The Riddle of the Third Sector: Civil Society, Western Aid and NGOs in Russia

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Abstract
This article examines the forms and logic of political activism encouraged by international development agencies in Russia by focusing on the project to promote civil society development. The version of civil society that has been brought into being by western design—the third sector—is far from what Russian activists desired and what donor agencies promised. Despite its claims to allow a grassroots to flourish, the third sector is a professionalized realm of NGOs, inaccessible to most local groups and compromised by its links to a neoliberal vision of development. The article pushes beyond some of the recent polarized discussions of NGOs (where they are regarded as either “good” or “bad”) to show that despite its ambivalent effects, the idea of the third sector remains compelling to local actors. Drawing on extensive ethnographic fieldwork with provincial women’s groups, this article examines local responses to the third sector and considers its unexpected signifying possibilities. [Postsocialism, civil society, third sector, gender]
This book seems too emotional for a textbook. It appears too dry and practical for journalism. Let me tell you a secret—I have done this on purpose, so that you, my readers could not only gain an intellectual understanding of the third sector, but in order that you could feel in your heart the people who live and work in it.

The third sector is not a spy novel. The third sector—truly, truly—isn’t the name of a secret military organization in Zimbabwe; it’s not even part of a football field.

It’s you and I. That’s what this book is about. About us. Surprised? Let’s think about it some more. When you are sold a color television and it breaks down within a week, and the technician shrugs his shoulders—who will help you defend your consumer rights? That’s right, the consumer defense organization.... When your only son is sent to serve in the army in a hot spot, to whom can you run for assistance? To the Soldiers Mothers committee. There, you will find mothers and fathers who, just like you, don’t want to wait for acts of kindness from the military committee. When your child falls seriously ill, who is the first to offer help? The society of parents with disabled children. It’s all the third sector—non-commercial organizations, formed by people to resolve their problems, or just in order to be together.


The term “third sector” (tretii sektor) that this text teaches and celebrates was first introduced to the vocabulary of Russian activists by international donor agencies. Although incomprehensible to most Russian people, it has become a crucial signifier for those involved in the community-based activism I explored in my research. Third sector is used widely in the Russian-language promotional literature international foundations use to advertise their activity, and in the instructional materials they produce. “Charity for Beginners” is one such example. Published in Russian by the British Charities Aid Foundation (CAF), and authored by Olga Alekseeva, the information officer in the Moscow office of CAF,1 it has been widely distributed amongst non-governmental organizations in Russia. I first came across it in Katia’s library, a friend from the provincial city Tver’. An enthusiastic participant in local groups and associations, Katia had accumulated a wide variety of third sector support materials; Alekseeva’s text had fallen into her hands when she attended a CAF seminar in Tver’.
But what is the third sector? Although a western-identified model, the term is not widely known in either Britain or the US (to the consternation of my Russian activist friends, I was no better informed than they were). The third sector is a realm of informal groups—associations, clubs, or NGOs (non-governmental organizations). It derives its name from its role in a triad, where the first is the state, the second is the private sector of businesses and enterprises, and the third is the realm of citizens' initiatives. Beyond this, as Alekseeva’s text suggests, the third sector is a project of persuasion, one that has sought to transform purportedly dependent and politically passive Soviets into active citizens, savvy consumers, claimers of rights and defenders of their interests. The third sector represented a riddle to the Russian activists I worked with in my research; although many found the idea captivating, they were troubled by the way it had transformed their work. As such, the third sector offers a good site from which to rethink the forms and logic of political activism encouraged by international development agencies in the post-Cold War period.

In this article, I contribute to recent critical scholarship of aid to postsocialist states by examining the project to build a third sector in Russia. In the first half of the article, I examine the discursive prominence of the third sector by accounting for its rise and tracing its origins. I show how it is linked to the concept of civil society, which has been a key term of democratization. Starting as a rallying cry of East European oppositionists in the 1980s, in the 1990s it took on a quite different meaning when it became central to a new, neoliberal vision of development that encourages non-governmental groups to take on the functions of the state. In the second half of the article, I draw on long-term fieldwork with Russian women’s groups to consider the significance of these shifts by investigating the third sector ethnographically. I introduce three consumers of the third sector message: Lydia, a former Communist Party activist turned NGO professional; Katia, the unemployed provincial woman who first introduced me to Alekseeva’s text; and Maria, a women’s movement activist who mediates between foundations and local women’s groups. Through presenting these three cases, I highlight local contention about the third sector and consider the riddle that it represents. Contributing to recent critical scholarship on NGOs and civil society, I show that the third sector that has been created by international donor agencies bears little resemblance to the civil society that was desired by Russian actors. Neither does it deliver what it promises: rather than allowing a grassroots to flourish, the third sector provides a structural and symbolic framework for the reproduction of former elites of the Soviet regime. It facilitates the gendered distribution of power and re-
sources and contributes to the formation of hierarchies, jealousies and competition between groups. However, moving beyond some of the polarized discussions that tend to regard NGOs as either “good” (libratory social movements, evidence of “globalization from below”) or “bad” (elite and fatally compromised by their complicity with neoliberal restructuring), I show that in the third sector the good and bad are intertwined and interdependent. I show that despite its shortcomings, the idea of the third sector remains compelling to local actors. “Third sector” has become an important part of the imaginary repertoire of Russian activists; it is a site of contestation and sense making (between money and morality, state and society). As such, it offers a rich site for an investigation of the “construction and contestation of new cultural landscapes” and the “emergence of new asymmetrical power relations” in transforming postsocialist states (Berdahl 2000:1).

Context
The backdrop for this new talk about the third sector in Russia is the restructuring of the social services following the collapse of state socialism, the emergence of the first independent community groups and the influx of international capital to these groups in the form of grants and funding. During the Soviet period, education, healthcare, and child-care were provided by the paternalist socialist state. While these services were under-resourced and unsatisfactory, they were a crucial part of the social contract (Cook 1993). The dissolution of the USSR in 1991 and the collapse of the socialist state led to the steady erosion of social guarantees in Russia. Radical economic and social reforms undertaken by Russia’s first democratic governments during the 1990s compounded this erosion and failed to install new structures. As Alekseeva’s account suggests, in this murky situation there were no guarantees for either human or consumer rights and no adequate health care. Russian people struggled to deal with the new post-socialist phenomena of unemployment, withheld wages and hyperinflation, in the absence of a functioning social safety net.

