



POTATO ONTOLOGY: Surviving Postsocialism in Russia

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Among the hills, among the pits,
A boorish frill-necked birdie sits.
It lays eggs—a gift from God.

—Traditional Russian riddle; the answer is potato, Sadovnikov (1995:125)

The potato should be a major component in strategies aimed at providing nutritious food for the poor and hungry. It is ideally suited to places where land is limited and labour is abundant, conditions that characterize much of the developing world. The potato produces more nutritious food more quickly, on less land, and in harsher climates than any other major crop—up to 85 percent of the plant is edible human food, compared to around 50% in cereals.

—UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Web site declaring 2008 the
“International Year of the Potato”

During field research in Russia since perestroika, I have studied local conceptions of citizenship and practices of sociability in conditions of rapid social change and class stratification. This has led me into many conversations about the everyday science of frugality, with people in Moscow, Yaroslavl, Vladimir, Tver’, St. Petersburg, and other places. Open-ended ethnographic conversations have revealed complex patterns of mutual engagement within communities and integration with the postsocialist labor, service, and commodity markets. Many times I have thrown in broad, admittedly loaded questions like “how do you survive?” or “how do people

in Russia survive?” With all the force and immediacy of common sense, more often than not people have blurted back “potato”: *kartofel*’ or its diminutive *kartoshka*. “We survive on potato.” “My zhivem na kartoshke.” “Russia lives on potato.” “If not for our potato plots, I do not know how we would survive.” Social scientists have recorded such statements in Russia and the former Soviet Union throughout the two decades since perestroika. So for instance, Sarah Ashwin quoted a coal miner in the Kuzbass region saying “what is 100 percent true is that we’d die without our allotments [of potato land]” (1999:170).

Such declarations about potato survival appear frequently in the Russian news media as well; especially in provincial regions, newspaper stories celebrate this “population feeder”—*kormilitsa*—while others use the topic of potato to reflect on the bitter ironies and insecurities of postsocialist poverty. The weekly national paper *Argumenty i fakty* published an article in 1997 entitled “How We Survive Without Money,” which avowed that “almost all Russians, from night watchmen to Academicians, grow their own potatoes!” (Sivkova 1997). A full decade later, despite modest but steady increases in standards of living, it is not uncommon to encounter texts like the letter to a regional newspaper in Siberia, in which a pensioner laments “How will we get through the winter without our potato?” after a broken city water main flooded his cellar, miring his one hundred buckets of newly harvested potato in mud (Myshkin 2007).

For a few years, I have been asking people directly about potato, observing potato practices in various contexts, and collecting potato narratives and artifacts. I toured central Russia for several weeks in 2003 with a team of Cornell potato scientists, visiting institutes, seed factories and inspection stations, commercial and state farms, and garden clubs from Kolomna to St. Petersburg, discovering a complicated and contradictory potato picture. That trip taught me much about tuber pests, blights, and reproduction, and the illustrious histories of Soviet “hero varieties” like Lorkh and Udacha, but also revealed much about how potato figures in practice and epistemology. The forceful ways in which people talk about potato, the multiple contexts in which potato appears, and the intensity of focus and effort dedicated to it led me to regard this tuberous vegetable not just as an important material artifact in a certain household ecology, although it is certainly that, and not just as a symbolic resource that represents in summary form some key aspect of political and social economy (as in Ortner 1973), although it is also that. I came to see potato as what Clark and Chalmers (1998) call a “cognitive resource”—an object in the world “coupled” to the social mind and thus an irreducible vehicle of thought about and action in the world. As an element of concentrated and widespread

practice, moreover, potato figures in and lends shape to particular forms of action, interaction, and intentionality. Potato does not merely help to conceptualize the postsocialist world in an interpretive register; it also plays a role in structuring, maintaining, and regenerating that world. Although potato discourse often quite explicitly examines and critiques that role, more often it legitimizes and celebrates the population's ability to feed itself autonomously, "no matter what."

In line with recent anthropological efforts to destabilize the dichotomy between materialities and their representations, this essay follows Henare and colleagues in arguing that "meanings are not 'carried' by things but just are identical to them"; methodologically, this is significant because "the things encountered in fieldwork are allowed to dictate the terms of their own analysis—including new premises altogether for theory" (2007:3–4).

Foods and foodways of course have rich histories as focal objects of anthropological inquiry. In an important review essay on "The Anthropology of Food and Eating," Sidney W. Mintz and Christine M. Du Bois (2002) identified six major modes and directions this literature has taken since 1984, among them classic ethnographies of food systems, works that focus on single commodities, works that address food and social change, and works that deal with symbolic aspects of eating (ritual, identity). More recently, Jon D. Holzman reviewed the increasingly rich literature on food and memory, noting the multidimensionality and shifting indeterminacy of each of those phenomena. Food, Holzman writes, "has the uncanny ability to tie the minutiae of everyday experience to broader cultural patterns, hegemonic structures, and political-economic processes, structuring experience in ways that can be logical, and outside of logic, in ways that are conscious, canonized, or beyond the realm of conscious awareness" (2006:373). Memory, similarly, can be "social, psychological, embodied, invented, private and political, discrete yet also interconnected and reinforcing" (Holzman 2006:373).

Ethnographically compelling in its own right, as a quotidian commodity of socialist and postsocialist domestic economies, potato also constitutes a ritualized mode of activity, exchange, and negotiation within families, networks and communities, and across larger polities. It facilitates engagement with, detachment from, or protection against markets and politics. It is indelibly linked to particular epochs (such as WWII) and in complex ways to recent social change. Potato is viscerally, painfully, poignantly, and triumphantly planted in memory and history, as nearly every conversation about it illustrates.

Yet this essay is not, at heart, about *Solanum tuberosum*. It makes heuristic use of certain manifestations of potato to say something about Russian society and more

broadly, about ways in which a material thing can be an integral and integrating vehicle of social consciousness as well as consciousness of society.

I usually refer to “potato” without a definite or indefinite article, to convey some of the sensibility and anthropomorphism inherent in the Russian collective noun *kartoshka* (from the German *Kartofel*), which can signify the whole universe of potato, or just one tuber.

POTATO IN RUSSIA

Potato was likely first brought to Russia from the Netherlands by Emperor Petr I (Peter the Great) in 1698 at the end of his European tour. There were largely unsuccessful attempts in the 1700s under Empress Yekaterina II (Catherine the Great) and her son and successor Pavel I to spread potato cultivation; as elsewhere in Europe, the Russian population believed that potatoes were poisonous, disease causing, and part of an underhanded plot by elites to extract yet more of their labor or produce. Under Tsar Nikolai I, potato cultivation was forced on state peasants, provoking widespread revolts in the early 1840s. Only in the second half of the 19th century did the potato become an agricultural staple in the Russian empire, maintaining its importance in the national diet since that time (Ekshtut 2000; Langer 1975:54; McNeill 1999).

THE POWERS OF POTATO

In some measure, the social significance and entailments of potato are contingent on its basic botanical traits, and on the activities and domestic practices that derive from those traits. Potato is a strange and contradictory thing. It requires grueling and tedious labor to plant, protect, harvest, transport, and store, yet it appears to multiply itself almost magically underground. One of the most lumpen foods, it can be transformed in countless ways, to produce culinary delights (and McDonald’s fries). Interviewed for an elite Moscow business and politics magazine, an elegant Russian governor’s wife bragged about her husband’s virtues, one of which is his knowledge of one hundred ways to cook potato (*Profil’* 1998).¹ Beyond its versatility, potato’s nutritional yield is unsurpassed by any other vegetable; it is rich in vitamins, minerals, protein, and complex carbohydrates (Salaman 1949:121–125; Lang 2001:31). Poverty, famines, and war have taught many populations that with just a small amount of dairy fat, humans can survive indefinitely on potato. But the very qualities that make potato beloved and revered across cultures also make this food a tool of political leverage or legitimation in the hands of states and elites.

