

The changing nature of rurality and rural studies in Russia

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Abstract

This paper seeks to outline different strands of the reconfiguration of the social and spatial perspectives on the countryside in Russia in the last 20 years. The country's transition implied changes in the production of knowledge, including the re-examination of research topics and bringing new theories into rural studies. The article strives to develop a theoretically informed critique of the recent studies, specifically addressing the changing vision of rurality. Taking as a starting point traditional concerns in rural discourses, i.e. the ways rurality have been traditionally studied in Russia, this paper seeks to identify what rural studies might gain and lose from the shift in academic research. Critics have focused on the problems of bringing together past and recent trajectories in rural research, concentrating on the power of construction of particular rural discourses in different environments. The reconstruction of changing rural discourses aims to provide an interpretative framework for understanding the ways various rural images and policy concepts are implicated in the construction of the Russian countryside.

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1. Introduction

The past two decades in Russia has been a period when it has become more difficult to understand changes and policies relating to the rural. As for the country in general, new “market” ideology and transitional forces, in particular changing economic practices, tended to be automatically accepted as a driving force, which defined Russian rural space. This picture has been reflected in both the Russian and the Western media, where the marginality of the rural in the general context of political and economic change has been taken for granted.¹ In

essence, I argue that compared to the other European countries, there is still a serious lack of knowledge about the recent developments in the rural sphere in Russia.

In view of this, the paper attempts to bring more careful attention to the meanings of rurality in Russia and to address the complexity of this concept. The article shifts away from the dominant analyses which focus on specific components of rural life and considers what has been done and what is being done in terms of research on a wider range of interests in the countryside. From the outset I admit to the unavoidable selectivity and partiality of my approach, as it is only possible to sketch the outlines of the critique of works on rural thematic within the scope of this article. The paper focuses most specifically on Russian writings on rurality as it elucidates important themes in recent thought on the subject largely unfamiliar to the Anglo-American audience. It also attempts to bring academic discourses in the context where they originated by means of comparative analysis of academic representations of rurality and their intersections with visions of the rural as a space lived by rural people.

In analysing the important themes in recent thought on rurality the paper engages with the Russian scholarship on this subject in a two-part discussion. In the first section, a

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¹For example, the Western media has generally been inclined to present distorted information about events happening in Russia, tending to overemphasise negative developments and to discredit changes that are important for Russians themselves (see, for example, recent stories from BBC (2001a, b, 2002, 2004) or National Public Radio, NPR (2000a, b, 2001)). Russian media coverage of rural change has also often fragmented. Rural data is very scattered and the economic performance of rural areas is accorded the highest priority. The predominance of economic rationale in the media analysis of rural change has diverted many scholars from studying the aspects of Russian rural life, which are hidden behind the veil of economic restructuring.

brief introduction is given to the heritage of rural studies in the Soviet Union. The article outlines different approaches to rurality in Soviet times with specific attention to interdependencies and contradictions between various traditions of rural-focused research. It argues for the need to consider political and discursive contexts in which the rural was constructed and draws attention to the meanings and practices through which it was articulated. A second section then interrogates recent analyses of rurality and identifies current challenges in consideration of this subject. It establishes an analytical framework for new attention to the Russian countryside which energises a number of contemporary empirical studies of rural Russia.² The aim of this paper is to provide connections between the Soviet and post-Soviet studies of the countryside, to reflect on recent developments in social theory and to re-engage with the issue of rurality. It provides analysis of multiplicity of visions of the countryside in Russia and presents a closer reading of this subject. The article attempts to impose some order on conceptualisations of rurality in Russia and explains they have been developed over the last 30 years.

2. Traditional concerns: Soviet rural studies

2.1. Definitions

Since the beginning of rural studies in Russia in the 1890s, scholars have paid careful attention to the meanings of rurality. The majority of the early works have focused on co-production of rurality by peasants and nature, emphasizing the role of agriculture as an activity essential to the vitality of the Russian countryside. Throughout the 1960s Russian rural studies flourished as a genre and new energies have been put into conceptualising rurality. At that time the city and rural areas were portrayed as two completely different worlds: simple dichotomy was deployed to distinguish between urban and rural (Kuznetsov, 1971). Traditional interpretations of rural spaces as those with specific rural functions can be traced both in Anglo-American (Cloke and Milbourne, 1992) and Soviet academic discourses (Mereste and Nymmik, 1984). Within the USSR, it was quite common to think of rural spaces in terms of the prevalent “rural” functions. The works employing this functionalist perspective considered rurality as a notion signifying specific socio-cultural arrangement, which tended to be portrayed as fixed in terms of its form and functions deployed to produce it. From this point of view, a *negative* definition of rurality has been developed to describe rurality as places “out of the city”: the rural portrayed as “the other” to the urban (Kovalev, 1980). The rurality was thus seen as “inter-urban space” with fuzzy outer limits (Ioffe and Nefdova, 1997). This negative definition has been repeatedly rehearsed in many academic studies (Polyan and Sergeva, 1986; Alekseev, 1990;

Alekseev et al., 1989), which explicitly constructed the rurality as “the socio-economic category opposed to the urban” (Zaslavskaya and Muchnik, 1980, p. 18). Secondly, a more *positive* definition, proposed by Eniedi (1976), was based on the assumption that low population density and extensive use of land (“traditional rural functions”), which were deemed to be peculiar to rural areas, affected behaviour and attitudes of people lived in there. Mereste and Nymmik (1984) constructed a more detailed categorisation of these specific “rural” functions, discerning between rural (forestry and agriculture) and semi-rural (mining) ones. Works during that period sought to delineate and fix the existence of the “real” countryside providing the careful account of “authentic” rural experiences and practices.

Apart from the specific definitions of the countryside there have been at least five broad approaches to shaping the meaning of rurality in the Soviet rural scholarship. The next section will use discourse analysis to examine the earlier approaches to rurality and examine the basic discourses characterizing the debates, policies and social practices constructing the Soviet countryside. The aim of this analysis is to provide some introduction to the values embedded in discourses of rurality and contexts in which they developed. Following Foucault (1980), I reflect on the ways in which power of translation of specific actions of lay people, professionals and academics was used to construct particular representations of the countryside and legitimate the dimensions and characteristics that define the rural. Unravelling this process of discourse formation provides an understanding of the flows of meaning creating rurality and the power to impose these constructions on others. In reviewing discourses of rurality I recognise the constructed nature of discourses themselves (Murdoch and Pratt, 1993) and allow space for reformulation of discursive knowledge by rural people themselves in the form of more or less coherent “stories” of the countryside. This mediation challenges direct correspondence between specific discourses of rurality and lived constructions of the countryside: it acknowledges the inability of discursive knowledge to translate multiple practical knowledges of the rural.

2.2. Agri-industrial space (“Agropromyshlennaya” sreda³)

The first discourse on rurality which can be distinguished in Soviet rural scholarship has been influenced by functionalist perspective in that countryside was considered as a fixed phenomenon with stable characteristics and a specific demonstrable purpose. Within this agri-industrialist discourse rurality was viewed as mainly agricultural, and as a vestige of pre-industrial existence soon to be

²Although the article sketches out these empirical applications it primarily focuses on theoretical developments in understanding rurality.

³“Sreda” (среда) in Russian is understood as a space/society or multiplicity of conditions which produce of specific space and living conditions (Ushakov, 2003).

effaced by the influence of urban centres.⁴ This agricultural determinism, facilitated by a close association between the rurality and agriculture, was also deeply embedded in the popular consciousness. The major characteristic of the rurality was seen to be its link to the land and agriculture (Zaslavskaya, 1975, p. 13), and rural space was therefore denied any other uses. The idea of multiple rural space was thus reduced to its geographical (fixed) space, stripped even of its social contents. As Zaslavskaya and Muchnik (1980) put it “the notion of the rurality has more of a statistical and administrative character, than a socio-economic essence” [p. 21]. Therefore, the place of social rural space has been replaced by an abstract structure of “*agropromyshlennaya sreda*”, which overemphasises the importance of existed imagery of the rurality as agricultural.

