

Looking ‘The Gift’ in the mouth

Russia as donor

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The Soviet Union in its time was a major player in international development aid, and indeed, the Cold War may be cast as a competition between differing models of development, one capitalist, one socialist. When the Soviet Union was dissolved in 1991, the tables were turned and Russia, once the core of a Soviet empire, was made subject to development initiatives just as was the developing world, aka the ‘global South’. However, in this case, the ‘global North’ shifted to assume the identity of ‘the West’, and a new terminology of ‘transitioning economy’ was contrived in order to avoid the awkwardness of referring to Russia and other Eastern European countries as ‘developing economies’ (Wedel 1998) – this was, after all, the ‘second world’ and not the third, and the Soviet Union’s economy was, in fact, developed (just according to the wrong model, so to speak). The net effect of being so targeted was the same nevertheless, and Russians themselves knew it – it was not uncommon in the 1990s to hear Russians remark ironically, ‘We are not starving Africans!’



Fig. 1. *The Donors Forum is a highly professionalized Russian NGO whose purpose is to enhance the effectiveness of organized grant-making and thereby support the development of a democratic civil society in Russia.*

A new concept

Throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s, Russia was obliged to play the role of quintessential eastern recipient of Western aid. But in 2007, Russia officially signalled its intention to reverse the directionality of aid once again by



Fig. 2. *Pierre-Louis Ronny receives medical attention from a Russian search and rescue team after being rescued from under the rubble of a building in downtown Port-au-Prince a week after the January 2010 earthquake.*

issuing, via the Ministry of Finance, a ‘Concept on Russia’s Participation in International Development Assistance’,¹ and thereafter began to participate actively in the global arena of international aid donorship. According to the OECD’s Development Assistance Committee (which references a statement made by Russia’s Finance Minister Aleksei Kudrin in 2010), Russia spent approximately \$200 million on official development assistance in 2008.² According to the Financial Tracking Service, Russia’s expenditures on humanitarian aid in 2010 totalled more than \$34 million, about a third of which went to Haiti in response to the January 2010 earthquake.³

The impetus for this formalization of a ‘concept’ on development assistance can be traced to Russia’s presidency of the G8 in 2006, and the summit that was held in St Petersburg in July of that year; in an article in *Parlamentskaia Gazeta* following the summit, a reporter commented, ‘Russia is currently the only G8 country that has not worked out a strategy for activity in the sphere of international development assistance.’⁴ Less than a year later, it had such a strategy – at least on paper. The message is pretty clear: Russia is resisting its latter subject placement in the global political economy, refusing to play the role of non-reciprocating aid recipient, and insisting on being taken as a legitimate player in the aid game. A key question is what sort of impact Russia’s changing subjectivity might have on development discourse and practice.

I’m working with a fairly simple argument here, namely that persistent assumptions about the directionality of aid flows are reflected in development discourse and practice, with the ‘global North’ privileged as a consummate donor and the ‘global South’ inversely cast as a consummate recipient. The failure to break away from unsatisfactory shorthand labels such as ‘global North’ and ‘global South’ and ‘the West’ and ‘the Third World’ is symptomatic of these persistent assumptions, as is the fact that South-South and East-East partnerships are treated as titillating novelties (ominous or valorous, depending on one’s orientation). I am further arguing that these assumptions about North-South directionality are more fully exposed by Russia’s emergence as a donor of aid (which could also be said about India’s or China’s emergence). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, those assumptions are *both* challenged *and* affirmed by Russia’s participation in international development assistance. I will come back to this point presently.

Along with the master narrative of North-South aid flows, there are also the assumptions about West-East aid flows that came into play with the changes after 1989, but this is a secondary dyad in development circles (and indeed it seems unlikely that the phrases ‘hemispheric West’ and ‘hemispheric East’ will ever catch on). A subsidiary argument here is that development discourse is compartmentalized: on the one hand, there is the discourse about the North developing the South, but on the other hand and separate from this, there is the discourse about the West developing the East. This is a contrived separation that is not helpful – the historical configuration of each is different, but the issues are essentially the same. I am seeking ways to bring these extremely artificial constructions together into one discursive universe, to force them into dialogue with one another, because I think this will reveal some significant patterns that are otherwise not as readily apparent.