The physician Redcliffe Salaman touched on this in the conclusion to his 1949 magnum opus *The History and Social Influence of the Potato*, with a strong statement about potato and power:

If for any reason, good or bad, conscious or otherwise, it is in the interests of one economically stronger group to coerce another . . . that task is enormously facilitated when the weaker group can either be persuaded or forced to adopt some simple, cheaply produced food as the mainstay of its subsistence. The potato, being the cheapest and one of the most efficient single foods man has as yet cultivated in the temperate zones, lends itself readily to the task. The potato can, and generally does, play a twofold part: that of a nutritious food, and that of a weapon ready forged for the exploitation of a weaker group in a mixed society. [Salaman 1949:600]

Although the cynicism and teleology that Salaman imputes to the powerful in this telling may be overdrawn, it is nonetheless clear that potato systems, practices, and ideologies do play a role in stabilizing and legitimizing the particular inequalities characteristic of postsocialism, in Russia and beyond.² In the early 1990s, the Russian government distributed land rights and promoted subsistence farming among urban and rural families as a cushion during market reforms. “Not for the first time in Russia’s history,” note Judith Pallot and Tatyana Nefedova, “the state was looking to personal food production for assistance in a difficult situation” (2003:41). Official encouragements were hardly necessary to spur great portions of the increasingly vulnerable population to intensify or return to domestic production, as Burawoy et al. put it, “to compensate for the involution of the formal industrial and agricultural economy” (2000:60). The political and economic contexts of such policies and strategies have been examined in detail by social scientists, but the net result is that almost two decades after the end of the Soviet Union, household farming remains an essential part of agricultural production in Russia, with potato as a ubiquitous component.³ Comparable self-provisioning systems are widespread throughout the former Soviet Union and Soviet bloc countries, from Central Asia through the Caucasus, the Baltics to Bulgaria.⁴ It is crucial to query the cultural logic of these mass-scale practices of postsocialism, and to examine modes of elite support for systems that keep populations busily focused on their gardens while the collective wealth of nations is privatized and concentrated.

With those wider geopolitical puzzles in mind, for the moment I want to focus in on the space of a single Moscow dacha kitchen, where a telling experience with

my friend Tanya in 2001 inspired me to think about the specific role of potato in postsocialist political economies.

Tanya retired from her career as flight attendant in the 1990s, having logged 30 years of international flying on Aeroflot. She proudly exhibits photographs of herself serving Fidel Castro on a flight from Havana to Moscow—she was an elite *stiuardessa*. Her husband has a plastic surgery practice in Moscow. Their daughter has completed law school. On the weekend I visited them at the dacha, Tanya informed me that her family's cash income was only \$150 per month, but I reckoned it as being much higher; there are many incentives to underreport earnings in Russia, even to a visiting anthropologist. Through timely apartment swaps in the early 1990s, Tanya managed to acquire a large year-round dacha and two Moscow apartments that she rented out. Her family was relatively well-off; having harbored their resources and managed their portfolio of opportunities in modestly entrepreneurial ways.⁵ Their dacha had elegant furniture and TVs in every room, and they drove a relatively new car.

On the day of my visit, Tanya careened around her kitchen, pulling apples from a huge sack a neighbor had given her to make applesauce to last the winter. As we talked, she sorted decaying apples from good ones, putting the rotten ones to the side. Such sorting is common in Russian kitchens: in the end I watched Tanya salvage the good spots from these bad apples and throw them into her vat. I was surprised at this only because to my mind, Tanya had enough resources—and enough perfect apples—to be able to compost the mushy ones.

Perhaps a paper on potato ontology should not linger on these apples, but because potatoes are *pommes de terre* I hope readers will forgive this botanical metonymy. The underlying mode of being in the world is the same, a largely unspoken, nearly unspeakable frugality embodied in everyday labor, foundational to the concatenation of nutritional, physical, discursive, and political-economic processes. The science of frugality that I observed in Tanya's kitchen is a practice of bodies and of the body politic, ripe with meaning but grounded in things. As Iordanis Marcoulatos argues, “meaningfulness, structure, and orientation inhere *in the world*, rather than levitate over it. They are not super-imposed as detachable elements, but rather constitute the very shapes of the world. Meaning does not exist exclusively within the bounds of a mental or otherwise spiritual sphere; it is an intrinsic part of lived reality, an inalienable aspect of its ontological constitution” (2003:258).

After she sorted the apples, Tanya gave me the grand tour of her house and gardens, and we lingered long in the garage where no car could ever fit amid the

shelves of stewed tomatoes and peppers, pickled cucumbers and salted cabbage—a meticulously ordered shrine to the products of her labor, far more than her small family could use in the course of a year.

Tanya did not grow potatoes herself in 2001; she devoted her garden and her time to vegetables, fruit trees, berries, and flowers. But every year she buys many kilos of potatoes at the rural market just after the harvest, when they are cheap and fresh, to store for use through winter. This is a common practice: people who do not grow potatoes buy them in large quantities “to get through the winter.”

While we were cutting apples, I had asked her to explain how most people get by, and she answered: “Of course, we [all] survive on potato.” Tanya’s family clearly did not live on potatoes when I was there, and they probably never had. Yet despite all evidence to the contrary (a kitchen overflowing with a combination of store-bought delicacies and homegrown vegetables), she insisted on the centrality of potato. What were people like Tanya saying when they declared that they, their families, and their society lived on potato? What was she doing by storing potatoes to last the winter?

For a small segment of the population of the Russian federation, potato-centered subsistence has been a literal reality since the end of the socialist welfare state. Much more widely, however, potato has figured as organic capital and currency, with substantive immediacy relative to the dominant but distant commodities of Russia’s capital wealth. In this aspect, potato and its kin products create a semblance of food security, and the activities that support that semblance are often highly elaborated, fetishized, aestheticized, and celebrated. Discursively, potato appears as a touchstone referent, summarily capturing the multifaceted, historically and culturally meaningful strategies that families, networks, and communities feel compelled to deploy in postsocialism. It is these latter two aspects that Tanya’s intensive food production and hoarding activities, and her comment, exemplify.

In light of historical experience and contemporary economic exigency, practices and narratives of potato survival seem logical and readily understood. Digging beyond vernacular explanations, however, uncovers thicker layers of social significance and contestation. Both metaphorically and metonymically, and across levels of scale, potato unites various realities and registers, different points of historical memory, and diverse populations. Yet it indexes social divisions and disagreements every bit as powerfully. In any of these valences, potato sustains a commentary on—if not always a clear critique of—the scope and depth of poverty and the visceral experience of class stratification and social exclusion. Potato is as paradoxical and contradictory socially as it is botanically.

