



The Sociology of Culture in the Soviet Union and Russia: The Missed Turn

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Abstract

This article maps the development of the sociology of culture in the Soviet Union and Russia from pre-Soviet to post-Soviet times. The analysis highlights the effects of two groups of factors – one cultural, the other structural – the combination of which brought about various patterns at each stage of the discipline’s development. Because of the political environment within which they worked, Soviet researchers of culture had to employ strategies of resistance to survive. The three most common were: finding niches in related, ideologically neutral disciplines; doing purely empirical work; or, in contrast, critiquing ‘bourgeois social theories’. They also opted to work in the modes of reading rather than writing, oral discussions rather than publishing, and communication with like-minded colleagues rather than debates with opponents. Contemporary Russian sociology of culture displays this inheritance in being structured by the opposition between isolation and international integration, as well as the tension between an elitist vision of culture and the economically centered worldview which has been dominant since the 1990s.

Keywords

cultural sociology, cultural turn, Russia, sociology of culture, Soviet Union, history of sociology, sociologists, sociological theory, sociological research

Introduction

Sociology has moved beyond the period of national schools. Cultural sociology¹ is no exception. However, a global, united sociology, which might seem to be an alternative to the co-existence of individual national schools, does not exist either (Pelayo, 2015), and its very possibility has been the subject of debate since at least the end of the 1980s (Albrow, 1990). Instead, different patterns emerge from the tension between the opposing tendencies

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of internationalization and indigenization (Quah, 1993). Each of these tendencies, in turn, is represented by different, sometimes conflicting projects, such as 'global/provincialized' inclusive sociologies (Pelayo, 2015) versus the international domination of American sociology² (Hiller, 1979), and 'reactive' versus 'proactive' ways of indigenization (Archer, 1990: 2). In the case of studying culture, this diversity is especially significant because it is deeply interconnected with national contexts of thinking, treating, and researching culture as well as with local political, institutional and ideological structures. This is why national histories of research in the field of culture are instructive.

The Russian case is especially revealing. Along with the influence of Western philosophical, anthropological, and sociological theories, the field of the sociology of culture first developed under the considerable constraints imposed by the Soviet regime. Then it was influenced by the major social changes that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. More recently, it has transformed in light of academic policies favoring globalization and in response to an enlivened public sphere. All along, the discipline has carried the *gravitas* of 19th-century Russian philosophical and literary thought.

Yet, even if Russian philosophical, religious and cultural heritage generally lies within the contours of the European academic landscape, the alternative historical path of the Soviet period – which brought the experience of isolationism, intense ideological pressure, and institutional constraints – has had peculiar effects on the circulation of ideas, the development of cultural sociology and the configurations of academic life. These circumstances forced Soviet researchers of culture to devise strategies of resistance and survival. Some found niches in related and ideologically neutral disciplines, while others did purely empirical work. Another option was to work within the genre of abstract theoretical criticism of the 'bourgeois social theories'. Their projects were often inspired by the traditions of old Russian sociology, literary studies, linguistics, semiotics and philosophy, but they often could only realize them through reading rather than writing, oral discussions rather than publishing, and communication with like-minded colleagues rather than through debates and polemics.

Because of these conditions, Soviet sociology missed out on the 'cultural turn' which intensified international dialogue on culture and created some coherence among disparate academic schools. Its absence from this major intellectual event is remarkable given the growing interest in culture among Soviet sociologists in the 1960s and 1970s. It has also had long-term consequences; eventually, this led to the current state of affairs in which the discipline has become thematically and institutionally disconnected and interest in sociological studies of culture has declined among the public and academics. However, the current growth of an international cultural-sociological agenda offers an opportunity to turn the rich pre-history of the sociology of culture in Russia into academic forms that are more developed, more internationally integrated and more in line with the formula proposed by Margaret Archer: '[w]e predicate unicity, we explore diversity, we elaborate universality' (Archer, 1990: 2).

Factors and Periods

In this article, I argue that there are several factors which not only shape the development of the field of the sociology of culture in Russia; they also effect the autonomy of science and academic life as well as the academic interests of scholars. For the purposes of analysis and clarity, I will divide these factors into two spheres.

The first sphere is cultural, and encompasses the 'internal environment' (Alexander and Smith, 2003) of academic action. This includes cultural patterns, styles of thinking, and research traditions; in other words, it consists of the cultural structures of national sociological thinking about culture. The Soviet period had drastic consequences for the sociology of culture: mature forms were unable to develop, causing them to become dispersed across several related disciplines. As a result, the legacy of research traditions and ways of thinking about culture has become reduced to somewhat vague patterns of cultural imagination.

The second sphere encompasses the external environments of academic action, its structural and material contexts. The political, institutional, and (to a certain extent) economic forces which transformed Soviet/Russian sociology in general also altered the sociology of culture. The period in Russian history I discuss consists of several shocks of global proportions that dramatically affected political, social, and academic life.

Both cultural and structural/material factors might appear as 'drivers' and 'constraints' of academic action. 'Cultural drivers' and 'structural constraints' is the more typical pattern; however, other combinations also exist. For example, since the very beginning of the Soviet period, Russia has been a country with a very focused and invasive policy in the sphere of culture. The 'cultural revolution' project, which was launched by Lenin in the early 1920s and which lasted until 1939, was one of the most ambitious long-term projects in cultural policy in the world (Kurennoy, 2013). Another example is the Soviet Ministry of Culture, established in 1953, which became the first ministry of culture in the world. It created a precedent by establishing a pattern of management in the realm of culture.

A simple periodization of Russian/Soviet sociology delineates five stages. The first is pre-Soviet sociology, which starts from the second half of the 19th century³ and finishes after the Russian Revolution in 1917. It developed in line with European intellectual trends, although these trends were remarkably affected by social and political life (Batygin, 1998). Thus, not only Russian Marxists, but also positivists, Hegelians and neo-Kantians were equally critical of tradition and established social institutions. Gennady Batygin characterized this period of Russian sociology as the 'rationalization of nihilism' (Batygin, 1998: 25); he stressed that the 'Russian intelligentsia's belief in the scientific reorganization of society became an important prerequisite for the triumph of the Marxist sociological worldview' (p. 26). At the same time, Russian sociology had an important and internationally recognized specificity (Hecker, 1915), having absorbed the legacy of the Russian literature, philosophy and especially religious thought.