The question of responsibility for social needs has been urgently contested by the associations of the new non-governmental sphere—women’s groups, consumer rights groups and other associations. These groups were first permitted during the perestroika period of the late 1980s as General Secretary Gorbachev tried to democratize Soviet society from above. The term civil society (grazhdanskoe obshchestvo) entered Russian political discourse during this period, as first Gorbachev, and subsequently Russian reformist politicians, con-
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sciously sought to change the nature of relations between individual and state by creating an active citizenry that would take on more responsibility in society (Pilkington 1992). Societal groups (obshchestvennyi organizatsii) mushroomed in the early 1990s in response to the collapse of the Soviet system of social security. Women are very prominent in this type of association (Lipovskaya 1997, Sperling 2000). In response to the much commented upon “masculinization” of post-socialist public space (Pilkington 1992, Watson 1993), women have found a niche in the nascent non-governmental sphere.6 For many, it is perceived as a counter-model to the “dirty” realms of politics and business.

Since the early 1990s, western-identified donor agencies such as the Charities Aid Foundation, Eurasia, the Ford Foundation, and MacArthur have stepped into the fray, contributing to the project to forge citizen activism and responsible engagement. They have specifically sought independent community groups to work with, as part of their commitment to civil society development. Aid to women’s groups has formed a proportionally small, yet ideologically significant portion of this aid. This is testimony to the important role women play in this sphere, and points to some of the gender realignments in the post-socialist period I will examine in this article. Foundations have supported diverse programs such as women’s leadership training, the development of computing skills and electronic networking, business training and health-related projects.7 Drawing on 19 months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 1997-2001, I examine the third sector from the two vantage points that my research afforded me—well-resourced foundation-sponsored NGOs, and provincial women’s groups that are on the periphery of this aid.

From Civil Society to the Third Sector

“The dusty term, drawn from antiquated political theory, belonging to long, obscure and justly forgotten debates, re-emerged, suddenly endowed with a new and powerful capacity to stir enthusiasm and inspire action” (Gellner 1994:5, on the concept of “civil society”).

The promotion of the third sector in Russia has to do with the popularity of the concept of civil society, which has been a crucial ideological signifier of democratization. The meaning of civil society has shifted considerably in the course of the past two decades, in response to social and political change in the region. Here I explore these shifts in order to provide a framework through
which we can understand the plight of the people who “live and work” in the third sector, in Alekseeva’s terms.

Classically defined as the sphere of public interaction between family and state, in former socialist states civil society came to mean that which was not determined by the Communist Party. It reemerged in the 1980s, as Gellner so memorably described, popularized by Central European intellectuals as a means of expressing resistance to socialist states.\(^8\) As Vaclav Havel, one of the leading Czech dissidents put it, “the various political shifts and upheavals within the communist world all have one thing in common: the undying urge to create a genuine civil society” (cited in Wedel 1998:85). Although they represented only limited circles, these Central European “oppositionists” and their ideas had disproportionate effect.\(^9\) In response to their debates, scholars in Europe and the U.S., of left and right, became newly persuaded by the concept of civil society. Conservative subscribers to the “totalitarian” school took this as confirmation of their worldview, which saw citizens inevitably resisting an oppressive state, and interest in the concept of civil society on the right took off in the 1980s (Foley and Edwards 1998). Meanwhile, western leftists interpreted dissident and oppositional activity to be manifestations of a newly energized left opposition within state socialist society; it appeared to be compatible with new left visions of participatory democracy (Ost 1990, Habermas 1989).

The democratic revolutions of 1989 appeared to confirm this and the concept of civil society came into a new vogue. Civil society now signified the triumph of capitalism and collapse of the socialist alternative. In scholarly circles, the concept became something of a catchall. As Seligman puts it, “it has been picked up in the West, used (and often misused) by writers on both the political right and the left to legitimate their own social programs and has entered academic discourse with a vengeance that is somewhat disquieting” (1998:79). The popularity of the concept of civil society is evidenced by the “neo-Tocquevillian” swing amongst social scientists in the post-Cold War period.\(^10\) One example is Robert Putnam’s influential work on social capital (Putnam 1995, 1993). According to Putnam, “social capital refers to the features of organization such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Putnam 1995:67). He regards social capital as a vital ingredient for a healthy and successful democracy. Informal associations and groups play a crucial role in his analysis by generating social capital, which will then percolate to the broader society, recreating the polity. In many ways, social capital is a parallel concept to civil society; certainly it informs those who fund and promote civil society development in postsocialist states. Analysts
have represented the creation of a civil society in post-socialist states as an essential part of "catching up" with an idealized West and of "recovery" (Habermas 1990). In the immediate post-Cold War period, scholars of democratic transitions came to regard civil society as a key ingredient of democratization, with its constituent component of social capital. In these discussions, a strong causal relationship is posited between civil society and democracy—the more civil society, the more democratic a society is presumed to be.

But this was not just an arcane debate; in the 1990s, the concept of civil society became central to a new vision of development, a "New Policy Agenda" (Robinson 1993) that was "driven by beliefs organized around the twin poles of neo-liberal economics and liberal democratic theory" (Hulme and Edwards 1997:4). According to this formulation, which was shared and upheld by most international lending agencies including the World Bank, civil society development is essential to the development of markets. Thus it was that in former socialist states, civil society became a project, something to be implemented (Sampson 2001). Civil society was "central to western aid programs in Eastern Europe, linked intimately to privatization aid" (Hann and Dunn 1996:9). In Russia, civil society promotion finds material expression in the project to build a third sector. As I have explained, donor agencies have channeled a great deal of support to associations and groups, and have encouraged them to believe in the importance of their work. As one American political scientist put it, (writing in Surviving Together, an English language journal that documents and maps postsocialist NGO activity) "the new metaphor is society as a three-legged stool—market sector, public sector and civil sector." All three have to be in balance and the third sector "should be an equal player with the market and government" (Rifkin 1997:8).