POTATO SUBSISTENCE AND SUBJECTIVITY

Although statistical measures vary, and despite methodological disagreements among analysts of poverty in postsocialist Russia, several economic factors are starkly clear: between 1990 and 2000 the real value of average cash income was halved, precipitating a profound, even historically unprecedented peacetime decline in the standards of living of the population (Clarke 1999:6); the economic crisis of 1998 wiped away the small gains made in the earlier part of the 1990s.⁶ Growth in the GDP has averaged 6.7 percent per year since 2000, improving conditions for many, but even in 2006 roughly half of the population of the Russian Federation lived on the ruble equivalent of \$10 or less in wage income per day, and in that year, 15 percent lived on less than the average subsistence minimum of \$4 per day.⁷ At the end of 2007, the average monthly pension was only 3,086 rubles, or about \$125.⁸ Relative to the United States or the European Union, housing and utility costs throughout Russia can be low, but market prices for food and the costs of other commodities are comparable, so the inadequacy of such official incomes is readily apparent. Both quantitative studies and everyday observations and conversations indicate significant declines in both caloric intake and nutritional quality for many population groups.

THE PUTIN MYTH

There is a widespread conviction in the Russian public and internationally that the Putin years brought newfound stability and substantial economic growth to Russia. The majority of the population experienced some relief from the endemic and severe wage and pension arrears of the Yeltsin era, and real disposable incomes rose by an average of ten percent every year from 2000 to 2007. Overall GDP rose by an average of 6.7 percent per year over the same period. However, many scholars have argued that all of these improvements were more attributable to the steady increase in world oil prices and the concomitant boom in Russian export income over that same period than to changes in state policies. Putin's authoritarian policies and the entrenchment of the KBG created a semblance of reduced criminality and corruption, but Russia remains extremely high on Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (147 out of 180 countries in 2008). Michael McFaul and Kathryn Stoner-Weiss (2008) offer a critical analysis of the Putin legacy, insisting that the retrenchment of autocracy in Russia has actually impeded economic development in significant ways.

The public perception of a Putin-era boom can be attributed in part to the success of the administration's public relations campaign, facilitated by the nearly complete suppression of independent media since 2000. The Russian media today (electronic and print) are full of peans to the social and economic achievements of the Putin–Medvedev years.

All of these indicators of the scope, depth, and persistence of poverty make it tempting to take people's pronouncements about potato survival literally. Indeed, having declined slowly in the decades after WWII, reliance on homegrown foodstuffs soared during perestroika. It continued to rise through the 1990s and has remained high across the entire country since then.⁹ Citing Goskomstat figures, Pallot and Nefedova note that household production "accounted in 2001 for a staggering fifty-four percent of the total value of agricultural production in the Russian Federation" (2003:41). Global economic and food crises only intensify household food production.

One even more surprising number jumps out from federal statistics, and is cited constantly in the media, by agronomists and economists, and by people at large: the family plots (officially "people's farms") of rural and urban dwellers produce 90 percent of all potatoes and 80 percent of all other vegetables grown in Russia.¹⁰ This percentage changes little from year to year, and it is particularly notable that despite improvement in economic conditions since 2000—with average income rising by about ten percent per year and the wage arrears problems of the 1990s significantly diminished—the already-high household share of potato and vegetable production actually increased slightly (Wegren 2005:9). Rural household farmers and urban dacha growers consistently produce around 30 million tons of potatoes per year. As Clifford Gaddy and Barry Ickes point out, this is more than all the farms of the United States and the United Kingdom combined (2002:168). Even more surprising is that this huge quantity of potatoes is grown largely without artificial inputs, and with little mechanization. Manure is the main source of fertilizer, few pesticides or fungicides are applied, Colorado beetles are picked off by hand, and most tilling and harvesting are done by human labor (Filippov 2000). These remarkable realities of everyday potato growing were stressed constantly—and with ironic national pride—by the Russian potato scientists and agriculturalists I visited in 2003. One of the country's leading potato pathologists posed it as a rhetorical question, ripe for pondering in this context. "Where else but in Russia," he asked, "could you find this gargantuan productive labor done by old people and poor people, producing something out of nothing, and feeding the whole country?"

A crucial question emerges here. Who is actually growing these 30 million tons of potatoes and the other fundamental foodstuffs feeding Russia? When I traveled with the potato scientists in 2003, we set out with the understanding—based on ubiquitous local and international discourses about Russian potato growing—that these enormous quantities of potato were grown at dachas, the modest summer

houses of urban workers. In actuality, although the scale of urban production is quite high, and has increased quite significantly since 1992, rural households and small farms supply the much greater portion of agricultural produce (potatoes, root vegetables, meat, and dairy). Only gradually did this critical misperception become apparent. Indeed it was quite easy to hold on to the conjoined notions that (a) the majority of urbanites grow food at dachas to survive, and (b) the nation is fed by this dacha growing, because dacha gardens and potato fields quite visibly encircle all Russian cities and towns, and because almost everyone—citizens, scholars, and agricultural officials alike—participates in sustaining the misrecognition of the provenance of most of Russia's food supply.¹¹

Dacha farmers do invest a massive amount of time and labor in potato growing, however, and they do grow a lot of food. The intensity of the urban population's dedication to food production is discussed with both praise and scorn in media accounts, blogs, and everyday conversation, where the rationality of this labor investment provokes the most pointed debate.¹² It is indisputable that millions of postsocialist citizens do struggle for survival in conditions of "medieval subsistence" as the Yabloko Party leader Grigory Yavlinsky called it in 2002.¹³ It is also true that potato is a productive crop and nutritional marvel. However, most economic studies show that potato growing and urban household agriculture contribute insignificantly to either household income or dietary sustenance, and are actually a net drain on the fiscal and human resources of many families. Except for post-*kolkhoz* (postcollective farm) rural families who utilize their larger land allotments to produce potatoes for barter and small cash income (Fadeeva 2002), home-grown potato is a relatively unimportant component of household consumption, but one that requires enormous investment.

From a narrowly economical standpoint, the drawbacks of potato growing are hard to ignore. Although dacha agriculture does provide a portion of the nation's potato and vegetable supply, for many who engage in it themselves it is only marginally profitable in terms of cash or nutritional benefit and likely unprofitable in terms of total outputs of labor and anxiety. Analyzing multiple data sets and their own household surveys, Clarke et al. conclude that the costs of domestic food production far outweigh the benefits in terms of "the value of useful product," which they characterize as "very meagre" (2000:491), only enough "to buy a box of chocolates or a few bottles of vodka and a bit of sausage for the weekend" (2000:494). Economists Gaddy and Ickes echo this: "Self-production of food on the scale seen in today's Russia is an example of extreme primitivization. It reflects both shrinkage and loss of human capital. If the labor of the scientist is more valuable

on the potato field than in the research laboratory, then there is a serious problem in the economy” (2002:168).

This irony is hardly lost on the public and is a pivotal element of the public and familial potato debates. Yet declarations about potato sustenance wane only slightly. Why do so many people insist that the survival of families, communities, and indeed of the Russian nation rests on potato? Why the widespread claim that potato saves the day? And why the mass investment in subsistence practices, which seem to provide marginal returns?

As a narrative gesture, potato reifies the historically profound and complex process of social devolution: from a state in which, at least since the 1960s, most persons participated in and benefited from the commodity–service–welfare nexus, to one where a significant proportion of persons have been progressively marginalized from societal participation and benefit. That, however, is a mouthful; that is why people need to be able to say *kartoshka*. Potato represents this historical shift—and the common experiences this larger history entails—in a word, while mass-scale potato practices rehearse this reality in bodies, families, and communities.

