



RUSSIAN SOCIOLOGY AFTER 1991:

THE INSTITUTIONAL AND INTELLECTUAL DYNAMICS OF A “POOR” DISCIPLINE

Mikhail Sokolov

Editorial note. This paper is a short English version, produced by the author, of a much longer paper in Russian published in the same issue of *Laboratorium*. The data discussed in the English version are presented in much greater depth in the Russian paper.

This paper approaches the sociological study of science by defining academic life as a “dual economy” of money and attention. Scientists, including social scientists, seek to maximize both their financial revenue and colleagues’ attention to their work. As in conventional economics, to receive attention from others one has first to invest some attention of one’s own. From a technical perspective, attention is a fee one pays in order to get a glimpse of the “current discussion” and to find out what kinds of statements are likely to be relevant to it. From a ceremonial perspective, the ritual of citing one’s predecessors in opening paragraphs confirms that both responsibility for shortcomings and praise for achievements are shared with one’s colleagues. “Attention economics” is perfectly suited for the study of how the scarce good of professional attention is allocated. The term itself originates from studies of online commerce (Lanham 1994), and while it has not been widely used by sociologists of science, the phenomenon it refers to has been widely described under other names. Hagstrom’s “gifts of recognition” (Hagstrom 1965), Bourdieu’s “symbolic capital” (Bourdieu 1983), Latour’s “cycles of credit” (Latour and Woolgar 1979), and Collins’s “cultural capital” (Collins 1989) all exploit the parallels between the logic of conventional economics and that of the transfer of ideas, accumulation of competence, production of theories, and allocation of fame which we observe in the academic world.

The two dimensions of academic life—monetary exchanges and the exchange of attention—are in no way independent of each other. For the purpose of this paper, the following aspect of this interdependence is most significant: investment of time and effort into one of these two systems is sometimes possible only at the cost of withdrawal from the other (e.g., when one has to postpone reading and writing papers in order to teach more lucrative undergraduate courses). Perhaps the major social achievement of the modern sciences was the emergence of institutions which effectively eliminated many contradictions between the requirements of the two economies. Generally, fame is the principal route to financial prosperity, economic security, and better working conditions in academic life. Conversely, as long as one stays in academia, any choice which yields financial gains in the immediate future at the cost of producing scientific output below one’s ability level inevitably results in greater financial losses in the longer term. As has been demonstrated repeatedly by studies of salary increases following a publication or citation of one’s publication in a leading journal, skillful investments of attention lead to greater quality of production, quality of production in turn leads to attention from colleagues, and attention pays (Katz 1973; Tuckman and Leahey 1975).

“ATTENTION SHORTAGE ECONOMIES”: THE RUSSIAN CASE

It would be excessively idealistic to assume total congruity between the monetary economy and the economy of attention. The life of any real-world academic organization offers a wide spectrum of deviations from this pattern. Some of these deviations result from flawed institutional systems which may fail to provide necessary checks and balances. Others arise from the wider social contexts in which these institutions are embedded. Still others result simultaneously from the flawed institutions and the influence of their wider social contexts. The history of the social sciences in Russia over the past two decades offers fertile ground for the study of these phenomena. Post-Soviet Russia has inherited a massive academic sector dominated by the institutes of the Academy of Sciences (see Graham 1975; Beliaev and Butorin 1982; Shlapentokh 1987; Greenfeld 1988; Weinberg 2004 for details on the Soviet Academy of Sciences and the position of sociology within it). The end of communist rule was accompanied by a rapid increase in the number of social science departments in Russian universities. Higher education in the USSR was predominantly geared toward the production of technical specialists. The loosening of centralized control over curricula resulted in an exponential growth of social scientific departments, which was further fueled by the abolition of professorships in “scientific communism” and “historical materialism.” These professors typically found new employment as instructors of “sociology” or “political science.” Thus, before 1989, there were no specialized undergraduate programs in sociology; by the end of 2007, over 100 such programs had been created. Finally, the arrival of Western foundations, which played an important role in financing the Russian sciences in the 1990s, facilitated the growth of private universities and research centers emulating European or US institutional patterns. The scientists employed by these diverse institutions acted under somewhat similar societal conditions. By Western standards, and by the standards set by other sectors of the Russian economy, they were all exceptionally poorly paid. Thus, for example, until the year 2000 no researcher at the Russian Academy of Sciences had an official salary exceeding 120 US dollars. This arguably had far-reaching consequences for both the attention economy and the monetary economy of science.

