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VOLGA FARMERS AND ARCTIC HERDERS:

COMMON (POST)SOCIALIST EXPERIENCES IN RURAL RUSSIA

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Introduction¹

When discussing privatisation and farm reorganisation in rural Russia, a divide tends to be drawn between the temperate agricultural zones of southern and European Russia versus the tundra and taiga zones of Siberia (in the centre of the Russian Federation) and the Far North (at the eastern end of the Russian Federation). The former is often taken to represent "Russia" in its essence, while the latter tends to be exoticised as something distant and more akin to the rest of the circumpolar Arctic than to Russia. In anthropology, this state of affairs is exacerbated by the fact that ethnographic research undertaken in Siberia and the Far North has tended historically (in both Soviet and post-Soviet periods) to focus on "indigenous peoples," and there is an abundance of it (witness the post-Soviet flourishing of Western ethnographies -- see for example Anderson

¹ I wish to acknowledge the village administrations of Paigusovo, Republic of Marii El, and Snezhnoe, Chukotka, without whose open accessibility and generous assistance I would not have been able to carry out my work and this paper would not have been possible.

2000, Balzer 1999, Grant 1995, Kerttula 2000, Ziker 2002), while ethnographic research in rural European Russia has focused on “peasants,” and this research is extremely sparse (cf. Gambold Miller 2001, Hivon 1995, Perrotta1998). Consequently, material on East European peasants is sometimes taken to stand in for the lacunae in research on rural Russia, and if Russian peasants seem a world apart from the indigenous reindeer herders of Siberia, then all the more do East European peasants seem so. However, Eastern Europe is *not* Russia, while Siberia *is*.

In the Soviet system of agriculture, the country and all of its diverse agricultural zones – from the black earth to the boreal tundra -- was treated as a whole. “Agriculture” (*sel’skoe khoziaistvo*) encompassed everything from cereal production and farm animal husbandry to reindeer herding and fox fur farming. In the early 1990s, Russia’s privatisation program was applied evenly across the entire country, so that state and collective farms from Briansk Oblast’ to Kamchatka were undergoing reorganisation at the same time according to the same template with the same immediate results in terms of the organisational forms adopted (Van Atta 1994, Wegren 1998).² The same evolving legal system – including a recently passed and hotly debated law on alienation of agricultural land – applies equally in Russia from west to east, regional attempts to loosen the reins of federal control notwithstanding.³

² Regional variations in organisational forms and in policy began to develop later, as failing enterprises were again reorganized or consolidated, and varying forms of property were adopted.

³ While there are a few federal laws that apply specifically to the North and are tailored to local conditions there, there are also special laws applying to only the Volga region, or to only the Black Earth region, for example – that is, Siberia is not an isolated case set off from the rest of Russian agriculture.

This paper, in the spirit of comparison that characterised our group at MPISA, begins with the question: what would happen if one compared farm reorganisation in a “peasant” village of European Russia with farm reorganisation in an “indigenous” village in the northern tundra? I argue that not only is it entirely possible to make such a comparison, but indeed such comparison must be done if one is to understand the full range of implications of privatisation and reorganisation in post-Soviet Russia. Thus I compare here two villages from these two different regions in Russia in terms of the difficult changes these villages have undergone as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the implementation of Russia’s program for reorganisation of state and collective farms. The villages are located at a great distance from one another, and the links between them are few, although not non-existent.⁴ One is the village of Snezhnoe, located in the western tundra of the Chukotka Autonomous Region, which is itself located on the farthest northeast border of Russia just opposite from the U.S. state of Alaska on the Bering Strait. The other village is Paigusovo, located near the Volga River in the Republic of Marii El, which itself is located in central European Russia about midway between Moscow and the Ural Mountains.⁵

⁴ My selection of the village in Marii El – and in fact, the impetus for the entire project – came as a result of my close acquaintance with a Chukotkan family that has kin connections in that village. The husband/father of this family was born and raised in Marii El and made arrangements for me to be hosted by his sister and her husband, who is the mayor of Paigusovo.

⁵ My depth of experience in Snezhnoe, which I have visited 3 times since 1996, far exceeds that in Paigusovo, which I visited once briefly in 2001. However, my long experience working in Snezhnoe and my familiarity with village records there did lay a foundation for working efficiently in Paigusovo, such that I was able to accomplish far more there in far less time than I had ever accomplished in Snezhnoe. Moreover, my excellent contacts in Paigusovo as a result

Snezhnoe's population is predominantly Chukchi, an ethnic group classed as "indigenous peoples" both in Russian nationality politics and scholarly ethnic sensibilities, while Paigusovo's population is predominantly Mari, a Finno-Ugrian ethnic group in which Finnish and Hungarian scholars take a particular interest.

MAP 1 about here

Neither Chukchis nor Maris have been studied ethnographically in terms of how they have adapted to the reorganisation of the collective farms that had been at the centre of their social lives for most of the twentieth century. Both groups have been studied primarily in terms of their ethnic identity – Maris as a participant in the wider Finno-Ugrian identity (cf. Lallukka 2001, Saarinen 2001, Taagepera 2001), Chukchis as a participant in the "Small Peoples of the North" in Russia or the wider "Fourth World" indigenous identity (cf. Gray 1998, Kerttula 1997, Krupnik & Vakhtin 2002). Yet both groups have been equal participants in the socialist system of collectivised agriculture in the Soviet Union, and this point forms the basis for comparison in this paper. The details of each group's participation in Soviet agriculture are quite different: In Snezhnoe, the main economic activity of the local *sovkhos* (state farm) was reindeer herding, while in Paigusovo the local *kolkhoz* (collective farm) was engaged in cereal and potato cropping and dairy farming. Yet in each case the rhythms of life were regulated by the farm production plan and the socialist competition, by the quest to establish "Culture" in what were considered

of the Chukotka Marii El link (mentioned in note 4) greatly facilitated my research. Since I was living in a home with a family in Paigusovo, I had much more intimate access to local lifeways even than in Snezhnoe, where I was always provided my own separate apartment.

“backward” rural areas, and by respect for the farm Director as the main “boss” of the village. Moreover, both Chukchis and Maris were acutely aware of being Not-Russian in a Soviet Union dominated by Russian “elder brothers.”

This paper comprises a comparative overview of both collectivisation and decollectivisation in these two villages, embedded in two very different agricultural regions in Russia. I provide a profile of each village, and go on to review briefly the history of socialist collectivisation during the Soviet period before describing the process of capitalist decollectivisation following the collapse of the Soviet Union, focusing on the distribution of land and property in each village. I conclude with an examination of outcomes and responses to the post-Soviet changes, with a particular focus on individual strategies of village residents (as opposed to focusing on the current state of the remnant enterprises leftover after reorganisation of the collective farms, as in the papers by Gambold Miller and Heady, and by Stammler and Ventsel in this volume).