The similar conclusion can be drawn from the stories told by rural people themselves. Several interviews I conducted in different locations in Central Russia demonstrate changing role of cultural symbols under the influence of agri-industrial discourse (Shubin, 2003). In fact, these studies revealed that young and middle-aged people often forget the toponymy of places and local landmarks referring instead to the cultural markers related to agriculture. Instead of traditional (toponymic) local names, rural people widely used the names of the collective farms which were in charge of agricultural use of specific areas. As the effect of dominant agri-industrial ideologies and introduction of modern technologies (car, telephone) in the rural life, lived space of a typical Russian village with all its topological signs and marks, paths and ways through it to the “other” spaces has been transformed into an abstract space of agricultural production. Within this discourse rurality as almost exclusive domain of agriculture has been disconnected from lived spaces of rural people, as they stress in their interviews: “in the post-war period, and especially in the 1970s the rural space has been transformed into ... monotonous, levelled and faceless space ... space of abstraction”.⁵

⁴Some of the main ideas represented in this discourse stem from the Stalin’s First Five-Year Plan, adopted by the communist party in 1928, which called for rapid industrialization of the economy and collectivization of agriculture. The plan implied creation of industrialised collective farms which had to provide food for the growing cities and to free many peasants for industrial work. The agri-industrial thinking about rurality has been and still is very influential in creation and transformation of the contemporary Russian countryside (see also discussion on post-Soviet rural studies).

⁵The material used is drawn from the archive of Intercentre, the Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences. The archive comprises the materials from the research projects on “Social and spatial structure of Soviet countryside” (1991–1995), “Real economics and politics in rural Russia” (1995–1996) conducted by the research group from the Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences including Vinogradsky, V., Fadeeva, O., Nikulin, A., Steinberg, I., Shanin, T., Rodionova, G., Kovalev, E. Interviewees: A. Taryshkina, I. Tsaplin, A. Samokhvalova, Krasnaya Rechka village, Saratov region. I am especially grateful to Teodor Shanin and Alexander Nikulin for proving an access to this archive.

This denigration of the role of rural people in the production of rurality points to an important internal contradiction within this discourse. Although collective farms as the dominant organizational mode of production and transformed nature represented the vital ingredients in a co-production of rurality, social relations (apart from those involved in agricultural production) were implied as non-existent in the countryside. In line with the state ideology, people were supposed to be brought into this abstract rural space just to maintain agricultural production. The state was purely instrumental in tackling rural problems: housing and facilities were build and maintained in the countryside only “because “labour force” or “manpower” has to be accommodated somewhere” (Vishnevsky, 1998, p. 103). The image of the village as “our common bread-giver” was widely used to draw attention to rural problems. The idea that “capital investments create [rural] people”, although criticised in some academic works (Ioffe, 1987, p.138), remained popular amongst decision-makers. Social relations between the rural people and ensuing social problems were out of sight: “the social aspect of rural planning was ... non-existent” (Artemenko, 1991, p. 113). Thus, in some academic studies rural space was constructed as abstract space and was treated as a material, rather than a set of relations between people and other objects; a product, rather than a means of production. As Artemenko (1991) describes it, “the rural [space] is a major arena for the appropriation of human and non-human elements of space into an immaterial space” [p. 115], where the latter was seen as a space of agriculture and agriculture-related industries.

Another important limitation of the agri-industrialist discourse emanates from its contradictory treatment of nature. On the one hand, the economic significance of collective farming was blamed for destroying environment and subordination of nature to industrial logic (in the form of melioration, for example), which reduced its instabilities. On the other hand, “natural” characteristic of rural space was recognised as a primary rather than subordinate feature of rurality.⁶ The dilemma of a nature-society divide was thus recreated within the rural context, where the countryside was considered as a part of the “habitat of human beings”, who have to overcome the obstacles of their “natural” surrounding in order to keep up social ties with their urban counterparts (Dmitriev et al., 1988, p. 138). As Belov (1984) pointed out, “the [space of] nature started right after the door. However, the further from the door, the more independent and untamed nature became” [p. 176]. This idea of “untamed” and “independent” nature and the need to “conquer” gave rise to a series of academic works on this issue (Lopatina and Nazarevsky, 1972; Usov, 1984). At this point, I come to the other popular theme in Soviet rural studies—the idea of colonisation of rural space.

⁶For example, Raitviyr (1979) stressed the importance of thinking about nature as a defining characteristic of rural space, while associating urban space with society.

2.3. Colonising space (“*Preodoleniye*”⁷)

The Soviet-period studies were conducted at the time when the idea that rural space could not be considered as an independent, but only as a part of urban sphere of expansion had popular appeal in the USSR. In early rural studies, there is an occasional glimpse of independent rural communities (*mir*) as a sphere of social activity between the household and the state (Chayanov, 1929, 1993). Later on, however, the idea of “*preodoleniye*” rural space was brought into play.⁸ Several studies refer to the rurality as an “open” space, which needs to be “conquered”, “overcome” or “negotiated” (Valeev, 1986; Dmitriev et al., 1988). In line with the concept of “culture of villages”, rural space was perceived as a web of relations of production between and within settlements, while the areas outside of villages were ignored or implied “open” and ascribed to agricultural use only (Bater, 1996). Culture of “consuming space” was seen as the only way to command rural space, while paying little attention to space itself (Ioffe and Nefedova, 1997).

I suggest these works focusing on “*preodoleniye*” of the countryside can be considered as a rural colonisation discourse, since colonialism means “unequal territorial relationships among states based on subordination and domination” (Watts, 2000, p. 93). In the USSR, where the existence of urbanistic government policy was well recognised, urban space was seen as the medium of technology and industrialisation, bound to power, which superimposed itself on rural space (Alekseev et al., 1989). This idea was made explicit by Valeev (1986), who stressed that “strongly pronounced dominance of the cities over the rural areas ... determines social and economic life of the latter” [p. 110]. In the same vein, Ioffe (1987) suggested that “peculiarities of the city are usually determinant on the dynamics of [adjacent] rural areas” [p. 137]. Thus, rurality was constructed as subordinated to the urban, and rural culture was seen as a colonised one.

Policy-makers and rural dwellers, however, understood colonisation of rural space differently. There was a conflict between discursive and practical meaning of rurality revealed in the series of works by rural sociologists from the Siberian branch of the Soviet Academy of Sciences (Zaslavskaya and Ryvkina, 1975; Zaslavskaya 1980a, b; Zaslavskaya and Muchnik, 1980). Investigations of rural discourses have highlighted the processes which con-

structed rurality as a site of contested meanings and revealed contradictions between public feelings about rural space and official symbolism in abstract construction of countryside. While the state agents tended to put the emphasis on “conquering” of unproductive space (the campaign for the ploughing of the virgin lands in North Kazakhstan in 1950–60s is a good example), rural dwellers often talked about “learning about and understanding” rural space as a way to master space. As an old man from Teplovka village in Saratov region summarised in an interview, “knowing your village and neighbourhood is... a trait of real husbandry”.⁹ Rural people in their interviews expressed strong feelings against the spread of the urban realm, which meant subduing the rural space of “better atmosphere and free life”.¹⁰

However, it is important to stress that in the Soviet time there was almost unequivocal relation between the realm of discourse and administrative thinking of the state agents. Political interests of the state and normative paradigms developed by the proponents of the dominant socialist system had defined the ways in which space and rurality were understood. Political negotiations and discursive struggles over space were rather limited in the context where individual thinking was generally discouraged and opposition to the state was not tolerated. In this context, abstract representations of rurality served to legitimise authority and control over multiple rural spaces in Soviet Union. Homogenisation of the rural in this case provided means for controlling this abstract space, regulating everyday practices.¹¹

Rural space has therefore been denied heterogeneity within this colonisation discourse. Despite warnings by some academics that this appropriation of the countryside would unavoidably mean “compression of ... rural space”, eventually resulting in a “subordination of a rural state” (Zaslavskaya, 1975, p. 26, 29), the task of “commanding” space was accorded a priority in the command system planning. Nefedova and Treivish (1996) blame past rural colonisation on “specific colonisation stereotypes of thinking, encouraging any expansion and appropriation” [p. 38], and rightly so; the sprawl of the urban domain into rural space and the conquering of new territories rather than making effective use of already existing ones were part and parcel of the command system. Internal features of rural space, therefore, were not taken into account; the only thing which mattered was increasing arable land area. Rural people were seen as a hindrance to this all-mighty urban expansion, because of their inability to quickly attune to urban-style life. In line with this prevalent rural colonisation discourse, rural dwellers were perceived as

⁷“*Preodoleniye*” (преодоление) means overcoming, conquering space (Dmitriev et al., 1988, p. 49). The explanatory Russian dictionary suggests that *preodolenie* also means to overpower and to belittle (Ushakov, 2003).

⁸Changing thinking about rurality as a space to be conquered or colonised stems from the government’s policies (adopted in 1965) aimed at concentration of agricultural production by means of merging profitable and unprofitable farms and centralisation of control over rural people through the hierarchical settlement structure (ordinary village, centre of collective farm branch, central farmsteads, inter-collective farm settlement) (Nefedova, 2001). Colonisation discourse developed on the back of the agri-ruralist discourse, which contributed to subordination of rural cultures and marginalisation of the countryside.