Indeed, donor support has led to the proliferation of NGOs in Russia; in many ways this funding looks like a success story. My argument here is that this new version of civil society is quite different from what activists desired and what donor agencies promised. In the 1980s, civil society indexed the hopes and ideals for a post-Cold War era: boundarylessness, joining Europe. The civil society that dissidents yearned for was a realm of citizen empowerment, of discussion and debate. The third sector is a far cry from this vision. Despite the folksy, grassroots flavor of much of its promotional literature and talk of empowerment, charity and voluntarism, the actually existing third sector is a professionalized realm of NGOs, inaccessible to most local groups. Further, the third sector takes on more than its global proponents and local participants have bargained for. In the third sector, NGOs are encouraged to become serv-
ice providers, taking on the responsibilities of the former socialist state. Indeed, in recognition of similar phenomena worldwide, recent scholarship critiques the civil society concept as a primarily rhetorical device for democracy's missionary work (Comaroff 2001, Hardt 2000, Mandel 2002), a device that simultaneously rationalizes structural adjustment policies and facilitates the cutting back of state social provisioning (Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar 1998; Foley and Edwards 1996).

Despite this new critical turn in scholarship, donor agencies remain and development discourses continue to percolate in former socialist contexts. "Third sector" remains a crucial signifier that activists have to engage, since collaboration with donor agencies means taking on the models and concepts they promote. Contributing to recent studies in the anthropology of postsocialism, I push the critique of NGOs to pose a series of questions about this process of engagement. What sense do activists make of injunctions to engage in charitable or voluntary activity in the context of massive societal upheaval, the collapse of social safety nets and former certainties? How do they navigate these circulating and clashing values and discourses in their work? What does the third sector look like on the ground and what scope for citizen empowerment does it afford its participants? Attention to the "gaps, slippages and difference between ideas that purport to be the same" in this project (Gal and Kligman 2000:93) can tell us a great deal. In this next section, I address these questions by examining the third sector ethnographically.

Third Sector Entrepreneurs
Critical observers working in diverse postsocialist settings have increasingly portrayed the third sector as hierarchical and jealous of its assets, a site where Soviet era elites thrive (Abramson 1999, Mandel 2002, Richter 1999, Sampson 1996, Wedel 1998). It is often the case that those who most comfortably use the language of the third sector are sitting very securely on Rifkin's "three-legged stool," those who are invested in all three sectors (business and state, as well as the "non-governmental" sector). My research shows that in the Russian provinces, the third sector is often the property of old elites, the Soviet nomenklatura. Quick to recognize its legitimating potential, they were able to make a neat sidestep from state or party structures to colonize non-governmental space. My first ethnographic case illuminates this phenomenon.

The Humanitarian Institute is a provincial third sector support unit located in one of the cities where my research was based. I learned of its existence from women activists of my acquaintance soon after arriving in the city. It is registered
as a societal (obshchestvennaia) organization, but has received support from the city administration, and is situated in spacious, well-located offices in the center of town. Since the mid-1990s, it has been the recipient of several large grants, from foundations such as TACIS (the EU program of Technical Assistance to the CIS) and Eurasia. When I visited the institute, I found it was strikingly well equipped for its provincial circumstances. It has several computers, printers, a Xerox machine (all of which are conspicuously lacking in the offices of the local newspaper, situated one floor up) and a permanent staff of seven people. Its raison d’etre is to strengthen the local non-commercial sector, both by running trainings and seminars for members of local NGOs, and by lobbying the local administration for support. Depending on the terms of the grant it is working under, seminars can be one or two day events, or can be ongoing over a series of weeks; I attended several of these in 1997.

The Institute claims a great deal of success. According to the deputy director, representatives of over 200 of the 450 locally registered societal organizations have used its facilities, in the context of some kind of consultation. The institute claims to have been behind the recent establishment of special non-profits advisory departments at the Mayor’s office and in the oblast administration. Certainly it is true that its activity has raised the profile of non-governmental activity and introduced the term “third sector” into the vocabularies of local journalists, politicians and officials. During the period I was in the city, the institute organized a fair of non-governmental organizations, in which about 40 organizations took part and to which journalists and representatives of the local administration were invited. I dropped in on the fair, which was a busy hubbub of people snacking on sandwiches and drinking wine. About 20 organizations, including the booklovers club, a shelter for the homeless, a children’s after-school project and an organization for people in wheelchairs, had made and submitted displays, which consisted of photographs, posters and charts detailing their activities. Representatives of these organizations stood proudly next to them, and at the end of the day, one exhibit was announced prizewinner (the prize, awarded to a child development center, was a camera to document further group activity). The directors, Lydia and Pavel Kharkov stood hobnobbing with the most important people, and introducing the people who stood around, encouraging a kind of networking. The institute was surely doing all that it was supposed to do. Yet it was contentious in the city, and many societal groups refused to attend its activities and seminars. I became fascinated by this apparent paradox and determined to find out why.
I discovered that contra the western association of “third sector” with uncontaminated non-state space, the institute is perceived not to be neutral, but to exist squarely in elite hands. The directors of the Institute are a husband and wife team who command significant clout locally. Lydia had been an active komsomolka,15 her husband Pavel was the former director of the Marxist-Leninist Institute, the municipal ideological center of the Communist Party, which was responsible for the dissemination of party propaganda and the preparation of party cadres. In 1992, what was once “Marxist-Leninist” became “Humanitarian,” and the institute was swiftly privatized, to undertake a variety of new civil-society friendly projects, including the dissemination of third sector material. Research confirms that this move is typical of many non-commercial endeavors. Just as they have made easy transitions into business, those who thrived under the old state socialist regimes have proven to be adept at mastering the symbolic order of NGOs and projects (Sampson 1996). This trend has been compounded by the policy of many foundations, which have specifically sought to send members of the local and regional administrative elites abroad on training schemes. Lydia is a graduate of the Johns Hopkins Third Sector “Enablement Training” program, where she spent several months, coming home with a diploma and a host of useful acquaintances with other NGO professionals, which in turn facilitated the networking back home that won the support of Moscow based foundations.

At a time of scarce resources, her success rankled. The generous office facilities, the staff and the opportunity to travel and study abroad were beyond the grasp and dreams of most local people. These resources combined with Lydia’s careless sense of entitlement exasperated impoverished activists, who saw themselves doing the very community-based work in whose name the center existed. My activist friends who grumbled about her institute saw this activity as evidence of business as usual, where those who have get more. To them, the “third sector” was just another domain, a new empire over which people like Lydia could rule.

