"Traditional Culture" and "Folk Knowledge": Whither the Dialogue between Western and Post-Soviet Anthropology?¹

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Almost 15 years ago, Gellner (1980) edited a book focusing on the differences between Western and what at the time was "Soviet" anthropology, and a few years later he stated that "to fly from London to Moscow, from anthropological discussion at one end to similar discussions at the other is to shift from one climate and atmosphere to another" (Gellner 1988:3). One cannot help but think that, had he attended the international conference "Ethnic Traditional Culture and Folk Knowledge," he would probably have had more or less the same impression in the present post-Soviet context. Held in Moscow (March 21–24, 1994), this conference was organized by the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of the Russian Academy of Sciences, with financial aid from the Wenner-Gren Foundation and institutional support (as well as funding for publication of the proceedings) from UNESCO. Valery Tishkov, director of the institute, and Irina Semashko were its conveners, and Vyacheslav Rudnev was in charge of the program. It must first be said that, besides the usual joys of conference-convening anywhere, the organizers encountered a whole range of extra difficulties linked in part to the shaky state of the Russian economy. Bewildered as we were by an unexpected late spell of Muscovite winter, the little group of foreign participants also had to learn to cope with the idiosyncrasies of Russian—post-Soviet?—daily life. However, against Tishkov's assertion (1992:371) that a "general erosion of morals, lack of professionalism and internal constraints . . . have become second nature to Soviet people," a group of Institute members showed non-stop dedication to the adequate running of the show.

Some 145 papers were scheduled: two-thirds had Russian authors while only 6 came from other former Soviet Republics and 15 from various East European countries; the U.S.A. and Western Europe, along with Argentina, India, Israel, and Kuwait, which I shall call "Western" because of their clearly dominant scientific paradigm, provided the rest. The program did not mention participants' institutional affiliations, and therefore it was impossible to know whether the bulk of the Russian anthropologists came from the organizing institute or

represented other local institutions such as the St. Petersburg Institute of Ethnography or Moscow University. Such a collection of papers had to be distributed among three concurrent sessions, but many scheduled speakers, both Russian and foreign, failed to appear; the group of foreigners was about half the announced size. This in a way was welcome, however, in that it allowed more opportunity for discussion, especially since the nonsimultaneous interpretation of most sessions used up much of the already short time allotted to each paper.

The geographical (rather than problem-oriented [see Shnirelman 1992]) organization of the institute since its creation in the '20s was not apparent here. The many papers covered an array of geographical settings and historical contexts, and despite the expected strong representation of works on the formerly Soviet territory (especially its eastern part) they were more diverse than their authors' origins. Almost worldwide in coverage, they were organized by themes, among them "Time, Cyclic Recurrence, Calendar," "Diagnosis and Treatment in Traditional Folk Medicine," "Nutrition and Food Habits," "Man, Environment, and Folk Economy," "Spiritual Life and Body Dynamics in Folk Culture." The attempt to bring natural scientists, psychologists, physicians, and others together with social scientists resulted in a substantial majority of the former group in a few sessions, providing opportunities for a rich exchange of data on specific points of interest and for the identification of fields of cooperation such as weather forecasting. Judging from the sessions I was able to attend, however, it is doubtful that any real transdisciplinary dialogue took place: such dialogue has to be part of the research project from its inception, and this had not been the case with most of those presented here. The organizers presented the conference as a first Russian attempt at such a multidisciplinary approach in this field; time will tell whether, after this necessary first step, social and "hard" scientists will manage to find enough common ground for joint research. Practitioners of various aspects of the "folk knowledge" (martial arts, divination, diagnosis and healing, etc.) that was the focus of interest of the meeting also attended. While the Western participants approached them with an almost fieldwork attitude, not to say curiosity, the Russian natural scientists present were apparently quite accustomed to their company and collaboration and presented a few papers jointly with them, for example, on the evaluation of an "extrasensory effect." This was quite different from what would happen in a similar meeting in the West, where the anthropologists would likely stand by the shamans and healers under the scrutiny of suspicious physicians, biologists, or physicists, whom they would accuse of ethnocentrism and scientism.

