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'The Dirty Countryside' and 'The Littered City' (Everyday Practices of Dealing with Rubbish in Different Communities)

'Rubbish Societies'

Social life is made up of more than just human relations. According to Bruno Latour, things, or 'non-humans' [Latour 2004: 5], are also actively included in the social order; they can even 'be seen as actors (active participants) in society's functioning' [Gladarev 2006: 99]. Rubbish – conventionally speaking 'things that have been and gone' – also possesses the necessary attributes to be active and to have an influence on human life. This is manifest in the language which accompanies and serves the phenomenon of rubbish. Thus in Russian public discourse perhaps the most widespread term is the phrase 'the fight against rubbish'. In this way rubbish is not simply an active participant in our lives but we are regularly 'at war' with it, and one cannot say for sure in whose direction the balance of power will tip at a given moment...

The topic of rubbish is by no means peripheral in social discourse, and, as a rule, people talk and write about it as an ecological problem or, to use alarmist terminology, as an 'ecological catastrophe'. In our daily routine, however, this 'struggle against rubbish' is just a routine and everyday practice, and if the customary status

quo is not disrupted, it passes without comment or thought. As a female inhabitant of one of the Pskov' region's villages put it, in response to a sociologist's abstruse question about the problems of rubbish and the ecology in the countryside, 'Ecology is miles away. We ain't got no ecology here...'¹

The central task of the given article is to make 'the invisible visible', to touch on the topic of the practices of dealing with rubbish, a topic that is not problematised or commented upon in our everyday life and which is not very popular as a subject for social analysis. In the study of social commonalities, habitats, and identities, as Mary Douglas has put it, symbols of profanation are as essential as the use of black for the contour of any drawing [Douglas 1984]. Without claiming to give a detailed drawing of any distinct contour, we will nevertheless outline some of the directions of the research and analysis of rubbish as a social phenomenon. At the forefront of our research are the 'rubbish' practices which constitute 'background (non-explicated) knowledge and ability' [Volkov 1997: 30-31]: the art of solving the practical tasks of the routine, everyday 'management' of rubbish.

In this article, when we talk of rubbish we will mean refuse and waste [Sovremennyi *tolkovyi slovar* 2001: 364], the phenomena which man tries to protect himself against and rid himself of, that he tries to remove and eliminate from his field of vision and smell. Rubbish is a specific object of a culture and 'the rubbish of one culture can be seen by another culture as not being rubbish at all' [Kuliev 2002: 163]. By way of an illustration to the given thesis, we will include a case from our own research practice. Several years ago a group of sociologists carried out research in a Krasnodar *stanitsa* over the period of a month. The researchers, following the traditions of Russian ethnographical methodology, were each lodging in different local families, and from time to time they would congregate for joint discussions. At one point practically all of the project's participants started making the trip from home (i.e. what they temporarily thought of as that!) to the club building, where the seminars were held, with rubbish bags in hand, because the sole public refuse bin to be found in the *stanitsa* was within the club walls. For some reason, coping with rubbish in an unfamiliar social and cultural context turned out to be very difficult – rural life required different knowledge and skills... This experience

¹ This article uses material from research projects carried out by colleagues at the CISR (Centre of Independent Social Research), St Petersburg: 'Faraway from Cities. The Life of an East-European Village. Rural Life in Russia, Estonia and Bulgaria' (2002-2005); 'Urban Economic Strategies of Adaptation of "Lower Strata" in the Context of Transformation (The Case of a St. Petersburg Flea Market) (2002-2004)'; and the research summer school 'The Caucasian Border: the Safety Zone. The Seminar and Summer School (the Kuban *stanitsa* [large Cossack village] (Krasnodar Region) and Krasnodar, 2-23 September 2002)'. [The translations into English are those on the site of the CISR, http://www.cisr.ru/complete_milieu.en.html - Editor].

introduced us to the idea of researching everyday ‘rubbish’ practices in the city and the countryside. We think that comparing the ‘rubbish’ situation in various social contexts will help us to see more clearly, and analyse in more depth, practices which are not always evident and noticeable¹.