What I have found in both villages is that, although the general sentiment has been a preference to continue working collectively in some form, the villagers who are doing the best job of surviving and creating stability for themselves are those who have abandoned whatever remnants of the collective farm that still exist and have found ways to become self-sufficient, and in some cases even entrepreneurial. However, lest this be taken as a recommendation of individual entrepreneurship as the solution to problems in rural Russia, it must be noted that even those who might seem to be individually self-sufficient actually rely on some form of collective mutual aid, whether kin-based or neighbourly. The few who have made a success of entrepreneurship are uniquely enterprising individuals who would probably pursue such a course and make a success of it under any circumstances, a point that Gambold Miller has also noted elsewhere (2002:230). Moreover, these are people who started out with advantages they had

accrued in the Soviet period, and which reorganisation either did not erode or in some cases actually enhanced. There simply are not adequate resources – land, animals, equipment, ready cash -- for everyone to be equally entrepreneurial, and the most successful are in many cases those who succeed in monopolizing available resources to the exclusion of others. Moreover, the barriers to obtaining credit to purchase inputs are overwhelming for most villagers. Therefore, rather than advocating individual entrepreneurship, the best recommendation seems to be greater support for existing collective structures in the village, which could balance the lack of access to exclusive control of resources. My conclusions would thus reinforce those of Gambold Miller and Heady in this volume.

“The” Agrarian Question as it was posed by nineteenth century Marxists and twentieth-century Leninists (cf. Kautsky 1988[1899]) stemmed from a view of the peasantry as a problem, specifically as an obstacle to socialist revolution. It was a “what is to be done?” question demanding a solution. In the context of the postsocialist reform of agriculture in Russia, it seems that the form of the question (peasantry as problem) has not changed, but the socialist content has merely been replaced with capitalist content. I would suggest that the twenty-first century agrarian question for Russia should be posed not as a problem, but truly as a question, namely this: how are individuals and families and communities in rural Russia managing to live their daily lives and look toward the future? What are their concerns, their strategies, their failures, and their successes? And how can their own local priorities be supported? It is, if you will, a question of moral economy. This is at the centre of my ethnography of these two villages in rural Russia. In the sections that follow, I focus on the lives of village residents in Paigusovo and Snezhnoe in their experience of the post-Soviet changes happening around them and to them.

Snezhnoe and Paigusovo: A Tale of Two Villages

My description of each village focuses narrowly on the village location itself, although in both cases there is a wider context. Limiting the focus in this way helps make the cases more comparable; the two villages by themselves are quite similar, but as the focus pulls further and further back to take in more of this surrounding context, there are more and more contrasts to account for. In the case of Paigusovo, which is the administrative centre for an association of villages governed by a single *selsovet*, or rural council, the wider context takes in 22 smaller hamlets (with a total population of 1719) and a network of crisscrossing relationships between them. Some inhabitants of these hamlets are employed in the former “Paigusovskoe” *kolkhoz* based in the village of Paigusovo. The total land holdings of the wider Paigusovo *selsovet* is about 4000 hectares, the majority under crop production. In the case of Snezhnoe, which is an isolated village in the tundra, the wider context takes in mobile brigades of reindeer herders, who have similar crisscrossing relationships. These herders are employed in the former “Anadyrskii” *sovkhos* based in the village of Snezhnoe. The total land holdings of the former *sovkhos* is on the order of 3 million hectares. For the purposes of this paper, those 22 hamlets surrounding Paigusovo and those reindeer brigades orbiting Snezhnoe will be for the most part left out of the picture. I focus instead on the main village in each case, which occupies the centre of the constellation.

The two villages are roughly the same size, both in terms of physical dimensions as well as population (see Table 1). There are also similarities in average household size (about 3 persons per household) and the ethnic composition – Russians comprise a small minority in each case. Neither has any paved roads, although Paigusovo is at least connected to the district centre as well as to the regional capitol by paved roads – Snezhnoe has no outside road links whatsoever. The village can be reached only by river barge and helicopter in the summer and fall, or via the

“winter road” that is carved along the frozen Anadyr’ River by passenger tanks (*vezdekhody*) from January to late April. This makes Snezhnoe’s residents far more isolated and far less mobile than Paigosovo’s.

Table 1. Profile of the two villages		
	Paigusovo (2001 data)	Snezhnoe (1996 data)
Population	320	376
Number of Households	96	122
Average Household Size	3.3 persons (range 1-6 persons)	3.1 persons (range 1-9 persons)
Ethnic Breakdown	Mari 93% Russian 6% Chuvash 1%	Chukchi 47% Chuvan 27% Russian 16% Other* 10%
Households with land	virtually all	22
Average size of holdings	about 3 hectares (range .4-15 hectares)	207 sq.m. (about .02 hectares) (range 16-832 sq.m.)
*Other includes Chuvash, Evenk, Jewish, Itel'men, Komi, Koryak, Lamut, Nentsy, Ukrainian, Yukagir and Yakut)		

Village layout, however, is remarkably similar in both cases, and this is attributable to the determination with which the Soviet Union sought to establish fully functioning and standardized villages even in its remotest regions. In both villages, substantial new construction occurred in

the 1980s. Each village has a central lane that is lined with its key institutions: the *sovkhoz/kolkhoz* headquarters, the *selsovet* office, the house of culture, the library, the school. In each village, a store is located a short walk from this “centre,” and there are dedicated residential districts laid out on detectable grids. Paigusovo being much older, its houses are primarily wooden single-family dwellings with carved wooden trim typical of the Volga region. These houses have no plumbing, but have wells located nearby. A few newer, brick-and-plaster duplexes near the *kolkhoz* headquarters, for the most part inhabited by key *kolkhoz* personnel, have been situated close to the village centre, and these have plumbing. Snezhnoe has no single-family dwellings, but is dominated by housing of three types: older single-story multiple unit buildings, newer two-storey eight-unit buildings near the *sovkhoz* headquarters (similarly occupied by key *sovkhoz* personnel), and the most recent two-storey 16-unit apartment complexes. There is no plumbing in the village, but water is drawn from the nearby river through pipes to communal spigots. A key difference in the way space is structured in the two villages is that, in Paigusovo, housing plots were designed to allow adjoining space for the purpose of household gardening and animal keeping, while in Snezhnoe no need was seen for this – and thus the block construction makes the village incongruously reminiscent of a micro city.

In both villages, land immediately surrounding the village centre is exploited for personal use by villagers. In Paigusovo, virtually all families possess some land, and the land is carefully partitioned into cultivated parcels that have been assigned to families by the *selsovet*. I had ready access to maps that showed the layout and family distribution of these plots, along with the area in hectares. This land is planted with crops that are used partially for subsistence and animal fodder, but primarily for market, with cabbage, potatoes and hay being among the key crops. In Snezhnoe, documents showed that perhaps two dozen families had been allotted plots of land nearby the village upon which to build crude greenhouses, although maps of these parcels were

not available and administration officials were equivocal about exactly how land had been assigned. However, in a sense, all villagers have as much of a relationship to land as do the villagers of Paigusovo, since all – in particular indigenous residents -- feel a sense of moral entitlement to the tundra. For the most part, the land surrounding the village for a radius of several kilometres is uncultivated and is an important source of wild plant resources that all villagers both communally and cooperatively harvested – a variety of berries, mushrooms, pine nuts, and other tundra roots and leaves. Some of the gathered resources were kept for household use, while some were traded to the *sovkhov* for staple foods like flour, oil, rice and macaroni. Villagers were also able to exploit additional wild resources of fish (the village is located on a major river) and game, although technically much of what they harvested here was considered poaching. Thus, although specific parcels of land were not assigned to most families in Snezhnoe, land was nevertheless counted by each household as one of its assets.