In my research, I came across several examples of this phenomenon, where those who had made it into the world of grants and projects were regarded with jealousy and mistrust by members of organizations outside the loop of international funding. These skeptics were highly dubious about the new science of the third sector peddled by firmly entrenched elites, regarding it as a new and self-serving ideology. As one of my informants said of Lydia, “although (she) speaks about charity, what she’s really doing is taking care of herself. It’s a new way to build a career and create a job for herself.” Third sector practitioners
commonly position themselves as an avant-garde, progressives of the new order, pitched against backward looking state bureaucrats and self-seeking businessmen. They invite trainees into this framing also, as I found out when I attended some of the institute’s seminars. Indeed, Lydia was given to making grandiose pronouncements about her activity. At the founding meeting of a new oblast-level societal organization, to which she had been invited as a “leader of the non-commercial sector,” we chatted and she told me that the work of the Institute was “truly revolutionary.”16 Comments such as these helped me to understand the negative reaction she elicited in local activists. In her newfound third sector expertise, Lydia was widely perceived to be behaving with the same didacticism that characterized her former komsomol work. In all senses then, the “new” that Lydia’s third sector supposedly represents is outweighed by the “old” in people’s perceptions.

I collected similar accounts about other provincial centers. I spoke with a journalist, Lena, who works in the same building as a third sector support center. She and other colleagues used to join staff of the center during their tea break, until she grew tired of hearing their triumphant narratives about the third sector and what it represented. Lena recounted, hilariously, how members of the center would lecture the impoverished editorial collective about the necessity to win grants, to make applications. Lena perceived this to be form over substance, a transparent vehicle for self-advancement and self-promotion. As she put it, “The center works only for itself...the one thing they know how to do is write grant applications.” This skeptical take on third sector activity parallels intelligentsia constructions of the Soviet division of labor, whereby capable specialists were forced to work under the didactic instruction of bureaucrats and party workers who make up and enforce unnecessary rules. Informants who were not aligned with the third sector had a stock of tales to recount about its absurd manifestations, and in the course of my research, I heard numerous ironic commentaries about the newly-minted skills and technologies of the third sector, the glossy certificates that are issued to participants of training programs and workshops, and those who are captivated by them and relate to them without irony. These were groups which would announce, proclaim, and use third sector terminologies with abandon, in ways that defied comprehension, advertising themselves and the services they purported to provide, and taking up considerable space in the local papers.

Some of my informants told me they were disenchanted with the Humanitarian Institute because it contradicted its own claims. Although it advertised itself as a regional resource center for the non-commercial sector, it was not truly open.
Irina, the director of a small women’s group told me that she was always put off when she called, either by being told to call back, or to make an appointment. This offended her because it contravened local norms of polite behavior, and because it contradicted the center’s own claims to openness. Indeed, from talking to Lydia and her staff, I learned that training sessions and seminars were available only to members of officially registered organizations, sometimes only on a competitive basis. This precluded the participation of interested persons, or groups that had not yet, or did not wish to formalize by registering with the state. Crucially, there was a perception that information intended for local groups was actually withheld from them. In the course of my fieldwork, I heard numerous accounts of Lydia’s unwillingness to distribute her resources, and one story that circulated was that one of her frequent attendees had consulted with someone to ask, “Is it possible to apply for a grant without Lydia Viktorovna?” Contra Putnam’s assumption that social capital is widely accessible, the social capital that was generated by the Institute and its activities was perceived to be concentrated in her hands.

What to make of the Humanitarian Institute and this contention? On one level, this example illustrates the complex ways in which the third sector reinforces old networks and hierarchies and enables the reproduction of old dependencies (Bruno, 1998, Mandel 2002, Sampson 1996, Wedel 1998). My account also shows that the third sector reproduces what Verdery has called “socialist paternalism” (1996:24), where old elites prosper and regular folks are kept busy guessing at the logic of their power (Berdahl 1999). But my point is neither to denounce the institute, nor to imply as my informants did that it signaled no change. From participant observation (attending seminars, speaking with other participants), I can assert that the center largely did what it was supposed to do, disseminating third sector literature and running seminars to the extent that granting agencies required. Contention about the Humanitarian Institute attests to local awareness of the contradiction between the third sector ideal and its social reality. They knew that unless a group was already well resourced and connected and had a material base from which to launch community initiatives and grant applications, it was unlikely to succeed. Rather than condemn the message however, local activists condemned the messenger. Their third sector critique was highly personalized, focusing on Lydia and the symbolic and material resources she had been able to accrue.

Despite this, I found that the idea of the third sector continued to appeal to many of my informants. The kind of women most commonly drawn to informal associational activity in the 1990s were teachers, doctors, engineers, highly educated women who were not of the party state, but who had considerable cul-
tural capital in the old regime. Invested in the kitchen discussions and debates of the perestroika period, these people had great hopes for political reform, but found themselves devalued and shut out from the new sources of economic and symbolic capital in the new democratic Russia. Voluntary or societal work offered them a way to recoup. The model of the third sector appealed to them, because it affirms this informal activity; according to the model of the third sector, community groups, associations, and clubs are integral to the workings of a healthy society. What is more, in comparison with the other two spheres—business and politics—the third sector is a righteous location. The market and formal politics were widely regarded as dirty, but also as masculine domains, as I have already explained. In contrast, in these constructions the non-governmental sphere was seen to be decent, moral, and in this way peculiarly feminine. In sum, it made a more palatable location for women such as Katia.

**Katia and the Chekhovian Third Sector**

Katia is a former university teacher in a provincial town near St. Petersburg, and an avid consumer of the third sector message. She is now officially unemployed, having quit her job when the university department she worked for was unable to pay her salary. Thanks to her husband's modest, but steady income, she has been able to manage by taking on a variety of informal jobs. However, she retains a sense of bitter disappointment. Losing her job and the social status that went with it was a great personal blow and she experienced an intense sense of demotion. Like many unemployed (or formally employed but unpaid) women with higher education, Katia began to participate in meetings of several local societal organizations (*obshchestvennye organizatsii*). She became a regular participant of the various workshops and seminars on women's non-governmental activity that were held locally. In the course of these activities, she had amassed an impressive library of third sector materials—brochures, handouts and books, including Olga Alekseeva's *Charity for Beginners*. When I met her, she was talking of setting up her own women's organization, a center that would provide support and advice to unemployed women. She told me that she knew of many women like herself who had energy and enthusiasm to bring to social projects, indeed she said she had already pulled together a loose group from her former workplace.