The next stage of early Soviet sociology had a less clearly defined endpoint, lasting until the late 1920s or early 1930s. What characterized this period were the impetuses of Marxism and Soviet cultural policy. In addition to being the time of academic 'afterlife' – when emerging 'proletarian scholars' were gradually superseding the 'bourgeois professorate' and several important sociologists were expatriated (Batygin, 1998: 23–25; Simirenko, 1966: 19) – it was also the era that ended with a ban on sociology in the Soviet Union. These first two periods were strongly focused on culture, which meant that the general decline of sociology in Russia would threaten the sociology of culture with extinction.

The ban was lifted in the 1950s after the Soviet delegation visited the Third ISA World Congress of Sociology in Amsterdam in 1956. This visit resulted in nothing less than the

revival of institutionalized Soviet sociology, the establishment of the Soviet Sociological Association in 1958, and the proliferation of academic positions and events (Batygin, 1998: 33–34; Shalin, 1978). This third period, when enthusiasm thrived within a complex and non-homogeneous structure, ended in 1972 when the political and ideological conservatism that had been gathering steam finally achieved institutional change in Soviet sociology. This marks the beginning of the fourth period in which the ongoing efforts to institutionalize sociology had to contend with the shadow cast by stagnation. This continued until Perestroika was introduced in the late 1980s. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 ushered in the final period which continues to the present day.

I argue that the most important events influencing the present situation – as well as future trends – happened during the third and fourth periods, that is, between the 1950s and the 1980s. The earlier stages form a pre-history, which is too distant to have had a direct influence. As for the final stage, the internationalization of a cultural-sociological agenda has been its most prominent feature. The decline of the national schools prompts a consideration of the development of national sociologies of culture.

Rather than proceeding chronologically and structuring my analysis using the periods of Russian/Soviet sociology, the discussion will be organized through the two spheres of factors elaborated above. This allows me to accentuate important leitmotifs which have relevance beyond the Russian case. After explaining my methodology, I provide an overview of the two sets of factors influencing the development of the discipline. Then I explore the most important effects of these factors on the configurations of academic life. In the final sections, I explore the current state of affairs in the sociology of culture in Russia and suggest a vision for the future.

Methodology

The data for this project have been drawn from five complementary sources: reviews of general sociology and the sociology of culture that were published between the last years of the Russian Empire and the present day; empirical and theoretical works published after 1956; memoirs and recollections of the pioneers who revitalized Soviet sociology that were published in the 1990s and the 2000s; PhD dissertations in the sociology of culture completed between 2009 and 2013; and interviews with five leading experts in the fields of the sociology of culture and cultural studies that were conducted in 2014.

The research has been built on the analysis and exegesis of these data sources, which has enabled a cultural-sociological reconstruction of academic forms of life that are shaped by cultural and material factors. The relevance of a source was determined by its potential influence on the current state of affairs.

It is possible to find several monographs and reviews of Soviet/Russian sociology describing the field in general, many of which are published in Russian and international journals (Bikbov and Gavrilenko, 2002, 2003; Filippov, 2013; Greenfield, 1988; Simirenko, 1966; Zdravomyslov, 1995). However, it is revealing that very few such works are specifically about the sociology of culture (Kogan, 1998; Sogomonov, 1998). In addition to academic publications, it is important to consider recent attempts by the pioneers of Soviet sociology to reconstruct the fate of several generations of Soviet sociologists (Doctorov, 2013; Kon, 2008; Yadov, 2014; Zaslavskaya, 2007). These reconstructions

often combine autobiographical and substantive reflections. The group of recent PhD dissertations defended in the specialization of the 'sociology of culture and spiritual life'⁴ has served as a subsidiary source of information.

Reconstructing the Soviet period of the sociology of culture, however, introduces a serious methodological problem: the lack of documentation. Firstly, for historical and stylistic reasons, the Soviet sociological academy had a strong bias in favor of oral forms of communication. Accordingly, important events, trends and facts were never documented. Secondly, keywords are misleading in many cases. Because of censorship, Soviet scholars used titles and keywords to camouflage rather than spell out the real substance of their work. Finally, social science institutions often used pseudonyms. As a result, Soviet researchers of culture worked in institutions such as the Lenin Library or the All-Soviet Research Institute of Technical Aesthetics, and published their works in journals such as *Decorative Arts in USSR*. These obstacles complicate the tracking of ideas and studies, revealing gaps which can only be filled by personal recollections. To this end, I interviewed five important figures of Soviet/Russian sociology and cultural studies to supplement the textual analysis.⁵

Factors Influencing the Progress and Development of the Sociological Study of Culture

Cultural Factors

Culture was one of the core motifs of Russian sociology before the October Revolution. Sociological studies of culture mostly focused on the two key spheres of Russian intellectual life: religion and literature. The sacredness of these spheres reinforced romanticism's understanding of culture as a special realm of the highest moral integrity.

Sociological theories of culture had already developed in Russia by the turn of the 20th century (Kogan, 1998: 325). This intellectual endeavor was supported by the expansion of empirical research through large-scale surveys and the monitoring of literacy rates. But this progress was short lived. The 'after-life' that followed the Revolution only lasted 15 years; politically driven change would alter the dominant philosophical perspective into a culturally insensitive version of Marxism which eventually resulted in the total ban on sociology. What survived despite the ban was the romanticized understanding of the concept 'culture', both as an academic inclination and as common sense, and the dedication to studies of literature and reading. Together these preserved a distinct line of research in the sociology of culture in Russia through all the stages of development, from the 19th century to the present.

The commonsense meaning of the term 'culture' depends to a large extent on the specific national intellectual history, and in Russia this meaning is still shared by scholars and the 'lay' public. Raymond Williams once distinguished three distinct meanings of the term 'culture' in the social sciences (Williams, 1983: 90–91). The first refers to the Enlightenment understanding of personal and collective development. The second indicates a wide scope of meaningful entities, such as a way of life, beliefs and practices, and since the time of Tylor's *Primitive Culture* (1871) it has generally been associated with the anthropological understanding of the term. The third meaning distinguishes a

specific domain of advanced artistic and intellectual activities, such as literature, theatre, and music, but it can also extend to the humanities more broadly and include religion, philosophy and scholarship.

