

Exploring and representing uncertainty: the demand to create order from chaos

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'You want to write about us? Look, this is how we are. (sweeping her arm to take in the others sitting on the courtyard bench) We are nothings. This is a crazy place... a crazy time. We cannot even understand ourselves and you want to understand (about us). I just don't know.'

Uncertainty, fear and the apparent contradictions of stagnation and rapid change are defining experiences of daily life for many of the poor and dispossessed in Donetsk, a post-industrial city in Eastern Ukraine. Throughout my fieldwork, exploring the ways in which people are coping with post-Soviet change, I struggled to make sense of people's lives recognizing that local people often say they are living 'non-sensical' lives. These tensions have remained during the process of writing up as I aim to create coherence without doing too much violence to local experiences and representations. Much has been written in recent years about the changing nature of anthropological fieldwork and writing, however as graduate students and young scholars we often find ourselves constrained in the ways we write. Raising questions of anthropological authority, representation and authenticity, this paper addresses the tensions I encountered through the demands of disciplinary orthodoxy, producing linear, ordered texts from disintegrated and fractured lives.

Introduction

This paper is drawn from the experiences of nearly two years ethnographic fieldwork in Donetsk, a post-Soviet city in Eastern Ukraine. In this paper I am principally concerned with two interconnected issues, the challenges and processes of doing ethnography in a situation that is characterized by uncertainty and disorder and the subsequent, related, problem of representing this disorder within the constraints imposed by the conventions of writing in the discipline of anthropology. As professionals we seek to render the complexities of social forms intelligible to others, and to do this we discover and relate the threads of order that are inherent within the particular social context we have been immersed in. My own work poses a problem for this perception of the task of anthropology. I fear that creating order and sense actually misrepresents the character of the lives of the people and social processes I have engaged with in my research.

Questioning the possibilities and motivations of representation has been central to many discussions since the onset of the 'writing culture' debate in the 1980s. This debate is fundamentally concerned with questions of textualization—how we choose to express our experiences, descriptions, and analysis in written form. As authors, we write texts in order to accomplish certain purposes, which in the case of anthropology is most often to convince the reader that we are presenting a coherent and informed account. As Marcus and Cushman note, 'what gives the ethnographer authority and

the text a pervasive sense of concrete reality is the writer's claim to represent a world as only one who has known it first-hand can' (1982: 29). Writing ethnography is increasingly recognized as an integral, iterative process of fieldwork, no longer, as Van Maanen put it, '...like a rather pleasant, peaceful, and instructive form of travel writing' (1995: 1). In fact, 'writing has emerged as central to what anthropologists do both in the field and thereafter' (Clifford 1986: 2) and it is the interplay between the field and representation that I explore in this paper. At the heart of this is a dilemma, as an honest account of my field is one that will necessarily be chaotic, troublesome and untidy.

As the 'writing culture' debate has shown, there is a tendency for ethnographic texts to become monovocal and decontextualized. Events and experiences in the field are transformed into patterns and simplified narratives. In turn these are distanced from the struggles of their birth and the umbilical cord which connects these refined thoughts to the jumble of thoughts, actions and imaginings of individuals is often severed. Through the act of writing the intricate processes and strategies employed to gain the knowledge are often only notionally included in the finished text. Employing such narratives obfuscates the complications of both doing ethnography and of the social world itself, creating an authority that is always problematic and, I argue, especially so in writing about a period of change and uncertainty.

The next section provides relevant background, contextualizing the discussion, and then the remainder of this paper is split into two main sections. In the first I deal with the ethnographic challenges of understanding chaos and the second section explores some of the strategies that I have adopted in order to provide representations that are sensible without doing undue damage to my informants' views of the world.