She told me that she had first learned about the "third sector" when a library foundation came to the city and gave a seminar. "We didn't know what it was," she recalled, "it's a new sector of life." Explaining its relationship to prior, Soviet era forms of organization, she told me,
“Everyone thought that the term obshchestvennaia rabota (voluntary societal work) was no longer meaningful, because in former times it signified primarily party, Komsomol or union work. And there was a strong element of obligation associated with it, it barely differed from state work, and in general it was too formalized. That’s why I don’t like to use this term. It has a lot of baggage….that’s why I have reformulated it for myself. I’m dividing up a new sphere of activity for myself. It’s very interesting for me, very meaningful, and I see myself as a new professional in this area. I see it to be quite a responsibility. It’s practically a new profession.”

Here, Katia refers to the deep mistrust of collective action that is the legacy of the Soviet period. As she suggests, the notion of obshchestvennaia rabota (societal work) is compromised by its Soviet association. For her, the third sector provides a new way to reclaim, or to rehabilitate voluntary societal work.

In the course of our acquaintance, we met frequently—in her tiny flat, or in the university library—to discuss local non-governmental developments and the third sector. I was interested in learning more about the women’s group she intended to set up. I never met any of her purported collaborators, but she was a wonderful source of local information and I was fascinated by her enthusiastic involvement in this world. What always struck me in her accounts was the intense sense making process that she underwent and was still undergoing at the time of our conversations. I ultimately came to realize that I was an important interlocutor for her, that my interest in her greatly stimulated her telling. For Katia, “third sector” seemed to represent all that was good about civilized human nature. On one occasion, she astonished me by saying that “Chekhov was a man of the third sector.” Later, in the course of an interview, I asked her to explain what she meant:

“It’s a matter of character, that determines where a person chooses to put his energies—in business, bureaucracy, the state, or the third sector. What does it depend on? On old culture. There were probably people of this type even in Soviet times. Not to call it third sector, we never had such a sphere, but these were exactly the type of people who today would be people of the third sector because of their character. They are socially oriented, unselfish, accomplished…. We can take Chekhov as a particularly indicative person in this light…. I think it is possible to say that people by their very make-up can be in one way or the other material for the third sector.”
She continued, "I told you, I have a very interesting friend who works at the university. She is in charge of students' practice teaching sessions in schools. The word "third sector" never passed her lips; she's not interested in it as I am, because she's too busy. But by her very make-up and activity, by her selflessness, by the amount she puts into her work—nobody pays her money for it, she does it totally altruistically—she is for me a kind of ideal."

Here Katia appropriates what she considers to be the best aspects of Russian culture and society in the name of the third sector. For Katia as for Olga Alekseeva, it is a place where the best social instincts can meet and pull together to make a difference, a site of moral and enlightened citizens' activity. However, unlike Olga Alekseeva, who appears to be addressing the public in general, Katia's narrative expresses a great deal about her opinion of the correct role of a certain strata of society, the intelligentsia. For Katia, the best social instincts are located in the best of society. Hers is not a vision of regular folks (the "grass-roots" in NGO-speak) pulling together. Rather, hers is a vision of an enlightened few acting as example and inspiration for others to follow, of an elite acting in the name of the people (narod). Thus, the moralizing dimension of third sector discourse was appealing to her. Katia's narrative and reclaiming of the category intelligentsia illustrates the negotiations between past and present that characterize post-socialist society (Burawoy and Verdery 1999, Grant 1999). Unlike Alekseeva, she does not emphasize the newness of the third sector. Rather, she uses "third sector" to reaffirm a set of values, an orientation that is widely perceived to be anachronistic. What is more, her interpretation of the third sector enables her to neutralize the fearful uncertainty of the present. In invoking Chekhov, she summons up a timeless vision of Russian culture, according to which people like her have a secure role.

But beyond this, the third sector performed a kind of structuring role around which she had built a new life and routine. Katia really lived the third sector. In addition to attending seminars and trainings, she was engaged in an almost daily round of visits to friends and acquaintances, wherein she discussed the third sector and its local manifestations and told them about the group she wanted to set up. These were rituals that assisted her in the creation of a new life. Our conversations fit the same category. She associated me, a British woman, with the third sector (despite my protestations that I understood it no better than she). After recounting her latest thoughts and updating me about the activities of other local organizations we both knew, she would quiz me, asking questions
such as, "Is that how the third sector should be? Is this the real place of the third sector?" I came to understand that she was asking for my assistance in her project and for a while we discussed the potential for collaboration.

Katia took it upon herself to educate those who were unaware of the third sector about its role and importance. As she got bolder, she began to make visits to people who were on the periphery of her circle, men and women she knew only tangentially, but who held responsible positions in the local municipal administration. She would drop in at their workplaces to chat, her visits thus assuming a semi-formal character. As an academic, her accounts were often quite theoretical and elaborate. One day over tea in her apartment she regaled me with the tale of one such meeting with a lower level official, wherein she had dazzled her interlocutor. The woman in question was impressed by her account and had pledged her support to Lydia and her project.Flushed with the memory of her victory, she told me, "I would never have dared speak to such people before I became involved in the third sector!" It was clear to me that each visit and each conversation represented a further step in her new career, and was part of the process of building up a third sector portfolio. In so doing, she achieved a crucial transformation within herself, from an unemployed middle-aged woman, to a trailblazer of the third sector.