Philip Smith and Alexander Riley suggest that the three meanings outlined by Williams are supposed to represent different stages of academic thinking about culture (though in a different order than Williams had specified them). Whereas the first and the third refer to traditions that were once dominant in the social sciences, the second meaning of culture corresponds to the contemporary stage in the sociology of culture; consensus has formed around the anthropological understanding of culture at least since the 'cultural turn' (Smith and Riley, 2009). What distinguishes the second definition of culture from the others is value neutrality.

Russian scholarship is out of step with this international consensus because of its historical heritage. As a result of missing out on the cultural turn, the value-neutral conceptualization of culture is not fully embraced by the broader Russian public, nor many researchers of culture, for whom culture never lost the capital letter 'C' in its title. This view contributes to a cultural pessimism towards mass culture as well as a disenchantment or lack of faith in the ability of cultural sociology to provide robust explanations. From the 1960s to the 1980s, researchers were enthusiastic about culture because it offered a way to avoid the dogmatism of the Soviet Marxism, but this enthusiasm waned as economic centrism became more dominant. Through the next two decades, a post-Marxist anti-cultural 'culture of suspicion' became a recurring theme in Russian common sense.

The presupposition for such a view is a refusal to recognize contemporary mass culture as culture, whether that is because it is held to be vulgar and simple, or because it is believed to encourage people to be passive, irresponsible, and non-reflexive. Boris Dubin, an esteemed Russian sociologist of culture who was principal researcher of the Levada Center (one of the most prominent Soviet/Russian intellectual groups), made this point explicitly:

The phrase 'Russian culture' has become commonplace today. However, it is far from obvious that one could responsibly apply the notion of culture to the reality of contemporary Russia. Of course, a domestic humanities scholar is accustomed to finding 'culture' everywhere – from ancient Mesopotamia to today's graffiti on Arbat Street, without any difficulty. (Dubin, 2008: 67)

The romanticized understanding of culture, rooted in 'old' Russian philosophy and unchallenged by the conventions brought by the 'cultural turn', justified researchers' placement of 'genuine' culture into the category of the sacred, in opposition to the profane/mundane zone of 'mass culture'.

Another influential legacy is the longstanding opposition of Westernization and isolationism in Russian cultural and political life. At the most general level, Westernization stresses the European roots of Russian culture and seeks to reinforce this connection through particular Western patterns in political and social life. In contrast, isolationism points to Russian specificity, if not self-sufficiency, and its independence from any external patterns. Historically, this opposition has taken various forms, and its continuity is debatable. However, it has remained intense enough to influence both the public conscience and the social sciences since the first half of the 19th century, when debates raged between the 'Westernizers' and the 'Slavophiles' (Hecker, 1915).

In international sociology, the specificity of national contexts has often been seen as a reason to avoid following dominant sociological patterns in both theoretical and empirical realms of inquiry (Hiller, 1979: 128). In the Soviet case, this argument has been stated even more emphatically at the official level; Soviet sociology, which was supposed to contribute to the formation of a new kind of man, saw itself as dealing with 'social problems which mankind has not faced before' (Osipov and Yovchuk, 1963: 621).

In post-Soviet Russian sociology, the project of isolation is represented by a new traditionalism and civilizational approach which claims to build a special sociology for a special country. Unlike the Soviet approach, it appeals to the distinctness of Russia's philosophical and religious roots, its geographic situation, and its historical heritage. This remains very much a project of isolation, which is generally based on a belief that Western social thought is of limited relevance and value. However, the theoretical resources marshaled for this project do not appear to be exclusively or even mainly domestic, at least with respect to Alexander Dugin, the most important representative of this perspective; rather, they grow from European conservative thought (such as the French New Right) and revisions of the civilizational approach (see, for example, Dugin, 2009).

The 'Westernizing' tendency is represented by a small but growing number of universities and research centers. Scholars affiliated with these institutions seek to integrate into global sociology, and because they value international as well as national recognition, they have made an effort to gain visibility abroad. Unsurprisingly, the 'anthropological' concept of culture dominates among these cultural researchers. Thus, it would appear that Dubin's 'domestic humanities scholar' is not actually that domestic.

The representatives of these two tendencies form a minority in Russian academia. They are surrounded by thousands of teachers and researchers in universities and institutes across the country who cannot be classified as advocating either tendency. While most of them object to the civilizational approach and reject a particular traditionalism, the 'Westernizing' project looks even more threatening because it demands that they develop radically new skills. For established professionals, this amounts to an implicit or explicit devaluation of their current credentials and their academic background; in this project, their current *modus operandi*, not to mention the whole Soviet sociological past they have inherited, could be rendered irrelevant.

Because the isolation versus integration debate continues a long-term opposition within Russian political and intellectual life, and because it defines the most prominent and passionately argued positions in Russian sociology, these two tendencies are sure to have the greatest impact on the future of the discipline. As for the sacralized view of culture as the sphere of the sublime, this is best left at level of the 'collective unconscious'.

Structural and Material Factors

Policy has been a driver of sociology in Russia since the Soviet era. At the beginning of the 20th century, Russian sociology was part of an international academic community that included prominent and internationally recognized sociologists.⁶ However, the situation changed dramatically after the Bolshevik Revolution: because there could only be one true theory of social development, sociology was declared a hostile 'bourgeois science'. From this point onward, political principles and mechanisms directed the course of the discipline; this influence can be seen in the decline of Russian sociology after the 1917 revolution, the

attempt at academic resistance in the 1920s, the wholesale prohibition of the discipline in the 1930s, the revival of sociology in the 1950s and 1960s, and the difficulties it faced in 1970s.

The decline of sociology was a gradual process, especially in the sphere of culture. What slowed it down was the new cultural policy and, to a lesser extent, the inertia of academic life. Political reason was a great project in Lenin's Cultural Revolution which continued into the late 1930s (Kurennoy, 2013). The project aimed to create a new anthropological type – builder of Communism – and championed education and enlightenment. To achieve such dramatic change, Soviet ideologists required a better understanding of the current state of affairs.

