

Dialogue in the Academic World

As its title suggests, *Forum for Anthropology and Culture* accords a central place to discussion. To mark five years of the journal's existence, we decided to dedicate the tenth Forum to a discussion of the role of discussions, disputes, and dialogues in the contemporary academic world.¹ In Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, the relaxation of censorship has not necessarily been followed by open dialogue between different groupings and across disciplines; 'coterie cultures' are still the rule. However, academic traditions where conditions should apparently be more favourable to general, mature discussion also suffer from a dearth of dialogue. The Russian historian Klyuchevsky once described a thesis as 'a book with two opponents and no readers', but many academic articles and even some books fall into the same category (assuming they arouse even that much interest in the first place). Citation of extant analyses often takes the form of round-up footnotes or fashionable tags, without there being any attempt to engage with the content at a more searching level. At the same time, new means of communication (for example, online forums) provide new places where views can be recorded and debates initiated. And, in an increasingly international (electronic) world, new kinds of dialogue and collaboration are possible — though this also has its dangers.

¹ Our thanks to Oleg Kharkhordin for suggesting this topic.

In this connection, we invited participants to address the following questions:

- 1 *Do you agree with the analysis that scholarly discussion in the humanities and social sciences is often conspicuous by its absence? If so, are the reasons behind this factionalism, information overload (no time to read anything not on one's own subject, where one 'knows it all' anyway), undue respect for authority, a combination of all these, or something else entirely?*
- 2 *What role do reviews play and/or what role should they play in encouraging academic dialogue?*
- 3 *To what extent do the accepted rituals of information/opinion exchange, such as discussions (formal and informal) at conferences, seminars, internet discussions etc. contribute to genuine academic dialogue? What could be done to make them more effective?*
- 4 *What impact has the 'globalisation' of the academic world had on scholarly dialogue? Have you come across situations where the interaction between different academic traditions has led to friction? (For example, different academic cultures may have different reviewing styles, peer reviewing is de rigueur in some cultures but not in others, and academic debate that seems honest in some places seems discourteous and even libellous in others.)*
- 5 *Do you welcome the inclusion of the so-called 'general public' in academic discussions? What is the function of 'popular' books, articles, and journals, and of media coverage, and other forms of outreach in the academic world?*
- 6 *What do you think journals such as Forum for Anthropology and Culture can do to encourage discussion?*

For reasons of space, only a limited number of responses has been published in English. Other participants in the discussion included Nikolai Antopov, Pavel Belkov, Aleksandra Britsyna, Varvara Dobrovolskaya, Ekaterina Guba, Junna Hiramatsu, Catriona Kelly, Vladimir Klaus, Galina Komarova, Mikhail Lurye, Andrei Moroz, Mikhail Rodionov, Svetlana Ryzhakova, Mikhail Sokolov, Andrei Toporkov, and Nikolai Vakhtin.

YURI BEREZKIN

There is really no serious discussion in anthropology and folklore studies, but I am not sure that the situation is the same in related disciplines. There has been lively and, at times, even heated debate at the linguistic conferences that I have attended, as well as in the discussion of questions raised in the conference papers on the Internet. I haven't been to any historical conferences myself, but judging from the publications that come out of them, there is lively discussion of the papers there too. So, it makes sense to talk about anthropology and folklore studies in particular. The situation in archaeology is somewhere in the middle — better than in anthropology, but worse than in linguistics. My opinion is based on personal experience, and, naturally, I am not suggesting it is reliable from a statistical point of view.

That said, I haven't noticed a fundamental difference between the discussion of papers and publications in Russia and abroad. In this sense, Russian academia is fully integrated into that of the Euro-American world. Discussion takes place on the pages of *Current Anthropology*, but that is a case unto itself, a different sort of anthropology.

So what is preventing discussion in anthropology?

Firstly, the intolerably low level of not just some, but most of the papers given at conferences and many articles in edited collections and journals (and I would like to stress that I see no real difference between conferences within Russia and international ones). I would classify poor texts - oral as well as written — in the following way: Firstly, those that are simply poor, contain few facts, the most primitive sort of theorising if any at all, and have 'conclusions' that basically repeat what was said in the 'introduction'. Secondly, texts that are intentionally complicated, abstruse, and whose conclusions and premises are impossible to verify. Thirdly, text-reflections, essays which fail to conclude

anything or to bind anyone to anything. Fourthly, derivative, boring, and platitudinous texts which repeat — with references to the ‘classics’ — what everyone has been aware of for some time. And then there is a fifth category — descriptive texts dealing with very specialised questions. These works are not necessarily bad in their own right, it just makes no sense to make them the focus of broader discussion.

Clearly, poor texts and papers do not invite discussion — what is there to discuss in them? Even proper criticism is pointless. If the criticism is devastating, you risk entering into conflict with colleagues on whom you might be dependent at some point for project funding. If the criticism is gentle, then it lends support to, rather than challenges what the weak speaker is saying. And there is another fundamental obstacle to discussion. The overwhelming majority of participants at anthropological conferences are not capable of judging each others’ material either from a theoretical or, for that matter, a factual point of view. By and large, the audience perceives a difference in the quality of the papers, but is unable to say anything in particular about them.

And then there is an even more serious problem. Debate is only possible when discussion is founded on concepts that have some relationship to fact. Did Finno-Ugric languages become widespread in the Baltic region in 2000 BC or did they exist there from the early Holocene? Was the Mississippi cultural community established under Mesoamerican influence or are the similar cultural developments in the two regions the result of a shared ancient heritage? Did the quality of life of the local population in Pskov get worse after its union with Moscow, or not? Did the USSR intend to attack Germany at the beginning of July 1941 or later? In all such cases, different answers are possible depending on which facts one relies upon. Even when facts are in short supply, the problem is likely to have a perfectly neat solution: either this, or that, or some combination of different reasons. One important point to remember is the following: participants in discussion are expected to have specialist knowledge of their subject, but the arguments which they advance must be understandable and clear. We are all ignorant when it comes to physics or biology, but we can still grasp the basics of theories concerning the extinction of dinosaurs or the meaning of the experiments that are supposed to take place in the European collider. Yet, in anthropology and folklore studies, wide-ranging questions that require real alternative solutions, and whose logic is easy to explain to non-specialists, have not come up in recent decades. Where, then, is the debate expected to come from?

I’m sure that if a problem arises there will be no need to force people to take part in discussions or write reviews — discussion will come

about naturally. If authors themselves find it hard to formulate the questions they want answers to, or if their questions are not intended to be answered at all, then their colleagues will remain indifferent to them.

It is not the particular ineptitude of anthropologists in carrying out research that has brought about this situation. The natural sciences are also familiar with practices such as the promotion of unexciting topics, a lack of knowledge, and attempts to shroud banality and slapdashery in academic discourse. I also have my doubts that the average level of academia was any higher in the past than it is today — it wasn't, just read the old journals. The problem rather lies with the very discipline of anthropology, which the science has defined for itself. The plurality of possible answers in research, which makes the researcher's job very similar to that of a detective, is a feature that is above all characteristic of historical reconstructions. Humans first appeared in America *either* along the coast of Alaska *or* in the Yukon and Mackenzie valley. In the summer of 1941, Stalin was *either* ready to invade Europe, *or* he wasn't. Anthropology, however, has ceased to be a historical discipline. Nor does it interest itself in the way in which society functions — that is the business of sociology, political economics, and political science. Anthropologists, for the most part, are interested in how people understand and interpret their own and other cultures, and the symbols that they employ to do this. This is a subject that anthropologists alone are qualified to study, but the price anthropology pays for this is the loss of discursiveness. As soon as the discussion turns to interpretations, the plurality of answers fades away, or even disappears completely. Moreover, the most convincing conclusions from studies of the knowledge systems of certain cultures are hardly generalisable, and, as a result, researchers find themselves trapped by their own material.

Remaining within the bounds of interpretative anthropology, it is possible that a problem will emerge that requires a specific response and will attract many specialists to search for its solution — I'm not sure. But one thing is for sure, if that question is raised, then the inevitable outcome will be discussion.

MICHAEL DAVID-FOX

When *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* was founded in 2000, its editors were centrally concerned with the issue of dialogue. In our view, Russian studies in the United States had become excessively insular. In those days before the turn of the millennium, being young and idealistic, we declared that we

would ‘internationalise’ the field. The leading Russian Studies journals, in our view, had become staid and tame, narrowly specialised outlets mostly for junior scholars who needed to publish in order to get tenure. In sum, we wished to shake things up, to spark debate. But how?

The question of scholarly debate in scholarly periodical literature is fundamentally linked to the question of genre or rubric. Certain formats are more likely to spark genuine exchange (rather than polemic); others are suited to attract certain kinds of participation from authors from different disciplines and stages in their careers.

Kritika’s central focus on reviews — long, essay-like reviews, often of multiple works in different languages, which include a scholarly apparatus — is itself a form of dialogue. The journal generally reviews English language books alone only if the reviewer is from an academic culture outside the Anglophone world; otherwise, we focus on works published in Russian or the European languages, principally German and French, or review several works in several languages together. This avoids the problems involved in reviewing works of one’s colleagues from the same country and discipline, which of course inhibits criticism. We also in every issue publish longer, article-length ‘review essays’ that survey greater numbers of works, and, more rarely, ‘review articles’ that survey an entire field with a component of the author’s original research. These features make the reviews implicitly dialogic and focused on the commonalities and divergences of scholarship in several national traditions. The reviews also encourage English-speaking readers to pay more attention to works in other languages.

Second, *Kritika* wished to attract scholars across disciplines and levels of seniority to publish. The editors had great success in inviting the most senior and most prominent scholars in the field — who had tended to move away from the area studies journals, and who may not have had the material, time, or inclination to contribute research articles — to participate through shorter, more interpretive genres such as the ‘reaction’ piece. In all of our special theme issues and so-called ‘Forums’ (several articles devoted to a given theme) we have invited one or two scholars to survey the articles in a ‘reaction’. Their task is tie the publications together, put them in a broader context, and suggest directions for further exploration. In order to discourage ad hominem arguments authors can only respond to these reactions in letters to the editor, and the authors of reactions are instructed that their primary task is not to evaluate the publications but to survey the intellectual landscape they traverse. In general, we have had success in soliciting contributions not only from senior scholars in history, but from Slavists and specialists on literature and culture working in Slavic Departments. We have also recruited with some success

historians outside the Russian field, especially with Germanists, thus starting a different kind of exchange. But we have had far fewer results in attracting to our affairs a range of social scientists such as political scientists, historical sociologists, and anthropologists.

Further, in order to spark faster-moving debate on topics of current interest, we introduced the rubric of 'Ex Tempore', in which one author launches an intervention into a current debate and two or three others respond. Again, the job of those respondents is not necessarily to directly criticise the original contribution but to add to the discussion from their own perspectives. We can fast-track these debates into print without much delay. By contrast, a much more fast-moving medium, an electronic supplement to the print publication called e-Kritika <<http://web.mac.com/kritika/iWeb/ekritika/Home.html>> did not spark the kind of extensive on-line exchanges we had hoped, and it is now closed. In its place, we hope a new website will be able to devote more attention to visual history. The failure of e-Kritika is an interesting example of a dialogue that never got off the ground. We found scholars in the field too overburdened and overcommitted (and perhaps too cautious to post something on-line without extensive preparation) to contribute to the electronic discussions in the numbers we would like.

Finally, *Kritika* has spent much time and effort in order to publish special thematic issues of the journal. We have publishing almost one special issue per volume, reaching a total of nine book-length special issues in the ten years the journal has been in existence. These began with our very first issue in January 2000 ('Resistance to Authority in Russia and the Soviet Union'), and have included such topics as 'Negotiating Cultural Upheavals: Cultural Politics and Memory in 20th-Century Russia' (*Kritika* 2,3, Summer 2001); 'Political Violence in Russia and the Soviet Union' (*Kritika* 4,3, Summer 2003); 'Circulation of Knowledge and the Human Sciences in Russia' (*Kritika* 9,1, Winter 2008); and 'Imagining the West in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union' (*Kritika* 9,4, Winter 2008). In the summer 2009 we published 'Enmity and Fascination: Russian-German Encounters in the 20th Century'.

These special issues are dialogic in several senses. First, they all explore topics in which interesting new work is being conducted, and methods developed, and the issues invariably bring together contributions from scholars from Russia and Europe as well as North America. Here it is necessary to note that *Kritika* from the start launched an extensive program of translation, in which voluntary translators work compensated with only a token honorarium to promote scholarly exchange; here we have had great success in attracting fine, dedicated translators from Russian to English, from professors emeriti to graduate students, but have had less success

with French-English and German-English translators. Needless to say, this translation program has cost a lot in terms of the editors' time and effort. Second, all the theme issues originate from international *Kritika* conferences. Originally, these were held in the U.S., at the University of Maryland and at Harvard University. But in order to attract a more international mix of participants, and to foster ties with scholars from other key countries, *Kritika* began to organise these conferences abroad, first at EHESS in Paris and more recently in Berlin and St Petersburg. The format of the conferences itself is noteworthy; these are all what we call 'workshops', meaning that participants from several countries read the papers in advance and discuss the papers at length. Authors then revise their articles in light of the discussions and submit them for publication in the special issue.

The St. Petersburg workshop, held on 26-27 June 2009, concerned 'Models on the Margins: Russia, the Ottoman Empire, and Spain'. The resulting special issue, now forthcoming, will focus on Ottoman-Russian interactions and entanglements, since it proved impossible to create a three-way 'dialogue' with Spain. The most basic precondition for scholarly dialogue is a willing and engaged interlocutor.

The editors of *Kritika* wish *Antropologicheskii Forum* continued and long-lasting success.

EVGENY DOBRENKO

1 Who could possibly argue with the sentiments expressed? And the reasons proposed in the question are also pretty accurate. Focusing on 'serious discussion' is completely right. In general, what passes for 'discussion' today is in fact petty squabbles and backbiting. Someone writes a devastating article. In response, the journal publishes an outraged letter from the offended party along with another article with new accusations. Next, articles are normally published in defence of the editorial position. That is what passes today for 'debate'. The level of mutual disrespect is sometimes astounding. There are people whose entire reputations are built around their participation in such cock fights. Sometimes the person has nothing more to his name than his participation in various disputes of this sort. There are countless examples of this on the Internet and in news-

papers, but, unfortunately, the style has also penetrated academic journals.

Take the example of a recent ‘discussion’ that took place in the Moscow literary journal *Voprosy literatury* [Questions of Literature] (2008. No. 1). A respected archivist, Leonid Maksimenkov, who played a key role in the publication of some early, classified archival materials, has recently become embroiled in nasty exchanges with the Russian archival management. The conflict has clearly personal overtones and, as a result, the reputation of the respected scholar is crumbling before one’s very eyes: the author has been transformed into a petty squabblor, picking on and insulting everyone around him indiscriminately. The ‘debate’ has been fuelled by wild accusations hinting at the abuse of power and corruption in the archival management. Clearly, the place for such accusations is a court of law and not an academic journal but, of course, it isn’t the Russian way to go running to the authorities. Thus a serious historian has been transformed into a spiteful journalist giving vent to his spleen on the pages of academic journals. Having published the expository opus, written in the style of the satirical articles about thieves and bureaucrats published in the journal *Krokodil*, the editors of *Voprosy literatury* were obliged to publish the refutation of the accused followed by Maksimenkov’s reply. And this is all under the rubric of ‘Polemic’. In reality, an academic journal seems to have got caught up in a vulgar shouting match.

Instead of publishing Maksimenkov’s indiscreet disclosures, *Voprosy literatury* would have done him a favour if they had told him to go back to his work in the archives. Meanwhile Maksimenkov is publishing texts of this sort in various journals and accusing everyone around him of plagiarism and theft. What’s more, few people are interested in the starting point of the controversy — the fact that the book Maksimenkov was reviewing seems really to have been terrible. In literature studies these sorts of debates can continue *ad infinitum*: everywhere - from ‘Bulgakovology’, to ‘Platonovology’, ‘Babelology’, ‘Mandelshtamology’, ‘Tvetaevaology’, ‘Sholokhovology’, and so on - has its hardliners who have been pleading their cases for several years everywhere save a court of law and accusing each other of everything but outright criminality. Each camp has its own stokers of ‘debate’ similar to Maksimenkov who, if they were given access to the pages of academic journals with their squabbles, would cause the degree of discursiveness to increase dramatically. And yet it is hardly right to see this as an indicator of healthy academic debate.