By merit of its botanical qualities, labor demands, and social genealogies, potato spans a broad continuum of exchange and production, from the most technocratic global markets to the most isolated rural outposts. On one end of that continuum, Russian potato is quite observably commodified, mass produced, and even modernized—as in Monsanto’s genetic trials with Russian varieties or, more vividly, through the widespread “Kroshka Kartoshka” wagons, where young women in polyester peasant costumes serve out steaming baked potatoes, stuffed with any of dozens of fillings. Other points along this continuum are marked by the trucks and buckets spilling with potatoes in farm markets in early fall, or the poor elderly women in white aprons and scarves selling a few kilo buckets on upturned crates; such women are ubiquitous at urban intersections and on the edges of the same farmers’ markets (see Figure 1). At the extreme nonmarket end of this continuum, subsistence farmers reproduce their crops through what they save from year to year with few cash inputs, and it is these who sustain the social imaginary about circular self-sufficiency. As a socially familiar image, potato dramatically conveys both the boundaries and the connections between global markets, marginal markets, and subsistence.

In their essay “The Potato in Materialist Imagination,” Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt traced the British potato debates of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, which posited the prolific tuber as “an icon of the autochthonous body” and “a peculiarly primitive food, a thing representing mere subsistence and



FIGURE 1. Potatoes for sale in a Moscow farmers' market, 2003; the sign gives their provenance as Nizhnii Novgorod and their variety, "Udacha" ("Success"; one of the most productive and favored Soviet varieties). Courtesy of Elmer E. Ewing, Cornell University.

(in some minds) the virtual end of culture" (2000:111–112). As juxtaposed to bread, deemed a representative of society and civilization through cooperation and division of labor, in the complex cycle from planting to baking and distribution—potato was cast as the master signifier of primitive social reproduction, as a thing that "comes right out of the earth, haphazardly shaped, like a clot of dirt, but virtually ready to eat." For British political writers looking toward Ireland, potato "represented a presocial state of isolation in which the poor were cut off from civilization and undifferentiated both from each other and from nature" (Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000:114).

It is useful to reflect on conflicting images of potato in contemporary Russia in light of Gallagher and Greenblatt's study of these 200-year-old British debates. In current Russian iconography, potato survival conveys the pathos of rural forgottenness, on the one hand, and the heroic contributions of small growers to the survival of the nation, on the other hand. Importantly, and in contrast to the British debates, potato is called "the second bread" in Russia—thus ideologically

redeeming it, drawing it into the realm of social production, rather than contrasting it to “civilized” food.

Nevertheless, the surge of potato consumption and growing does mark the disintegration of social contract, of socialist contract between classes, ages, social groups, and geographical regions. Food indexes modern persons—the pizza, burger, and sushi eaters—and distinguishes them from peoples outside the nexus of cosmopolitanism: potato eaters. Even more deprived, or anxious, and symbolically cut from the modern metropole are potato growers, fastened by the demands of potato to their provincial towns and fields.¹⁴ These are ontological rather than merely phenomenological or epistemological distinctions, anchoring both individual and collective subjectivity.

Although many Russian cooks declare their love for the dear and malleable potato, the flipside of its centrality in the diet is its monotony there, the poverty of choices and choices of the poor it conveys. Among the fields of labor, potato work is grubby, backbreaking, and tedious, all about beetles, nematodes, and fungal blights. Potato growing is as ignominious as it is beloved; no matter whether one values or disdains it, potato work nevertheless shouts “peasant,” marking persons and their communities as backward, primitive, premodern, and impoverished. Urban or “weekend” dacha growers spend a good deal of communicative energy redeeming their potato commitments from disdain; in one string of Internet commentary, in response to critics who deem potato growing an “illness” and a sign of “slave mentality,” defenders declare it a “creative process,” an activity without which some older people will “die of longing.” One writes that “it is mystical, irrational, but it always seems to me that all will remain right in this country, as long as our people ignore their calculators and keep growing potatoes” (*Zhurnal Andreia Mal’gina* 2008).

A young Moscow banker, horrified by her memories of potato growing and eating, made a spitting sound as she told me she will never again eat a potato, as if to say, “I am no longer a potato person,” as if she were purging the very potato-ness out of her body, and splitting her own social community off from the larger potato class and its history.

POTATO HABITUS: DOMESTIC FRUGALITIES

For a great number of people in Russia, a common supper is three or four boiled potatoes, with a drizzle of oil, a scoop of salted cabbage, a chunk of bread with butter or margarine, tea, a piece of sausage or cheese. This has long been a staple diet for many Russian families, whether they grow their own potatoes or not.

Annual per capita potato consumption in Russia averages around 125 kilograms, just less than a pound of potatoes per person per day (Caskie 2000:202).¹⁵ Obviously, many people are consuming far more per day than this average, with rural and provincial residents being highly dependent on potato meals (Pickup and White 2003). It must be said that except when they cannot afford the dairy or meat to accompany potato, most families do not regard such a supper as either deficient or dull, in part because of the more substantial nature of the midday meal—which may also centrally feature potato in one of its many forms, but also because potato is regarded as a comforting, filling, versatile, and sustaining food. Potato is reliable.

In her essay “The Nourishing Arts,” Luce Giard noted that “*doing-cooking* is the medium for a basic, humble, and persistent practice that is repeated in time and space, rooted in the fabric of relationships to others and to one’s self, marked by the ‘family saga’ and the history of each, bound to childhood memory just like rhythms and seasons” (1998:156–157). The social relationship with potato in Russia is anchored in the immediacies of preparation, which encompass a range social motions from acquisition (whether growing or purchasing) to serving. Even the smallest of culinary motions are fraught with meaning and history, but it is the way that they reveal the domestic science of frugality that interests me here. One potato process reveals these thinkable and unthinkable—articulated and unarticulated—aspects of potato frugality most clearly: peeling.

To peel potatoes you need a stool, an old newspaper or bucket, a paring knife, and preferably a man if there is one around. He sits on stool’s edge, legs apart, leaning forward, and peels off the skin with slow curving motions, wasting almost none of the white, but removing all traces of brown. The peels fall onto newspaper or into a bucket. A pile of white potatoes grows on the table beside him. In many families, potato peeling is one of the only interior culinary activities done regularly by men. Potato is also used to mark love. “The Happiness of Peeling Potatoes,” an article in the magazine *Rossiia*, instructs husbands: “Try to help her with work in the kitchen, and show that you like peeling potatoes in her company. That will fill your woman’s heart with joy” (Uralov 2006).

Whatever the joy involved, the moral and physical challenge of peeling is in the removal of only the thinnest layer of brown skin. You must remove the brown layer, because, according to competing local interpretations, it contains a small amount of toxin, or is tainted by direct contact with the soil. Nevertheless, while removing the brown you should not waste even a small scraping of the white.

A story anthropologist Bruce Grant told me in 1997 first inspired me to pay attention to the skill exhibited in potato peeling. On a visit to Sakhalin Island, among the gifts he brought were ergonomically sublime OXO peelers, to make preparing the daily pot of boiled potatoes easier for his hosts. When he returned a year later, he found the peelers unused. “It IS easy to use but it takes off too much of the peel” one family told him. Indeed, it is impossible to peel potato correctly with an OXO. Proper Russian potato peeling requires sharp focus and a sharp paring knife, to take off only the outermost microlayer of skin. On the surface, this is a banal observation, pointing only to the instrumentally frugal actions of historically poor people. But like Tanya’s unwasted apples, such a practice embodies, to borrow a list from sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, “a whole cosmology, an ethic, a metaphysic, a political philosophy” (1977:94).