⁹Intercentre archive. Interviewee: D. Tolkachev, Teplovka village, Saratov region. Interviews conducted by V. Vinogradsky in 1991.

¹⁰Intercentre archive. Interviewee: A. Protasova, Lokh village, Saratov region. Interviews conducted by V. Vinogradsky in 1991.

¹¹As a result, as Fadeeva (2003a) states, rural authorities in Russia “have greater power to control local businesses than their urban counterparts” (p. 77).

“literally poor country cousins”, disparagingly described as “the herd ... invading the city to buy goods” (Bater, 1996, p. 192), ironically called “rural folk”. Nikol’sky (1996) provides even more dramatic characterisation of rural people as “the prisoners and bosses of Agricultural GULAG” [p. 230]. An average rural dweller was constructed as a “man [sic!] ... in “dirty black boots, a tattered, padded jackets and a cap, and a smoking a papirosa” (Bater, 1996, p. 192). This “inferior” rural culture, therefore, was deemed to be literally replaced, or colonised, with the dominant urban culture.¹² This colonisation of rural space “within” the country, it was argued, could be traced back several centuries, when expansion of the country to Siberia was generally aimed at expanding the arable lands and mastering the rural landscape (Nefedova and Treivish, 1996).

At its extreme, this idea of colonising rural space extended into an assumption that the countryside is futureless in general and it is doomed to be swallowed up by the urban (see Alekseev, 1987, for criticisms). As a result, rural colonisation discourse has come together with concept of “*agrorod*” (rural township), which is well-known in British literature. The part and parcel of this concept was the tenet of forceful abandoning of so-called “*neperspektivnye derevni*” (“unviable”, “futureless” villages) (Pallot, 1997; Bater, 1996).¹³ Some rural studies were explicit about this “reconstruction” of the rurality as a way to accommodate it to the urban way of living (Kuznetsov, 1971; Baryshev, 1969). In others, the widespread influence of these ideas was implicit (Kuznetsova, 1986; Strongina, 1986). There was also a wave of criticism of the concept of “*neperspektivnye derevni*” in the Soviet literature, soon after rural planners took on board this idea, when scholars called for the “re-establishment of the rurality” and a re-assessment of urban-focused policy (Alekseev et al., 1989; Alekseev, 1989). These criticisms stressed that “transformation of villages ... into comfortable urbanised settlements, hardly different from the towns, will mean disappearance of the rurality”¹⁴ (Zaslavskaya, 1975, p. 20).

Heterogeneity of rural space, however, sometimes escaped the logic of the existing ways of organising and

controlling political actions. Some rural people sabotaged colonisation and coercive resettlement, even when vital supplies were cut off and infrastructure was dismantled. “Alternative” networks were formed in the blindspots of the state proprietary and homogenising mechanism. Rural people redefined rurality as a “grey” area where stealing, illegal employment, and non-taxed sales of equipment and materials were becoming common features of rural life (Shanin, 1999; Nikulin, 1999, 2002a). A retired farmer epitomised this struggle to defend social specificity and vitality of the rural in this way:

There was a man coming to our Teplovka village—an architect, I think... And he said in our collective farm office: “I can build two houses, where all your Teplovka will go, and fit into...” What a fool! ... We will still do things in the way we are used to do them.¹⁵

Through this tactical use of marginal spaces rural people have attempted to challenge the vision of rurality as a homogeneous construct in the dominant colonisation discourse. However, as noted earlier, the crucial element of contextuality of this discourse was limited opportunity for competition for hegemony between the interests of rural people and the state. In the period of centralised decision-making, local people did not have a real and effective say in rural strategy formulation.

2.4. Urban-style modernisation (“*Dogonyayuschaya [gorod] modernizatsiya*”¹⁶)

The imagery of rural development, and the idea of modernisation of the village in the way to bring it closer to the city, is the third theme common to the Soviet-period studies. Ideas of “bridging the gap between the city and the country” were prevalent at that time.¹⁷ As was the case with British rural community studies (Wright, 1992), Russian scholars conceived modernisation mainly in terms of economic modernisation, as a process of gradual change from a simple, “village economy”, to a diversified economy of urban centres.

These works, therefore, tended to focus mostly on the economic dimension of rurality. The “ideal countryside” in “*dogonyayuschaya [gorod] modernizatsiya*” discourse is the space to be predominantly determined by economic perspectives and opportunities for investment. From this perspective, landscape and nature were seen as commodities, which needed to be managed by the state to ensure

¹²Dominant discourses on rurality in the Soviet time have been often directly translated into government policies and social practices constructing the Soviet countryside. As a result, discourse on the “inferiority” of rural cultures legitimised exclusion of rural people in the USSR, who until the early 1960s were not even allowed to have a passport to move freely around a country. Between 1939 and 1962 collective farm members, unlike their urban counterparts, could also be legally prosecuted if they failed to attend their work during at least 100–150 days a year (Afanasiev, 1996).

¹³It is necessary to mention, however, that the prevalence of *agrorod* in the USSR was taken to the extreme by some European authors, who, as Alekseev and Tkachenko (1993) put it, “obviously exaggerated a tendency of *agrorod* creation in the USSR” [p. 5].

¹⁴This colonisation discourse like many dominant academic paradigms of the Soviet time had a tangible effect on transformation of the countryside. Prevalence of colonisation stereotypes of thinking about rurality has led to the policy of *agrorod* creation, which in part triggered replacement of individual houses with blocks of flats, especially in the large rural settlements.

¹⁵Intercentre archive. Interviewee: D. Tolkachev, Teplovka village, Saratov region. Interviews conducted by V. Vinogradsky in 1991.

¹⁶“*Dogonyayuschaya*” (догоняющая) modernisation can be translated as modernisation which aims to catch up with urban development (Vishnevsky, 1998, p. 38).

¹⁷Modernisation ideas were prevalent since late-1960s and they become especially dominant in 1970s, after the government launched the programme for rural transformation and creation of showcase “viable” settlements, where society and culture were supposed to be “developed” to urban-style standards (Kolganov, 1999).

development of urban areas. The modernisation discourse is energised by the functionalist and negative definition of rurality in rural studies. There are strong parallels between colonisation and modernisation discourses in terms of the recognition of subordinated role of the countryside in relation to the urban space. In both approaches, the cultural and social meanings of the countryside are reduced to its utilitarian value: the most important function of rurality is rooted in its ability to satisfy productive and consumptive needs of the city.

In modernisation discourse, however, social dimension of the rural has been accorded more attention than it received in colonisation mode of thinking. Primarily, the focus of modernizers in relation to rural space was utilitarian: social backwardness of countryside was considered as one of the possible hindrances to its technological and economical development. The rather loose adaptation of such catchphrases as “eradication of differences between the town and the country” (Kuznetsova, 1986) within rural modernization discourse further reveal the ideological incongruity between the populist measures aimed at infrastructural development of countryside and the attempts to create politically dependant rural “production spaces”. Attention to rural communities and social development of the countryside was only justified insofar as it could help to overcome rural economic underdevelopment and retardation. Rural areas were differentiated as if they were positioned on the scale from simple to complex according to their economy and society (Lukhmanov, 1988). The final aim of this modernisation project was seen as “technical and economical integration of the rural sphere ... into the modern [developed] world” (Nikiforov, 1979, p. 10), while the social side of the project was accorded a secondary role.

In line with this modernisation model, the truly rural was defined as a marginal space, “a space of crisis” (Denisova, 1995; Nefedova and Treivish, 1996), isolated socially and spatially from the urban as a major development domain. As Nikiforov (1979) puts it, “the major generic feature of the rural space is ... its backwardness” (p. 12). The images of “losers” or “fools remaining to stay in the villages” (Denisova, 1995) were prevalent in the popular discourse. In the letter for the Komsomol’skaya Pravda newspaper, parents from a village in the Kirov region wrote to their child: “We have spent our life digging in the soil and manure ... at least you go [to the town] and live *real human life*” (p. 3, emphasis added). It was what Denisova (1995) called “second-gradedness” of rural life, condescension to the village, treating it on familiar terms” [p. 222] in academia that eventually contributed to development of “modernisation” discourse. The rural sphere was thus described as a world of “underdeveloped services, appalling living conditions, non-existent communications and sparse road network” (Stepanov, 1979, p. 147). Therefore, the political and social corollaries of modernisation thinking have been the appropriation of heterogeneous ruralities, imposition of sameness across a variety of rural

people and marginalization of rural interests. The aggregation of societal interests under the dominant ideological paradigm has become more evident in another discourse, which involved categorisation of rural space.

