Nancy Ries

"Honest Bandits" and "Warped People":

Russian Narratives about Money, Corruption, and Moral Decay

In the 1980s, we started with pluralism, and ended with banditism.—Pavel Teplyy, "Towards to the Triumph of Capitalism?"

Perestroika (1986-1991) was an era of fervent unveiling: the manifold problems of Soviet society were exposed in all the media. Official ideology was discredited as the depths of Communist Party corruption and hypocrisy were exposed, shocking stories of revolutionary and Stalinist terror were told and would... These were the years of glasnost—the policy of transparency decreed by Gorbachev in early 1987 as part of his reform for bureaucratic, technological, and social modernization. Glasnost quickly overtook the narrow boundaries Gorbatchev had set for it; however, for a few years, there was a euphoric sense that all the dark corners of society would be exposed to public scrutiny, and that this exposure might serve as the basis for creating a democratic and just social order.

One of the bitter paradoxes of post-Soviet Russia is how quickly all sense or pretense of transparency evaporated (and with it much of the popular faith in democratization). The well-thed complexes of communist persuasion have given way to manipulations of public information that are more open but all the more manipulative for their visibility, and all the more troubling for their ubiquity. Many of the conversations I had with people in Moscow and Yaroslavl during ethnographic fieldwork touched upon the idea of the profound cynicism (and metaphoric literalism) of the people toward the state. Many claim characteristics post-Soviet Russia from top to bottom. People talk about cynicism to describe a general context of moral corruption and dishonesty, where it seems that everyone is engaged, to some degree, in cheating, lying, swindling, and stealing—wherever it takes to capture one’s share of the available economic resources. Those higher up on the socioeconomic or political ladder are cast as the most cynical, because, while pretending to care about the general welfare, they take advantage of myriad opportunities to enrich themselves at public expense.

As an interlocutor, I take these discourses about cynicism at face value—as embittered expressions of lost faith and political groundings. At the same time, I regard them as a dynamic and powerful field of sociocultural production. Through talk about cynicism (and through cynical talk), people actively deconstruct whatever legitimizing discourses or practices are presented on behalf of the reconstituted political-economic order, and thus regularly inoculate themselves against any naïve belief in state or market ideology. At the same time, the notion of ubiquitous cynicism explains and justifies their own less-than-honest actions—actions such as misrepresenting their income on tax declarations or as criminal by hijacking trucks or perpetrating scams. Finally, but perhaps most importantly, cynicism in its many guises is metaphoric shorthand—a way of encapsulating, depicting, and circulating a view of the present world.

The phenomenon of all-legitimizing cynicism is not, of course, only a post-Soviet one. Under different guises (kitchen table humor, absurdist art forms and talk, participation in the black market), it was quite common in Soviet times. However, in the late years of communist rule in Russia, many still held the innocence of the people (narki) in contrast to the corruption of those with power. This claim of popular innocence is one of the things that began to disappear in the early 1990s with the demise of Soviet rule. Thus, the particular cultural contours of post-Soviet cynicism, the metaphors employed to explain the spread of cynicism in Russia, and popular ideas about possible paths of redemption from the traps of cynicism are the central issues explored in this essay.

Cynicism emerged for me as an ethnographic issue in Yaroslavl, Russia, during the summer of 1995, not in the form of abstract discussion, but through vivid narratives centered on two dominant and inter-connected themes: money and the mafia. Not surprisingly, in this new market economy people spoke candidly about money getting it, keeping it, spending it, hiding it, losing it to thieves, swindlers, relatives, or tax authorities; making do without it. As my close friend Olga declared:

"This is all anybody talks about anymore: money, money, money. All you hear, even as you pass people on the street, is money, money, money—then slang for "millions" as people discuss their easy ways, their schemes, their dreams." This is so even among children. I heard a great deal of speculation about other people's money: who had it and by
what...mysterious means they got it, how they spent it or lost it. Although much of this talk centered on the pragmatics of money, there was a significant moral dimension to these narratives, as well. People also spoke constantly and colorfully about the mafia, describing personal encounters and engagements with so-called “bandits” (banditi), the thievery, extortion, bombings, shootings, and poisonings attributed to the mafia. As with conversations about money, these stories seemed to invoke simultaneously “the real mafia” and what Katherine Verdery (1996:219) calls “the conceptual mafia” or “the-mafia-as-symbol.” One of the ironies of the new capitalism in Russia is that the multiple meanings of the mafia as both the destroyer of any hope for justice and social order and also the most likely potential source of justice and order. To this point I will return later in the essay. In narratives about money and the mafia, people used a semiotics, a vascular to express in a simple, linear fashion the enormously complicated, multidimensional realities of their changing society. To some extent, these condensed narratives seemed key to my presence as an interested outsider. I was interviewing people to try to understand something of their reality, but that reality had so many complications, and there were so many new secrets, that it was hard to convey it except by way of these parables. Through their symbolically charged metanarratives, people conveyed a general image of the political, economic, social, cultural, and moral complexities, contradictions, and conflicts of their world. These were complexities and conflicts that they faced and were aware of every day, not as abstract issues, but as real dimensions of every social transaction and encounter.

An “Honest Bandit”

I was initiated into the worlds of mafia and money (both real and conceptual) on my first day of fieldwork in Yaroslavl, for this initiation I remain grateful to Pasha, an acquaintance who played a crucial role on me, probably as an act of pr pr pedagogy designed to uproot my scholarly pretensions. Although not his main interests, his ploy impressed me all at once in local orientations and practices which would otherwise have become clear only slowly. Pasha was virtually the only businessperson I knew when I arrived in Yaroslavl to study changing conceptions of work. I called him on my first day in town and asked him if he would set up interviews for me with other people in business in the city. Perhaps irritated because I didn’t first invite him for tea (or something stronger), Pasha said he was too busy to help me, although he would think about my request. Within an hour, however, the phone rang, and Alekha, a friend of Pasha’s, offered his services as informant.

At noon the next day, Alekha picked me up in a burnished black Mercedes, and we drove to a cafe. The hostess greeted Alekha warmly and seated us in a curtained alcove. After Alekha ordered our meal, he said, “Okay, so what do you want to know?” I politely inquired as to the nature of his business. After a long pause and a piercing but amused look, he said “I...I am a bandit.”

I raised an eyebrow and smirked, trying not to show that I was taken aback. Here I was, on my first full day in Yaroslavl, sitting across the table from a gangster. And the gangster was grinning at me, tracing my reaction, pleased at his ability to disarm a foreign ethnographer. “Aaah,” I said, somewhat at a loss for words. “I had assumed from what Pasha said that you were a businessman.”

“Well, yes, I am a businessman. I am in the business of building roofs.” Fortunately, I had learned in a conversation with a young student the night before that “roofs” (krysha) was bandit slang for the various forms of protection the mafia offered. During the rest of my summer in Yaroslavl, and later in Perm and Moscow, and Tver, I heard this term invoked constantly—in a short span of time it had become a key cultural referent throughout Russia. I asked Alekha to explain what it meant to provide roofs for people.

Well, the traders and speculators are always cheating each other. They borrow money and disappear with it. They take goods on consignment and don’t pay for them. They are always on to cheat each other, to make money however they can. Goods get stolen out of warehouses and stores. We protect the businessmen from each other. We ensure the collection of debts and recover stolen goods. Our clients’ managers know who is protecting them, whether our clients have good kryshas or not. A good krysha means good business.

“Does every business have a krysha? Even the booth selling potatoes and mushrooms from their rucksacks on the sidewalk? Do schools and hospitals have kryshas?” I asked. He smiled patiently, and it was clear he...
recognized in my questions the international image of Russian mafia bandits as scalawags who terrorize the urban population with their "racket".

We don’t make a point of "coveting" the babushkas. But they are constant­ly hassled by street criminals and alcoholics. So they ask our guys to protect them. So every month they pay twenty, thirty bucks (Aleksa spoke of money only in dollars), and we watch over them. The babushkas know they better not mess with the old ladies because our guys are watching out for them. And schools don’t have keys! Because there’s no money involved. It’s only when there is some kind of money that people need protection. Understand, Nancy, we don’t go out and seek our clients: they come to us, our clients approach us to provide them a service which they need.

"You seem like a nice guy," I said, "Do you mind being a bandit? How do you feel about what you do?"

Bandits are known for their honesty, we protect our clients from being cheated, we enforce their contracts, collect their debts for them, ensure some kind of normal business relations. They know they can count on us. Eventually, this will become, I would like to have it become a legitimate business, a regular kind of collection agency like you have in America.

I asked him how he got into this "business," how it was structured, and how it operated. He explained that he had been an engineer, with an advanced degree, and had worked as a unit director in a local factory. But he was also an athlete, a weight lifter and a boxer with many trophies.

When all this began, the master under whom I apprenticed proposed starting a gang. Within four years, we built up our gang to the point where we now have an echelon of "middle managers" (brigadiers) and thirty "soldiers" (brats) working under us.

"This is a delicate question, and you don’t have to answer if you don’t want, but . . . do you ever have to . . . kill anyone?" I inquired. Aleksa paused before answering.