An analysis of the phenomenon of rubbish is one way in which research can explain the contemporary social order. In particular, as an alternative to the already acknowledged concept of the ‘consumer society’ (for example, [Baudrillard 1996] there arose a concept of the ‘society of rubbish’ or the ‘rubbish society’ [O’Brien 1999]). The topicality of this concept is linked to the fact that the ‘production’ of rubbish, and the practices of taking control over it, constitute a universal and historically permanent sphere of social activity. At the present moment, these practices can tell us a lot – they form a whole range of social and economic statuses, they reflect social values and open up a whole network of social ties, imbricating themselves also in everyday logic. Just like the practices of the consumption of material goods and cultural commodities, they are a mechanism of social differentiation; the specifics and the diversity of ‘rubbish’ practices reflect the differences in individuals, the running of the home, social groups and communities, and various lifestyles.

Thus, this article aims to analyse the day-to-day practices of ‘production’ and ‘management’ of rubbish, the ways in which it is mastered. We will also try to reconstruct the social significance and meanings attributed to rubbish in different social contexts – in the city and the countryside. The main research questions on which we focus are as follows: How do rural and urban practices of the ‘production’ of, and deliverance from, rubbish differ? Are there specific characteristics of rubbish as a social phenomenon? Can we talk of different ‘rubbish communities’ when we compare the city and the countryside?

Waste products of the home: rubbish in the private enclosures of the countryside house and the city flat

At some point I took out the dustbin. I was frozen to the core. I emptied its contents about three metres in front of the rubbish dump. About fifteen minutes later the caretaker came to our place. He kicked up one hell of a fuss. It became clear that he could just look at the

¹ Here we mean generalised practices in the city and the countryside. It goes without saying that we recognise the social heterogeneity of rural and city communities and, accordingly, the diversity and mixture of practices of dealing with rubbish. Nevertheless, our research allows us to generalise to a certain extent our observations and to talk about certain general images of ‘the city’ and ‘the countryside’ in the case in question.

rubbish and easily work out which tenant and which flat number it belonged to...

Sergei Dovlatov. *Solo on an Underwood*.

Objects and food-stuffs turn into waste as soon as they are no longer used or consumed. Rubbish can be old, superfluous, broken, unfashionable things, and stale, uneaten food-stuffs, etc. However, the speed at which things are turned into rubbish¹ varies in accordance with their functional load and symbolic value in various contexts.

Rubbish in the countryside

The process of the production of rubbish and the practices of dealing with rubbish in the countryside are, to a large extent, subject to the necessity of using old things and waste products to their maximum potential in everyday life. Most of all this concerns organic rubbish which serves as an important raw material in home management. Organic materials, which make up a fairly large part of waste in the countryside, complete their own particular cycle in the sphere of the home: slops are given to livestock, manure is used for fertiliser, vegetable waste goes on the compost heap. Also included in this cycle are wood and paper waste products. For example, wrappers, the packaging of food products, etc., are burnt in the stove. Thus countryside housekeeping is partly self-sufficient: the fire of the hearth – the stove – which gives life (warmth and food) gobbles up all that is not needed, extinct, far beyond serving its original function. Only things that cannot be recycled or burnt are thrown away. The sorting of rubbish – which today has been introduced to Russia's cities as an overseas innovation and as a solution to 'global ecological problems' – is a rational procedure for the rural dweller, a natural process, just as natural as the running of the household. Many countryside dwellers we spoke to in the villages we were studying do not even see the substances mentioned as rubbish. As they would have it, in the household rubbish is practically non-existent, though there are things and objects of various levels of necessity and relevance.