2.5. Categorising rurality

Another approach of defining the rurality was to express it by means of statistical data and other parameters, in terms of its social and spatial characteristics. This approach avoided describing rurality itself, concentrating instead on differentiation of existed rural areas and their expressions. Different typologies and “indexes of rurality” were constructed for purely technological purposes, i.e. the development of planning initiatives, agricultural regulations and service provision. The definition of the truly rural as “the typological unit with the average values of major indicators” was quite common (Fuks, 1982, p. 33). Most of these typologies drew explicitly on the census variables and statistical definitions, thus narrowing a whole variety of existing ruralities to a very limited set of well-defined and easy-to-use types. Professionals, policy makers and academics drew upon highly variegated social representations of the countryside: visible but fixed mental constructs used as shorthand to organize and manage complex rural spaces.¹⁸

Thinking about rurality in terms of uneven and variegated space while applying classificatory practices aimed at creation of normalised objects reveals internal contradiction existed within categorisation discourse. On the one hand, this discourse can be linked to the disciplinary regime of the Soviet society which was aimed at creation of a homogenised society.¹⁹ Rural people were treated as abstract “bolts”²⁰ in a state mechanism working and living collectively as “a one big Soviet family”. In the countryside, this collectivist tenet was reinforced through the coercive creation of collective farms and introduction of the system of levelling payments.²¹ On the other hand, categorisation discourse attempted to acknowledge the variety of social, economic, natural and political conditions existing within the vast rural area within

¹⁸Billig (1985) referred to these categorisations as “bureaucratic models of thought” (p. 87).

¹⁹Categorising rurality was a part of the command economy, which required production of well-defined representations of the countryside to fit within the overall process of planning and managing Soviet economy and society (it can be traced back to the first Five-year plan in 1929). Expression of complex ruralities through a limited number of statistical indicators became increasingly popular in the 1970s, when new methods of statistical analysis allowed to create sophisticated rural typologies and to apply increased “planning pressure” on the rural dwellers and collective farms which did not fit in these simplified categories (Ryvkina, 1998).

²⁰According to this “technological” vision, people were denied initiative and individuality (everyone went to school, then to university, then work placement and a guaranteed job with the standard pay rate).

²¹According to this system, maximum payment rates (“limits”) were adopted by the State Ministry of Labour. This measure was aimed at eradicating differences in payment between rural professionals (vets, agronomists) and rural poor, who constituted the social basis of the early communist reforms. This levelling system was known as “*uravnilovka*” (Ryvkina, 1998).

the Soviet Union. In order to make sense of this diverse multitude, the philosophy of categorisation was used to minimise ambiguity and vagueness and to achieve what Sibley (1995) referred to as purification of space. Categorisation has created purified categories of the rural which excluded representations deemed indeterminate or inconsistent. One of the aims of constructing such typologies was to make rural space more manageable as the “others” (groups and individuals showing any deviation from the existing standards) were more noticeable in within the categories with clear boundaries and properties. Under the command system rurality was transformed into a series of standardised constructions, a sort of totalitarian space. This closure and exclusionary (restrictive) character of rural space was felt by the people who lived in it even more acutely:

The life [in the city] is different—it is more easy to live there... We think life is somewhat more open there”. “We did not see anything. We lived away from the city, in our village... like in isolated space of our own. [We lived] like in the dead end...²²

As early as in 1963 Kovalev warned that these simplified typologies, “failing to reflect already existing variety of ruralities will become even more inadequate in the future” (p. 24). A small number of early works incorporated several social indicators for categorisation, while the others were totally “utilitarian” (Zaslavskaya et al., 1982), focusing entirely on the economic dimensions of the rural sphere (Maksimov, 1986) (for a detailed review of rural typologies see Alekseev, 1990). The studies that followed demonstrated the tendency to lose sight of real picture of the rurality, as development and refinement of most of the typologies continued to hinge on statistical methods of rural differentiation.

There are obvious interlinkages between this thinking of rurality in terms of purified categories and colonisation modes of thought discussed earlier. In both theoretical approaches, rural space was constructed as a sort of closed (stagnant or “dead”) space, opposite to open space of the city seen as developing and extending its limits. These discourses therefore share common generalised and essentially aspatial strategies which replace local sensitivities and encourage the creation of a somewhat colonialist mindset on the part of academics and policy-makers and a “colonised” feeling amongst rural people (Lurje, 2002). Similar to rural colonisation model, categorisation of rural space was based mainly on statistical/economic abstractions without regard for the interests of rural dwellers. This lack of sociological insight diverted most scholars from understanding the social construction of the rurality. The conflicts of internal and external powerful interests, which drove the processes of rural change, have found little attention in the rural studies

in the Soviet period. The next section introduces the works which attempted to address this issue and to develop understandings of different power relations and social practices in reconstructing variegated ruralities.

2.6. Multifaceted village (“*Mnogolikaya derevnya*”²³)

The domination of colonisation and modernisation stereotypes of thinking about rural space has been challenged by several rural studies in the end of the Soviet period which contributed to the construction of rurality as a *social* category. In redefining contemporary ruralities, Zaslavskaya (1980a) was among the first to call for “bringing people back” into rural studies. As she stressed, in the system of prevalent agrarist thinking of “land-machinery-humans” in 1960s “the machinery was the weakest point, while currently it is more often the humans, who require more attention” (Zaslavskaya 1980b, p. 78). Alekseev (1990) develops this argument even further, insisting on “complex” definition of the rurality to include the interests and the visions of the countryside possessed by actual rural inhabitants. In his book “Multifaceted village” he discusses different experiences of the rurality obtained by different users of rural space, who use different reference systems. “Because there is a multiplicity of reference systems, the rurality is a “multifaceted concept”, he insists (Alekseev, 1990, p. 16). The rural is no longer perceived as the exclusive domain of agriculture and it is recognised that competition between different interests creates the rural as “social and cultural space”. The state is attributed the role of the mediator between different negotiating bodies and groups enabling them to solve societal problems.

Viewed from a wider critical perspective, his conceptualisation of rurality might also be seen as an attempt to move away from “traditional” vision of rural space to a more open-minded (or even post-modernist) approach emphasising rural diversity. This is close to what Mormont (1990) called “answering the question of “who is rural”, i.e. constructing rural space as a multiple space—in line with the numerous ways in which each occupant of that space feels or perceives it. However, this “multifaceted” conceptualisation of the rurality does not go that far as Mormont in stressing its multiplicity. Alekseev (1990) in his conceptualisation of the rural stresses the existence of different rural functions, but does not make it explicit how it is constructed and what kind of spaces constitute the “complex” rural space. Additionally, no account is given to how these multiple spaces, forming one rural space, are organised and constitute themselves. This conceptualisation of rurality was developed at the very end of the Soviet period, and enjoyed neither widespread nor overt support among the public and academia.

²²Intercentre archive. Interviewees: I. Sitkina, E. Sharonova, Atamanovka hamlet, Volgograd region. Interviews conducted by V. Vinogradsky and O. Vinogradskaya in 1991.

²³“*Mnogolikaya derevnya*” (многоликая деревня) means different, multiple, multifaceted village (Alekseev, 1990).

2.7. Before the post-Soviet transition

The development of the above discourses of the rurality of the Soviet period led to the construction of different ruralities. The vision of *productivist rural areas* suggested an unproblematic combination of agriculture and related industries within the confines of seemingly socially homogeneous rural areas. My argument here is that Soviet-period rural studies dehumanised rural space, despite aspirations of some academics to bring people back into understandings of space. The focus on the space of production (rather than production of space) means that this discourse was unable to address some of the critical social issues that shape inequality and deprivation, not engaging the dialectics of physical-human totality of existence. Rural identity was thus constructed as single and homogeneous, which was not easily compatible with the prevalent binary thinking. This triggered a conflict between natural and social domains, which cannot be accommodated within this simplified construction of the rurality. This conflict developed into the *colonisation discourse*, where the rurality itself was accorded a subordinate position in relation to the urban and doomed to be colonised by the latter. This was different from the process known as gentrification or class colonisation in the British context, where the migration of middle class ex-urban groups into rural areas triggered conflicts over the legitimate definition of the rurality. Substitution of “traditional” social representations of the rurality with new definitions of rural space introduced by immigrants, is different from the colonisation of rural space that occurred in Russia. The “backward countryside” in this colonisation discourse, regarded as the relic of the past, was subject to appropriation and modernisation through its integration into modern (urbanised) world. In contrast to the previously mentioned concepts, the vision of *the rurality as a multiple space* was constructed on the basis of understanding the space as relational rather than as a resource. Although this notion of “rural space” referred to specific functions performed by the countryside, it was more heterogeneous and more diverse in terms of social representations than in the agricultural and colonisation discourse. Conceptual debates on multiple ruralities awaited further developments which came with the change of social regime and thinking.