Besides their long-lasting interest in "ways of life," in the past few decades Soviet anthropologists devoted themselves mainly to ethnic matters, building up a theoretical corpus around the concept of "ethnos," and the entries in a recent ethnological dictionary published by a public-administration institute show the strong position that these issues still hold (Viktorin et al. 1994). When

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studying religion, these anthropologists sought the "earthly roots" of "beliefs" seen as a form of social consciousness and as a clue to understanding both "the inception of religion and its early development" and the ethnogenesis of the group. Shamanism, magic, and "folk knowledge" in the dimensions of it bordering upon the paranormal were "understood as part and parcel of a religious cult" (Basilov in Gellner 1980:231, 234-38), and certain natural-science scholars showed so much interest in parasciences that it is sometimes wrongly thought in the West that these were considered legitimate fields of research. Such investigations have no more legitimacy today and are still conducted on the margins of official projects, but, as their initiators put it, they benefit from the new intellectual climate, not to mention the current revival of mysticism. At the same time, Western anthropologists who have recently taken up the study of divinatory, magical, and healing practices focus on social facts and the related symbolic representations; even when they try to adopt an internal point of view in relation to what, following Needham, among others, they often are reluctant to call "beliefs," most of them give no sign of intending to provide evidence for the controversy about their empirical reliability. Although this has of course not always been the case (see, e.g., Vogt and Hyman 1959 on water dowsing), they strive to grasp the internal coherence of a set of propositions about the organization of reality in relation to which they do not consider identifying a factual content or asserting a level of falsity or truth as part of their business. (Whether in doing so they strengthen the idea that "anything goes" is another question.) On the contrary, Russian scholars were here clearly oriented towards the integration into established science of a broad "folk knowledge" including what in the West are two distinct categories, parascience and ethnoscience. This integration was in fact pursued along two different lines, one devoted to demonstrating the scientific value of such matters and the other arguing for an opening up of the dominant scientific thought to other kinds of thinking and a reduced emphasis on "abstract reasoning." Both positions were, however, in accord with the same, always implicit "grand-dichotomy" pattern: tradition/modernity, atemporality/history, concrete/abstract, sign/concept, myth/science, and so forth. Other papers concerned a variety of agriculture, settlement, nutrition, and health practices the efficiency of which is relatively easy to measure: here again the stress was on their empirical evaluation and the applications these researches could foster, a recurrent concern in post-Soviet publications (e.g., Rudnev 1990).

These remarks point towards what may have been the most striking feature of the conference: a clear difference in preoccupations and discourses between two anthropological climates and atmospheres. Of course, it is not the first time that this issue has been raised, and at least two meetings have been devoted to it. But the Burg Wartenstein (in 1976; Gellner 1980) and Paris (in 1989; *Regards* 1990) conferences were held either long before or in the midst of the perestroika period, and even in

1989 it was difficult to foresee what the extent of the changes would be and whether they would be more than transient or superficial. Chichlo (1990:232) gives an example of this when he recounts the difficulties encountered by Tishkov in his attempt to rename the Institute of Ethnography and thus signify a clear political, institutional, and epistemological break: ethnography had been seen as a subfield of history, a discipline now described in the former Soviet countries as having played the unethical role of supplying disinformation (Chichlo 1984, 1990). Now that the Institute has indeed been renamed "Ethnology and Anthropology," the conference was quite paradoxically marked by the "dominance of the descriptive mode over the analytical one" apparent in recent publications (see Kozlov 1992 and Skalnik 1992). Is this because of "the almost total abandonment of historical materialism by scholars" and the "methodological vacuum" it has led them to (Kozlov 1992) or because of a return to what Chichlo (1985) calls their almost purely descriptive tradition? Whatever the reasons for it, the meeting did lack an analytical and epistemological level that would have permitted a thorough questioning of its own conceptual framework. Only during the closing session, when it was proposed that an interdisciplinary association be launched, was there a belated discussion of what to call it. One need not recall, for instance, the debates about the idea of "popular culture" to recognize that none of the concepts making up the conference title—"ethnic," "tradition," "culture," "folk," "knowledge"—is by any means free of ideological constraint or theoretical imprecision. Nor is any of them, not to mention some of the related notions ("archaism," "survival," "authenticity," "wisdom," "belief," etc.) scattered through the various papers, exempt from often careless use. Using everyday expressions in the conference title was presented by the organizers as a way of attracting the attention of "natural scientists" who might not be familiar with anthropological jargon. The uncritical use of these expressions by participants shows the kind of difficulties that will confront future cooperation.