¹ In contemporary anthropology there is a concept in development according to which a thing is not simply a certain artefact but it, much like a human being, lives its own life. Coming from this perspective, in the research of the material sphere that surrounds man, the metaphor of a biography is employed. Thus Igor Kopytoff writes that every thing has its own biography or 'career' that unfolds in the cultural and historical contexts of social relations. Of particular interest are the stages of an object's 'maturation', the changes in its usage as it gains in age, moving on to other states after its suitability to its original purpose has been exhausted [Kopytoff 2003]. In the framework of the given approach, the transformation of an object into rubbish is one stage in its biography. At this stage there is either a refusal to see it as rubbish which, eventually, it will be, or there starts a qualitatively new turn in its biography when the object, having been rubbish for a while, again receives the status of object. Both of these processes are evident in the practices which are connected with the production, sorting, conservation and use of rubbish and the deliverance from it both in the city and the country.

The 're-using of waste' principle of countryside housekeeping is, in addition, brought about by the underdeveloped state of the rural infrastructure and the need to make up for the shortage in goods. Our observations show that, in the rural context, things that have lost their original purpose are used to different ends. Rural dwellers are persistent in slowing down the conversion of things into rubbish. Here is how one female country-dweller comments on her relationship with old things:

I don't have a single rag that goes for nothing. Not one! Say I've got an old dress, I'll make an apron out of it. Or a cloth bag. Or a curtain. Or little bags for seeds. But that would be a last resort. [...] Or let's say you take an old scarf and put skirt fabric around its edges - then you have some beautiful little warm mittens, you know, to put on when going out for firewood or to the barn. Or you can make something like little warm slippers for the winter from a scarf - such warm slippers, and cosy too. All in all, everything has a purpose! A real recycling industry...The very last stage is little circular mats made from rags. After that there's nowhere for it to go - all that's left is the death of matter! [Vinogradsky 2002: 301].

From this extract it is clear how this woman strives to prolong the life of things, turning them from one thing into another, like a conjurer. For her the category 'old' does not mean 'used' or 'unneded', but merely 'ready to carry out a new function in the running of the home', a new possibility. Here it is a question not of the newness or oldness of the thing, but of its usefulness or uselessness in everyday life. 'And you can use soft, worn-out strips of cloth as hot-hands for the pot. Everything goes to work!'; 'And if a bowl has rotted through, I can cut out some little circles from plywood, put them in, and then you get a container for dry bird feed. You throw out stuff that can no longer find another purpose' [Ibid.: 302]. But one can always find a purpose for it. In the last resort, you can make it into a duster. The expression *pustit na tryapki* [to use something as a duster], used to refer to old things, is, one suspects, known and understood by few city-dwellers today, just as hardly any rural dwellers would even think of buying napkins in a shop for wiping away dust, or a duster or a sponge for washing dishes and the floor. The industrial manufacture of rags and the appearance of multi-coloured dusters on the counters of city shops, providing training for the city-dweller in how to lead a 'civilised' everyday life, are not relevant to the sphere of the natural rural keeping of the household - for them dusters are 'dead' things that have merely moved away from their initial function.

In the running of the country home, from its birth to its death, an object lives up to a dozen lives, changing in appearance, increasing and decreasing in size, migrating from the wardrobe to the kitchen garden, from the kitchen garden to the kitchen, and so on. It is not

for nothing that in the conditions of the countryside the places for rubbish are scattered and allocated all over the running of the home and even go beyond its boundaries. For example, a basket with burnt waste sits next to the stove, the slop bucket is in the kitchen, the rubbish 'to be taken out' is next to the front door, the rubbish pit is beyond the kitchen-garden, and so on. This general arrangement of 'rubbish' places, and the diversity of 'containers for conservation' of refuse, are brought about by the complex trajectory of the future use of discarded items in the running of the home. Holding out on the boundary between life and death, an object is constantly reborn, attached to a new vital thread, delaying its inevitable transformation into rubbish. The repeated utilisation and the exploitation of the thing to its maximum potential gradually leads to an almost mystical 'material disintegration', the disappearance of the discarded object within the bounds of the rural household economy.

