

# To be happy in a Mercedes:

## Tropes of value and ambivalent visions of marketization

### ABSTRACT

The disintegration of Soviet social contracts has provoked, for many Russians, a continuing deliberation over the tense interrelation between material embodiments of value (wealth and commodities) and moral ones (respectability, education, and kindness). By contrast with previous anthropological tendencies to locate value production primarily within exchange transactions, in this article I identify two historically specific tropes of value (“culturedness” and “civilization”) and show how their articulation illuminates positioned experiences of large-scale change and social displacement. From the particular vantage point of St. Petersburg schoolteachers, I consider everyday deliberations about value and social difference as they take form within both local and global frames of reference, examining how these two contexts frequently produce divergent—but only seemingly contradictory—visions of marketization, its desirability, and its sociomoral significance. [value, consumption, postsocialism, capitalism, globalization, Russia]

Late one evening in December 1998, the teachers and administrators of St. Petersburg, Russia’s English Specialization School No. 25 were enjoying their annual New Year’s celebration banquet.<sup>1</sup> As the night drew on, some flew home to children and dinners to prepare, and the remaining revelers piled leftover food and alcohol onto one central table and crowded around it. Into the stream of toasts and anecdotes, someone interjected a question for group discussion: Was it better to be happy or to have a Mercedes?<sup>2</sup>

Several votes were offered for happiness. The head of the English department pointedly asked me to contribute: I was the American, so what did I think? I concurred that certainly to be happy was better. Another teacher piped up triumphantly that it would be best to “be happy in a Mercedes!” Whereupon another corrected her, saying that, no, those who had Mercedes were not happy, because they “aspired”—they were never satisfied but were always aiming for more (*oni ne radiuitsia potomu chto stremliaiut*).

The Mercedes question provided several minutes of distracting party conversation. It had an assumed answer, to be sure. But in the middle of an evening full of good wishes for 1999 and toasts praising the talents and hard work of the teachers’ *kollektiv*, the debate also addressed nagging doubts and key dissatisfactions of the moment. The ritual of playing out possible responses allowed participants to come to an unusually unequivocal conclusion, more reassuring than those likely to be found in their workaday lives. Questions about who deserved what and why—evaluations teachers made according to scales of comparison both local and global—had a special urgency and poignancy just then, in the wake of the August 1998 ruble crash (popularly known simply as the “kriziz”) that had devalued salaries radically and made getting by suddenly much more exhausting. Around the toasting table, the revelers had found that one could at least be glad not to have a Mercedes because having one would mean sacrificing too much of oneself, endangering future happiness and the sustenance of any meaningful social relationships.

The debate's outcome that night did not mean that the question was really closed, however. Mercedes were not entirely dismissed as not worth having; neither was their lack—and the lack of a world of other luxuries being consumed by a few Russians but inaccessible to most—so easily understood or accepted. Rather, in the context of rapid marketization and other forms of institutional and social change, the very meanings of material prosperity and privilege have come into question: What is their relationship now to other familiar and trusted measures of personal worth and moral standing? What are the correlations, both desired and perceived, between the nature of an individual's productive activity (esp. gainful employment) and his or her share of the material resources distributed among members of a larger social body? Is one's level of material privilege supposed to correspond roughly to one's moral legitimacy and how well one is respected by one's peers or to some other measure? On what kinds of resources can one rely for what kinds of sustenance? In a situation of rapid change and social displacement, how do people conceptualize their own value vis-à-vis various social others—whether according to market or other scales?

Active deliberation over such questions is not unique to postsocialist Russia. Rather, I view it as more generally indicative of periods of socioeconomic crisis, upheaval, or transition (Newman 1999; Weber 1992). Indeed, many of the narratives I describe here resonate with the descriptions of commodification, resignification, and social restructuring that anthropologists and historians have produced of colonial and postcolonial contexts (e.g., Burke 1996; Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Foster 2002). During the past decade or so, postcolonial industrialization and the growing dominance of transnational capitalist markets have turned questions about commodity choice and the cultural significance of mass-produced goods into key themes of anthropological research around the world (e.g., Abu-Lughod 1993a, 1993b, 1995; Appadurai 1990; Berdahl 1999; Comaroff and Comaroff 2001; Davis 2000; Gillette 2000; Howes 1996; Inda and Rosaldo 2002; Miller 1994, 1997; Watson 1997).

Yet Russia—having stood for centuries as a colonial power in its own right—constitutes a different kind of periphery of the global economy than do the modernizing, postcolonial societies more commonly the subjects of ethnographic research (cf. Foster 2002; Gewertz and Errington 1991, 1996; Howes 1996; Liechty 2003). This status gives rise to particular brands of ambivalence on the part of many Russians, perhaps especially those of the old professional classes who are likely to share particular sentiments of social entitlement as well as resentment at having been left behind by market reforms. Furthermore, I would argue that the rather abrupt nature of political and economic transformation in Russia since perestroika has provoked, for many, an especially intensive process

of interrogating the correspondences between collective and private interests and between material and moral indices of value. Thus, postsocialist Russia offers a fresh opportunity to revisit and resituate relatively familiar anthropological questions concerning how social actors conceptualize value and social difference and how these conceptualizations are imbricated within both global capitalist processes and national experience.

Among the urban Russians who were part of this study, a sense of loss and of struggle has commingled with a particular kind of investment in what many see, nonetheless, as processes of progress, modernization, and positive change—with implications for how individuals consider various ways of being and envision their own places vis-à-vis multiple and potentially conflicting scales of value. In this article, I identify two key, parallel tropes of material and moral value—"culture," or "culturedness," and "civilization"—that help to provide a framework for understanding the tense deliberations over value that, I argue, have been so central to lived experiences of marketization and social displacement. "Culturedness" evokes Soviet norms of propriety and has been used to critique post-Soviet class developments and crass nouveau riche materialism; "civilization" more directly articulates the anxieties attending globalization and the desires for greater access to expensive consumer commodities from the West. Thus, such everyday commentaries condense historically specific logics of value in particular and sometimes divergent ways, pointing up painful tensions within teachers' and others' post-Soviet lives: desires for both happiness and a Mercedes or, less metaphorically, for culturally legitimated forms of social security as well as the lifestyle possibilities presented by global capitalist integration. Understanding these commentaries as situated visions of social justice and power that people frame on both local and international scales, however, I ask finally whether one really needs to see the multiple desires they express as contradictory at all.

### **Can a teacher be happy in a Mercedes? And other questions of value**

This article is based primarily on 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork in St. Petersburg in 1998–99, supplemented by follow-up work in 2003 (see Figure 1). The research included a series of in-depth, semidirected interviews with each of about two dozen teachers as well as extensive participant–observation in two schools (including participation in classes, school assemblies, and workplace gatherings) and in less formal contexts (including shopping trips and off-hours socializing with teachers and their families). The overall project was planned as a study of postsocialist consumer practice and ideology, concentrating on the kinds of daily provisioning for which



**Figure 1.** St. Petersburg: Russia's European capital and the "Venice of the North." Photo by J. Patico.

Russian mothers and wives tend to be disproportionately responsible. Among my reasons for focusing on teachers, then, was the high degree of feminization of the teaching profession. Thus, most of the perspectives reflected here are those of women, although male teachers' and family members' perspectives were taken into account whenever possible.<sup>3</sup> These specific views were supplemented by my attention to local and national mass media's treatment of related questions of consumerism, class, and social change and by time spent in a variety of public consumer and shopping environments in the city.

