Dying Unneeded
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A few months into fieldwork some fellow Fulbright scholars told me the story of another anthropologist, who, on his last day in the city of St. Petersburg, “lost it” on a bus. They couldn’t remember why. Perhaps he was pushed or berated for not having the correct change. In any case, he let out a loud string of expletives in English. When he met up with them afterward he was still shaken. They told me it was completely unlike him to react that way. I sympathized with the anthropologist, but the story was funny because of its implied irony. Anthropologists are supposed to fit in and understand local practices. In many ways, it seemed like a story about anthropological failure.

Months later, toward the end of my own fieldwork, I stood in a long line at Kievskyi Station to buy train tickets. When my turn came at the window, the woman sitting behind the glass told me that foreigners had to purchase tickets in a special office. This was true when I lived in Russia in 1994 (although even then I often managed to purchase tickets as a Russian), but the dual pricing system for train tickets—one price for Russians, another for foreigners—had long been defunct. I told her as much, but she was immovable. I raised my voice, asked for her name. I told her that she was wrong, did not know her job, and that times had long changed. I ranted about not having a Western salary. Her face remained stony. By that time there was not one person in the hall who did not know that I was a foreigner, that I wanted train tickets, and that the cashier wasn’t going to sell them to me. I moved to where my husband James, in Russian fashion, was holding a spot in another line. He raised his eyebrows ever so slightly but didn’t say a word. The young
woman behind us caught my eye, smiled, and, shrugging her shoulders, said, “Russia—the land of miracles.” “Exactly,” I responded. I bought the tickets without any problem at the neighboring window.

“Land of miracles” refers to strangeness, otherworldliness, and unpredictability. What happens is beyond explanation. It means something along the lines of “only in Russia”—an ironic statement about confounding circumstances. As the “land of miracles,” Russia is unique and other, even to its inhabitants. Anything can and will happen. When I tried to ask interviewees about their future or the future of Russia, the most common response was “Who knows?” This openness and indeterminacy, as we shall see, is an integral part of Russian character and society. It opens up a space of spontaneity and possibility that is sometimes hard to bear unless it is, in some measure, bound.

I began to think about these episodes—the anthropologist on the bus and the anthropologist in the train station—differently. They did not seem so much anthropological failings as Russian triumphs. Russia had done her work; she’d gotten under the skin. My reaction was more authentic than any anthropological coolness I might have mustered. I drew unnecessary attention to myself, but the Russians who witnessed the outburst were not perturbed. Such an occurrence is normal, even expected, in the land of miracles. It has long been a central part of Russian identity. As Boym writes, “Russian, and later Soviet, cultural identity depended on heroic opposition to everyday life” (1994, 3). I am a product of a middle-class American upbringing, a particular family, and my own temperament. In public I am often reserved and temperate. In losing it, I may have become more Russian—more direct, open, and emotional. Russia drew me out. The moment was liberating. These moments, however much they frustrate, make one feel alive. The individual revolts against authority and is rewarded with a feeling of autonomy. Significantly, this moment had another reward in the Russian context. A stranger and I experienced a fleeting bond related to a struggle against imposed authority. For a moment, we stood united in our recognition of an absurdity we had no control over.

The relationship between order and a sense of autonomy or freedom is central to the story I tell. In the West the Soviet state is commonly regarded as a totalitarian state, where power was centralized and absolute. Citizens of a totalitarian state are not free; their lives are controlled by political authority. Many post-Soviet scholars would agree that this is a far cry from what the Soviet state was able to achieve. Katherine Verdery is succinct: “contrary
to the original ‘totalitarian’ image, socialist states were weak” (1991, 426). More recently Alexei Yurchak’s notion of deterritorialized milieus is instructive. Deterritorialized milieus are “tightly knit networks of friends and strangers who shared some interest, occupation, or discourse” (2006, 131). These networks “drew on the system’s possibilities” (132). Yurchak also writes of “being vnye”—living “simultaneously inside and outside the system” (128). Siting around the kitchen table, among an intimate circle of friends and relatives, Soviet citizens inhabited space that was set apart from the state. That space, however, was not immune from the influence of the state. In fact, the state specified the form and quality of the space. What made the space exceptional was precisely its relationship to the state—just as a deterritorialized area is defined by its relationship to a territory. The Soviet state was central to the logic and significance of social relationships and the experience of freedom in Soviet times.