No, there are few killings, it isn’t necessary. Although sometimes there are fights among the different gangs (brigadiers) in town. We try to get our men to keep out of trouble, for instance, only to go to

"our" restaurants and bars (I thus realized we were in one of Aleshka’s protected cafes). When different gangs mingle, crime can be trouble. We try to enforce a policy of discipline. Our "boss" shouldn’t drink too much, or smoke even. They should be family men, decent, or­derly people.

"And what about the police?" I inquired.

The police know us. They know all the buildings (an affront to diminutive of bandits) in town, who works for whom, whom we protect, they know everything. And they rely on us to provide order which they themselves can’t: they don’t have the resources. There would just be chaos if not for us, because the businessmen are inca­pable of running their affairs in an orderly way. Most of them are uncivilized! You know, the Russian people. It’s not the decent busi­nessmen who are driving around in Mercedes cars. They live in a more modest way, they have family values and don’t need the show­off of fancy homes and cars; it’s only those from the working-class backgrounds who need to show off their new wealth.

He went on to explain that he had been arrested in the spring of 1995 and spent an entire month in prison, without charges being filed.

I was lucky to get out after a month, it could have been a lot longer. But I wasn’t telling them anything they wanted to know. I just smiled and held my tongue. In general I was well taken care of there. The other prisoners took care of me, because they knew who I was, they brought me so much food I gained five kilos while there. I would sit in my bunk, and the others would bring me food, I didn’t even have to leave my cell. Though I had to spend the days without any clothes, to keep the bedbugs away! It was okay there, however; the cops even gave me mattresses and blankets, you often have just a metal plinth to sleep on. I was well treated. And then they just let me go, because they didn’t have any charges against me, and I didn’t talk. In general the police just have a quota to fulfill, they have to arrest a certain number of us every month, to show they are doing their job.

"What about your wife? Wasn’t she upset that you were in jail? Didn’t she cry?" I asked.

My wife didn’t cry, she was very strong, she understands. My wife is a "good kid" (tolstaya). My mother cried.

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The rest of that day and the next, I spent driving around Yaroslavl with Alesha as he made his rounds. First we met some men in a parking lot outside of a noisy public; Alesha sold his old Mercedes, took temporary possession of a decrepit Soviet-era Lada (he explained that he was getting ready to buy a jeep, the only kind of vehicle appropriate for driving the terrible local roads), and then drove to a furniture store (belonging to one of his clients) where he checked the forty-hundred-dollar bills he had received for his Mercedes on their counterfeite-currency detection machine. Then we visited other clients together. What was remarkable to me was the ease with which he (and I with him) moved through the ranks of the city; we dropped in on the director of a newly founded private university; walking right in (and asked to join) some kind of power-lunch; we visited bankers and store-owners, walking freely and unannounced into their offices. Nearly everyone was polite and many were even friendly with Alesha, and he was always polite and soft-spoken, although I sat in a vestibule while a verbal altercation, which I could just barely hear behind closed doors, took place between him and a bank director. At the end of our first day together, we dropped in on his partners, who didn’t seem particularly glad to see me, in part, perhaps, because he was busy taking care of his dying mother, who rested on the couch while Alesha and his partner talked “business.”

Everywhere we went, Alesha greeted people he knew on the streets; some, he explained, were also bandits from his or other gangs; others were businesspeople whom he “protected.” He was clearly an energetic participant in the flow of activity in the city. At one point we drove up to a set of kiosks to buy some snacks. A policeman jumped out of a jeep parked nearby and greeted Alesha warmly. There ensued a discussion about the policeman buying some ammunition for his “hunting rifle” through Alesha. We stopped in at Alesha’s apartment (an average Soviet apartment but with brand new Scandinavian furniture) to pick up some documents he needed; there Alesha unlocked a gigantic safe and proudly displayed to me his collection of firearms and a block of hundred-dollar bills about the size of a breadbox.

During the two days we spent making rounds, Alesha seemed eager to let me observe his business, and he patiently, though easily and without many details, answered my questions about the structures and practices of the local mafia and its role in the current social and economic system. To this day, I don’t know why he agreed to meet with me, or why he was as open with me as he was; when I asked him at one point, he just said, “Why not?” and laughed. My best guess is that it was a form of entertainment for him. He seemed to enjoy performing his identity as a bandit for an adored and interested foreign woman. It is also possible that so many exiles were parading my presence as a sign of his legitimacy and importance, although in general I felt I had very little social capital compared to the obvious wealth and status of him and his clients. In any case, through Alesha, I made contracts with a wide range of people with whom it would have been difficult to meet otherwise, and several of these contracts proved valuable in the development of my networks in the city. To travel: he streets with a bandit was to observe the patterns of interconnection and power that structure a postcommunist Russian town; it was also to experience a mysterious, charmed kind of passage across hierarchical boundaries and between a variety of social realms.

Later, in conversations and experiences with other informants, I had many opportunities to gauge the veracity of Alesha’s representations of self, city, and society, and to understand the hidden factors in the various transactions I observed with him. While it was difficult for me to discern the degree to which he believed his own claims to legitimacy and service of the common good, I decided that this was not really the main issue; what was important was the enthusiasm with which he employed these legitimizing discourses, which were his personal reflections of a much wider sphere of talk about trust and deception, alliance and conflict, civility and chaos, work and scheming, morality and socio-spiritual corruption.

In his narrative about the role of mafias gangs, Alesha depicts the landscape in postsocialist (or newly capitalist) Russia as a place of weak governance, where the state has insufficient resources and incentives to protect people’s interests or those of business. The mafia, on the contrary, has the wherewithal and the will to provide order at ground level where it is needed—and it is needed wherever money is at stake. Alesha depicts the mafias as honest, decent, and disciplined in contrast to low-level businesspeople, whom he casts as unscrupulous, ostentatious, and immoderate; in this he is invoking the popular image of “New Russians” (Neryn Kulbillate—the Russian nouveau riche who are represented in jokes, media stories, and everyday talk as unscrupulous, undependable, and thoroughly corrupted by the thirst for money. During the rest of my fieldwork in Yaroslavl, what was striking to me was the degree to which Alesha’s basic construction of the social terrain of contemporary

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Russia and the mafia's function in this landscape was echoed in conversations I had with many other people. How was it to explain the fact that elderly, impoverished pensioners described their world in more-or-less the same terms as those used by a successful member of the contemporary Russian mafia? Was Atleshov cynically echoing the popular construction because it conveniently legitimized (some of) his business activity? Or were these discourses, diagnostically reinforcing and building upon each other, capturing—perhaps in the symbolic codes of narrative—some crucial dimensions of the restructuring social world?

Privatization: Views from Within

Although the success of enterprise privatization in Russia has been acclaimed by some outside observers (see, for instance, Aslund 1995 and Blasi, Krasnova, and Kruse 1997), the perspective of Russian citizens who have not been leading participants in the process is not merely as tamable. Until the fiscal crises of the late 1990s, the voices of neo-liberal politicians, businesspeople, writers, and scholars could be heard around the globe, exalting the birth of capitalism in Russia, conceiving it as the cradle of eventual democracy and prosperity for all. In conversations with international harbinger of optimism, during fieldwork in Russia, I was often struck by the passion with which they espouse their worldviews, not hesitating that their triumphalist declarations do not always echo on the ground.

There, local discourses about privatization and marketization are contextualized within a cluster of intertwining phenomena: overnight fortunes and unpaid workers, pyramid schemes and vouchers, “swindles” (obzvy) and violence. These form basic points of local conceptions of society, economy, and politics.

The spectacle of seemingly overnight fortunes has been quite vivid throughout Russia. I say seemingly since in fact many of these fortunes were far from instant; instead they represented, on the one hand, the lifelong maneuvering of Soviet-era elites whose persisted allowed them to turn power or status into capital during the late Soviet and early post-Soviet years, and, on the other hand, they represented the proceeds from Soviet-era black market activities, which served as excellent start-up capital in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Garshin’s 1888 desire permitting the formation of cooperatives provided a significant opportunity for those poised to privatize. Only a small percentage of the usual economic strategizing that took place during those years was publicly evident, in the form of small retail shops and services that began to appear. Less visible but more meaningful were the enrichment strategies of communist bosses, factory and shop directors, upper- and middle-level KGB functionaries, ministry bureaucrats, and other socialist-era elites, who created cooperatives as devices through which to siphon capital, equipment, labor, and other resources into privately held enterprises. When privatization went into full effect in the late 1990s, this process escalated dramatically in scope.

Overall, the financial machinations of the elites entailed little investment in productive industry; on the contrary, since they often involved industrial directors, managers, and party bureaucrats conspiring to dissipate and sell off equipment and raw materials which lie within their domains, many productive enterprises devolved into trading organizations or holding companies, and the managerial elites transferred the capital thus acquired into offshore bank accounts or into their privately held cooperatives. Thousands of new banks were registered, and while some were legitimate, many others were merely cover for quasi-legal investment or money-laundering.

Having far more capital than most people, Soviet-era, black-market traders similarly found themselves in a prime position to start cooperatives that would allow them to invest, launder, and build on their existing wealth by entering the sphere of trade on a serious scale. One wealthy Moscow woman explained that her husband made his first fortune in the 1980s by illegally duplicating music and video cassettes for sale on the black market. When he became free as such that capital openly, he started buying and selling real estate in central Moscow. When I interviewed this woman in 1994, the couple was building their first house—a fifteen-room mansion, complete with gazebos, stables, and fountains, on a lovely landscaped, four-acre parcel near Moscow.