To this end, a large number of empirical studies of cultural life were conducted during the 1920s and early 1930s, many of them based on earlier work by sociologists and art theorists. For example, a massive survey of readers' interests was administered in active units of the Red Army in 1920 during the Russian Civil War (Glushchenko, 2013).⁷ Other surveys studied art audiences, measuring aesthetic perception and response,⁸ the commercial aspects of the art production, and the social and demographic characteristics of the spectators (Kogan, 1998).

The momentum of the academy slowed over the course of the 1930s,⁹ gradually grinding to a halt until the 1950s when sociology had to start over from scratch. Its rebirth was – again – the result of a political decision: the Soviet Union needed a voice at international sociological congresses and conferences. Politics was also a priority at the institutional level: the Soviet Sociological Association was created a decade before the first large sociological institute in the Academy of Sciences (Bikbov and Gavrilenko, 2002), which demonstrates that nomination and representation directed by the political will was far more important than research agendas.

The 1960s were a time of great hope in the Soviet Union as well as in the West. That optimistic mood was especially important for a fledgling sociology; enthusiastic neophytes who were not trained as sociologists were as convinced of the breathtaking possibilities of the rediscovered science as the discipline's founding fathers had been at the end of the 19th century. Unsurprisingly, like their 19th-century counterparts, many of the first Soviet sociologists were positivists.

The political liberalization unleashed by Khrushchev's 'Thaw' added momentum to this surge in sociological activity. Culture became an oasis, offering emancipation from the predominant economic determinism. When Khrushchev's 'Thaw' turned into Brezhnev's stagnation, culture was converted from an oasis to a refuge, and the sub-fields of the sociology of culture which appeared ideologically neutral became niches where scholars could hide non-Marxist frameworks from the disciplining 'eye' of the authorities. This strategy, however, had some drawbacks.

Effects and Consequences

The Cost of Isolation: The 'Anisotropy' of Soviet Sociology and the 'Time of Oral Sociology'

For the discipline of sociology, one of the most drastic consequences of the Soviet era was its disconnection from the international agenda. Having been resuscitated for the

benefit of Soviet international relations, Soviet sociology increasingly became an insular project. What is even more peculiar upon closer examination is that the separation from the international scene was asymmetrical and unreciprocated.

A small but prominent group of Russian sociologists has remained engaged with international sociology. To know Western sociology meant (and still means) to be academically well versed. The 'adoption' ('*vvedenie v oborot*') of a Western sociological theory or concept into Soviet academic usage has become a standard technique in PhD dissertations, and is supposed to signal a trustworthy contribution. In the same vein, many of the most famous Russian sociologists today built their reputations through the 1970s and 1980s by translating classical and contemporary Western sociological literature.

Finally, mention must be made of a special institution, The Institute for Scientific Information on Social Sciences, which collects, translates, reviews and analyzes internationally published books and articles in the social sciences. In the Soviet period, the purpose of this institution was to serve the demands of the ideological struggle. The strategic importance of this task ensured that the institute was well-funded and efficiently organized. A number of prominent Soviet sociologists have worked under its auspices, which gave them full and easy access to the newest international books and articles (an unobtainable luxury for the rest of the academy). One of the experts I interviewed recalled working there and even suggested that in 1970s they had read more Western academic literature than their Western colleagues. Talcott Parsons' impressions during his visit to the USSR in 1964 also confirm that Soviet sociologists were familiar with Western literature (Parsons, 1965: 123).

However, Soviet and post-Soviet Russian sociologists rarely published their research in Western journals, and this remains the case today; only recently has this started to change. Irina Savelieva and Andrey Poletayev found that from 1993 to 2008, Russian (by affiliation) sociologists have published no more than 47 regular articles in all of the sociology journals included in the Web of Science database (excluding *Sotsiologicheskoe Issledovaniya*, a Russian-language journal); furthermore, starting in 2000, they were publishing 2–3 articles a year (Savelieva and Poletayev, 2009: 18–19). These figures reveal that Soviet and post-Soviet sociology in general and the sociology of culture in particular were 'anisotropic' fields: the messages of academic communication travelled in only one direction – from West to East.

Why would the best Soviet scholars appreciate Western sociology to the highest degree, but not endeavor to publish in Western journals? This enigmatic 'anisotropy' is so strange that it deserves a cultural-sociological explanation. In a sense, it resembles mystical communication with a supernatural reality: the believers investigate, interpret, discuss and disseminate its messages with rapt attention, but they do not dare to generate messages themselves, besides oral communications, such as prayers. Western sociology, accordingly, has become an abstract reality beyond any possibility of feedback, though wise priests, of course, harnessed their hermeneutical power and struggled for the right to produce legitimate interpretations to be shared among the Russian-speaking community.

This metaphor becomes even more apt when considering scholars who had access to Western literature during the Soviet era but who were not part of the Soviet academic

establishment; only this elite group enjoyed some international communication, and it did not include any sociologists of culture. One of the cultural scholars I interviewed explained how the idea of publication in international journals was unthinkable in his academic milieu: 'we didn't have it even as an idea – to publish our articles in the West ... I knew that I'd never go abroad'. Consequently, when real communication suddenly became possible after Perestroika, it came as a shock: 'when travels abroad were made possible a funny effect appeared: the people I knew from books – just a name, the printed letters – you would suddenly meet them in the flesh and start to discuss ... very funny, the characters are taking on life'.

There were, of course, 'hard' reasons for such non-engagement. Publishing a paper in an international journal was risky; it could stifle career development, and in some circumstances, it could even be treated as an anti-Soviet activity. Additionally, few Soviet scholars were proficient enough in English to write academic papers in that language. Another contributing factor was that some of the important emerging figures in Soviet sociology were 'in disgrace' (which might mean banned from publishing) because of the turnover in staffing at the Institute for Concrete Social Research in 1972.

This staffing turnover remains one of the most discussed events in the history of Soviet sociology. When Mikhail Rutkevich was first appointed director of the institute in 1972, many assumed that he was chosen to increase ideological control over sociology. After four years of firings and closing down centers, Rutkevich himself was dismissed on the grounds that he challenged the ideological curator of the institute (Batygin, 1998: 38). The changes in personnel initiated a powerful and lasting conservative turn toward the ideologization of academic work, and several scholars were pushed aside for nearly two decades.