When the state collapsed, social order was compromised—the order of the state and the interpersonal order. The space where Russians sensed autonomy, indeed freedom, expanded infinitely outward, no longer held in check by the interpersonal order nor by the limits imposed by the state. Space became boundless, dangerous, unbearable, even deadly. “Everyone went their own way” more than one middle-aged Muscovite told me, as if society were spun by a centrifugal force outward. Individuals, spun far apart, ended up alone and isolated. “Each his own way, someone to robbery [razboi], someone else to binge drinking [zapoi].” The Russian “craving for freedom, to lay all caution and pretense aside, no matter the risk” (Nielsen 2006, under “Interlude: Vitya”) was set loose. In a greater tragedy, Russians’ attempts to reestablish social connections with others, to regain a sense of order, sometimes placed them at risk of dying.

For a long time I did not understand this. Instead I saw a paradox I could not resolve—a nostalgia for order alongside a thirst for thwarting it.

SPACE AND ORDER

However much they complain about the vicissitudes of the System, Russians feed off of spontaneity and unpredictability, the unexpected. Social connections frequently render the official rules of the System inapplicable. “No” does not necessarily mean no. When I talked about this with my landlord over tea, he said that it might be easier to live somewhere where rules were clearer, but he also noted that when his mother lived in a small village in
French-speaking Switzerland she found it unbearably boring. Misha told me, “Those people would stop for a red light in the middle of the night.” Having lived two years in French-speaking Switzerland, I had to agree that many of them probably would. Then again, so might I.

Toward the end of my fieldwork, Ira’s husband drove Ira, Ira’s mother, and me to a friend’s house. On the highway, he commented, “In America the cars probably stay within the lanes.” I replied, “And Russians would probably find that boring.” They all laughed. Ira’s mother said, “Well you’ve learned something about Russians.” Rules are not always fixed; this grants individuals space to maneuver. It opens up the door to spontaneity and the unexpected.

In the summer of 2004, my friend Lena and I attended a Fourth of July celebration sponsored by the American Chamber of Commerce. When we arrived, the guards at the gate were not letting any more people into the Kuskovo estate where the festivities were being held. Lena tried to talk her way past to no avail. She then rolled up a bill into a tiny cylinder, gave it to one of the guards, and, grabbing my hand, marched us through the gate without waiting for any indication of permission, verbal or otherwise. The guards—there must have been at least five of them at the one gate—had machine guns slung over their shoulders. Once inside Lena laughed at my obvious discomfort. “What do you think they’re going to do?” That evening we watched fireworks over the lake. Every few yards along the lake shore there were fierce-looking German shepherd police dogs with their handlers. Lena did not seem to notice. Later Lena and I were stuck in traffic as we tried to leave. It looked like it would be impossible to make a left turn. There was a young policeman standing nearby. Lena leaned out the window and sweetly asked, “Are you in charge here?” He said he was. Lena then asked, “How do we get out of here?” He promptly stopped traffic and we were able to turn left. I asked Lena why she went through this exchange, instead of simply asking him to help us turn left. She said, “You have to make them think they are very important and then they will do something for you.” As much as Russians bemoan these situations, they are highly skilled at circumventing rules through social connections, whether long-standing relationships or fleeting instances when an agent of the System is rendered human. Misha, my landlord, spoke of the accomplishment of making a human connection with a policeman—by offering him a cigarette or telling a joke and making him smile. It does not always work, but when it does it is rewarding. Authority becomes human and malleable.
Anthropologist Finn Sivert Nielsen, who did ethnography in St. Petersburg in the early 1980s, once tried to get a drink with his friend Vitya. It proved difficult. They ended up in a hallway behind a door marked “No admittance for unauthorized persons” drinking to the health of an obliging, drunk waiter of an establishment where no wine was being served. Nielsen reports the words of Vitya. “Do you see why I’m happy to live here, and would never consider emigrating to the West?” (2006, under “Interlude: Vitya”). This sense of satisfaction depends on thwarting rules through social connections.

An appetite for the unpredictable and contingent coexists with a yearning for order. This was one of those contrasts I had so much trouble trying to reconcile during the first period of my fieldwork in Moscow, before I realized that reconciliation runs the risk of distorting the very culture I wanted to understand. In Culture: A Problem that Cannot Be Solved, Charles Nuckolls advocates an anthropological theory of paradox. “A paradox is an idea involving two opposing thoughts or propositions that, however contradictory, are equally necessary to convey a more imposing, illuminating, life-related, or provocative insight into truth than either factor can muster on its own right” (1998, 273). Paradox lends culture dynamic and generative possibilities. It is culture’s vitality. To resolve paradox is to fatally distort culture.