Occupations in the two villages are strikingly similar. In both cases, the remnant of the former *sovkhov/kolkhoz* remains the key employer. The total number officially employed in the Paigusovo *kolkhoz* was 385, more than half the total workforce but this included residents from the surrounding hamlets. The total number officially employed in the Snezhnoe *sovkhov* was 86, also more than half the total workforce. In both villages, the other occupations included teachers (accounting for almost as many jobs as the following categories combined), culture (in the House of Culture and the library), administration, shop clerks, utilities (telephone office, heat and electricity), and medical technicians. In neither village was there any kind of manufacturing or other productive enterprise aside from the *sovkhov/kolkhoz*.

The occupational structure in Snezhnoe has changed much more in recent years than it has in Paigusovo, and this is related to migration issues. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the subsequent reorganisation of the state farm, a large number of non-Native residents

in Snezhnoe left the village to return to the other parts of Russia from whence they had come. They had originally been attracted to Snezhnoe by well-paid professional positions in which they could earn salaries much higher than what they would have earned outside of the Russian north. Consequently, Snezhnoe lost nearly its entire top tier of *sovkhoz* professionals – the director, its economist, accountant, radio operator, warehouse supervisor, construction supervisor and chief mechanic -- as well as trained professionals in the village *selsovet* who maintained village records, along with several teachers.⁶ This loss of professionals caused a crisis in the village, and for a number of years their positions were simply left vacant, as there was not a single person available who was trained to do the work (eventually standards were lowered, and untrained personnel began to fill these positions). Paigusovo's population, conversely, has remained much more stable since the collapse of the Soviet Union, since the majority of residents were born and raised within the surrounding district, if not in the village itself. The *kolkhoz* did lose some of its key professionals, but these people generally shifted to other professional positions within the village (for example, the former *kolkhoz* director became the village mayor) or to private farming. Trained professionals remaining within the *kolkhoz* were moved into the vacated positions – not an option for Snezhnoe, as there was always a shortage of trained professionals to begin with. In

⁶ This loss of trained professionals accounts for the difference in the quality of the records I was able to obtain in each village. In Paigusovo, village records were up-to-date and neatly maintained, and I was given free access to them, as well as cheerful assistance in interpreting them. In Snezhnoe, records were already many years out-of-date and their accuracy doubtful, and there was no one knowledgeable enough to provide adequate assistance in interpreting them – although access to record books was freely given.

spite of this difference that would seem to favour the Paigusovo *kolkhoz* over the Snezhnoe *sovkhov*, both village enterprises were failing.

The socialist background

Ironically, although Snezhnoe is much more remotely located than Paigusovo, the Snezhnoe *sovkhov* is much older than the Paigusovo *kolkhoz*. The selsovet of Paigusovo was formed out of its 22 villages in 1954 (the villages themselves are much older), and the *kolkhoz* was brought together in the main village at about that time. On the other hand, the location of Snezhnoe was targeted for the establishment of a new village and *sovkhov* by the Soviet Department of Agriculture in 1929, at a time when the collectivisation movement was barely underway across the country. It was one of a handful of experimental stations set up in regions of the Far North to prepare the way for the establishment of *sovkhov* as the primary organisational form of the reindeer economy, and in fact it was the first *sovkhov* to be established in Chukotka (Druri 1989:4). The early start can be accounted for by the zeal of the Soviet authorities. In many ways, Chukotka's very remoteness and intractableness made it a particularly enticing challenge to the Soviet mission of bringing socialist enlightenment to every dark corner of the country. The idea seemed to be that if it could be made to work in Chukotka – a place so far from the centre and so close to the capitalist “Other” in America – then it could surely be made to work anywhere.

Throughout this paper, I have been using two terms to refer to these collectivised enterprises: *kolkhoz* and *sovkhov*. Although it is true that a common pattern in collectivization began with the initial creation of a *kolkhoz* (a collective enterprise) and that many of these *kolkhozy* were later consolidated with others and converted into *sovkhov* (state enterprises), both Paigusovo and Snezhnoe represent exceptions. In the case of Paigusovo, the enterprise remained a *kolkhoz* until the time of reorganisation in the early 1990s, and the remnant enterprise is to this

day commonly referred to as “*kolkhoz*.” In Snezhnoe, the enterprise was created from the very start as a *sovkhos*, a rare case in the Soviet Union. As in Paigusovo, Snezhnoe residents refer to the remnant enterprise as they always have, as the “*sovkhos*.”

The differing initial organisational forms of the two enterprises accounts for an important difference in the experience of the workers. In a *sovkhos*, workers were considered employees of the state and were paid a regular salary. Thus Snezhnoe’s *sovkhozniki* were conditioned early on to a factory-like work-discipline and an employee mentality. The *sovkhos* was apparently quite successful and experienced growth throughout its existence, and with their regular salary the employees – even reindeer herders – enjoyed purchasing power in the village store, which was well-stocked and through which even new furniture and eventually television sets could be ordered. In Paigusovo, *kolkhozniki* were initially paid for their labor only in kind with *kolkhoz* products. The only source of cash was through the *priusadebnyi uchastok* or personal garden plot adjoining the farmstead, plus personal livestock holdings. Thus villagers were highly motivated to give time and effort to their personal plots, but as *kolkhozniki* they were obliged to work a minimum number of days per year for the *kolkhoz* or face a penalty.

Yet here is also a key difference between the life experience of villagers in the two villages: In Paigusovo, each household was allotted up to .40 hectare for the personal garden plot, and the climate allowed the planting of a full range of garden vegetables on these plots. Snezhnoe is located in the arctic tundra, and therefore household gardening is practically impossible without a greenhouse, and individual greenhouses would have been a rarity in Soviet times, if only because building materials were not available locally and were difficult to obtain (greenhouses built in the 1990s seemed to have been cobbled together with salvaged wood, and the village administration allocated plastic sheeting to cover them in the growing season). For similar reasons animal keeping was also not common in Snezhnoe except in the *sovkhos*, whereas in Paigusovo each

household was allowed to keep up to two sows and one cow, and an unlimited number of chickens. In the absence of household garden plots, gathering of wild tundra resources from the area surrounding the village was an activity that Snezhnoe residents always engaged in to supplement their diets. Yet villagers described a different atmosphere when they spoke of the Soviet period – back then, the gathering activity was treated as more of an afternoon outing, something families and friends did for the pleasure of the activity as well as the pleasure of the extra food products. Although they continued in the post-Soviet period to engage in gathering activities collectively, there was now a sense of desperate dependence on this resource for subsistence. I often encountered women returning from a day's gathering, and their emotional state would range from cheerfully ecstatic if they had a full bucket of berries to show, to nervously despondent if the day's pickings had been slim.

In the 1970s the Paigusovo *kolkhoz* started paying small salary, plus sharing proceeds from the sale of the harvest (meaning each worker received a share according to what he harvested personally). This enabled *kolkhozniki* to live off that salary and accumulate savings by selling their personal produce, which was encouraged by the state as evidenced by the fact that state procurement centers were set up to buy products. Thus, although it was still technically a *kolkhoz*, the enterprise began to resemble a *sovkhaz*, and the villagers' lifestyle in some ways came to be more similar to that in Snezhnoe in terms of work rhythms and financial security.

The 1980s was a time of significant reorganization in agriculture across the Soviet Union as a result of new policy instituted by Gorbachev beginning in 1986. A key component of the new policy was an approach called *khozrasschet* or self-financing, which handed over to enterprises – and in the case of Paigusovo, directly to brigades of workers -- the responsibility for production. Enterprises still received a plan from above, and they still sold their produce to the state for predictable prices, but they had to take on more responsibility to organize their own labor with

the resources at their disposal. After subtracting expenses, they got whatever was leftover from the sale of produce. Villagers in both Paigusovo and Snezhnoe pinpoint this as the period when the tumultuous process of reorganization began, rather than the period of post-Soviet reforms in the 1990s.