The 'Levada group' was a case in point. Its head, Yury Levada, and those who came to the fore during the early years – including, among others, Lev Gudkov, Boris Dubin, Alexey Levinson – are now among the most famous Soviet/Russian sociologists. The group shared an interest in cultural analysis in sociology, and was undoubtedly one of the most culturally sensitive sociological communities in Soviet sociology in the 1960s and 1970s (Gudkov, 2011).

Intellectual life as a Soviet academic in the humanities revolved around seminar series which gathered interdisciplinary groups of intellectual elites and neophytes. The censorship of oral forms of communication was understandably less strict than for written texts. Several famous seminar series were launched in the late 1950s and early 1960s, including the seminar of the Moscow methodological circle, and the seminar of Revekka Frumkina. One of the most respected among them was the sociological seminar run by Yury Levada and his colleagues, which was launched at the beginning of the 1960s. It embraced the most famous Soviet philosophers, sociologists, historians, philologists and other humanities scholars, many of whom were invited to give lectures at the seminar. On 28 December 1967, the keynote speaker was Talcott Parsons, who had become an influential figure in Soviet social theory.

One of the core themes of the seminar was how to apply resources from cultural anthropology, structuralism, literary theory and other disciplines related to classical sociology to create a culturally sensitive sociological theory. These resources reinforced the group's commitment to classical sociology, especially Durkheim's project of 'sociologie religieuse' and Weber's interpretive sociology, and was later enriched by the German

sociology of culture which emerged in the late 1970s. In addition to international scholarship, which was mostly known through the critical reading, translation and interpretation of literature, the Levada group's sociological inquiries also integrated the rich and advanced resources of Soviet literary studies, structuralism, linguistics and semiotics, as represented by such figures as Sergey Averintsev, Yury Lotman, Vyacheslav Ivanov and Vladimir Toporov.

Linguistics, semiotics, and literary theory, which were the cradle of cultural studies in the West, also became the locus of cultural theorizing in the Soviet Union, but for different reasons. In the latter case these cognate disciplines had been the refuge of non-Marxist theorizing and the 'center of crystallization of all Soviet social science' during the Soviet ban on sociology (Zilberman, 1978: 275, 278). In this regard, the ideas the Levada group created and transmitted in the 1960s and 1970s anticipated the world sociological agenda, and to a certain extent foreshadowed the culturally sensitive perception of Durkheim's later work in sociology and the foundation of the 'strong program' in cultural sociology by Jeffrey Alexander and his colleagues in the mid-1980s (Alexander and Smith, 2003).¹⁰

This concern with culture stemmed from different roots than those that gave rise to the Western cultural turn, and blossomed more or less independently. During the 'Thaw' period, culture became an essential center of gravity for resistance against the Marxists' economic determinism, which was perceived as more restrictive since it was the only permitted mode of understanding social processes for decades. Thus, for this short but glorious time, the sociology of culture became one of the major epicenters of the 'emancipatory pathos'. Unfortunately, due to historical reasons and the style of work of many Soviet sociologists – their focus on reading and discussion rather than writing and publishing – this burst of cultural-sociological activity was not sufficient to lay the foundations for a long-term legacy.

In 1972, the Levada group's institutional base was liquidated along with several other research groups of the Institute of Concrete Social Research. Its members dispersed to several different academic and semi-academic institutions. By that time oral forms of communication had not only become dominant; they were also the only possible mode of exchange for the whole community. Levada's seminar, which was held over many years and moved from institution to institution, became the only organizational form of academic communication. Further intensifying the situation was the ban on publication which was enacted in response to Yury Levada's growing influence; the shadow of this ban covered all his colleagues, reducing their chances for the publication of regular articles in Soviet academic journals. 'That was the main amusement – to read and to discuss' Lev Gudkov told me during his interview, which is why he designated that period 'the time of oral sociology'.¹¹

Strategies of Survival: The Theoretical–Empirical Gap, Institutional Niches, and 'Hide and Seek' Keywords

After the ideological, reactionary turn at the beginning of 1970s, cultural sociology in the Soviet Union withered. Sixtiers'¹² fascination with culture and their emancipatory visions for sociology faded as they were forced to adapt to new forms of academic life. The result was – to borrow Alexander and Smith's distinction – the formation of several

sociologies of culture as sectoral sub-disciplines instead of cultural sociology(-ies) as general sociological research program(s) (Alexander and Smith, 2003).

These constrained circumstances gave rise to three basic survival strategies: hiding in ideologically-neutral sub-disciplinary niches; shifting to purely empirical work (to appear positivist); and camouflaging one's interest in theory via a special genre, the 'criticism of bourgeois sociology'.

Many Soviet scholars whose studies could arguably be seen as part of the sociology of culture worked in the related spheres of ethnography, anthropology, art studies and culturology. The last of these disciplines deserves special attention. The project of culturology, as defined by Leslie White, failed to take root in the international arena. However, a cognominal project gained considerable popularity in Soviet and Russian academia. The Soviet version of culturology, whose connection with the project of White is disputed, emerged in the 1960s under several pseudonyms (a 'hide-and-seek' technique which happened within sociology too), such as 'poetics', 'semiotics', 'works on secondary modeling systems', 'aesthetics', and even 'morphology' (Zenkin, 2012). Along with the aforementioned general attention to culture, the development of the discipline in the USSR was also driven by a renewed interest in local cultures which was very much a backlash against the internationalism of Stalin's epoch (Zenkin, 2012).

Culturology in Russia was institutionalized in the beginning of the 1990s when courses on culture became common at Russian universities, and the Russian Institute of Culturology, which existed from 1932 to 2014 under various names, received its final designation. Another indicator of institutional success was that the Russian governmental committee conferring doctoral degrees specified 'PhD in culturology' as a separate degree. Today the most popular topics in culturology include studies of popular culture, everyday life, urban studies, studies of literature, and the history of ideas and institutions. Many of these studies include components of sociological analysis. Unfortunately, as often happens with interdisciplinary fields, the lack of a disciplinary canon means that many of these studies lack depth. Nowadays, studies of this sort form the mainstream of Russian culturally oriented research, though apparently this problem is not exclusive to the Russian case, considering that there have been similar complaints about cultural studies (see for example the critique of 'decorative sociology' in Rojek and Turner, 2000).