Nearly everyone I have interviewed has a tale to tell of a friend, relative, colleague, or acquaintance who amassed a considerable fortune after 1991. Such stories were often tinged with awe and assertion, since so many fortunes had their base in the semicriminal shadow economy. In 1994 in Obninsk, a town several hours south of Moscow, a nursery-school teacher told me of a locally infamous, former foreign-currency speculator, a word that connotes a general slantedness. Her description vividly summarized the popular image of New Russians who are seen as uncultured, uneducated, and unsoprocious persons who have accrued unthinkable wealth through criminal or
quasi-criminal means, and who live in vulgar splendor, tinged with an aura of violence.

Ten years ago he was kicked out of his apartment and fired from his job for "speculating." He just barely avoided going to prison for his activities. Everybody knew him from childhood, he was always getting in and out of trouble. Now he is the town's richest businessman, with a dacha, a house, several cars, and his own bodyguards. He drives around town in an armored Rolls Royce, his Rolls Royce armored Mercedes surrounded by the cars of his bodyguards with their submachine guns.

While seeing such New Russians aggressively and visibly cruising the streets of the cities, towns, and villages, and while watching their directors building new dachas, purchasing foreign vehicles, and refurbishing their private offices in grand style, most workers are themselves earning salaries below the official subsistence level, are being kid off, or are working for months on end without being paid. Families use a variety of strategies for coping with this. Many of these strategies are similar to those employed in the Soviet period. People depend on relatives, friends, and colleagues for mutual assistance; they employ the science of begging that developed over a lifetime; they rely on the domestic production of foodstuffs (especially via dacha gardening); they do part-time, nighttime, or weekend work, and they engage in many forms of trade to make extra money. Hoarding food, utilizing public benefits and discounts, and pilfering from the workplace remain as common as they were in Soviet times, although the specific contours of these practices have changed somewhat, with new opportunities and constraints.

There were a few moments in the mid-1990s when some people believed that they too, might partake of the bonanzas of privatization and make their own overnight fortunes. As part of the official privatization program, in 1992 the Telnin administration announced that a voucher worth 10,000 rubles (around $44 at the time) would be distributed to each Russian citizen for investment in the newly privatized enterprise of their choice. Many people believed that their vouchers gave them an opportunity to participate in the future of Russian economic development, although many others realized right off that this was an absurdly insignificant amount. People who invested and lost two hundred dollars, the equivalent for their family of two month's salary, and, more importantly, a large chunk of their savings. Quite a few of my informants described their own or their friends' experiences of investing in the mid-1990s to 1994.

For many the experience of investing in these schemes provided an introduction, in one form or another, to the new world of alchemy (deception and swindling) and to the weird cosmologies of capitalism as well. People by the millions fell for the promise that their investments would "delight in almost perennual profits..." yield wealth sans perceivable pro- entreprise of their choice. Many people believed that their vouchers gave them an opportunity to participate in the future of Russian economic development, although many others realized right off that this was an absurdly insignificant amount. People who invested and lost two hundred dollars, the equivalent for their family of two month's salary, and, more importantly, a large chunk of their savings. Quite a few of my informants described their own or their friends' experiences of investing in the mid-1990s to 1994.

Billboards, subway cars, and newspapers were plastered with advertisements promising enormous returns on investments; it was common to see ads offering several hundred percent yields on deposits (measured in dollars) instead of constantly inflating prices. The MMM company was the most active promoter of such investment opportunities, and their witty television ads were a topic of widespread public attention and amusement. These depicted Russian folkloric characters, the affable urban simpletons Lening Colubok and his family, who used their MMM profits to buy, first, new kitchen appliances, and then cars, purebred dogs, a vacation abroad, and a fancy new dacha. These humorous ads worked their magic, and people lined up at investment points all over Russia to hand over their vouchers—and often their entire savings. Being, in fact, nothing more than a countrywide pyramid scheme, MMM collapsed in 1994 when investors began to complain about not receiving their interest and not being able to withdraw their capital. Its director, Sergei Mavrodin, was charged with tax evasion and other financial crimes, but he later ran for and won a seat in the Russian parliament by promising depositors to return their capital if he was elected.

MMM was only the most visible (and most brazen) of hundreds of similar financial pyramids, in which tens of millions of hopeful Russian citizens invested what little capital they possessed. The media in 1995 were full of accounts of angry investors lined up outside the locked doors of these bankrupt firms in hopes of gaining some of their money back. While most of these schemes were ultimately simple, others were more complex marketing pyramids, less prone to sudden collapse but equally unwieldy for most investor-entrepreneurs.
experiences losing money through such schemes, international, na
tional, or local. They spoke with bitter irony about their own naiveté in
the seductive new marketplace of trickery and con. There were many
ways to be swindled on a large or small scale. Regular day-to-day shop-
ing often entailed hidden risks, and although these might seem relat-
ively insignificant, they created an atmosphere of mistrust and furthered
the sense that everyone had become cynical and corrupt. Although the
development of markets and the ubiquity of kiosks selling everything
from beer to footwear has made shopping much easier than it was in
Soviet times, people regularly remark on the problem of discerning fake
or counterfeit products from genuine name brands: traders sell cheap
imitations of designer clothes, and imported liquor bottles are filled with
illegally-brewed grain alcohol that is tinted with food color.1 Savvy
consumers have developed numerous ways of discerning the real from the
fake.1 and the sharing of shopping experiences and advice is a regular
topic of conversation. Writing about consumption habits in con-
temporary Russia, Caroline Humphrey comments that people buy
from kiosks with the “certain knowledge that they are being cheated
and, she argues, with a full understanding of the various mechanisms
through which that cheating is perpetrated (1995:51). “Public markets,”
she writes, “have become huge favors of disingenuousness” (61).
Property transfers also present a significant risk of swindle. With
privatization, buying and selling property became legal, and property
transfers occur at a furious pace. The market, however, is full of shady
real estate agents and crooked developers, who have worked out myriad
ways of cheating people out of their money or their property. They sell
properties that don’t belong to them, abscond with deposits and down
payments, stare customers in high-interest loans that they can’t repay,
or get people to sign away their property by taking advantage of the
complex bureaucracy involved. This last method has been especially
effective in swindling elderly people who don’t understand the intric-
cacies of contracts. Explaining why she dare not sell or trade her apart-
ment, whose mortgage payments she could no longer afford, one small-
scale businessman declared that “if they want to swindle you, they
will find a way. The agents know the ins and outs of the paperwork. No
matter how savvy and careful we are, they are many steps ahead of us
with their little tricks.” My friend Olga, a schoolteacher, and her hus-
band Yuri, a bookkeeper (one of the “prestigious” new professions, in
which a person could earn a decent salary, at least until the banks
collapsed in 1998), told me their story of a property swindle which took
place in 1995:
We tried to buy another apartment. We found some agents, and they
showed us a place, and we put a deposit down on it. Then, they
refused to give us the apartment or our money back, the whole thing
was just a huge swindle. We tried to get some guys to help us get the
money back, we had our own krysha, but the agents’ krysha was
stronger, and our krysha couldn’t break through theirs.
People engaged in business or trade face the challenge of avoiding
swindles and dealing with unscrupulous partners, clients, and suppliers on
a daily basis; the risks involved correspond, of course, to the scale of
the business being transacted. Hence the ubiquity of krysha in business. It is
no exaggeration to say that everyone doing business has some kind of
“protection”—whether supplied by buddies, the police, or some other form of
official connections (or all of the above). “Where money flows,” as one
businessman said, “there is always a risk of swindle, because
money attracts swindlers like flies; swindlers have a nose for money or
property changing hands.” The bandit Aleha summed up only a small part
of the situation when he said “the traders and speculators . . .
borrow money and disappear with it. They take goods on consignment and
don’t pay for them . . . goods get stolen out of warehouses and stores.”

These are the only most direct forms of swindle in business. The
general atmosphere is one of fierce competition for capital, resources,
properties, supply, control of specific markets, industries, or geo-
graphical regions, official support and favors, and so on. To engage in busi-
ness in Russia is to engage in an elaborate, multileveled, and con-
stant struggle to maintain even a slight advantage in these various
arenas. While this description (and these ‘belletristic’ metaphors) apply to
capitalism everywhere, Russia entirely lacks a framework of state reg-
ulation and oversight within which business “honesties” may take place;
there are no final arbiters for the conflicts that constantly arise, and
there are few developed moral or ideological constraints on bad be-
havior. Such conditions make the field of enterprise a frighteningly slip-
pery one in which rights, rules, alliances, and obligations constantly
change. One of the key collectivisms in contemporary Russian is “bru-
ntia,” meaning simultaneously “to turn, spin, resolve, whirl, squirm,
circle, twist, counter.”4 It is a common piece of local knowledge that

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only by knowing how to knititia can one keep one’s head above water in any kind of environment. The Russian mafia are, in a sense, the masters of this dance. Their occupation entails a kind of “meta-spinning” among different realms of enterprise, within and between different social fields and different levels of hierarchy.