Bringing the privatisation process to the village

The basic facts of the process of privatization in Russia are by now well known: in 1991, then-president Boris Yeltsin began issuing a series of decrees requiring all state enterprises in Russia, including *kolkhozy* and *sovkhozy*, to reorganise themselves into joint-stock companies or ‘farming enterprises’ (*fermerskoe khoziaistvo*) (cf. Wegren 1994). This precipitated a ripple of responses throughout Russia’s regions as local administrations began seeking ways to implement the new policies. In both Paigusovo and Chukotka, this reorganisation was accompanied by a great buzz of opinion and much public speculation about what the future held for villagers. In Paigusovo, the early 1990s came to be characterized as the time of the “farmer movement” (*fermerskoe dvizhenie*), since individual, entrepreneurial farming was clearly the model being pushed for adoption on all fronts. However, those who opted to become individual farmers – that is, to sever their links to whatever fate awaited the *kolkhoz* -- remained in the minority. Several villagers in Paigusovo reported to me that those who took the entrepreneurial step to become a “farmer” (*fermer*) were stigmatized and distrusted in Paigusovo at first. The vast majority of villagers, faced with negative opinion and what seemed like overwhelming practical obstacles, took what they viewed as the safest course and kept their land in the collective enterprise. Even some of those who took their land out merely farmed it on the side while they kept other jobs in the village.

In Snezhnoe – actually, in Chukotka generally – rather than seeing the changes as a “farmer movement,” there was instead much rhetoric about indigenous peoples returning to “traditional” forms of economy, regaining their ancestral lands, and finally becoming owners of their reindeer herds once again. Newspaper articles reporting on this period generally convey a positive attitude towards this “herder” movement, although perhaps it was merely the novelty of imagining indigenous peoples as entrepreneurs that garnered the positive attention. Here also, those who privatised reindeer herds and broke away from the collective enterprises in Chukotka (whether indigenous herders or Russian entrepreneurs) were in the minority. In Snezhnoe only one brigade of reindeer herders, out of four remaining brigades in the *sovkhos* (at its height in the late 1980s there had been 12) opted to take the individual, entrepreneurial route, withdrawing 21 employees (of about 84) from the main *sovkhos* in 1992. This enterprise now had to negotiate market conditions and become entirely self-sufficient, bargaining where it could for supplies, transportation, access to markets, etc., either with the remnant-*sovkhos* director or with independent, itinerant traders. This proved more difficult than anyone had anticipated, and the new enterprise gave up within a year and rejoined the main remnant *sovkhos*.

Thus individual herding was short-lived in Snezhnoe – but individual *farmsteading* by former *sovkhos* employees (those not directly engaged in herding reindeer) slowly began to emerge as an option pursued by an enterprising few within the village. Later on, entrepreneurial hunting also became the aspiration of several former herders. These trends in Snezhnoe are discussed below, as well as the development of individual farming in Paigusovo.

The distribution of property

In both Paigusovo and Snezhnoe, there are no pre-collectivisation records of individual title to any land in the village or its environs. In Snezhnoe, the reasons for this are obvious: the village

was constructed on tundra that was in effect being colonized by the Soviet Union as the village and its *sovkhos* were being established. When I asked villagers in Paigusovo about pre-collectivisation land titles, most said they did not really know about it, but doubted there was any such record. One consultee said he believed there had been *obshchiny* (communal settlements) in the area before the revolution that would have collectively owned the land, and that there had never been any major landlords in the area. Thus neither the Paigusovo *kolkhoz* nor the Snezhnoe *sovkhos* had to be concerned with specific land or property restitution. Both villages consequently followed a formula for property and land distribution that seems to have been fairly standard throughout the Russian countryside.

It should be noted that liquidation of *kolkhozy* and *sovkhozy* was not obligatory in Russia. One of Yeltsin's decrees, in response to protests over the initial insistence that all must thoroughly privatize, allowed for the option of essentially retaining the same organizational structure and merely reregistering the enterprise with a new name. This option was followed in both Paigusovo and Snezhnoe. Even in this case, however, *kolkhoz* and *sovkhos* members had to be given the prerogative of opting out of the collective and taking their shares with them.

In general, two kinds of property got distributed: "property shares" (*immushchestvennyi pai*) and "land shares" (*zemelnyi pai*). Property shares could only be claimed by *kolkhozniki* or *sovkhozniki* who quit the enterprise altogether – by taking the shares, they were basically cashing out and striking out on their own. These shares could not be claimed as land – land was handled separately – rather, they were formulated as a cash value equivalent to what the employee was entitled to take. The value of each employee's share was calculated based on a combination of how many years one worked and what salary level one had reached. These shares had to be claimed directly from the *kolkhoz/sovkhos* and were generally paid in kind (if they were paid at all), even though the shares were assigned a cash value. In practice, one had to claim these shares

at the very start of the privatization process or in effect forfeit them, because in later years both the remnant *kolkhoz* in Paigusovo and the remnant *sovkhov* in Snezhnoe were in debt and had virtually no assets from which to pay out property shares any more, neither in cash nor in kind.

In both Paigusovo and Snezhnoe I heard tales of shares that were never collected, and whose owners knew they never would be. In Paigusovo my host Leonid, the current mayor of the village who was director of the *kolkhoz* at the time of privatisation, did not claim his share right away. He was equivocal about the reasons why, but it was fairly clear that it had been a matter of conscience, as if taking his shares out of the collective would have been immoral, at least at the time. His wife, Angelina, told me without hesitation that it had been a mistake, since as director of the *kolkhoz* he had the biggest share, and there was much they could have done with it. His share remains on the books, as though waiting to be claimed, but both husband and wife know they will never get it even if they ask for it, and they will not ask for it now.

In Snezhnoe, when I mentioned an interest in understanding the distribution of shares to one of the deputy directors of the remnant *sovkhov*, Valentin, he told me that he and his wife, Irina, still had their certificates attesting to the amount of their shares in the *sovkhov*. He said this with derisive laughter, and invited me to come by and view the certificates. During my visit, Irina had to rummage at length through piles of long-undisturbed family belongings before she was able to produce the certificates. Valentin said they were worthless pieces of paper now, and they would never get a kopek for them – he likened them to the now-worthless 10,000 ruble privatisation vouchers that every Russian citizen had received as one of the first steps in the privatization of state enterprises (one of these vouchers was given to me as a gift by another villager). Valentin had plans to hang onto his certificates in order to show them to his grandchildren someday, as a testament to the absurdity of those times.

In Snezhnoe (more so than in Paigusovo) I was told of villagers who opportunistically took their shares out of the *sovkhos* in whatever form they could, whether in cash or in kind, and essentially fled the village – mainly the Russian and Ukrainian *sovkhos* professionals mentioned earlier. Villagers clearly viewed this as an immoral act, since it essentially pilfered the assets of the *sovkhos*, and those assets were no longer available for collective benefit and were in no way reinvested in the growth of the village. The implication was that those who did not have deep ties to the village felt no sense of obligation to its collective welfare. However, Valentin himself, although he and his family stayed in the village and clearly had no intentions of leaving, was criticized by other villagers for having improperly appropriated *sovkhos* assets for personal use, thus excluding other villagers from benefiting from them. A prime example given was his possession of the *sovkhos* milk separator, which his family used to make cream cheese for themselves. Villagers, who in the past took for granted the availability of such dairy products in the village store, could now enjoy them only by purchasing them from Valentin, if and when he offered them for sale, and at prices most villagers could no longer afford.