Although Katia certainly lived the third sector, it cannot truthfully be said that she worked in it. Relations with donor agencies remained beyond her grasp and she never founded her non-governmental women's group. My point however is not that she was duped by the third sector message; although she never won grants, Katia certainly derived benefits. First, "third sector" was a kind of plan, a framework around which she made sense of the ruptures and change in her life; it enabled her to make sense of her losses and to regain self-respect. Second, she was ultimately able to convert the moral capital she had generated into a more material form of power: on the basis of her third sector portfolio, her formal qualifications and employment history, she was ultimately appointed director of a newly founded, government funded Center for Women and Families in 1999. Her appropriation of the third sector assisted her in a kind of networking that eventually landed her a job. This seemingly unexpected outcome underscores the significance of what third sector literature tends to ignore—the material vulnerability and hence limited choices of many of those who engage in associational activity.
Ambivalent Insiders

In my final ethnographic section, I examine the third sector from the perspective of some of my most interesting interlocutors—feminist activists who have worked with foundations since they first set up in Russia. Highly educated, western-oriented feminist groups found themselves particularly well positioned to take advantage of these early collaborations. Their members frequently knew foreign languages; some had traveled to Western Europe or the U.S. and were thus quick to find a common language with the representatives of donor agencies. Women such as these were initially enthusiastic to work with western-identified foundations. Their goals of democratization and civil society development seemed to be in tune with the ideals and aspirations that brought them to non-governmental activity. However, the reality they have encountered has proven to be rather different than the promise. These women were motivated by the spirit of the 1980s civil society debates, their activism was driven by the desire to establish new, non-hierarchical forms of social relations. Collaboration with donor agencies led them to formalize, register and professionalize their formerly loose clubs and groups, transforming their activism in troubling ways. Now NGO professionals, they felt sharp disappointment at the third sector, at the same time as they reaped its considerable rewards (good pay, travel, professional status). Their work directly engaged the riddle of the third sector and I found them to be some of its most sophisticated theorists.21

Maria is a veteran activist of the Independent Russian Women’s Movement. She first became active in women’s groups in the late 1980s, when a feminist discussion group set up in her institute. It was made up of women who were both excited about the potential for reform, and concerned with the processes of socio-economic change and their impact on women. She attended the first forum of the independent women’s movement at Dubna in 1991 and was present when the movement received its first financial support from international agencies.22 Since the mid-1990s she has worked for one of the main women’s coalition organizations in Moscow and hence, with most of the foundations that are active in Russia. I got to know her during the Moscow-based phase of my fieldwork, when I worked as a volunteer in her office, assisting with translation from English and editing the English language texts they produced.

Maria’s work entailed the dissemination of information and the occasional distribution of grant monies to other women’s organizations. A good proportion of her work involved sitting at her computer in her Moscow office, sifting through the various electronic bulletins from international women’s organizations and selecting materials to translate and disseminate to groups in the re-
gions. She was frequently baffled by the kinds of issues raised, and occasionally asked me to assist her in translating some of the key terms that would pop up (such as “sustainability,” “grassroots,” “gender mainstreaming”). One day, as we sat together at her computer she turned to me with a grimace, “I have a Masters degree and I know two languages, but I live in a two room apartment with my two sons, husband and mother-in-law and have no hot water. Am I a grassroots woman?” This term, which she associated with rural, third world contexts, did not seem appropriate to Russia or to her life. We would laugh hilariously at some of the mismatches between the rhetoric of transnational campaigns and of foundation mandates and Russian reality, and on occasion I assured her that some of the project speak was incomprehensible to native speakers of English, too. She was familiar with the guiding principles of the development industry, knew them far better than I, and would tell me about the latest trends as she understood them, particularly after her trips abroad to attend meetings of international NGOs.

At the same time as she had mastered the rhetoric, however, she was uncomfortable with her role and frustrated with the exercise of translation. Her job required her to be deft in learning key words and concepts, to pick them up, apply them in grant applications and explain them to other women activists in seminars. However, she was skeptical about their utility and applicability. Through our acquaintance, she had developed a fascination with cultural anthropology, and on one occasion she told me that she felt like an anthropologist, trying to find her way around in this new field. Through her narratives, I got a sense of the changes that the women’s movement had experienced in the course of the last decade. She was uneasily aware of the gulf that had opened up between herself and her colleagues and local women’s groups. While she sat in a comfortable, well-equipped office and drew a hard currency salary, her colleagues in the provinces struggled to meet local problems with a chronic lack of resources. Disparities such as these had led to a breakdown of solidarities within the women’s movement. Once when I asked her about her relationship with regional affiliates, she replied, thoughtfully, “Basically it’s good, but I receive a salary and they don’t. I swing between a guilt complex and being confident in what I am doing.”

In the course of our conversations, I listened to her struggle between the two identifications that her work entailed—women’s movement activist and third sector worker. They were frequently in conflict. She had come to feminism and the women’s movement out of a commitment to egalitarian, non-hierarchical relations between women. She was nostalgic for the earlier phase of women’s
organizing before foundations arrived and began to provide resources for this activity. It was a time of easy exchanges, she told me, when women were willing to travel to other cities to lead seminars, to attend group meetings, “to get to know each other, not as ‘trainers’, or ‘big sisters’, but as equals.” As other civic activists of the time, she had been inspired by the idea of civil society, the catchword of perestroika-era associational activity, yet she was disappointed by the civil society of NGOs that had been brought into being by international agencies. In her work at the center she found herself engaged in a bureaucratic and constrained type of activism that was shot through with new hierarchies. In essence she had become a gatekeeper of third sector resources. During my bi-weekly visits to her office I had numerous occasions to pursue this topic with Maria and her co-workers. As we sat drinking tea and eating cookies, or the fruit that they brought from their dachas (country houses), I asked them what they thought about civil society and the third sector. I found these women struggling to make sense of their new environment, puzzling to understand the role of the third sector and its implications, and to figure out the often-contradictory roles that foundations played. They told me that although foundations were ostensibly committed to ideals they shared, their policies frequently undercut these ideals. Some of the women said they were disturbed and frustrated by the fact that agendas were set outside, in Washington. They commented on the fact that issues such as domestic violence and trafficking became “fashionable,” regardless of what was happening on the ground, and how their ability to maintain themselves depended upon keeping abreast of international currents.