Donetsk: change and uncertainty

Ukraine declared independence from the disintegrating USSR in August 1991 and has since been going through a series of social, political, economic and institutional changes that are often referred to as 'transition'. My fieldsite, Donetsk is the capital of the part of the Donbas region that now lies in Ukraine and constitutes an important economic, administrative and political centre within the country. During recent years the area has suffered greatly from the reforms being enacted in Ukraine and, in particular, the rapid and drastic decline of heavy industry. The accompanying loss of status that heavy industrial workers enjoyed in the Soviet Union, has led to widespread poverty, disempowerment, disenchantment and dispossession. Donetsk is not alone in Ukraine for suffering these problems, however, poverty and dispossession are compounded by the significance of ethnic and political identifications. The majority of people in Donetsk are Russian-speaking Russophones and a large proportion identify themselves further as ethnic Russians. Both of these identifications have a major impact on the way that people negotiate and respond to the changes. As Wanner notes, 'the confusion over reorienting oneself to another cultural (non-Soviet) identity is compounded by overall social and economic chaos and the subtleties of identity choice' (1998: 18).

On gaining independence, Ukraine was originally thought by many to have a 'rosy future' (Dyczok 2000: xiii) based on assessments of its agricultural resources, skilled workforce, sound transport infrastructure and large industrial base. However, the changes to free market, democratic rule, good governance and economic restructuring

have not occurred at the pace that has been expected; instead the period of independence has been marked by decline, corruption and social atomization. The collapse of the socialist system of social and economic control, in conjunction with the break-up of the Soviet Union have resulted in a shifting and uncertain context, and in people having to reassess lives, personal biographies and beliefs in a situation of hopelessness and frustration.

The term transition has been, and continues to be, used in respect of the processes of change occurring in Central and Eastern Europe. I suggest that the term transition has continued to hold a large influence in the way that large-scale social change is characterized because it functions as a palliative and facilitates the promotion of three major ideas:

- transition suggests that social problems, the deprivation and unrest which characterize this period are only temporary;
- transition suggests that whilst the current period may appear to be characterized by nonsense and contradiction this stage is part of a larger process and therefore has underlying order and meaning;
- transition suggests that the ultimate end point of these changes is both knowable and known. This allows the grading and rewarding of different countries according to their degree of success and failure along this predetermined path.

This use of transition thus promotes a view of social change which is linear, developmentalist, modernizing and ethnocentric. These particular constructions bear similarities to Orientalism (Said 1979) in creating distance between the West and the non-West in which the West assumes primacy. In line with this, much of the writing on Ukraine has concentrated on macro-level processes, both echoing and recreating the transition paradigm rather than the lived experiences and realities of social change in post-Soviet era (Berdahl 2000). This concentration on meta-narratives of change underplays and belies the intense negotiations and struggles that have been occurring and result in the chaos and uncertainty which many people say is their primary experience of the post-Soviet era. It is the exploration of these complicated processes, opposing them to simplified meta-narratives, that anthropological understandings are particularly well placed to offer. In this paper I wish to present the idea that the particular social context in which I was working was a 'special case'. I realize that the endeavour of most anthropology is to create order from disorder. It is the particular context of Donetsk as a site of chaos and change that contributes to the problems discussed here. In this sense Donetsk constitutes a new kind of field, if life makes non-sense to local people, what sense does a responsible and responsive ethnographer make?

Ethnography in a time of change

Although this paper does not allow the space to offer a substantial critique of transition, I suggest that the application of the transition paradigm allows for ordered approaches to be created on a macro level towards the 'problem of Eastern Europe'. Situated within the very boundaries of Europe, this form of thinking brings an element of security into an otherwise potentially unsettling set of processes: the political, economic and social disintegration of 'our' neighbours.

I begin to explore local understandings of the chaotic and absurd through retelling an event that happened during fieldwork. On August 12th 2000, the Russian submarine, The Kursk, sank in the Barents Sea with a loss of 118 sailors. For days after the sinking everybody in Donetsk continued to follow each twist of the story and hotly debate the cause of the accident. Unwilling to believe in the possibility of an accident, people rehearsed theories of sabotage, terrorism, giant octopuses, and US rockets. After several days, when there was still hope, however slim, of people being found alive in the submarine, a new strand was added to the story. Nadezhda Tylik, the mother of one of the sailors, was filmed being forcibly sedated from behind by injection while complaining to the Deputy Prime Minister at a public meeting. Film footage of this incident travelled around the world and appeared on the news in many countries. I received several e-mails from people in the UK and other European countries asking me if I knew of this event. The general reaction from people abroad was incredulity and outrage. The reaction of local people in Donetsk, however, was quite different. In the days following the sinking of The Kursk, I was visiting Igor, and, as we sat in the kitchen drinking tea, the incident arose as a topic of conversation. I asked him if he had seen the footage, and then asked his reaction, to which he replied:

'What do you expect in our country? She was causing problems for somebody important. What did you think they would do... Just let her shout at them... These things happen all the time, they have not changed. In fact they are worse, now we are ruled by bandits... In a way she is lucky only to be sedated, there are times when she would have disappeared for doing that. No, in these times there is no order, and the people there are only concerned for themselves if you get in the way. She should have known better—she is in the forces and so...'

This response sites the incident as normal and normalized through the expression 'what you expect?', but does so within a frame that is explicitly not normal as demonstrated by the comments 'we are ruled by bandits' and 'there is no order'. This situation is also linked to historical events and the expectation of the possibility of such happenings. Finally there is the idea that this woman, Nadezhda, brought this trouble upon herself through the suggestion that she should have known better than to confront people in authority.

The present period is frequently represented in these terms as abnormal and chaotic, both of which also express a degree of fear and uncertainty. However, in this extended or permanent period of liminality, such abnormalities have become the expected and accepted condition of life for many and the absurd and arbitrary rule, echoed in phrases such as '*eta nasha situatsia*'—'it's our situation', which are employed to explain any unusual, incredible or negative situation. 'Only in a country like ours', says Vera Ivanovna, can people fall down man-holes because the covers have been stolen for scrap. '*Predstavlayesh*'—'Would you believe' is commonly invoked to both express surprise and intimate that really yes, here and now, anything is to be expected.

This sense of the absurd has also been captured by other people exploring the events surrounding the break-up of the Soviet Bloc. Nancy Ries (1997), for example, adopted the notions of '*polnaya razrukha*'—'complete collapse' and 'anti-Disneyland' to describe the topsy-turvy character of the perestroika years amongst her informants in Moscow. Similarly, Joma Nazpary (2002) adopts the local peoples' term '*bardak*', 'chaos' to describe the processes of change in Kazakhstan. This representation of

everything being upside down was summarized by a writer friend of mine who noted in her recent book ‘everything is upside down, we buy tomatoes by number and clothes by the kilogramme’. (Sedlarska 2001: 18, my translation).¹

Crucial to an understanding of the way in which the current processes of change are conceptualized in local terms are two mutually constitutive frameworks for these changes. Through particular understandings of both modernization and transition an understanding of the changes as chaotic is developed. I now turn to an exploration of the particular representations which form and underpin the understanding of these changes as chaos.

Local formulations of change as modernization

Change is often understood and represented through the idea of modernization but, in this case, the notion of change as modernization is reversed. As Ferguson has noted in his study of Zambian Copperbelt miners who also experienced rapid and dramatic economic and social collapse, the trauma of de-modernization is linked to a sense of loss. ‘This is modernization through the looking glass, where modernity is the object of nostalgic reverie, and “backwardness” the anticipated, (or dreaded) future’ (1999: 13). Many people in Donetsk do indeed feel that their experiences of being ‘modern’ are in the past and the trope of describing the current period as one of de-modernization is strongly linked to Soviet claims to modernity. Symbols of this decline are scattered across the domestic, industrial and imagined landscape. The strong image of, and desire for, a ‘normal life’ revolves around this sense of loss, particularly important is the fact that present day life is not considered to be normal. The list of lost aspects that people locally feel link them into modernity include; loss of the USSR, loss of the importance they occupied on the world stage as part of the USSR, loss of elevated status as Russians within the USSR, loss of economic standing, loss of the ideologically lauded position as workers, loss of political stability, loss of predictability in work and social time, loss of a coherent ideology, and loss of being part of a wider project.