Land

The distribution of land represents one of the sharpest distinctions between Paigusovo and Snezhnoe, for the reasons already discussed regarding land use. The very measurement of land in the two villages is indicative of these differences – in Paigusovo it is measured in hectares, while in Snezhnoe it is measured in square meters. Paigusovo's land distribution scheme was much more orderly and comprehensive than Snezhnoe's, which seems partial and ad hoc by comparison.

In Snezhnoe, small land plots (typically about 50 square meters) began to be allotted to villagers starting in 1991 primarily for the purpose of constructing the greenhouses that now exist

scattered about the edges of the village. I found only sparse records of these land allotments in the books of the *selsovet*. I also observed a few tiny kitchen gardens that had been cobbled together next to front stoops of apartment buildings, essentially creeping into the space of the street (which, being dirt, was easy to encroach upon); however, I found no records of this land being officially allotted for this purpose. In most cases, these enterprising kitchen gardeners were Russians and Ukrainians who had come to Chukotka as adults in search of well-paid work, and therefore had good memories of such gardening in their hometowns. The climate did not allow them to grow much besides carrots, potatoes, cabbage and greens, and these were dwarfed by the short growing season and poor conditions.

According to *selsovet* records in Snezhnoe, 22 households have land holdings, with an average holding of 207 square meters (plots range from 16 to 832 square meters). In one case, 150 square meters was allotted to one new enterprise for the purpose of setting up a pig farm. This person had already left Snezhnoe before 1995, when I arrived, and I heard stories from other villagers about his ill-fated attempt to set up an entrepreneurial enterprise in the village. The short-lived independent reindeer herding enterprise was allotted 342,500 hectares on a 50-year lease, but the land had already reverted to the *sovkhos* before I arrived. The idea of anyone else applying for and receiving a share of land from the *sovkhos* for any purpose did not even seem to be considered an option, and was never discussed by anyone. There had been no scheme for assigning shares of *sovkhos* land as there had been for assigning shares of *sovkhos* property. The tundra was marked by the regional land committee for the express purpose of reindeer pasture, and so the only way to legitimise a request for land would have been to establish an independent reindeer enterprise. But with reindeer herding generally on the decline in Chukotka, this was more and more an unlikely scenario.

In Paigusovo, there was plenty of land available to be distributed for the purposes of individual (household or entrepreneurial) farming. There were two ways people could get land:

1. The “district norm” (up to 1 *ha.* per household). This land did not come from *kolkhoz* – rather, it was drawn from the district (*raion*) land fund. Each district in the republic of Marii El was allowed to set its own norm, calculated on the amount of available land and the number of households in the district. During the Soviet period, the district norm for Gornomariiskii District, where Paigusovo is located, was .40 *ha* per household. In 1992 the norm was raised to 1 *ha* per household. All one had to do to get the extra .60 *ha* was come to the *selsovet* office and write out a handwritten statement asking for this land, and a plot(s) of land was found and assigned to the applicant. Not everyone applied for it – only 400 or so households out of 609 in Paigusovo *selsovet* received this additional land. The remaining households still have the chance to take it whenever they wish.

2. “Land shares” (*zemel’nyi pai*) (up to 1.9 *ha.* per person). This was land distributed by the *kolkhoz* itself (although technically *kolkhoz* land can be said to ultimately come from the district fund). It was distributed among residents of the *selsovet*, and from descriptions of it I understood the allocation of such land to be considered something of a collective trust. The land was assigned not per household, but per person, with the stipulation that one had to be a working adult at the time of the reorganization of the *kolkhoz* and the distribution of the land shares. It was not necessary to be an employee of the *kolkhoz* – one could have been working at any job in the village – and this shows how interconnected the *kolkhoz* and the village were. The amount of land distributed per person varied in each *kolkhoz*. In the Paigusovo *kolkhoz*, the standard allotted land share was 1.90 hectares per person. Many villagers commented that the *kolkhoz* gave up this land begrudgingly, and gave up only the worst agricultural land.

Thus with these two sources of land, any individual could personally possess no more than 2.9 hectares. Since land was parceled out from different land funds at different times, one household's land might be scattered in several small parcels around the village. For example, Leonid and Angelina had five small plots, the two largest being about two kilometers from their house. However, a very few people, I was told, had rather large land holdings. How did they do it? There were two possibilities: 1) It was possible to rent land officially from the district, up to certain limits, or 2) It was possible to arrange unofficially to take over plots of land. A small number of enterprising farmers in the district – I learned of only one such case in Paigusovo -- simply went around to surrounding villages and found people who had the right to land, but could not or did not want to work it for one reason or another. Arrangements were made for the aspiring entrepreneur to take over this land in every way except officially in name. Such agreements were informal. I was told at the district land committee office that, although this practice seemed to violate the spirit of the law, people got away with this because there was no law explicitly prohibiting it.

Ownership of land remains a rather fuzzy matter in both villages. In both cases, although laws about the purchase and sale of land in Russia have recently been passed and the concept of private property has been pushed on villagers for over a decade now, there are few who express any need or desire to exercise exclusive ownership over the land they possess or use. Land seemed to be treated by most as something almost like a sacred trust. It was not something to be taken lightly – In Paigusovo, having possession of land came with serious and complicated responsibilities, as we saw with the fact that land could be taken back if it was not worked productively. In both cases, when villagers in both villages acquired land, they did not purchase it – the land came as their share, which they received *not* by virtue of pre-collectivization ownership, nor even necessarily only by virtue of working in the *kolkhoz/sovkhov*. They got it by

virtue of being a citizen – having a modest land share was a basic citizen entitlement. At the time they received it, the land was still legally considered the property of the Russian state, and everyone seemed quite comfortable with this – legal ownership by another did not interfere with their use rights. It also did not interfere with the intimate relationship they had to the land.

While the nature of the relationship to land in Paigusovo and Snezhnoe differs, in each case the relationship is imbued with significant meaning. Villagers in both locations clearly showed their knowledge of the land, although it was knowledge of a different kind. In Paigusovo, where each household has exclusive use of a tiny parcel, every square meter of that land is intimately known and production is coaxed out of the last centimetre of it. In Snezhnoe, the individual greenhouse plots notwithstanding, the main focus in terms of land is the vast tundra, measured in millions of hectares. Especially for indigenous residents, this land is seen as a cultural legacy that is shared with others. The intimacy of its knowledge is on a different level – it is not the varying characteristics of square meters that is known, but rather the varying moods of mountains, rivers, lakes and rocks, especially among those who make regular trips out to the reindeer brigades (which is by far not all residents). But even those who are village-bound wander far in the surrounding tracts of tundra, and they have always seen this as something shared with fellow villagers. Thus it is odd for them to experience increasing competition for good berry-gathering patches, as their need for barterable resources becomes more acute.