An incentive structure that promises greater long-term gains and thereby encourages investments into the attention economy rather than the maximization of short-term financial gains simply does not work in a context in which these gains are a matter of survival. The academic version of the “vicious circle of poverty,” resulting from the inability to save enough assets for effective investment, puts a general freeze on the attention economy. Faced with the choice between an activity that promises a paycheck in the near future and one that could one day result in greater renown, Russian scientists had to opt for the former. As a result, the time and effort invested into studying others’ academic output or into publishing one’s own work were reduced to the minimum necessary to qualify for a salaried position. While all academic organizations deviate from the pattern described at the end of the previous section to some extent, the Russian social sciences have diverged from it more than most. This makes them an intriguing natural experiment demonstrating how fluctuations in monetary economics influence exchanges of attention in different institutional systems.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT

The findings reported in this paper were obtained through a study of the Saint Petersburg professional sociological community that the author has been carrying out since 2003. The primary aim of the study is to provide a historical sociological account of the transformation of Russian sociology since 1985. The general research strategy can be loosely defined as a “community study,” with Saint Petersburg sociology serving as an “iconic metaphor” for the whole of the discipline in Russia¹. The project uses a wide variety of research methods, including:

¹ The classical “community studies” are widely (and often justly) criticized for treating local populations as reliable models of the whole of society. Arguably, however, Saint Petersburg sociologists can be plausibly regarded as such a model of a national disciplinary community, given that (a) it is empirically demonstrable that all types of institutional structures, intellectual movements, and individual strategies existing in other Russian localities are represented there; (b) as a result of the processes described in this paper, the local community is relatively isolated. The geographic mobility of academic personnel in Russia is extremely low by Western standards

- (a) prolonged participant observation in all of the city's most important sociological research and educational institutions;
- (b) formal and informal interviews with a large portion of the Saint Petersburg sociological community;
- (c) an analysis of how some Saint Petersburg authors are cited by local colleagues in publications in both local and national periodicals;
- (d) an analysis of archival documents depicting institutional changes, organizational development, academic events and personnel movement in the last 25 years.

To state the exact number of sociologists in any given location precisely is an inevitably ambiguous task, since it is inseparable from struggles for control over access to disciplinary "fields" (Bourdieu 1988). We can, however, roughly estimate the total number of people employed in research institutes and/or as teachers of sociology in higher education in Saint Petersburg at 400. Of that number, the author and his various collaborators have already interviewed more than 200 (many of them repeatedly). In the past ten years, the author has worked at (1 and 2) the Sociology Department and Smolny College of Saint Petersburg State University; (3) the Sociological Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences; (4) the European University at Saint Petersburg; and (5) the Center for Independent Social Research, which, combined, employ over 80% of that number.

PATTERNS OF FRAGMENTATION OF THE DISCIPLINE

Three features of post-Soviet sociology's attention economy are especially striking when we compare it with its Western counterparts. Firstly, the total amount of attention circulating in the post-Soviet economy is markedly lower. Secondly, the patterns of fragmentation of the "attention spaces" (Collins 1998) are dissimilar to those prevalent in most Western social scientific disciplines. Thirdly, the directions of investments of attention are directly determined by the need to maintain one's presence in diverse academic labor markets. All three features become readily visible as we analyze Saint Petersburg sociology.

The city's sociological community consists of several networks whose members are all virtually unaware of each other. At the center of each network one can usually find one or two organizations commonly used to identify the network as a whole. The three largest networks include (a) the network of the European University at Saint Petersburg's political science and sociology department and the Center for Independent Social Research (the EU-CISR network); (b) the network of the Sociological Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences, which also includes a few minor market and public opinion research firms (the SIRAS network); (c) the network of Saint Petersburg State University's sociology department and the Institute for Complex Sociological Research, which is attached to the University (the SPbSU-ICSR network). There are also a few smaller networks, usually centered on the city's minor sociology departments.