Teachers are also one of a number of social-professional constituencies who can provide pointed critical perspectives on contemporary processes of cultural transformation in Russia—by virtue of their professional roles as providers of public services as well as the specific ways in which they and other highly educated, still state-employed professionals have been situated in socialist and post-socialist economies. In the recent Soviet past, schoolteachers (as well as, e.g., medical doctors and engineers) were part of what Vladimir Shlapentokh (1999) has called a "mass intelligentsia," in distinction to the more exclusive

intellectual elite. These strata enjoyed a certain kind of "middle-class" lifestyle—although they were never particularly well paid in relation to other categories of workers and bureaucrats (not coincidentally, both the teaching and medical professions were highly feminized; Jones 1991; Shlapentokh 1999).<sup>4</sup> More recently, these groups have been among those most negatively impacted by the disintegration of Soviet administrative and economic structures, offering a poignant and charged perspective from which to consider how rapid marketization provokes crises of value and legitimacy for those caught up in it. The world of these "old" professional classes, as I came to understand it through the lens of St. Petersburg teachers' experience, was one in which the very logics according to which people once set goals, evaluated prestige, and received their material rewards had been largely upended, resulting in no small measure of disorientation and in the need to adapt the bases of practical knowledge and frameworks for perceiving social reality.

Although teachers had been positioned uniquely as socializing transmitters of knowledge to the younger Soviet generation, by the late 1990s some among them felt

painfully aware of an erosion of the social recognition and respect that their work was accorded, not to mention of the remuneration by which it was materially rewarded. Casting themselves as relatively impoverished but at least cultured professionals, the teachers with whom I worked in St. Petersburg tended to be both eager consumers and vociferous critics of the Russian market economy. They commented on the irony that they, educated citizens of what was so recently considered a world superpower, now seemed to be living in just another “Third World country.” These judgments speak directly to the subjects’ precarious positionings as professionals still dependent on the sinking ship of state-sponsored institutions within a privatizing former world power, suggesting that although teachers are not necessarily representative of urban Russians, they present a vantage point that is structurally revealing of certain processes of institutional decline and marketization.

To make useful anthropological sense of the teachers’ deliberations, this article attends to some of the most concrete, “deceptively frivolous” (Abu-Lughod 1990) instances of consumer judgment while also taking into account the relatively unpredictable episodes that become occasions for people to question and comment on the comparative worth of different individuals and their endeavors, populations and their development, and commodities and their qualities. These elements of comparison are fundamental to the way in which I mean to invoke “value” here: to refer to the evaluative terms in which actors judge the significance and worth of persons as well as things (and how these reflect on one another). This is a mode of comparison whereby the objects’ socially salient qualities are framed (explicitly or implicitly) according to scales of relative valorization. Culturedness and civilization, as discussed here, are examples of such scales. In addition, I am interested in how what would seem to be qualitatively different measures of value—most notably, assessments of people’s moral rectitude or social usefulness, on the one hand, and their material prosperity or access to desired commodities, on the other hand—are made to correspond to one another, as actors articulate logics of value, that is, visions of how various kinds of resources and rewards are or should be distributed among members of a larger social body. Listening closely to how these questions were treated and noting the contexts in which they arose, as the undercurrent of people’s discussions and decisions about (most notably) consumption and work, brings into relief a politics of social difference that was being negotiated in everyday life during a period of rapid institutional change and cultural transformation.

My framing of these questions is partly inspired by, but also diverges from, previous anthropological approaches to value, its representation, and its reproduction. Within this provocative body of work (e.g., Appadurai 1986; Graeber 2001; Munn 1986; Myers 2001), particular atten-

tion has been devoted to the dynamics of gift versus commodity exchange systems, building on the legacies of Karl Marx (1990) and of Marcel Mauss (1967; see also Eiss and Pedersen 2002; Gregory 1982; Thomas 1991; Weiner 1992). Particularly since Arjun Appadurai’s 1986 examination of the politics of value, a key objective has been to problematize the relatively strict division sometimes supposed to inhere between “gift” (affective, ongoing, and socially oriented) and “commodity”—money (impersonal, fleeting, and individualistic) exchange (Keane 2001; Kopytoff 1986; Miller 2001; Myers 2001; Patino 2002). This scholarship has highlighted the fluidity and tensions at work in any given context of exchange, emphasizing that only through struggles over value do objects and social relations come to be defined in one way or another. Analytical emphasis has tended to be pitched toward economic transactions as the primary locus at which the production of value is examined.

A sense of struggle and doubt over legitimate meanings and privileges is unquestionably salient in the contemporary Russian milieu, and it is this foregrounding of contingent and discomfiting transformation that makes the anthropological notion of “value” an appropriate place to begin an analysis of postsocialist life. Yet, rather than fixing analytically on things in motion or moments of transaction, my approach here is more explicitly subject centered, asking how particular people explain to themselves, and thereby engage in, processes of structural and cultural change. If people, indeed, are deliberating over how measures of material prosperity and of moral legitimacy correspond to one another in contemporary Russia—how they, for example, oppose, shore up, or serve as negative or positive proof of one another—I am also proposing that people’s shifting and strained conceptualizations of these correspondences, as expressed here through ideals such as “culture” and “civilization,” are exactly what anthropologists should be looking at to better understand the ramifications of such (so-called) transitions to capitalism as lived and jarring realities.<sup>5</sup>

### Soviet culturedness, civilization, and consumption

Although the juxtaposition of “culturedness” and “civilization” as teachers discussed these themes points to socioeconomic tensions and deep ambivalence in contemporary experiences of marketization, I note at the outset that they are, in fact, closely linked, both conceptually and historically. Hence, a brief consideration of the Soviet background to teachers’ postsocialist conceptions is warranted.

Shifting conceptions of “culturedness” have been particularly well documented by cultural historians of the Soviet era, and their intersections with notions of “civilization” are significant. Although the Russian word *kul'tura*

can signify “an achievement of the intelligentsia in the sense of high culture, a synthesis of ideas, knowledge, and memories” (Dunham 1976:22), *kul'turnost'* (culturedness) came to refer in the early 20th century to a code of public conduct and a template for the proper relationship of individuals to material possessions, denoting a combination of polite manners, hygiene, and basic knowledge of high culture. Scholars suggest that it sanctioned a particular kind of acquisitiveness that took root in the 1930s and remained a central aspect of social and moral life from that time forward (Dunham 1976; Fitzpatrick 1999). The masses to whom the Soviet Union was to bring culture included not only Russia's peasants, many of whom were moving into urban areas, but also the peoples of other republics and regions (including Central Asians and the nomadic groups of the Siberian north) considered backward in their development (Fitzpatrick 1999; Slezkine 1994). “Beds, gramophones, sewing machines, watches, and radios were all goods that helped raise their possessors out of ‘Asiatic’ backwardness and into ‘European-style’ modernity and culture” (Fitzpatrick 1999:103). A Stalin-era worker from the Soviet republic of Tadjikistan boasted that “I don't live in a my old mud hut anymore—I was awarded a European-style house. I live like a civilised person” (Fitzpatrick 1999:103).

Thus, culture was a matter not only of social distinction but also of progress and civilization (cf. Elias 1978; Frykman and Lofgren 1987), whereby European Russian urban lifestyles were posited as the standard to which other Soviet peoples were to aspire (even as cities like Moscow and St. Petersburg were themselves rapidly industrializing, urbanizing, and becoming civilized). In other words, the project of becoming respectable and cultured (urban) citizens through the adoption of particular material lifestyles and modes of behavior overlapped with the ideas of civilization that more explicitly concerned questions of relative national and ethnic development. The tropes differ primarily in their most immediate scales of reference, then, as post-Soviet teachers' commentaries still reflect.