In my opinion, all this neatly reverses the situation in Soviet times when ‘debate’ was managed, from beginning to end, by the editorial board. If back then, any debate was organised so as to avoid any of the real issues involved in any topic, then today the opposite is true:

‘discussion-squabbles’ in which personal insults are exchanged have become almost the only way of promoting a publication. However, I fear that practices such as these do not so much increase the circulation of the journal as destroy any academic reputation it might have.

2

It appears to me that the problem here is more than a question of genre. On the one hand, the review tradition is genuinely dying out, and, on the other, it no longer functions as a means for expressing alternative points of view or even counter conceptions. These days, in specialist journals in the West, reviews have been entirely replaced by inflated synopses with critical opinions usually being expressed in the last paragraph - if they go beyond that, then the review becomes almost a ‘review article’. The fact is that the publishing industry has grown so much that reviewing has become a means of advertising books and a way for librarians to orient themselves in the market. Even the partial coverage of book publications in short reviews often means that specialist journals are turned into collections of reviews with articles taking up only one third of the space, and reviews occupying the remaining two thirds.

But, if in the West academic publications at least do get reviewed (albeit not very well), the situation in Russia is much worse: specialist books are hardly reviewed at all with the exception (in literature studies or cultural history) of *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* [New Literary Review] and, occasionally, *Voprosy literatury*. In the past, you could find reviews in the ‘thick journals’, but today, apart from the odd review in *Novyi mir* or *Znamya*, academic work is hardly reviewed at all. This is clearly a worrying development: book reviewing shapes the academic field and forms the disciplinary landscape, without which there can be no serious dialogue and debate. As a consequence, some Russian academic publications are reviewed far more in the West than they are in Russia itself. This situation is all the more absurd given that Russian publications are available in the West while western publications are hardly available at all in Russia.

That said, the reviews that do appear are much more interesting in Russia: reviewing is less ritualised, less institutionalised, and thus reviews are livelier, more controversial and altogether more useful (conversely, however, the absence of a culture of discussion is often apparent when debate degenerates into mockery or even outright abuse). The absence of supply generates an absence of demand: the fact remains — reviews take time to write, while, at the same time, the genre is held in very low esteem: nowhere are reviews considered to be serious publications. Unfortunately, reviewing has become a form of ‘community service’ — unpaid and unrewarding.

3

In my opinion, the main cause of mutual misunderstanding (or the ineffectiveness of dialogue) is not anything to do with academic

rituals etc., but plain ignorance. This is most obvious at interdisciplinary conferences. On more than one occasion, I have been astounded by how uninformed my colleagues in neighbouring departments are. Say a group of researchers working on Soviet culture gets together historians, literature and cinema specialists, anthropologists. It quickly becomes apparent that the traditional historians don't have a clue what it is that a historian of literature does, for example, while the latter have no grasp of the basic work of a historian. And neither of them knows anything about the methodological approaches of related disciplines. Basically, it is a shock for all concerned.

It is, of course, possible to content oneself with the thought that people were 'lazy and uninterested' in the past as well, but the fact is, in the past, interdisciplinarity just didn't exist. It is hard to give an example of a political or social historian who was interested in cultural history forty years ago. There was no need for it. And the same went for the specialist in literature studies who was busy with his or her Silver Age. Yet, in cultural history today, many historians are reinventing the wheel without having the faintest idea of what has already been done in particular fields, or even a knowledge of what literature is available on their subject.

The other problem is really to do with communication and is also relatively recent: in almost every conference you attend, you are confronted with someone who, in a totally relaxed way, will be discussing the most up-to-the-minute questions using the newest 'academic' lingo. There is no substance behind such talk of course: they read a bad translation of Foucault, Baudrillard, or Derrida that they've happened to pick up at the local bookshop and a linguistic transformation begins: the listener is subjected to a stream of academese, simply incoherent blethering peppered with countless 'discourses', 'simulacrum', and other signs of 'up-to-date-ness'.

4

It goes without saying that a certain Russian approach to discussion exists. Following decades of Soviet officialese, the 'review style' (something between sarcastic mockery, the journalistic *scoop*, and an assault on a person's reputation) has become firmly established in post-Soviet academia. A 'killer-reviewer' type has even emerged, along with a whole series of popular academic publications founded on this sort of banter. The genre is flourishing, in particular in newspapers and on the Internet. Generally, this sort of 'discussion' consists in making fun of people's writing styles, without any analysis of the material or serious discussion. Moreover, reviewers are little-known young journalists specialising in this area. In the West, or at any rate in the US, specialist journals have a rule: the people who review books are not merely specialists in that particular subject, they are authors of books in their own right too. In Russia, the situation is

totally different. Anyone who cares to try their hand can write a review. It can be funny to read the way in which someone just out of high school does a journalistic razor job of the work of a leading specialist in a particular field. It could only happen in Russia. In the West, you can find these sorts of reviews in publications with a political agenda, but never in academic ones. In Russia today, the line between discussion and plain rudeness appears to have disappeared completely. Reviewers often resemble the character from Shukshin's story 'Shot 'Em Down'.¹ Behind all that bravado, there's just ugly provincialism and an inferiority complex.

5

It seems to me that the democratisation of academic discussion which has come with the Internet has resulted not so much in the creation of a creative academic environment, as in an atmosphere of constant conflict and squabbling which spills over into the public sphere. Is the participation of the 'general public' desirable? That all depends on what we understand by 'general public'. Are we talking about people who just happen to be browsing the forums? From my perspective, it's people like Viktor Toporov² who constitute the 'general public'. If we are talking about the participation of an unspecialised and ignorant part of society, then their absence is no great loss.

6

Steer clear of publishing anything 'on discussion' or 'on debate' in particular. Experience shows that proper analytical work illustrating new approaches and materials is the most effective and provocative way of eliciting discussion. It is not discussion, per se, which is important, but rather the significance of the themes it raises.

DINA KHAPAEVA

'It's Nothing Personal, Just Business'

As I see it, it is the anti-intellectualism of the humanities that is the main reason for the absence of discussion, debate, and criticism. The lack of interest in ideas is reflected in the way that the academic community has begun, unashamedly, to work exclusively according to the rules of the market and the public sphere (with the odd foray into politics). The absence of ideology in contemporary humanitarian knowledge is, to a large extent, a result of the

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¹ Vasily Shukshin's story 'Srezal' is about Gleb, an aggressive know-all from a village who specialises in 'shooting down' visitors from the city — in the eyes of his fellow villagers, at least. [Editor.]

² A poet, translator, essayist, and memoirist from St Petersburg known for his intemperate views and ranting blogs. [Editor.]

gradual transformation of the humanities into a business — ‘it’s nothing personal’.

The acute anti-intellectualism of the social sciences and the humanities is a result of the crisis in humanitarian knowledge. It is easy to see what the attraction of scientific knowledge was back in the days of the founding fathers of the social sciences and their successors, who believed scientific truth was something intelligible and accessible, and that sooner or later humanity and society would be transformed with its help. The enthusiasm of their critics in the 1970s was also understandable, when, drawing on several arguments, they set about proving that the truth promised by the founding-fathers was unrealisable, inaccessible, and beyond our grasp. Ideas are meaningful if one believes that scientific truth is attainable or that it can be shown to be out of our reach. And if this belief no longer exists? If the most important, and, indeed, the only idea which drives the sciences of humanity and society (if they wish to remain sciences) proves to be a prehistoric sort of positivism and the scientism which goes along with it? And if this is a siege positivism, conscious of its limitations and aware of the fact that, outside its besieged fortress walls, hostile forces that can poke fun at it lie in wait; if this is a fearful sort of positivism, which doesn’t only prohibit the asking of questions, but is also scared to make enquiries which fall outside the limits of its narrow field of specialisation?

From the moment that the social sciences and humanities proved incapable of curing society of its ills, from the moment people lost faith in their diagnoses, and their methods were compromised, scientism emerged as a form of psychological self-defence against the disillusionment of society and the distrust of the ‘ignoramus’, a defence from the falling public interest in researchers and their work, and also from the doubts that researchers experience from time to time about their own work. Positivism became the only safe haven for those who wanted to continue their research in the humanities. The high point of humanitarian introspectiveness came at a time when the humanities were in the last stages of their development, when society had lost much of its respect for humanitarian knowledge, and when the approaching moment of intellectual disorientation had lessened the value of ideas.

It is interesting that the sorry state of academia has had little if any effect on the reputation of university degrees in the humanities. One of the reasons for this might be that universities have, for some time, been just as ageist as schools: people are expected to enter universities only at a certain age. Universities remain extremely successful businesses, despite the fact that graduates no longer believe their mentors will be able to provide them with the methodological ‘key’

to give them the intellectual confidence that the ‘route’ they have chosen is the right one.

That said, such faith is no longer really necessary. If, in the 1960s and 1970s, you had to hold certain views (or reject all theories, on principle) in order to be part of the academic community, these days such commitment is considered very eccentric indeed. In meetings, colleagues discuss politics, the weather, nature, business — that is, the specifics of career development, their search for the perfect job and the right people, salaries and property — they form alliances, but hardly ever talk about their views and ‘creative ideas’. That’s what the annual reports exist for, so why spoil the party?

In the era of no ideas, the battle for fee-paying students has obviously influenced the quality and the content of educational programmes. The teaching of history is a good example in this regard: the need to ‘lure’ students with interesting, accessible topics has begun to alter appreciably the nature of the discipline. For example, at American universities (excluding Princeton, perhaps), history degrees are now grouped around four principal themes which provide the structure for discussion of all the countries and periods on the curriculum: food, witchcraft, violence, and, of course, sex. This ‘gastronomical’ turn, as it were, in the study of history clearly reflects the anti-intellectual outlook of contemporary academia.

As a result of the intellectual disorientation created by this moment of crisis the notion that ideas — at least in the humanities — have an independent value has been undermined. In other words, the humanities has ceased to be a means of self-expression, and has turned into praxis with no tangible or meaningful link with the world of ideas. With the deficit of ideas and the crisis of faith in science, you would have to be a real fanatic to work on the same topic or in the same narrow field of research for any length of time, or to be genuinely interested in doing so. And given that real fanaticism is a fairly rare condition, there are two possible paths, or scenarios open to the graduate after the completion of his studies. Intellectual work can function as a means of self-expression, but this is already far removed from ‘academia’. By the former, we mean intellectual writing, something which is neither a matter of academic inheritance nor something that can be learned, in the same way as you can’t learn to be talented. The second option is the choice of a narrow field of research — which may at first set the teeth on edge, but then even this feeling of disgust disappears. And, for want of a more useful activity, there remains a university career as a means to put bread on the table. It’s nothing personal, just business.

Let us turn now to the way in which the field works. ‘The best specialists in their field get jobs at the best universities’ — who really believes in the idea of meritocracy these days? Can we be confident

that the work, of historians, for example, at the most prestigious universities is much worse or much better than that of their colleagues at less advanced institutions? In the end, it is not a question of the quality of a person's writing, nor, clearly, of their capacity to produce new and interesting ideas, but rather how well and appropriately they fit into the environment, who their supervisors were, and how well rooted they are in their specific fields. When it comes to making a decision about the recruitment of new staff, the rules of the social sphere play a central role: the most important thing is who you know, and what sort of reputation you have (if you are pleasant and well-mannered, if you are a good dining companion, etc.). Who finds it easier to get into academia? Someone who challenges something that his boss and colleagues agree upon, or someone who agrees with everything and everyone? Or, rather, someone who quietly listens and writes what his workmates want to hear from him — it's nothing personal, just business.

In the past, when ideas still meant something, doctoral students always cherished the hope of one day arguing the case in favour or against the ideas of their teachers and, as a consequence, making their name. Today, any student knows that ideas are dangerous: they know that, in the past, these could cause disagreements bringing people into conflict. In short, ideas could threaten their chances for promotions.

Have you ever come across an assistant professor brimming with his own original ideas? Having your own opinions is clearly an obstacle when it comes to establishing successful business relations — anyway, what do you need opinions for when you are just supposed to be doing your job? And what difference does it make if you work in a bank or in a university faculty? Why, it's nothing personal, just business!

The devaluation of ideas is reflected in the fact that their plagiarism no longer shocks people, nor is it considered unacceptable, discreditable, etc. Researchers who have reputations as plagiarists don't suffer from these at all — on the contrary, the 'community' is quite understanding about such 'practices', considering them, most probably, as 'the espionage of the industry'. But, again, it's nothing personal.

But let's now move away from the crisis, and talk briefly about academic journals, which undoubtedly constitute the foundation for the 'production of scholarly knowledge'. Was there really always as little debate as there is today? In the era of grand theories, the absence of debate and criticism was never a problem: Durkheim's *L'Année Sociologique* or Bloch and Febvre's *Annales*, were largely made up of reviews, in which the founders of the journals expressed their ideological disagreement with their opponents and radically increased

the number of their supporters. Which of today's journals can boast an ideological platform which its supporters would readily take to their pens to defend? And without a programme, how is it possible to tell 'one of us', whose work is worth printing, from 'one of them'?

What do peer review journals and academic journals consider their role to be? To seek out original ideas? But how is it possible to evaluate new and original ideas on the basis of a consensus, and, indeed, an anonymous consensus, within which not one of the reviewers is willing to run the risk of being labelled a reactionary? The only texts that might be accepted by consensus are those that have been toned down beforehand and 'sanitised' by perspicacious authors who understand what the 'professional community' expects from them.

Perhaps journals are concerned with the much praised notion of interdisciplinarity? Just try and publish a genuinely interdisciplinary article, which crosses the boundary between two disciplines, and you'll understand the situation for yourself. It wouldn't be far off the mark to describe today's academic journals as machines for distributing future jobs and salaries, and as closed corporations, in the depths of which (within each narrow professional field) the distribution and redistribution of potential incomes takes place, a sort of futures market, in which decisions about who gets which job are made.

But if it is not possible to tell journals apart on ideological grounds, they must still be distinguishable by something. And, in fact, they do differ in terms of their subject matter, and when even this coincides, they are still distinguishable by a number of stylistic quirks which cannot be identified with any particular academic method. But apart from these stylistic subtleties, the main, really tangible difference is the interests, networks, and alliances of people at the head or behind the scenes of these journals. But again, what's there to discuss if everyone knows all of this already: the alignment of forces, the personal relations between the members of editorial boards, the personal relations with editors of other journals...

And even if you dismiss all of the above as malicious allegation, then what sort of debate is there to talk of when the world of academic journals has long and quite contentedly been following Braudel's example of the *longue durée*? What heated discussions can there possibly be if, even in the most lively journal, your article only sees the light of day six months after it was written, in the best possible case, and normally a year later? And if responses to it are printed a year later again? Ideas, like all worldly things, exist in time. Life doesn't stand still, and over the course of a year the interests of intelligent people alter considerably. Academic journals move at the pace of a nineteenth century mail coach when everything else in an academic's life — correspondence, news updates, etc. — is one

mouse click away. So, we can say with some certainty that there just isn't — and can't be! — time for discussion in academic journals.

It goes without saying that debate takes place today as well. This is usually motivated by personal grievances, individual quirks, unspoken stylistic disputes or all-out wars between certain groups. But these occasional fallings-out are most likely irrelevant to the debates that we have been asked to discuss by the editorial board of *Forum for Anthropology and Culture*.

There is, of course, a solution. This is to enter the public sphere, where, today, the question of whether ideas have an independent value is also under debate. Yet, we should not forget that the public sphere has very different rules to academia. Here, it is not one's colleagues who are the judges, but the reader. Granted, work still depends on one's colleagues and not on the reader. The 'modern scholar' is thus faced with a tough choice between business and intellectual pursuits, between the things he loves in himself (if this is relevant) and the complete absence of anything 'personal'.

The views expressed here are, of course, intentionally exaggerated, and to a grotesque degree at that. But I would like to hope that they might allow people to think about the developments taking place in contemporary academia. In any case, it goes without saying — it's nothing personal...