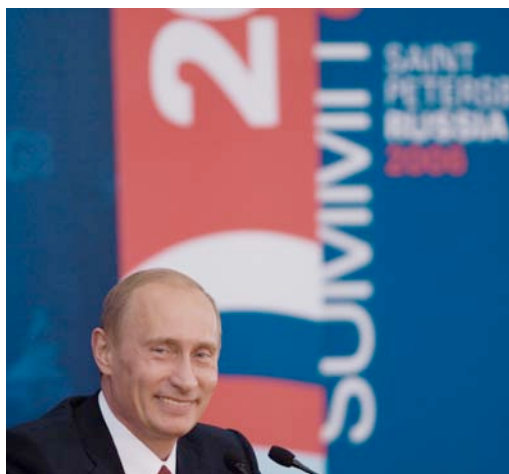


Fig. 3. Vladimir Putin addresses a news briefing at the 2006 G8 Summit hosted by Russia in St Petersburg.



Fig. 4. President Hu Jintao of China, then-President Vladimir Putin of Russia, and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh of India held a tripartite meeting during the 2006 G8 summit in St Petersburg.

The relevance of ‘The Gift’

One conceptual lens through which some insight might be gained is that of Mauss’s understanding of the gift (Mauss 2002). Mauss played with the idea that a gift implies obligations and opens up a social relation, noting that if the obligations are not properly observed, then the social relation becomes distorted – and one of the examples he cited was ‘almsgiving’, or charity. As Jonathan Benthall has suggested in these pages, development aid ‘is in fact charity by another name’, and mere avoidance of the word ‘charity’ does not mean the demeaning relationship inherent in one-way flows of development aid is avoided (Benthall 2001: 2). In the words of Mauss, ‘Charity is still wounding for him

who has accepted it, and the whole tendency of our morality is to strive to do away with the unconscious and injurious patronage of the rich almsgiver' (Mauss 2002: 83).

Anthropologists have tended to limit their deployment of gift theory to analysis of small-scale societies and face-to-face social contexts, less often applying it to the analysis of charity on a larger scale, such as in the work of international NGOs, or in international development aid (besides Benthall 2001, see for example Bowie 1998 and Douglas 2000). However, gift theory is being picked up by development theorists outside anthropology in disciplines such as international relations (Hattori 2003) and geography (Mawdsley n.d.) as a useful tool for unpacking the relations inherent in international development aid. One reason it is so useful in this context is because the 'charitable impulse', that *something* which makes people want to 'do good' by giving, also compels corporate entities such as NGOs and government aid agencies to couch their actions within the language of such altruistic giving (regardless of how underlying motives might be more cynically understood).

It could be argued that charity – or development aid – becomes wounding precisely in those circumstances when it is framed as a *free* gift with no return expected (possibly implying the recipient is incapable of return), rather than as a Maussian gift that would imply ongoing mutual obligations. Moreover, there is often a mismatch of expectations between givers and receivers, differing assumptions about the nature of the gift that are mixed up in a single social arena involving many givers, receivers and onlookers (for example, a governmental aid donor, a governmental aid recipient, and the citizens of both countries who observe the flow of aid and are positioned differently in relation to it). Harkening to Mauss's admonition that 'charity is ... wounding', could we then see the Russian government's efforts to join the global community of donors at least partly as a defence mechanism against the demeaning experience of being treated as a perpetual recipient on the world stage, and an effort to be seen as a global player with prestige and influence? In order not to be categorized alongside Africans or Haitians, must one be seen to *give* to Africans and Haitians?

Russian 'citizens of the world'

My own anthropological field research in Russia was carried out at a time (the 1990s) when Russia was in the position of being an aid recipient, and in a location where the need for humanitarian assistance was genuinely quite acute (Chukotka, a region in the Russian Far North; see Gray 2005). My most intense and long-term periods of fieldwork happened to place me alongside residents of Russia (of various ethnicities) just as they were experiencing being targeted by both official development assistance and more informal charity from abroad, and in some ways I found myself implicated in the delivery of some of that aid and charity. The ambivalence of that positionality – both mine and that of my interlocutors – was deeply impressed upon me.

