. In recognition of his contribution to the sociology of labor, Yadov was chosen to serve as vice president of the International Sociological Association.

The Professional Code of Ethics adopted by reform-minded scholars in 1988 affirmed the right to free inquiry and unfettered debate as vital to the science of society. The document urged sociologists to cultivate “tolerance and respect” toward opponents, show “courage of conviction,” shun “ideological labels,” and avoid appeals to “authorities” in settling scientific disputes. It also encouraged sociologists to reflect on their past, unleashing a period of soul-searching among Russian intellectuals who sought to reconcile their reformed identities with the selves they fronted under the communist regime.⁵

In the spiritual perestroika that followed, some claimed to have always been closet dissidents, many hastened to renounce the soviet past, and most conspicuously ditched their communist party cards. Not Vladimir Yadov! While he suffered grievously during the soviet campaigns against liberal intellectuals, he didn’t join the stampede. Yadov saved his party card and to the end remained committed to the ideals of Eurcommunism espoused by Palmiro Togliatti and the principles of social democracy, which he saw as the most humane political and economic system. He urged his colleagues to take society’s problems as their own, setting a personal example how to harness knowledge for social reform. “We shall not fulfill our duty as sociologists if we confine ourselves to writing books. We need to do our best to influence the permutation of social planets,” wrote Yadov. “Fighting corruption, setting up independent courts, establishing a progressive tax system, and more – this is what the situation and people demand.”

The wheels of history had turned once again when Vladimir Putin ascended to power. He was slow to reveal his agenda, but a few years into his first term as Russia’s president it became clear that he had little regard for civil society and its institutions. Sociologists who settled comfortably into their post-soviet routines discovered that it was no longer safe to criticize the government. Those who engaged in public protests and insisted on exercising their constitutional rights faced reprisals.

In 2010, the ultra-nationalist intellectuals established a rival sociological association, challenging the organization led by Yadov and his colleagues.⁶ After Yadov stood up to Gennady Osipov, an ardent proponent of Russian nationalism and mastermind of the competing professional

association, he had to defend himself in court against the charges of slandering his opponents as proto-fascists. Hobbled by the reactionary policies, old age and illness, Yadov felt increasingly marginalized.

In 2009, on the occasion of his 80th birthday, students and friends who stood by the man published a festschrift, bearing witness to the weighty contribution Yadov made to Russian sociology. Volodia, as his friends call him, didn't lose his optimism regarding the country's long term prospects. He continued to take part in debates and show great interest in research, his own and his younger colleagues'. But his mood darkened, as he grew bitter about the curtailments of civil rights and the rise of the virulent nationalist strain in Russian sociology.

My contacts with Yadov intensified in 2006 when my colleague and friend Boris Doktorov started with me the project "International Biography Initiative" – an online venture devoted to documenting the revival of sociology after World War II. With the help of sympathetic scholars, we collected interviews with Russian sociologists, conducted online forums, and promoted biographical methods in social research.⁷ Yadov took a keen interest in the project. He wrote memoirs, sat down for interviews, and supplied rare documents pertaining to the formative years of soviet sociology, its evolution after the demise of Khrushchev's Thaw and transformation under perestroika.

Vladimir Yadov died on July 2, 2015. A few years before his death, he and I began an intense dialogue over the internet about the fate of Russian sociology and the situation in the country. We agreed to challenge each other to the utmost while discussing the compromises scholars had to make in order to survive under the soviet regime, ethical dilemmas faced by intellectuals who chose to emigrate, the moral cost of staying in a country devastated by repression, the transformation soviet sociology underwent following the Gorbachev revolution, the evisceration of free speech under Putin, the waning prospects for political reform, and the future of public sociology in the country where conducting oppositional research and speaking truth to power could cost intellectuals their livelihood, freedom, or even lives.

With poignant frankness, Volodia recalls in our exchanges his bewilderment about a relative who faced purges in the terror campaign of 1937, the uneasiness about his Jewish roots and the desire to conceal his ethnic identity in a country riddled with antisemitism. He confesses that some of the past compromises make him cringe today, that he acted "cowardly when he failed to travel to Moscow and defend [Yuri] Levada at the jaw-boning [ideological] session," that he is ashamed to admit he "remained silent" at some party meetings where his colleagues faced the ritual degradation ceremony.

Volodia talks about the qualities that helped him assemble and keep together a team of committed scholars: "I am choleric by temperament," "an extrovert with explosive character," someone who has "hard time protecting confidential information." But these very qualities, he goes on to say, "facilitated friendly communications" and "helped me build a research team

where the regalia mattered little and the contribution to the common cause was paramount.”

“Truly, Jesus was . . . the first socialist!” Yadov avers when challenged to define his political creed. “I was and remain a proponent of socialism,” he told me proudly. “I am convinced that the social arrangements are just only when democratically elected representatives strive to bridge the glaring income gap between social strata.”

Ruminating about colleagues who chose to emigrate, Yadov explains, “I completely understood them. At the same time, I sensed they were driven by quite different motives.” Fascinatingly, he regales how, in the heyday of perestroika he, as director of the Institute of Sociology, went about selecting young scholars for the study abroad program, waiting anxiously to see “who will return and who will not – the British Council stipulated that everybody must come back.”