EVE LEVIN

1

I cannot agree that scholarly discussion has become 'conspicuous by its absence'. The statement presumes that 'once upon a time' academics assiduously engaged in scholarly interchange in their published work, responding to a broad range of extant interpretations with humble, open minds. Such a golden age never existed. When I read old journals, including the one I now edit (*The Russian Review*), I see the same level of engagement as in the past. With the exception of articles that are designed to survey the current state of knowledge concerning a given issue, authors have always tended to note a few landmarks of scholarship, and then move on into a presentation of their own new contribution. This is not necessarily bad. When authors engage in a lengthy, point-by-point refutation of extant scholarship, they may have proved their predecessors wrong, but they have

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not created a cogent alternative interpretation. In order to leave sufficient room to present their own findings effectively, authors often must forgo extensive consideration of alternative views.

Yet, as the question demonstrates, scholars are suffering from considerable anxiety about the level of scholarly discussion. Why? I propose these causes:

a) The burgeoning number of works that deserve mention. New works appear every year, while the old ones remain valuable. Thanks to new electronic media, particularly bibliographical databases and on-line access to an increasing volume of old and new material, we have fewer excuses for omitting from consideration items that are quite old or very recent. As postmodern challenges to the authority of any literary canon have entered our consciousness, we have become more squeamish about referencing some works while excluding others. Of course, we still do make choices, citing 'the greats'. However, now our 'greats' tend to be the masters of critical theory and senior contemporary scholars, rather than the Imperial Russian scholars cited by the preceding generations.

b) A quest for originality. Each scholar is supposed to make a brand-new contribution to human knowledge. However, most scholars do not produce profoundly new conceptualisations, or open up topics never before studied. In order to emphasise the distinctiveness of our own work, we can either ignore similar scholarship, or we can magnify our degree of departure from it. Neither approach results in genuine dialogue with other scholars' ideas.

c) Our own desire for evidence of 'relevance.' I confess to practising this ego-exercise, ubiquitous among academics: As soon as I receive a new book or article in my field, I look immediately to see if my own publications are listed in the footnotes and bibliography. Citation in itself has become a professional courtesy, and a form of professional assistance. In the 1990s many American universities started experimenting with citation index scores as a means of assessment of faculty productivity, and citing friends' publications became a means of fostering their academic success. At the same time, academic authors have less motivation to cite the works of scholars outside their own circles. Russians tend to cite other Russian scholars; Americans cite Americans and Canadians (and sometimes other Anglophone scholars). This occurs despite the much improved language skills of the current generation of scholars, and the much improved access to each others' publications.

d) Worry that engagement with others' scholarly work could be misinterpreted as criticism. We fear not only that valued professional colleagues might take offense, but even more that their academic superiors might use our words as weapons against our colleagues.

Many of us have seen appointment or promotion-and-tenure committees latch onto statements of challenge or disagreement to justify negative decisions: ‘Dr. X’s work is not widely respected.’ In a ‘sound-bite’ culture, just one faultfinding phrase can overshadow pages of praise. Most of us don’t want to be responsible for inadvertently destroying a colleague’s career.

Together, these concerns tend to inhibit vigorous debate in published form, even while we cite increasing numbers of works.

2

Reviews commonly come in two forms: 1) Assessments of the value of published books, which usually appear in academic journals; and 2) Pre-publication reports on book or article manuscripts, which are shared only with the editors and the author of the work under review. Both types of reviews play a crucial role in the ‘quality control’ of academic publishing.

Reviews of published books promote conversation in the academic profession. The review typically consists of a brief summary of the content of the book, followed by a presentation of its strengths and weaknesses. Reviews can encourage interest in a book, or discourage it; and they can advance, or inhibit, the author’s career. The reviewers initiate discussion of the author’s ideas, but the intended audience is future readers of the book — as well as professionals who won’t actually read the book but need to keep abreast of trends in their field.

The author who is the focus of the discussion in a review rarely has an opportunity to respond. There are logistical reasons for this: imagine the complexity of sending all the book authors prepublication copies of reviews and collecting their answers in time for the publication deadline! Also, it would be a rare author who would refrain from refuting every criticism. Some authors would insist that negative or even insufficiently complimentary reviews not be published at all. On the American side of the Atlantic, academic criticism cannot easily be characterised as ‘libel’ — US law requires the ‘victim’ to prove not only untruth but also material damage. But British law takes the opposite tack, and threats of legal action could easily dissuade journals from running reviews over the objections of the book authors. So at *The Russian Review*, an American journal with a British publisher, we do not release reviews to authors in advance of publication. Over the years, we have received a handful of letters from British solicitors objecting to reviews and demanding that we repudiate them. Instead, we offer the offended British authors the same opportunity we grant Americans (and all nationalities): we will publish a Letter to the Editor, along with the reviewer’s repartee. The aggrieved authors usually feel better; the result is to bring still more attention to the unwelcome review.

Longer, more detailed reviews of books could enhance their value in promoting academic debate. However, from a publishing standpoint, longer reviews must come at the expense of full coverage of emerging literature. At *The Russian Review*, we have chosen to keep reviews short, in order to present more of them. In a typical year, we review 130+ new books, including a majority of English-language publications in Russian studies. That way, readers are assured of acquaintance with a broad array of newly-issued scholarship. But because most reviews are under 1000 words, they provide little detail about the book's content, and even less in the way of comparison to extant literature. Other journals, most notably *Kritika*, focus on a smaller number of reviews that delve more deeply into the books' contribution to knowledge. The editors of *Kritika* and I see our roles as mutually complementary.

The second type of review, pre-publication reports on manuscripts, constitutes a very important manifestation of academic dialogue. In these reports, authors receive (ideally) direct, candid commentary on their work-in-progress, and then they have the opportunity to revise their manuscripts accordingly. Editors often add their own comments, and guide authors in sorting out the (sometimes) conflicting advice in the reports. But reviews of this sort spark limited academic dialogue, because only the author, 1–3 reviewers, and a small editorial board (or a single editor) are involved. The tradition of maintaining the anonymity of the authors and the reviewers — necessary in order to keep the review process honest — further limits wider discussion.

The peer-review process — along with expert copy-editing — generates the 'value-added' of academic publishing. In our Internet age, anybody can write and circulate their products, blurring the lines between 'published' and 'unpublished' works. Amidst the hundreds, even thousands, of hits that a 'Google' search might yield, how are serious scholars to know what is — and is not — likely to be reliable? Peer-reviewed publications provide a measure of assurance as to the quality of the work.

3

The quality of discussion in academic forums varies widely and idiosyncratically. All of us have attended meetings (either in person or in cyberspace) that were remarkably stimulating and those that were a waste of time.

Ideally, conferences, seminars, on-line discussions, etc. encourage interchange among participants across institutional, national, and generational lines. In my experience, the selection of participants is the key to a good result:

a) Inviting scholars who study different aspects of the same topic. When all the participating scholars share some research interests,

they all have something cogent to contribute, and something to gain from their fellows.

b) Including two or three ‘outsiders’ — established scholars from tangentially related fields — to serve as commentators to raise questions and offer new approaches. Such visitors can raise unprecedented questions and offer alternative analytical models and conceptual approaches.

c) Choosing committed participants. Those who show up only to make their own presentations and then disappear for the rest of the time do little to promote dialogue. Scholars who want to contribute all they can and take all they can from the proceedings make for stimulating sessions.

Ideally, conferences, seminars, on-line discussions, etc. foster an atmosphere of mutual respect, where even criticisms are voiced in the context of affirmation of the scholar’s worth. In my experience, the structure of the meeting has much to do with creation of a comfortable milieu for academic exchange.

a) When participants provide drafts of their papers in advance of the meeting itself, the focus moves from presentation to discussion. The audience can respond with more thoughtful assessments rather than first impressions of the paper.

b) When the schedule is less crowded, participants have more opportunity to explore questions in depth. At many conferences, the discussions over meals or during outings rival those conducted during the formal sessions.

c) Moderators need to be willing to intervene. If a discussion begins to devolve into an argument between only two participants, or becomes repetitious, an activist chair can move it along to other issues. Moderators can make sure that all participants have their chance to speak — especially those who are shy by temperament, or more junior in academic rank, or less comfortable in the language of discussion.

Most of all, those of us who are senior scholars can model good discussion behaviour for our juniors and our students. We can avidly seek opportunities for intellectual engagement with a wide variety of scholars (and non-scholars) at many stages of their careers. We can demonstrate how to disagree without becoming disagreeable. We can show how to give criticism supportively and accept it in the same spirit. We can change our minds without worrying about appearing to vacillate. We can acknowledge intellectual debts graciously, and academic tributes modestly. I was privileged to have an exemplary mentor in these virtues, Allan Wildman, in my early professorial years.

4

The growth of electronic communication, coupled with the relaxation of ideologically-defined political blocs, has permitted an unprecedented degree of global communication. Even though the journal *I edit* is subtitled 'An American Quarterly,' in the past 20 years it has attracted a fully international audience, as well as an increasingly international cadre of contributors. It is not uncommon, now, for the author of an article, each of the two referees, and the editor to all be living on different continents, yet to be in instant communication.

I have not discerned different *national* styles in the types of scholarly discussion that arise in the context of journals. While some reviewers of books and articles are overly blunt, or overly gentle, no single nationality tends more one way than the other. Some authors take advice graciously and integrate it fully into their revised manuscripts, while others become testy and argue tenaciously against even the most minor criticisms. Both types have come from every nationality I have encountered. It is true, though, that scholars from the former Soviet Union sometimes misjudge the level of scholarship in the West, and submit articles for publication on the level of 'popular-scholarly' literature, which are too elementary for our readership.

It is in interactions in person that different academic traditions become more visible. At international conferences, I have seen some Eastern Europeans read their papers at a clip two or three times faster than normal speech, hoping to squeeze as much as possible into their allotted 15 minutes. Few of the foreigners in the audience can absorb material at that speed, and so they miss an opportunity to engage with the speaker's ideas. Moderators in Europe seem to be more deferential to listeners of higher academic rank, offering them the first opportunities to comment and question, while Americans tend to offer the floor to audience member in the order they ask to speak. American senior scholars tend to be more approachable, welcoming even beginning students to discuss with them. American students can be too informal, expecting to be welcomed as equal participants when they have not yet acquired sufficient knowledge to contribute.

5

As a faculty member at a publicly-funded university, I recognise the obligation of scholars to educate not only each other, but also the populace as a whole. In addition to producing publications for our own edification, we should also find ways of communicating our discoveries to the public. Otherwise we risk surrendering that role to dilettantes who distort our ideas. Still more serious, we risk missing the opportunity to make the value of our scholarly pursuits known to the ordinary people who (as taxpayers) fund our research.

Many academics have mastered the 'public lecture,' in which they present a university-level exposition of a topic for an audience consisting of educated non-academics. Such lectures usually come with a 'question period,' but the dialogue is usually one-sided, with

the member of the public posing a question, and the academic expert answering authoritatively. Digital media provide a new means for academics to reach a wide non-academic audience, and gradually the number of websites produced by experts has been increasing. But academics are understandably reluctant to contribute to Wikis, such as *Wikipedia*, because their carefully-chosen words can be rewritten in a nanosecond by any person with computer access.

The participation of non-specialists in on-line academic discussions is more problematical. Certainly, some of the non-specialists would use such participation to learn, and their questions could spur academics to rethink what they mean to say. However, given the level of discourse one usually finds on public sites, such as those sponsored by newspapers or broadcast media, academic discussions would be more likely to suffer than to benefit. Even the on-line commentary found on the site of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* — an American weekly gazette dedicated to issues of university life — is only slightly more literate than one can find on the American low-brow Fox network site. Public forums, then, seem to bring out the worst in academics.

When access is too open, discussion boards can be taken over by academic ‘wannabes’ — individuals who ‘read a lot’ or who have tried, but failed, to achieve academic standing — who have the spare time to fill cyberspace with ill-informed observations. In such situations, serious scholars often stop reading postings, and seek alternative means of communicating with others like themselves. For that reason, I think that it is best for some forums to remain strictly for professionals.

6

While academic discussion takes place very frequently at professional meetings, in on-line discussion boards and lists, through the review process, and through private correspondence, it rarely is preserved for later examination. Journals nowadays rarely publish transcripts of academic meetings, and that is just as well. Truth be told, a lot of this discussion does not merit preservation. Good ideas are incompletely formulated and are buried amidst the bad and the banal. Nuggets of little-known valuable evidence surface, but often in incomplete or semi-accurate form. The paths to new insights are long and indirect. So in their raw form, discussions are useful to the participants and immediate observers, but not to later readers.

The material published as ‘discussions’ in academic journals is much more carefully crafted. In *The Russian Review*, the items that form what we call a ‘thematic cluster’ have undergone careful screening and multiple critiques. Often the clusters begin as a live discussion, either at a conference or via electronic media. The authors draft their articles; the cluster organiser critiques them; the authors rewrite them. Then the process is repeated at the journal: the editor solicits

external reviews, and on their basis proposes changes. Then the authors rewrite the articles yet again. Rewritten articles inspire changes in the introduction and the commentary. When authors see the framing materials, they often wish to make further changes in their articles, in order to respond to the challenges they find there. About half of the ‘thematic clusters’ that we plan fail to pass these stringent quality tests, and so do not materialise. The content that finally appears in print has withstood challenge.

Although *The Russian Review* includes ‘thematic clusters’ in about a quarter of our issues, their scope is usually quite limited: a specific oeuvre (such as Joseph Brodsky’s ‘On the Talks in Kabul’ in volume 61, number 2; or the film *Tsirk* in volume 66, number 1); a specific genre (such as the ‘Diaries’ cluster in volume 63, number 4); or a specific event (such as the Russo-Japanese War, in volume 67, number 1). Only rarely do we solicit discussions of broader methodological or conceptual issues, such as the two clusters on post-Soviet historiography (volume 60, number 4 and volume 61, number 1).

For that reason, I value the kind of discussion the *Forum for Anthropology and Culture* provides. By making the focus of each discussion forum a significant aspect of conceptualisation or methodology, the editors make it relevant for a wide audience. By providing a set of questions, the editors structure the conversation. The editors can refine the final product by allowing the contributors to read each other’s draft essays and incorporate specific references to points of agreement or disagreement. Perhaps the *Forum* can devise ways of continuing the conversation in subsequent issues, by actively soliciting readers’ responses to a given forum and selecting the most thoughtful of them for publication in a subsequent issue.

STEPHEN LOVELL

1

I see only limited grounds for academic *Kulturpessimismus*. Scholars in the humanities and social sciences are constantly discussing — even if not always on the pages of journals. Academic exchange in liberal societies — and across liberal societies — is far closer to Habermas’s ideal than any eighteenth-century coffee house. The opportunities for such exchange have expanded in exciting ways over the last fifteen years with the growth of the internet and the breaking down — to some extent — of boundaries between national academic cultures. As regards my own field

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of Russian studies, I would say that there is vastly more communication between the British and American, the Anglophone and German, and the 'Western' and Russian academic worlds than I recall from my days as a PhD student in the mid-1990s.

Admittedly, the notion of academic communication as an ideal-type public sphere — as a domain for disinterested rationality to roam as it sees fit — is vulnerable on a number of points. Here, as everywhere else, there are less disinterested intruders: power, patronage, inertia, convention, loyalty. It is hardly revelatory to say that certain people, institutions, and fields of study have greater than average power to initiate discussion and set its terms. In Russian history, one could point to the hegemony of the Soviet period as a focus for scholarly endeavour, or to the coalescence of discussion around particular themes in that period. One could also mention the mantra of 'interdisciplinarity' — a gesture to intellectual exchange that quite often allows scholars to make larger claims for what they were doing anyway.

These, however, are truisms. The real question is whether the limitations on disinterested communication are currently increasing. My impression is that they are not. Academia has its hierarchies, but they are less divisive than those in many other professions. It is possible for a junior lecturer or even a graduate student to express frank and public criticism of the work of a much older scholar. Of course, we all engage in self-censorship as we tone down dyspeptic first drafts of book reviews, but courtesy does not have to come at the expense of content. More pertinently to the present discussion, the types of discussion scholars engage in are now more diverse than they used to be, and no less meaningful.