Family narratives powerfully transmit potato-peeling morality. When I told her I was writing about potatoes, Marina, an erudite older friend, a Doctor of Social Sciences, plunged into a war story. She and her mother were evacuated to Kazakhstan, while her aunts remained in Moscow. When she returned after the war, the aunts told her their food stories. Always on the verge of starvation, her aunts did not waste even those dirty, unappetizing peels but saved and mashed them into pancakes. One day, Aunt Shura dropped the hot frying pan and the pancakes slid into a bucket of dirty washing water. “Here comes the most important part of the story,” Marina says. “Aunt Shura took them out of the filthy wash water, rinsed them off, re-cooked them, and they ate them. I will never forget that, never,” Marina says.¹⁶

Most families have such stories. Children may resent what Bourdieu calls the “implicit pedagogy” (Bourdieu 1977:94) of such narratives but still they have sticking power. They can make the smallest waste not just an occasion for guilt—although it is also that—but nearly a physical–moral impossibility. Such stories become ineluctably embedded in culinary motion and emotion, and persist as familial and collective “recipes” for survival: the newspaper story “How We Survive Without Money” (Sivkova 1997) relays instructions from the family of a young physicist: “carefully wash and clean the potato. Cook the white for the child. Mash the peel scrapings, add milk, make pancakes.”

In the constellation of these particular stories it is instructive to observe the degree to which wartime survival strategies are available for resurrection in memory and practice. In conversations about potato, people talk about the war. When elderly people talk about the war, they tell stories about food, which invariably means they talk about potato. In 1992, a retired scientist, Aleksandr, told

me how he had been evacuated by train from Leningrad with his mother and brother in 1941, to spend the war years in the Urals. This man declared that they would never have survived, were it not for his mother's pig-headed stubbornness when it came to potatoes: Although she had never farmed or even gardened before, being an urbane intellectual, she single-handedly saved the three of them by claiming a small plot, obtaining and planting seed potatoes, and watching the garden round the clock as harvest time neared. "Potato is all we ate," he said, "but it saved us." Although full of personal portent as all individual iterations are, there is nothing in this story that is not also utterly commonplace.

In response to the three-pronged Nazi invasion in June 1941, the Kremlin mobilized state resources for the army and for military production. Food provisioning was a gargantuan challenge, given that the *chernozem*, the most fertile zone of agricultural production of the Soviet Union, was front line for the earth-scorching practices of Nazi occupation, an explicit tactic of Operation Barbarossa. Soviet populations were left to fend for themselves, with the slimmest of rations for bread, oils, and meat. Rural people were assigned no rations whatsoever, not even bread, as the state expected them to feed themselves along with supplying the war effort (Moskoff 1990:135–151). Throughout the Soviet Union, government offices and enterprises assigned small plots often in the middle of industrial yards and in the vacant spaces between apartment blocks, for their workers' self-provisioning efforts. These plots were used to grow cabbages, beets, carrots, and most importantly, of course, potatoes. Where the state withdrew, in other words, potato grew. In the postsocialist political landscape, the "individual" household coping mechanisms of self-provisioning are a similarly critical backbone of policies of economic liberalization and withdrawal (Wegren 2000:49–50).

Aleksandr and his wife, also a retired scientist, had always enjoyed planting flowers and tending their berry bushes and pear trees at their dacha outside of Moscow; busy with cultural pursuits and their grandchildren, they never wanted to spend time on food production. By the mid-1990s, however, like many fellow citizens, they dedicated most of their garden space to potato and other vegetables.

POTATO LABOR

Throughout postsocialist Eurasia, potatoes are grown on small bits of land, often within the boundaries of provincial cities. In the Russian countryside, stripes and squares of potato are tucked everywhere, with large fields broken into dozens of small plots, demarcated, fenced, and protected in myriad ways. Most allotments

are smaller than ten *sotki*—1000 square meters or one-tenth of a hectare—roughly one quarter acre (Pallot and Nefedova 2007:81–82, 185).¹⁷

Preparing the ground for planting requires immense body-taxing labor. Potato's ability to grow in an extraordinary range of soils and climates accounts for its position as the world's leading vegetable food crop; but it produces its best yields in well-cleared, tilled, and fertile ground. Although most rural growers have access to tractors and horses—the latter of course also providing soil enrichment—most quasi-urban and dacha farmers prepare their rows with shovel and muscle, some of the latter proffered by kin, cementing crucial reciprocities. Compost and manure improve the soil, but growers devise other additives, some mystical in nature. Shrewd techniques and concoctions are shared in newspapers, mimeographed gardening newsletters, and via the Internet.

A portion of each potato harvest is saved from year to year for replanting. Poor farmers may reuse seed for six, eight, or ten years, which continuously reduces yield.¹⁸ Rural sociologists and potato scientists in Russia discuss the many ramifications of this reuse of seed with a combination of agronomic horror and national pride (Filippov 2000). Russian potato provides and keeps providing.

Everyone despises the ravenous Colorado beetle, which many believe to be an American entomological weapon from the Cold War. People spend hours picking these dreadful beetles off by hand, drowning them in beer or spirits, and cursing their neighbors who are not as devoted to this task (Williams 2007). As harvests mature, thievery becomes the more imminent threat. In a standard local anecdote, a journalist asks a dacha farmer why he is digging his potatoes early. "If I do not harvest my potatoes today my neighbor will harvest them tonight." When a family's field is not right next to their house, some member of the family may sleep in a lean-to in the field as the harvest matures. Every year brings newspaper and apocryphal reports of someone knifed or bludgeoned trying to steal potatoes (Slackman 1999; Humphrey 2000:152). Vigorous physical defense of potatoes is a moral and even a legal right.

Relatives may come from cities to help with the hard labor of tilling, planting, weeding, guarding, or harvesting in return for a few sacks for themselves; potato is a basic staple among the home-produced food items that circulate among and link extended families, friends, and colleagues in complex networks of mutual support and exchange.

Harvesting is exhausting work and must be done quickly and massively at the optimal moment in terms of potato maturity and weather. Labor for this is always

in short supply, requiring a range of solutions. Families call on whomever they can for help in exchange for sacks of potato. School children are still being bussed out to the remaining collective farm fields for the peak harvest weekends, prompting both praise and complaints on the part of journalists, who disagree as to whether this is great training for the future or a debilitating waste of their time (Lindt 2007).

Potatoes migrate by the millions into the cities in early autumn. Rural farmers and increasingly commercialized distributors of their produce transport potatoes in huge Soviet-era trucks. Urban farmers transport their harvests back to their city apartments by car or on public transport, in suitcases, wheeled carts, and rucksacks. There, they have to be spread out to dry, before being stored in buckets, crates, and sacks on semiheated balconies or hallways. Indeed, in vegetable producing urban families, space in the apartment may be organized to accommodate the processing and storage of potatoes, fruits, and vegetables. As the anthropologist Catherine Wanner said about similar practices in Ukraine, “every house is a factory” (personal communication). Families measure their need and many try to produce or buy what they will require for the whole winter and as much of the spring as possible—100 or 200 kilos per family is not unusual. The calendar arches across potato time: potato practice structures the lifeyear from seed to harvest to storage through potato depletion in the spring (Galtz 2000:25).