Paradox has a special affinity for Russia, where Russians themselves consider their country a place of paradox, contradiction, and absurdity. In fact, an exclamation of “Russia!” might mean just that—difficult to understand, impossible to resolve. Pesmen recounts a Russian who spelled it out for some American visitors. He uttered “Russia!” and then clarified “by adding the usually implicit word ‘paradox’” (2000, 289).

Muscovites thrived at beating the System, and yet many of them, at least among the middle aged, were nostalgic for the old System and the order it imposed. The nostalgia for Soviet order reflects a yearning for the social connections of the past, which were structured and granted potency by the Soviet order. In addition, it reflects a yearning for a particular sense of space or freedom crafted through these connections that is only possible when the official System is routinely circumvented and contested. In Soviet society people were granted a sense of collectivity if only because they were all subject to the state and its version of history. Their lives were to variable degrees organized by the state, especially through their work. This type of collectivity could be construed as Soviet or, alternatively, as anti-Soviet. In another
sense, individuals were integrated through social connections that served to compensate for weaknesses in the System or to right perceived injustices in the System. This sense of collectivity was more intimate and idiosyncratic, even as it bore the mark of the state. Social identity and action depended on the existence of the state, even when they undermined the authority of the state. Social connections, notwithstanding whether they were more superficial, deep, fleeting, or long-standing, were compromised with the dismantling of the Soviet system, the core around which they were organized and put to use. Although the Soviet system imposed rules and limits, these were hardly static. By the time of Brezhnev, who was the head of the Soviet state from 1964 through 1982, the System was widely considered unsystematic and incomprehensible. Soviet order created space for spontaneous social action and, in fact, enabled that action. Over time, these possibilities for autonomous social action grew as the authority of the Soviet state waned.

When middle-aged Muscovites mourn the loss of the Soviet system, they are principally mourning their ability to think and act in a coordinated way with other individuals around them in a way that is creative and not fully determined by the political economy. In many ways Soviet society permitted the thoughts and actions that sustained it, but also those that eventually loosened it.

STRUCTURE AND AGENCY

Central to this work is another, theoretical paradox that represents one of the abiding concerns of social theorists, particularly anthropologists. Anthropologists often speak and write of structure and agency. Indeed, the central preoccupation of anthropologists is showing that who we are and what we do is bound up with the structures of our society. There is a troubling paradox in this, and perhaps most troubling in the West, where we have an idea of the autonomous self, free to act, and a more muted idea of structure that determines self and action. How can the self and the self’s actions be autonomous and yet determined by structure? The short answer to that question is that structure opens up possibilities for agency, even as it closes others off.

Post-Soviet ethnographers also grapple with the relationship between agency and structure. Burawoy and Verdery (1999) draw on the theory of Jürgen Habermas (1989) to suggest that the collapse of state and economy granted more importance to everyday practices.
Our view of the relation between macro structures and everyday practices is that the collapse of party states and administered economies broke down macro structures, thereby creating space for micro worlds to produce autonomous effects that may have unexpected influence over the structures that have been emerging. In the language of Jürgen Habermas . . . the disintegration of the system world has given freer rein for lifeworlds to stamp themselves on the emerging economic and political order. (Burawoy and Verdery 1999, 2)

Burawoy and Verdery posit that the disintegration of the system allows the lifeworld—“a reservoir of taken-for-granteds, of unshaken convictions that participants in communication draw upon in cooperative processes of interpretation” (Habermas 1989, 124)—to flourish. This elides the crisis of the 1990s, which was a crisis not only of the system but more importantly of the norms and values of the lifeworld. “Taken-for-granteds” and “unshaken convictions” were in short supply. Habermas’s theory posits that the central problem of modernity is the colonization of the lifeworld by the system. The system gives shape to the lifeworld and makes communicative action possible. The system’s demise in Russia, at least initially, also harmed the lifeworld. Structure begets agency.

That said, societies continually create structure, and moments of chaos transform into moments of greater stability. Agency opens up again in new ways. Russia is an especially stark example of this process. Of course, individuals have different access to the rules and resources of structure, and thus agency is channeled differently. So while many in post-Soviet Russia are wielding new rules and resources, some are not, and channels of agency are restricted. Kideckel argues that, among industrial workers in postsocialist Romania, “worker collective agency and resistance has largely evaporated” (2008, 12). Structure limits agency.