But I would still like to end with some words of caution. Discussion should not be allowed to become a fetish. It is only as good as the people who coordinate it and the people who take part in it. It may or may not be worthwhile. As a colleague once remarked to me, the best way to make a quick and brilliant academic career is to be noisily and impressively wrong about something: your peers will spend the next ten years putting you right in ways that confirm your importance. Perhaps public discussion also runs the risk of becoming a ritual cure for our common predicament: the fact that we are all lonely scholars stuck with the questions and the sources rattling around in our own heads. Being a scholar will probably continue to require us to be self-absorbed — and isolated — at least some of the time. Much of the most meaningful academic communication will still be face-to-face or one-to-one rather than public and shared. It is perhaps the model of the lone scholar that we need to be more concerned about than the fate of *diskussionnost'*, as the latter is receiving such favourable treatment from funding bodies who extend business models to

academia and favour collaborative work and research networking over less tangible and more chancy forms of output. Discussion is already where the smart money lies.

2 Quite a few reviews published in academic journals make rather bland reading, offering a straightforward summary of contents rather than an incisive analysis. There is also the problem that print journals are pushed for space and restrict the length of reviews (the most severe limit I have come across is 500 words, but 750 words is pretty standard). But even a review that is little more than a précis may perform a useful function by helping readers to find their bearings in the literature. I quite often use reviews in this way, especially when investigating areas that lie outside my main expertise. It is still desirable, however, for even the shortest review to evaluate the sources and arguments of the book in question.

Longer reviews, and review articles, can be extremely effective at making connections and refocusing debate. My impression is that the longer format is used more extensively and creatively than was the case even ten years ago. Examples from my own field include the journal *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* and the internet publication *Reviews in History*, which allows reviewers more space (2,000 words, sometimes more) and gives authors the right of reply.

3 The most rewarding conferences are small, thematically focused workshops (if possible, with pre-circulated papers). The larger academic occasions — such as annual jamborees in American hotels — can also be very valuable, even if the most stimulating intellectual exchange usually takes place outside the formal sessions. The main failing of seminars and conferences is that not all participants fully understand the difference between the spoken and the written word. But I would say this is less of a problem than ten years ago, as conference presentations are tending to get shorter and more engaging, and conference organisers are taking measures to that end.

4 The internet, the end of the Cold War, the English language, and the changing priorities of funding bodies have together given a huge boost to scholarly dialogue across cultures, even if the exchange is unequal in some respects: Anglophone scholars make rather fewer concessions than the rest, which is regrettable.

Cultural differences undeniably remain, despite signs of convergence in the work of younger scholars. In my (admittedly limited) experience, the Anglo-American world takes the institution of peer reviewing much more seriously than continental Europe. Quality control is in general weaker in Russian academic life. It is noticeable that authors are allowed to recycle material from one publication

to another, which would be frowned on in Britain or North America. Russian academic articles tend to make fewer efforts to present material in an engaging way or to gesture to broader debates. Against that, they are sometimes less modish and more informative than Anglo-American writing. Russia — and perhaps also Germany — has more of a divide between ‘serious’ academic writing and lightweight ‘scholarly-popular literature’ (*nauchno-populyarnaya literatura*). In Britain and America it is easier to find a middle ground between the two — not least because of the economics of publishing in the English language.

The Anglophone world itself remains divided in some ways. In general, I would say North America is more hierarchical and more professionalised than Britain. This is presumably due to the length and rigour of American PhD programmes and to the sheer size of the country and its intellectual community (which considerably raises the political stakes of academic debate). There is also the fact that the British system of state audit (the Research Assessment Exercise, to be replaced by the Research Excellence Framework) puts pressure on scholars to publish regularly and fairly profusely. As a result, recent publication profile may to some extent displace more traditional means of construing seniority — administrative service, teaching *stazh*, long-term research contribution.

5

The public uses of history, and the public role of the historian, are topics of much discussion in my academic field. It is rare to attend an inaugural lecture, or to read a departmental website, that does not make reference to it. The evidence of the last couple of decades is that there is no ‘problem’ here: a substantial number of scholars have written and broadcast very effectively to the general public. History — most of it originating in academia — is having a well-attested public boom.

The trick, I think, is to avoid becoming sanctimonious on either side of the public/academic divide. From time to time, scholars who have written very successfully for a wider audience tell colleagues that it is their moral duty to do likewise. These colleagues, for their part, indulge in a certain amount of knee-jerk disparagement of the more media-savvy scholars. I would say that it is probably interesting at some stage to try your hand at a form of writing other than the journal article or the monograph — after all, an academic career is long, and monotony can set in — but prescription here would be quite wrong. A book that finds even a handful of thoughtful and appreciative readers is absolutely worthwhile. Whether it is economically feasible is another matter.

The real issue with public history is not whether it should exist or whether it is a ‘good’ thing but whether it manages to communicate the intellectual diversity, richness, complexity and originality of

more specialised studies. It is very difficult for a historian to get a good book deal unless s/he makes gripping narrative the structuring principle, focuses on a canonical big event or major figure, and includes a hefty dose of human interest. And then there are anniversaries. I suspect that 2017 will see the publication of rather more new histories of the Russian Revolution than is strictly necessary. But departures from the prevailing norms are by no means impossible. Think, for example, of the brainy, analytical history contained in Niall Ferguson's *The Cash Nexus* and (with one or two caveats) *The Pity of War*. Human-interest narrative, too, can be the conduit for extraordinarily 'thick' and perceptive historical description: take G.S. Smith's biography of D.S. Mirsky, or Catriona Kelly's reassessment of the Pavlik Morozov affair, or John Randolph's recent revisiting of the Bakunin family (to name but three examples that have caught my eye in the early twenty-first century). The fact that Smith's book was priced at 65 tells us more about the marketing failures of Oxford University Press than about the inability of scholarship to speak to a wider audience.

6

The main formal means of encouraging debate in journals is to encourage contributors to operate in the middle ground between short book reviews and lengthy, specialised research articles. But *Forum for Anthropology and Culture*, and certain other journals, are already doing this. As I suggested in my earlier answers, I am not altogether convinced that there is much of a problem here. The main thing — and here I risk sounding platitudinous — is for editors to choose interesting topics for discussion.

ALEKSANDR LVOV

Almost all of the discussions that I've taken part in have left me with a bad taste in my mouth: it seems that people don't listen to each other, that they don't want to listen. Why is this happening? Otto Gerhard Oexle comes close to answering this question in an article comparing the current debate about historical 'facts' and 'fictions' with century-old debates, in which Ernst Troeltsch, Georg Simmel, and Max Weber attempted to answer 'the call of Nietzsche'. He points out that much of what is being discussed today, and at an 'international' level at that, was already being discussed decades ago — though on the basis of better premises for it, and with more convincing results [Oexle 1996].

What Oexle says also applies to most of the debates in anthropology. These are built around the same structure, centring on concepts such as *tradition*, *folklore*, *ethnos*, *people* and so on. One side is made up of those who want to use, or are accustomed to using these concepts as tools, while the other is composed of those interested in deconstruction. You would think that the positions of the two sides would complement each other: the first is interested in concrete research, the second in methodology. But, for various reasons, the positions of the two sides have been established in a slightly more categorical way than they could have been, with the result that they now appear unacceptable to either party. Concepts that underpin a large amount of research are proclaimed entirely ‘obsolete’, and are dismissed by contemporary academia as ideological constructs with no empirical foundation. The same accusations are thrown back at them only in different terms: their critics’ statements are dismissed as ‘newfangled’ constructs — whereas traditional concepts are now identified with reality. In the Russian context, the conflict between ‘old’ and ‘new’ academia frequently acquires features of the ‘Back to the Soil’ [Pochvenniki] versus ‘Westernisers’ debate, something which doesn’t help to ensure mutual understanding between both sides.

One way or another, debate about the epistemological status of concepts, while outwardly preserving its academic character, is becoming meaningless. It is turning into a conflict of values, which, as Max Weber writes, is ‘an irreconcilable death-struggle, like that between “God” and the “Devil”’. Between these, neither relativisation nor compromise is possible’ [Weber 1949a: 12]. This loss of meaning is evidenced by the fact that, as Oexle has rightly pointed out, participants in these discussions have failed to make use of the experience of previous generations of academics. In the guise of ultra-modern (or even post-modern) debates, variations on the old arguments between Friedrich Nietzsche and Leopold von Ranke and the neo-Rankians are produced, but at the same time, the solution Weber proposed to this conflict, which has by no means lost its relevance today, is ignored.

According to Weber, scientific concepts of culture cannot help but be ideological constructs: ‘Only a small portion of existing concrete reality is coloured by our value-conditioned interest and it alone is significant to us. It is significant because it reveals relationships which are important to us due to their connection with our values. Only because and to the extent that this is the case is it worthwhile for us to know it in its individual features.’ [Weber 1949b: 76].

As such, Weber asserts that it is meaningless to search for an ‘objective’ academic language that is free from value preferences. Attempts at objectivity have to be made elsewhere: the self-reflection of the academic, the recognition of the hybrid character of the concepts

employed, as part of both a logical theoretical structure and a system of values. Yet, as he points out, modern academic debate is characterised by a confusion of analytical and evaluative promptings — and precisely this is what transforms it into a war of words.

How can the quality of debate be improved? How can the grains of rationality be separated from the backbiting, if this is possible at all? Oexle appears to have a fairly optimistic outlook: he interprets the growing interest in the half-forgotten classic ‘science of culture’ since the 1980s as a sign that a new era of discussion is dawning. But that still leaves the question of how we are to explain the poor quality of debate, which, as Oexle has shown, simply ignores the findings of Weber and others.

It is worth considering carefully Weber’s principal requirement to separate value judgements from logical judgements, while accepting that scientific concepts are necessarily value-concepts. The scientific ‘ideal type’ described in this requirement could function perfectly well as a yardstick of the current state of discussion in academia. But can it show us how to rectify this situation? Why is this simple and seemingly logical requirement yet to be institutionalised? I believe that the answers to these questions can be found in the mechanisms of correlation between the values of academia (and academics) and life values which stretch beyond the boundaries of academia. The main problem, in my opinion, is that academics have no idea about these mechanisms. I will try to illustrate this by several examples, but before proceeding I would like to turn once more to Weber and his ideas about the correlation of life and science.

At the end of his article, “‘Objectivity’ in Social Science”, Weber describes two forms of scientific existence that are successively substituted, one for the other, in accordance with the stability of the system of concepts and related values. The first of these forms presupposes cumulative development, the steady accumulation of knowledge whose value is widely recognised; the second, the restructuring of the conceptual framework in accordance with the altered system of values. The eventual result will be a loss of confidence, a disappearance of sense of direction in the growing ‘twilight’, followed by a change of orientation and a further search for the light ‘The significance of the unreflectively utilised viewpoints becomes uncertain and the road is lost in the twilight. The light of the great cultural problems moves on. Then science too prepares to change its standpoint and its analytical apparatus and to view the streams of events from the heights of thought’ [Weber 1949b: 112].

The twilight moment that Weber writes about is undoubtedly upon us. But can science and scholarship regain their lost sense of meaningfulness by simply restructuring its conceptual framework? Of course, one can measure the value of science by its budget, the

financial support it receives from the government and private sponsors, and the opportunity to look on cultural and social processes from above (as Weber terms it) And yet, doubts about another sort of value have been raised and answers to them not yet found; the loss of confidence Weber referred to is all too obvious.

Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi's well-known book, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, is an excellent example of the recognition of this division between science and life. The book, in the words of the author, is 'part history, part confession and credo'. It came about 'in an effort to understand myself as a Jewish historian, not within the objective context of the global scholarly enterprise, but within the inner framework of Jewish history itself' [Yerushalmi, 1982: xiv-xv]. The conclusions were unsettling: 'Jewish collective memory' (as Yerushalmi understands it) has no need for historical science and academic historians. And this doesn't only apply to the Jewish case. The same division between the historian's determination to 'recover a total past' and the 'drastically selective' character of collective memory [Ibid.: 94-95] is happening everywhere. If, as Yerushalmi maintains, the historian was steeped in the organic life of his people and European culture generally at the beginning of the 19th century, then by the end of the century, his efforts to acquire a total knowledge of the past had gone beyond the needs and understanding of the collective — something which permitted Nietzsche to compare history to 'a sleeplessness that destroys the hidden thing' [Ibid: 133 note 33].

So how did the academic community react to Yerushalmi's conclusions? His book was the subject of lively debate, although not so much about the problem of the modern historian's alienation, but rather in the rapidly developing field of historical memory studies. In other words, unable to overcome its disconnection with life, academia continues to do what it does best: to study the division that has been discovered between itself and life, 'to view the streams of events from the heights of thought', thereby widening this division. At the same time, according to Yerushalmi, 'historiography that does not aspire to be memorable is in danger of becoming a rampant growth [Ibid: 101].

Of course, not everyone considers the rupture between memory and history such a tragedy. Pierre Nora, another of the founding fathers of memory studies, also connects the emergence of his field of study with the rupture of the link, which had been strong until the 1930s, between the historian and his collectivity, the memory of the nation and its history [Nora 1999]. In France, however, it was possible to re-establish this link: historians are not only interested in deconstructing the 'myths of national history', but also play the role of 'national memory administrator' demanded of them by society

[Uvarov 2004]. If that is really the case, then we ought to envy French historians. But still, I don't think that we can dismiss the idea of alienation that Yerushalmi talks about as something which concerns him alone.

The dividing line between anthropology and life runs in a similar way through history — it passes through the very foundations of the discipline. Anti-essentialist criticism has resulted in some fundamental categories (such as *race*, *people*, and, to a certain extent, even *culture*) disappearing almost completely from academic usage and has trained us to be suspicious of any form of social identity based on ethnic origin and 'natural' bodily attributes. At the same time, anthropologists have to admit that the notion of essentialism, rejected in scholarly circles, is hardly an outmoded relic of another age. On the contrary, it has breathed new life into a globalising world and become a powerful means for consolidating diverse groups.¹

Anthropologists have identified this rupture, which is a result of the victory of anti-essentialism in academia and its triumph in the social sphere, as something which has made it more difficult to carry out field work and to present results in a politically correct way (See, for example, [Fischer 1999: 473—474]). Clearly, far from all anthropological subjects would be happy to find out that their identities are constructed, their traditions are invented, and the communities to which they are linked by such warm, blood bonds are imagined. And it won't be that easy to explain to them that terms they find offensive are simply academic expressions and cast no aspersions on either them or their community. Indeed, such justifications would be misleading since, in actual fact, contemporary anthropological language has its own set of values directly opposed to essentialism.

I will venture to formulate the following generalisation, omitting for the sake of brevity the necessary qualifications: *as long as a person experiences an essential connection with a particular group, the language of contemporary anthropology will be foreign to him*. This, of course, applies to anthropologists as well. They, however, can choose between being alienated from their professional language or from their nearest and dearest, or otherwise falling into some sort of professional schizophrenia in an effort to save their 'real' selves from their harmful research interests. But, in any case, it appears that the conscious alignment of academic concepts and everyday values is impossible.

All this, of course, applies only to a certain part of anthropology, which I would not exactly call 'contemporary'. In the modern world,

¹ Arjun Appadurai has linked the reasons for this development with several practices of modern nation states, which facilitate the formation of ethnic groups by creating the opportunity for them to experience their unity in a bodily way [Appadurai 1996: 157].

there exist other sorts of anthropology, which operate with concepts such as, for example, ‘the vital force of the Slavonic people’ and ‘cultural evolution’ according to Serguei Oushakine [Oushakine 2005: 65]. In those ‘research-and-publishing conglomerates’, as Oushakine calls them, the link between concepts and value ideas is very clear. However, these concepts themselves are hardly likely to pass the litmus test for essentialism, and thus be accepted into ‘Big’ science. Or rather, they could be accepted, but only as research objects, which allow it to be appreciated ‘how given practices of problematisation and thematicisation fit into a broader pattern of social mapping used by that community’ [Ibid: 66].

Another way of getting into ‘global’ anthropology while maintaining the bond with a particular group and its values, is to transform the researcher into a *native anthropologist*, a questionable status, constructed, according to Elza-Bair Guchinova, ‘by “post-colonial” anthropologists not only to keep their colleagues on the straight and narrow, but in order to mark out for scholars from the former colonies their inalienably provincial niche in academic life’ [Guchinova 2005: 45]. We are witnessing a ‘glocalisation’ of science, as it were.