Obviously, the above examples illustrate the 'culture of poverty', inherited from the Soviet past and brought about by an economy of deficit, thus being a manifestation of a particular thrifty way of relating to things.¹ In the framework of such a perception, the transformation of objects into rubbish is tantamount to an unpardonable luxury. An object, bought once upon a time, accompanies a person and his nearest and dearest for practically their entire lifetimes. It is woven into their life stories and is even endowed with its own biography. Those old things that accompany us throughout our lives are valued as the most precious things which 'it is a shame to throw out' (for more on this, consult: [Gurova 2004; Orlova 2004]). The cultural sluggishness of 'rubbish' practices, insensitive to the conditions of a consumer society, feeds on the specific 'gut feeling' of 'entrepreneurs from the people', their ability to see useful things in a heap of rubbish, lending this an essential importance. In the rubbish-to-thing cycle one finds more than just the objects that have fallen out of use from one's own domestic life – one can also find things that turned out to be unneeded by former inhabitants and were frivolously thrown away. In one of the villages of the Novgorod district where we carried out some of our research, we came across a man who worked on the repair of footwear for his fellow village dwellers. When we asked him where he got the material for the repair of shoes, the repairman was sincerely shocked: 'I go out on to the street, I find it, and I pick it up!'. As Mary Douglas puts it, what has been written off as no good is brought back for the renewal of life [Douglas 1984].

¹ Not only this, perhaps – most rural dwellers in Western Europe, certainly in the remote countryside, let alone in developing countries, could attest to similar practices. [Editor].

Unneeded things thrown out by an inhabitant of the countryside will most probably be given a new life in many amateur workshops. This is because the considerable space available for rural housekeeping makes it easy to accumulate and store a 'stock of recyclable material'.

Rubbish in the city flat

It would seem that city-dwellers rid themselves of waste products much more quickly and willingly than country dwellers. Stale bread and batteries that have been worn out in a personal stereo fly to the rubbish bin, torn-up trainers and granny's broken-through armchair migrate to the rubbish dump. At the same time, even in the city set-up the throwing away of old things can be slowed down. Since long ago the talk of the town has been those balconies, mezzanines, and store-rooms, that are stuffed full of all kinds of junk. This can be stored for decades, waiting for its hour to come. Things that have fallen out of use are stored 'just in case' with the hope that they will sometime be in demand again. However, practice shows us that the likelihood of their being used in the city is very slim. In the set-up of the contemporary 'consumer society', old stuff in the city flat can expect only a temporary shelter; soon new things will make the old ones budge, things which, as a rule, are expected not to be in use or storage 'for later on', but rather to survive only a short period of usage, to be swiftly replaced by more functional, technically modernised and/or stylish models. The disappearance of the goods deficit and the emergence of a culture of consumerism in post-Soviet Russia has significantly weakened the processes of the storing, renewal, and recycling of things that have fallen out of use. The slogan of Soviet times 'do it yourself' dictated a way of organising everyday life in the city flat by adapting and altering old or unneeded things and rubbish 'put aside', along with the help of the housekeeper's native wit.¹ But this is gradually being replaced by calls to 'buy, try, discover for yourselves' new designer goods.

Cramped city abodes can't cope with the onslaught of new things and gradually rid themselves of old tat, which is packed off to the rubbish dump. Getting rid of junk and the day's accumulated rubbish is one of the imperatives of a clean abode. At the same time, the routinisation of the practice of regularly taking out the rubbish increases the sense of its constant presence and the impossibility of removing it. The cyclical process of the heaping up of rubbish and the necessity of ridding oneself of it is the subject for worn-out jokes about the lazy

¹ Contemporary researchers, in connection with this, suggest that we label Soviet society 'the renovation society' [Gerasimova, Chuikina 2004].

man who could not find the time to throw away his Christmas tree before the first of May. Given that rubbish surfaces all the time in the city abode, people try to set aside a fixed, designated place for it. In the countryside, rubbish has a 'shameless' rationality; in the city, people try to hide and disguise it.