We are by now aware that since their critique of evolutionism Western anthropologists have abandoned a number of concepts that Soviet social scientists continue to use and to discuss, to the point that their meanings have significantly diverged from those they retain in the West. Clarification of terminology could help reduce miscommunication. This seems especially important for particular fields of research (such as Arctic ethnography [Black 1990]), and some of them, such as ethnic studies, already have concept-clarifying texts. But the core of the problem as we encounter it today may have deeper roots than mere lack of correspondence of terminology. For example, one of the sessions was entitled "Magic, Shamanism, between Semantics and Rationality." Leaving aside the opposition between these last two notions, a glance at the Russian version of the program reveals that instead of "semantics" the original title says "irrationality." Technical mistranslation or deliberate decision? Assuming that the translator

was an anthropologist, one possible explanation points to an implicit acknowledgment that the notion of "irrationality" and the related idea of "prelogical thought" were unlikely to please most Western colleagues and a consequent preference for "semantics," a concept carrying an apparently more innocuous connotation of "symbolism."² Could this not be seen as a sign of the kind of relationship that exists today between the two anthropological traditions?

Political opening now allows for the formulation of projects, and it is not uncommon to hear Western anthropologists describing the huge amount of ethnographic data stored for decades in Eastern Europe and still waiting in the field as an "ethnographic El Dorado." Russian scholars themselves sometimes resort to this image (Tishkov 1992:375), implicit in which is the idea of conquest or, at least, of exploration. To the surprise of us Westerners, who have a markedly individualistic view of the fieldwork experience, the notion of an "ethnographic expedition" appeared several times during the debates; the impossibility of organizing field trips because of budget cuts was repeatedly deplored (see also Kryukov 1993). The "Great Northern Expedition," Bering's second epic journey through Siberia and on to Alaska, was the most important of the early expeditions sent to this El Dorado by the Academy of Sciences in 1733. It was placed under a largely international command: Bering was Danish, and the scientists who took part in it came from various European nations. But some of them, like the French astronomer La Croyère, quickly earned the reputation of not being very competent at using the sophisticated instruments borne on the shoulders of hundreds of serfs, for whom this transcontinental stroll was anything but leisurely. Who can be sure that the present hesitations and ambiguities of Western anthropological theory, for example, in relation to the production of cumulative knowledge, will not lure post-Soviet anthropology towards the sterile bedding-out of anachronistic transplants into a dead tradition? Las Vegas-style rows of slot machines are now ubiquitous in Moscow subway stations and hotel lobbies. Practically nothing but Anglo-American hits can be found in the city's best record stores, and fast-foodization is on the march. Beyond the necessary critique of its tradition of positive ethnography, the worst of all possibilities might be for Russian anthropology to look down on everything that comes from its own history and uncritically adopt every foreign trend in what at present often seems more a cosmetic approach (as in the translation problem described above) than a real epistemological joint venture.

A similar problem of course exists in all the East European countries, where there is "a struggle going on for

a genuine critical anthropology which would transcend the existing sterile, positivist ethnography" (Skalnik 1992). In Russia the debate was launched some time ago, and concerns have been voiced about "the danger of the loss of scholarly traditions and the breaking of links between generations" (Schnirelman 1992) once again after the virtual destruction of ethnography in the '30s (Slezkine 1991). Others criticize what they see as the excessive popularity of postmodernist theory (Kryukov 1993: 14). With the exception of a very few papers of foreign origin, however, and rather paradoxically in view of the theme of the meeting, postmodernist stances were unnoticeable here. Concerns about the production of cumulative knowledge were, however, repeatedly expressed, in particular in connection with the project of a multidisciplinary "world encyclopedia of folk knowledge." If, as it seems, this undertaking aims not only at the mere compilation of ethnographic data for comparative research (for which existing structures such as the Human Relations Area Files could perhaps be found) but also at the application of this information, it is difficult not to see as inherent in it the risk of becoming a contradiction in terms—of trying to fit into a fixist and universalist ideal framework local forms of knowledge that acquire their meaning and efficiency from their ecological, cultural, and sociological contextualization.

As a matter of fact, the continuity of the local intellectual tradition was apparent in this conference in, for example, the stress put on the study of the interaction between human activity and its environment. Important in Soviet prehistory because of marxist theory, this theme here took on a tinge of Western environmental and political concerns. Again, the historical trend whose origin in Russian intellectual life dates from long before Soviet times also had high visibility. Nonetheless, several papers struck me as permeated by the substantialist and ahistorical view of "folk knowledge" inherent in the assumption, dating from the early days of European ethnography, that "folk knowledge" is homogeneous within a society, as well as in the idea that only "ethnic," preferably oral, cultures are traditional or (supposedly amounting to the same thing) genuine. They neglected, for instance, to acknowledge the influence of the dominant culture on practices that may not be as "archaic" and "stable" as they seem. Without going into detail, a case in point is the magnetizers' eager pursuit of a scientific-type verification of their claims and the influence on their theories of the worldwide diffusion of the results of experiments on biomagnetism. Similar remarks could be made about weather forecasting practices. The failure to discuss the social circulation of specific forms of knowledge was all the more noticeable in a meeting taking place in Mikhail Bakhtin's homeland (although it is true that Soviet scholars acknowledged the literary-critical aspects of his work more than its sociological interest). On the whole, and again with the exception of a few papers, it seems to me that the conference failed to raise the essential issue of the heuristic value of the notion of "folk knowledge" in a time of generalized transnational cultural flows and broad (for