Maybe discussion between ‘global’ and ‘local’ anthropologists could help us find a solution to this situation, to discover a new system of concepts more relevant to the value preferences of most anthropologists and the current state of the world. But for that to happen, there has to be the prospect of meaningful discussion between them, something which doesn’t yet exist. Something is preventing anthropologists from understanding *themselves*, and without that it makes no sense to argue with others.

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SVETLANA RYZHAKOVA

'Cutting Words with Gold': On the Stylistic, National, and Corporate Particularities of the Art of Discussion and Review

All of the reasons listed in the second question for the absence of serious, well-formulated discussion and review practices obviously have their place and, in my opinion, have very real causes, motives, and even manifestations. Some studies in the 'anthropology of academic communities' (Cf.: [Antropologiya akademicheskoi zhizni 2008]) are fully able to identify these, but the question of what *ways and means* might be employed to overcome this situation is not so easy; this requires specialist attention. But most importantly, we have to understand on what basis and for which goals we must strive while creating arenas for discussion and review.

In my opinion, one of the most important questions is that of *personal motivation*. Let's not forget that participants in almost all discussions — and particularly large, unorganised ones — are motivated by completely different factors (early Buddhist priests have written on this subject, classifying the public as 'the scholars of Brahman, mired in his erroneous views', 'naive commoners', 'professional polemicists whose goal is not the acquisition of new knowledge, but the process itself', and so on). Before entering into discussion, even with colleagues, it's always very useful to determine what the discussion is ultimately going to be about and who is going to take part in it. Thus, Otto Weininger wrote the hugely popular and inspirational

study filled with lamentations about women, *Sex and Character*, which a number of young people (including the author himself) committed suicide after reading. Biographers nevertheless know that the decision to write the book from a certain perspective, and the selection of facts and ideas, presented in a brilliant narrative style and supporting this perspective, were to a large extent (if not exclusively!) connected with the young philosopher's own personal tragedy. Rejected by one woman, he decided to take revenge on them all.

Whether they admit it or not, ethnographers have clear motivations for choosing certain research strategies: 'sentimental', 'analytical', 'romantic', 'structuralist', 'psychoanalytical', and so on (a slightly different set of strategies is provided by Aleksandr Prigarin, in his article 'Model Research Strategies in Ethnology: The challenge of the field, and individual experience' [Ibid: 141–161]). But at the same time, they don't always 'get enough distance' from their styles, principles of selection, and instruments. Paradoxically enough, people tend to be more reflexive in everyday life. Thus, an Indian friend of mine who was getting married to a Russian woman and had planned a wedding ceremony in an Indian church in Delhi, was asked, 'what sort of ceremony would you like? Something for yourselves, your relatives, or something that will cause public outcry?' Depending on the customer's position and wishes, the format of the Indian wedding, which is in theory the same for everyone, can be modified. It is quite possible that this has something to do with the rich tradition of preserving cultural diversity in India on the one hand, and with the custom of strict social stratification and the identification of particular group practices¹ on the other.

From some experience participating in academic conferences and seminars in India, I can bear witness to the high degree of participant involvement in the process, but very rarely to the capacity of these participants to 'hear' what anyone else is saying, that is their ability to acquire new knowledge and modify the knowledge that they already possess (this, of course, does not apply to various small groups of westernised elite academics). The 'average' academic discussion in India is characterised by a highly theatrical way of presenting material, although, in general, it is more like a 'concert' than a 'theatre performance', since the performances in this 'concert' are only united by certain referential concepts whose 'syntagmatic' links (which sometimes include historical chronology) are created by the speakers themselves.

¹ The recognition of 'others' in this context entails an attempt to discover the most important features of their everyday culture and behavioural norms (i.e. communicative aspects), but much less frequently the desire 'to understand them', to discover the specificities of their worldviews, etc. As such, socialisation in Indian society takes place for the most part (and in some cases exclusively) within one's own group.

Secondly, there's the question of *national and cultural models* for the organisation and development of discussion. While there are a great many universals in the way in which a given problem is discussed in a community, different historical periods, ethnic and national cultures of the world have developed their own particular means of doing so. Particular national, regional and confessional *styles and traditions of discussion* are well-known; in structural terms, these almost always fall between etiquette, the realm of ethical and even aesthetic conceptions (and by this we mean the 'unacceptable', as well as 'unsightly' and 'unrefined' ways participants in discussion behave) and worldviews. In theory at least, academic traditions constitute a separate domain which dates back to Antiquity (where the idea of symposia, conferences with alcoholic drinks, also originates), but in reality, we are often involved in a peculiar sort of 'syncretism', combining academic methods with mythology, ideology, and even propaganda and brand management.

One of the most advanced examples of this is the *Buddhist culture of discussion* — an obligatory part of monastic education, whose founder is thought to be *Dignāga*, and one of the most important centres of which is the Monastery of Sera near the capital of Tibet, Lhasa.

Today, visitors can witness the discussion process between monks in an enclosed courtyard at a particular time (usually three or four times a week, at around three to five in the afternoon). A monk or novice who asks questions sits on the ground and another person who answers stands opposite him. The first remains impervious and immobile, while the second makes smooth rhythmical movements the whole time, which look like a strange sort of dance or martial art movement. From time to time, he works himself up into a state of excitement, and, when expounding a good argument, 'seals' it with a sharp smack of one palm against the other, as if 'sending it off' to his opponent. In this way, young men learn not only how to listen, hear, speak, and defend their position, but also the plasticity of bodily movements corresponding to the notions of 'question', 'doubt', 'search', 'discovery', 'the embodiment of ideas', 'correspondence', and other far more complicated cognitive categories from the Buddhist worldview and monastic practices for the development of consciousness.

It is interesting that neither the culture of public debate in particular, nor philosophy in general is seen in Buddhism to have anything to do with 'truth', which, in the Mahāyāna tradition, is understood to transcend all human expression and to 'give off its own light' somewhere between individual effort and the collective ceremonial space. And in any case, Buddhist public debate is in no way intended to strengthen the human ego — the product of ignorance and the root of all evil.

The Eskimo ritual of group dance-discussions or dance-arguments has also been described in ethnographic works. These can last for years and take the form of regularly assembled collective ‘gatherings’ accompanied by copious amounts of food and perfectly friendly conversation. Pantomime-like ‘stances’ are incorporated into the gatherings, in which participants perform terrifying dances against each other and make frightening facial expressions, threatening movements and dangerous lunges. A tirade of abuse is heard, the ground shakes from stamping and the brandishing of arms, yet nobody touches anyone and not a drop of blood is spilled. After some time, the exhausted participants in this ‘discussion’ bring their fierce transactions to a close, relax and rejoin their peacefully discussing brethren. The source of the dispute (a theft, or somebody’s unlawful behaviour) may not even be mentioned or referred to for the rest of the gathering; the resolution of the problem is left in the hands of the appropriate spirits and Deities, whose answer is expected in good time.

There are also fairly detailed descriptions of the discussion etiquette of the Caucasian peoples, a great deal of which has been codified, although not always recorded. One of the main tenets of this is respect for elders, and particularly for elderly men. ‘With gold I cut your words’ is a standard Abkhazian expression used when it is necessary to interrupt a respected member of the community.

From the examples cited above, the following, third question concerning the culture of discussion inevitably follows: namely, *education*. Discussion is understood here as a cultural institution, which does not arise ‘of its own accord’, but is transmitted from one person to another as a collective skill. It is necessary to develop the skill of discussion in small groups, a little at high school but, in particular, at university; it is already too late to start learning it at PhD level where people should already have the skills to discuss problems, but where, in theory, they work on their own and therefore have other things to concentrate on.

Individual intelligence, knowledge and experience in the field cannot guarantee you success in academic debates, in the same way that a dancer is often unable to move with a partner or as part of a group. Without a competent and authoritative director, the combination of ten first-class soloists might result not only in a badly executed group dance, but also in conflict, slanging matches, and the complete disintegration of the collective.

Discussion is thus the *craft of ‘directing’*, and consists of being able to operate both with a ‘microscope’ and a ‘telescope’, or to put it another way, of knowing how to see problems in all their detail and from a distance. It is the art of constructing the picture in its entirety, of preserving the compositional totality, of narrating the concrete

and the particular. Clearly, not everyone who takes part in the academic process has an aptitude for this; and on top of that, it requires scholarly authority and a certain amount of administrative power as well. We are all in need of people who are capable of acting as mediators and ought to encourage them to create an arena for discussion in which we are willing to participate.

During my years at university (1989–1994), I was unable to develop my discussion skills to any great degree. Things got better during my time studying at summer schools at the Central European University, where introductory lectures generally lasted for around forty minutes, following which there would be a lively discussion of questions that had been assigned beforehand and which we had had time to get to grips with by ourselves. I encountered a much more advanced level of discussion and criticism within small academic groups working on specific projects, and also among colleagues from different fields, particularly dancers, directors, and instructors of Indian classical dance and music.

I'm sorry for saying this, my fellow scholars, but musical instruments and stages are much more indicative of a person's individual and professional level of development than are written texts; in the world of actors and musicians, indifference is not an option, there are raging debates which involve almost everyone. I learnt a lot in the course of my music and dance classes and thanks to my teachers and course mates, with whom I was constantly engaged in creative discussion and incessant mutual criticism of the harshest sort.

Of course, it all depends on the specific *situation*. I've been teaching for more than ten years at the RGGU, at the Centre for the Study of Religion and Social Anthropology, where, amongst other things, I give lectures to students of Oriental Studies. It has been impossible to create an atmosphere of productive seminar discussion in any of the groups, not only because of the level of individual interest the students have in the subject, but also because of the quality of the education, knowledge, and skills with which they arrive from school. One of the main aims of the course was to organise high-quality seminars in which students can develop discussion skills and where evaluation is by written exam (thus relieving the lecturer of an additional burden and significantly 'lightening' his workload).

Among my most positive experiences of discussion — albeit in a university rather than research context — I would include a seminar series on Indian religion, which was part of a 'Religions of India' course at the RGGU (September — December 2008). During the series, I personally saw the 'overall picture' emerge, with participants experiencing 'double vision' as they listened intently to each other's papers, asking for the most part pertinent questions and analysing particular materials from the gradually emerging 'world of religions'.

Each being 'answerable' for a particular God or Goddess, participants provided information about the given spiritual figure, ceremonial practices, religious beliefs, and worldviews. When presenting their materials, almost all the students discussed the general subject matter, the actual idea of the Indian (and more generally, religious) cult, its structure, variety, possible public role/functions, means of transformation, forms of translation in historical time and cultural space.

And then there is the problem of *professional isolation*. The lack of interesting debate that I talked about earlier and the disappearance of the critical review genre are related problems and are also closely connected with the fact that people have little knowledge of what their colleagues are writing about in related fields. The proliferation of materials, printed or otherwise (among which there might be very little of real interest or use), is forcing us to read much more than we used to, while at the same time, creating a paradoxical situation in which much less is read in its entirety (clearly, there are similarities here with Lewis Carroll's wonderful book, *Alice Through the Looking Glass*: 'Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to stay in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!')

Apart from a few exceptionally brave and ethical scholars who are not too concerned about keeping their contacts and establishing their careers, most of us refrain from voicing our criticisms of individual monographs, conference presentations, or other forms of self-expression in the public domain of academic journals. One of my colleagues, a respected and well-known scholar, has long been prevented from publishing a rich and extremely critical review of an ethnic history textbook of one of the peoples of Russia. Sergei Sokolovsky has noted in particular that this disinclination to publish negative reviews is the sad legacy of the Soviet period, when the printed word was seen to correspond almost automatically with the 'officially sanctioned position' and where criticism usually resulted in ostracism, arrest, and even execution.

That said, the fact that reviews today have an informative or even promotional (and sometimes self-promotional) value rather than being critical would seem to have another explanation. One of these is that, on the whole, the discipline of 'ethnography, ethnology, and anthropology' has ceased to be a science, and now represents an area of cultural interest for various specialists: from ethnographers to politologists, sociologists, psychologists, and novelists, from scholars to local historians, artists, poets, (neo)shamans, label managers, and tour operators. While in no way ruling out the possibility of valuable new discoveries and insights in the field of interdisciplinary studies, I would venture to say that dialogue between these people is like trying to bring a footballer, a rifleman, a discus thrower, a gymnast,

a cyclist, and a chess player together with all their equipment to play the same game on the same field. This surreal situation, in which not only is there no common (diverse, yes, but nevertheless mutually comprehensible) methodology, but there is also no shared descriptive language, basically means that there can be no common ground on which data is verified. In this context, every participant is like a performer on U-Tube: personal success is entirely dependent on the first impression you make in the context of the enigma that you yourself have created. The ‘interdisciplinarity’ that comes out of this is often nothing more than the redivision of the academic world, the search for genuine colleagues in any sphere of the arts and sciences who are interested in the same questions as you are. In this way, the growth in ‘interdisciplinarity’ seems to be an indicator of the way that the foundations (visionary, methodological, and instrumental) of the traditional disciplines are crumbling. Indeed, it is only collective inertia that has stopped them from disappearing completely.

There have been times when my efforts to enter into discussion have been met with complete incomprehension and outright rejection, and even personal insults. A number of Russian colleagues have preserved the tradition of splitting up and defending their ‘patches’ of the research field. The fairly typical expression ‘but he’s not a specialist in that field’ sometimes (although, of course, not always) serves as a ‘broom’ to sweep ‘outsiders’ out of their ‘allotment’, which, among other things, ensures there is no competition. In this way, a ‘neo-feudalism’ of sorts can be seen to exist today, not only in the Russian public sphere generally, but also, and in particular, in the humanities, with the situation of academic discussion culture and criticism only serving to illustrate this more clearly.

Debates, forums, and interesting discussions have by no means disappeared: they take place, and quite successfully, in small groups, among local academic societies working on particular projects and even among scholars who write independently and are not bound by any institutional links (and with related specialists). Those who participate in these collectives do not seek to promote themselves and put others down, there’s no place here for grant opportunism or for ‘character assassinations’. The pace at which these groups work can differ from the normal academic cycle, taking a much shorter or longer time. And generally, this type of work produces the most interesting outcomes.

The following issues thus make up part of the question of professions: the existence (or absence) of real (rather than assumed) authority, trust, the ability to evaluate the achievements of all — even the most junior — researchers, interest in the work of others and the ability to derive pleasure from their success. You might even say that the very existence of such a profession constitutes an institution of discussion

and criticism in itself. Successful discussion can only have one objective: science itself (or art) and its means of expression. The emergence of other objectives — political, ideological, market, or otherwise — inevitably brings about the collapse of the system. I am convinced that real academic life is something elitist and to a large extent even intimate. Far from everything that is written and moreover spoken here should be published, let alone brought into the public domain.

This brings me to the last question about *methods of discussion and criticism*. Here we must return to our initial point about motivations, since, in this case, the question of ‘how’ something is done is derived from the question of ‘why’ it is done. Discussion and criticism appear to be two different instruments in the academic (and, for that matter, artistic) process. In my opinion, modern, high quality criticism should be in some way similar to the ‘remaking’ of the shaman’s body: the ‘bones’ should be picked over and the ‘meat’ boiled away in order to leave the really strong and enduring core. But this will only be possible for those who really understand, transform, and acquire new ‘bodies’. Clearly, the focus should not be the character of the person being reviewed (as, unfortunately, often seems to be the case; moreover, many authors are incapable of distancing themselves from the texts they have written), but rather the topic under discussion. Of course, not everyone working in academia will like this, and, what’s more, there are very few people who know how to do this in a professional and inoffensive way: the reviewer himself has to be a real professional. Of course, this only makes sense if both parties come from the same scientific discipline and speak the same language (or are at least able to understand one another).

In conclusion, a few words about the *publicity* of discussion and criticism. On this point, I subscribe entirely to the practice of the Buddhist monks, who have not tried to ‘dumb down’ their message or make it clear, understandable, or accessible to the general public, but rather worked out a way of closely evaluating and differentiating their audience, adapting the Buddhist texts differently for different groups. Even though, far from all of our colleagues possess the wonderful skill of being able to state their views in different cultural idiolects, this skill could nevertheless become a means of ensuring they participate in various spheres of public life in a more active and successful way.