3. Post-Soviet rural studies

The majority of Russians now do not understand at all why do we need to study rural areas (Alekshev, 2001, pers.comm.)

3.1. Restructuring of rural geography (“*Destruktirovannoye prostranstvo*”²⁴)

The recent political and economic changes in Russia, which can be characterised as “restructuring”, have also

affected what are understood to be rural areas. These shifts in political regimes have coincided with changes in rural research. During the last decade, the main areas of debate have shifted from productive transformation of the countryside and the role of state in successful colonisation of urban space to the questions of social nature and contested consumption of rurality (Nefedova, 2003; Patsiorkovski, 2003). The issues which were marginal to the preoccupations of the Soviet rural studies such as social problematics of rural development and everyday rural geographies have been brought to the fore. Gradually rural studies began to look at the processes through which people living in rural space constructed their vision of the rurality. This “social” turn encapsulated the shift from studies of general spatial differentiation of conditions of living, a basis of agriculture-centred philosophy where people were treated as “productive elements”, to the studies of different interests and relationships between various social groups in the production of rurality (Zaslavskaya, 1999). Within this discourse rurality is now constructed as a multiple space, embracing “geographical territory, social relations and general [cultural] links ... a space, rather than a dot in the map” (Zaslavskaya, 1999, p. 505). The new challenges of transition therefore brought to the fore the issues of diversity of social relations and cultural practices shaping Russian countryside and stressed the need for more creative theoretical approaches to examine the differential construction of ruralities.

Unfortunately, this growing academic interest in changing countryside has been inadequately supported by the governmental and non-governmental organisations. Most of the ongoing rural research projects are funded by international agencies, while the Russian government “does not bother about science in general and rural studies in particular”²⁵ (Ryvkina, 1998, p. 54). The certainties of the Soviet period based upon the government’s commitment to develop a “modern” countryside and encourage “efficient” food production have been suddenly replaced by the ambiguities of policies that at once seek to reduce the costs of supporting agribusiness, to devolve responsibilities for rural development to the local authorities and to provide some social protection to rural people. Together, these policies are altering the views of rurality, with some seeing agriculture as still central to an understanding of the Russian countryside and others re-evaluating the roles of farming in production of rural spaces. The second part of this paper provides a review of the recent developments in approaches to understanding rurality in Russia. It starts with the reflections on traditional preoccupations of rural studies with agriculture and traces the transformation of Soviet agri-industrial discourse during the transition. It later reviews the new themes which emerged in Post-Soviet rural studies and analyses the repositioning of

²⁴“*Destruktirovannoye prostranstvo*” (деструктурированное пространство)—restructured space (Rodoman, 1998, p. 182).

²⁵The commercialisation of rural studies means that long-term research projects are becoming less popular and feasible: research which has immediate impact in current debates is the only type that receives funding.

agriculture within transformed rurality and construction of contested meanings of the countryside.

3.2. *New agri-rural space (“Prostranstvo agroukladov”²⁶)*

Recent social and political changes in Russia have challenged the sustainability of agriculture and its stewardship role in the countryside.²⁷ The feasibility of Soviet-period agri-ruralist strategies in the context of reduced state support and serious constraints on technological development of farming has been brought into question. Hand in hand with these changes came different understanding of rurality as a complex cultural and social, as well as agricultural space. The infusion of Russian rural debates with the ideas of heterogeneity of countryside, however, did not coincide with the end of productivist²⁸ era. The opening-up of the countryside to different competing interests in Russia did not mirror the processes of rural economic and social restructuring in other European countries.²⁹ The unresolved problem of land sale and ownership, restricted by legislation, frustrated diversification of land use and ensuing differentiation of the countryside (Melamed, 1996). The new agri-ruralist discourse is firmly placed within this changing context of limited access for non-farming interests to the land combined with the emerging surplus of agricultural land resulting from industry’s recession.

Despite the emergence of socio-ruralist discourse, which challenged the convergence of the “rural” and the “agricultural”, the proponents of agri-industrial discourse have argued for firm rooting of rurality in outmoded concerns with farming, “rural functions” and “natural resources” (Aleksandrov, 1993). Calls to understand the rurality as a multiple space in academic debates conflicted with the image of the homogeneous productivist countryside deep-rooted in public consciousness. The supporters of

the agri-industrial discourse assert the existence of symbolic symbiosis between agriculture and countryside based on economic interests of rural people (Ioffe and Nefedova, 1998). The actors which legitimise agriculture-centred specificity of rurality include farm managers and the state which still provides support to the people who can ensure the survival of extensive and production-oriented agriculture. After the breakdown of the Soviet welfare state, the power and resources in the countryside were retained in the hands of former Communist party leaders, who turned into new farm managers and local councillors (Afanasiev, 1996). Moreover, different commentators have revealed that the majority of farmers, who failed to adjust themselves to the ever-changing economic conditions, had nothing to do but to rely on traditional ways of farming without even thinking about alternative uses of space (Simagin, 1994; Katikhin, 1995; Nefedova and Treivish, 1996). As one of the farm managers told me in the interview,

A long after the beginning of the reforms we have still been thinking that changes are temporary and we all come back to state regulation and subsidies. So even under the new conditions we did nothing to change the way things were going and the way we were thinking about the village [rurality].³⁰

The upshot of this is further bureaucratisation of mechanisms ensuring rural planning and service provision so that funding channels previously (in Soviet times) focused mainly on supporting agriculture-related activities become reified.³¹ As a result, the idea of “maintaining traditional stewardship role” of agriculture in the countryside (Government of the Russian Federation, 2003) is gaining ground. In this context the construction of rurality in the new agri-ruralist discourse can be seen as an unstable constellation of forces of extensive and production-oriented agriculture. This new rural space, which may be called “super-productivist” (Halfacree, 1999), is abstract and exclusionary, as it leaves little scope for different (other) constructions of the rurality to diverge from dominant representations of countryside.

Transformed agri-ruralist (agri-industrial) discourse develops in contradictory ways by differently representing the role of agriculture within the context of global circuits of capital and changing rural social backdrop. On the one hand, in this discourse rural spaces are often equated with distinctive agricultural spaces, which are becoming increasingly integrated in global, mainly urban-centred food

²⁶“Prostranstvo agroukladov” (пространство агроукладов)—space of different agriculture-centred lifestyles (Nefedova, 2003, p. 8).

²⁷As early as in 1990 Russia saw the start of the covert de-collectivization of state farms. However, the results of the agricultural reform announced later were mixed. Although the government decree of 1991 envisaged privatization of collective farms into joint-stock companies and partnerships with limited responsibility, de facto many farms were allowed to retain their collective status and organisation. The reform thus saw the collapse of the state-run agricultural production and removal of food price control, while it did not cause rapid improvement in the lives of the rank-and-file members of the collective farms because the inherent management practices often remained unchanged (Nefedova, 2003).

²⁸Following Lowe et al (1993), I refer to “productivist” countryside as a space with predominant industrially based and expansionist agriculture supported by the state’s efforts to increase its productivity.

²⁹The shift in priorities in Russian political agendas, which was mainly due to inability of the state to control the agricultural sector under transition, has led to limited diversification and dispersion of farming activities. However, this was different from the transformation of European countryside since the 1970s, where the policies promoting intensive food production in the postwar era have been substituted with policies seeking farm diversification and rural environmental protection (Marsden et al., 1993).

³⁰Interview conducted in July 2000 as a part of my PhD on “(Net)working social exclusion in rural Russia and Ireland” (Shubin, 2003). Interviewee: O. Samokhin, Zhilkontsy village, Moscow region.

³¹Philips (2001) characterises Russia’s transition period as “a gradual confinement of planning to bureaucratic institutional politics and... decision-making generally. To a degree this pattern could be interpreted as a reconstitution of the political culture of the Soviet Union and its restriction of the sphere of politics and policy making” (p. 61).

production networks.³² On the other hand, growing marginalization of farming within the regional and national economies is acknowledged, which inevitably changes rural identities and brings to the fore social meanings of the rural. The “social turn” in post-Soviet rural studies, however, did not lead to the total repositioning of rurality within this discourse. The increasing importance of social and cultural practices in shaping ruralities is recognised in agri-ruralist thinking the form which does not undermine the significance of agricultural production in the countryside. Social reproduction of rurality in this case is strongly linked to its agricultural development. Illustrations include attempts to represent agriculture as a “background”³³ (defining) characteristic of rurality (Nosonov, 2001) and efforts to understand rural lifestyles as agriculturally embedded in the form of *agrouklad* (Nefedova, 2003). In the latter case, it is argued that “the meanings of “rurality” and “agriculture” are all but isomorphic” (p. 18) because of the predominance of agriculture-centred lifestyles in rural Russia. Distinctive significance of rurality is therefore reconstructed within the agricultural sphere and complex relations among the social, cultural and economic processes producing variegated countryside are not fully recognised.

