

## Recovering Privacy Eastern Ethnographies of the Private Sphere

Benjamin COPE

**The latest issue of the St Petersburg based social science journal, *Laboratorium*, is devoted to gender sensitive ethnographies in the post-Soviet space. Despite the fact that it lacks an overarching thesis, it convincingly questions the notion of private sphere in a space clouded by the legacy of an ideologically intrusive communist system.**

**Reviewed:** “Gender Relations in the Private Sphere: Post-Soviet Transformations of Family and Intimacy”, *Laboratorium* No 3, 2010, Dir: Irina Tartakovskaya, <http://soclabo.org/eng/>

The latest issue of *Laboratorium* explores how transformations in post-Soviet societies are impacting family and intimate relations. The range of cases considered is huge: from the domestic arrangements of migrants in St. Petersburg to the worldviews of women in traditional villages in the Caucasus or the impact of the internet on same sex relationships in Siberia. The journal demonstrates the scope and potential of gender sensitive ethnographies in this region.

*Laboratorium* is a new sociological journal published on paper and online, in English and Russian in St. Petersburg. A peer-reviewed academic organ, its aim is to publish experimental sociological research – both in terms of the themes covered and the approaches used, then in terms of the “freshness” of empirical research. The special issue under review here fits this agenda as it is comprised of case studies exploring the effects of social transformation in a variety of intimate contexts across the former Soviet Union.

## Recovering privacy

It is one of the great innovations of gender studies to have made clear that the corporal, the domestic and the familial are sources of political struggle. “Your body is a battleground”, proclaims the billboard-style art of Barbara Kruger. Catharine MacKinnon builds her feminist theory of state on the argument that the very notion of “private sphere” is an ideological construct, enabling the exploitation of women by men.<sup>1</sup> In the case of the post-Soviet Union, the question of what might constitute a private sphere is further clouded by the legacy of a communist system that, in seeking to establish social justice, found it necessary to intrude into the private sphere.<sup>2</sup> The period of transformation that has followed the collapse of this system has been marked by “privatization”; but surely this term is inappropriate to describe processes that have led a huge amount of the country’s wealth to fall into the hands of a small number of men. Thus, a gender based investigation of what constitutes the private sphere in the post-Soviet space is more than apposite and ought to be theoretically radical and politically militant. In both these senses, the journal introduction is unnecessarily timid.

While exploring the private sphere from Tajikistan to St. Petersburg, via Israel, the journal brings to the fore the extraordinary social, cultural and spatial diversity covered by the term “post-Soviet”. Indeed, reading the special issue, one reconsiders how extraordinarily ambitious, if perverse in its outcomes, the Soviet state’s project of modernization was, considering both the breadth and the diversity of the socio-cultural contexts that it sought to revolutionize. The spaces and variety of cases covered by the journal are similarly wide-ranging and, thus, this publication simply provides a series of spotlights on certain places and issues. However, the scope of the contributions once again raises a question: is this space really post-Soviet either in a temporal sense (is the heritage of the Soviet period still the most determinant factor today?) or in a spatial one (are these spaces different from other places on the peripheries of global capitalism?).<sup>3</sup>

## Emancipation or resilience of the past?

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<sup>1</sup> Katharine MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, Camb. MA, Harvard University Press, 1989, p. 35. Barbara Kruger’s art can be seen on [www.arthistoryarchive.com/arthistory/feminist/Barbara-Kruger.html](http://www.arthistoryarchive.com/arthistory/feminist/Barbara-Kruger.html).

<sup>2</sup> Almira Ousmanova discusses controversies of the approaches of the private sphere by communist theorists in “O Marksistkoy teorii liubvi”, *Topos*, n° 3, 2010, pp. 195-228.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion on the problematic use of the term “post-socialist”, see Magdalena Zaborowska, Sibelan Forrester and Elena Gapova “Introduction: Mapping Postsocialist Cultural Studies” in Magdalena Zaborowska, Sibelan Forrester and Elena Gapova (dir.) *Over the Wall/After the Fall: Post-Communist Cultures through an East-West Gaze*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2004, pp. 1-41.

The opening article by Zhanna Cherpova and Larissa Shpakovskaya analyses the attitudes of “young adults” in St. Petersburg towards relationships, marriage and parenthood. The authors compare the language of state policy that foregrounds the role of the family, especially young married couples, in addressing Russia’s demographic problem, with interviews with young people in a variety of non-formalized relationships. This article shows that these young professionals have a pragmatic approach in balancing career requirements, personal fulfillment and parenthood very different from the state’s programmatic call for young families to act as a privileged locum of child rearing.