The place allotted to rubbish in the city flat is usually at a far remove from the living quarters - it is placed in the kitchen (or more rarely, in the loo). The rubbish bin is to be found in the 'condensed' space of the flat. It is shut tight, hidden not only from 'the gaze of outsiders', but even from that of the inhabitants of the flat themselves. The little disposable rubbish bags ensure an additional level of isolation, protecting even the rubbish bin itself from getting dirty, even though this was its initial function.

Leaving the 'cosy' womb of the bin, the rubbish of the city-flat falls on to the courtyard's rubbish dump, either down the gut of a rubbish chute or directly. At the moment when the rubbish is moved to the rubbish dump it still remains a part of our life and identity. The now-widespread practice of using opaque plastic bags for rubbish, apart from its hygienic function, also carries out the task of allowing the 'proprietor of the waste' a certain anonymity. Later on, when our plastic bag has got mixed up with the others, there is a distancing and alienation from it and the rubbish becomes 'no-one's' or 'society's'.

'Society's' rubbish

One of the things I had come to like about the dump over the years was the way that it never stayed the same, it moved like something huge and alive, spreading like an immense amoeba as it absorbed the healthy land and the collective waste.

Iain Banks. *The Wasp Factory*

Rubbish in the city

In one of the music videos of the Russian rock singer Yulia Chicherina, the heroine goes on a promenade, pacing through the waste dumps of the city's streets. The littered space is presented in a way that is not at all like the repulsive city depicted by Patrick Susskind. On the contrary, it is filled with a certain aesthetic content. One can go on a truly romantic walk down refuse-covered stretches of asphalt, it turns out. As a matter of fact, this is the very city through whose streets our life unravels... 'Society's' rubbish is not just the rubbish that has moved from private enclosures to the rubbish dumps next to the block of flats, but it is also the rubbish of the so-called social

places. Moreover here it is produced no less actively, perhaps even more actively. Rubbish that for whatever reason has not ended up in the proper place, or which has fallen out of the transportation vehicle (we have all observed how picturesque the area round the rubbish dump looks once the dust-cart has been and gone) – all this rubbish becomes part of the city's landscape. However, the 'war' against rubbish goes on constantly – people try to 'fight it off', accumulating it in particular – hidden and/or far-off – places. The rubbish in the dumps hides with varying levels of success under the roof of the container that is situated behind a little concrete or brick wall – like a screen that is hiding something shameful, dirty, unseemly, indecent and therefore secret. In densely populated public places, society's rubbish is removed to refuse bins and irretrievably disappears thanks to the constant work of a whole army of professionals.

Street refuse bins are there for 'spontaneous' rubbish, rubbish created 'here and now' which people are also supposed to get rid of as soon as they can. Refuse bins are an integral part of the landscape of central and touristy areas, parks and public gardens, bus stops and shops, and so on. These 'rubbish' places are situated where crowds throng – meeting places or favourite places for walks, places for spending leisure hours, places where tourists go to have fun. One could say that such public spaces are marked by a row of refuse bins which do more than simply accompany people – they form the path itself, they 'take you by the hand'. The presence of refuse bins is a sign of a place's cultivation, a marker of a city landscape as opposed to the 'uncultivated countryside':

*There, just by the river, stands a culture park,
I stroll in it, and just spit in its bins until dark.
But you, of course, don't understand, there, in your hut.
For you are nothing. Just an uncultivated rut.*
[Vysotskii 1999: 137-138]

At the same time, refuse bins are hardly to be seen on the streets of dormitory suburbs. There, these 'culturally designed' places of rubbish (bins) do not make up a single chain; they are concentrated in the most densely populated regions.

Thus, in public places, refuse bins constitute places where society's rubbish is 'tamed' and regulated. It is evident that the accumulation of rubbish, the moving of it so as to make it invisible, and the process of hiding it in certain fixed places, is an attempt to make rubbish more regulated and safe. A place of rubbish, confining as it does waste products within impregnable walls, wittingly presents the surrounding area as clean and presentable. Evidence for this can be seen in the aestheticisation of any rubbish receptacle, be it a communal refuse bin or an office wastepaper basket, a dustbin or an ashtray. Beautifully designed and inserted into an interior space or a landscape, it is as if

these rubbish receptacles use their appearance to hide the ugliness and foulness of what they contain. Frequently they just signify cleanliness, but they can by no means be seen as merely functional, since the aesthetic make-up of the bin may be more important than its purpose¹.