Potato production is scientific and ritualistic, patterned by transmitted knowledge but also ripe for invention. It is laborious, tedious, and exhausting; only vigilance will thwart thieves and beetles and other pathogens. It is also existentially demanding and socially divisive. Caroline Humphrey asks “Who is to go and do the backbreaking work? Who will stay for months in a tiny, comfortless hut? Who will go to the market to sell the produce?” Observation leads her to the answer: “it is the elderly retired people who bear these burdens”—a situation that, she notes, gives rise to intrafamilial conflict and intergenerational estrangement (Humphrey 2000:152).

Local pundits and global economists all seem to grouse that the cost of transport alone makes potato uneconomical; this is clearly the case given that a kilo can be purchased for 8 to 12 rubles—20 to 30 cents—on roadsides or farmers’ markets in any city or town in the early autumn. Economist Vadim Radaev found that 40 percent of urban residents he surveyed had vegetable plots, usually including potatoes, and that 75 percent of those with plots said their harvests were an important part of their families’ material survival. Ironically, though, he also discovered that it was the employed, relatively better-off families who kept

gardens. “To become involved in the informal economy on a land plot,” he notes “one has to be mobile, capable, have additional material resources and above all, have support from the family” (Radaev 2001:351).¹⁹

The Russian anthropologist Serguei Oushakine has regaled me over the years with stories of his efforts to convince his parents in Altai to stop growing potatoes, offering to buy them potatoes for the winter. He showed them his calculations, proving that they were losing money on transport and other monetary costs by growing their own, not to mention their momentous labor. Only in the past couple of summers, and only gradually, have they shifted from growing to purchasing. Such testimonies by adult children about trying to convince their parents to stop growing potato are widespread, already part of the larger narrative (Zhoural Andreia Mal’gina 2008). The tentativeness of this process of letting go suggests something about the grip of potato.

The undercurrent of mockery and disdain toward the potato enterprise is substantial. A translator told me, “It is our punishment for living with Communism all those years, for our passivity, now we have to labor like horses to survive!” In the context of a rich discussion of the contested social meanings of food cultivation, ethnographer Jane Zavisca tells of a writer who disdains his in-laws’ dacha dedication, saying “I don’t believe that one should work a dacha. It should be for leisure. But my wife’s parents grow potatoes and everything else. The bus, the walking, the heavy sacks of supplies. They are exhausted all the time. It’s not a dacha, it’s a form of slavery” (Zavisca 2003:804). The bad-boy Russian writer Eduard Limonov writes, more scornfully: “The dacha turns a Russian into an idiot, it takes away his strength, makes him impotent. Any connection with property tends to make people submissive, cowardly, dense, and greedy. And when millions of Russian people are attached to dacha plots and spend their time planting carrots, potatoes, onions, and so on we can’t expect any changes in society” (Lovell 2003:231).

So why are scientists, teachers, office managers, engineers out in the potato fields? What does potato labor provide? People talk about this quite a lot. Here are some of the reasons they give for growing potatoes:

- Land should not go to waste.
- Gardening makes you breathe fresh air all summer.
- The hard work keeps people (men) out of trouble (away from drinking).
- Your own potatoes are “ecologically clean.” They taste better and are healthier.

- Growing potatoes frees limited cash income for needed purchases.
- Potato provides a medium of barter or reciprocal exchange.
- It is a national and familial habit, a “way of life,” even “a genetic memory.”
- “We love potato.”
- Potato establishes you as a moral person, concerned with simple virtues rather than wealth.
- We know we can survive if we can grow potato.

Anyone who grows food at their dacha or on their allotment may tell you any of these things, at various moments. Zavisca’s 2003 analysis well captures the social complexity of dacha growing in Russia, and the fallacy of seeking a singular explanation of the wide spread of these practices.²⁰ But I would argue that the last element trumps the others in importance. A Moscow friend articulated this in 2003, saying: “You can trust that if everything *really* falls apart, you have the skills and habits to survive. And, you can look at your potatoes in the apartment hallway in dark November, and *see* your food for the winter. You can *see* your own ability to labor like a horse, right there before your eyes.”

Potato may not actually be the life preserver it is touted as being, but the potatoes in the hallway and under the bed in November are a lived and living monument to family labor, to a family’s experience of key episodes of Russian and Soviet history, and to the knowledge, disposition, and bodily skills that these confer. More than any other single object or practice, potato captures and expresses the capacity to survive. In this vein, in Novgorod Oblast’ in 2004, pensioner Nikolai Zariadov erected a monument in his village—a pipe topped by a potato-like rock, and an inscription thanking Christopher Columbus and Peter the Great for bringing “this beloved vegetable” to Russia (Moroz 2004).

POTATO POLITICS

A woman in the Siberian city of Omsk told a journalist she would vote Communist in the 1999 election, saying, “When I think about economics . . . I think about how many potatoes I can afford to eat a day. Governor Polezhaev doesn’t understand that. The Communists do” (Coker 1999). A man from Volgograd wrote to the newspaper *Argumenty i fakty* that “our authorities [*vlast*] thought up an original solution: give everyone their own plot, so the little people can spend their weekends [official days off], plowing and tilling to feed their families” (Sivkova 1997:5). Such declarations of potato reliance are bitter commentaries on the political economy. They are lamentations about the nation’s abandonment of its

people. As the Soviet state did during the Great Patriotic War, instead of providing food (or paying wages), post-Soviet governors, enterprises, schools, and collective farms have made land available to workers. A strong vein of potato discourse scoffs at the indifferent state apparatus, as in, “we will show them we can get by even when they do not pay our wages or pensions.”

Some influential cultural figures and political leaders spin this subsistence quite differently. An interview in *Rossiiskaia gazeta* captures this remarkably (Shmeleva 2007). Andrei Tumanov, editor of the leading gardening magazine, *Vashi 6 sotok* [*Your 6 / 100ths of a hectare*] is introduced as the country’s number one *dachnik* (dacha grower). The article is entitled “Na dachnika nuzhno molit’sia!,” which roughly translates “We Should Pray to the Dacha Grower!”

Tumanov rehearses normative potato talk with passion:

When someone tries to tell me that the dacha is for resting, I go at him with my fists, replying that the dacha is for work, for work! My main argument is that as far as agriculture is concerned, this country relies on nobody more than on the dachnik. On dacha plots as much as ninety percent of the potatoes and eighty percent of other fruits and vegetables are grown. I am referring not just to the domestic garden plots but also to other small plots . . . people have to work, to help create surplus product for the country, to help themselves and those close to them.”

Then he adds: “Besides that, you can never buy clean, good products in the market.”²¹

All this is fairly standard, but what he says at the end is striking political commentary and pedagogy: “The average dacha grower lives seven to ten years longer than city-dwellers without dachas. And, as well, he rarely needs to go to the doctor, and does not go to rallies at the White House [the Russian Federal Building]. The government does not waste a kopeck on dacha growers [here he means agricultural subsidies]. The dacha grower is an ideal citizen. Our government should just offer prayers to these people, who live longer and produce!” (Shmeleva 2007:24). Although Soviet in its rhetoric of praise, Tumanov’s pointed message speaks to the moment, to the strange political and symbolic economy of postsocialist subsistence.