The next text by Yulia Gradskova analyses the opinions of young mothers with regard to state institutions for the pre-school care of children. Through the analysis of internet forums catering to young mothers, she finds that despite official pro-family policies and cuts to the state provision of pre-school care, state kindergartens continue to play a vital function. However, the difficulty in obtaining places in kindergartens, still involving bribes and presents to teachers, and state rhetoric on the importance of mother-care mean that greater emotional and organizational burdens fall to mothers.

The next article by Klaudia Zvenovich analyzes what the language choices of parents and children in bi-lingual Russian émigré families in Israel reveal about children-parent relations. Enlarging the post-Soviet private space to the Russian Diaspora in Israel, and analyzing the rhetoric of conversations in immigrant families, it argues that children use Hebrew to assert a greater independence, while parents’ use of Russian indicates a nostalgia for their cultural heritage, the social status that intelligentsia families enjoyed in Russia and a belief in a disciplined upbringing.

The text by Olga Brednikova and Olga Tkach also deals with migration, but, this time, the focus is on international economic migration to major Russian cities, in this case St. Petersburg. As part of an ongoing research project, the authors interviewed and visited the homes of women working as economic migrants, to explore their unusual and nuanced concepts of home. For the migrants interviewed, their living space can hardly be considered a private space: its most important characteristics are to be cheap and close to the workplace. Similarly, for these migrants, both the city where they live (primarily experienced in terms of the spaces of work and habitation) and the country they have left behind (a repressive structure from which they have freed themselves) can scarcely be described as home. Thus,

the authors conclude, rather provocatively, these migrants are real post-modern nomadic subjects.

Tatyana Litkina's article analyses the biographies and worldviews of three generations of women in a village in the North Caucasus. Here, traditional conceptions of family (marriages arranged by parents, respect for elders, valuing family honor above wealth, continual work by women, segregation of genders in public space) which survived Soviet modernization are now challenged by commercialization. Litkina's long-term biographies of three women provide a moving insight into the possibilities offered and the challenges posed to women of different ages.

Sofia Kazimov's article analyzing inter-ethnic marriages in Tajikistan also investigates how the contemporary socio-economic configuration is challenging traditional mores in Muslim communities. The author argues that during the Soviet period, interethnic marriages were mostly between Tajik men and Russian women. Now this trend is reversed with the majority of inter-ethnic marriages occurring between Tajik women and men from different geographical and cultural backgrounds. The author argues that the fact that Tajik women are able, despite social resistance, to contract these marriages suggests a degree of women's independence greater than that generally assumed. However, despite the fact that the motivation for inter-ethnic marriage is grounded in modern individualism, Kazimov finds that in many respects these women continue to support the patriarchal norms of their native culture.

The last essay by Tatyana Barchunova and Oksana Parfenova proposes the concept "Shift-F2" to suggest a queering of gender identity, and the use of the internet in facilitating this process, by women who have sex with women (WSW). Their study is based on an analysis of internet sites and in-depth interviews with WSW respondents from Novosibirsk and Krasnoyarsk, and reveals a complex set of identifications, resistances and fluid sexual boundaries in both real and virtual contexts. The authors argue that for WSW the internet offers greater opportunities for fluid sexuality than the real spaces of the cities studied. The article shows in great detail how both homo- and bi-sexual identities have to fight to be accepted against prevailing norms, how women engaging in homosexual relations encounter a different context than men, and presents both the internet and city spaces as being in dynamic evolution.

It is difficult to draw overall conclusions from this special issue. Rather, it is the range and detail of the accounts and the lived experiences they reveal that is most striking. It is therefore to be hoped that *Laboratorium* can act as a catalyst for more gender-based ethnographies of this kind and that, by promoting experimental empirically based sociological research, the journal can contribute to the international circulation of ideas about social processes and their effects.

Benjamin Cope is Lecturer at the European Humanities University, Vilnius, where he is a co-founder of the Laboratory of Critical Urbanism and teaches on “Critical Urbanism” and “Gender and Space”. He is a Tutor on H.E.S.P. Project “Teaching the Spatial Turn: Critical Concepts for a Globalising World.” He lives in Warsaw where he is a co-ordinator of the academic program at Zacheta National Gallery of Art and activist in the association “My.” He also plays music with the Belarusian group Nagual. He is co-editor with Nerijus Milerius of *P-S Landshafty: Optiky gorodskogo issledovania* (Vilnius: E.H.U. International Press, 2008).

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