These experiences also impressed upon me the importance of recognizing development aid as a cultural phenomenon, even though it is persistently couched in economic and political terms. The potential for aid to be used as a strategic foreign-policy tool is clear, but to reduce Russia's moves toward donorship to the simple formulae of realist international-relations theory is to miss the point. The challenge is to examine the cultural assumptions that underlie Russia's actions – as well as the cultural assumptions that underlie the international response to Russia's posturing as an aid donor and distinctly *not* a recipient. Thus, while it is useful to think through the macro-level relations, it is equally if not more important to consider the micro level of Russians' own experiential accounts. How might Russians approach development aid differently from the entrenched 'development apparatus', by which I mean, for example, the G8, the World Bank and its IDA (International Development Association), the OECD and its DAC (Development Assistance Committee), and the countries that acknowledge the authority of such global agencies? This apparatus has been constructed from within the Euro-American context as the only acceptable way to go about development (both the doing of it and the accounting for it), as if development were a common-sense and culture-free category. However, I would argue that it is a category heavily laden with shared cultural assumptions – assumptions not of the culture of any country or region or people, but of a bureaucratic culture of an imagined 'West', perhaps something of a transnational imagined community (*pace* Anderson 1983; cf. Gupta 1992).⁵

What is shared here in this 'development community' are the bureaucratic practices of development, which I am arguing are cultural practices – techniques for accountability, the way projects are planned and funded, the faith in 'capacity building' to reproduce accountable subjects, the emphasis on 'deliverables' and 'reportables' (cf. Gould 2005). These have been naturalized to the extent that participants in this culture proceed as if utterly convinced there is no other possible way of doing development (even as they are constantly discussing what has been wrong with

development in the past and exhibit a fervent belief that they are in the continual process of reforming and improving development practices).

Certain countries are placed in a separate category – ‘new’ donors as opposed to ‘traditional’ donors – not primarily because they are new on the scene (usually they are not), but because they do not (yet) share the culture of this imagined transnational community. There are all kinds of ways that this difference is discursively marked, such as in the phrases ‘emerging donors’, ‘non-DAC donors’, or ‘new partners’. To the extent that donor countries in this other category do things differently, that they *introduce new cultural practices of development* into the global arena, they are held suspect and cause worry, which is also discursively marked in particular ways, for example, in the phrases ‘reverse aid’ or ‘authoritarian aid’. As one article in *The Economist* put it, the spread of aid from these sorts of suspect donors is a challenge to ‘Western ideas of the right sort of giving’.⁶ The main worry articulated is that these donors will not be accountable and will therefore cause damage or harm in some way – or, as one think tank has put it, that they will ‘undermine democracy’.⁷

Thus many observers fail to see Russia’s emergence as a donor as a cultural, or even economic, phenomenon, but see it rather as a *political* phenomenon, and a negative one at that. This is in spite of the fact that, if one observes closely, it becomes apparent that the Russian government – or more properly a subset of actors within the government – is bending over backwards to play by the rules of the ‘development club’, and working with global agencies to develop the technology and accounting infrastructure to make Russia’s aid donations transparent and accountable. For example, in May 2008 the Russian Ministry of Finance held a workshop, along with the World Bank, entitled ‘Development aid statistics: International experience and the creation of a Russian accounting and reporting system’. The workshop’s sponsors included USAID, the OECD, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the UK’s Department for International Development (DFID).⁸ A recent Russian textbook on international development institutions – the first of its kind⁹ – argues forcefully that ‘Russia’s participation in the OECD and the DAC not only will facilitate raising the prestige and increasing the influence of the country in the international arena, but also will allow to a greater degree its integration into processes of global economics’ (Zaitsev *et al.* 2010: 207).¹⁰

I have only recently begun to explore Russia’s emergence as a donor ethnographically, by spending time with participants in the extremely well-developed and sophisticated (Western hand-wringing notwithstanding) Russian NGO sector, encountering volunteering organizations that are beginning to add an overseas dimension to their helping work. These are people in their 20s and 30s who are just coming of age in terms of their international social and political awareness, the first Russians I have encountered who have described themselves not as Russian patriots, but as ‘citizens of the world’. They are socially active, either as contributing members of charity organizations or in having spent time as volunteers abroad, and they provide evidence of a blossoming informal volunteering movement in Russia (entirely independent of the Putin-inspired volunteer youth movement *Nashi*¹¹).