President Putin himself affirmed this detachment of the state and the remarkable survival of the abandoned people. In a Kremlin press conference in June 2003, the same journalist, Andrei Tumanov, asked Putin “do the authorities intend to pay more attention to the ordinary hardworking people

with their spades and rakes, who form the backbone of this country?” Putin replied:

In the old days they used to allocate people six hundredths of a hectare, and then the size grew a little, and then a bit more. The strange thing is that ninety percent of the potatoes grown in the country are grown in these little private gardens. Ninety percent! And these gardens produce eighty percent of the vegetables and sixty percent of the fruit. These figures seem incredible, but these are the facts. So, I would first of all like to thank everyone out there who takes part in this work for such amazing results. And I hope that you will get satisfaction out the work you do this season and that it will bring you good results. [President of Russia 2003]

Thus did the president of Russia offer his awe, his hope, and his good wishes. He even added that “my own parents in their time worked hard keeping up their garden, labored away from morning till night and made me do the same. So I know very well what it’s all about.” In this one brief sweep, Putin announced, legitimized, historicized, and even romanticized the recurrent politics of abandonment by the state.

Like Putin, people rising above subsistence cut their connections to potato labor in practice and in narrative. The banker who told me she no longer eats potatoes, said “We were poor as kids, and I ate so many potatoes my whole life, I told myself that was *it*, I will never eat another potato.” This kind of shift in diet marks class detachment as well as a deliberate dividing of past and present, socialism and capitalism. Potato as symbol and practice marks the political economy of contested meanings and subjectivities.

As should be clear, potato is a symbolically, historically, and politically charged phenomenon, immensely overburdened with significance for all of its (or because of all of its) lumpen banality. Potato represents the investments of labor and devotion that carry persons and nations across historical eras. It sits on the cusp between desperate hope and the terror of insecurity; the same moment, in the same breath, potato shouts both “we can survive” and “God help us now.” Politically, as Putin’s comments so vividly show, potato not only signifies but actually solidifies the symbiosis between corrupt and careless governance and popular activity. This is not to say that if they were not growing potatoes people could or would necessarily be out in a public arena critiquing the status quo, rationalizing the economy, and creating a sophisticated civil society. Indeed, potato is a form of civil society in a neoliberal autocracy. Through potato circulate all kinds of messages about basic

human and Russian morality, about the inherent and inevitable structure of the citizen–state relationship, and about the forms of practice that sustain community and society. Both physically and ideologically, potato is a critical medium of exchange, reciprocity, collaborating, and mutual support, and thus an elemental force of social connection, cohesion, and communication. And yet two steps down the path, potato also scores the ground of social exclusion, the laborious desperation of being cut off.

EPILOGUE: POTATO LOVE

Many people talk of loving potato—not just in a gustatory sense but metaphysically. Potato talk is amusingly and anthropomorphically affectionate. Over a meal with fried potatoes in 2003, my slightly tipsy friend Anya declared “Potato is the most important, potato is the beginning, and it is sacred.” Then she added, “Good food is the product of the soul.” An article on “Potato—Familiar but Surprising” waxes with similar tenderness: “If you try to exclude your familiar potato from your daily menu, after a certain time you will inevitably feel a pang of nostalgia for this vegetable so dear to your heart.” The article went on to relay a number of recipes for medicinal and cosmetic uses of potato, including my favorite. “If your lips are chapped by autumn winds and rains, make a paste out of mashed potato, cottage cheese, and sour cream, spread on your lips and leave for ten minutes” (Kartoshka—znakomaia neznakomka 2004).

One story unites many strands of potato narrative, and I end this essay with it, because it has consistently guided my thinking. It is a story that crosses ontological domains and levels, interweaves emotional valences, and fuses bodily, family, and national memory. My friend Vasya is an older man who often shares his life stories and his soul with me.²² One afternoon in 2003, he cooked lunch for me while I perched on a stool in his tiny kitchen. I told him about my potato project and just like Marina, he dove into a series of epiphanies, literally outlining an entire book for me, in the air, with his wooden spoon.

While the main course cooked, he opened a bottle of Riabinka liqueur; we toasted distant friends, and ate carrot salad. He grew intense, leaned on his elbows, and told me this story.

You know how the Stalinist state gave no help to the country folk during the war. The population was mostly women, all the men were off at the front, or dead already, most would never come back. So the women toiled by day for the kolkhoz. They could be shot for stealing even a handful of grain but

they all hid some barley in their hems and bras, how else would we survive? After they would come home from twelve or fourteen hours at the kolkhoz they had to plow their own fields of potatoes, kartoshka was life or death for us then. But they could not use horses from the kolkhoz. The horses were exhausted after their own day of labor, and they had to let the horses rest, or they would be useful to nobody. So the women would bring home the horse plow and strap themselves in, seven or eight women pulling the plow to make the rows. They would make the rows and the old babushki would come along behind to rake the soil into mounds and plant the potato seed and then we kids would cover the plants with soil. When I was thirteen or so, I was old enough, I got to walk behind and guide the plow as the women pulled it.²³

I recalled these very images from Vasya's life when I later read the words of Soviet Marxist philosopher G. L. Shchedrovitskii: "It is not separate individuals . . . who create and bring about activity but . . . *activity itself takes hold of them and compels them to behave in a certain way* . . . in order to become a *real human being*, the child must attach itself to the system of human activity" (Slobodchikov 2002:35; emphasis mine).

Vasya's story obliged me to consider in a fundamental sense: How do we become who we are? The child attaches itself to the system of human activity; what is it like to be that boy, quite literally harnessed to the human activity of eight women pulling a plow? What does this teach a boy about human labor, about gender, about politics and justice and humility and hunger and mother love and the absence of men? What kind of lifelong orientation toward potatoes might this implant—what does one feel about the life saving but grueling labor of *kartoshka*? And when a new era of intense impoverishment comes around—as it has for Vasya and most of the people he knows—what does that leave him feeling about time, modernity, the progress promised by his nation, and the life of labor his mother and he invested in it?

On the day of our lunch, however, before I could get too heavy imaging the Herculean labors of his mother, Vasya made a remarkable segue, one that shows how potato bridges time and predicament. He told about his institute days, when he and his fellow music students would be trucked out to a collective farm for the potato harvest.²⁴ The mechanical combine dug up the rows and the students walked behind to gather the potatoes resting on the upturned soil. But, Vasya said, starting to laugh, "there were these huge wild pigs that came out to steal potatoes behind us. We would leave the sacks in the field along the way and they would

come and RIP open the bags with their huge snouts and you would hear KHRU KHRU! KHRU KHRU!” He nearly fell off his stool, miming the long-snouted pigs and the students running in all directions waving their arms, desperately trying to shoo these beasts away.

Then, coughing with laughter, Vasya stood up and opened the lid of the frying pan, full of perfectly cooked home-fried potatoes. With smiling irony, employing a double diminutive, he said: *vot tebye kartoshechka*, in a way that nobody ever says “potatoes.” In his word *kartoshechka* steamed forth both his avuncular tenderness toward me and his profound affection for—his kinship with—these heroic spuds.

ABSTRACT

Asked to explain the mechanisms of everyday survival in Russia, many people answer with one word: “potato.” Potato is a key factor in subsistence throughout postsocialist countries, but potato discourses and practices serve as well to dramatize the stark devolution of state–society relations and the ceaseless industry of the population. This essay posits potato as an axis of practice, around which myriad gestures of labor, exchange, and consumption are organized; it also presents potato as a complex system of knowledge, embedded in historical memory and encapsulating local theories of economic devolution. Several ethnographic and economic studies have analyzed the significance of postsocialist food growing; this essay focuses on the chief product of that labor and the narratives that circulate around it. It argues that although potato conveys popular critiques of social stratification, it also frames experiences of personhood.