Privatization pressures

In both Paigusovo and Snezhnoe, there were compelling reasons to remain linked to the collective enterprise, and striking out on one's own required a degree of courage and determination that few in either village possessed. In Paigusovo, the issues revolved primarily around the distribution of land and the obligations that came with it. To begin with, the process

itself was extremely bureaucratic, involving the *kolkhoz*, the district executive committee, and the district land committee. One had to demonstrate the ability to work the specified amount of land productively before it would be given – if the land was not worked, it could be taken away and placed back in the land fund. Moreover, a person who was taking his land share out of the *kolkhoz* also had to take possession of his work record (*trudovaia kniga*) an act that was both highly symbolic and carried sobering consequences. Every working adult in Russia has a work record, kept in a little red booklet, that bears the only evidence of his life's work history, and this record is essential for activating local and federal social welfare benefits. This work record was always held by the employer for as long as a person was on the personnel rolls. Thus, when one “checked out” as a *kolkhoz* employee, one was also forfeiting the social safety net that came with being a *kolkhoz* member and an employee within a recognized organisation.

Moreover, if one took land, one had to become registered officially with the district administration *as a farmer*. Such registration carried the obligation not only to work the land, but to show a profit from it. Land that was not worked could be taken away. Farmers who did not turn a profit, showing at least some small income from the land on the tax return for a given year, lost a year in the calculation towards receiving a state pension – an extra year would have to be worked before the pension would kick in. A *kolkhoznik* does not have to worry about this – all he must do is stay on the *kolkhoz* personnel rolls to keep his pension clock ticking. Thus, an independent farmer has a lot more insecurity. But besides all of these logistical problems, there was the psychological component of being classed as a farmer, since farmers were stigmatized and distrusted in Paigusovo at first. This had begun to change by the time I arrived in Paigusovo in 2001, and several villagers I spoke to mused that they had begun to consider taking up independent farming.

In Snezhnoe, it was unthinkable for most *sovkhos* employees to leave their jobs, unless they could manage to find another job within the village and make a simple transition to it, and in some cases even that was not as simple as it might seem. With privatization, longstanding state subsidies that had kept the reindeer herding industry afloat during the Soviet period were no longer forthcoming, which in effect meant the instant disappearance of salaries for *sovkhos* employees. By the time I arrived in the village of Snezhnoe in 1996, *sovkhos* employees had already gone several years without a pay check, and were scrambling to find ways to get by. Their salaries were still calculated on paper, but so were their debts to the *sovkhos*. Valentin, the *sovkhos* deputy director, reeled off for me the myriad deductions typically made from a *sovkhos* worker's pay check: two percent for the pension fund, 13 percent for income tax, income advances for staple foods and shares of reindeer meat, six percent reduction if the employee was childless. He said that many *sovkhos* employees were actually in debt to the *sovkhos*, and thus they could not break away from the *sovkhos* until that debt was resolved in some way. Employees on other payrolls – the village administration, for example – also experienced salary delays at times, but nowhere near as often or as long as did *sovkhos* employees. This resulted in a creeping sort of class differentiation emerging among the villagers. One place this manifested most noticeably was at the village store. Although all villagers at times suffered cash flow problems and had to take food from the store on credit, the store became more and more reluctant to advance such credit to *sovkhos* employees, reasoning that they might never receive their overdue salary payments, whereas they trusted administration employees to pay their bills (and in fact the bills were paid by direct transfer from the village budget). Eventually *sovkhos* employees came to be considered something like “deadbeats” at the store and were denied credit altogether. This lent added urgency to the activity of gathering berries and pine nuts in the surrounding

tundra, since they represented *sovkhos* employees' only chance to obtain cash or to barter for staple foods.

Remnant collective enterprises

As I have stated, the majority of *kolkhoz/sovkhos* employees in both Paigusovo and Snezhnoe have chosen to stay with the collective enterprise. In both cases, that remnant enterprise has barely managed to stay afloat, and has experienced perennial problems and difficulties. In Paigusovo, the former *kolkhoz* was reorganized and renamed “Collective Shareholders Enterprise Paigusovskoe” (*kollektivnoe dolevoe predpriiatie Paigusovskoe*) The former economist of the *kolkhoz*, who was now engaged in full-time private farming, told me that all of the most talented professionals left the *kolkhoz* during the process of reorganization. She said the remnant enterprise had survived up to that point only because the *kolkhoz* before it had been so generously subsidized by the state that huge surpluses of inputs remained, and the enterprise had been living off those surpluses for many years. The last director of the *kolkhoz* (the current village mayor) had been director for 18 years before deciding that the period of reorganization was the right time for him to move on. Since then, the remnant enterprise has gone through several directors, each one giving up after only a short time and leaving the enterprise further in debt, while the confidence of the villagers plummeted further and further. The current director is a young man who had taken over the job only 6 months before I arrived. He painted a bleak picture of the situation he had inherited. The enterprise officially employs 385 people, but he has about 200 workers on the books who do not actually come to work. They are engaged in other activities (many are presumably working household plots), but are simply reluctant to remove themselves from the *kolkhoz* rolls for the reasons stated above. Most branches of production are defunct – the dairy, grain and vegetable branches are active, but pigs and chickens were given up, and the apple

orchards are left untended (my hostess Angelina said that employees harvested the apples for their own use, or they took them to market and kept the proceeds).

The director lamented the impossibility of meeting the enterprise's many financial obligations. In 1995 the government levied a value added tax on produce that put the *kolkhoz* in debt. The enterprise was also being taxed a rate per worker to support the local police force, but since half the official workforce is inactive, he saw this levy as being senseless. The *kolkhoz* is about 440,000 rubles in debt to the state, and it owes workers about 400,000 rubles in back salaries, but the director said that the workers themselves actually carry this debt since as owners of the shares (worthless as they are) it is their *kolkhoz*. So basically, he says, the workers are too far in debt to pay themselves. The only workers who get any actual cash salary are the milkmaids, because the milking of cows simply cannot be neglected and no one particularly wants the job. Thus to keep these milkers working, he pays them 50% of their salary in cash and the rest in kind. The director complained that he actually had competition for good workers from private farmers, because when they needed assistance, even if it was only on a temporary basis, they could pay cash wages because they were taking produce directly to market.

The director concluded his critical assessment by saying that a pure *kolkhoz* form can no longer be successful. This sounded like rhetoric from 10 years ago, but apparently he is the first enterprising young director to come along in Paigusovo and say this. He planned to put the old *kolkhoz* into bankruptcy proceedings and simultaneously start a new enterprise that would employ a fraction of the workers – the rest, he said, should take their land and go, but they had the option of renting the land back to the *kolkhoz* if they did not want to work it themselves.

The situation for the remnant *sovkhov* in Snezhnoe was similarly bleak. In 1993, it was reregistered under the name “Agricultural Enterprise Sovkhov Anadyrskii” (*sel'skokhoziaistvannoe predpriiatie sovkhov Anadyrskii*), thus actually keeping the word

“*sovkhov*” as part of its official name. At about the same time, the reindeer herder/brigade leader who had attempted to break away and form an independent herding enterprise took over as director of the remnant *sovkhov*, and he remained so until the time of this writing. In spite of the stability in leadership, the enterprise floundered. As in Paigusovo, many *sovkhov* employees remained on the official payroll although they did little or no actual work for the *sovkhov*. In fact, there seemed to be little work to be done, since production in the primary branch – reindeer herding – was all but halted by the mid-1990s due to a cataclysmic crash in the reindeer population (a phenomenon occurring throughout Chukotka at the time – see Gray 2000). Other sub-branches of the enterprise – such as the five fishing camps – seemed to be manned more for subsistence purposes than for production purposes, and in fact poaching of fish and game became more common (and more tolerated) as *sovkhov* employees sought ways to be compensated for their long-delayed salaries.