At the same time, some of the people I have spoken to express a certain incredulity about the idea of Russia as a donor of aid abroad. At first, the phenomenon was almost too new to be studied, and many of the people I encountered were surprised to hear that their government was setting itself up as an international aid donor.¹² A common response was that there are still problems enough inside Russia that need to be addressed, so why would Russia be thinking about sending aid abroad? There is some discussion of these issues on Russian blogs and social-networking sites, much of it sharply ironic about the ambiguities inherent in Russia taking the role of donor or helper in relation to ‘the Third World’.



Fig. 6. At the Donors Forum conference, attendees browse the slick brochures of Russian NGOs.

The relentless significance of Africa

As I mentioned above, there are two rather separate conversations going on in development discourse: a primary one dealing with North-to-South vectors of aid, and a more recent and subsidiary one dealing with West-to-East vectors of aid. I am entering these conversations from a different perspective altogether: via Russia's entry into the 'development community' as it steps out of the role of recipient and into the role of donor. And here is where I take a perhaps unexpected detour to Africa, because I would argue that it is by using Africa as a fulcrum that Russia attempts to lever itself out of the West-East axis as a transitioning recipient country and into the North-South axis as an emerging donor country.

In what at first was only a very thin official development discourse coming out of Russia, I was surprised to see the extent to which Africa featured in the Russian government's official press releases, which have appeared in both Russian and international media sources. In spite of the fact that Russia's official overseas development activities are primarily targeted at the Newly Independent States, those in Central Asia in particular, statements of government spokesmen are more likely to make reference to Africa as a key recipient of Russia's international largesse – for example, highlighting Russia's contributions to the Millennium Development Goals, of which Africa is an iconic focus, or boasting of Russia's intention to cancel African debt.¹³ They also mention the presence of African students in Russian higher-education institutions as an example of Russia's aid to the developing world, usually pointing out that this dates from the Soviet period.

Here I will state what I think is obvious, but which bears emphasizing at this point: the signifiers 'North' and 'South' and 'West' and 'East' are category markers, and while the content of these categories remains persistently ambiguous, in usage there is an implication that what is signified is a matter of common sense between all interlocutors. One clear assumption in this usage is that the 'North' is already developed and does not need help, while the 'South' is undeveloped/underdeveloped/developing and needs 'our' help. Of significance here is the question of who controls the deployment of the discourse of development, such that who belongs to each category becomes seemingly obvious, and the jargon and practices (aka 'best practices') of the ruling global agencies come to seem natural and beyond reproach. The logical converse of this naturalization is that those who fail to employ the jargon and practices are in some way worthy of censure.

It is in this sense that Russia's emergence as a donor *both* challenges *and* affirms assumptions about the directionality of development aid: Russia challenges them by entering this arena as neither properly of the North nor properly of the South, and as such it is in a unique position to introduce innovative development discourse and practice. On the other hand, Russia affirms entrenched assumptions by the way it positions itself as a donor to 'the Third World', especially to 'Africa' writ large, and also by its near-wholesale adoption of the accepted jargon and practices – at least in most quarters of what remains a not-fully-formed Russian government aid apparatus. It appears that for all states aspiring to be leaders in the world and wishing to join an elite peer group of donors (and this category of aspirants includes China, which decidedly does *not* kowtow to accepted jargon and practices), Africa is the arena where they can demonstrate their power and privilege by rendering aid to those presumed to be perpetually powerless and underprivileged. Donors need recipients in order to be donors – in order to get to give – and Africa remains the world's most iconic perpetual recipient.

Conclusion

Through both its domestic and foreign policies and practices, Russia seems to be resisting its recent subject placement in the global political economy, refusing to play the role of non-reciprocating aid recipient, and insisting on being taken as a legitimate player in the aid game. For Russia, it seems, incorporation into the global economy, and the continuation of its own development, necessitate its becoming a donor in the global system of givers and receivers. This takes me back to my emphasis on theories of the gift, and the idea of giving on a global scale: for states that are vying for position in a global arena, it is crucial to openly demonstrate one's global 'goodness' and generosity. If there are ideas about the right sort and the wrong sort of giving, then Russia seems to be setting about earnestly to demonstrate that it rightfully deserves to be one of those who gets to give. ●



Fig. 5. Soviet two-kopek stamp depicting Patrice Lumumba, first prime minister of the Republic of Congo. The Soviet Union's Peoples' Friendship University, whose purpose was to educate students from the Third World, was named after Lumumba.

Notes

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1. English translation available as ‘Russia’s participation in international development assistance: Concept’. Direct link to pdf: http://www.minfin.ru/common/img/uploaded/library/2007/06/concept_eng.pdf (last accessed January 2011).