In many ways, the roles played by commodities in this Soviet civilizing project are strikingly similar to those that have been observed in empire-building projects elsewhere in the world (Burke 1996; Comaroff 1996). Specific to the communist case was a particular kind of emphasis on collective and individual labor as the basis for access to goods and a special insistence that great prosperity was or would soon be universal within the Soviet Union. Although material prosperity was most accessible to the new administrative elite, the ideology of *kul'turnost'* stressed that the goods people desired were available to anyone in exchange for hard work—or that they would surely be accessible to all citizens soon, even if reserved for some members of the front guard now (Dunham 1976; Kelly and Volkov 1998: 295). In this sense, *kul'turnost'* masked and legitimated

the entrenchment of social inequalities within Soviet society (Boym 1994:105; Fitzpatrick 1992:218).<sup>6</sup>

Ideals and incentives notwithstanding, the 1930s and immediate postwar period were characterized by constant shortages and a dearth of consumer products (Buchli 1999: 93; Hessler 1996; Osokina 1998). Even after the postwar economy had stabilized—and later stagnated, as the period of slowed economic growth and general social malaise (the *zastoi*) experienced under Leonid Brezhnev is popularly described—hierarchically allocated access to goods and privileges remained a lasting feature of the Soviet mode of governance and administration, persisting for the duration of communist rule.<sup>7</sup> The emphasis on acquisitiveness was amplified in the post-World War II era, when new material comforts (“crepe-de-chine dresses, old-fashioned dinnerware”) were cited as indicators of improving standards of living and even an increase of good cheer in Soviet life: just desserts for the wartime hardships survived by “the marching enthusiasts of the new Stalinist order” (Boym 1994:105; see also Dunham 1976).<sup>8</sup> Although shortages continued under Brezhnev in the 1960s, consumer commodities and sought-after domestic conveniences gradually became more widely available as greater priority than ever before was given to their production.<sup>9</sup> “Their Excellencies the Refrigerator, the Washing machine, the Television set, the Record player, and most coveted, the ‘Volga’ [automobile] made their appearance. . . . Cookbooks with tempting color plates, featuring jellied sturgeons festooned in radish rosettes and live daisies, were followed by chapters on *kul'turnost' [sic]*” (Dunham 1976: 244). Even in the last decades of Soviet power, official discourses strove to frame materialist preoccupations in terms of particular personal virtues, including simplicity, modesty, moral purity, and mutual respect.<sup>10</sup>

Being cultured in the late 20th century, then, meant both consuming in a tasteful manner and being a knowledgeable, well-behaved, and ideologically correct kind of Soviet citizen. *Kul'turnost'* was a shifting but essentially persistent coding or logic of social values, wherein the proper use of objects indexed professional achievement as well as moral-ideological correctness. Such ideals maintained a more international significance, as well, as material prosperity was held as evidence of Soviet progress and superiority—even if such materialism was also in tension with the explicitly antibourgeois goals of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” and if enthusiasm for Soviet progress was tempered by warnings against the kind of spiritual degradation proclaimed to characterize the capitalist West (e.g., Zamoshkin 1969). Mass media in the Soviet Union and throughout the Eastern Bloc touted the material standards of living enjoyed in their countries as among the best in the world and as rising all the time, leading citizenries to think of consumer goods as their right (Crowley and Reid 2000; Humphrey 1995; Verdery 1991, 1996).

Still, this “right” was continually frustrated as consumer shortages persisted, such that acquisition of desired goods actually required continual social networking and considerable stores of knowledge, ingenuity, and expertise.<sup>11</sup> Travel to other socialist countries in Eastern Europe along with occasional images from Western Europe and the United States through tourists or the Voice of America fed a growing sense that Soviet conditions compared unfavorably with those elsewhere and were no longer improving (Bushnell 2003). Yet expectations of increasing prosperity and of linear progress toward higher levels of civilization have continued to resonate, contributing to the way at least some citizens contemplate their shifted positions vis-à-vis local and global hierarchies of value and material distribution.<sup>12</sup> In the following two sections, I explore teachers’ talk about questions related to culturedness and to civilization in turn.

### Contemporary struggles over culturedness and commodification

In the late 1990s, everything one might desire had become readily available in St. Petersburg’s shops, and money (as opposed to social contacts) had become more primary to the fulfillment of everyday needs. Yet people were uncertain how much of it they would have from month to month or how another sudden jolt of inflation might suddenly devalue their salaries and savings.<sup>13</sup> Although teachers and, indeed, most families still very much depended on public education (the former for their livelihood, the latter for their children’s educations and professional futures in a highly literate society), schools now received only scant financial support from federal and local governments, squeezing teachers between forces of structural change and the need to provide for their households and precipitating conflicts between teachers and their students’ families. Without a doubt, the level of their state salaries (usually barely enough for the subsistence of one person, let alone a family) gave them little reason to feel appreciated or privileged—especially in the year following the ruble’s plunge (Patico 2001a). “No one is thinking about us,” one teacher summarized, asking rhetorically: “Who lives better here (*u nas*)? Someone who produces or sells, or works in a bank. We [teachers] don’t produce anything concrete. [The attitude] works out to: go ahead and live, however you want.”

Although teachers’ specific roles as educators and transmitters of culture are salient here, their more significant commonality of experience in the late 1990s (at least in terms of the questions considered by this study) was based not so much in a shared professional identity or calling but, rather, in their shared structural positions as well-educated, relatively poor state employees.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, the professional as well as family and financial back-

grounds of the teachers and social players were various: Some of them had been trained at pedagogical institutes and had been teaching in public schools for as long as 20 or 30 years; others had fled professions such as engineering and applied sciences, for which funding and demand had dried up in 1990s St. Petersburg, choosing the field of education because of a consistent need for teachers. The most immediate roles played by all of these women and men as teachers and within the schools, however, shaped their experiences of socioeconomic upheaval in significant ways.<sup>15</sup>

They often felt that Russia’s more respectable, knowledgeable, useful, and hard-working subjects were not able to consume in the cultured if modest manner that really befitted them, whereas sketchier characters were consuming far beyond what they appeared to deserve.<sup>16</sup> The nouveaux riches of the 1990s, popularly known as the “New Russians,” embodied the discrepancy most clearly, at least in the common stereotypes, according to which they had immodest and conspicuous taste in clothes; spent money extravagantly and pointlessly; possibly engaged in criminal activities; and showed a lack of proper respect for others and a dearth of intelligence, education, and culture. These stereotypes were widespread, mirrored and coproduced by the media (e.g., in stories in the daily *Peterburg-Ekspres*), and were the subject of myriad popular *anekdoty*, or jokes (Krylova 1999; Patico 2000). Even while the New Russians were roundly ridiculed, however, the continuing need for kul’turnost’ articulated in the *anekdoty* was also being eclipsed in public fora such as the most popular glossy women’s magazines (*Cosmopolitan*, *Domashnii Ochag*) by more explicitly consumerist admonitions to be “super-fashionable” (*super-modnyi*) and highly conscious of one’s “image” (*imidzh*), representing a partial shift away from the calls for modesty and social centeredness that had characterized an earlier era.<sup>17</sup>

Many St. Petersburg public school teachers were susceptible to these kinds of encouragements; among my acquaintances, this was especially true of younger, childless, or unmarried women in their twenties and thirties who had relatively more time and money to spend on their individual desires for self-improvement. Yet many also found culturedness to provide a meaningful frame for thinking about contemporary matters of social difference and worth. Unsurprisingly, given their own professional commitments, teachers associated kul’turnost’ with education, interest in high culture (museums and literature), and being *intelligentnyi* (knowledgeable, part of or related to the intelligentsia)—although such attributes could also be, at least rhetorically, declared nonessential to culturedness. For, beyond those qualities, the adjective *kul’turnyi* referred to someone who was respectful of others and, as one teacher put it, “[knew] how to behave in a given situation.”