As productive activity in the village plummeted, the director actually spent more time away from the village in the regional capital, negotiating deals for loans and subsidies under a variety of federal support programs, many of which were targeted to northern indigenous peoples (the director himself is Chukchi). Occasionally he sent back shipments of staple goods for his employees, who could take them on credit from the *sovkhov*, or barter buckets full of berries or pine nuts for them. In fact, this now became the primary productive activity of many *sovkhov* employees, particularly women. Many villagers accused the director of profiteering on their misfortune: they noted that he wore fine clothes and lived in a nice apartment in the regional capital (facts I verified on my own visits to him there), while the “staple foods” he sent them were hardly adequate for survival (my own inspection of the tiny *sovkhov* trading post verified that the offerings were heavier on cakes and chocolate bars than on the flour, rice, oil and macaroni that villagers desperately sought). Eventually, the Chukotka regional administration

intervened in the fate of all remaining *sovkhozy* in Chukotka by persuading directors – Snezhnoe’s included – to sign over their enterprises to municipal property, to once again be centrally managed from above by the district administration (see Gray 2001).

Individual strategies

In the context of this dissolution from beneath them of the collective enterprise that had been the source of stability throughout their lives, several families in each village have pursued creative strategies to support themselves independently of the failing remnant *kolkhoz/sovkhov*. In some cases they survive by determined individualism, accumulating resources about themselves, even at times appropriating formerly collective resources to their own private use; in some cases they apply collective, cooperative practices as they engage in mutual aid that is often kin-based. Yet both individualists and collectivists form collaborative links that run throughout the community.

In Paigusovo, one of the newer duplexes is shared, ironically, by two families who pursue different strategies – one more individualist, one more collectivist. I found it somehow symbolic that they nevertheless collaborated to construct a communal bathhouse between their two adjoining yards – indicative of the overall collective atmosphere that still prevails in the village (another indication is the cooperative pasturing of privately-owned cows in a collective herd). On one side of the duplex is Zoia with her husband and teenage son, on the other side are Angelina and Leonid (the village mayor), with Angelina’s aging mother.

Zoia was formerly employed as the *kolkhoz* economist, but left in 1994 when the *kolkhoz* stopped paying cash salaries. After an experimental foray into private enterprise (a sewing and farming company that had been formed by a group of village women), she took all of her property and land shares out of the *kolkhoz* and took up farming full-time. The almost obsessive energy with which Zoia pursued farming was readily apparent – even as we talked, she processed

and canned two dozen jars of freshly harvested tomatoes, and described herself and her family members as running constantly like squirrels running on a treadmill, but never managing to get ahead. Still, she said she pursued farming because she loved it, particularly the independence of it. Zoia's family farmed a total of 16.6 hectares, including land from their parents and 8 hectares of land rented from the district. She sometimes hired labour on a short-term basis to help with ploughing or harvesting of her fields of cabbage, potatoes, hay and grains. They had managed to purchase a truck, tractor, and a potato harvester, and they had built two big garages for equipment, plus a large greenhouse. Zoia had plans to build warehouse for storing cabbage over the winter so it could bring a higher price in the spring. She was financing these improvements with loans, although not those obtained conventionally through banks, which she described as a process too slow to benefit the farmer, who often need money fast as a stop-gap between a bad harvest in the fall and the spring planting. Thus she had negotiated loans informally with other local entrepreneurs.

Zoia's neighbours, Angelina and Leonid, were also engaged in farming, but they did this on what they called an "amateur" basis, since they each kept day jobs that paid regular salaries. The land they worked was tiny in comparison to Zoia: only 2.9 *hectares* total. Nevertheless, the produce of these small plots was a significant source of annual income; while their salaries totalled about 2500 rubles a month, they earned about 14,000 rubles in one month of peddling cabbage in the district centre. Besides these plots of farmland, every inch of their adjacent household plot was planted with a wide variety of vegetables and fruit trees, and in the back they kept a cow, a sow with piglets, and several chickens. Angelina and Leonid owned no farming equipment, but Leonid's sister and her husband owned a tractor with a potato harvester and a hay baler. The two families cooperatively worked to plough and harvest each other's fields, and in fact formed a small collective during the harvest period, even sharing meals together. The

household of Angelina and Leonid expanded during this time: they were joined by their son and his wife, who came down from school in Ioshkar-Ola to help with the farm labour, as well as Leonid's sister, who collaborated with Angelina's mother to prepare meals for the crew. Angelina said that most of the proceeds from the sale of farm produce went to their son and his wife, and that they probably would not bother with the farming except for them.

Similar patterns of strategies can be found in Snezhnoe, with perhaps a single significant difference: in Paigusovo, with infrastructure intact and accessible markets nearby, people are working, individually or cooperatively, to produce. In Snezhnoe, remotely located and inadequately serviced, people are working, individually and cooperatively, merely to survive. Two families in Snezhnoe similarly represent an individualist versus a collectivist strategy. There is another layer of complexity involved, since ethnic differences in the composition of the families reveals some of the differences in opportunity structures available to indigenous residents versus Russian and Ukrainian incomer residents. One of the families is headed by Valentin, the Ukrainian deputy sovkhos director already discussed who "privatized" for himself the sovkhos milk separator. The other is a large, extended family of Chukchi reindeer herders represented in the village by Petya and his several siblings.

Over the course of several years, I was able to observe the progress Valentin and his family – wife and three children -- made in transforming their small apartment, which was part of an 8-unit complex, into a farmstead in the very centre of the village. Little by little, he expanded the edges of his domain to occupy space further into the street on the 3 sides available to him (his apartment was situated at one end of the building complex). He began by acquiring the neighbouring apartment, thus expanding his two rooms into four. Onto the front of this he constructed a cow stall, a large storage room, a deep-freeze unit dug deep into the permafrost, and a chicken house. To one side he had added on a greenhouse. Valentin was fortunate into that

heating pipes ran past his house, and thus he was able to add running water to his farmstead by jerryrigging pipes appropriated from a sovkhos cattle barn whose optimistically initiated construction had been abandoned shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union. When he wasn't at work carving out his farmstead, Valentin and his sons would hunt and fish, while his wife and daughter would go out gathering in the nearby tundra. Thus by producing their own vegetables, dairy products, eggs, and supplementing them with fish, game and wild plant resources, the household was becoming uncannily self-sufficient as well as oddly incongruent within its tundra conditions.

Petya was a young bachelor employed by the *sovkhos* as a veterinary technician; his family included two brothers and three sisters, eight nieces and nephews, and an aging mother who lived in the tundra with the dwindling reindeer herd. The six siblings moved back and forth between the tundra reindeer camp and the village, but the entire family was rarely if ever all gathered in one or the other location at the same time. They sent resources back and forth to one another whenever transportation was available. Petya was expressly critical of Valentin, saying that his farmstead was thriving at the expense of the remaining villagers. He identified an array of raw materials that had gone into Valentin's household directly from the formerly common resources of the *sovkhos*. For their part, Petya and his family were also trying to accumulate resources and build up a homestead within the village, but they were pursuing this cooperatively through extended kin networks, as well as neighbourly networks in the village. The family had managed to acquire and privatize two adjoining apartments in one of the 16-unit blocks, and Petya spent much of his time working to renovate the apartments. He wanted it to be a comfortable home for his nieces and nephews, and he hoped to convince his mother to leave the tundra and finally come settle in the apartment. Like Valentin, Petya scavenged materials where he could, including from the abandoned *sovkhos* cow barn. Many of my conversations with Petya took place as he

was slowly but systematically disassembled the wooden interior structure of the barn to obtain both firewood as well as construction materials. However, unlike Valentin, Petya visibly suffered from an internal moral conflict as he worked. He described a sense of shame at being reduced to activities that he would have described as hooliganism a few years earlier, and he routinely left the day's load of scavenged wood in the barn until nightfall, when he could carry it home without attracting so much attention.