2. By comparison, in 2008 the US spent \$26,842 million, the UK spent \$11,500 million and Ireland spent \$1,328 million. Sources: OECD 2010, ‘Beyond the DAC: The welcome role of other providers of development co-operation’, available online at <http://www.oecd.org/dac/opendoors> (accessed January 2011); and OECD 2010, ‘Development aid: Net official development assistance’, table available online at <http://www.oecd.org> in the statistics section of the website (accessed January 2011).

3. By comparison, in 2010 the US spent more than \$4,450 million, the UK spent more than \$568 million and Ireland spent more than \$89 million. Source: Financial Tracking Service, <http://fts.unocha.org>, ‘Make a custom table’ section of website (accessed January 2011).

4. Antonov, S. 2006. Bezvozmezdno – ne znachit ne vygodno (Free does not mean unprofitable). *Parlamentskaia gazeta* no. 195 (2045), 22 November (the online version of this issue has unfortunately been removed from the newspaper’s website). Translation from the Russian by the author.

5. Thanks to Steven Sampson for pointing out that it is also a transnational *actual* community, since jet-setting development professionals see enough of one another to form long-term face-to-face relationships.

6. Development aid from authoritarian regimes: An (iron) fistful of help. *The Economist* 6 June 2009, p. 57.

7. Freedom House, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio Asia 2009. Undermining democracy: 21st-century authoritarians. In this report, Russia is lumped together with China, Iran, Pakistan and Venezuela as one of ‘five influential countries [that] are impeding democratic development both within and beyond their border[s] ... By doling out billions of dollars in no-strings-attached foreign aid, these regimes are hobbling international efforts to improve governance and reduce corruption.’ See the Executive Summary at <http://www.underminingdemocracy.org/execSummary.php> (last accessed January 2011).

8. Interestingly, the UK had already suspended its programme of foreign aid to Russia in March 2007, and DFID’s website was changed to make a bold statement that it was time for Russia to become a donor in its own right. However, the UK has not *entirely* suspended its programme, since UK aid to Russia continues, but has shifted to take the form of helping Russia to build up its own aid programmes. See the DFID website at <http://www.dfid.gov.uk/where-we-work/europe/russian-federation/> (last accessed January 2011).

9. Since late 2008, I have been trawling the internet for evidence of such books, and in October 2009, I exhaustively searched the major bookstore Dom Knigi in both Moscow and St Petersburg; store staff working the politics and economics section of the Moscow store made a valiant attempt to locate any related books, but ultimately responded with shrugged shoulders.

10. Translation from the Russian by the author.

11. Nashi (‘Ours’) is a pro-Putin, Kremlin-backed youth movement, founded in 2005. Its full name is ‘Youth Democratic Anti-Fascist Movement, Nashi.’ See Belov 2008, Hemment 2009.

12. The first forum on involving Russian NGOs in international development assistance took place only in June 2010, sponsored by the Open Forum for CSO Effectiveness. In their report of the event, the Russian organizers write that ‘the majority of CSOs [civil-society organizations] in Russia still underestimate the importance of IDA [international development aid]’. One of the main points of discussion at the forum was the aim of ‘promot[ing] a reputation of Russia as a “good door”’. Report (in English) available online: <http://www.cso-effectiveness.org/-open-forum-national-consultations,049-.html> (last accessed January 2011).

13. See for example the statement of one of Russia’s deputy finance ministers, Sergei Storchak, at the 23 October 2007 session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York, in which he states: ‘It is obvious that new and traditional donors should join in a common programme to reach the Millennium Development Goals’ (translation from Russian by the author). Posted on Russia’s pages of the United Nations website: http://www.un.int/russia/new/MainRootrus/Statements/ga/ga_docs/Statement231007ru.htm (last accessed January 2011). See also the RIA Novosti news item from 20 October 2007 about a press conference of Finance Minister Aleksei Kudrin in Washington, DC, ‘Rossiia vneset \$20 mln v fond borvy s maliariei v stranakh Afriki’ (Russia will pay \$20 million into the fund for the fight against malaria in the countries of Africa), posted on the Ministry of Finance website: <http://minfin.ru/ru/press/speech/index.php?afrom4=20.10.2007&ato4=20.10.2007&id4=1017> (last accessed January 2011).

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