One might mention one more thing. Rubbish is one of the city's permanent employers. Thanks to it there will always be a job for cleaners, caretakers, cleaners of refuse chutes, drivers of dustcarts and those cars that glaze the streets, and so on. This huge army of professionals – rubbish-wrestlers – have been given the role of maintaining cleanliness by the city community, a community which limits its own activity in this sphere to walking from the flat to the refuse chute or the rubbish dump. Furthermore, rubbish is becoming a 'property', a livelihood for the poor, the destitute, and the homeless², who, by redefining the significance and symbolic image of rubbish, practically turn it into a commodity. Cardboard, bottles, tins, rags: these dustmen-professionals know to a nicety which waste products can be used again and where it would be most profitable to pass or sell them on.

Rubbish in the countryside

No matter how rational the running of the country home is (i.e. devouring most of one's own waste products), the rates of 'production' of rubbish far outstrip the rates of its 'consumption'. What also enables the 'overproduction' of rubbish is the emergence in the countryside of new types of waste that, perhaps, have not yet been mastered. For example, in a rubbish pit in one of the villages under research in the Novgorod region plastic bottles of beer and lemonade clearly predominated. One way or another, some of the unneeded waste products and those things that have stopped serving their purpose still leave the boundaries of the courtyard. The organised and sanctioned places of rubbish in the countryside are not disguised and do not hide ashamedly behind a little screen as in the city. They are evident to everyone, practically on display for general viewing, perhaps so as to make them more accessible. For example, in the village where we did our research, there are three organised, sanctioned places for rubbish. A rubbish pit intended for the use of the inhabitants of the village's sole two-storey building is situated in the courtyard of this. Improvised public refuse bins – ordinary metal buckets – stand by the entrances to two of the local shops. The only 'communal' rubbish container is placed near the village centre, by

¹ For example, one should call to mind the research done on the refuse bins in China's cities – these bins have been made in such a way that it is, in practice, very hard to use them. [Alimov 2002].

² See, for example [Solovyova 2001].

those shops mentioned above, but just behind them. In this way all of the places for rubbish are concentrated in one place. The dark or opaque plastic bag, making one's 'private' rubbish practically invisible on the city's communal rubbish dumps, is used in the countryside solely as a way of carrying one's rubbish to the dump, to be used more than once.

Throwing one's rubbish into a container is, in the rural set-up, more of an exception than anything else. Firstly, it would be reasonable to assume that one container for more than one hundred and thirty households simply doesn't meet local needs. On top of this, this container is very rarely emptied. During our research in the region, over the period of two summer months, the container stood as it was, untouched. It was very picturesquely overflowing and, so far as we could tell, for all of this time the overall quantity of the rubbish in it did not change at all. Secondly, the city-dweller's habit of walking from the flat to the rubbish chute or dump is not shared by the rural dweller. According to our observations, special 'rubbish runs' – that is, sorties from one's home with the sole intention of taking rubbish to the dump – take place infrequently, as one must have a lot of time and energy to spare. Despite the fact that the dump is situated in the village's centre, the main paths avoid it, and therefore one does not get the chance to use this specialised rubbish 'reception centre' 'on one's way past' or 'at odd moments' as city-dwellers often do without any difficulty. The shortage of areas specially set aside for rubbish gives birth to a large quantity of makeshift, disorganised dumps which are distinguished by the convenience of their position in the village itself or at least near it.