These virtues were often taken to be lacking in contemporary civic and social realms. In fact, dealing with unpleasant people who had money was a recurring aspect of life for teachers at the two schools I studied (the link between money and unpleasantness often was seen as causal: most likely, well-to-do people had accumulated their money thanks to a lack of scruples). Both schools were relatively prestigious and well-reputed public institutions, so that entrance was difficult to gain. Here, financially struggling teachers came into regular contact with the parents of their students, many of whom teachers described as quite “well-off” (*obespechenie*). Some of the families were also members of the “intelligentsia,” as teachers characterized them; and teachers sometimes established friendships and exchanged favors with those parents with whom they felt they could see eye to eye (Salmi n.d.). Others did not; one woman, who enjoyed a relatively secure financial position thanks to her husband’s earnings from multiple jobs, said that she preferred not to feel obligated to parents who might later demand favors such as higher grades for their children.

On a darker note, teachers (and, notably, a school psychologist) also correlated the wealth of children’s families with a range of psychological, behavioral, and academic problems: obsession at a very young age with comparing their peers’ possessions and social status; suffering neglect because their parents were more interested in money-making than child rearing (a view I saw repeated in St. Petersburg’s popular press and in nationally distributed women’s magazines); difficulty with their class work and dependence on private tutoring. “They get used to doing nothing in school and then go for their private lessons and everything is explained to them,” teacher Nadezhda complained; “the tutor explains and their parents pay.” Teachers and others criticized private schools for allegedly espousing a starker kind of grades-for-cash approach.

The teachers’ poverty in comparison with most of their students’ economic standing was sometimes a source of embarrassment in interactions with both pupils and their parents. Teacher Lena described how her young students had taken note of things she did not have, asking questions such as, “You don’t have a watch??” implying that they were shocked she could not afford one (which, Lena explained, was not strictly true; she had already lost or broken a few watches and could not afford to keep buying them). A particularly insulting incident had arisen when uniform jackets were being made for the children in her class. A parent helping to organize the making of uniforms had said to her, “Why don’t we have a jacket made for you too? It will be all of 300 rubles.” “All of 300 rubles,” Lena repeated to me, indicating that the parent’s remarks had been particularly offensive to her: they implied that her appearance was poor as well as called attention to the difficulty she would have afford-

ing improvements. “When you are wearing the same outfit all year,” another regretted, “you want something new. Looking noticeably worse than the students is somehow unpleasant.”

A young teacher and active English tutor, Anya, explained that she made sure to “look after herself” very carefully so that she would be attractive in every detail (hair, nails, etc.) when she went to people’s homes to give lessons; she had noticed that people liked it. But fashion-conscious Anya had also been taken aback by a blatant example of the evaluation of teachers according to their attractiveness rather than their teaching. A student’s mother (herself displeased about the incident) had told Anya about a comment that her young daughter had made about another teacher at their school. “Mama,” the girl had said, “how can I respect my teacher if she has a run in her stocking?” In another context, the run itself might have been treated as a form of unculturedness. But although Anya would scarcely have been caught dead with a run in her own stocking, the tone in which she recounted the story suggested that the girl’s judgment illustrated the cold, precocious materialism of a new generation of young people who might discount a well-intentioned mentor on the basis of an impoverished wardrobe.

Beyond these image concerns, at issue in relations between teachers and parents was a certain unease concerning their mutual obligations and the role of money in mediating those relationships. One group of colleagues told of a small boy from a rich family who had seen a workman doing repairs in a school hallway and had referred publicly to him as “my worker.” Teachers inferred that having gotten used to his family’s employment of various individuals (such as carpenters who might come to do fancy renovations in their apartment—a sign of privilege), the child must have found it natural to think of any such laborer as “my” worker and of any teacher, one woman bemoaned, as “my” teacher. In their telling, the personal pronoun *my* came across as offensive because it was interpreted rather literally to express possession, or perhaps simply—and no less offensively?—personal employment of a teacher by a family rather than by the state or by a particular educational institution.

What kinds of attitudes toward the commodification of cultured labor and the revaluation of different subject positions can be seen here, at this intersection of public institutions and private capital? The women and men who taught at these schools were not really opposed to the idea, in itself, of working privately for other individuals. Neither did they seem particularly resistant to the private funds that were flowing into public schools. Rather, what appeared really troubling to them was the thought that a wealthy family might try to “employ” them; that is, that a family would assume it could control a teacher because it had money to pay, in effect, hiring the teacher as its

own private employee. In Soviet Russia, as one teacher put it, “a teacher was [treated] something like a tsar or lord . . . whereas now it is like *working for a family*. Even if the parents know nothing about the educational process, they will allow themselves to criticize it . . . at private schools teachers work under even closer parental control, because people who are paying money want successes, results” (emphasis added).

The idea that teachers were ever treated like tsars in the Soviet Union is rather a stretch (Jones 1991). Still, the respect and deference they had been granted as educators and as socializers of Soviet youth contrasted starkly—at least in the minds of some teachers themselves, and particularly in retrospect, in the nostalgic light that has been cast by post-Soviet processes of marketization—with the less-attractive notion of “working for a family,” being retained, as it were, as domestic labor. Liza, a young teacher in her twenties, developed this thought, explaining (by way of elaborating what it meant to her to be *intelligentnaia*) that:

I give knowledge and upbringing (*vospitanie*) to children. If I work as a governess (*gubernantka*) and give it to just one child—this is a different matter. That is called a servant (*prisluga*)! . . . I have the need to be useful to society (*potrebnost' byt' nuzhnoi obshchestvu*). That's why I didn't become a salesperson at a shop (*lavka*)—it's not a way to realize my possibilities.

In short, although many teachers were willing or at least financially compelled to offer their services to individuals for cash in certain contexts, in the classroom they were supposed to be doing something different. Their work there was understood to have a special kind of social justification and legitimacy.

That legitimacy they now felt to be in question, as circumstances mostly beyond their control were pushing them up against divergent scales of value, scales on which parents' money would be weighed against the other potential but threatened bases of cultural authority. For teachers, it was the suggestion that wealthy parents might be able, with their cash, to dictate coercively the terms of the exchange—what their money would buy, where, and when—that was most upsetting because it seemed to put teachers in a position of greatly weakened institutional authority, able to do little to challenge the power of other people's money. The immediate setting of the school was an important stage for these dramatizations of value: Here, the presumptuousness of the rich dealt a penetrating blow to teachers' sense of the worth of their hard-earned professional knowledge and qualifications, at least as conferred by their official positions if not also by a more universal kind of value they believed to inhere in education and in kul'tura.

This version of events is, of course, framed exclusively by the perspectives of teachers; others I encountered complained about the money that was continually demanded by public schools for tutoring, exam preparation, additional after-school English courses, unofficial school entrance fees, “voluntary” contributions for special events and class presents to teachers, and so on. I heard teachers acknowledge the need for “sponsors” (*sponsory*), that is, wealthy parents who contributed money to supply the schools with new furniture, building renovations, or teaching materials not covered by state funds. (Often, these were unofficial payments that secured places for donors' children at the schools. Most teachers were less directly involved in the collection of such fees by school administrators, higher-ups who functioned at some remove from the rank and file.) Meanwhile, many, especially English teachers whose linguistic expertise was in great demand, worked as hourly tutors in the evenings and on weekends, receiving pupils at home or paying house calls. Although they were chronically overworked, being able to take extra students and to set their schedule and fees as they liked provided a welcome opportunity and an important source of supplemental income.<sup>18</sup>

In other words, teachers themselves were involved to varying degrees in certain forms of private enterprise and money transactions even within the domain of the school; what is striking is their own accountings of their constrained power to determine the terms on which they and their services would be consumed. Legitimized authority and professional integrity, on one hand, and cash resources, on the other, could be variably understood either as mutually exclusive and competing value forms (a wealthy person was likely to be unpleasant) or as mutually reinforcing ones (good pay begetting good quality of service and vice versa). The question of how these two forms corresponded (and in whose favor), then, was just what teachers (and parents) were struggling to define.