Keywords: postsocialism, Russia, food, everyday life

NOTES

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1. This anecdote is political as well as culinary, as his potato expertise makes the governor one of the “people.”
2. It is interesting to note the ways in which potato is being promoted as a means of staving off the catastrophes wrought by global grain crises; see Rosenthal 2008.
3. Among many writers on state policy, poverty, and subsistence, see particularly Rose and Tikhomirov 1993; Shlapentokh 1996; Wegren 1998, 2000; von Braun et al. 2000; Radaev 2001; Shanin et al. 2002; O’Brien and Wegren 2002; Manning and Tikhonova 2004.
4. See Kostov and Lingard 2004 for an economic overview; Abele and Frohberg 2002 for broad critical inquiry; Rose and Tikhomirov 1993 on the comparative scale of and incentives

- for household food production in Russia and Eastern Europe in the early 1990s; chapters on Tajikistan, Armenia, Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova, and Latvia in Dudwick et al. 2003; and the chapters on Russia and Hungary in Leonard and Kaneff 2000. Closer ethnographic examinations include Hervouet 2003, 2006 on Belarus; Cellarius 2000 on Bulgaria; Nazpary 2002, especially chapter four, on Kazakhstan. The best ethnographic sources for Russia are Humphrey 2000 and Zavisca 2003.
5. In the mid-1990s, Richard Rose identified what he calls Nine Economies and schematized the demographics of the majority along various survival portfolios: Enterprising, Defensive, Vulnerable, and Marginal (Rose 1994). This schematic still applies to conditions more than a decade later.
 6. Clarke 1999, Spryskov (2003:9–41), and various authors in Manning and Tikhonova 2004 discuss methodological challenges in the measurement and characterization of poverty in Russia; Dudwick et al. (2003:3) present broad World Bank poverty indicators for the 1990s. World Bank reports of 2005 and 2006 outline more recent trends.
 7. These estimates are based on Russian Federation State Statistical Service (Goskomstat [n.d.a]) figures, which scholars of economic conditions in Russia take to be broadly credible; see Clarke's discussion of Goskomstat household survey methodologies (1999:8). See also the World Bank Russian Economic Report (2006:29). The difficulty of living on the official minimum was illustrated in March 2008 by a young journalist who tried to do so for a month; her reports from the poverty line were widely noted and discussed on the Russian Internet (Surnacheva 2008a, 200b).
 8. See the Goskomstat n.d.b table.
 9. Pallot and Nefedova discuss the expansion of production in personal or household plots—what is called “personal subsidiary farming” (*lichnoe podсобное khoziaistvo*), noting that every year since 1992 this personal sector has produced more than in 1990, some years by nearly 20 percent (2003:41).
 10. See Goskomstat n.d.c. See also the detailed discussion in Pallot and Nefedova 2007:17–21 and O'Brien and Patsiorkovsky 2006: xvii.
 11. Pallot and Nefedova 2007 do an excellent job of teasing apart official production statistics to demonstrate the significant geographical and typological differences in agricultural sectors; they also critically reflect on the ways that agricultural production has been theorized in the post-Soviet period (see pages 24–35, in particular).
 12. For typical newspaper stories representing different views, see Lindt 2007, *Svobodnyi kurs* 2002, and *Altaiskaia Pravda* 2006. Internet commentaries also provide good exemplars of the range of positions on potato growing (see, e.g., *Zhurnal Andreia Mal'gina* 2008).
 13. Comparisons of contemporary life with feudalism and medieval existence are a standard part of the discursive landscape in Russia, in conversation, in the media, and among academics. Shlapentokh's 1996 article and 2007 book are the most extended examples of scholarly use of this trope. See Verdery's crucial examination as well (2006).
 14. Images of temporal devolution are common throughout the former Soviet Union. Julia Holdsworth writes about her fieldwork in Ukraine that “many people in Donetsk do indeed feel that their experiences of being ‘modern’ are in the past. . . . Symbols of this decline are scattered across the domestic, industrial and imagined landscape” (2004:6–7).
 15. Wegren's (2005:13) estimates of per capita consumption are lower, whereas some sources point to much higher potato consumption; the International Year of the Potato Web site, using UNFAO data, estimates consumption in Russia to be 140 kg.
 16. Moskoff quotes a Soviet Red Army soldier on kitchen duty during the war: “You were lucky if you got to peel potatoes. You could keep the skins. To go to the kitchen was like a holiday” (1990:131; on potato skins, see also p. 40).
 17. Humphrey describes such allotments in Ulan-Ude, Buriatia (2000:150–152); Pallot and Nefedova 2003 and 2007 analyze the diverse scales of household agriculture. See also Caskie 2000 on allotment practices.
 18. Elmer Ewing, a potato scientist from Cornell, was stunned to learn this when we visited a group of rural sociologists at the Center for Peasant Studies and Agrarian Reforms in Moscow in March 2003. Since potato degrades so much from generation to generation, Ewing did not

- think this form of reproduction could continue for more than five years, although Russian rural sociologists had consistently found it going for longer in rural areas around St. Petersburg. As the gross potato stock depletes, households have to save a larger portion of each harvest for the next year's seed, thus requiring additional labor and other inputs. See the papers in Shanin et al. 2002 for some of the work of this group.
19. Clarke et al. 2000 bring a range of data analyses to bear on the questions of who grows, how much subsistence agriculture provides and at what cost to families, and why growing is so widespread. Burawoy et al. 1999, Lovell 2003, Zavisca 2003, and Hervouet 2003 and 2006 each capture the complex cultural logic supporting these practices. Gerry and Li 2007 argue that home production makes sense as a buffer against short-term income shocks in the absence of reliable social welfare, but are detrimental as long-term economic strategies.
 20. Hervouet 2003 and 2006 provides a similarly thick ethnographic description of dacha growing in Belarus.
 21. Since the 1980s, there has been widespread suspicion about marketed goods throughout the former Soviet Union. Counterfeit and contaminated foodstuffs are especially feared, in the wake of numerous reports of poisoning by falsified alcohol and other products, and in the aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster. There is a complex hierarchy of regions where the "cleanest" potatoes supposedly are grown. People are also suspicious of the many artificial additives in "Western" food products.
 22. Soul is an ontological category in its own right. To say he shares his soul with me refers to a very specific set of practices, well codified in Russian ways of being and talking. Dale Pesmen 2000 evokes and analyses this brilliantly.
 23. See Paxson 2005:272–273 on horses, plowing, and potato planting.
 24. Sending students, academics, and others out to help with the harvest was a standard, annual feature of Soviet life, and even if you were taken to pick cabbage it was still called going out "on potato"—*na kartoshku*.

Editor's Note: *Cultural Anthropology* has published a number of essays that examine the post-Soviet dynamic. See, for example, Karolina Szmagalska-Follis's "Repossession: Notes on Restoration and Redemption in Ukraine's Western Borderland" (2008); Paul Manning's "Rose Colored Glasses? Color Revolutions and Cartoon Chaos in Postsocialist Georgia" (2007); and Alexia Bloch's "Longing for the Kollektiv: Gender, Power, and Residential Schools in Central Siberia" (2005).

Cultural Anthropology has also published essays analyzing food as cultural production. These include Heather Paxson's "Post-Pasteurian Cultures: The Microbiopolitics of Raw-Milk Cheese in the United States" (2008); Mark Leichty's "Carnal Economies: The Commodification of Food and Sex in Kathmandu" (2005); and Carolyn Rouse's "Purity, Soul Food, and Sunni Islam: Explorations at the Intersection of Consumption and Resistance" (2004).

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