

Vlada Baranova

Soyuz.ru, or How to Restructure Russian Anthropology

‘Social Anthropology in Russia: Research and Teaching, Past and Present’, a colloquium organised with the support of the Higher School of Economics (HSE) by Zhanna Kormina (HSE-SPb.), Sergei Abashin (Institute of Ethnography and Anthropology (IAE), Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow), and Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov (University of Cambridge), which took place on 11–13 September 2007 at the town of Pushkin near St Petersburg, addressed a wide range of issues and led to lively discussions. There were three main groups of papers, presented by scholars from Princeton, Saratov State University, the University of Tartu, Yerevan, and the Centre for Pontic and Caucasian Studies in Krasnodar as well as from the HSE, IAE, and Cambridge: the study of anthropology at university level, social anthropology as an academic discipline, and the special features of the Russian academic community.

The first topic, the study of anthropology at universities, generated commentaries on different traditions of teaching. While Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov described the situation at Cambridge, Nonna Shahnazarian (Centre for Pontic and Caucasian Studies) analysed the teaching of anthropology at universities in Armenia,

Nagorny-Karabakh, and Georgia. Aimar Wenzel (Tartu) criticised the unreflective use of the term 'Eurasia' and 'Eurasianism' in academic contacts between East and the West. Elza-Bair Guchinova (IAE/Yerevan) looked at the anthropology course-books currently available in the Russian language – which, unfortunately, on the whole demonstrate exactly what university teaching materials in the subject should *not* be like. After a discussion on whether a standard set book was or was not desirable for teaching anthropology and whether those present would actually use such a book, whatever it was like, those present came to the conclusion that it was vital to create a 'virtual library' of materials on social, cultural, visual etc. anthropology, so that universities in the Russian provinces would also be able to access this material over the Net.

As part of the next group of papers, Elena Yarskaya-Smirnova (Saratov State University) addressed the field of social anthropology: 'between market economics, social engineering, and pure science', and shared her experiences of setting up a department in the subject at her university. In Russia, departments of social anthropology may be located in a range of different faculties – history, sociology, philosophy – and often this institutional location has a direct impact on terminology and methodology. Both Sergei Sokolovsky (IAE, editor of *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie*) and Igor Kuznetsov (Centre for Pontic and Caucasian Studies) concerned themselves with the disciplinary boundaries of social anthropology, with Kuznetsov, in particular, attempting to save the subject from the Scylla of history and the Charybdis of sociology. Both these talks and the discussion following them affirmed that one of the besetting problems of anthropology in today's Russia is the basic choice of subject matter. Researchers avoid 'sensitive' topics such as the anthropology of war, or social deprivation and social atomisation, a situation is traceable both to methodological dogmatism (it is held that modern urban society should be studied by sociologists, not anthropologists) and with anxieties about addressing 'political subjects' (or, at the very least, the reluctance to espouse an explicitly civic position).

What characterises the day-to-day existence and forms of self-representation in post-Soviet space and Eastern Europe? Ludek Broz (University of Cambridge) argued that modern Czech anthropologists fall into four groups: the 'classics' of Czech anthropology, those who concentrate on teaching, those primarily preoccupied with field work, and young anthropologists, who have been strongly influenced by Anglo-American writing. All of these observations are, of course, to a large extent true of Russian anthropology as well. At the same time, there was a good deal of discussion at the conference of whether there actually is a unified community of anthropologists and/or ethnographers. For example, Sergei Shtyrkov (EU-SPb.) chose to see the practice of Russian social anthropologists as characterised in

particular by a number of linguistic tags, e.g. the use of such oppositions as *informant* – *informator*, *ethnic group* – *ethnos*. These specificities of usage become a way of defining disciplinary boundaries.

Serguei Oushakine (Princeton) attempted to analyse the modern Russian anthropological community using the classic model of interaction between negative and positive group identity.

So is it possible for academics espousing very different methodologies and who do not even have an agreed term for their own profession (calling themselves *etnografy* and *etnologi* as well as *sotsialnye antropologi*), and lacking a (meta)language too, it would seem, to have any sense of overall unity? One important pre-condition for the existence of any scholarly community is the existence of a unified informational field. The American Association of Anthropologists, for example, has an international forum called ‘Soyuz’ devoted to the study of the former Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact countries; it would be perfectly possible in principle to set up a Russian-language version of this. Indeed, the participants at the conference plan to do just this, and do set up a kind of ‘Soyuz.ru’, with electronic newsletters about new books and conferences and a site publishing course syllabuses and allowing access to an electronic library.

Exchange of information was also addressed at a round table on the challenges and opportunities facing Russian anthropology journals. Albert Baiburin (*Forum for Anthropology and Culture*) and Sergei Sokolovsky (*Etnograficheskoe obozrenie*) pointed to a variety of practical problems (especially distribution in Russia and abroad, the official regulations governing peer reviewing recently introduced by VAK, the All-Russian Committee of Academic Attestation),¹ and also intellectual problems: the low standard of many published reviews, the lack of reflective discussion of central issues facing contemporary anthropology. Representatives of several other journals, including *Byulleten: antropologiya, menshinstva, multikulturalizm* [Bulletin: Anthropology, Minorities, Multiculturalism], *Zhurnal issledovaniy sotsialnoi politiki* [Journal for Studies of Social Politics], *Neprikosnovennyi zapas*, and *Laboratorium*, also took part in the discussion.

The presentations at the conference had an improvised feel; even the

¹ This committee is responsible for ratifying higher degrees across the Russian Federation. A requirement for the award of candidates’ degrees and higher doctorates is that the scholar concerned should have made a number of publications in journals recognised by the committee. The so-called ‘VAK List’, which is regularly updated, is the official register of such journals. Admission to the List, and continuing presence on it, depends on adherence to regulations about procedure issued by VAK, which include the stipulation that submissions be peer-reviewed, that abstracts be published in English, that lists of members of the editorial board include their academic qualifications, etc. *Antropologicheskii forum/Forum for Anthropology and Culture* was placed on the VAK List in 2007. [Editor].

final programme specified a good many subjects as ‘t. b. c.’, and in the eventuality, quite a number of speakers did not really bother to ‘confirm’ anything much concretely about the subject in hand, instead preferring simply to generalise on the basis of personal experience of research, teaching, and the professional community at large. This informal style, as one would expect, was a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it certainly generated a productive and relaxed discussion of the basic features of recent Russian anthropology and of its central problems and assumptions. On the other hand, real progress towards a sense of professional unity will likely require a more explicit recognition and analysis of theoretical issues and a focused presentation of case-studies based on field work.

The participants hope to organise further gatherings of this kind, and other types of activity – e.g. the creation of a working party – would also seem advantageous, if work is to progress further.

One final point: despite the reference to ‘the past’ in the sub-title of the conference, the discussions focussed mainly on the present and the future of social anthropology in Russia. But no doubt the reconceptualisation of the past remains on the agenda, and critical analysis of the ideas and methods of Soviet anthropology will be offered at another conference in this series.

Translated by Catriona Kelly