The contested representation of rurality within this discourse as a “socially modified” but mainly agricultural space lies at the heart of the cultural politics in the countryside. The question is whether the current organisation of production in agriculture does not place serious constraints on heterogeneous (complex) construction of rural space. If countryside is understood as heterogeneous in terms of social composition, can it be defined at the same time “agriculture-centred” and more homogeneous in terms of land use? I suggest that the answer lies in the re-examination of the role of productive and consumptive needs in construction of the “new countryside”. New scholars of the Russian countryside have abandoned the formerly popular idea that in rural areas “the space is inextricably linked to the production infrastructure” (Ryvkina, 1980, p. 6), i.e. rural dwellers are workers of particular agricultural enterprise and their relation to that agricultural unit forms their identity. Meanwhile, space for consumption interests to stake claims for use of the countryside is limited by land-use regulations, so major *material* disputes and conflicts over land use under transition are hardly existent.

³²Russian rural space, however, is different from capitalist space because it is not fully open to the forces of capitalism and exchange, not constructed by changing market interests and therefore is not fully flexible and fluid.

³³This representation of agriculture as a “background” feature (фондовая отрасль) of rurality suggests marginalization of other visions of the countryside. The ensuing denial of the distinctive significance of the social and cultural elements of rurality and the erosion of local differentiation is increasingly at odds with the other approaches revealing the multiplicity and diversity of symbolically charged rural places (see, for example, Alexeev et al., 2003).

This is not to say, however, that immaterial or *symbolic* struggles between different actors for a definition of the rurality do not exist. On the one hand, the new agri-ruralist discourse promotes productivist vision of the countryside as an ideal space where farmers still practise traditional (extensive) agriculture securing healthy food production and preservation of attractive landscapes. The rediscovered (after the “social” turn) social dimension of rurality is used to support this agriculture-centred view by stressing the role of the farmers as the custodians of rural traditions. In the idyllic countryside represented by this discourse, rural and agricultural are interlinked: the rurality is described by rural people as the “country from childhood memories”, where “you remember how to plant this blackcurrant when you were a child” (Nikulin, 1999, p. 248). From this agriculture-centred position, imagined rurality is constructed as “glubinka”: quiet, natural and healing countryside, peripheral to urban cores and their deteriorating influence. The changing image of rurality (any deviation from the ideal image) seems to cause a negative reaction from the majority of population, as this “traditional image of countryside is a part of Rusianness” due to “rural mentality” of the Russians (Aleksiev and Simagin, 1996, p. 121).³⁴

On the other hand, alternative definitions of the countryside as a heterogeneous entity suggest that rural areas are not homogeneous and the idea of rural idyll therefore cannot be replicated elsewhere. The “imagined countryside” is conceptualised as a contested space, reconstituted by competing interests into different zones of “province” and “glubinka”³⁵ according to the degree of underdevelopment (Rodoman, 1996, 1998) and “wretchedness and overall idiocy of rural life” (Ioffe and Nefedova, 1997, p. 4). Rurality thus seen as de-structured (differentiated) space—space of different groups, in-migrants and farmers, with their different representations of the countryside (Rodoman, 1998).

To summarise, despite the continuing influence of the legacies of productivism, new post-socialist approaches, committed to critique and deconstruction of “traditional” constructions of rurality, have started to challenge the topics and debates about an “agriculture-centred” rural space. I suggest that rurality is now constructed as a sphere where the interplay of consumption and production interests “co-produce” representations of “ideal” and “real” countryside, where productionist and post-productionist strands of ruralist discourse are involved in contesting (and contrasting) processes of its construction. This indicates the internal conflict within the new agri-ruralist discourse: network of symbols which is used to

³⁴This idealisation of the rurality is close to the British popular discourse of the “rural idyll”.

³⁵Here “glubinka” is used in a different way compared to the “productivist” thinking to refer to a backward and ignorant space (see also Ioffe and Nefedova, 2000; Patsiorokovski, 2003).

make rurality meaningful contradicts the materiality of practices, through which this rural space is reconstructed. Rurality is therefore becoming an abstract space, a space of the conflict, where academics theorise its complexity and multiplicity, while in reality “numerous” uses of this space are confined to the agricultural. This is a space, in which different constructs are concatenated.³⁶ On one hand, rural space is broken into fragments and has no existence, on the other hand it is homogeneous and socially real and as such localised.³⁷

This construction of rurality as homogeneous and exclusionary space energised the recent efforts by rural geographers to explain the effects of divisive trends in the countryside and to assess how particular groups are marginalized by these processes. The next section reviews the emerging debates on social fragmentation of rural space and attempts to explore the persistence of colonisation stereotypes of thinking about rurality.

3.3. “Stranger” peasants (“*Postoronniye krestyane*”³⁸)

The historical legacy of urban-biased conceptualisation of the rurality, popular in the Soviet period, where rurality was defined in terms of backwardness and under-development, contributed to the development of new, “social” models of modernisation. In Soviet-period studies, there was an intention to leave behind the social space (of social relations and social problems), because it contained a set of unresolved problems that did not go well with the political statements about the successes of socialist transformation of the countryside. Resurgence of interest in social composition of rurality due to anxiety about the ways people adopt to the transition have encouraged studies of rural societies. While Soviet scholars stressed the need to bring rural communities from the edge of the socialist economy closer to diversified economy of urban socialist centres, in the post-Soviet period the social aspect of modernisation has received more attention. Social organisation was now conceived as changing from a simple, truly rural society, to a complex urban society. Vishnevsky (1998) argued that rural society was regulated by a “power of land”,³⁹ when rural people, who have been involved in

farming for ages, totally depended on the land and had to adjust their lives to comply with the demands of agriculture. In this simple society people are not acting as individuals, they are “immersed in a community”. Proponents for this socio-modernisation discourse perceive rural space as a “social matreshka” (Russian doll): a rural person is located within a household, household is immersed in a community and community is the basis for all other layers of society (Vishnevsky, 1998). This socially fragmented (not individually independent) people are believed to support the existing order of things and oppose new developments. Thus, true rurality is seen as a backward, godforsaken place with abundance of no-man’s land, where “landscape, [rural] environment ... are of no interest for anyone” (Rodoman, 1998, p. 181). This vision of rurality, therefore, still reflects “a somewhat colonialist” mindset (Alekseeva, 1995), putting rural people in a situation when they were encouraged to transfer their backward traditional society to a modern one. Supporters of this colonisation position have stressed that “urbanities ... look upon the countryside as inferior, and the word *derevnya* [village] assumed a derogatory meaning in Russia’s urban parlance” (Ioffe and Nefedova, 1997, p. 426). As an old man from Sokolovka village in southern Russia put it, “countryside was and still is ... [a place where] discriminated and ill-fated people live” (Nikulin, 1999, p. 247). Nefedova and Ioffe (1996) summarise: “in public consciousness ... “village” (rurality) is identified with backwardness and unsophisticated taste” [p. 132]. This backwardness spurs talk about modernisation of the countryside as a means of extending the urban realm, i.e. colonisation of rurality, which is widely conceptualised as “a benign force of economic modernisation and social advancement” (Watts, 2000, p.77).

At the other extreme, there is “a power of money”—complex urban society, where people overcame their dependency on the land and started to “conquer” or “consume” it (Vishnevsky, 1998). Possible adverse-side effects of modernisation and urbanisation threaten a simple rural society; “power of money” spoils it from inside. Rural and urban are thus conceptualised as social spaces with different social life organisation: traditional but unjust in the countryside and modern and just in the city. The rurality is constructed as irrational and strange,⁴⁰ difficult to understand: “rural societies ... are constructed in a strange incomprehensible way so they resist any attempts of their systematic scientific interpretation” (Vinogradsky, 1999, p. 448). Rural dwellers are therefore pictured as the “other”: “peasant ... is the other. Alien to everything: rationality, democracy, market, legislation ... He [sic!] is a crafty beholder of this world exterior to him [sic!]” (Vinogradsky, 1999, p. 457). Following Philo (1997),

³⁶Lefebvre (1991) called such a space “both abstract and concrete in character: abstract inasmuch as it has no existence ... and concrete as it is socially real and as such localised” [p. 341–42].