In the absence of reliable, coherent, and accessible state arbitration in business matters, the mafia are also, of course, the primary suppliers of mediation, compensation, and conflict resolution services. For many businesspeople, they provide the only controlling or coercive apparatus readily available. Their range of services includes the common rubrics—meetings between two opposed parties that are mediated by the bandits representing each side. The outcomes of rubrici may depend on communications shrewdness or on some logic of justice, authority, alliance, or brute force (or a combination of these). If rubrici fail to resolve a conflict, the mafia may be engaged to utilize more drastic means—everything from “unpleasant encounters” to assassination.

For those who haven’t spent much time in Russia, the specter of the mafia may appear terrifying, astonishing, and exotic. From a local perspective, however, kralki, rubrici, murders, bombings, and assassinations have become surprisingly normal features of the daily landscape, of conversation, of humor, and of popular culture. It is not uncommon to see groups of five or six “mules” aggressively marching, almost in formation, through a metro station or along a street. “Where they go, off to a rubrici,” my Russian companions say with droll humor. Several businesspeople have described their experience with rubrici in interviews. If Folkinger references to loshi and protection money are a standard feature of much conversation.

The media regularly report the numbers of businessespeople, politicians, and journalists—a joke about the ignominy of low-prize, thousand-dollar hits, and there are plenty of anecdotes about hired killings gone wrong. This realm of murders and assassinations is not far removed from the experience of most people; on the contrary, many have stories to tell of their close encounters with bandits, of murders or bombings they have witnessed, and so on. One acquaintance, a woman engaged in very small-scale egg distribution in Moscow, described how she was dragged into a car and driven to a forest, where some bandits to whom she owed money threatened to strip her naked and drive a grenade taped to his neighbor’s door as he was leaving for work; he called the police who removed the grenade, but they could not figure out why the neighbor, a businesswoman, had been targeted. In Moscow during the summer of 1994, I was twice in the vicinity of bombings, close enough to hear the explosion and witness the ensuing commotion. The interesting aspect of these experiences for me was to observe, in myself as well as in those who tell me their own stories, a sense that these events were entirely explicable, as horrifying but as common a part of contemporary life as automobile accidents. Thus does an aura of violence become an almost banal part of existence.

The Metaphysics of Money

Thus far, I have presented only a general outline of some of the contours of socioeconomic life in the developing markets of Russia. There is, obviously, much more to it. But the phenomena described above form the basis for widespread declarations about the “cynicism” that seems to have infiltrated the social fabric. However, most people—even the mafia bandit Altra—are not so cynical that they do not seek to explain and justify the social changes they have experienced. As people watch others and, indeed, find themselves energetically participating in the scramble for resources—learning to knittita on whatever level—ideas about the power of money serve as symbols of the compelling force behind all this activity and its resultant changes in social relations.

Contemporary Russian narratives often describe an expanding sphere of uncontrollable corruption, greed, duplicity, and savagery; a dystopic regime where the values of charity, compassion, love, and labor have all dissolved under the insuperable hypnotic of what many refer to as “the cult of money.” There are multiple positions from which this social image is cast and a wide range of inflections that vary according to age, education, ethnicity, social status, degree of involvement in the marketplace, and economic experience. Nonetheless, certain certain moral images are remarkably consistent, part of the general, “commonsense” view of the changed social world.

The symbolic construction of money as an almost animate, destructive agent serves in Russia, as elsewhere, 20 to summarize the increasingly complicated dynamics of systemic transformation. As Jonathan Parry and Maurice Bloch (1986) have theorized in Money and the Morality of Exchange, at issue in these fictitious discourses about money is the

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question of how two overlapping, interdependent, but separate spheres of social life—the long-term sphere of collective values and the short-term sphere of private interest—are to be reconciled or articulated. In any society, they argue, both of these spheres are necessary to social and biological reproduction, yet each must be insulated from the other in reliable, stable, and socially legitimated ways. The shifting of money may occur when the nature of the exchanges between these two spheres is under contest, and this is surely the case in Russia as it has been throughout the post-socialist world. Conversations about money mark a general effort to define profound structural changes in moral terms; money is, in a sense, a symbol of the force which has dissolved the socialist institutions, practices, ideologies, and commitments that seemed (for better and for worse) so sturdy and unassailable.

Katherine Verdery writes that "as a state-socialist economy increases the play of market forces, it opens up spaces for radically new conceptions of the economy and the place of money in people's lives" (1995:56). In socialist economies, of course, most people had few ways to amass capital or multiply their money without direct investment of labor. In moving away from the logics of socialism, people must come to grips with the seemingly magical quality of money in a market system, where money begets money, goods accrue value through trade, familiar work practices have given way to mysterious forms of economic activity, and income disparities create utterly disparate, inconceivable worlds.

Where traditional boundaries of moral and group identification have been effaced, the flow of money can be cast as the primary agent of that effacement. Where it seems that personal integrity, moral limits, concern for the well-being of the larger community, and a desire to perform "honest work" have disappeared, the thirst for money can be invoked to make sense of that disappearance. One irony here is that money has been reinvented with the fetishistic power it had in communist propaganda as an agent of spiritual and social corruption.

A retired schoolteacher, Viktoria, whose family was managing quite well through a variety of means (including renting their apartment to me for the summer), lamented that:

We are morally damaged. Look how many these days are glued to their television, and what are they watching? All the American films so long denied them but especially the martial art films. Our old Soviet films all had some moral base, which wasn't bad. In fact the philosophy of communism corresponded to Christian philosophy. The only problem then was at the top with the officials. They gave us those moral messages but we didn't mean anything to them, we "little people," and they lived their comfortable lives behind a curtain, that was the real iron curtain, hiding their happy lives from us. Now it is all out in the open, and nobody is ashamed. Now we all know what it is about, and everybody wants to get rich and live like our leaders always lived, even the children are already totally damaged, really warped.

Viktoria's commentary sheds light on many aspects of the discussion at hand. In a few verbal strokes, she constructs a history of class relations, posits certain alignments of cosmology and ideology, and conveys the emotional effects of moral confusion and decay. In particular, Viktoria suggests that there was always a social realm wherein money circulated and corrupted—the sphere of the communist elites—but that the "little people" were excluded from, in a sense pretend form, that corrupting force by the fixed barriers of power and privilege. When she says "even the children are already damaged," she implies that there no longer seems to be any reliable separation between the spheres of innocence and corruption (childhood and adulthood, people and elites). In this vein, another teacher described her disdain for the changes she witnessed in her ten-year-old nephew: "He's really charming, but he smokes and drinks already. Kids today only think about money. When I asked him what he thought of a pretty girl in his class as a possible future wife, he said, 'No, she's too poor.'" The thirst for money is said to motivate extreme breaches of social relations—even those of kinship. Kolia deplored the collapse of family values, saying: "It is sickening what is happening nowadays to children. People just toss their kids out on the streets, to fend for themselves, so they can save money. It was never like this before. Now there are thousands of abandoned kids."

The media has reported a few cases of people who murdered their own parents or grandparents so as to inherit and sell their apartments, and such stories are picked up and spread to verify the claim that money drives people to the most abominable behaviors. Tales of friends, relatives, and associates cheating or abandoning each other for the sake of money are not uncommon.
Despite claims that now everybody is corrupt, there is a logic of degree: most people concurred that the moral waters are murkier the higher one looks. The more money a person has (or the more money that circulates around a person), the more corrupt he or she must be. Government officials and the new business class are seen as being the most corrupt of all, as being utterly disinterested in what happens to "the people" as long as their pockets are full and their dachas protected by high walls. Discourse is somewhat slippery and contradictory on this point. However, the threat for money creates moral corruption, while, at the same time, existing moral corruption may allow the threat for money to take hold. This must be so if the speaker perceives himself or herself as being relatively immune to money's power.

Many people invoke the notion that the willingness to work for money has disappeared. Presumably, nowadays many people want to get it magically, instantly, and without labor; this idea seems to reflect most vividly the lack of faith between socialist ideologues about the honor of work and the evil of speculation. Talk constructs a standard opposition between real work, which does not bring a person money, and those dishonest or unproductive activities that do make money. In contrast to the transparency of "real labor," money-making activities are murky and mysterious. My friend Olga talked about an acquaintance who works as a cleaning woman in a fancy shop where they sell nothing but some kind of German skin balm—so expensive that few can afford it. "The cleaning woman says all she does in the mornings is gather up vodka and wine bottles, and she wonders what her employers actually do during the day." Olga also passed on the story of an engineer who works in a joint venture. "He signs a few pieces of paper every month and gets a huge salary. I have no idea where the money comes from to pay people like that for nothing."

Trading, the predominant (and most visible) economic activity of the day, feeds into the image of money-making as an activity by which money is made without work. Russian streets are now crammed with private shops, kiosks, and small stands, and it is imagined that the owners of these enterprises make "piles of money" without working. This, of course, reflects Soviet-era and even pre-Soviet Russian conceptions of trade as immoral speculation. As Mikhail, a retired scientist, put it, "nowadays anybody will kill anybody else for a little thing." His son recently disagreed, however, saying, "If that's true, then why would all these people sit all day in kiosks, selling vodka, when they could just as easily kill someone?" His father retorted, "What kind of work is that, sitting in a kiosk? That isn't work. Those people just can't figure out whom to kill."