In my opinion, academia, like the sacred realm, ought to have its ‘protectors’ and ‘guardian demons’, through whom man can improve himself, take on a different form, find a new meaning in life and gain recognition among those he trusts. The best, the most beautiful, and the most complex is not intended for mass consumption, as, for example, the following situation illustrates. It is well known how

highly developed and popular the Indian classical music culture is. Everyone wants to win the favour of their audience, from inexperienced students to seasoned professionals. Yet the most prized ‘treasures’, the masterpieces, the unique feats of technical and artistic skill — the *khas* (usually passed from generation to generation in families of musicians) — are never performed in large concerts. For these pieces there are exclusive receptions and small societies of real experts and aficionados, who are able to listen to the performances of the masters for hours on end. This is no place for photos and video cameras, people come here purely for the art. Thus, for example, Annapurna Devi, the first wife of the great musician and accomplished sitar player Ravi Shankar, who is also widely known in the West, never plays for the general public. Shut up in her house in Bombay, she has made a vow to devote her art to God. On the basis of her limited number of behind-the-scenes performances, musicologists have recognised her as an even better performer than her gifted husband.

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TATYANA SHCHEPANSKAYA

The scene is the Institute of Ethnography at the Academy of Sciences (now MAE RAN) in the 1980s. My desk is on the balcony; beneath us is the exhibition room where a collection of ethnography from Australia and Oceania is displayed. Sitting on that balcony, I argue for hours on end with my supervisor and later with my colleagues, who back then seemed infinitely superior to me. This goes on for months, we argue day in and day out about almost every line of my doctoral dissertation (what attention lavished on the work of a junior researcher!). From time to time we are cut short by the excursion guides: ‘You’re disturbing the excursions!’ we’re told, if, in the heat of an academic argument, we raise our voices too much. At that point we move to the coffee bar of the Akademichka — a canteen for academics located in the building next to the institute.

Tatyana Shchepanskaya

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I remember how, in those days, even official discussions of collections of articles, dissertations, and monographs could sometimes last for hours and could get very heated; but the real discussion took place at an unofficial level.

Discussion sets the tone for a certain sort of academic communication, establishing, in particular, what pleasure is to be gained from academic work and one's personal commitment to the profession. It is precisely these never-ending arguments that make academic communication so intense and profound — characteristics of discussion which are disappearing from everyday urban life.

In 2005–2006, I carried out group interviews with academics from Fiztekh (Ioffe Institute of Physics and Technology, St Petersburg). Recalling the start of their careers in academia, the informants spoke about the special atmosphere of their academic institution: *And the other thing that was really valuable*, remarked one of the participants in our conversation at Fiztekh, a PhD candidate in Physics, *was that there was absolutely no distance between people, not even between supervisors and PhD students, all the discussions we had, they weren't just rush-jobs, they took place, hunched over tables, or sitting on chairs in the corridor, for hours on end. And, well, that was taken very seriously, the fact that the minds of young people were being formed here. I don't know, that's what seems to be missing these days, in my opinion anyway. Even Perel himself or Dyakonov,¹ they'd sit there for hours on end in a corridor somewhere or another, on these little sofas, and people grew up with them. And we're talking about complicated subjects too — theoretical physics is very complicated, and if you haven't got that everyday communication, so that you get everything first hand from your supervisor, discuss everything together... Well, there was no real distance between people in academia back then, so far as I can see.* Informants talked about the disappearance of that atmosphere, and the disintegration of academic schools. *Well, there's some of that left here too, but to a lesser extent, because, well, in general, nowadays there's such an emphasis on money...everyone's so hung up about grants... that they stopped, you know — Seminars. — not even seminars, but just talking, face to face, for hours on end, there's simply no time, everyone's always frantically this, that... barking at each other 'I don't have time!', but it's true no-one does have time, and no-one's going to give you the time of day just like that, for free, no way* [Author's field materials, 2005].

In the opening essay in the collection 'Anthropology of Academic Life', G. A. Komarova writes about the decline in the quality of academic debate in the ethnographical community [Komarova,

¹ Vladimir Idelevich Perel (1928–2007) was an eminent theoretical physicist and leading light at the Ioffe Institute of Physics and Technology. See <<http://www.ioffe.ru/Perel/index.php?row=1&subrow=0&lang=ru>>. M. I. Dyakonov was his collaborator in the 1970s and 1980s. [Editor.]

2008: 11]. Judging by the comments of the physicists, ours is not a unique case. Yu. L. Kachanov has made some similar remarks with regard to sociology: *In the last ten years, there has not been one theoretical discussion of any importance for the 'sociological community'* [Kachanov 2001: 111].

As a form of communication, discussion is at the very core of an academic way of thinking, co-operating, and being creative. Discussion is a form of on-the-spot, collective creativity which allows interlocutors to understand each other better and to formulate their ideas more precisely. Thus, through discussion a collective agent is formed — an agent of creativity and cognition. But how is this compatible with the real relationships that exist in academia — especially given the atomisation of the academic community — and with individual competition? G. A. Komarova links the increasing superficiality of academic communication with the atomisation of the academic community (in ethnography and related fields) and its fragmentation into competitive and uncommunicative cliques and groups [Komarova 2008: 11]. This doesn't necessarily follow, however: after all, these same cliques and groups can emerge in the course of discussion and around common ideas, concepts, and explanatory models, which take shape in the course of these discussions and giving rise to new schools. How else then, can this situation be explained?

In the last ten to fifteen years, there has been a remarkable change in the character of academic communication. I see the decline in quality of discussion as the outward sign of a transformation taking place inside the institution of academia itself. One of the features of the transformation is linked with the redistribution of control between the profession and its external structures: what is known as 'managerialism'. Nowadays, the external factors are above all financial (from state sources of funding to foundations), whereas in the Soviet period they were the administrative organs. So, there was external control in the Soviet period too, albeit of a slightly different sort to that which exists today. How is external control linked to the level of academic discussion?

Is it worth constructing arguments in the knowledge that, ultimately, veracity (or 'victory') in academic debate depends not only on the convincingness of your thesis, but also on the extent to which this thesis is supported by external institutions?

In an interview with Valery Tishkov, Solomon Bruk has recalled how scholars at the Ethnographical Institute AN SSSR, while working on the *Atlas of Peoples of the World*, were sometimes obliged to remove certain points from the map (settlements of certain peoples, for example), either because they were prohibited from referring to peoples who had been repressed, or because foreign governments

(whose official positions were in contradiction with the contents of the atlas) requested that they do so. Solomon Bruk has recalled one occasion when, as a result of one of these cartographical disputes, telegrams were sent from Bulgaria to ten senior state officials: the leaders of the USSR and Soviet academia. Soviet ethnographers reacted by making urgent last-minute corrections to the publication: in the printing house itself they requested that the orange colour used to represent the settlement of one disputed ethnic group be removed [*‘Uznat iz pervoistochnika’* 2008]. Academic questions about ethnic groups and their settlements were resolved, not by discussions on the various sides, but by the administration, acting ‘top down’. There are many examples of such administrative ‘decision making’ recorded in memoirs of the Soviet period.

The situation today might also be connected with the understanding of the discursive mechanisms of power, or, more precisely, with the way in which this understanding is explicated following post-modern deconstruction. This has particular relevance for the social sciences, where something that used to be a means of intraprofessional conflict and competition has suddenly become an object and, to a certain extent, a method of study... This is an exceptionally interesting situation for analysis. But such analysis would have to be based on concrete materials: interviews, observation work. Classical ethnography with its impartial perspective would be somehow out of place here. This is a hypothesis that requires further research, and here I am just providing an outline for it.

Institutionalised academic discussion (judging from experience of the 20th century) has been used both as an instrument for producing/endorsing discourse (and, thus, for defining the boundaries of the academic community, that is, those people who share this discourse and agree to use it) and as a means of discursive stratification (the construction of intra-professional hierarchies on the basis of this discourse — the allocation of influence through the recognition of the right to express oneself within an established discursive framework). And thus discussion has been a means of redistributing power. Of course, the redistributive social role of discussion has existed alongside its ‘truth’ defining role, that is to say, establishing what constitutes ‘knowledge’ and thus can (with the blessing of institutionalised academia) be used in extra-academic public debate as means of controlling society as a whole.

The micropolitical functions of academic discussion (who plotted against who, who let who down, or, vice versa, managed to get their work pushed through) took place ‘behind the scenes’ and were confined to the corridors. Some of the publications that exposed such things ([Formozov 2005], for example) seemed scandalous.

Yet, this understanding of discursive practices — specifically, as a means of redistributing power (by establishing certain rules for recognising information as ‘knowledge’) has been legitimised by post-modern deconstruction.

So, what sense is there in discussion now? You can’t ‘win’ at it: everyone knows that it is simply an exercise in demonstrating who has the better resources of influence, the most social capital, as it were. And if this is the case, then the goal can be achieved without resorting to discussion (through self-organisation into mutually cooperating groups, for example, or by relying on other forms of capital, administrative or economic for example — something which you can see reflected, for example, in the shifting sources of recruitment at a number of academic institutions).

As the micro-political aspects of discursive practices have emerged, the specific ‘knowledge-related’ aspect of these practices has receded into the background. At the same time, the emergence of the former might be more than just a result of the professional efforts to deconstruct academic ‘battles’, exposing them as relationships of power. It is not only social scientists who have understood and debated the ‘political’ nature of academic discussion; similar ideas have been quite clearly expressed in the everyday, ‘folkloric’ discourse of professional communities as well.

Solutions? In theory, there are several possibilities. One, in which the emphasis is on social mechanisms for redistributing power, is already known to us (all these forms of self-organisation and self-regulation within the academic community that I have spoken about above). In this case, discussion becomes a mere ritual and can be done away with completely or otherwise reduced to a formal exercise. The only thing is that such an approach would deprive academic research of one of its most important tools. Another solution is to rehabilitate discussion on condition that its political (with a small ‘p’) elements are recognised, openly discussed and regulated. There must be some established practices for controlling the ‘political’ consequences of academic discussion so that these may be once more used for the pursuit of knowledge. However, competition within the academic community poses an obstacle to establishing such practices.

In order to find a solution to this problem, we ought to consider some examples of genuinely successful (in terms of generating knowledge) discussion. However, these days, discussions which give you the impression of being really useful and productive are, in my experience, few and far between. I remember a three-day event held under the auspices of the Russian-French symposium, ‘The Development of New Methods and Approaches in Social Anthropology’, which took place from the 25-27 September 2008 in Moscow at the Institute for

Ethnology and Anthropology RAN. The working conditions and liveliness of the discussion were, in my opinion, enhanced by several factors:

- Papers and presentations (which were kept to 15-20 minutes each) were directly followed by questions and discussion when what the presenter had said was still fresh in the minds of the audience.
- The number of people giving papers was limited, and there was no sense of any time constraints, something which allowed for in-depth and serious discussion.
- The theme of the symposium — the discussion of methodological questions — also helped keep the discussion intense and to the point.
- It was possible to avoid the typical situation in academic events of this kind whereby everyone in the audience disperses after the keynote speeches and discussions of the ‘most interesting’ papers have taken place. This might have had something to do with the fact that two related, but at the same time very different academic traditions were represented at the event, and that each theme raised was the source of dialogue between them, creating the opportunity for different and original perspectives, assertions, and approaches to be articulated. This created the impression that what was being said was fresh and new, and made it feel as though everyone was taking part in discussion, even the people who weren’t giving papers. You could sense this feeling of participation in the lively exchange of views that took place in the conference room and in the way the discussion continued out into the corridors.

In my opinion, one other factor contributed to the liveliness and openness of the discussion: the barriers created by intra-professional competition were removed. In this case, differences in opinions were justified by the existence of different national academic traditions. When discussing papers in which opinions very different from their own were expressed, people did not try to prove how ‘wrong’ or unjustified the author’s position was, nor did the theoretical discussion ‘degenerate’ into a war of words; all sides were prepared to discuss any challenges seriously and to engage in constructive dialogue.

From earlier on in my career, I remember the working conditions at the seminar organised by Sergei Neklyudov on contemporary folklore, which took place over a number of years at the IVGI RGGU, and the three-day seminar on sociology and the anthropology of professions that took place at the Institute for Sociology RAN in 2004, both of which produced impressive academic results. Again, in both these cases, discussion grew out of a meeting of two academic traditions (folklore and ethnography in the first case, and ethnography and sociology in the second).

At Sergei Neklyudov's seminar, I participated in the beginning stages of work on the project, 'Contemporary Urban Folklore' (later published as a monograph). A collection of articles followed the discussion of the ethnography of professions at the Institute for Sociology, a theme which was fairly new to the social sciences in Russia. A discursive framework was established for the discussion of the ethnography of professions. It was important to agree on the meaning of certain sociological and anthropological terms and approaches that were already well established in the fields of sociology, ethnography, folklore studies, social and cultural anthropology. Following the discussion and in the course of preparing the collection of related articles for publication, a network of researchers dealing with the ethnography of work (professions, organisations, working practices and relations) was established, which also included people working outside of Moscow and St Petersburg.

But let us get back to the question of the qualitative decline of academic discussion (specifically, in the field of socio-humanitarian studies). Yury Kachanov has seen this as an indicator of the decline of theoretical competition, that is to say of the irrelevance of 'the over-arching theory of everything'; the structure of academic knowledge is expressed in the terms of 'theoretical pluralism' — similar to Deleuze's concept of rhizome [Kachanov 2001: 111; Deleuze, Guattari 1976]. According to this paradigm, the object of social knowledge, in other words, social reality, is constructed by those very people who gain knowledge and depends on the paradigms they select. As a result, it becomes meaningless to discuss the 'truth' of any particular paradigm — truth is defined differently in each context. In this context, competition between individual researchers and academic schools can no longer be expressed through competing paradigms, since the difference between these is seen to be justified. As such, 'theoretical pluralism' can be considered an established means for lessening competition in the professional sphere.

Measures to curb internal competition have been established in various professions as a means of reinforcing professional autonomy and reducing dependence on external factors (in this case, on the market). The fact that intense competition can be not only a stimulant, but also an obstacle to the development of professions (something which is particularly remarkable in the field of knowledge production) has even been noted by economists. As the British economist Robert Matthews notes,

The intensity of competition, as such, is a very important factor in creating temptations to cut ethical corners. I have read, for example, that the increasing intensity of competition among scientists in the United States, which you might expect to be conducive to the advancement of knowledge, has also increased scientists' fear that their half-formed

ideas will be plagiarised; allegedly this has increased secretiveness and diminished trust and the early diffusion of ideas are important for the advancement of science, it is not clear whether the net result of increased competition has been on balance good or bad [Matthews 1991: 744–745].

Thus, the decline in the intensity of discussion or in its capacity to inform could also be a symptom of growing competitiveness in academia, itself a product of the way academia operates in the market place.

As far as conclusions are concerned: is this just a storm in a teacup? Is there really no discussion? Or rather does it exist (and I am inclined to support the argument that discussion, and very passionate discussion at that, exists as means of communication) but not lead to the results that those who write about its absence expect from it? If the current situation can be described as one in which discussion is absent, then what are we to compare it with? With the raucous ‘knock-out’ discussions of the Soviet period, in which one theory was left victorious whilst the other was condemned (more often than not along with its author)?

I would argue that discussion exists today, however, what is less certain is how effective it is. This might be because the participants in such discussion do not have a clearly defined idea of what they want to get out of it.

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NARIMAN SKAKOV

3 Conferences are often good for networking, but do not really encourage discursiveness or respect for academic rigour. Open discussion on the Internet is frequently of a low academic standard, and, in addition, in my experience, those who take part in it tend not to observe the basic rules of etiquette. In my opinion, discursiveness can be improved by using traditional seminar methods enhanced by new technology. This might take the form of virtual seminars, in which specialists from different countries and schools are brought together (Skype, for example, is already used as an international and inter-continental telephone connection).