People point to whatever they perceive as signs of this decline and chaos: old men and women rooting through waste bins, street children sniffing glue in the gardens in the centre of the city, the visibility of organized crime, disparities in wealth and living standards, isolation of the government over economic and political issues, unemployment, rising crime, the growth of interest in mysticism and the supernatural, and the simple fact of being Russian workers in Ukraine at a time when workers are not needed. A friend who was trying to explain the way in which business fails to obey ‘normal’ rules told me the following anecdote:

‘How do you turn sunflower seeds into tractors? First you gather sunflower seeds from local people in the village, offer them goods in return in this case shoes that you have got for some fridges. If people don’t want the shoes you can always try the chairs from the canteen—stolen of course. When you have your seeds, you swap them for shoes with a contact that is actually looking for fridges. You could have

¹ Due to changing living standards, vegetables normally considered to be staples are now thought to be expensive and so are often bought by individual item rather than by weight. Paradoxically, there are large numbers of second-hand clothes shops opening that sell mainly clothes imported from Western countries. The cheapest of these can be bought according to weight.

swapped him the fridges in the first place but that would have reduced your profit. At this point it is important to have at least doubled your money. Then you swap the shoes for metal parts and sneak them over the border exchanging them for petrol, which you bring back and sell for cash. With the cash you buy fridges from the man who swapped them for the shoes and take the fridges to the second man who finally locates the required tractors. Then you start looking for somebody who wants tractors.'

The combinations of random exchanges, barter and the ultimate pointlessness of the hunt for tractors all underline the sense of this process being absurd, and therefore not part of rational, modern business.

Local formulations of change as transition

The second trope through which common understandings of the changes are managed is that of transition. Constrained by wider discourses to view the process of change as transition, many local representations invert the supposed benefits of transition using the same discourses, language, and images. In local constructions, the use of transition is again employed to emphasize the lack of normality. With the end of the Soviet Union, many people held unrealistic expectations of rapid development in living standards and integration into Europe. These images have been promoted through the discourse of transition. Responding to a perceived lack of success on these terms, local people have come to measure failure on an unrealistic scale, and in local constructions and imaginings, transition itself is represented as either non-existent or derailed.

Explanations for this lack of success, this 'derailed' transition, vary. For some, the political and economic influence of the West has been used to undermine and destroy socialism and the socialist block for political and ideological reasons, and then subsequently to subjugate or destroy the countries of the former socialist block. One example relates to the 'invention' of CFCs, which, it is claimed, has been used by the West to destroy the successful industrial base of the former Soviet Union. As one informant told me, 'our factories never had any problems before the changes... they have invented this thing called CFCs'. Other derailed transition tales link the government and national elites into plots to destroy the weaker sections of the population by allowing poverty and decline to continue to their ultimate end. These understandings of change only make sense in opposition to an idealized notion of transition, one which follows some of the more ideologically influenced approaches to the former Soviet Union.

However, although chaos is a paradigm through which people can make some sense of their lives; this occurs mostly on the level of day-to-day interaction. Chaos and disorder continue to exist as threatening forces that serve to make life overall incomprehensible and subject to the vagaries of decisions made by others. In this they are self-perpetuating in that the withdrawal from wider social processes into small networks both provides security from a threatening situation in the short-term. However, this also severely limits the possibilities of understanding and engaging with these very social processes which could ultimately reduce their wildness.

Writing chaos—the problem of representation

As I noted in the introduction to this paper, writing is integral to fieldwork, especially as now it is increasingly difficult to delineate ‘the field’. I remain in frequent and regular contact with several people from Donetsk, and we have met up both in UK, other parts of Europe and in Ukraine. With these constant reminders of the responsibilities I have to these people I call my friends and informants, and their interest in and engagement with what I write, I face the difficult problem of representing change and uncertainty.

All ethnographic writing requires that the processes and chaos of the field take on an order and regularity that is imposed by the author. This order often reflects disciplinary concerns as well as the concerns of the field. Anthropology as a discipline has not always been good at explaining change, and, as I have shown above, a major theme of the lives of many of the dispossessed in Donetsk is that they no longer understand their own lives or articulate their environment as either ordered or sensible.