Information circulates relatively regularly inside each network, but very little is exchanged between networks. Thus, seminars at the CISR or the EU are regularly attended by their faculty, fellows, and students, but rarely attract members of the SIRAS network and virtually never draw anyone from the SPbSU-ICSR network. This even includes lectures by academic celebrities such as Robert Putnam or Bruno Latour. The same holds true for conferences and other events at SIRAS or SPbSU. Similarly, there is little exchange of ideas via periodicals. Each of the city's three sociological journals is published by a different organization and acts as a mouthpiece of its network: *Annals of Saint Petersburg State University. Sociology* is published at the SPbSU, and *Telescope* at SIRAS. Only the *Journal of Sociology and Social Anthropology* (JSSA) is a joint venture of SPbSU and SIRAS. The overwhelming majority of both the authors and the readers of these journals belong to the networks which publish them. Thus, in 2000–2001, nearly 40% of JSSA authors were working either at SPbSU or at SIRAS, compared to

as a result of high real estate prices and low transferability of the most important academic assets, and the flow of ideas in the "shortage attention economy" is minimal. Whether the generalizations based on observations of sociologists may be extended to other social science disciplines is a more difficult question. Economics, ethnology, and psychology have followed different paths of institutionalization, although sometimes the resulting patterns seem strikingly similar.

35% SIRAS researchers among the authors of *Telescope* and more than 90% SPbSU graduate students and teachers among the authors of the *Annals*. Of these three journals only the JSSA had a significant number of non-Saint Petersburg contributors (39%). Both *Telescope* and the *Annals* had fewer than 5% contributions by authors residing in other cities. This is in no way characteristic of Saint Petersburg alone. A review of the two Moscow-based journals with the widest circulation in Russia, *Sociological Research* and the *Sociological Journal*, reveals essentially the same picture. From 2000–2001, 47% of both of them had Moscow-based authors. These data as well as a citation analysis demonstrate that the physical distance between Russian cities effectively limits attention spaces. Most libraries lack the funds necessary to subscribe to periodicals from other cities, and most editors do not have sufficient resources to distribute their publications freely. The same picture holds true for conferences. If it were not for the Internet, the local professional communities in Russia would be nearly totally isolated. Finally, there are two professional associations in Saint Petersburg: the Saint Petersburg Association of Sociologists and the Maxim Kovalevsky Russian Sociological Society. The first is heavily dominated by the SIRAS network, while the second consists almost entirely of members of the SPbSU network.

An observer familiar with European or US sociology might expect that this isolation is produced either by these networks' specialization in different substantive fields or from a deep animosity arising from conflicting methodological, theoretical, or political commitments. Neither, however, is the case. All three major networks as well as many minor ones list among their members experts on political sociology, interethnic relations, social stratification, and gender. A survey carried out by the author as well as an analysis of information provided on their websites and in *Who is who* publications revealed only minimal divergence in areas of specialization. While there are some statistically significant variations in methodological credos (with members of the SIRAS network frequently expressing a preference for "quantitative," and members of the EU-CISR network preferring "qualitative" methodology), theoretical positions (self-proclaimed "positivists," "functionalists," and "structuralists" at SIRAS, more "phenomenologists" and "interactionists" at CISR), and political alignments (with both EU-CISR and SIRAS networks being mostly liberal, and the SPbSU network more conservative), none sufficiently explains the lack of contact between members of the sociological community. The members of the EU-CISR network pride themselves on being the most progressive and internationally recognized part of Russian sociology (an assessment which members of other networks sometimes agree with), but apart from this no explanation is offered for their isolation.

What really distinguishes the networks is their specialization in the different academic markets that create a demand for their labor and expertise. The EU-CISR network depends entirely on the "grant economy" and on collaboration with Western colleagues as a source of income and career opportunities. The SIRAS network, the least affluent of the three, extracts its resources from the Academy of Science and its scientific foundations (the Russian Foundation for the Humanities and the Russian Foundation for Fundamental Research), as well as from small-scale market research. Finally, the livelihood of the SPbSU-ICSR network depends on the budget of the Ministry of Science and Education as well as on tuition fees and diverse government research contracts. There is only minimal overlap between the networks in terms of their sources of income and, thus, minimal competition between them. What is more, from the very beginning of their careers their members accumulated the resources essential for success in "their" labor market and useless in the markets others specialize in. Thus, connections at different ministerial agencies are probably the most important type of social capital for those planning to start a recognized undergraduate teaching program, while connections with European scholars are crucial for those planning to prepare an application for a European Union Framework grant. The first type of capital is useless, however, for the second group of actors, and vice versa. As the resources necessary for success in each market diverge, there is only minimal interest in what members of other networks can supply. Members of other networks are neither competitors for financial resources nor potential collaborators in joint projects. In an academic world built around economic ventures—in the conventional sense of the term—this means that the different sociological networks are hardly interested in each other at all.