4 The notion of 'borders' (disciplinary, spatial, or national) is no longer dominant in academic circles. The ease of access to all sorts of discourses and opinions (a consequence of new revolutionary technology — e-mail, Internet, the iPod, etc.) is accelerating the fast dissemination of information. Academic debate takes place in all sorts of on-line forums and often in the absence of a 'moderator', that is someone who mediates the discussion. The full emancipation of academic thought is on its way to becoming a concrete reality. Yet, at the same time, the egalitarian digital space can cause the intellectual level of academic discussion to drop: in the stream of information it is sometimes difficult to find intelligent and interesting texts. In my opinion, the meeting of different 'national' traditions of discussion is not a great danger. The threat comes rather from the sheer quantity of information which is becoming accessible through the multifarious discussions that are taking place at different levels. Research in the humanities risks turning into an exercise in summarising secondary sources (the processing of which takes up more and more time), while the process of integrating material into a coherent overall picture and reflecting on methods and other theoretical questions takes second place.

At the same time, there are still certain differences between schools which influence the way

in which academic work is conducted. From my own experience (higher education at a standard university in a former Soviet republic, masters and doctoral studies at a traditional British university), I felt there was a fundamental difference between the average Soviet university and British higher education. The mental adjustment (in terms of how to work with texts alone) took me, all in all, three years. I realised that the notion of ‘referat’,¹ propagandised to a greater or lesser degree at all levels of higher education in the former Soviet Union, had prevented me from interacting freely with materials (and particularly aesthetic materials). Traces of the ‘referat’ system can also be seen in Russian publications today, which often take the form of a modestly formulated hypothesis followed by a summary of the opinions of the discipline’s ‘Greats’ in its defence. The replication of other people’s opinions and the tendency to ‘harp on’ about banal postulates must be done away with as something which constitutes the heritage of a rigid ideological system.

5

So far as I can see, one can’t now prevent the ‘general public’ participating in academic and other sorts of debate. Everything confidential ends up being digitised and put on the Internet. It also makes no sense to talk about the ‘general public’ at the moment; we should focus instead on the openness of certain debates.

The role of ‘popular’ academic literature, in my opinion, is likely to become more and more important. For example, a lecture devoted to the global financial crisis given by an Oxford professor of economics got 20,000 hits on iTunes during the first week after it was posted on the Web. The dividing line between universities and ‘the man in the street’ is disappearing. Moreover, a number of influential scholars are becoming more and more active in public life. Noam Chomsky (politics), Slavoj Žižek (human rights), and Jacques Derrida (the protection of animals) are all examples of how the line between public and academic is disappearing.

6

One idea would be to create a series of publications with guest editors, whose aim it would be to present different academic schools (British, North American, Continental European, and Russian, for example). Each issue could be dedicated to a particular ‘school’ and would include methodological papers and articles employing a given method to analyse some sort of anthropological material. The task of the editors (who would have to act as the ‘choreographers’ of their academic space) would be to attract the best and most representative work of their particular school. The only potential problem would be the choice of a working language suitable for all participants (English and Russian?).

¹ A *referat* is a course-work essay written by undergraduates (normally around 5000–8000 words), which has a highly conventionalised structure, requiring a round-up of secondary literature at the beginning etc. [Editor.]

STEVE SMITH

Two Cheers for the Academic Monograph

Visiting book stores in Russia recently, I was struck by the fact that a division appears to have opened up between history books written for a popular audience — a small number of titles, often on political and military or on national themes — and the mass of academic history books that are produced by professional historians and are published only in small print-runs. In 2007, a record number of titles — over 100,000 books and pamphlets — were published in the Russian Federation, according to the Knizhnaia Palata, of which 3,207 were titles in history. This was fewer than the number of publications in economics (6945) and law (5864), but more than in philosophy (2619), psychology (2351) or sociology (1529). The average print-run of ‘scientific publications’ (*nauchnye izdaniya*), however, was just 490 <http://www.bookchamber.ru/stat_2007>.

This suggests that despite the different structure of the publishing market in the Russian Federation, which, although dominated by commercial publishers, is still reliant on subsidies from central and regional governments, the pattern of publication of historical titles is now very similar in Russia to that in the West. In the UK and USA, for example, books by professional historians overwhelmingly take the form of specialised monographs, and the print-runs of these have steadily declined since the 1970s, to the point where sales are now less than a quarter of what they once were. At the same time, the number of historical monographs has increased, reflecting the expansion in the number of professional historians within universities. Nevertheless, despite the advance of electronic technologies, the publication of historical monographs is no longer particularly profitable for publishers, so print-runs are short — often around 500 — and even university presses now look to publish historical books that are aimed at a mainstream public.

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It has become something of a cliché that in ‘postmodern’ society the public loses a sense of connection with the past, that it begins to live in a perpetual present. But in the UK, at least, this seems to have little to do with a decline in public interest in history. My colleagues in the USA often complain about the absence of a historical consciousness among the broad American public, but the same cannot really be said of the UK. Television history series, such as Simon Schama’s *History of Britain*, have been hugely successful; two history channels are currently available through satellite and digital technology; films dealing with historical subjects enjoy box-office success. Forty-two million people are said to have visited a museum in the UK in 2006 — more than the number who attended league football matches; and popular interest in projects of historic preservation and archaeology is high. One might add that there also are many amateur practitioners of history, including those who research the history of their families and local communities; those involved in oral history projects and other forms of recording the past; and those who enjoy re-enacting historical events.

All of this activity — which tends now to be called in English ‘public history’ — i.e. history as read, watched, heard and practised by a popular audience — testifies to public interest in the past, but raises rather painfully the question of how the bulk of academic history — in the form of monographs published in small numbers for fellow specialists — relates to this public interest and to the wider task of shaping public consciousness of the past.

Despite the declining sale of works by professional historians, academic history in the UK is in buoyant shape. The recent Research Assessment Exercise (RAE 2008), which evaluated the research outputs of academics across the universities of the UK, pronounced the discipline of history to be in a ‘very healthy state’. 1,819 full-time historians in 83 universities each submitted four publications to the history review panel, and only a very small proportion of this work was judged to be of ‘below international’ levels of excellence. Yet only a tiny proportion of this work will ever be read by anyone outside the small community of professional historians. This is not, it seems, because academic historians are not interested in the general public. The RAE history panel commented on the rather widespread involvement of academic historians in public history: ‘University-based historians are engaging in many ways with their local and national communities, including through links to museums, heritage organisations, local as well as national media, adult education initiatives and education in citizenship’ (<<http://www.rae.ac.uk/pubs/2009/ov/>> UOA 62 subject overview report). Yet it is clear that the work of academic historians is characterised by qualities that do not appeal to a general readership. The qualities of originality,

analytical acuity, cogency of argument, depth of research and so forth that are valued in the academy are not necessarily valued by general readers: more importantly, they often go hand in hand with a narrowness of vision, an off-putting 'academic' style, concentration on the analysis of 'problems', engagement with scholarly controversies to the detriment of narrative and generalisation that engage non-academic readers.

One striking development in the UK in recent years has the growth in the number of leading academic historians who have tried to meet public interest in history by writing serious, professional history but in a way that shuns the worst characteristics of the scholarly monograph or article. This phenomenon has been particularly marked in the field of twentieth-century Soviet history, where a number of books on Lenin, Stalin and the Second World War have generated big profits for authors and publishers. It further throws into relief the question of the value of academic historical production: do we need the vast number of specialist monographs and a seemingly ever increasing number of specialist academic journals?

It is not so long ago that all history was written for the educated public. In 1839, when commencing his history of England from ancient times to 1660, Thomas Babington Macaulay commented that he would be satisfied only if, for a few days, his history displaced the latest novel from young women's tables. It was, of course, the rise of history teaching and writing as a specialised profession, located in the academy, which led to the division between historical works written for the public often by non-professional historians, and historical work of an increasingly specialised type that was written for the academy. As early as 1920, the American Historical Association appointed a committee to study the 'general protest of a large portion of the public against the heaviness of style characteristic of much of the history now being written'; and in a chapter of their report, John Spencer Bassett asked, 'Can writers devoted to research and filled with the scientific spirit be true to their purposes, and at the same time write history that has the charm of literature?' It is the question that still haunts us.

It seems to me that the desire to appeal to a public beyond the academy is wholly admirable. The quality of the work of the recent commercially successful historians in the UK is generally high — certainly superior to that of the average scholarly monograph. Much of this work is written in an elegant and engaging prose. Unlike the textbook, which is often aimed at school students or undergraduates, it often incorporates new historical research and, to that degree, can claim an element of originality in terms of content as well (it is hoped) of interpretation. Such writing often takes the form of biography or historical narrative, forms whose readability derives from the fact

that they focus on ‘big’ historical figures, on their choices, predictions and moral failings. Such writing is often more focused on the historical event than much academic writing, with a consequent stress on the role of chance or of decisive political or military leadership. Sometimes it is characterised by colourful writing about the ‘experience’ of ordinary people, caught up in the maelstrom of war and revolution.

But therein lies the rub. For all these things that appeal to general readers — and that may in themselves be positive — nevertheless have a downside, so that these texts often raise problems for the professional historian. The focus on individuals, for instance, reinforces an idea of history as something made by ‘great men’; the focus on human agency masks the ways in which deeper, more ‘structural’ levels of determination operate in shaping historical development; the focus on narrative tends to shift attention away from the analysis of problems, so that the complex relationships between human agency and structural determination are flattened out in the interests of a smooth and engaging narrative flow; finally, the focus on individual motivation tends to elicit a subjective — and often moralistic — response from the reader.

In theory, academic history is written in an environment where disinterested scholarly enquiry is conducted for its own sake, relatively free from the pressures of the market or the state. In reality, of course, the pressures to conform — for the purposes of getting tenure in one’s academic position — or to produce in order to get promotion or for the purposes of the next research assessment exercise are very real. However, it is broadly true that academic history is largely conducted for its own sake, rather than out of a need to survive or to make money. This is no longer true of the commercially successful — or would-be successful — historian who is seeking to write or make a television series for the public. Such a historian may feel herself wholly motivated by the desire to raise public understanding and to contribute to democratic debate. In reality, however, she is under pressure from the start — from literary agents, publishers, tv producers, distributors, the editors of book-review pages in the quality press to produce what the public wants, for that is the least risky way of ensuring that a profit is made. The most successful of the new breed of historians are paid large advances by publishers or television producers, and huge amounts of money are spent on marketing: the bottom line, then, has to be that the book or television series sells in big numbers. From the first, then, what historians write about is shaped — if not determined — by the perception of agents and publishers as to what will sell well. A book on the lovers of Catherine Great is almost bound to sell more than one about the Russo-Turkish wars; another biography of Stalin is almost bound to

sell better than a book on Stalinism and the shaping of Soviet identities.

That said, ‘experts’ don’t always get it right. What literary agent would have predicted, for example, that a book about why some societies have developed over 14,000 years while others have not (Jared Diamond’s *Guns, Germs and Steel*) would sell over 1.5 million copies and win a Pulitzer Prize? Moreover, the best of the historians now writing for a broad public do find ways to persuade agents and publishers that innovative historical research can be packaged in a ways that will meet the requirements of the academy and still have a wider appeal. Nevertheless, given that the stakes are so high, originality of theme or approach, together with many of the conventional attributes of historical scholarship (such as footnotes) or explicit engagement with the work of other scholars — are not things that rank high in the priorities of commercial publishers.

Another less obvious pressure is also at work, for the need to appeal to public taste goes beyond the choice of subject-matter. It also entails satisfying — or at least not upsetting — the public’s deeper ideological and ethical predilections. In the books that have appeared on Soviet history in Britain since the fall of the Soviet Union, a desire to satisfy the public’s need for a history that is written in terms of political failure and moral bankruptcy is palpable. There is, of course, an ethical responsibility on all historians to address the bloody crimes committed by all regimes in the twentieth century — including democratic regimes. But nevertheless, a historical narrative that foregrounds the ‘crimes’ of Communism or the evil personality of Stalin is likely to espouse a form of history in which moralistic condemnation squeezes out historical insight and understanding, one that serves mainly to construct an ‘other’ against which British and American readers can feel good about themselves. Here the academic mode — in which crimes of history are approached in a non-judgmental fashion, with a view to explanation rather than a condemnation — is certainly superior. It may suit a publisher to promote a history book that is ‘controversial’, even ‘shocking’, but it will be a rare book that genuinely forces readers to examine their own political and ethical preconceptions and yet manages to sell well.

To conclude: different problems are raised by commercially successful history, on the one hand, and by academic history, on the other. To some extent, they represent two different cultures, and the chances of reunifying them by returning to the days of Macaulay are remote. The recent spate of books and television series aimed at a mainstream audience are admirable in their concern to shape and enrich public understanding; but this concern is always governed ultimately by the need to make money. Academic history,

by contrast, is inspired by a spirit of pursuing knowledge for its own sake (however compromised by other pressures); yet this is usually at the expense of any impulse to put specialist knowledge at the service of the public. If one wishes to see a society in which ordinary people have greater control over their lives, then acquiring greater knowledge of the past, encouraging a less superficial, less ideological, more critical understanding of the past is vital. Professional historians have a unique contribution to make to this process: for it is only by encouraging a more complex understanding of the historical development, of broadening the parameters of public interest in the past geographically and chronologically, of developing critical skills of engaging with and contesting historical work that democratic advance can take place. Perhaps, then, all professional historians should try to produce at least one work of popular history during the careers. At the same time, however, to do that requires that for most of the time we practise history free from the pressures of the market and according to the rigorous standards of the academy. Professional historians should not cease to write their monographs and scholarly articles, therefore, however few people read them; for, in the last analysis, history can only make its contribution to public debate if it is rooted in an ongoing, deeply rooted engagement with difficult historical issues, with the clarification of the important detail, with the conduct of debate and, above all, with widening the boundaries of historical enquiry in ways that reflect the changing needs of society.

To do this requires, first and foremost, that one is seriously engaged in the pursuit of history, according to the rigorous standards of the academy.

MARK D. STEINBERG

The Ambiguities of Criticism— Notes from a Journal Editor

I wish there were an easy and unambiguous answer to the question posed by the editors of *Forum for Anthropology and Culture*: whether genuine, productive, scholarly discussion in the humanities and social sciences is ‘conspicuous by its absence’ and how to foster it.

On the one hand, I think that a good case can be made that critical discussion — which is to say exchange based on difference and opposition that moves knowledge and thought forward —

is alive and well in the scholarly worlds I inhabit. I see this, for example, in

- the large number of conferences and workshops in Russian studies across the disciplines, many of these international and interdisciplinary, and many of which require that papers be read in advance to ensure maximum time devoted to discussion;
- meetings sponsored by interdisciplinary centres at larger universities — Russian and East European studies centres but also centres for the humanities or cultural studies — where diverse faculty and students discuss new work, often quite vigorously;
- regular departmental lectures and colloquia by visiting scholars, which are always followed by discussion;
- informal, and often interdisciplinary, study groups at many universities;
- postgraduate advisory committees where a diverse group of faculty offer often strong criticism of a doctoral student's dissertation as each chapter appears (and Illinois has joined other universities in holding not only a final defence but a more useful 'preliminary doctoral defence', where the entire committee gathers together to discuss a draft dissertation, not in order to decide for or against but to discuss issues for the final revision);
- discussion forums organised or hosted by journals (including *Forum for Anthropology and Culture / Antropologicheskii forum*) around topical issues;
- and the process of anonymous peer-review at scholarly journals (more on this momentarily).

My own scholarly writing and teaching have benefitted enormously from the often intense but mostly useable criticism I have received when presenting my research in colloquia (both to other historians and to scholars in literature, cultural studies, and other fields), at inter-university workshops like the Midwest Russian History Workshop, at working conferences such as a recent conference on emotions in Moscow and on eastern European cities in Berlin (both with pre-distributed papers, both with invited commentators, both interdisciplinary, and both involving scholars from various countries), and at the interdisciplinary Russian Studies Circle (known simply as 'the kruzhek') at my university, where wine, food, and comfortable seats in a faculty-member's living room help loosen restraints on critical dialogue and discussion. In various ways, the inelegant but useful concept of 'workshopping' applies to all these quite productive practices for nurturing healthy criticism and thus advancing scholarly debate and thought. In this light,

I would suggest that discussion and debate are quite evident, including across disciplinary and national boundaries — indeed, usefully questioning these old divisions.