Sometimes deserving people do make money, but there is often some kind of "machine" by which this occurs. A young seamstress, Anna, who dreams of being a fashion designer, cast things in an eminently folkloric vein in the following story:

Russians don't really want to work, you know. It is too hard. One of my friends went to Florida and stayed with a Russian émigré there. He said it was beautiful and everybody was rich, but he couldn't stand it. Life there was too easy, the phone was always ringing, there were always dozens of messages on the answering machine, business calls to answer, too much hustle, exhausting. Russians don't need that kind of insanity. Though we are living in poverty now, we wait for miracles, like always. All poor Russians wait for miracles, like the Fool from Russian fairy tales, who always did everything wrong but married the princess in the end anyway. But miracles do happen nowadays. One artist I know brought some paintings to Moscow to sell in a park. An Italian wandered by, fell in love with his work, brought him to Italy, toured him around, lavished millions on him. He came back loaded with money and bought himself an apartment in Moscow!

Such winsome accounts are overshadowed in conversation by those which highlight a logic alien to fairy tales, however. In older Russian tales, the honest (though perhaps lazy or foolishly) hero usually prevails, and the villain gets his or her punishment. However, contemporary stories more often emphasize the inversion of this moral logic. Kolia put it starkly: "Look at who gets rich nowadays. Not people doing honest work or anything productive. Just those people who know how to steal, are willing to steal and kill and smite to get what they want. People kill their own parents to get their apartments to sell. We are warped."

The image of two intimately connected but utterly unequal social groups, the "honest" people who have played by the rules and only gotten poorer and the former communists, businesspeople, traders, and bandits who have stolen everything they possibly could, was constantly voiced by other working people and pensioners with whom I spoke. At a birthday dinner for Pasha's father—a man featuring homemade potatoes and mushrooms gathered at the dacha—Pasha's mother lamented: Honest Bandits and Warped People
bitterly about the impossibility of living on their pensions and the fatal insult that was being delivered to the people who had worked so hard their entire lives. **Flirting** sat dispiritedly silent during most of the meal, the father finally said.

There's no future for Russia, it's twenty or thirty years away. The government does not serve the people. It just wrings them dry and steals from them. Our mayor, our governor, what do they do? They just travel to exotic lands supposedly to make “deals”—they go to Portugal, Japan, Europe, on money from our taxes and stay in fine hotels, eat fancy meals, buy presents for their mistresses. They live like kings already, but they want more. Our own factory director, having piles of money of his own already, demanded that a shipment of wood for the factory be put aside, so he could use it in his own dacha. They have everything, but they want more. And we, who have worked all our lives, have nothing.

Striking incongruities were sometimes encountered in relation to such discourses, however. I spent quite a lot of time talking with Viktor, my landlord for the summer. Many of our conversations hinged around his depictions of the poverty in which his family and her friends now live, and the “moral insult” that this represents to pensioners.

I don’t understand. People work for forty-five years and find themselves paupers. Is that fair? No, it is dishonest. The government has treated us very very badly, insults all of us who endured everything. And look at all the stuff in the bazaar, what an insult. None of it is Russian, traders just go to Poland or Turkey, buy stuff, bring it back here to sell. While our local factories sit empty. There used to be no shoes to buy, now the bazaar is full of piles of shoes to enjoy but they are all imported, and our shoe factory sits empty. Now, we honest people are still so poor as ever. It is no wonder that nobody wants to live honestly anymore. If you live honestly, you starve. Regular workers are just starving nowadays. The minimal sum required for living is now officially one and a half million rubles per month per person, and we get 150,000 each as pensioners, so we live out hungry.

I made no comment on the flaw in her mathematical calculation, which was repeated a number of times during our acquaintance. I took it to indicate her affective response to the degree of separation she sensed between herself and the newly rich. There were other puzzling moments in her discourses and practices, however. Viktoria and her husband had gone to live for the summer in their dacha, in order to rent their apartment to me for the sum of two hundred dollars per month. This money, she explained, they would use to pay part of their grand- son's thousand-dollar tuition to the new private university. It was unclear to me, at first, how they raised the rest of his tuition, as the summer progressed, however, I realized that they must have had several ways of earning money on the side. One day someone called offering an apartment on the Volga River for sale. I passed this message along to Viktoria. Later I overheard her asking her husband, “Did you advertise that you wanted to buy an apartment on the Volga?” He said he had and took the caller's number. Clearly the family had some capital to invest. During the entire summer, she brought home vast quantities of berries, mushrooms, mushrooms, and other produce for preserving, saying, “this, and the peppers we are growing at our dacha, is the only way we old people can survive anymore.” And yet, on another day she described the forty-dollar electric kettles she planned to buy. “Imagine, it boils water in two minutes and shares itself off so that it won't boil dry!” The incongruities in our conversations—her descriptions of their extreme poverty and the evidence I saw to the contrary—may have been her attempts to assuage the moral repugnance she felt toward shadow income. As someone who had spent her entire working life in the Soviet system, where these realms were clearly marked and income on the side might be disguised, she could not easily see her family’s extra income as legitimate. The director of the private university, who I met during my travels with Alexei, explained this, saying:

Since, in Soviet times, people had no way to earn money legally aside from their official jobs, since so much economic activity was in the shadows, it is natural that now they hide and do not even in many cases appraise their own incomes. So while they complain of having so money, they are getting money on the side, which they do not even really count consciously as income.

My friend Tanya offered an alternative explanation, however:

She is ashamed at how she is cheating you, Nancy! Taking two hundred dollars for such a place, from an unsuspecting foreigner. She

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has to make you think she’s really poor, so you will feel good about giving her an insane amount of money for the apartment, an apartment that you can’t even really work in, because she is always there herself."

I did not agree, however, that Viktoria was consciously manipulating my feelings. Rather, it seems to me that she was working on her own self-constructive, trying to perceive herself as a “good person.” Living the life of relative poverty which was so far so long ideologically constructed as containing honesty and morality among powerless Soviet people. Current realities gave her family economic opportunities not directly related to their own labor, and it was necessary for her to frame these in terms of the predominant ideologies of the past.

People in their forties and fifties, who came of age during the Khru- shchev “thaw” (a period of relative liberalization in the early 1960’s) more openly express their cynicism—the conflict they negotiate between moral values and pragmatic necessities. My friend Larissa joked bitterly that “there is no mafia, we are all mafia now,” referring to her sense that there is no way to survive economically if one behaves ethically. Olga and her husband, Vasia, honest and hardworking people, were apprehensive about the point of imprisonment when they found themselves considering a way of getting a kickback from suppliers at Vasia’s workplace: it was clear that this was the way his colleagues were making money. I was taken aback as I read myself encourage them to do this; “What am I saying?” I asked aloud, and Larissa replied, sardonically, “You see, it’s inescapable, even you are getting as corrupted as we are.”

More striking than these generational differences in discourse are the distinct ways that social status shapes people’s representations of money and morality. While conversations with “working people” constantly revealed an ideological struggle to coordinate moral and pragmatic interests (as, to put it in Parry and Bloch’s terms, to navigate the shifting, blurry lines between long-term collective interests and short-term personal needs), conversations with successful and powerful people reflected these concerns in abstract and detached language. It might be argued, and I think most of my Russian friends would agree, that the greater a person’s corruption, the less he or she would be bothered by the problem of social cynicism. A couple of examples illustrate this point well.

When I visited Yaroslav’s new private university with the bandit

Alesha, the director showed me around the newly renovated building and was especially proud to show me the computer center whose appointments and technology rival those of many well-endowed universities in the West. He explained that the university had received grant money from the German government for the retaining of Soviet military officers, that they had established a sophisticated computer laboratory and were training the officers (and some of their wives) in systems design, programming, and other high-tech applications.

A few days later, I returned to the university by myself for a formal interview with the director. I asked what the main problems in business in Russia today are, and he said:

There is no culture of agreement here, that is the main problem.

There is no mode, for example, of dividing property. So, two guys, longtime friends and colleagues, working together, start to disagree about the direction of their business, and they come to the point of splitting up. But it is impossible for them to figure out how to divide their capital rationally, to appraise its value correctly. So they fight, and then they call in their respective “bands” who assist them in working things out. Bandits (banditry) is thus a normal phenomenon in times like these. It is necessary to get people to pay their debts in the absence of a developed legal system and a developed business culture. The Chechen mafia has been fulfilling this function for a long time in Poland. I cannot predict how long that will be the case, but it is slow to evolve. Also, there is always a margin of people who do not really have the talent or means—the capital—to start their own businesses, but who want to get ahead. Sandfly is for them a way.

This explanation frames current reality in starkly functional, pragmatic terms with no hint of moral questioning and no expression of anxiety or uncertainty about the future. During our tour of Yaroslav, I had asked Alesha who the director was and how he had founded this university. Alesha explained that the director had been a top city official, a highly-placed Communist Party member. During the transitional years, he was able to get the German grant and some other capital—Alesha’s explanation here was vague—and acquired buildings for the university to renovate. It was clear that, like many former party leaders and managers, the director had been able to transform his power and connections into a new platform for the greater accrual of power, wealth, and prestige—his chauffeur drives him around in a new Volvo,
and he just returned from a grand tour of American universities where he was on a quest for partnership arrangements. I asked Alesha whether, in his view, it was mainly those with top party connections who were doing really well today. He said:

Well, those people, who were even then very active and business-like (deist), and who were shrewd and had good connections, of course things have been much easier for them, and they are doing quite well today. But if a person is very smart... he can do anything, even without those connections.