In the 1960s, and especially after the dissolution of the Institute for Concrete Social Research in 1972, many sociologists of culture were squeezed into spheres related to sociology. For example, Gudkov and Dubin worked in the Lenin Library, using literature as an empirical field for the application of their cultural-sociological ideas. Another institutional refuge was the Institute of Technical Aesthetics where scholars led applied projects, such as developing the design of domestic appliances and even a project designing a futuristic taxi cab. This was an institutional niche where scholars often hid their real research interests, such as the sociology of arts and aesthetics, the sociology of everyday life, and the sociology of technology. As a part of this technique of concealment, publication outlets and article keywords were often selected to mislead readers rather than assist them in finding and accurately identifying the focus of their work. As Alexander Bikbov has pointed out, what is crucially important about these techniques is that concepts, definitions, and theoretical distinctions were the result of institutional rather than intellectual processes (Bikbov and Gavrilenko, 2002).

This situation, where sociologists and cultural sociologists scatter to find shelter in other disciplines, should be recognized as a typical ‘maneuver’ in conditions of ideological and political pressure that has precedents. As David Zilberman pointed out, in the 1920s, when sociology first experienced decay in the USSR, the discipline was *de facto* incorporated into linguistics and semiotics (Zilberman, 1978: 278). It should come as no surprise these disciplines provided considerable support for the reinvention of sociology in the USSR in the 1950 and 1960s.

The growth of the empirical-theoretical gap is another important feature of Soviet sociology. Empirical and theoretical work were so alienated from each other that they formed two nearly separate realms of research activity. The number of empirical sociological studies conducted between 1960 and 1990 was so impressive in part because of how many all-Soviet and regional representative surveys were commissioned. Unfortunately, the vast majority of these works are now only remembered by participants in these studies. The resulting publications have not typically been digitized and are rarely indexed by contemporary bibliographical systems; if they are available at all it is through outdated library systems. This vanishing legacy follows the (mis)fortunes of another part of the iceberg hidden beneath the surface – special surveys commissioned and organized secretly by the authorities to inform policies (Batygin, 1998: 31–32). That was another huge endeavor which included large-scale surveys conducted weekly to measure the moods, sentiments and attitudes of different segments of the Soviet population. ‘One could say’, Batygin (1998: 31) claims, ‘a historically unique “mutant” of the empirical social survey has been created under the “iron curtain”’.

When speaking of empirical studies, the sociology of art should be mentioned. Cultural interest in the arts has always been pronounced in the Soviet and Russian academy. A major segment of what could be called the sociology of culture in the USSR was in fact dedicated to the analysis of literature, theater, cinema, painting and other artistic forms. If treated as a separate realm, this vast area of research would demand its own in-depth investigation; providing a complete outline of this field is beyond the scope of this article, especially considering the complex and understudied nature of the issue and the difficulty of defining the borders of sociological inquiry in the field of the art.¹³ It will have to suffice to mention just a few central figures among those who worked both in theoretical and empirical research: Sergey Plotnikov, Yury Davydov, Ehlina Orlova, Natalia Kozlova, Mikhail Zhabskiy, Yury Fokht-Babushkin, Daniil Dandurey, Lev Kogan, and Svetlana Ikonnikova. Empirical works focused on the perception of art, readers’ behavior, and measuring the cultural consumption of different categories of Soviet citizens. Another important contribution was made by sociologists who studied leisure-time pursuits. However, the majority of those studies were conducted using a narrow positivist approach and made little attempt to engage seriously with any sociological theories.

The two important exceptions to the empirical–theoretical polarization must be mentioned. The first one is Marxism-Leninism, the official doctrine of the Soviet Union. However, in many cases connections between empirical data and Marxist theory existed only at a rhetorical level. The theory that seemed most plausible and the best fit with the reality of Soviet society was Parsons’ structural functionalism. Alexander Filippov went as far as calling Parsons ‘the main Soviet sociologist’ (Filippov, 2006: 335), referring to

the dominance of structural functionalism in Soviet sociology from the 1960s until the collapse of the Soviet Union. It continues to be influential in some circles. This theoretical orientation was the most convenient choice in the conditions produced by the stable social (and spatial) structure of Soviet society. Vadim Radaev supports this view, declaring that at the turn of the 21st century, Russian (economic) sociologists are still 'unable to overcome their infatuation with functionalist macro-sociologist schemes inspired by T. Parsons' (Radaev, 2002: 3).

This 'infatuation' with structural functionalism co-existed peacefully with the official Marxist paradigm because it usually remained hidden. Even Parsons himself did not recognize it beyond the heated Marxist criticism of his theory by Soviet sociologists during his first visits to the USSR (Parsons, 1965: 123–124). In Soviet studies of culture in the 1960s, structural functionalism became the first and the main base for attempts to create the sociology of culture as a general sociological theory rather than a specialist concern (for example, the sociology of arts, the sociology of reading).

The theoretical pole was mostly populated by scholars who studied and interpreted Western sociological theories under the pretext of engaging in the 'critique of bourgeois theories'. They effectively brought Western social thought to a Russian-language academic audience, but they rarely dealt with empirical studies. This purely theoretical form of inquiry sometimes influenced dominant paradigms. One notable example is Leonid Ionin's general criticism of both structural functionalism and positivism. His celebrated book, *Interpretive Sociology* (Ionin, 1979), added a new dimension of social thinking for Soviet sociologists and challenged the dominance of Parsons' theory in Soviet sociology.¹⁴

Another influential theoretical debate emerged in the sociology of arts and took place against the backdrop of world disturbances in 1968 (which includes both the explosion of counterculture in the West and the Prague Spring). Powerful conservative criticism by Yury Davydov and Irina Rodnyanskaya took aim at neo-Marxism and counterculture on the one hand and Parsons' theory on the other (Davydov et al., 1980; Davydov and Rodnyanskaya, 1980). They made an important contribution which remains relevant to contemporary cultural sociology: criticizing Parsons' appeal to the formal mechanisms of transmission of culture and stressing the importance of cultural substances. However, proper academic debates such as these remained relatively rare.