But I recognise that this is rather too sanguine an assessment. I can with no less justification, and with the same scholarly sites in mind, point to a good deal of hesitation to articulate and engage difference, and frequent failure of scholars to challenge themselves in interdisciplinary discussions in order to think deeply about different approaches. At least in the United States in recent years, a favourite word used to speak of discussion and debate is the rather gentle ‘conversation’ (indeed, this term has become a bit of a cliché in the media, business, politics, and academia). At best, this is meant to emphasise civility — criticism should not be personal and hurtful. But this can also mean hesitation to criticise too much or to deviate too far from dominant paradigms — for then pleasant ‘conversation’ becomes unpleasant ‘argument’. The flip side of this is an unwillingness to deeply engage criticism of one’s own ideas. In my two and half years as editor of *Slavic Review*, I have seen many manuscript authors respond to critical peer reviews in quite defensive terms — accusing the referee of being unfair and unprofessional (though sometimes this is justified). And I have seen many peer reviewers do little more than offer summaries of a manuscript and a few gentle suggestions. Many book reviewers likewise pull their critical punches so as not to provoke or offend. Some reviewers, after agreeing to our request to review a book, even return the book to us saying they do not want to publicly criticise a terribly flawed book: partly to spare the author, partly to protect themselves from the hostility of the reviewed author, partly out of a belief that silence is the best criticism. Self-protection in an environment that does not welcome harsh debate is not entirely a matter of slightly paranoid perception or over-sensitivity. In the recent past, *Slavic Review* was sued — and other publications have seen similar cases—by an author who felt that his career was damaged by a critical review of his book. That a single review can damage a career is, of course, a remarkable claim (and in fact the court duly threw it out), but the feeling that strong criticism, even possibly excessive criticism, requires legal punishment, though admittedly rare, reflects a certain chilling atmosphere that has arisen around critical debate.

So my response to the questions about the current state of criticism and how to foster genuine and productive debate is ambiguous. As editor of an interdisciplinary scholarly journal with a diverse international readership, I regularly think about these matters. So, to look more closely at these questions, I would offer some evidence from my experience as editor. I should mention that *Slavic Review* is a relatively old scholarly journal: it was first published in north America in 1941, initially as a continuation of a British publication,

the *Slavonic and East European Review*, temporarily forced to cease publication by conditions of war. And the journal is responsible to a professional association: it is the official scholarly journal of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies (renamed in 2010 the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies), which chooses the editor and has ultimate oversight over the journal. In other words, as editor I am responsible to a large national association and, more elusively, to the journal's established traditions and reputation. I am also not an absolutely free agent in the editorial decisions I make, for almost every article we publish is subject to 'peer review'.

Peer reviewing of manuscripts is a rather interesting place to ponder the state of critical discussion in academia. Peer review, of course, is standard practice for academic journals in the United States. To be sure, the precise weight of peer review in editorial decisions is influenced by how selective a journal has to be — or, put differently, how structurally motivated an editor is to seek a critical evaluation. Currently, *Slavic Review* receives about 150 new manuscripts a year (and more than 50 revised and resubmitted manuscripts) from scholars throughout north America and Europe (west, central, and east). We can publish only about 25 manuscripts a year. This compares to some quarterly journals in the humanities that I am aware of that receive about 300 manuscripts a year and others that receive no more than 50. (We also receive more than 500 books for review each year and choose around 200 for review.)

The goal of peer review is clear: to use informed and critical judgment to ensure that the journal publishes what I describe in my regular letter to peer reviewers as 'important original research raising significant interpretive and analytical questions both within fields of study and across fields and disciplines'. And as I regularly say to the authors who receive these evaluations — whether I am rejecting their paper, asking for revisions and resubmission, or accepting an article but recommending further revision — I view the process of 'double-blind' specialist commentary on new work as not just a matter of judging work for publication but a process of intellectual exchange from which good scholarly work becomes still better before publication'.

In practice, of course, peer review is an imperfect mechanism for nurturing productive criticism. And it is justifiably contested: I recognise that some journals that do not rely on peer-review are very successful at publishing valuable and stimulating articles. But not only do I have no choice in the matter given the academic and institutional world in which *Slavic Review* is situated, but my experience has convinced me of the great potential value of peer review to do just what my editorial letters ask for: stimulate critical scholarly dialogue before publication so as to ensure that the work

that is published does the most to advance knowledge, interpretation, and further discussion.

Anonymity helps to create a space for probing criticism in peer review. We do everything we can to hide the identities of both referees and authors (never a perfect process, of course, especially in small fields, though it is easier to guess correctly at the identity of an author than of a referee). Anonymous evaluations mean that — as much as possible in an imperfect world — judgement is based on the content of the paper rather than on who wrote it. In principle, this reduces the risks of bias, favouritism, and deference to established authority. (Of course, I do know who the author is when making my final decision, so possible prejudice is not entirely impossible, though I try to guard against this and especially try to avoid discriminating against junior scholars.)

Most important, peer review demands critical dialogue. Reviewers can respond to a paper any way they like. Like many other editors, I ask for a report for the author and, should a referee have comments they do not want to share with the author, a confidential report for the editor's eyes only. Most referees, though, write a single report, sometimes quite lengthy. In our reviewer's instructions I ask for particular attention to the following questions: 'Does the article have sufficient originality and interpretive significance to merit publication in *Slavic Review*. Will it be of value to a specialist in the field? Is the methodology appropriate? Does the manuscript have the breadth that is desirable in view of the interdisciplinary readership of *Slavic Review*? Will it be of interest to scholars outside the immediate field?' Referees usually address these questions directly, but also offer criticism that ranges from the very specific (a mistaken citation or mistranslation) to large questions of methodology, interpretation, and critical engagement with both the topic and the existing scholarship. In particular, I judge to be especially damning referees' criticisms that a work only 'fills a gap' — examining archival documents not previously used, studying a poem not previously written about, reporting on a neglected political party, describing in rich ethnographic detail a previously neglected place or relationship. For it is precisely a work's 'critical' engagement with larger questions of analysis and interpretation that is required — this includes, of course, being aware of and engaging existing research, argument, and theory. Thus, both in process and in desired result, peer-review is a strong mechanism for stimulating critical scholarship and discussion.

This is all a bit idealistic, I realise. Yet I have been consistently impressed with how often and well the system works. How responsible and critically engaged most referees are. How appreciative most authors are and how eager to benefit from criticism. How often work

becomes much better as a result — which means, most often, better at critically engaging ‘significant interpretive and analytical questions’ and making the article significant both within particular fields and beyond.

Not always, of course. I have rewritten my cover letter and the review form for referees several times to intensify the language asking authors to be critical. For I have been frustrated by overly-generous referees who feel that if an article simply fills a gap, no matter how small and inconsequential, it deserves to be published for this ‘originality’. But much worse than this hesitancy to criticise is the abuse of the mask of anonymity. Though these are exceptions, some peer reviews are frankly incompetent and unprofessional — and authors are quick to inform me of this (and, sometimes, blame me for my poor judgment in choosing that person as a referee). Sometimes referees are gratuitously nasty: ‘if this article were submitted in my graduate seminar, I would give it a B-minus’ — a less than mediocre grade in American universities today and a devastating grade for a graduate student. Sometimes they are simply unfair: refusing to see the legitimacy of a particular project or approach and therefore offering, not constructive criticism, but advice to jettison the current project in favour of completely different evidence or different methodologies or theories. To be sure, blanket criticism of an article may sometimes be justified, but often it reflects a narrow-minded attachment to certain scholarly paradigms of what qualifies as legitimate work. Still, these are the rare cases.

Sometimes, there is a national, academic-cultural, aspect to these failures, but I do not see this as a major distinction. Some do. An east European scholar recently complained to me that ‘it is almost impossible for scholars from outside western academia to have their work accepted by a peer reviewed American journal, for our whole scholarly approach is different’. This is not entirely accurate—*Slavic Review* and other western Slavic studies journals have in fact published works by Russian, east European, Asian, and Latin American scholars. Also there is no single other ‘approach’, even within individual countries — methodologies and styles vary by discipline, training, generation, and individual choices. But the concern is not completely without merit. In some cases, the problem is a scholarly tradition (common in history in Russia, for example) that holds it is enough to explore an under-researched topic, thoroughly mine the archival sources, and describe one’s findings (of course, this is a tradition in historiography not limited to Russia). Peer reviewers’ demands that there be ‘interpretation’ and ‘critical engagement’ with existing scholarship are seen as imposing a western academic paradigm and thus creating unfair obstacles to publication of useful research. By contrast, I have also received articles from scholars outside the Anglo-American academic world

that offer *only* interpretation, theory, and criticism of others without basing this on any original research. In both types of cases, I admit that it is the tradition of *Slavic Review* — and my own orientation — not to publish such work, though I fully recognise the value of new research evidence on its own, and I find purely theoretical essays often stimulating.

In a word, especially in the interests of promoting critical discussion, double-blind peer reviewing is a double-edged sword. It has some powerful potential benefits, especially in lessening deference to established authorities and fostering open and engaged criticism. But anonymity can also be a mask protecting irresponsibility and bias. Above all, the editorial insistence on ‘criteria’ and ‘standards’ has the double-edged potential to create a fair system for selecting works for publication that will best advance scholarship while also potentially protecting hegemonic paradigms and restrictive canons that stand in the way of new approaches, methodologies, arguments, and even styles of writing.

In order to ameliorate these potential problems, I try to keep some of these hazards in mind when choosing peer reviewers, evaluating reports, and writing to authors. When choosing a referee, I try to be both responsible and creative. *Slavic Review* has a database of more than 4000 scholars active in the study of Russia and central and eastern Europe around the world, and we are constantly adding new names. In selecting referees, I look for expertise on a topic (especially evident in research and publication) but also what I think of as ‘critical perspective’, to help ensure breadth and significance beyond a particular subfield. For example, I might ask a scholar who is working on a related topic but in another discipline than the author of the manuscript, or who is in the same discipline and working on similar questions but researching a different country. I often ask scholars outside the north American academic world to evaluate a manuscript. And I try to ask both senior and junior scholars. When reports vary widely, I usually seek a third opinion — perhaps from a member of the editorial board (which has 27 members in various disciplines, working on various parts of the region, and trained in a variety of countries). Very few papers are accepted after a single round of review. Even most of the strongest papers require revisions and a new evaluation. All of this is standard practice in comparable journals. This is not a perfect process, for reasons I have already mentioned. And then there is the complication of my own role. I cannot possibly know every field of study this journal covers, be certain of which scholars I can rely on to be both critical and fair, or be aware of (or even recognise) the many hidden agendas in different fields. Still, I believe the advantages of this system outweigh the disadvantages for ensuring scholarly quality in a way that both respects established scholarly standards and fosters originality,

innovation, and critical discussion. Of course, much of the critical dialogue in peer review is hidden, except to the parties involved. But, when it works, it helps produce better scholarly work, which is, after all, the point of criticism.

As editor, I have also tried as editor to encourage discussion in more public ways. One mechanism is a cluster of articles around a topic or theme, which I have tried to feature more often than in the past. These usually involve three to five articles — all peer reviewed — accompanied by critical commentary. Recent issues, for example, feature forums on ‘Nature, Culture, and Power’ throughout the region, on the study of emotion in Russian history and culture, on contemporary Russian party politics, on ‘the copy’ in literature, on postsocialism in a global setting, on world fairs in eastern Europe, on new approaches to the siege of Leningrad, on new ethnographic research on the Balkans, on ‘Soviet subjectivity’, and on other possible topics being considered. These topics are generally proposed by scholars in various fields, whom I invite to help as guest editors of the forum. Most of these forums are interdisciplinary, involve multiple national sites of study, and include scholars working in multiple countries. Most important, the inspiring ideal motivating topical and thematic clusters is to encourage cross-area and cross-discipline discussion. Adding an invited commentator further adds to this potential to foster critical dialogue. Thus, for example, the four papers in the emotions forum, though all concerning Russia, were by scholars in three different disciplines working in three different countries (and in most cases trained in different countries than the ones where they now work), and the commentator was an influential historian and theorist of emotions who works mainly on French history (to bring a still more comparative and critical perspective).

Like other journals, *Slavic Review* also periodically features ‘discussion forums’ around individual articles concerning critical or controversial topics. These articles themselves tend to be more essayistic than conventional works of research. And they are sometimes quite provocative. Recent issues, for example, have featured a controversial essay by a legal anthropologist, Robert Hayden, on genocide and ‘genocide denial’ in the Balkans, with two critical commentaries, one by another legal anthropologist who works comparatively on war crimes and one by a historian who works mainly on Germany, and a response by the author. For another discussion, I invited four historians of Stalinism (from different generations and from both Russia and the United States) to comment on an essay by Sheila Fitzpatrick reflecting on her personal experience of ‘revisionism’. All of the original essays are peer reviewed and the authors have found the criticism useful. Sometimes the articles that end up in ‘discussion’ sections are texts that peer reviewers advised me to reject

as interpretively unconvincing, though potentially useful in raising questions worth arguing about; in these cases, the critical peer reviewers sometimes go public as the commentators.

Related in form are review essays on new scholarly approaches to a particular topic (thus often examining a number of related publications), such as a recent review essay on ‘selfhood and subjectivity’ in Soviet studies, or focusing on a particular field of activity, such as reviews of recent theatre or film in Russia or eastern Europe. I also have these peer reviewed — both to determine the value of the contribution and for the benefit of the author. In review essays, as in other articles, the goal is critical analysis.

And then there are letters from readers. Here is where discussion can spill over the organised structures of argument and discussion in a journal. Naturally, these are almost invariably critical. In my dreams, I imagine someone writing to say how delighted they are with some article, forum, discussion, or book review — but then I would probably not consider this useful enough to publish! The only restrictions are length, scholarly engagement with a problem, and avoiding ‘personal abuse’. In fact, it is the ‘personal abuse’ issue that most often leads me to ask a letter-writer to revise (an approach which I prefer to rejecting a letter). We always give the criticised author the opportunity to respond. In principle, letters can be quite interesting sites for dialogue. Sometimes, I fear, they are too defensive, specific, and trivial to be of broad interest.

Finally, a brief word on book reviewing. As I mentioned, many scholars prefer to limit their criticism when reviewing books. Others indulge their own particular theories and arguments about a field rather than summarising and analysing the book itself. Our instructions to book reviewers offer the following advice, collectively written and revised by editors over the years, and typical for similar journals: ‘Please keep in mind authors’ and readers’ needs for careful, fair, and thoughtful evaluations. While it is useful to describe briefly the book’s content, the emphasis should be on identifying and evaluating a book’s contribution to scholarship, interpretation and methodology, strengths and weaknesses. Critical evaluations are appropriate in scholarly discourse, though these should be scholarly not personal.’ In longer ‘featured reviews’ we especially highlight the need to engage the book critically and explore its ‘larger implications’.

All of these expressions of a desire for constructive critical engagement — whether in refereeing and writing articles, essays, and commentary, in reviewing books, or in letters to the editor — are ideals. As we have all experienced, some authors, referees, and book reviewers do this brilliantly, some abysmally. And even some of the most brilliantly critical pieces of writing can be unfair and useless —

more a critical performance of self than a responsible engagement in critical discussion with others. But this, to state the obvious, is how the world is — and why the state of critical discussion, and the real affects of our efforts, will always be ambiguous. Under the circumstances, and without lessening our efforts to do more, we should be cheered by just how good it is.

FROM THE EDITORIAL BOARD

In this particular issue, we have abandoned our established practice of attempting to synthesise the general trends of the discussion that emerged from responses to our questionnaire, not simply because the comments on dialogue here are so varied and disparate, but because the discussion is so vigorous and self-sufficient that further commentary would risk over-simplifying it and imposing overall directions on it. Better to let readers themselves explore the many different avenues taken. We have tried to cast our net as wide as possible in terms of the contributors invited, who come from very diverse cultural and disciplinary backgrounds, and who write from very different positions as well. The general mood was considerably more optimistic than we expected (perhaps in reaction to the explicitly downbeat tone of the questionnaire). It is notable that this entire discussion demonstrates a clear interest in, and commitment to, the exchange of scholarly opinion — something that certainly makes one think again about how justified the pessimism expressed at the outset actually is. There is the sense that the social sciences and humanities are on the verge of reviewing their cultural status and place in the system of knowledge — a development that can only be welcomed.

At all events, the exchange of opinions that took place proved remarkably fruitful. Many of the views expressed are thought-provoking, and some of clear practical benefit. We are grateful to all the participants in the discussion for their contributions.