### The state of Russian civilization: Globalized consumerism as a parallel scale of value and desire

Turning to the more explicitly cross-cultural scale of value represented by standards of civilization, I do not mean to say that teachers represented a conservative old guard that was resolutely, naively defending kul'tura and the institutions of a bygone era from seemingly inevitable forces of commoditization. To assume so would be to obscure many of their motivations and hopes for the future, because the teachers and their families were mostly in favor of the most emblematic changes of the past decade. They wanted to improve their homes, wardrobes, and diets, and they more or less accepted the idea that building a Western-modeled market economy was the only

conceivable path toward such progress, for themselves and for the nation as a whole. Such attitudes must significantly complicate an understanding of the resentfully anti-commercial sentiment teachers appeared to espouse from their positions as neglected and cultured representatives of public institutions.

As I have noted, not only was Russia a center of industrial modernization within the Soviet Union but Soviet mass media also proclaimed the Union to be a world leader in terms of its technological and consumer sophistication and the citizenry's comfort and prosperity. These claims were not entirely persuasive to the population (Humphrey 1995; Lapidus 1983; Verdery 1991).<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, the deluge of attractive and previously unfamiliar commodities that flowed into Russia from the United States, Europe, and throughout the world in the early 1990s proved to be unnerving and even insulting (*obidno*) as people struggled to "catch up" on developments they had missed ("We didn't know there could be a bathroom like that!" as one woman recalled). In all kinds of contexts, the teachers, their families, and other acquaintances told me—sometimes with a smile or laugh—that Russia was

"behind" the United States and Western Europe (Figures 2 and 3).<sup>20</sup>

Often the situations that prompted these comments were not ones I could anticipate, as these examples from the field illustrate.

A friend asked me what I thought of Mary Kay cosmetics. They had appeared in St. Petersburg and she wondered whether they were popular in the United States. I told her that I thought that they had been more popular a decade or so ago. "Of course," Olga replied. "We are ten years behind in everything."

"Here everything is simpler" [*u nas vse po-proshche*], a woman told me when I likened her plant, which I did not recognize by appearance or name, to wheat grass I had seen in the United States. Hers, it turned out, was oat grass; wheat grass, she explained, "is a more expensive [plant] culture," and, thus, she deemed my familiarity with it a reflection of U.S. sophistication.

Responding to a question about "civilization breaking out all over the world" (the question posed by her



**Figure 2.** Generic, Soviet-style storefronts (such as the one that announces this shop simply as a "Bakery" to passers-by) persist in the postsocialist era. Photo by J. Patico.



**Figure 3.** Soviet-style establishments coexist now with local and international franchises such as this café, one of several popular chains in St. Petersburg, 2003. Photo by J. Patico.

teachers really referred to civilization's "breaking up," but she misunderstood the idiom), a serious and collected high school girl taking an oral English exam asserted that civilization comprised technology and "polite relations among people," including the ability to make contracts and to depend on others. The girl judged that civilization was not flourishing in Russia, in which, although it was trying to emulate the West, such "polite relations" were not prevalent as yet.

On a national television talk show, a bachelor who liked to spend all of his time traveling to exotic places around the world discussed the difficulty of finding a wife willing to share this unconventional lifestyle. His next planned journey would take him to see how a Stone Age tribe in Africa lives. Russian girls are used to civilization and are not interested in that kind of life, the young man regretted. In response, the host of the show proclaimed that "if you want to see the Stone Age, you can stay here!"

In short, in more sober conversations as well as jokes, people portrayed Russia as less civilized and sophisticated—in its

technology and material culture as well as in its social relations—than Europe (esp. the western and northern countries) and the United States. Humorous, ambiguously disparaging evaluations of Russian development took part in a kind of "cultural intimacy": "the recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality" (Herzfeld 1996:3). They were often tinged with notes of irony, poking fun at "Western" as well as Russian life, at times pointedly. Some evaluations acknowledged downsides to civilization (my neighbor took my lack of ingenuity with electrical wiring as an example: "Civilization has spoiled you") and, conversely, some found worth in the skills and hardiness that come from living under more adverse conditions.

More importantly, these commentaries were premised on the notion that a well-developed material culture was integral to, and an indicator of, any normal or standard, civilized society. Likewise, *kul'turnost'* was linked with a well-groomed, dignified, and appropriate material presentation of self: a kind of "self-civilization" (Dunham 1976)

that paralleled Russian civilization writ large, even as it critiqued the excesses of the nouveaux riches brought into being by the post-Soviet market economy. By these lights, the national self-denigration and “self-peripheralization” (Liechty 1995:186) implied in such comments, and the positive value attached to lifestyles perceived as Western, should be taken seriously (if not quite at face value) as indicators of how many people were construing differences and inequalities on a global scale.<sup>21</sup>

As in the New Year’s Mercedes debate, these charged comparisons were sometimes articulated with special clarity at ritual moments of communal stocktaking. In a birthday toast to me, one teacher, Larisa, said that perhaps at some time in the future the situation in Russia would be better than it was now so that I would want to come back not to work but *prosto tak*, just to visit. Another guest, a teacher’s husband and a former naval officer who had sailed around the world, commented that conditions were not so bad in Russia; in other places life was much worse. “Where?” Larisa asked challengingly. Africa, he argued, China. Larisa looked at him, nodded, smiled, and said, to the amusement of the other guests: “Yes, if we were only blacker, it would be just like Africa here!” The joke presented a pointed critique of the current state of things in Russia. No concrete parallels were drawn between people’s lives in the two locales, but the point was clear: Living conditions were so poor in St. Petersburg that they could be compared to those of blacks in Africa, who stood for the most primitive lifestyle of all. On another day, the same naval officer compared my modest kitchen favorably to rooms in which he had seen entire families living in Africa; hearing this, a companion declared, “Compared to Africa, we feel good about how we live!”<sup>22</sup>

Thus, as they evaluated the conditions of their own lives and events in Russia, more generally, Russians used regional and national shorthands (“Russia” vs. “Europe” or “Africa”) to measure and compare standards of technological advancement, economic development, and polite relations, conceived as interrelated aspects of cultural and civilizational advancement. (Nevertheless, that some remarks were humorous drew attention to the distance in culture and sophistication normally assumed to exist between the two environments and their inhabitants—a difference represented here through the imagery of race.)<sup>23</sup> In a similar manner, the less-than-satisfactory material world of St. Petersburg was vividly described through the language of “exotica.”<sup>24</sup>

Conversations about exotica were especially active during the financial crisis of 1998 and its aftermath and had somewhat subsided in 2003, during a period of relative economic recovery. In the late nineties, in a variety of analogous contexts, the term *exotica* (*ekzotika*) was offered up, always with a wry smile or laugh, but also, seemingly, as part of an actual apology to me about an environment

with which the speaker thought I—my Americanness foregrounded—would be uncomfortable. A makeshift door handle, crafted from a stick; a broken-down, messy house (the hostess invited me to visit even though it was not in very presentable shape—I could visit it as exotica); a traditional-style oven at the family dacha—all of these were placed in the category of “Russian exotica.” The first time I met teacher Maria, she asked me why I had chosen to come to Russia. “For something different, wild?”