³⁷Klubov and Popov (1991) echo this argument in their debates about rural space: “there are a host of specific villages... [as well as] a uniform social entity expressed by an abstract notion of rurality” [p. 144].

³⁸“*Postoronniye krestyane*” (посторонние крестьяне) could be translated as “stranger” or “foreigner” peasants and refer to the idea of social modernisation of “archaic” countryside (Ekhalov, 1999, p. 9). *Postoronniy* (посторонний) in Russian means “unfamiliar”, “other”, “not belonging to a particular group” (Ushakov, 2003).

³⁹The idea about the “power of land” has been proposed by Uspensky (1956), who claimed that “every move, every action, every thought of a rural dweller belongs to the land” [p. 67]. This idea has been selectively incorporated into socio-modernisation discourse to justify social colonisation of rurality.

⁴⁰Nikulin (1999) has argued that both in academic and lay discourses rurality is constructed as a strange space (“kolkhoz life is based on irrationality”, p. 262) which is difficult to understand for the people from the outside.

it might be argued that this “otherness” of the rurality and its alienation from the wider abstract space suggests its exclusion or colonisation in order to exorcise the interior danger.

In this discourse priority is still given to urban development, which is seen as a locomotive of modernisation (westernisation) and, therefore, colonisation of rural space. The same ideas can be found in popular (lay) discourses associated with socio-modernisation debates. Rural people acknowledge that their decision to move out of the village is usually taken on the basis of its marginal position in the modern society:

We had a good mechanic here. We wanted to give him a flat, asked him not to leave [the village]. He said: “I cannot live like this anymore... I had enough of this dirty life, I am moving to the town. I had enough of living on the edge”—It is all because of constant changes, experiments on the peasants... lack of care about people.⁴¹

It is not only rural society which is seen to be “on the edge” of life. Rural studies themselves are marginalised and limited. With the urban-focused nature of social research in modern Russia and lack of clear government interest in rural research, there is little encouragement for scholars to continue rural studies.⁴² As one of the prominent Russian rural sociologists stated recently, “those few rural researchers [who are still doing their research] are not working for today but for tomorrow” (Zaslavskaya, 1999, p. 158).

In this “tomorrow’s world” of rural studies Russian scholars started to re-visit the ideas of modernisation through thinking about the ways rural space is constructed and consumed by various conflicting interests, doing away with the myths of non-crisis development produced during the Soviet time (Kagansky, 1997; Patsiorkovski and Patsiorkovskaya, 2001). Colonisation processes, while disorganising rural space and making it abstract, fail to accommodate innate heterogeneity of the countryside. While colonisation project continues to subsume supposedly empty rural space, the latter “reveals its multiplicity and contents and challenges colonialism” (Akhiezer, 1996, p. 291). Following Lefebvre (1991), I suggest that the basis of these colonisation processes, articulated in representations of space stressing domination of urban realm and urban-centred spatial practices, is thus hamstrung by subversive (“other”) representational spaces of the rurality, which “fights back” and re-establishes itself. The colonising (urbanised) power is, therefore, forced to diffuse itself through and accommodate itself to the space of the others. Unilinear explanations of change are challenged by the

diversity of social and economic practices moulding the Russian countryside. Illustrative of this is the process of decolonisation, which brings attention to alternative ruralities created by multiple social relations and cultural practices.

3.4. *Everyday ruralities (“Prostranstvo krest’yanskoi povsednevnosti”⁴³)*

Processes of economic and social restructuring in Russia have created heterogeneous and changing landscapes of rurality exaggerating differences between localities, lifestyles and organisation of space. These radical transformations disrupted the most familiar and recognisable patterns of spatial structure and use of the countryside and disturbed the landscape of the mundane ruralities. Social and political transition has changed the very essence of everyday existence of rural people which reflected celebration of the new developments and frustrations and disappointments with broken promises and inadequate attention to their problems. The need to investigate this changing context has been recognised by some rural researchers who have focused their efforts on unravelling the seamless fabric of everyday countrysides by exploring the ways people are adjusting to different kinds of living. In this light, the construction of rurality has been predicated upon two different propositions about the changing nature of the Russian countryside.

First, a number of rural geographers have attempted to rediscover the extraordinary qualities of familiar ruralities and to defamiliarise rural cultures (Steinberg, 1996, 2004; Vagin, 1997; Nikulin, 1999, 2002b; Veliky et al., 2000; Efendiev and Bolotina, 2002; Gudkov and Dubin, 2002; Lurje, 2005). These contributions have attempted to give voice to everyday rural lives and to explore what is often referred to in Russian lay discourse as “*rodnye prostory*”—familiar lived space of everyday life, self-evident but also problematic landscape of the mundane. In so doing, rural scholars have tried to uncover sensory practices and experiences of the countryside which meant overcoming “the colonisation of reason” (Eagleton, 1990, p. 15) in relation to rural spaces. From this standpoint, the process of attending to the particularity of everyday ruralities and bringing to the attention non-rational and often immaterial practices producing the rural can be described as “decolonisation”. Ageing command system and abandonment of omnipotent communist ideology with its “objective” rationality of domination have contributed towards the process of decolonising rural space. Postcolonial discourse⁴⁴ develops on the basis of the growing feeling that in the recent years ruralisation of society has been under

⁴¹Intercentre archive. Interviewees: A. Serdyukov, D. Skomakha, V. Dzyuba, Bolshoe Talovoe village, Rostov region. Interviews conducted by I. Steinberg in 1993.

⁴²Although there are several research projects in rural Russia which are supported by the government-related agencies (for example the Russian Foundation for Basic Research or RFFI, which still prioritises natural rather than social sciences), the funding is rather limited and inconsistent.

⁴³“*Prostranstvo krest’yanskoi povsednevnosti*” (пространство крестьянской повседневности) could be interpreted space of everyday lives of rural people, everyday ruralities (Vinogradsky, 2002).

⁴⁴Rodoman (1996) in his article on colonial transformation of Russia suggests the emergence of postcolonial thinking in Russian society. He argues that the idea of “empty, useless space” in relation to rurality is being re-evaluated due to the unfolding process of suburbanisation.

way, a process which entailed changing attitudes to the countryside and “increasing popularity of rural way of life for urbanities” (Alekseev and Zubarevich, 1999, p.5). This “rural way of life ... has been [continuously] reproduced in childhood memories of the majority of Russian children, including those living in the cities” (Nikulin, 1999, p. 246), so while they have been growing up this symbolic affinity with countryside has strengthened.

The focus on everyday ruralities in this discourse implies moving away from the urban cultural nationalism to spaces which offer new opportunities to previously marginalised groups. First, urban households are getting more involved with the rural lifestyle and cultures, as well as agriculture-related activities (increasing number of people working on personal allotment plots⁴⁵), thus signifying the end of urban-biased condescending attitude to rurality as a “second-graded” entity. Images and symbols of urban origin are becoming part of the everyday rurality which develops into more diffuse and heterogeneous concept. Second, the state attempts to change its directive role and to attend to the actuality of the everyday ruralities by reinstatement of traditional mechanisms of rural governance in the form of *skhod* (meeting) and *starosta* (village elder).⁴⁶ In true Benjamin’s (1977)⁴⁷ style, the recognition of tradition as a part of fluid everyday practices rather than a cornerstone of static, conservative imagery, changes the iconography of the countryside. Tradition, as an emancipating force, creates multiple links between actors and different associations not limited by specific boundaries, which makes rurality more pluralistic and inclusive. Third, certain re-orientation of the Russian rural policies towards everyday rural problematics has contributed to opening up of the terrain of the definition of rurality and made rural people the agents of representation. The new socio-political discourses of the rural partially embrace the logic of rural community living with its element of mutual support in forms of *pomochi* (spontaneous co-operative workgroup based on reciprocation of assistance) and *skladchina* (pooling together of money or other resources) as innovative and creative (Kolganov, 1999; Korobeinikov, 2000). This recent focus on the rural everyday contributes to renegotiation of the identity of the countryside outside

the categories of dominance and resistance and without subsuming the rural under the colonising ideology which appropriates it.