2. The British and North American "semantic" and "symbolic" anthropologies have rather blurred boundaries, while the intellectual filiation of the French *anthropologie du symbolique* links it more directly to the study of "spiritual culture." This is not the place to recall the critique of the association between semantics or symbolism and irrationality.

lack of good) transposition of dominant scientific discourses into other cultural languages. It was therefore an idealized view of "popular wisdom" that was invoked by the speakers who demanded greater awareness of it on the part of political authorities in their approach to contemporary problems.

However, this last point also shows that whereas "Western discourse deals largely, most of the time, with things which, by common consent, don't really matter except in the academic context" (Dunn 1992:385), post-Soviet anthropologists are engaged in seeking practical applications for their research. Pre-Soviet ethnographers already had similar concerns, and during recent decades the concentration of the discipline on ethnic matters placed it on the front line with regard to urgent social issues and attracted political attention. The persistence of this trend no doubt also has to do with social legitimacy and financial and professional—in short, survival—concerns. This is a fact that their overall comfortable living standards should not lead Western anthropologists to forget, prone as they are to do so with their critical view of and general resistance to applied research. At the Moscow meeting they were divided on the issue of the instrumentalization of research, some of them having trouble following their Russian counterparts onto what they had learned, often the hard way, to see as treacherous ground. And when they deal with things that indeed matter outside academia, such as nationalism, they do so with a cautious attitude in relation to their lack of control over the use that might be made of "the notions of [their] knowledge" and of their "fragile tools" (Fabre 1994:148–49). Fabre's remarks, made at a conference devoted to unraveling the intertwining of "nation," "identity," and "heritage" in Europe, suggest that, besides the usual domain of applied anthropology, it might be useful to look at the experience of some countries in cultural heritage research and politics. Limiting myself here to the French case, I would like to point out that it shows how relatively close equivalents to the notions of "traditional culture" and "folk knowledge" can be incorporated into a very broad idea of "heritage": though sometimes criticized for lacking real heuristic breadth—is it more than just another variation on the theme of "culture"?—the *patrimoine ethnologique* has nonetheless been a leading operative notion for a good part of French "at home" ethnological research in the past 15 years as well as for the identification of certain aspects of heritage politics. Borrowing its broad sense from other fields such as genetics or law, the concept has a dynamic dimension that emphasizes the importance of transmission. This allows it not to be restricted to a backward-looking stance but to encompass the ultimate forms acquired by traditions and forms of knowledge in the course of their reproduction or invention (Chiva 1990).

The above allusion to another international meeting also allows me to indicate that Russian scholars have participated relatively little in such events or in the associations and networks created in Europe in recent years, such as the European Association of Social An-

thropologists, although they might find a lively forum in these structures (this is less true, it seems, of other post-Soviet scholars, who may feel more need to show their new independence). The Moscow conference was useful as another necessary step towards a better dialogue between two scientific universes in a domain in which they are not accustomed to cooperating and do not even know each other's work very well. For Fortes (in Gellner 1980:xxv), the Burg Wartenstein meeting had already laid "a foundation . . . for much future cooperation." It is true that some joint projects have since been realized, especially in Asian and Arctic research, among them the 1988 exhibition "Crossroads of Continents" and conferences on ethnic or kinship matters, but perestroika has taken place in the meantime, and, as far as the theme of "folk knowledge" is concerned, the new conceptual framework of post-Soviet social sciences seems to the outside observer fuzzy and fragmented by contradictory trends. One who is attentive to the frequent calls for international scientific cooperation and prepared to respond to them might consider it difficult to say what direction the dialogue will now take—what developments will be possible given the wide gaps in theoretical and ethnographical standpoints, scientific and applied goals, and political implications. Whatever form the effort launched by this conference assumes, it seems reasonable to suggest that whether it achieves more than the exchange of ethnographic data will depend on both sides' willingness to tackle these issues.

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