Petya desperately wished to free himself from what felt to him like debt peonage to the *sovkhos* director, whom he increasingly grew to despise. He talked of building a greenhouse, although he admitted he knew nothing about growing vegetables. He also dreamed of becoming an independent hunter-trapper, but he had no means of obtaining a rifle and bullets, which required not only cash, but also a license. He felt that it was within the *sovkhos* director's power to help him make that transition, and so he stayed with the *sovkhos* in the hope that, through persistent negotiation, he could obtain the director's help to achieve his goals. He also knew that, even as an independent hunter, he would probably remain dependent on the director, with his connections to the city, in order to market his products.

Conclusion: the trial of the “-isms”

I am indebted to my colleague Steven Reyna for providing me with a metaphor that I find to be an excellent heuristic device in terms of provoking my thinking about the postsocialist predicament in Russia. Reyna suggested that – for the sake of argument – we might look at the current situation in post-socialist Russia in this way: Socialism has died (or was it killed? he provocatively asks), and capitalism has moved in to take over. Now capitalism – and its attendant neo-liberal theory – is on trial, and must prove that it is doing a better job than socialism did. Since so much of our group's research at the MPI has shown the difficulties people are

experiencing in postsocialist societies, we might be accused of trying to declare capitalism guilty of not providing for the social welfare of the former subjects of socialism. Indeed, discussions of the postsocialist situation all too often seem to degenerate into a standoff between the proponents of capitalism and the defendants of socialism, with each side claiming their ideological package to be superior to the other. To suggest that socialism might have been “killed” is of course to challenge the popular Western belief that it died a “natural death” because it was a flawed organism to begin with. Coupled with evidence of things gone from bad to worse in parts of the postsocialist world (with “wild capitalism” blamed for it by some), this leaves room to argue that the merits of the socialist system were not fully appreciated, its well-known failures notwithstanding.

We might say that *both* socialism *and* capitalism remain, in a sense, on trial, and that in fact this is truly the “trial of the century.” Proponents of each system have long made claims to the moral high ground. Due to particular historical shifts in power relations, capitalism’s proponents in a sense acquired the possibility to fulfil their long-awaited desire to elbow aside socialism, and from their perspective, justice has now been served. But does the evidence so far show that capitalism is doing better in the postsocialist world?

Capitalism vs. socialism may be the trial of the twentieth century, but is it (or should it be) the trial of the twenty-first century? As Gudeman (2001:149) points out, “some mischief has been perpetuated by measuring one against the other, that is, seeing socialism as economically “inefficient” and the market economy as immoral and alienating.” My understanding of the project of this group of researchers at the MPI has been to gather hard evidence about the current condition of people’s lives under postsocialism from locations rarely visited by those who figure most prominently in the trial of Capitalism vs. Socialism. However, as someone who has spent time in those locations, I would argue that the whole enterprise of opposing capitalism and

socialism is inherently flawed and should be abandoned for a different project, one that I will describe below. But why do I advocate for a mistrial?

First, neither capitalism nor socialism exists in any pure form (thus the invention of the phrase “actually existing socialism,” which has been countered with “actually existing capitalism”). As Chris Hann argues in the introduction to this volume, and as many of the papers show, socialism varied considerably in practice, from situations such as in Poland where collectivisation was never implemented, to East Germany where title to collectivised land was retained, to Russia where the state never relinquished title to land. Capitalism is equally variable, and the “free hand of the market” is rarely as free as the proponents of a neoclassicist model might wish -- witness the heavy government subsidisation of agriculture in the United States. No single political-economic system is ever purely socialist or purely capitalist – there is always some degree of mixture.

Second, to the extent that something resembling the ideological concept of socialism or capitalism *does* exist “on the ground,” one cannot possibly argue wholesale that one is / good / better / right / while the other is / bad / worse / wrong /. In any context where an attempt has been made to apply either capitalism or socialism, there will always be a trade-off between positive and negative outcomes *from the perspective of those experiencing that system*. I add the emphasis here, because this is precisely the project I advocate as a social anthropologist: to investigate the lived experiences of human beings. How socialism or capitalism fare in the light of scrutiny depends ultimately on the context of that lived experience, and not on aggregate figures. For example, it might be a fair assessment to say that, in general, residents of the village of Paigusovo are faring worse under the attempt to apply a capitalist model in Russia than are residents of Ioshkar-Ola, the capital of Marii El – not only are Paigusovo residents worse off in comparison to Ioshkar-Ola residents, but the whole village is doing worse today in comparison to the Soviet

period. So in one sense one could say that capitalism has not brought benefits to Paigusovo. However, within Paigusovo, some residents are certainly faring better in the current conditions than others, and a very few have become quite successful economically. Furthermore, if we take any single resident of Paigusovo, that person will say that some aspects of her/his life have improved under the current conditions, while some have gotten worse.

What complicates matters here is the tendency for former Soviet citizens to wax nostalgic about how much better things were under socialism, which seemingly provides evidence for the proponents of socialism that their system was *good*. Yet those same Soviet citizens, having spent one breath complaining about what has been lost in the turn away from a socialist system, will in the next breath say they feel that their lives have improved overall in the last 10 years. Have their lives improved because of capitalism, or because of their own adaptiveness and ingenuity, regardless of the system they find themselves in? Are they nostalgic for socialism because it was better, or because it was what they had known their whole lives, and one always looks fondly upon the familiar? If they look fondly upon a system that was flawed, should we dismiss their positive reflections as “mere” nostalgia, or should we consider the possibility that certain aspects of that system might be worth developing within the new context -- perhaps, as Gudeman (2001:155) says, “carrying out community values of distribution as opposed to creating productivities”? In Paigusovo and Snezhnoe, socialism was the only system the village residents knew, and they made it work for themselves. They grew accustomed to it, they understood it, and therefore they were traumatized when it disappeared. What I wish to emphasize is that people in the process of living their daily lives do not much care whether they are living under socialism or capitalism, as long as they can find a way to make their lives work.

Another important lesson to learn from the villagers of Paigusovo and Snezhnoe is that the material, the quantifiable, is not always the absolute measure of their satisfaction. Even when

people are struggling harder than they did in the socialist period to make a living, they sometimes express satisfaction, even excitement, over the character their lives have taken on. They might travel more, they might meet a wider variety of people, they might even host a foreign ethnographer in their homes – these are things that add a great deal of interest to their lives, and this is something they value quite highly.

The ethnographic material I have gathered in Snezhnoe and Paigusovo provides an indictment of systems of power in general and their approaches to managing local populations. Thus, in my analysis, I prefer to treat capitalism and socialism together as one variable, both together representing the effects of any huge, overarching system that can, by imposing a model that ignores local practices, wreak havoc on the lives of some subjects while enriching the lives of other, offering to most a mixed bag of benefits and detriments. Being distracted by the ideological debate surrounding socialism and capitalism draws attention away from the concrete realities of the people living under either socialist or capitalist systems.

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