Being “smart” means being active, energetic, and ambitious (deist); it also means being shrewd, always on the lookout for opportunities to make money or gain power; and, especially in the current context, it seems to mean negotiating the margins of danger and taking risks, but only those for which you have adequate “cover.” “Cover” — the protection of “roots” is partly structural, dependent on the set of connections and the security of status, and partly charismatic, a function of one’s ability to intimidate and charm. Alesha, too, seemed confident about the possibilities for making money, maintaining power, and living well; this sanguine optimism was the key feature of the speech and mode of self-presentation among the mafia, elite businesspeople, and government officials alike. In conversations and interviews with such people (including a group of mafia gangleaders with whom I sat through a dinner party charged with the drama of threats and brutality), I never heard a single expression of concern about the corrupting power of money.

Another interviewee shows this nonchalance in stark relief. While visiting a bank with Alesha, I had a short conversation with its public relations director, a sophisticated man in his early thirties. Without any irony or hesitation, he told me the following:

We try to “control the press” so the public does not get scared about their investments; they are very nervous right now after M.M.M. and everything. This is easy, since there is no free press here, no fourth estate. We just pay journalists to write what we want them to, and the people believe anything in print. Although it is hard when you have investments from regular people. They have the strange habit of coming to collect their interest and then turning around and cursing the bankers, calling us “scoundrels” because they are sure we are getting very rich off their money. They are earning 100 percent a year from us and calling the bankers scoundrels.

This man seemed to have no sense of how cynically his words rang. This suggests how powerful the discourses of particular status groups can be in shaping social perceptions. The general surround of “businesslike” (deist) talk is like a powerful filter through which very few of the concerns of other social groups penetrate. This man clearly had no idea why bank customers cast bankers as “scoundrels,” although his own brief rendition of how he uses money to control the press is a flagrant articulation of the general spirit of cynicism and public swindling which so many people decry.

The Dangerous “Cult of Money”: Retribution and Redemption

Contemporary stories and lurkas about a population warped by the cynical and moral debasement that circulate with money do not stand alone. Rather, they are almost always in implicit or explicit dialogue with transcendent images of a near or distant future in which some form of social redemption will occur. Exposing a logic of retribution—human, magical, or divine—of the stories depicts the dangers of the “money cult,” and the circulation of these stories may act as a subtle form of interpersonal warning, a pedagogy of moral order couched in almost folkloric forms. At the same time, this circulation represents a collective discursive effort to imagine “ways out” of the morass of moral confusion, to resolve the urgent question of establishing boundaries of right and wrong, private and public in short, to revise the contours of social order in relation to changed patterns of economic and political practice.

In the absence of any common ritual forms for navigating these unfamiliar waters, public and private discourse is arguably the box in which a moral order can be renegotiated and moral anxiety is expressed.

Narratives describe three main forms that retribution may take against those engaging in the cult of money: wealthy people experience psychosomatic, financial, and physical dangers. Those who fall prey to the temptations of money must cope with their constant vulnerability to the general ennui that may result when money is one’s highest value; they are also liable to being swindled, robbed, kidnapped, or killed. A Moscow feminist described a complicated chain of psychological despair in the lives of New Russians: 

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You know who’s suffering the most now? The wives of the rich businessmen. They have everything, but life is totally boring. They are not involved in their husbands’ business activities. The men think their wives should be happy, with their fancy kitchens and clothes, but these women have nothing to do or be involved in. All the patients in a new neurosis clinic are the rich husbands who are going nuts because their wives are so unhappy.

Anxiety is another primary psychological penalty paid by the wealthy. I heard a number of tales of how people turned to others to police or the bandits is exchange for money, or tales of people who were killed when they made a wrong move or tried to cheat someone. Families are also under threat. Several unrelated people in Yaroslavl told me the same story of a woman working in oil refining (still a partly state-controlled industry) who managed to divert huge sums into her own pocket by working hand-in-hand with the mafia. Presumably, she tried to hide some of her income from the mafia to avoid paying them their full share of the profits. As a result, the bandits kidnapped her two children and held them for a huge ransom (one person said $200,000, another twice that). In the end, she paid them and got her children back. “Why would anyone want to live like that, having to worry all the time that your children would be kidnapped?” asked a woman, hearing this story at a dinner party.

In Yaroslavl in early August 1999, the media reported the brutal slaying of a married couple who had made a fortune in the beverage distribution business. Discussing a newspaper report about the killing, the artist, Kolia, explained:

You see, there is no point in making big money. People are greedy. As soon as they see large sums flowing, they demand their percent. This couple probably got greedy, maybe they tried to hide some of their income, or maybe their competitive got annoyed with them for grabbing too much of the market here. It’s all stealing and fraud; it isn’t worth it to do anything; you work hard, figure something out, make some money and you think you’ve done it, and then somebody takes it all away from you. There’s no point in trying to make money. People are greedy. As soon as they see it flowing, they want it. Or you get killed if you cross someone. This is normal business in Russia today; it’s the cult of money . . . very simple. And money attracts trouble like a magnet. Because of this, there will never be a normal business climate in Russia. Everyone just wants big bucks as fast as possible, and will do anything to get it. It is a very murky water.

As in many Russian cities, the edges of Yaroslavl have sprouted with beautiful and pretentiously large private homes, always surrounded by tall brick walls that are topped with barbed wire and security cameras. These are the fortresses of the New Russians. Expressing both awe and disdain in their vulgar grandeur, my friends would show me around their dacha villages, pointing out these new structures and passing on rumors about who the owners were supposed to be and the shady ways they said to have made their money. These houses stood as symbols of the miraculous new wealth in their midst, but they also conjured tales which reinforced the idea that the cult of money brings on the demise of its most fervent devotees.

A number of times I rode the bus past a particular red-brick palace, and each time my companions would point and explain that it was the house of a particularly ruthless politician, recently murdered in his own home despite his barbed wire, bodyguards, and electronic security system. I spent many evenings listening as people told stories of tales about such murders, all hinting on the inevitably connection between money-making and death. On one level, these were just stories people told with exaggeration and thrill. The kids telling slasher stories around a campfire. But these were pregnant with a kind of occult significance as well: they signaled a belief in the inevitability of some manner of social redemption, some ultimate retribution of the contradictions of morality and money. As Pasha, myadder friend explained:

It is not at all worthwhile to make a lot of money, you just attract attention and get yourself killed. It is much better to stay very small, stay in your own small corner. Of course everybody has to pay for liars—there is no getting around that. But if you stay little, take care of your debts, pay your rent for protection, you have a chance to be okay, make a little money and survive. But you have to be very careful, not to step on anybody’s toes, not to go over the limit.

In Moscow in 1994, I visited my old friend Andrei, a poet and artistic impresario. He had moved from his old communal flat, which he had proudly inhabited for decades, into a nice large apartment that a businesswoman, who valued everything Andrei had done in Soviet times to help underground artists, had bought for him. After hearing him describe

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this generous gift, I asked Andrei to tell me what he thought about all the social changes around him, and he took off on a descriptive flight:

Suddenly, into this life in which the Russian people have been conditioned to perceive poverty as an accomplishment, a sign of cleanliness and morality, suddenly into this life flies a sixteen-year-old boy behind the wheel of a Lincoln, and the question arises: when did he succeed in earning enough for a Lincoln? Any fool understands what it means: he killed somebody, he robbed somebody, he ran a racket, kidnapping, and so on. Everyone understands. Where did he manage to earn it? This sixteen-year-old kid with hardly anything on his face to shave? The people see this and go into wild shock. All understand: hard work, honest labor now means nothing. There's a guy, he's survived the war, and here he is earning a minimal salary, nowadays twenty thousand rubles—what is twenty thousand now? It means one breakfast. Per month. That is the minimum wage, what people earn who are washing floors, working their hands raw, and these people see the kid with the Mercedes. . . . Philosophers, scientists, make sixty thousand a month. That's three breakfasts. To express this in Russian language is impossible. Even artists can't describe this contrast of two Russians. Even our humor is dying. What can you say about this new world of ours? Nothing. But I'll tell you. When the big companies let out at night, the row rich pour into the street, and they are all drunk. They have been drinking all day. I have seen it with my own eyes, on the main streets, in front of the fancy new buildings. Our new wealthy class flies out of their gleaming skyscrapers, wearing their Armani suits, and they are all falling down drunk, falling into puddles with their Armani suits. All they can do at work is drink. They know there's no future, for them or for us. They live in mortal fear, in mortal shame, and to forget about it they drink until they fall down. This is the world we live now.

In Andrei's fantastic realism, Russiua is a new Babylon, one in which the cult of money leads to "mortal shame and fear," the first signs of an impending, inevitable world-collapse. Money earned "magically"—that is, dishonestly, through the sorcery of corrupt practices—also destroys "magically" and the New Russians, as the avant-garde of corruption, are the first to sense this inevitable destruction. Stories of this sort form a broad discursive tapestry; they weave the seemingly senseless social phenomena of a radically changed world into a clear theology, whereby—

at least in narrative—everything makes sense: there may be no just future on earth for the poorer workers or professor, but neither will the "wealthy class" enjoy the illegitimate fruits of their corruption."