Exotica modeled a relationship of inferiority and difference configured in time as well as space: It comprised artifacts and lifeways understood (or hoped) to be on their way into the past.<sup>25</sup> Against the backdrop of Russia’s and the Soviet Union’s historical civilizing projects, it reinforced a familiar model of linear development that evaluated peoples and places by relating them to one another in a hierarchical way. (It also, tongue-in-cheek, placed Russia somewhere much lower on the civilizational scale than speakers would be likely to locate it in full seriousness or than they would have been likely to locate it just a few years ago in the last days of the Cold War.) To a certain extent, people distanced themselves from exotica by joking about it, effectively declaring that they were not worthy of their degraded material position in the world or perhaps simply pointing out that they were personally savvy enough to have an idea about what they were missing. The jokes both dramatized and leavened situations of financial hardship and the humiliation they entailed.

Such ambivalence was mediated, furthermore, in teachers’ more concrete consumer judgments. One often heard that expensive “Western” goods (from the United States, western Europe, Italy, and Scandinavia) were high in quality (clothes and electronics were especially desirable). A pointed example of this sensibility is people’s reference to the “Eurostandard” as a way of distinguishing among the many goods from around the world that are readily available in shops and marketplaces. When they cited this standard, they situated below European goods both Russian goods (many of which were apparently held in higher regard before the opening of the market “enlightened” everyone) and the products of Asia and areas marginal to Europe: Turkey as well as Korea and China. They also suggested that the “European” was not merely a fashion, preference, or cachet but, rather, a standard of quality, sophistication, and propriety.<sup>26</sup> Young, fashion-conscious women tried to eschew garments from Turkey, Korea, and China—even if an inspection at first glance suggested to the eye that a particular item was actually attractive and durable. Anya fretted as we walked to a shop where she was comparing the fit of several different leather skirts, comparable in price but some from Germany and others from India and other points east. “If the price is the same,” she reasoned, “why would I want to buy some Indian trash (*drian*)?” (Patiko 2001b). (In the end, Anya, in

fact, purchased the Indian one as its cut and fit were the most appropriate for her—but not without some worry and extra consultations with salespeople.)

Yet, at the same time, a perceived risk was attached to buying some imports—primarily imported foods—because, as teacher Kseniia said, “Europe throws [its unwanted, shoddy, or stale] goods out here, as to the Third World.” Kseniia’s phrasing is telling because in the common parlance of the Soviet era, it was the state that “threw out” goods to the shops for people to buy. “‘They’ threw out (*vybrosili*) or chucked out (*vykydivali*) goods to people in stores. This was recognition that shops and markets were lower-priority parts of the same system as the specially distributed packages of luxuries to officials and the nameless, closely curtained buildings that contained foreign-currency stores” (Humphrey 1995:47). The idea that commodities from around the world could make sense, on some level, in terms of their allocation to the Russian poor brings into sharper focus the particular kinds of connection people were making between populations’ worth and the material conditions in which they lived: For, seemingly, a new seat of authority had assigned and released these goods to Russians, thereby assessing their places in a hierarchy of merit and priorities. Indeed, the analogy suggested that capitalism had introduced new “them” from the wealthy “West”: agents vaguely imagined but more locatable than any “invisible hand,” higher-ups who “allocated” to those down below.

Ultimately, then, the denigration of local conditions did not translate directly into a desire for goods from civilized places so much as it pointed to a set of more dynamic relations of power and correspondences of value being negotiated (cf. Berdahl 1999; Caldwell 2002).<sup>27</sup> Accordingly, people had developed a pragmatic sense of what the new pitfalls to the consumer might be and of how to predict potential problems and make meaningful links among observed cases to avoid future missteps.<sup>28</sup> One needed to watch out for particular markers, such as nation and factory of origin, unfamiliar new labels, or faked expiration dates—on any food products, but especially imports.<sup>29</sup> Regardless of whether any or all of the particular suspicions of deception and judgments of low quality were legitimate (and at least some seem to have been), the more important point is that such careful consumer discernments also tended to produce knowledge about the relative positionings of individuals, populations, and lifestyles along a civilizational scale of value and power.<sup>30</sup>

As in the school conflicts, then, shifting measures of value and authority were being interrogated as unsettling questions were raised about why an ostensibly deserving public was not receiving its legitimate rewards. Talk about civilization and exotica reproduced a particular sense of place and subjectivity: one that, like ideas of forsaken culturedness, expressed the shocks of marketization but that

also was tempered by a more explicit degree of support for the progress—however slow and uneven—such transformations were understood to represent.

### Tropes of value, visions of the good life, and the politics of social difference

Maria, a woman who was fairly pessimistic and bitter about the post-Soviet state of affairs in Russia, noted that she was in favor of the market—she professed to harbor little nostalgia for the old centralized socialist economy—but would prefer a “civilized” capitalism to the “wild” one Russia had now. Jumping straight ahead to the civilized version would be nice, Maria concluded.

Her contrast of the civilized with the wild was meant, I think, to evoke the contrasts of poverty, criminality, and striking new wealth and the general impressions of chaos that have so disrupted Russians’ senses of order and continuity in the past decade. As the teachers’ bitterness about “employment,” as discussed above, makes clear, part of what makes the post-Soviet economy feel so wild to people is the discomfiting way in which bases of authority are unnervingly vulnerable and terms of exchange can become startlingly fluid. This indeterminacy has to do with contested forms of value and struggles over their interrelation in both immediate, social and much grander, “civilizational” terms. At certain junctures, such as the uncomfortable confrontation of a teacher with a demanding and wealthy parent or the purchase of an expired imported commodity, tangible conflicts were instantiated between actors differently situated vis-à-vis nation, state, and market to define the worth of different kinds of activities and people—to determine, indeed, on what basis their needs and priorities were to be weighed against one another in a postcommunist milieu. But the fluidity of these scales of value was also the stuff of ongoing conversations in all kinds of contexts, from skirt shopping to classroom instruction to birthday toasts.

To return now to the story with which I opened: The debate’s outcome that night did not mean that the question was really closed. Rather, the teachers were engaging in a deliberation about social difference (measured in terms of professional activities and visibly divergent consumer styles) and its relation to dignity and social worth, on the one hand, and material prosperity, on the other hand. On that evening, worthy, cultured individuals were hoped—if not expected—to be the proper beneficiaries of higher standards of living, such that one merry holiday party conversation decided that Mercedes were really undesirable, by virtue of their association with the troubling people who currently owned them. By the same logic, however, another conversation might well vociferously criticize the conditions (such as a general lack of culture in society) that keep worthy subjects from

claiming their Mercedes and other signs of value. Doubt might also be cast on the worth of Mercedes-less subjects.

When I returned to St. Petersburg in the summer of 2003, I found more reason to wonder whether the interpretations might, with time, be leaning ever further in the latter direction, as teachers and other acquaintances had diminished their suspicious critiques of New Russians—even the category itself, people agreed, was no longer widely used to describe the wealthy—and as some of them acknowledged in newly accepting tones that the image of the business person, the *kommersant*, could evoke positive personal qualities such as hard work, intellect, and forward-looking planning. If Soviet kul'turnost' legitimated social inequalities in a particular way, so new idealizations of personal success and national progress will recast the contributions and entitlements of teachers and their similarly positioned peers, perhaps increasingly normalizing their relative poverty in both their own and others' eyes. And if teachers are gaining some conviction that the Russian market is not necessarily at odds with useful work, professionalism, and other measures of transcendent value and humanity, they may also find qualities such as culturedness to be less and less persuasive proofs of their own entitlement—although no new language may be immediately forthcoming, or so emotionally resonant, through which this disenfranchised version of a middle class might talk about forces of structural inequality. In this sense, they may find themselves “backing in,” to borrow Lila Abu-Lughod's (1990) phrasing, to new moral contracts and systems of power that come to seem more natural, less shocking, and less contestable.