The Current State of Affairs

The traumatic history of the sociology of culture in the Soviet Union, and the missed cultural turn, explains why it was marginalized by the discipline in the post-Soviet period. An important cultural cause for the lack of interest in culture among the general public and academics is the economically-centered worldview that has dominated the Russian public sphere and academia since the 1990s; this perspective gained currency as a result of the dramatic social change brought on by the collapse of the socialist project. Thus, the default position in Russia is to disapprove of cultural explanations, and this inevitably reduces their plausibility and potency in academic discourse. It also prevents a view informed by cultural sociology from being voiced in ongoing public

debates, even when the discussion concerns such crucial cultural matters as historical memory. A case in point is the value of Stalin's heritage, in particular, the splitting of Russian cultural codes into the discursive co-existence of the 'two Stalins': the most evil and the greatest. The issue of national history textbooks likewise remains primarily located on the non-academic level of public intellectual debates.

The institutional history has also contributed to its marginalization. Instead of being concentrated in the field of the sociology of culture, academic interest in culture is dispersed among several other disciplines: Russian culturology most of all, but also art criticism (*iskusstvovedenie*), ethnography, philosophy, and other related fields of research. Unsurprisingly, the experts I interviewed agreed that nothing particularly remarkable has happened in Russian sociology of culture during the post-Soviet period. However, the number and quality of works of culturologic research that resonate with sociological concerns is gradually growing (see, for example, Kurennoy, 2012; Samutina, 2013; Stepanov, 2014). In addition, the sociology of culture has started to appear on university curricula.

The era of direct political pressure on scholars seems to have ended, but economic and institutional forces have replaced it to form new constraints. This has significantly affected the thematic map of the discipline. A good example is the rise of the sociology of education. In the 1990s, Russia introduced major educational reforms which created a need for strong research in this area, resulting in the development of education-focused studies in economics, statistics and sociology, including the sociology of culture. As a consequence, even though the sociology of culture is not a specialization primarily concerned with education, the proportion of PhD dissertations related to educational issues among the specialization 'sociology of culture' has gone up to 25 percent in recent years.¹⁵

However, the most important feature of the current period is the gradual internationalization of the discipline. The reasons elaborated above explain why this feature is especially promising for future development. Academic trajectories are most likely to be determined by a scholar or research group's position with respect to internationalization.

A concern with international standing has been a problem for Soviet sociology before. In its earlier incarnation, its main characteristics were the 'anisotropy' of communication. This tendency still exists. However, whereas this communication takes peculiar forms for one part of the academy, it does not exist at all for another part. Mikhail Sokolov and Kirill Titaev described this division through the metaphors of 'aboriginal' and 'provincial' ideal types of science in Russia (Sokolov and Titaev, 2013). 'Aboriginal science' explicitly ignores international agendas, stating the preeminence of the Russian academic discourse ('a special sociology for a special country'). 'Provincial science' uses proximity to international (in this metaphor – metropolitan) science as a main reputational resource. However, because of what I have called 'anisotropy', this proximity is often not reciprocated or even imagined (Sokolov and Titaev, 2013). It is an open question whether Russian sociology of culture will succeed in outgrowing its provinciality.

Among the groups following the strategy of internationalization, one can identify different types of integration. A typical strategy involves importing large-scale Western

empirical projects, such as the 'World Values Survey' and 'European Social Survey', along with underlying conceptions, to the Russian context. The recent examples are international laboratories headed by or under the consultation of Ronald Inglehart and Shalom Schwartz in the Higher School of Economics (Inglehart et al., 2013; Schwartz and Butenko, 2014).

Another strategy involves the popularization of Western cultural theories in the Russian academy. For instance, a group of researchers headed by Natalia Shmatko has translated and interpreted many of the works of Pierre Bourdieu and thus substantially popularized his legacy in Russia. Some have even used his theoretical framework as the basis of their original empirical research in Russia (see, for example, Bikbov and Gavrilenko, 2002, 2003).

My own work lies within the latter strategy, which is worth mentioning at least to reveal the biases affecting the explanatory picture I present in this article. I have been a part of the Cultural Sociological Research Group of the Centre for Fundamental Sociology (Higher School of Economics), a semi-formal union, which promotes and develops the 'strong program' in cultural sociology in Russia, through the publication of translations, analytical works and original research. However, aside from the 'promotion' of cultural sociology in Russian-speaking academia, the members of the group are developing several thematic projects as a part of an international network. The most important empirical areas of these inquiries are: the body, aesthetics, memory, education, and the arts. This does not mean launching a national school, since all the above-mentioned projects are internationally driven. However, there is a special theoretical concern which distinguishes the group from the mainstream in this sub-discipline. This is the thesis of the ambiguity of the sacred, and it contrasts with the dominant position, which equates two basic oppositions: sacred/profane and pure/impure (Kurakin, 2015). This conceptual difference shifts the focus of empirical research towards the analysis of the fluid, conflicting, and violent forms of cultural life, instead of static representations of cultural structures.

Conclusion: A Troubled Past and an Uncertain Future

The Russian context presents a unique case of the development of cultural sociology in inhospitable conditions, which included some of the world's most dramatic political and social shocks of the 20th century, the isolation of the intellectual community, and severe ideological pressure on academics. These specific conditions contributed to the emergence of peculiar forms of academic life, directed the circulation of ideas, and shaped research strategies. Culture as an object of research has been used as an instrument of emancipation, an academic refuge, and a weapon in ideological struggles; it was also experienced as a realm of freedom.

The most important events and effects which were generated by these conditions are: the 'anisotropic' character of academic communication between Soviet and international sociology (when Soviet sociologists read and valued Western literature highly, but did not publish their works in international journals themselves); a strong bias towards oral forms of communication instead of knowledge accumulation through publications; the polarization of academic inquiry which created a chasm

between social theory and empirical work; and the thematic and partial institutional dissolution of the discipline into related disciplinary fields (but mostly Russian culturology). As a result, Soviet/Russian academia was unaffected by the impetus of the cultural turn. The best way to characterize the current state of affairs in the sociology of culture in Russia is the absence of distinct internal drivers of development. Consequently, the most promising direction for the discipline is a further integration into the international research agenda.