The fragmentation of the scholarly community and the resulting absence of a citywide market for ideas is not the only problem, however, nor even the main one. The institutional bases of each of the three academic

networks have built-in deficiencies which create obstacles for successful performance in the economy of attention. These built-in deficiencies are different for each institution. In what follows, I discuss the cases of two particular networks in some detail.

THE INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE SPBSU-ICSR NETWORK

The most salient trait that post-Soviet educational institutions inherited from the USSR is their massive standardization. Their structure and curricula follow a single pattern enforced by the Ministry of Education. Even the contents of their programs are regulated by a *Gosstandart* (state standard) which describes in detail which subjects, theories, and methods are to be studied. The contents of any departmental course offerings are not allowed to deviate from that standard by more than 15%. The present *Gosstandart*, issued in 2000, was prepared by a network centered on the sociology department of Moscow State University, which has been headed for 15 years by Vladimir Dobren'kov, who is well-known for his conservative political views and authoritarian administrative methods. The resulting document reflects Dobren'kov's intellectual commitments. Thus, among the 35 theorists mentioned in the *Gosstandart*, there are 15 Russian social scientists from the pre-1917 period (including rather exotic figures like Lilienfeld, Stronin, and Nozhin), but only 12 non-Russian authors active after 1950. Foucault, Goffman, Coleman, and Habermas are not included. The example of *Gosstandart* points to one characteristic feature of the intellectual life of this sociological network: the little attention circulating in Russian universities is predominantly allocated by administrative methods.

The institutional design of post-Soviet universities, which is enforced with such vigor, has very strong built-in obstacles to independent investments of attention from both university teachers and students. The teaching loads are extremely high by Western standards (with no less than twelve hours of teaching a week and very onerous administrative duties for assistant professors). On average, students sit through 24 hours (of 45 minutes each) of classes per week. None have enough time left to work in libraries or to conduct research, which in any case is not highly prized by the system. While the Ministry publicly proclaims the development of research in universities as one of its priorities and criticizes the Soviet practice of confining research to the Academy of Sciences, the university system it maintains provides enough disincentives to discourage any but the most dedicated scholar.

What is more, all university departments have to adapt their programs to meet the demand for a system of higher education that does not challenge its students. The labor market for sociologists in Russia is minuscule compared to the number of sociology students. As mentioned above, the estimated number of sociologists in Saint Petersburg does not exceed 400, even including all university teachers and most market researchers. At the same time, the number of undergraduate and graduate students working toward sociology degrees exceeds 2,000. Most of the students have no plans to enter this labor market, and are interested not in the quality of the education they receive, but in the benefits provided by being a student². As university revenue directly depends (both legally and illegally) on the population of the student body, universities are interested in attracting a large number of students and expelling as few of them as possible. Cutting workloads is the major mechanism for achieving this aim. Most sociology departments in Russia are working as "diploma mills," competing to make their degrees as easy to attain as possible. Given ministerial regulations, this objective cannot be fulfilled by shortening the total period of study or by cutting the number of hours spent in the classroom each week. The only way to lessen the burden is to trivialize the subjects taught. This dominant corporate strategy determines what is expected of teachers. They are to teach standard courses based on the textbooks, lessen the burden for the students, and give as few low grades as possible. According to institutional provisions, the amount of money they receive directly depends on the size of their departments and on the number of times

2 E.g., students are not drafted into the army—a significant benefit given the reputation of that institution and the size of the bribes needed to buy an exemption.

they are able to repeat one and the same lecture. As this amount is miserable in any case, the best strategy for them is to invest once in learning a standard course and to repeat it as many times as possible (sometimes at several universities), spending as little time as possible preparing their next lecture. Taking up a position in this production line nearly always terminates one's career as an attention entrepreneur.