On that festive night, however, the colleagues were shoring up their moral claims at a moment in which so many material aspirations seemed firmly out of reach. Yet to read even these earlier struggles in terms of a local moral resistance to capitalist modernity would be deceptively simple. For what emerges on examination of the tropes of culture and civilization is the pressing sense that a person must pursue both material respectability (if not great monetary wealth) and the kind of knowledge, virtue, and dignity money cannot buy. Neither was really satisfying or persuasive without the other—which is exactly what the parallel ideals of kul'turnost' and civilization are all about. The bitter losses of culture and the conflicted aspirations for consumer progress that are juxtaposed in these Russian commentaries push scholars, then, to be more attentive to how seemingly divergent scales of value, merit, and justice coexist—uncomfortably yet determinedly, and often in close tension with one another—in market and marketizing societies and to mine the kinds of value narratives recounted here for insights into speakers' positioned experiences of socioeconomic transformation as well as their ongoing engagement with those processes.

In the case at hand, although the judgments and desires described above sometimes appear irreconcilably ambivalent, conjoining potentially conflicting visions of national and class pasts, presents, and futures, they also can help make more tangible sense of just how and why teachers and other similarly positioned citizens may be, simultaneously, deeply resentful and utterly supportive of global capitalist “progress.” For, on closer consideration, their visions are not inherently contradictory. Rather, for cultured public employees in contemporary St. Petersburg, jumping “ahead” to a more civilized capitalism really would mean finding a society in which some of the standards and securities institutionalized in the Soviet past could be more confidently reconciled with the good life purveyed by the globalized marketplace. And is this wish in itself unique? Although the intensity and forms of such deliberation are specific to the historical moment under discussion here, at a basic level, the Russian teachers' unfulfilled desires to be both adequately civilized and cultured, both Mercedes owners and happy, both free and provided for, undoubtedly resonate with the aspirations and worries of a great many subjects around the world(s)—Third, Second, and First.

## Notes

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1. No. 25 is not the real number of the school. All personal names have been changed in this article.

2. That the term chosen here was not the common adjective *schastlivyi* (contented, fortunate) but the verb *radovat'sia* (to be glad, rejoice) is worth noting.

3. Although this study is biased toward the opinions and sentiments of women, I did not observe clear differences in how men and women I knew discussed the primary issues at hand. For more direct discussion of gendered consumer practices, see Patico 2001a:ch. 4, n.d.:ch. 5.

4. In the late 1990s, the very categories of class and status according to which my informants interpreted their own social positions were rather uncertain and contested, particularly in the context of the *krizis* that rendered making ends meet significantly more difficult for most of them than it had been during the preceding months. Despite the financial problems this implied, some teachers described themselves as “middle class” or as part of the “middle layer” of Russian society; others call themselves “poor.” Defining and delineating such classifications in objective terms is extremely difficult (what should be the key criterion: profession? salary? style of consumption? or as some preferred, the same standard of living believed to characterize the middle class in “the West?”). I am sympathetic to the view that, particularly in such a situation of flux, a more productive approach to class may be “as a cultural project or practice—rather than a social category or empirical condition—[through which one may] see how the local and the global are brought together in cultural process, not cultural outcome” (Liechty 2003:20–21). In any case, assumptions about what middle-class identity might entail in Russia varied widely at the time, even among sociologists and journalists (Balzer 1998:167, 171; Patico 2001a; Simpura et al. 1999:56).

5. Katherine Verdery’s description of the “transition” as expressed in Romania’s shifting property rights system suits here; in this view, transition is “a process in which *new constellations of possibility and constraint work on notions of value, both inherited and emergent*, to produce [e.g.] postsocialist property regimes only messily related to their Western blueprint” (1999:76; emphasis added). As anthropologists have hastened to point out during the last decade, the so-called transition to capitalism is not a simple, predictable, or unilinear process of Westernization or a derivative process whereby Russia is likely to “catch up” and become “capitalist” in the same way as the United States, Germany, or even the Czech Republic (Burawoy and Verdery 1999; Humphrey 2002; Humphrey and Mandl 2002; Verdery 1996).

6. Educational opportunity policies of the 1920s created new channels for social advancement and accrual of privileges along with an expanded administrative hierarchy of technocrats, party officials, state-sponsored writers, and others recruited from worker families (Kelly and Volkov 1998). Increasingly, differential incomes and allotments of consumer privileges provided incentives to bureaucrats, engineers, and other professionals as well as students. As Sheila Fitzpatrick observes, Stalin referred to the entire elite, including communist officials, as the “intelligentsia”; “thus, the Soviet ‘intelligentsia’ (in Stalin’s broad definition) was privileged not because it was a ruling class or an elite status group, but because it was [misrecognized as] the most cultured, advanced group in a backward society” (1999:105). *Meshchantsvo* had been a primary target of the communist revolution; the term approximated “petite bourgeoisie” but also referred to a “social type” that devoted excessive attention to material perks and social climbing at the expense of intellectual interests and spiritual qualities. Historians’ views vary somewhat as to how those negative traits came to be reframed and rehabilitated and to what ends (or to whose greatest benefit); as Dunham’s notable account has it, the Stalin regime began to form a partnership with an emergent, meshchantsvo-like middle class, “public in employment but private and inner-directed in its strivings” (1976:20; cf. Fitzpatrick 1992).

7. In a seminal discussion drawing on the work of East European theorists of socialism, Verdery has analyzed this “allocative authority” as fundamental to the logic of state power under socialism, although

maximizing allocative power does not necessarily mean maximizing the *resources available for allocation* ... socialism’s central imperative is to increase the bureaucracy’s *capacity* to allocate, and this is not necessarily the same as increasing the amounts to be allocated. The capacity to allocate is buttressed by its obverse, which is the destruction of resources *outside* the apparatus. [1991:421]

In other words, the system was not oriented toward profit generation and satisfaction of demand but, rather, toward the goal of state monopolization of resources.

8. As a popular Stalinist phrase put it, *Zhizn’ stala veselee*—life had become happier or more cheerful.

9. Under Nikita Krushchev in the 1950s and early 1960s, new efforts to shape material culture in accordance with functionalist, socialist ideals were made; but perceived threats to stability, including poor availability of consumer goods and dissatisfied bureaucrats, led the party under Brezhnev to increase material incentives once again, to allow elites quasi-legal perks, and to turn a blind eye to illegal or semilegal petty trade and other informal economic activity (Buchli 1999:137–147; Millar 1990).

10. These virtues underlie, for example, the *Moral Codex of the Builder of Communism* (Sharov 1965). Writings on ethics and etiquette, although not particularly consumerist in outlook, reconciled substantial attention to one’s own appearance with communal interests through emphasis on the importance of good grooming as a sign of one’s respect for others (Dubrovina 1989; Sagatovskii 1982). Limits were set: One Soviet commentator on ethics described “spiritual needs” (*dukhovnoe potreblenie*) in terms of the interest in and respect for knowledge, art, nature, one’s own and others’ labor, and other people in general; these proper orientations were said to be absent in the superficial and selfish “slave of things” (*rab veshchei*) who pursued material possessions with slavish devotion and judged others on the same basis (Sagatovskii 1982; see also Kelly 2001).

11. For the most comprehensive account of these practices, see Ledeneva 1998; see also Grossman 1977; Millar 1981, 1990.

12. Amy Ninetto (2001) describes how similar understandings of civilization and technological progress shaped scientists’ attitudes toward their work and Russian national identity in late 1990s Akademgorodok.