Mapping the contemporary field of the Russian sociology of culture is an awkward task. This is in part because interest in the discipline is as low among the public as it is in academic circles. But it is mostly because analyzing the field involves dealing with *what could be called* the sociology of culture rather than the sociology of culture *per se*. The latter is only partially related to the former because the history of the discipline prevented a fully-fledged thematization in the Russian academy.

However, in this respect the Russian case only exaggerates trends that can be found in other national contexts. We can see a great variety of sociologies of culture and *what could be called* sociologies of culture. These include, firstly, specialist sociologies of culture which apply sociological approaches to designated elements of culture (i.e. almost everything from ‘traditional’ objects, such as arts and religion, to topics that have only recently come to be considered cultural, from graffiti to economy). Secondly, there is cultural studies, which has been called the ‘warring twin’ of the sociology of culture (Inglis, 2007). And, thirdly, there are a number of related disciplines, from religious studies to musicology.

The question to be asked, however, is on what grounds these disputed disciplinary territories can be legitimately included in the “sociology of culture”. In other words, what provides the implied integrity of the discipline? What is the center of theoretical gravity? I argue that the only feasible candidate for this role is a cultural sociology which, in contrast to an amorphous and heterogeneous body of sociologies of culture, is a project of general sociological theory. That is why several prominent, theoretically-driven programs that take culture seriously, such as the ‘strong program’ in cultural sociology (Alexander and Smith, 2003), have grown so rapidly in the last 25 years that they have even begun to shape a new sociological mainstream. This should be seen as the pivotal trend for the future development of the sociology of culture both in Russia and worldwide. At the very least, this justifies putting theory ahead of methodology in the practical integration and review of cultural sociology.

Russian sociology cannot boast any domestically grown but internationally significant schools in the sociology of culture. However, it has a rich pre-history that encouraged sociological research in related disciplines (i.e., Russian culturology, linguistics, semiotics, arts criticism, literary theory and ethnography) as well as fostered deep philosophical and literary traditions of cultural reflection. The good news, however, is that the era of national schools in sociology has passed, and the forces of internationalization hold great promise for the future of the discipline.

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Notes

1. In a strict sense, I share the contradistinction introduced by Jeffrey Alexander and Philip Smith between cultural sociology, implying the autonomy of culture, and the sociology of culture, which ‘treats culture as a dependent variable’ (Alexander and Smith, 2003). However, in this article I only use this distinction when explicitly setting these two notions against one another. Elsewhere, I follow a broader convention of using these terms as synonyms.
2. In the case of cultural research, foreign dominance is not exclusively American. A crucial case to mention is British cultural studies. As cultural theories are even more culturally dependent on their original context than other sociological programs, some authors point to the restricted potential of its globalization beyond the British national, or at any rate English-speaking, context (Stratton and Ang, 1996).
3. In this periodization, I put aside the period of ‘proto-sociology’ dated by Alex Simirenko as 1782–1870 (Simirenko, 1966).
4. In Russia all PhD degrees require the approval of the government committee called the ‘All-Russian accreditation commission’ which specifies certain specializations and demands. ‘Sociology of culture and spiritual life’ is one of six sociological specializations that can currently be chosen. In 2016, reforms came into effect which will grant a few distinguished universities the right to award degrees autonomously.
5. The scholars interviewed were not selected to comprise a complete cross section of Soviet/Russian sociology of culture, but to fill the informational gaps I discovered by working with limited materials. Leonid Ionin, who is a professor at the Higher School of Economics (HSE) is a pioneer of interpretive sociology in the Soviet Union. He also wrote the most famous book on the sociology of culture in Russia. Alexander Filippov is a leading Russian social theorist and the head of the Centre for Fundamental Sociology at the HSE. He was a student of Yury Davydov, who was one of the most important cultural theorists in Soviet sociology. Lev Gudkov is a leading Russian public sociologist, the head of the ‘Levada-center’, a student of Yury Levada, and secretary for his famous sociological seminar. Alexander Gofman is one of Russia’s leading specialists in the history of sociology, a professor of sociology at the HSE and a student of Igor Kon, the pioneer of the theory of personality and gender studies in the USSR. Vitaly Kurennoy is one of the leading figures in cultural studies in Russia, and the head of the School of Cultural Studies at the HSE. I am grateful to them and to the other scholars I consulted for sharing their thoughts on the progress of the sociology of culture and related disciplines in the Soviet Union and Russia, and for their evidence and penetrating insights which greatly benefited my work. All possible aberrations from the truth, confusions and false inferences remain exclusively mine.
6. It is sufficient to mention Pitirim Sorokin, a Russian sociologist (Nichols, 2012), the author of *Social and Cultural Dynamics* (four volumes, 1937–1941), who became the President of the American Sociological Association after emigrating.
7. For a further analysis of Soviet readers see Dobrenko (1997).
8. For example, Vsevolod Meyergold, a prominent stage director and theater theorist, developed a 20-point scale of spectators’ behavior, ranging from ‘silence’ to ‘throwing things onto the stage’ (Kogan, 1998: 328–329).
9. The ban on sociology under the Soviet regime might also have had to do with the proscription of Nikolay Bukharin, who was a major supporter of sociology in early Soviet Russia. The decline of his political career began in 1929, and he was executed in 1938. I am grateful to Irina Glushchenko for her sophisticated commentary concerning the political context of the decline of sociology in the Soviet Union.
10. The investigations of Levada group did not make any impact on those ideas and theories because of the above mentioned ‘anisotropy’ of the Soviet social sciences.

11. I speculate that the current tendency among Russian sociologists and scholars in the humanities to use Facebook as a primary means for academic and semi-academic debates directly descends from this Soviet-era discussion culture.
12. The ‘Sixtiers’ are the generation of Soviet intelligentsia who came to the fore during the ‘Thaw’ in the 1960s. They shared humanistic and liberal views, were strongly critical of totalitarianism and Stalin’s regime, and created a specific lifestyle and culture.
13. The concept of ‘the sociology of art’ has not been of much use, and existing studies have mostly borrowed some gravitas from more mature and institutionalized fields, such as art criticism.
14. One of my interviewees mentioned that the book immediately became a rarity.
15. My calculation is based on the web database of the Russian State Library, and includes all the dissertations defended for the specialization of the ‘sociology of culture’ between 2009 and 2013. In accordance with the law, the library archives all the manuscripts of doctoral dissertations defended in Russia.

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