THE "GRANT ECONOMY" AND THE EU-CISR NETWORK

At first glance, the institutional environment of the network specializing in the "grant economy" is totally different. There are no state regulations and income is mostly derived from small-scale research projects sometimes carried out in collaboration with Western partners or directly supported by Western charitable foundations. The academic output of this network, however, turns out to be only marginally more effective. In some respects, its "attention economy" is even more rudimentary than that of the SPbSU or SIRAS circles. The members of the network are often unaware of each other's work even in cases when they work at adjacent desks in the same room. This network issues no periodical and is not represented by any professional association. As a rule, those few who were lucky enough to build an international reputation in the early days of post-Soviet sociology after the fall of the Iron Curtain manage to maintain it, but none of their disciples have succeeded in repeating their achievements. The attention circulating inside the network is allocated extremely unequally, and most of its members receive none of it. Citation analysis confirms the hypothesis that this part of the professional community is heavily dominated by members born between 1960 and 1965, who are much more heavily cited—in both the Russian and the English-language literatures—than their former students born in 1970–1975.

This disparity is probably due to three traits of the academic market. Firstly, this network displays certain features exemplary of capitalist exploitation and of the proletarianization of the masses of researchers. A nearly perfect nation-wide market for academic labor exists for its members. Since the foundations support networking and seminars, this network is geographically much more widespread, and the spatial mobility of its members is much greater than that of others. This market, however, has also produced a perfect capitalist stratification system in which those occupying the lower levels have little chance to climb up. From the very first days of its existence, the growing inequality became obvious. Those possessing the resources necessary for obtaining money from Western partners (languages, personal contacts, and familiarity with the working practices of the foundations) were able to hire others. These others, however, typically had to change employers periodically. Thus there were few opportunities for them to invest enough effort into thoroughly assimilating the literature on a certain substantive field or into gathering enough data to produce an important contribution on their own. Thus an analysis of the CVs of CISR research fellows demonstrates that from one third to one half of their time was spent working on research projects having nothing to do with the area they attempted to specialize in.

Secondly, the lack of solid income made them seek as many projects as possible. However, while gathering field data is usually supported by grant money, the publication of the resulting articles typically is not. The members of the EU-CISR network had a very strong incentive to skip the final phases of the research cycle, that of writing up and otherwise disseminating their findings, and to proceed to the next project. The disproportion between their involvement in the money economy and their involvement in the economy of attention may be illustrated by comparing the printed output of Russian and Western participants in a joint project. A substantial number of projects which resulted in papers and books authored by Western scholars left no textual traces of Russian researchers taking part in them even if the latter had actually done the greater share of data-gathering work. This observation sheds some light on how the dominance of the "core" in the academic world-system is maintained (Alatas 2003). It needs to be added that this unequal success in the economy of attention was sometimes secured by the conscious policies of Western partners to limit their Russian collaborators' rights to using the empirical data collected.

Thirdly and finally, extracting a livelihood from the unstable market of Western grants and contracts dictated an attention-investment strategy which was sometimes less than optimal from the point of view of at-

tracting attention in response. As in the case of the university teachers discussed above, there was strong pressure for the members of the EU-CISR network to cease upgrading their knowledge of the current debate once they had acquired enough skills to obtain the position of an unqualified laborer in a standard qualitative empirical research project. Investing attention into studying the works of their Russian colleagues was a waste of time from a monetary point of view (they received no immediate financial gains). Not surprisingly, none of the younger scientists were able to acquire a reputation of their own in such an attention-scarce environment.

CONCLUSION

The wider social contexts in which academic institutions exist affect the institutions not least through their influence on the motivations of individual scholars. Their incentive systems are designed to prevent disregard for the requirements of the "attention economy." These deterrent mechanisms, however, could fail if the prospect of long-term financial loss and the possibility of a loss of status become less threatening in the face of extreme and acute financial shortage. In this case the investment of academic labor in activities promising rapid monetary returns prevails over investments of attention into ventures potentially yielding long-term returns in the form of renown or status. The total amount of attention circulating in the disciplinary community diminishes, its spread is limited to rudimentary channels, and no one is able to accumulate enough attention to build a strong reputation of his or her own. Albeit in differing ways, each sector of Russia's sociological community is currently in this condition.

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