As an intellectual pursuit, one of the many criticisms that has been aimed at anthropology is that, in the effort to represent, the discipline has tended to produce texts that represent societies as both timeless and unchanging. As Fabian argues; in the past this has been done partly to the ‘other’, the culture under consideration, placing them in an alternative time frame and thus establishing difference (Fabian 1983). Similarly, Appadurai has argued that such forms of representation serve to position peoples and cultures in both time and space and that through the use of an ethnographic present traditional societies have been immobilized through the construction of them belonging in a place (1992).

In recent years, for a variety of different reasons, anthropologists have been obliged to approach such representations head-on and ethnographies that deal explicitly with change are becoming increasingly common. One of the areas where such ethnographies are being written is Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union where anthropologists have positively engaged with the task of writing about real existing post-Socialism (for example see Ries 1997 and Nazpary 2002). Such ethnographic accounts, however, present a new set of issues of challenges in terms of representation. In a time of greater than usual change, the representations produced in ethnographies are in danger of becoming rapidly obsolete. As Nancy Ries notes,

‘the very rapidity, enormity and complexity of those transformations can challenge our ability to depict and explain cultural practices and their meanings. As individuals, groups and nations struggle to “produce themselves anew” we witness, in many cases, a radical and ongoing fragmentation of voices, and a constant shifting of positions both social and symbolic which makes it difficult to “capture” an event or interpret a representation before its meaning is altered or undermined by competing or contradictory events or narratives’ (1995: np).

However, other writers such as Buroway and Verdery have argued that ethnography is particularly well positioned to explore the changes in the region, saying ‘This contraction of time horizons in the aftermath of 1989 gives unaccustomed validity to ethnographic research, whose temporal constitution now more closely approximates that of the actors whose behaviour it reports’ (1999: 3).

However, as Crawford (2002) argues, the problems of representation are especially difficult in times of social change and the fitting of social processes into a text is a 'necessarily violent' process in which we carve out large areas of reality in order to portray the particular parts we want to concentrate on. The predominant challenge for fieldwork in Donetsk is that 'what our informants are up to or think they are up to' and my production of 'third order' (Geertz, 1973: 15) interpretations are set within a context that is essentially confusing, full of contradiction and changing goalposts. Consequently I have to avoid doing too great a 'violence' to the lives and experiences of local people.

If, as Nancy Scheper-Hughes argues, ethnography should be used to provide a space for the voices of the poor and dispossessed to be heard, and indeed, as I believe, we need 'an ethnography that is personally engaged and politically committed' (1995: 419),² then the problem of representation becomes more than a personal and disciplinary engagement. Given the strength and power of the transition discourse, and the politically motivated understandings of a large amount of writing on the region, anthropology can provide the space for the experiences of ordinary people.

Ultimately, my writing produces a series of 'partial truths' that derive from 'an open-ended series of contingent, power-laden encounters' (Clifford 1986: 8). Acknowledging this, and shying away from claims to ultimate authority, I aim to demonstrate how the knowledge and understandings present in my work are contingent upon me, my presence, and the quality of relations which I formed in the field. Rather than seeking to produce a 'realistic tale' or even some form of self-indulgent confessional anthropology (Van Maanen 1988), I instead adopt an approach which explicitly engages with these subjective experiences and emotions of field work, recognizing that 'field work is situated between autobiography and anthropology' (Hastrup 1992: 117). If, as Clifford notes, the goal of ethnographic realism is to say 'you are there, because I was there' (1983: 118), and this continues to some extent to be the goal of ethnography, then what I need to convey in my writing is chaos, disorder and uncertainty. If not this, then at least to show some of the ways in which the knowledge I finally place on the page are created from series of personalized engagements.

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² The extent to which anthropology should be seen as a moral discipline, engaged objectively with subjects is still the subject of much debate. For example see *Current Anthropology*, 1995 36 (3).

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