Usually these makeshift dumps emerge on the edge of the village, nearer the forest or fields, on vacant plots of land, i.e. practically right on the village's border and on 'no man's land'. However, one does occasionally find informal, makeshift dumps in inhabited parts of the village as well. One of the village's female inhabitants gave us the following advice: 'Why on earth are you getting bogged down in your own rubbish – off to the woods with it. You'll see, everyone dumps it there!' (62-year-old woman). Another instance of this was when a female second-former simply took us to some stinging nettle thickets by a rather quiet street. The nettles swallowed our little bag of rubbish whole, clearly not for the first time, like a stone thrown into a river. It is clear that such makeshift dumps are known even to children and are no less legitimate than those dumps that have been formally set up. Such heaps of rubbish, beautifully inscribed in the natural landscape, are multiplying and spreading.¹

¹ Again, such dumps can be found in the Western European countryside too, e.g. in rural Ireland, often next to notices threatening horrendous penalties for dumping. [Editor].

At the same time even the most skilful disguise cannot solve the problem of 'no-one's' rubbish. And if city-dwellers can delegate questions about the organisation and regular servicing of rubbish dumps (even unsanctioned ones) to the ZhKKh¹ services, then for countryside dwellers, when there is an 'authority deficit', when the government has practically abandoned the countryside to its own devices, and the market with all its possibilities has not yet come into existence, the transport of rubbish from the village is predominantly a 'private' problem. The day-to-day rubbish from the rural home belongs solely to its creator and they themselves must deal with the waste products. People living in the country are their own caretakers and their own dustmen – they have to manage their own rubbish with no outside help. The problem with 'communal' rubbish is solved by collective effort. We were able to observe for ourselves that the necessity of cleaning out the rubbish pit, situated in immediate proximity to the 'two-storey house', forced the inhabitants to cooperate. They pooled together some resources to pay for a truck to come from the neighbouring city, and were then forced to load the vehicle themselves with their accumulated rubbish [Bogdanova 2006: 359]. As this happens fairly regularly, it allows the villagers to consider their village clean, unlike the neighbouring village where 'rubbish is scattered all over the courtyards' (in the words of a woman of around 50 years of age).

A 'delayed modernisation' of the 'dirty' countryside? (instead of a conclusion)

The differences in the practices of the 'production' of rubbish described above were, evidently, brought about by different eras of relating to things which, in their turn, are formed by different types of societies. Golofast distinguishes between three regimes in man's relationship with the material environment [Golofast 2000]. In his opinion, in the traditional and early-industrial society 'things' were not so widespread and it was for this reason that they were of undoubted value and accompanied man throughout his whole life. People would adapt themselves to each and every thing, and therefore the thing slowly became 'part of his personality and a habitual ingredient in his way of life and identity' [Ibid.: 59]. Modernist society added different ingredients and rules to our relationship with things. People and things became partners in social interaction or, to use Degot's expression, 'comrades' [Degot 2000]. The thing no longer held the symbolic value it once had. It became a functional component of everyday activity. Such changes were connected to the fact that the production of things had become an industrial and standardised

¹ Communal Housing Services. [Trans.].

process. As regards the late-modern, or post-modern period, two processes run parallel to one another, defining the character of the relations between people and things – a standardised mass production where the main value is attached to the principle of ‘replaceability’, and the manufacture of luxury goods whose value lies in their exclusivity [Golofast 2000: 60-61].

Within the framework of this analytical perspective, one is naturally drawn to the conclusion that ‘modern’ conditions still survive in the countryside. One must adapt an object to one’s needs, exploiting all its possible practical attributes to the max. Such an approach to objects slows down the process of rubbish production, minimising it. The city turns out to be closer to the post-modern situation, and here rubbish is ‘produced’ a lot more readily, one can rid oneself of it more easily, and if this is not possible then they try to eliminate it from one’s field of vision. In this case, one can hypothesise the ‘delayed modernisation’ of the Russian countryside; the countryside is following in the city’s footsteps but is slightly lagging behind on this shared path. In accordance with the logic of this explanatory scheme, the countryside and the city represent different ‘rubbish communities’ but, at the same time, they are developing in roughly one direction. However, we believe that the concept of ‘rubbish communities’ has limited heuristic value and does not completely explicate the differences in ‘rubbish’ practices.