Redemption through the Mafia

To see corruption as something which is morally bad needlessly burdens the task of analysis. It suggests that there are enemies who can be punished. We must expect, however, that people who act in particularistic and corrupt ways in not making a clear distinction between public and private affairs have few other options. They are part of societies in which the distribution of power is far more uneven than in certain nation-State societies where people can, quite apart from personal merits, afford to be "honest."—Anton Blyk, The Mafia of a Russian Village, 1860—1960

If money is the fetishized agent of social decay, the agent of redemption that appears in many stories is, strangely enough, the mafia. This is implicit in Andrei's tale, for everyone knows that the "moral flame" the New Russians feel is fear of being killed, and the mafia are, of course, the professional agents of murder. But a representation of the mafia as a redemption agent is much more broadly cast in Russian talk. That Alekshya depicted himself as an "honest" bandit may not be surprising: what is striking, however, is how widespread and explicit are notions that the mafia may be the most reliable provider of social and moral order. Until I encountered actual benefits and heard all kinds of bandit stories, it would have been hard for me to imagine the degree to which the mafia and its members have been constructed and experienced as a normal, necessary, and even comforting presence in day-to-day life. Conversations I had in 1990 and 1992 showed that the mafia was, for most people, the supreme symbol of evil and terror. Four or five years later, however, the shadow of evil was projected onto other social groups, and the terror the mafia provided was sometimes represented as the means by which survival and corruption might be retrieved. A few selections from local discourse suggest the contours of this conception:

A student in the private university who described himself as struggling to stay honest in a corrupted world, nineteen-year-old Lena offered his image of possible futures:

I see two forms of government for Russia in the future. The first will be the type proposed by Zhirinovsky's [an excentric nationalist pollin-
cient, with a crackdown on crime; although what Zhitnurovsky promises is impossible: a wealthy, comfortable life for all. He promises vodka for all the men, but sober husbands for all the women. This is of course a fairy tale. The other type of government will be made up by the mafia, and this is a more rational way to go. The bandits understood economic reality, they will set things up in a rational way. And you know, the majority of business people are not driving in Mercedes-Benzes, they live modestly, value family life. It's only the real working-class people who get suddenly rich and need everything fancy, to show off. By the way, the Russian mafia now has more methods of torture than there were during the Russian Inquisition. They are really advanced.

In this construction, the mafia—because it is both rational and "advanced"—will ensure some kind of social normalization. Letaï's depiction echoes that of the director of his university, who said that the bandits fulfill a crucial function in the absence of a developed legal and business culture that is "slow to evolve." Kolia, the artist, told a story that reflected these themes:

I made fourteen thousand bucks selling my old apartment. I gave my ex-wife half. The next thing I knew, some of her gangster friends came and stole the rest from me. That was all the money I ever had, and it was actually all mine, because that was my apartment before I even met my wife. I had just wanted to help her out, but she wanted everything. After that the gangsters stole the money from her! In the end, Alesha helped me, and he managed to get me three thousand back. That was all he could do. He's a decent guy, he gave me the whole three thousand, didn't take a cut. He said, "Kolia, I respect you, you're a good fellow, I just wanted to help you out and I don't need to make money off of you." He's a good guy.

Although I wondered whether Alesha really gave Kolia all the money he recovered, I decided that was not the most important point of this story. Here we have a traditional tale of good bandits and bad, fighting it out, with the good bandit achieving at least a partial victory.

Other stories about mafia gangsters emphasized their less pragmatic functions. One woman told me about having met one of Yaroslavl's top mafia leaders at a spa, and she enthusiastically described how he generously treated her and her companions to fancy meals and drinks and entertained them with his stories of life in the racket; she expressed regret that this man had recently been imprisoned while he lay in a hospital bed getting treatment for alcoholism. Marina, an ethnographer who had recently moved to Yaroslavl from Yekaterinburg, the proclaimed mafia capital of Russia, told me that:

the funerals of bandits have become the most important public ritual, much more interesting than avant-garde. People turn out in droves to watch the long parades of fancy black cars going in en masse to the funerals. They watch the newspapers to know when the funerals will be. It is a regular event in town, people are thrilled by it, fascinated to see those parades of the rich and powerful.

What are these stories about the mafia saying, and why are they so prevalent? Katherine Verdeny suggests that mafia talk circulates so actively in post-Soviet society because it symbolically expresses many of people's difficulties in the transition. Among the general meanings that mafia-talk may encapsulate, Verdeny suggests that since they flexibly mediate a variety of social fields, the mafia may stand for the "invisible horizontal linkages" integral to market economies, and as such they may symbolize people's suspicions that those linkages are morally questionable. Mafia, she proposes, "is a symbol for what happens when the visible hand of the state is being replaced by the invisible hand of the market... ." (In this sense, the image of mafia perhaps gives voice to an anxiety about statelessness, alongside other forms of insecurity) (1986, 199).

While Verdeny is quite right about what the mafia can symbolize, I think she has conveyed only half of the picture. The "conceptual mafia" that she describes does not fit the one depicted in the Russian stories above; these stories do describe "real bandits" but gloss them with a symbolic varnish of generosity, helpfulness, and innocuousness, and rely a sense of the awe (not altogether disprovable) with which the populace regards mafia rituals.

Ethnographic encounters suggest that there are a number of "conceptual mafi" circulating at once in post-Soviet context—just as there are any number of real and competing mafia gangs. Local talk, in fact, makes this quite clear. Interviewing five young workers at a Yaroslavl bread factory in 1991, I asked them whether they would vote in the upcoming elections. They all said no. One man said: "Why should we vote when it is all rigged and political offices are just bought and traded?"
It is nothing but a giant mafia up there. We must simply try to live on our own, away from here, and get by without politics.

As so many others do in casual conversation and media discussions, this man applied the metaphor of mafia not to the "real" mafia but to the "government" mafia—to those who are seen as invisibly, conspiratorially, and effectively mastering social resources and power to the detriment of the people "down here." My trader friend Pazha made these categories of mafia even clearer for me. One day, after hearing one of his long complaints about how hard it is to do business and still stay honest in Russia, I asked him whether he ever fantasizes about living and working elsewhere.

"No! I totally love my country, my motherland. I don't want to live anywhere else. This is my country, my soul, with all its craziness, mysteriousness, and unpredictability. I would die anywhere else, couldn't live. But I can't stand the corruption. Everyone has power or money or corrupt. The politicians—that is our true mafia, each and every one of them: the real mafia. The street bandits, who you have met, they are basically honest, hardworking guys. The real corruption is at the top, and it is the politicians, from top to bottom, who are the real criminals. I think they should all be taken out and shot. That is the only way for Russia to become a clean and civilized place: like Stalin did, we should just round up our thugs and destroy them. We pay our taxes to them and it just goes in their pockets. I am not against suffering the poor, the elderly, but I think the best way is for us to do this independently: give me those bandits to support and I will happily, joyously support them! Directly! Without the intervention of the fucking mafia government which takes the largest percent just for themselves. This is the way our country should be arranged. I am an honest businessman, and I pay my taxes, diligently, but I resent it, because I see the poor old women on the street and I know I could do a better job of taking care of them, just assign me those bandits and I will take care of them until they die. Another thing that is really pathetic: the way the old people believe in and give their last kopecks to the church. They are totally happy to give their last kopecks for the reconstruction of the local churches. But then you see the priests driving around in Mercedes, really! And living it up on the money they take from the poor, believing bakhshiy give them. The priests today are also the real mafia. Getting rich from two directions, from the contributions of the people who want to believe in something again and from the huge investments of the government, which is trying to prove its spirituality by reviving the church. Wherever you have such money pouring in, there is corruption and evil. I'm not, but if I were a terrorist, I would be a revolutionary. I think it is necessary, on a regular basis, to take certain groups of people out and shoot them, to restore the purity of our society.

However frightening Fishta's passionate diatribe may seem, I think vividly presents the sociocultural paradoxes of postsovietism and capitalism in Russia and the tangles of hypocrisy and cynicism in which people feel themselves caught. State power disintegrates and reintegrates, but though it pretends to move toward democracy and justice, it in fact seems as inaccessible, inconsistent, and insouciant as before. It seems unwilling to distribute resources as needed—whether to feed the old bakhshiy or guarantee a general rule of law in which market mechanisms might function. In such a context, it is no wonder that the bandits are sometimes cast as social redeemers. As depicted in public mythology, the "real mafia" seems to offer what the weak (or unwilling and self-interested) state cannot. Street bandits are accessible and flexible. They are sympathetic and fair—if the price is right. They are "protective." They offer arbitration services, and they move out of legalistic decisions in somewhat predictable ways. They are controlled by fixed internal regulations (the well-known mafia hierarchy and code of conduct) and thus seem to operate within a frame of social morality. They are relatively transparent: their mode of operation seems straightforwardly visible and thus negotiable. They fulfill functions of discipline and punishment—often, significantly, capital punishment. In short, they seem to embody the very qualities that characterize strong states. And, as a final touch, they render a range of macabre spectacles (such as momentous funeral processions) through which legitimate states normally glorify collective agency and undoing commitment.