13. On the fetishization of U.S. currency in Russia in the earlier 1990s, see Lemon 1998.

14. See Alapuro 1998 for a related analysis of teachers’ social networks.

15. To elaborate: Among the two dozen or so teachers I got to know, some were married and others were not; most were women; and most, except a few younger women in their twenties, had either one or two children to support. Some teachers earned extra money as private tutors, generating income that was often significantly larger than their school salaries. Others were less successful in attracting students or taught in fields where tutors were less frequently sought.

16. Nancy Ries (1997) has described similar discourses common during perestroika that indicted the wealthy and defended the ever suffering *narod* (people) as constituting an everyday oral genre of litany through which people responded critically to (while not effectively challenging) the political chaos of the Soviet Union’s collapse and the discomfort of economic “shock therapy.” Ries and others have highlighted the long-term continuity of a Russian moral narrative about the dangers of money and the righteousness of poverty and suffering: popular ideology that incorporates both official Soviet platforms and pre-Soviet

(including Orthodox Christian) ideas about collectivism and social justice (Humphrey 1995; Pesmen 2000; Ries 1997). Indeed, this ideology is described as central to the imagination of Russianness and the mythologized “Russian soul.” Echoes of such litany resonated in the St. Petersburg teachers’ reflections about Russian life at the end of the 1990s, although such rhetoric certainly had become less pervasive and plaintive than that Ries recorded in perestroika-era Moscow and was receding yet further among teachers and others by the time I returned to visit St. Petersburg in 2003, as I discuss here. In any case, such heroicization of poverty configures understandings of moral and material value in a specific and powerful way; yet its rhetorical intensity can eclipse other configurations being hammered out simultaneously. Indeed, less attention has been paid directly to the more ambivalent and conflicted ways in which the material and the moral have been entangled inextricably rather than opposed in Russian practice, discourse, and desires—even as they may, at times, be pitted strategically against one another as opposite or mutually exclusive ends (a Mercedes or true happiness).

17. The stereotypical New Russian is male; despite the existence of some wealthy businesswomen, the more frequent topics of discussion among teachers and others were the “wives and girlfriends” of New Russians who did not hold jobs and were seen as lazy, socially isolated, and superficial (Patico n.d.:ch. 5).

18. Indeed, some were able to draw relatively large numbers of students thanks to their good reputations or to referrals from other students or teachers, and they could charge hourly rates as high as \$10 (as of 1999). The significance of these lessons as a source of income is clear when one considers that teachers’ official monthly salaries were usually in the area of 1,000 rubles, or about \$167 before the 1998 financial crisis and about \$42 by spring 1999. Successful tutors could earn much more in this capacity than they did in their official jobs as teachers; for example, one woman, a single mother of two, reported receiving about 800 rubles per month from the school and 2,000 rubles in a good month from private tutoring. Still, school positions remained important because they provided stability and a pool of potential private pupils.

19. Gail Lapidus (1983) observes that the 1970s saw increasing pessimism and declining civic morale on the part of Soviet citizens, a trend she attributes in part to consumer frustration. I should note that although shortages of all kinds of goods were chronic and obtaining goods from abroad was particularly challenging, some imported commodities were available through official Soviet channels. Many of these were from Eastern and Central European countries, although Western European goods were not unheard of.

The variety, quality, and sheer quantity of Western goods seen and described [through travel, hearsay, or mass media] established new standards for evaluating Soviet products and services, and invited increasingly negative evaluations of Soviet economic performance. Even comparisons within an Eastern Europe more accessible and less ideologically suspect to the average Soviet citizen had subversive implications. [Lapidus 1983:237]

20. St. Petersburg holds a special position as the more “European” of Russia’s two biggest metropolises, both by design (as part of the Peter the Great’s Westernizing mission) and by today’s continuing popular opinion (Bassin 1999; Clark 1995). Of course, as one teacher phrased the widely shared sentiment when she considered whether her U.S. Internet suitor would enjoy a trip to

her city, St. Petersburg “may not be as European as some places” [mozhet byt’ eto ne takaia Evropa].

21. For a recent and extensive analysis of the attitudes of Russian youth toward the West, see Pilkington et al. 2002.

22. This kind of reaction seems to be widespread and requires more investigation. For example, Gerald Creed reports the words of a Bulgarian villager who had just returned from his first trip to Western Europe in 1995: “How can we ever be part of Europe . . . We are so far behind. We are just aborigines here” (1998:275). On related discourses of the “normal” and material culture in post-socialist Hungary, see Fehervary 2002.

23. The question of how racial categories are linked with standards of living in these Russian narratives is a fascinating one that I have little space to discuss here. For a more extensive account of discourses of race, ethnicity, and culture in Russia, see Alaina Lemon’s (2000) analysis of Roma identity and performance; on Russian representations of Africa and blackness, see Blakely 1986; and on the use of terms of *whiteness*, *blackness*, and *negry* to describe standards of living, see Patico 2001a.

24. “Exotica” is a sort of reverse side to the discourse of the “normal” as discussed in Fehervary 2002 and Rausing 2002.

25. I thank Elena Zdravomyslova (personal communication 1999) for highlighting this.

26. This is particularly clear in discussions of clothing, which fairly unequivocally posit Western European items as high quality and stylish, whereas Turkish, Korean, and Chinese garments—sold mostly in *rynki* (outdoor markets) and *iarmarki* (indoor bazaars) as opposed to the more posh shops—are assumed more likely to be shoddily made. Although observed material virtues or flaws in these items as well as the contexts in which they are sold (and the people who visibly sell them: e.g., shuttle traders from China or Central Asia in *rynki* vs. the young, Russian women of fancy clothing shops) play important roles in these evaluations, the long-standing symbolic weight of the categories “Europe” and “Asia” (Bassin 1999) also seem to inform these assessments.

27. Thus, for example, when describing a preference for Russian-produced foods, most people did not express a sentimental or politicized preference for the domestic but, rather, cited the advantages of relatively local produce, milk from the nearby Petmol plant, and chocolate from the Krupskaia factory of St. Petersburg. Produce from nearby cooperative farms might have more spots and bruises than the shiny, flawless fruits from abroad, but it had more taste and was assumed to be fresher. One did not know exactly when and how an imported, packaged cake had been made, but local bakery stands carried breads and sweets that one knew (or assumed) had been baked close by within the past few days. Domestically manufactured goods, especially cheap items specially transported to St. Petersburg from distant cities, could fall under suspicion or derision for similar reasons.

28. Some information was available to local consumers in the mass media (print, television, and radio), although many buyers depended more on hearsay. Newspapers and women’s magazines published comparisons of commonly used products such as mayonnaise and vegetable oil and guidelines for identifying fresh, safe products. *Domashnii Ochag*, the Russian version of *Good Housekeeping*, featured information about home appliances such as washing machines (October 1998) and kitchen tools (November 1998). Both free advertisement circulars and, from time to time, other newspapers and periodicals (such as *Peterburg-Ekspress*) reported on comparative prices for staple items at the city’s *rynki*.

29. Regarding expiration dates, one male music teacher, for example, noted that when the imports had started pouring in to

Russia, “the West” had sent its expired goods that had not been eaten at home. Although a shopper could, of course, examine the expiration date to avoid problems, false expiration labels, notoriously, were pasted over earlier, authentic ones. In my experience, such indictments generally veered away from any discussion of the state regulations and monitoring standards that were apparently ineffective in ensuring reasonable food quality and safety. Also, although people were aware that agencies that heard consumer complaints existed in St. Petersburg, no one I asked about them thought these agencies would be effective enough to make the bureaucratic trouble of appealing to them worth one’s while. For a more extended discussion of consumer practice (decision-making strategies, prices, types of outlets favored, etc.) see Patico 2001a:ch. 5, n.d.:chs. 2, 4.

30. Ries (2002) provides apocryphal evidence of the actual falsification of expiration dates in urban Russia.

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