Yadov bristles at his colleagues who embrace the ultrapatriotic creed and long for the restoration of the Soviet empire. “In the Soviet era, Osipov, Dobrenkov, Zhukov belonged to “nomenklatura” and they retain this status today. Above all else they value the tokens of ‘Tsar’s favor.’ . . . For as long as I knew Osipov, he was a man devoid of principles who told lies to your face, schemed prodigiously and intrigued against rivals.” He offers a forthright take on the servile scholars and administrators who stuck to their insidious methods through all the changes. Stories about their exploits and betrayals Yadov recounts in these dialogues will someday raise eyebrows among the practitioners of the trade in his homeland. And so will the judgment he passed on today’s political regime and its enforcers.

The full measure of Yadov’s alienation from the current state of affairs comes across in the letter he wrote to me on June 25, 2011: “Toward Putin I feel nothing but loathing. Cruel and cynical man who craves power and feels contempt for his people, he longs for wealth and luxury. What did he say when asked about liberal politicians? He said, ‘All they want is power and money!’ Yet his personal wealth is ensured by his control over the oil pipeline. No doubt this man can blackmail every single person in his entourage, including [President Dmitri] Medvedev. You can imagine how much well-deserved scorn will be poured on this man in 30 years.”

The day isn’t far away when my dialogues with Yadov find their way to Russia and show the grave concern Volodia felt in his last years about the cause he fought for his entire life.⁸

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Whether you elect to stay on the sidelines of history, find yourself drafted in its battles against your will, or enlist in its cause voluntarily, you face moral dilemmas and incur material costs.⁹ At the end of his days, Yadov considered himself “a very lucky man.” To my associate Boris Doktorov, he intimated that he led “an uncommonly happy life.” Key reasons for that, I believe, are the battles he chose to wage and the brawls he stayed away from. Vladimir Yadov exemplifies an emotionally intelligent being in the world. He lived a life where emotions were intelligent and he kept his intelligence emotionally sane. He struck compromises and made

mistakes, he saw his dreams come true and crushed again, yet he didn't give up hope and kept soldering on when the resistance seemed futile.

Today we remember Vladimir Yadov, the man of humility and courage. We celebrate the life of a public intellectual who aided history willingly, altered the trajectory of several institutions, and left lasting memories about himself. The world is a better place because people like Yadov are found in our midst.

Notes

¹ *Global Dialogues*, Volume 6, Issue 4, 2016.

² See D. Shalin "[The Development of Soviet Sociology, 1956-1976.](#)" *Annual Review of Sociology* 4 (1978): 171-91; "[Between the Ethos of Science and the Ethos of Ideology.](#)" *Sociological Focus* 12 (1979): 175-93; "[Marxist Paradigm and Academic Freedom.](#)" *Social Research* 47 (1980): 361-82; B. Firsov, *History of Soviet Sociology, 1950s-1980s* (in Russian). St. Petersburg: European University of St. Petersburg (2012).

³ D. Shalin, "[Sociology for the Glasnost Era: Institutional and Substantive Change in Recent Soviet Sociology.](#)" *Social Forces* 68 (1990): 1-21. B. Doktorov, [Contemporary Russian Sociology. Historical and Biographical Investigations](#) (in Russian). Moscow (2014),

⁴ *Vivat Yadov! On His Eightieth Birthday* (in Russian). Moscow: Institute of Sociology RAN. (2009).

⁵ B. Firsov, *Dissent in USSR and Russia, 1945-2008* (in Russian). St. Petersburg: European University of St. Petersburg (2010); A. Alekseev, *Dramatic Sociology and Sociology of Auto-reflexivity*. Vols. 1-4, St. Petersburg: Norma (2003). See also D. Shalin, "[Settling Old Accounts.](#)" *Christian Science Monitor*. 1989, December 29; and "[Ethics of Survival.](#)" *Christian Science Monitor*. 1990, December 4; "[Reforms in the USSR: Muckraking, Soviet Style.](#)" *Chicago Tribune*, 1987, February 16.

⁶ V. Yadov, "A Sordid Story (in Russian)." *Troitsky Bulletin*, December 6, 2011; D. Shalin, "Becoming a Public Intellectual: Advocacy, National Sociology, and Paradigm Pluralism," pp. 331-371 in D. Shalin, [Pragmatism and Democracy: Studies in History, Social Theory and Progressive Politics](#) (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2011).

⁷ *International Biography Initiative*, UNLV Center for Democratic Culture, <http://cdclv.unlv.edu//programs/bios.html>.

⁸ "From Dialogues of Vladimir Yadov and Dmitri Shalin" (in Russian), *Public Opinion Herald*, No. 3-4, pp. 194-219 (2015), http://cdclv.unlv.edu//archives/articles/vy_ds_dialogues.pdf.

⁹ "[Emotional Barriers to Democracy Are Daunting,](#)" *Los Angeles Times*, 1993, Wednesday, October 27; "[Vladimir Putin: Instead of Communism, He Embraces KGB Capitalism.](#)" *Las Vegas Review Journal*, 2007, October 24.