Dunn’s ethnography of workers in a baby-food factory in Poland suggests that socialism and capitalism hold different forms of power or different “emancipatory potential” (2004, 173) for workers. Capitalism atomizes workers who find themselves “individually as well as collectively disempowered” (173). But capitalism, like socialism, offers power through its own logic. In capitalism power is channeled in practices of consumerism; under socialism power was channeled in practices of redistribution. There is a further difference. Under socialism power or agency was often informal or oppositional. Under capitalism it is more fully subsumed by structure. “The
construction of the self-managing, choosing individual . . . is an integral means of regulating social actors so that the capitalist-democratic political economy runs smoothly” (166). Dunn’s argument suggests that the relationship between agency and structure itself may be reconfigured by particular forms of modernity. Agency reflects structure.

Most middle-aged Muscovites did not celebrate the early 1990s as a moment of independence from the incursions of state and economy into their social worlds. Rather, they experienced these years as chaotic and disordered. Agency was momentarily hindered by the collapse of state and economy because agency had co-opted the mechanisms of state and economy for its own ends.

**GIDDENS ON STRUCTURE**

Giddens’s (1984) theory of structuration is an attempt to resolve the paradox in a way that treats structure and agency as mutually constitutive in social practice. Giddens describes the structure-agency paradox as a tension between the “active, reflexive character of human conduct” and “human behaviour as the result of forces that actors neither control nor comprehend” (xvi). “The basic domain of study of the social sciences,” according to Giddens, “is neither the experience of the individual actor, nor the existence of any form of societal totality, but social practices ordered across space and time” (2). An agent only comes into being through social practices, and these social practices, repeatedly expressed, express structure. Taking Giddens seriously means a focus on Russian culture must fall above the level of the individual and below the level of the state. Structure and agency are both found in this interstitial space that is constituted through social practices.

In Giddens’s theory, structure refers to the rules informing social practices and the resources drawn on in social practices. Giddens takes particular pains to clarify that rules are primarily held in individuals’ “practical consciousness” by which he means that most rules are unspoken and unwritten, and are not consciously known by individuals. Structure is manifest in individuals’ knowledge of what to do next or how to “go on” (1984, 23). Structure is submerged under the visible in society, orchestrating the social practices through which it is made manifest. In the Russian case, structure is not the state but the rules and resources of social practices, some of which derived from the organization of the state.

In Giddens’s theory, structure has no concrete existence apart from social practices, although structure is not social practices per se. Structure refers
to the rules and resources drawn on in social practices. Giddens writes, “Structure is not to be equated with constraint but is always both constraining and enabling” (1986, 25). As structure closes off certain possibilities of action, it opens others. To clarify this he turns to language:

This is easily demonstrated in the instance of learning a first language. No one “chooses” his or her native language, although learning to speak it involves definite elements of compliance. Since any language constrains thought (and action) in the sense that it presumes a range of framed, rule-governed properties, the process of language learning sets certain limits to cognition and activity. But by the very same token the learning of a language greatly expands the cognitive and practical capacities of the individual. (1984, 170)

Giddens writes that structure is not the same as constraint and is “always both constraining and enabling” (1986, 25), but I contend that structure both enables and disables through constraint. This is readily apparent using the example of language. It is only through rules and limits that individuals are able to express themselves in language. Language is not static, though, and individuals’ use of language may bear against these same constraints, applying pressure. It is true that structure constrains and enables, but it does both through constraint. Constraint is central to the concept of structure.

Another analogy may further help to explain what I mean by constraint. Streams and rivers carve out their paths in a landscape. Once established, these channels are exploited and become more permanent aspects of the landscape. Yet, in time, erosion may result in new waterways. Waterways are constraining, but that is how they produce current and erosion. The constraint of the waterway leads to force and change. Without constraint the force of water is dissipated across the landscape and rendered less powerful to change the landscape. In society, structure enables action and change precisely because it constrains. In constraint lies possibility.

I use the notion of constraint to flesh out one of the central points of this work—constraint is integral to the Russian sense of freedom.

AGENCY

In Giddens’s theory the agent retains some separation from social practices. Agents only exist through social practices, but they are able to “reflexively
monitor” social action. Although most of the agent’s “knowledge” is located in practical consciousness, the actor wields the rules and resources of structure and thus must be, in some mindful sense, separate from structure. An agent separate from structure, though, must be primarily involved in repetitive day-to-day routine that contributes to the continuity of both the agent and social life. “Routine is integral both to the continuity of the personality of the agent, as he or she moves along the paths of daily activities, and to the institutions of society, which are such only through their continued reproduction” (1984, 60). Giddens’s agent is theoretically able to “act otherwise” (1984, 14), but must, for the most part, act predictably in order to perpetuate a consonant self and society. Agency is mainly channeled in the service of reproducing selves and institutions.