Levinson writes that the phenomenon of rubbish constitutes two basic dichotomies: ‘clean’ vs. ‘unclean’ and ‘needed’ vs. ‘unneeded’: ‘litter, rubbish, refuse – words used to signify objects that in the course of their existence move from the sphere of the clean to the sphere of the unclean, never to return to the former. [...] There is a later dichotomy of “needed” and “unneeded”. Old things, waste products – words for the time being synonymous with markers of “the unclean”’ [Levinson 2004: 261-262]. If one were to develop this perspective, one could advance the thesis that the phenomenon of rubbish in the city and the phenomenon of rubbish in the countryside are constituted on different grounds. The striving in the city to ‘tame’ rubbish, to conceal it and to make it more pliant and controlled, represents an attempt to protect oneself. Here rubbish is frequently interpreted as a danger and an evil – a thing that one ought to conceal and of which one must rid oneself. The creation of areas for rubbish that have been set aside and clearly delimited constitutes, in essence, a separation of ‘the clean’ from ‘the dirty’ (literally and symbolically). Thus the phenomenon of rubbish in the city is created with the application of the ‘clean’—‘unclean’ dichotomy. Furthermore, rubbish in the city is endowed with a particular status – it plays the role of a certain marker of a social order and social transformations. And so, according to the research of Simpura and Eremicheva, *dirt* in the city, in the given context understood more as ‘the state of being

littered', became for Petersburgers in 1993 a crucial social problem and was interpreted as a violation of the social order and even as a symbol of the deteriorating social system [Simpura, Eremicheva 1995: 188].

When one talks of the 'production' of rubbish in the countryside as a social phenomenon, however, another dichotomy turns out to be more relevant. Rubbish is sorted proceeding from a long-term perspective, depending on whether or not it is 'needed'. Here we do not witness any attempt to hide it or fence oneself off from it. It is completely open for everyone to look at and even use. Such a shamelessness, in essence, demonstrates the safety of the entity – rubbish is not scary and therefore it does not provoke the desire to fight it. In the case of rubbish in the countryside, the category of 'unclean' turns out to be not too fitting. Besides, rubbish in the countryside is not endowed with the same social significance as it is in the city - it is by no means a marker of the social order. Rubbish is, by contrast, inscribed in the surrounding landscape – it is as if it merges with nature. The makeshift, elemental rubbish dumps are akin to Simmel's ruins, where the powers of nature start to rule over man-made creation, and the equality between nature and the spirit shifts in nature's favour ('Denn dies bedeutet nichts anderes, als daß die bloß natürlichen Kräfte über das Menschenwerk Herr zu werden beginnen: die Gleichung zwischen Natur und Geist, die das Bauwerk darstellte, verschiebt sich zugunsten der Natur' [Simmel 1919]).

One can now come to the conclusion, perhaps, that the differences in the phenomena of rubbish in the city and the countryside are well illustrated by the fixed expressions, 'the littered city' and 'the dirty countryside'. On the other hand, while people often speak of the city as dirty, they would rarely speak of the countryside as littered. The countryside is *gryaznaya* [dirty] in the sense that by *gryaz* [dirt, mud] we understand not only rubbish and dirtiness, but also the natural and, up to now, organic, integral parts of our villages – 'soil, softened by water, slush...' [*Sovremennyi tolkovyi slovar* 2001: 145].

And so, to conclude, let us return to the central question of our research – can we talk of different 'rubbish communities' when we compare the city and the countryside? It would seem that we can, for the differences between the 'rubbish' practices of countryside dwellers and city-dwellers singled out by us in the given research cannot be denied. However, the concept of 'rubbish communities' should not suggest that the emphasis should be solely and firmly on the differences in styles of life and identities. The most important point is that the phenomena of city and rural rubbish are constituted on different grounds, and that is why rubbish is endowed with different social meanings and invites such different attitudes to itself.

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