It is important to mention, however, that this process of “decolonisation” of rurality has not yet resulted in significant economic or political independence as it might have been expected. Still, however, emergence of post-colonial discourse signifies a step forward towards “decolonizing the mind” (Thiong’o, 1986 cited in Jackson, 1994) and the construction of new forms of “ruralised” life. This involved not just a negation of the city and idealisation of traditional social values ingrained in the rural space, but appreciation of rurality as a basis for alternative society. It is close to what Mormont (1987) described as development of pro-rural representations of countryside, where the rurality is seen “not only as a space to be appropriated ... but as a way of life... Peasant autarky, village community and ancient technique are no longer relics, but images which legitimise this social project of a society which would be ruralised” (Mormont, 1987, p. 18). Rural community thus becomes an important point of this new rural way of life and the analysis of new community studies may uncover their implicit ideas about the rurality (see for example, Alexeev et al., 2003).

Second, in rediscovering familiarity of rurality a more creative dialogue has been established between geographers investigating the spatial restructuring of countryside and social scientists exploring how rural people are getting accustomed to the disruption of customs and everyday lives. In exploring the experiences and practices of rural everyday lives these works attend to the heterogeneity of the countryside and contribute to redefinition of rurality. The infusion of postmodern perspectives⁴⁸ stimulated some rural scholars to incorporate historical and local specificity of ruralities within broader theoretical frameworks. Specifically, recent efforts by rural researchers to understand the cultures of belonging and constraints of place on livelihood strategies brought to the fore fluid and networked dimensions of rural space.

These contributions re-examine the transformation of agriculture-centred construction of rurality within the networks which stretch across the superimposed boundaries of homogeneous regions. The studies of everyday consumption and social exchange in the countryside unravelled networks formed by rural people as a response to the changing everyday landscapes (Plusnin, 1997; Patrushev, 1998; Kozina, 1999; Gradosel’skaya, 1999; Samsonov and Shabanov, 1999; Rodionova, 2000; Steinberg, 2002, Vinogradsky et al., 2002). Fadeeva (1999, 2004) reveals the web of interrelations between rural households within the local webs of social relations, focusing on inclusionary effects of involvement into the networks of mutual help. Vinogradsky (1996, 1999) goes further in development of pro-rural representations of the countryside

⁴⁵Nefedova (2003) estimates that between 75 and 80 mn people in Russia are now involved in working activities on rural allotment plots and are “immersed in rural life with their hearts and minds” (p. 34).

⁴⁶It is important to stress, however, that despite the rhetoric of negotiation and self-organisation the state plays the dominant role in reshaping rural areas in Russia. Despite the partial shifts from discourses of “maximized production” and “control over rural space” to “market liberalization” and “self-governance”, rural areas remain heavily dependant on the state for financial and political resources (Mezhevich, 2003).

⁴⁷Benjamin (1977) in his analysis of the historicity of the everyday through trash has drawn attention to the ephemeral and transient aspects of daily practices and now-ness of everyday life. He called for revolutionary nostalgia for the future to overtake the sentimental attitude towards the past—in this case, abandoned practices and traditions are rediscovered and appreciated by themselves in their fullness, strangeness and creativity.

⁴⁸See for example Kapustin (2001) for analysis of postmodern/postcommunist transition.

in his study of rural communities. He sees rural community as a physical and social arena, an alternative society based on that specific rural way of life, a concatenation of heterogeneous networks of relations whereby multiple rural space is reproduced. The importance of these studies is that they broke with the assumptions of earlier works about “social scarcity of rural space” (Nefedova and Treivish, 1996, p. 8) and its emptiness: rurality is now seen as multi-layer construction, embracing different sets of social and cultural relations.

A major theoretical and empirical challenge which is faced by rural scholars lies in dealing with the ideological incongruity between the technological thinking innate to the economic treatise of rurality and alternative forms of representing the everyday characterizing the discourse on “*krestyanskoi povsednevnost*”. The adaptation of economic approaches to understanding of differential shifts in the social organization of the countryside, even at the level of households, encourages insufficient recognition of the heterogeneity of socio-cultural practices embedded in the construction of fluid rural identities. The rurality is often seen as a networked space in economic terms, although this idea is not explicitly formulated and well developed. Although these contributions take on board the idea about heterogeneous construction of rurality, the role of networks in production of multiple rural spaces is not fully studied. Rural studies would benefit from a wider integration of research themes, including those of consumption (Ilyin, 1999; Gordon and Klopov, 2001), imaginative geographies (Filippov, 2000, 2002; Kagansky, 2001, 2002; Akhiezer, 2002; Rodoman, 1999, 2002) gender studies (Elchaninov, 2001; Savoskul, 2002; Khotkina, 2003; Yaroshenko, 2001, 2002, 2004) and geographies of difference and inequality (Rodionova, 2000; Lindner, 2002; Rimashevskaya, 2002; Serova et al., 2004, Uzun, 2004), which would make this research less narrowly concerned with the economic imperatives of rural change and more focused on the dynamism and heterogeneity of the (everyday) processes producing variegated countryside.

4. Conclusion

Transition from the communist regime to the more democratised society in Russia implied attendant changes in the production of knowledge, including re-examination of research topics and bringing new theories (social and cultural) into rural studies. Although the arguments in this paper have specifically addressed the changing vision of rurality, the logic of these conclusions can be applied to a more general concept of space. Understanding of space as a homogeneous construct, open and empty, productive space rather than space of production gave the way to more complex vision of space. First ideas about multiple and complex construction of space appeared at the very end of the Soviet period, but they were largely developed by the end of the 1990s to incorporate fluid and networked construction of space.

There are three important implications of these changes in terms of rural studies. First, understanding of space as a multiple concept signified the beginning of the “social” turn in academia, with the emphasis transferred from “productive forces” in space to production of space by the competing interests. Studies of the processes through which rural people construct their representations of rurality involved the rural people more actively in research by giving voice to “voiceless but evocative ruins of rural Russia”. This was a breakthrough into the “silence zone”, “dark room”, “unknown space” of the countryside as it was commonly perceived (Kovalev and Steinberg, 1999; Nezavisimaya gazeta, 1999). As Steinberg (1999) put it, “it looks as if rural people were silent for at least 50 years, whereas for 30 years they were scared to say something and for 20 years they have not been asked” [p. 48]. Secondly, it had important ramifications for the “decolonisation of mind” and breaking down colonisation stereotypes of thinking about rurality as a part of the urban realm, “open”, inferior and needed to be conquered. The ensuing postcolonial discourses constructed rurality as independent space, “the self” rather than “the other”, heterogeneous space of networks and associations. Deeper understanding of power relations in constructing (producing) space drew attention to the forces re-constructing not only rurality itself, but the changing general spatial delineation of post-socialist Russia (ruralisation process). The transgression of urban-rural divide, celebrated in dichotomy concept developed in the Soviet period, and recognition of “alternative ruralities” indicates a third consequence of general philosophical change in relation to rural studies. Attendant representations of rural space depicted the countryside as a diverse and heterogeneous space reconstructed by spatial practices hinging on “traditional” self-sufficient living patterns accessible to all members of society (Shanin, 1999, 2002).

This academic transition, however, was not smooth and straightforward. Particular discourses developed in the Soviet-period, which combine economic (agricultural) functionality and institutional support into productivist vision of the countryside, continue to inform the rules and obligations associated with rural planning and development. Meanwhile, newly developed “post-productivist” (agri-ruralist) discourse also influences re-construction of the countryside. In essence, I have suggested that traditional concerns about rurality intersect with recently developed models, co-existing rather than replacing each other. Academic discourses developed on the basis of Soviet and post-Soviet representations of the countryside, are in essence “in-between” discourses compromising over the ways in which rurality is constructed. The usage of these “transitional” representations of rurality makes research methods also changeable and ever-adapting to changing contexts. These research methods are also “transitional” and incorporate both methods used in the Soviet period and new ones. As Alekseev (2001) puts it, “requirements of current TACIS [EU funded] programme

and former Committee for manpower of the USSR are very similar—both of the agencies have been interested in what was going on in rural Russia. It is only the ideology that has been changed”.

New research methods include budgetary interviews, which provide invaluable insights into how rural economic life is organised, and “reflexive” qualitative studies by researchers living in a particular area for a year or more (this includes the linking “objective” reality (and its possible quantitative interpretation) with its subjective understanding and representation by means of qualitative methods) (for review of these new methods see Steinberg and Kovalev, 1999).

Adoption of these new methods together with reconfiguration in the subject-matter of rural research contributed to creation of what may be termed as “new Russian rural studies”. In this paper I hope to have explained some of the issues that this academic transition involved. The reconstruction of changing rural discourses, attempted in this article, certainly requires further elaboration and amendment. Nevertheless, I hope that analysis of these discourses, notwithstanding its incompleteness, may provide some insights for understanding a variety of countryside images and policy concepts formulated in the Russian rural debate, as well as to serve as an interpretative framework for understanding the processes constructing the “unknown” Russian countryside.

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