In a sense then, however paradoxical it may seem, one of the conceptual matrices in contemporary Russian functions as a discourse projection of people's yearnings for a rational, distinct, and strong state apparatus. We, western ethnographers and others privileged by life experience in more stable societies, might be inclined to judge this as a highly mysterious projection. After all, it is the mafia that has facilitated the liquidation of legal parameters and the less-than-legitimate privatization of
public resources by former Communist Party bosses and powerful oth-
er, in the mafia that has made Donizzi murder a predictable out-
come of competition in business and politics. Yes, the spiritual integrity that
some discourse attaches to the Russian street mafia is of question-
able veracity. Nonetheless, despite all of the mystification I may detect in
their talk, I often find myself thinking that because of the stark forms their
economic "re-education" has taken, my Russian interlocutors perceive
the structural realities of class, power, and transaction in the capita-
list marketplace more clearly than I ever will.

Notes

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1. For phenomenological discussions of Soviet cynicism, see Yurchak 1997, Kim

2. Tomsk is an ancient Russian city about three hundred kilometres to the
northeast of Moscow. In the Soviet period it was transformed into a centre of luxury
industry, primarily distillable to the manufacture of automotive engines and parts.
With the collapse of the industry in the post-Soviet period, many of Tomsk's plants
sit idle, and vast numbers of workers inhabit the limits of unemployment, with all of
the complex and shadowy survival strategies that this necessitates.

3. In 1995, a million rubles equaled about two hundred dollars and a million was
a standard monetary reference, both concrete and semantic. In some circles, however,
people used similar to refer to millions of dollars, even rubles. After Donizzi's murder
it was a slang way of indicating a billion dollars or million, a memory, a promise, from
the stroller tax but also an allusion to the heaves of watermelons sold on city streets
every summer by traders, who are permitted to earn "piles of money" this way.

4. longue durée refers to the persistence of old ideas about the mafia (or various mafias) in all
television, literature and movies and suggests that explorations of the ways the conceptual
idea is used in contemporary discourse can reveal much about local perceptions of social
and political reality.

5. In the West, on Russian discourses during the time of perestrika, I have argued
that the key narratives (particularly lamented) was hearing in 1989 and 1990 were
widespread, not tied to my presence as an academic (Yurchak 1997), pp. 24-32. In contrac-
tum, many narratives I heard in Tomsk in 1995 seemed keenly to my foreignness. While
in the last years of the Soviet regime people were collectively and triumphantly
removing the past and mourning the uncertain future, by 1995 that future had
arrived, and local conversations were focused on the close-up specifics of sur-
realism. These specifics were probably viewed as being both beyond my comprehen-
sion and inappropriately to discuss with a relative stranger. Only a handful of close friends
openly described their economic strategies, and indeed it was only among old
friends that I had enough background knowledge to make sense of the complex
trajectories of survival efforts.

6. This is another crucial way the post-Soviet narratives were different from those of
perestroika. With the exacerbation of the ideological constraint of Soviet Communism
and the hegemony of the Soviet state, abstract and intellectual discourses and local
practices that had been keenly to state power were now decentralized. This entailed
a personalization and fragmentation on both ideological-discursive and practical
levels.

7. Alaska seemed to speak without irony here; clearly he was unfamiliar of the popular
image of collection agencies in the United States. Discursively moving toward legiti-
macy, he cautiously undertook its opposite.

8. A month later, also in a conversation I made through Alaska, I hoped to quite
accidentally to be a dash outside Tomsk that, to my surprise, turned out to be
the safe house that had gone used for meetings. Without warning a group of eight
mafia leaders, including one who Alaska told me was the head of a big Belarusian
gang, showed up for a依托-bank slating for a meeting to sort out differences.
All attention these eight men evocatively "performed" their friendliness for me,
over the course of a few hours in a concrete house and threw me in the nearby river if I
then turned out to be a spy, and not the amateur anthropologist that I claimed. I was
clearly enough to me to examine my friendliness borrowed directly from American
gangsters. During this—recognizing my own sense of the Hollywood thrill of it all—I
was not only amazed but exhilarated as I might have been.

9. For example, through discussions of media activity and culture with central
informants, I learned that housing courts were a cradle of criminal enterprise even in Soviet
times and that Alaska had probably been involved in underground activity even long
ago; I realized that the vehicles being traded were probably stolen; and I was
given tips by that Alaska's gang had recently carried out at least one
hired killing. I also began to understand that the street-level prosecuted racket
pro-

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thoroughly criminalized prosecution by gaining a seat in the parliament. People voted for him chiefly out of desperation, imagining his election to provide a chance for them to get their investments back. For a fascinating discussion of the narrative effectiveness of voice, see Kromenak 1994.

16. See Katherine Walker's detailed analysis of similar pyramid schemes in Tanzania, where, as another way to make an issue, those who have made huge windfalls before the pyramid collapsed were saddled with the political-economic management class. Walker hypothesizes that such narratives are among other results in the former socialist societies, as such schemes "created symbols of the rising bourgeoisie that feed on the primitive accumulation reclaimed under socialism in both public and private domains" and that they "helped to produce two opposing social groups: one whose new wealth enables them to have more and discriminate, policies, and one, increasingly impoverished and disenfranchised, who will see riches as immoral and risk in unemployment" (1993:202-203). Because government regulation of investment firms is so weak, such pyramids have been widespread throughout Eastern Europe: Albanian's experience, where angry investors took up arms and rioted throughout the country in 1997, has perhaps been the most vivid example of the vast scale and serious consequences of such scams. Comoroff and Comoroff describe a complex of such schemes in post-Apartheid South Africa, which, like Tanzania, experiences "a synergistic mix of scarcity and deregulation" (1996:28).

17. See wholesale-market workers described a box of shirts she was going to sell in a kiosk; the rock labels read "Made in France," while matatu labels read "Made in Kenya," and the plastic wrap read "Made in Italy." Her boss instructed her to remove the island label and the plastic wrap so that buyers would think the shirts were made in France. In a similar case, a friend explained one of his firm's frozen-food businesses: "I import expired product from Europe and he has employees resell the issues with new expiration dates, this man pays off the state inspection agents at the border so he can import his inventory without problems.

18. Despite these strategies are almost mythical in nature. There is, for example, a folkloric inventory of ways to disarm real vodka from cheap grain alcohol. This can be a deadly serious situation: there have been numerous instances of people being poisoned by drinking "vodka" that turned out to be drained from industrial alcohol.

19. In the various forms of karyn, see particularly Hladenski (1996).

20. The anthropologist Dale Perczynski (2000) has written a brilliant semantic analysis of the key term and its many confused forms. It must be noted that the ability to invent has always been adaptive in Russia. Products imported by the traditional traders, "the manikins" (potimile) who were from 19th century forwards (as part of the "oikia") carried on through the Soviet years in the various forms of bar, the complex system of favors and "pull." Karyn's initiatives provides a comprehensive database

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graphic treatment of Hat, and includes a discussion of its transformations in post-Soviet years; see also Denisova (1996) on the metaphysics of skin transformations in recent years.

20. This is the ubiquitous community slang for the 1941-1945 types, whose uniform style is crew cuts and black button jackets.

21. security: it refers to the political police, who were the designer of choice for this 1941-1945 types, of which the person in charge was a person who referred to his police state colleague as a “New Russian.” He was an official, but his role was not limited to surveillance. The person in charge of this 1941-1945 types, for example, is someone who referred to his police state colleague as a “New Russian.” He was an official, but his role was not limited to surveillance.

22. It is crucial, however, to note that I did not experience any sense of personal danger related to this kind of surveillance. In the context of money flows, especially in Moscow itself, an American academic is a very small fish indeed.


24. While living in Moscow, I learned that I could have raised a better payment for much less, and many people complained that it was a waste of money for me to do so much work in that space, especially given the fact that my landlord, his grandmother, and two dogs were frequently home, though they had promised to come only once a week to do laundry. In the summer, having heard my complaints about having no privacy, Grisha, one of my acquaintances, warned me not to demonstrate to me his constructions and his toughness, phoned Victor and made a verbal threat to gather his friends around and come “get the two hundred dollars back from them.” It was a mystery to me why my hopes suddenly disappeared in their wake, leaving me alone and saying they would return only in two weeks, until my acquaintance proudly told me about his phone call. I was horrified, I felt that there was “no such a thing” (this does not apply to local contractors, become part of an ethnographer’s own work world), and I felt that I did not manage to enjoy my privacy; this did benefit directly from the threat of badminton.

25. Elsewhere I have described popular discourses of “mythic power” (Ries 1991; 1999). See also Dale Peterson’s (1999) discussion of the ways in which memory disturbances could be purged of immoral consequences through complex avoidance practices.

26. As Max Weber noted in “The Social Psychology of the World Religions” (1946: 276), “in the possession of honor and power fashion these aura-legends so as to claim a special and hereditary quality of their own, usually a quality of being “[holy—” “holy”—]” seems to me just such a symbolic quality, perhaps not a quality of “holy” but certainly an essentializing mode of exploiting why some people had status and others did not.

27. The fact that there were small roles about “distant acquainances” or “acquain-
tances of acquaintances” suggests the mythic quality of such status, which they may be real occurrence, they are probably more rare than the casual talk makes them seem.

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