In June 1998, I attended a training seminar at the center designed to assist provincial women’s groups in their interactions with foundations. The attendees were the representatives of small organizations that mostly had a service orientation—crisis centers, women’s information centers, resource centers. Maria and her colleagues facilitated the seminar, coaching the provincial women representatives in the technologies of organizational development (to write grants, keep accounts, write reports). Watching them, I could see that they were clearly invested in what they were doing and sincerely wanted to support these fledgling organizations. Yet behind the scenes, I heard them question the terms and concepts that guided their activities. As Maria said to me “sometimes I think that it’s just an economic game! We will never be able to figure out the aims of the foundations, what drives their policy.” She continued, “Maybe the third sector and non-governmental sphere are just a load of rubbish? What’s the difference between this and business? We all pretend we know what the third sector is, and where we are going, but maybe it’s not true! Maybe this is just pro-
fessionalization! All we have is speculation, slogans—like civil society! What is it? Why is it any different from business?”

In the course of our acquaintance, I witnessed Maria seesaw between these positions. She was still moved by the language of civil society and captivated by its promise at the same time she was troubled by its social reality. In late spring 1998 I met with her shortly after her return from a meeting in New York (since attending the UN Fourth World Conference on the Status of Women in Beijing in 1995, Maria had been very active on the international feminist circuit, and frequently traveled abroad to represent her organization at the invitation of various groups). She told me she was inspired by the levels of cooperation she had witnessed between NGOs of other countries, particularly by the work of an African coalition that worked to find strategies to combat structural adjustment, and she wished that Russian NGOs could make similar alliances in order to better put pressure on the government. She told me that upon her return she had brought this issue up with colleagues within the women’s movement, and that most of them responded with amazement at her idealism. One woman said to her, “What are you talking about? A grant is money and as soon as a person receives money, becomes the director of a project, she forgets about feminist principles! Principles are in conflict with this activity! We can’t live on values! While I have no money, it doesn’t matter what I do, nobody hears me. It’s only when we have a budget that people start to respect us.” They pooh-poohed her suggestion that alliances should be formed on the basis of trust, saying, “Trust? Trust in what? We need to be professionals!” She added, thoughtfully, “it’s difficult to argue with their point of view...Democracy—is just a slogan! In Russia the word is discredited, is taken to mean a free for all, the freedom to do what you like without any obligations or responsibility. Even politicians barely use the word any more.” This comment testifies to the fact that despite the supposed complementarity of the three sectors as portrayed in the literature, in Russia, both business and government remain skeptical of non-governmental activity. Global foundations remain the only allies of organizations such as these.

In sum this last portrait confirms some of what we saw in the Humanitarian Instituted. Foundation support to women’s groups has given rise to a small and elite stratum of NGO professionals or career feminists. Those who put out the literature, control the technology and “live on grants” are increasingly distant from the societal organizations in whose name they speak. Meanwhile, the vast majority of women’s groups (local groups that set up with more concrete local objectives) find themselves struggling to meet local needs without the support of either state or donor agencies. What is more, these professional
women’s groups (as other foundation-supported NGOs) are complicit with a new and disturbing division of labor: as we have seen in the earlier part of this chapter, the third sector model encourages community groups into service provision. Societal organizations, most frequently run by women, thus end up fulfilling some of the socialist state’s former functions. They provide social services that the crumbling state sector is no longer able to provide, stopping up the gaps of the radical free market. In effect, this amounts to a re-traditionalization of women’s roles. Maria was acutely aware of this. She spoke about women being “used up” by their involvement in this sphere, “my heart aches when I think of how many excellent women I know who work in the third sector are ill. It takes such a lot from you, there is such uncertainty, we all get ill after a few years.” She longed to quit her own job saying that it was in contradiction with the circumstances of her own life, it demanded too much. Her colleagues urged her to keep at it, that she had to be responsible. “Yes, I’m responsible, we must be responsible, but why only us? And what about our families?”

**Conclusions**

In making these ethnographic juxtapositions, my intent has been to convey the complicated effects of the project to build a third sector in Russia. Highlighting the perspectives of three consumers of the third sector message, I have shown that local actors are only too aware of the contradictions of this project. Rather than a naturally unfurling organic entity, the civil society of the third sector in Russia is a costly project, externally promoted and installed by international agency design. Second, it is very different from the civil society that activists desired and international donor agencies promised, as these narratives show. It is a constrained place, characterized by new hierarchies and dependencies. While it claims to nurture the local and the grassroots, it enables a small circle of elites to flourish (many of whom were agents of the old party state). What is more, the third sector that is promoted and supported by foundations introduces a market logic and sensibility to non-governmental activity. Activists have been forced to adopt an entrepreneurial idiom in order to survive in the world of grants and funding, where NGOs compete against each other for scarce resources. Meanwhile, most community groups are outside the loop and can only dream of involvement, or look on jealously.

My account thus partially confirms the consensus portrait drawn by critical scholarship of post-Soviet civil society, yet it also insists on the need to pay attention to local interpretations. Delving deeper into activists’ narratives, a more
rich and complex story emerges. My account shows that the third sector remains compelling to local actors. To different degrees, the activists I have profiled here have all been able to imaginatively deploy the third sector. They have used it to make sense of losses endured, to generate new forms of symbolic and material wealth, and to make sense of some of the crucial realignments that characterize the postsocialist era: between state and society, money and morality. As they puzzle the third sector, they engage its contradictions and work within the clashing discourses and values to rethink the forms and logic of political activism offered them. The third sector then does not signal one single mode of engagement. It gains new meanings and machinations within local contexts and has signifying possibilities beyond the intent of its global proponents. It is an arena of agency, a site where global and local knowledge come together in a dynamic improvisation that is shot through with critiques of the inequalities activists confront. If international interventions are to be improved upon, understanding these local interpretations and processes is crucial.

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ENDNOTES

1In the book Alekseeva explains that she has spent considerable time in the UK and claims to have worked for ten years as a volunteer in various "charitable" projects in Russia. I take Alekseeva to be both propagandist of the third sector and one of its believers.

2"Third sector" or "voluntary sector" research only emerged in the early 1980s, but as a vision of development, it has already achieved a kind of hegemony amongst international agencies active in post-socialist contexts (Foley and Edwards 1997). Some of the key centers engaged in third sector research are the International Society for Third Sector Research (http://www.jhu.edu/~istr/), the Yale Program on Nonprofit Organizations (PONPO), the Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project, the International Society for Third-Sector Research at Johns Hopkins, ARNOVA (The Association of Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action).