Pierre Bourdieu has had more influence than Giddens in anthropology, and his practice theory also reserves an agent separate from structure and therefore bound to act in ways that reproduce structure. Bourdieu’s (2004) agent internalizes structure, and this internalized structure, or habitus, is a system of dispositions that are both structured and structuring. That is, dispositions are the embodiment of external structures and also the reproduction of external structure. If Giddens’s agent is located in the mind, Bourdieu’s agent is located in the body, as habitus. Bourdieu’s agent is in danger of being entirely swallowed up by habitus and able to act only through the generative properties of the habitus itself—structure writ small. This agent is not able to “act otherwise” because such action always lies outside the realm of the possible or thinkable. Action can never transgress habitus. Bourdieu, however, contends that action is not purely rote because habitus is itself generative.

As an acquired system of generative schemes objectively adjusted to the particular conditions in which it is constituted, the habitus engenders all the thoughts, all the perceptions, and all the actions consistent with those conditions, and no others. This paradoxical product is difficult to conceive, even inconceivable, only so long as one remains locked in the dilemma of determinism and freedom. . . . Because the habitus is an endless capacity to engender products—thoughts, perceptions, expressions, actions—whose limits are set by the historically and socially situated conditions of its production, the conditioned and conditional freedom it secures is as remote from a creation of unpredictable novelty as it is from a simple mechanical reproduction of the initial conditionings. (1977, 95)
But Bourdieu concedes that the habitus leads to practices that tend “to reproduce the objective structures of which they are the product” (2004, 72). Despite “an endless capacity to engender products,” habitus results in a social theory taken up with routine and habit, as in Giddens.

There are limitations in these two theoretical accounts of agency. One is that the agent remains separate from social structure to a certain degree, ensconced in either the mind (as in Giddens) or body (as in Bourdieu). The other is that there is less importance granted to spontaneity and indeterminacy than to repetition and reproduction. In some sense these theories are too intent at showing how structures determine the possibilities of individuals’ action and thought.

Perhaps most relevant to anthropology is the way that neither of these social theories entertains the possibility that the contours of agency may be a product of culture and political economy. If both structure and agency are located in the interstitial space of society, and if societies are distinct, then the relationship between structure and agency must be, to some extent, variable.

The Russian paradox of space and order grants more room for spontaneity, indeterminacy, and contradiction. Space grants agency, but agency needs order to play off. Without order, space is too wide open and agency is diffused. The space-order paradox also suggests that the friction between space and order imparts a particular sense of freedom from order. Thus constraint and boundedness is integral to the Russian sense of freedom. Without constraint, freedom is frightening, pointless, and potentially mortal.

SOUL

Agency is located not in the individual, but between individuals. This necessitates freeing the individual from the mind and body to bleed out into the space between individuals in society. This will become clearer through reflection on the social character of the Russian soul, dusha, elaborated in a later chapter. For now, it is enough to visualize the individual as a space around the body where the soul resides and interacts with other souls. If an individual is located in society, then an individual can come to emotional and physical harm through the weakening of social practices because these are the individual. When social structure is in crisis, so are individuals.

Individuals must share rules and resources in order to communicate and collaborate. But individuals are positioned differently in relation to those rules and resources. This indeterminacy in social practice grants a feeling
of unpredictability and spontaneity that is an essential part of life. Perhaps counterintuitively, the spontaneity and indeterminacy of social life grant a sense of control because unpredictability is evidence that the reign of routine and habit may be interrupted. In these reprieves, individuals have a sense of freedom from determination. There is more to this story, but it is better told through an ethnography of Russian space, order, and freedom.

Clearly, structure makes agency possible. Individual agency is a misnomer. Agency is always social. Thoughts, actions, and words require constraint in order to make them meaningful and potent. Thoughts take form only within a mental framework. Actions must act upon something. Words only make sense as part of language. Individuals are differently constituted and positioned in a matrix of social practices. Together, individuals hold and use social structures, often conflicting ones, to create new avenues for thought, speech, and action. Agency challenges the very structures that make it possible by pushing up against them, exerting pressure, and causing change.

Nonetheless, the availability of more-or-less stable social forms enables us to conceive of others, imagine their motivations, and know them. Because we have a framework through which to see and interpret the complex social world around us, we can think and we can act. In essence, we can be social beings.