

“P”UBLIC” SOCIOLOGY IN RUSSIA

© Laboratorium. 2009. No. 1: 205–207

Vasily Bushnev, Elena Moskovkina, Natalia Savelieva, Oleg Zhuravlev

Before discussing the need for public sociology in Russia, we must ask whether the conditions for the production of scientific knowledge in sociology are in place. It is virtually impossible in Russia to institutionalize autonomous sociological research. To a significant extent this has to do with the history of the discipline: Russian sociology emerged due to non-sociological factors, and sociological labor is strictly divided into education and academic research. There is no demand for researchers on the educational market, and the research market is dominated by market research and made-to-order studies commissioned for political purposes. Meanwhile the state is scaling down investment into sociological and other research.

Public sociology, which translates the results of scholarly work into the public sphere, is only relevant where the knowledge so produced is autonomous. Sociologists must not be politicians. The production cycle of sociological research must be governed by a professional logic. The sociologist must not be a “total intellectual,” in Michel Foucault’s term. Michael Burawoy asks: “Sociology for what?” and “Sociology for whom?” But the main question is: “Sociology whence?”—the question about the social location where sociological discourse is produced. Thus, Academician Gennadii Osipov demands that “the authorities listen to sociologists,” yet at the same time he is trying to make sociology subservient to the political demand of the day. Dean Dobren’kov uses the same rhetoric, but has turned the sociology department at Moscow State University into a business. The problem in these cases lies in the corruption of the principles of scholarly production (in the case of Osipov’s Institute of Socio-Political Research at the Russian Academy of Sciences) and of the production of scholars (in the case of MSU’s sociology department).

The absence of a large-scale public response by the professional community to events at the sociology department may be explained by how the division of labor works in Russian sociology. Sociology as a university discipline is represented by teachers who occupy positions within the university hierarchy. At present, the university is a corporation where the dominant positions are those that give access to administrative and bureaucratic resources. Successful careers are reserved for those who have control over the organization of the teaching process (which includes such powerful administrative acts as setting up a department, legitimizing a new discipline, or deciding on required readings) as well as hiring and funding decisions. Sociology teachers who occupy dominated positions are being exploited; for them, the most important skill is the ability to teach as many different courses as possible.

The university hierarchy reshapes the mechanism that regulates academic careers by rewarding scholarly work, since those who occupy the dominant positions within that hierarchy have a *de facto* monopoly on awarding research degrees. This turns teachers into hired laborers who sell their “encyclopedic” erudition and capacity for work, measured by the time they spend on teaching and administrative duties (such as supervising dissertations and theses, or holding departmental office hours). A successful career in teaching depends, among

Vasily Bushnev, Oleg Zhuravlev, Elena Moskovkina, and Natalia Savelieva are members of the OD group, which co-ordinated the student protests at Moscow State University’s sociology department in 2007–8. E-mails: darhont@yandex.ru, OlegZhur@yandex.ru, yaroslavkina@yandex.ru, natasha-saveleva@yandex.ru.

other things, on establishing good relations with the university administration. Thus, at the universities, teaching is increasingly turning into a subordinate practice, a thankless task which (through a series of filters based on starting conditions and resources available after graduation) attracts provincial lecturers who tend to be loyal to the administration and harbor no scholarly ambitions. Career advancement is dependent on seemingly non-essential practices outside the ostensible manifestation of academic work, such as writing speeches for deans, or ghostwriting chapters for textbooks and monographs published under the name of department heads or administrators. These practices are universally known but never discussed by either the administration or the “victims” themselves. This is no accident: these activities are inscribed into social relations of exchange and mutual concessions which secure young teachers the goodwill of the administration and advancement along the career ladder. Political indifference and the acceptance of a vicious circle of silence are among the main conditions that keep the university’s power hierarchy stable and ensure the dominance of those who hold administrative positions. As a case in point, Dean Dobren’kov is chairman of the Teaching Methods Association within the Ministry of Education as well as president of the Russian Sociological Association he himself founded, which incorporates sociology professors at provincial universities. These networks channel the exchange of loyalty for reviews, ministerial stamps of approval, and conference participation.

We note that professors who have made successful careers at the Academy of Sciences based on approval of their scholarly work tend to view the OD Group as a collection of excessively politicized young radicals. They are afraid of being associated with OD and keep their distance vis-à-vis events at Moscow State University’s sociology department and our group’s activities. On the one hand, they approve of the objective of fighting to improve standards of education, condemn the actions taken by the administration, and agree that the situation in the department must change. On the other hand, they describe the OD activists as overly radical young rebels with no knowledge or experience, both of which are supposedly indispensable to understand the true state of affairs in the academic world—the “hidden” conditions and motives behind the actions taken by the departmental administration and rector’s office.

The attitudes of university-based sociologists exhibit greater variation. Some give us paternal slaps on the back; some dismiss OD’s activities as “youth radicalism”; others abstain from expressing any serious judgment (considering that any statement would be overly political); still others deny OD the right to be the judge of what is happening at the department. In sublimated form, this view of the struggle at the department was expressed in Livejournal blogs, where some scholars, writing under pseudonyms, developed accounts of the face-off between the dean and the students that often took the form of outright conspiracy theories. Pronouncements of this sort served to widen the distance between university-based sociologists and members of OD; they may be interpreted as attempts to resolve the neurotic conflict between the desire to express one’s view of events at the department and preserve the depoliticized position of an apolitical lecturer.

These acts of distancing and “reserved silence” were one way to defend the university hierarchy that these academics are part of. Viewed as an extreme, borderline case, the sociology department opens up a wide perspective for assessments of the state of sociology in Russia. However, the authors of these statements refuse to view the existing university hierarchy as the underlying reason behind the emergence of institutions such as MSU’s sociology department, dismissing this view as being “excessively politicized” and “radical.” While they will venture some radical remarks in behind-the-scenes conversations and at face-to-face meetings, representatives of the Academy (with the exception of a number of sociologists whose support for us was overwhelmingly public), when offered the opportunity to make public judgments and assert their position, limit themselves to evasive statements or temper their assessments by making respectful gestures toward the existing hierarchy of authority. Thus, while criticizing Osipov’s position and commenting on the newly created Union of Sociologists of Russia, a number of sociologists made digressions in which they expressed their respect for Osipov’s services to Russian sociology. The hierarchical relationship between students and teachers must remain unshakeable, and so must the established hierarchy of authority, to be accepted by all no matter what.

"Practical sociology," represented by sociologists working "to order," is located at the boundary between the university and the research market. The most successful positions in it are occupied by agents who have managed to organize "businesses" that mass-produce sociological and market research. The dominant positions in this field are defined by the presence of a social network of influential and lucrative clients as well as by the ability to organize a "conveyor belt" of research that yields revenue due to a growing volume of orders and cheap labor performed by students or low-paid staff. Interviewers are responsible for a standardized, routine set of operations, while project managers and report writers perform the most important tasks, those of making the data obtained compatible with the client's conception of the desired results. Those who dominate "practical sociology" often head departments, thus providing their businesses with scholarly and university-based legitimacy.

As a result, we get two different but homologous hierarchies and forms of exploitation, which offer no positions to sociologists with long-term research projects. The creation of OD is an attempt to speak publicly about the state of affairs at universities and in the market for research services—two interrelated and interdependent segments of Russian sociology. It is also an attempt to reflect upon the conditions of our own activities—and to change those conditions.

Authorized translation from the Russian by Mischa Gabowitsch