3Following anthropological conventions, I make use of pseudonyms to protect the identity of the women activists I worked with in my research.
The emergent critical anthropology of NGOs and civil society has provided a valuable counterbalance to triumphalist accounts of the so-called transition to democracy in former socialist states by pointing to misallocations, distortions, and the power imbalance inherent in the encounter. In the last years, there has been a sharp switch in the zeitgeist. It has become politically correct to critique democratization. My concern is that this narrative switch could have disproportionate policy outcomes, namely the cutting back of civil society aid, which would have a disproportionate effect on women.

Perestroika (literally, rebuilding) was instigated by General Secretary Gorbachev in 1986 and lasted until the demise of the USSR in 1991.

Contra liberal democratic civil society discourses, democratization, and the liberalizing economic reforms of the early 1990s marked the demotion of women as a group in Russia and post-socialist countries (Bridger, Kay, and Pinnick 1996; Pilkington 1992; Watson 1997). For all the very serious flaws and contradictions of officially proclaimed equality, the state socialist system did not relegate women to the private sphere (Verdery 1996, Gal 1997). In the 1990s, women’s political representation dropped dramatically, and they experienced disproportionate unemployment. What is more, they were especially hard hit by the cut backs in social service spending that were encouraged by international lending institutions.

For accounts that specifically explore the impact of international aid on Russian women’s groups, see Hemment 2000, Henderson 2003, Kay 2000, Richter 1999, Sperling 2000.

Following Garton-Ash, I refer here to the work of Vaclav Havel, Adam Michnik and Georg Konrad to typify the civil society debates. While it would be problematic to homogenize their work, it can be seen to share a great deal and these authors were in dialogue with each other. See discussions by Garton-Ash 1990, Ost 1990, Gellner 1994.

See Wedel’s discussion of “a few favored cliques” (1998:83-120).

For commentary on this phenomenon, see Foley and Edwards (1996, 1998). A recent edition of the US Journal of Democracy, a journal that analyzes and documents the progress of democratization and civil society development, was devoted to the discussion of de Tocqueville’s work and its continued relevance. The editors conclude their introduction with this statement, “as we enter the new millennium, one might say with little exaggeration, we are all Tocquevillians now!” (Journal of Democracy 11(1), January 2000:9).

Following the collapse of the socialist alternative, democratization was considered to be an objective process. Studies tended to assume the existence of universal and objective indicators (such as public opinion surveys, voting patterns) that can be mapped and counted in order to trace successes and failures.

While in the early 1990s, the Bank was not interested in NGOs and development, by the late 90s it had an entire division devoted to it (James 1997). In the mid-to-late 90s, the World Bank began to support studies that explored the relationship between economic liberalism and democracy (Blair 1997). According to Sarah Henderson, this trend has continued into the new millennium; in 2002 USAID devoted 37% of its $506 million budget for democracy and governance to civil society initiatives worldwide. Anheier et al. estimate the NGO development field to be a $7 billion industry, with $2 billion funded by U.S. foundations (Anheier, Glasius, and Kaldor 2001, cited in Henderson 2003).

According to Janine Wedel, US Congress devoted $36 million to support “democratic institution building” in Poland and other ex-communist states between 1990-91. By 1995, the US had obligated $164 million to promote political party development, independent media, governance and recipient NGOs (Wedel 1998:85). Meanwhile the EU and private foundations also channeled funds to support NGOs and civil society. Sarah Henderson’s recent study of western civil society aid to Russia maps these funding trajectories: in 2000 George Soros’ Open Society Institute-Russia channeled over $56 million to NGOs, universities and other civic organizations; between 1993-2001 the Eurasia Foundation allocated almost $38 million to the
non-profit sector; between 1991-98 the MacArthur Foundation approved over $17 million in grants to support civic initiatives in the former Soviet Union (Henderson 2003:7).

14According to Henderson, there were over 450,000 civic groups registered in January 2001 (Henderson 2003:6)

15Member of the Young Communist League.

16This language echoes third sector promotional literature; see for example (Salamon and Anheier 1997).

17As Berdahl puts it, “the interplay between above and below, between the known and the unknown, between the state and its citizens was crucial in sustaining the socialist system in East Germany” (Berdahl 1999:46).

18During the Soviet period, obshchestvennaia rabota (societal work) signified enforced, party-mandated activity. Each person was required to undertake extra-curricular activities on behalf of the Komsomol (Communist youth organization) or the party. An individual’s performance in this area influenced the distribution of perks and privileges, effecting professional advancement. This has resulted in a deep mistrust of both formal and informal politics and collective engagement in the post-socialist period.

19Much ink has been spilt on the intelligentsia, which remains a very contested category in the Soviet period. I do not mean to assert the existence of intelligentsia as a unified, homogenized group, rather, I use it as an emic term. In this context, it is used to refer to those who identify with old cultural elites, in opposition to Soviet elites (nomenklatura). Although rarely used self-descriptively in the 1990s, I found that the term was often elicited by conversations such as these, where highly educated people reflected on their personal losses and the changes of the last decade.

20Speaking in the name of the narod, or moralizing on its behalf is a familiar trope of Russian and East European cultural elites.

21Regrettably, their views are rarely solicited. My interlocutors lamented the fact that they had no time or resources to undertake research into the third sector. Western funding encouraged them to move ahead and undertake steps that they did not have time to evaluate. They noted that foundations supported foreigners to evaluate and assess Russian non-governmental activity, instead of providing them with the means to conduct their own assessments and research.

22The first Dubna forum was attended by around 200 women, representing 48 organizations all over Russia. It brought women into contact with each other and stimulated interest in the emergent women’s movement. The main topic of the meeting was women’s worsening socio-political position in Russia, and its slogan—“Democracy minus women is no democracy.” It has been well documented by both foreign and Russian attendees. See for example Marsh 1996 and Sperling 2000. For accounts of how western aid arrived and transformed the movement, see Kay 2000, Richter 2002, Sperling 2000.

23Many women activists I spoke with made similar complaints.

24I examine the Russian campaigns against domestic violence and this process of translation in more detail elsewhere (Hemment 2004).

REFERENCES


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