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ANTHROPOLOGICAL FIELDWORK AND “HAVING AN IDEOLOGY”

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In European anthropological circles there was a burst of interest in the topic of ideology in the 1970s in the wake of the riots of May 1968 in Paris and consequent intense interpretative conflict about theory among French intellectuals. The ideas then discussed in the wider context of the Cold War still have pertinence to the present day when ideology seems to clothe, if not inspire, armed confrontations and authoritarian forms of government. This article reviews the intellectual formation then current among Western anthropologists, points to its deficiencies, and notes that even though the issues then debated about ideology still have some interest they were proper to their time. Since then, not only has anthropology moved on, but the world and the very purchase of “political ideology” has fundamentally changed. In this light I re-visited my fieldnotes from research in Siberia in the 1990s and 2000s and I attempt with hindsight to reflect on my ethnographic experience and its relevance for today. Finally, I introduce some remarks about the relevance of all this to the contemporary situation in Russia.

KEYWORDS: ideology, USSR, Cold War, Siberia, Buryatia, Russia

With nationalist and authoritarian ideologies rising around us, it is still useful to return to the ways in which ideology was debated in the past. In European anthropological circles there was a burst of interest in the topic in the 1970s in the wake of the riots of May 1968 in Paris and consequent intense interpretative conflict about theory among French intellectuals. This may seem a long time ago, but the ideas then discussed in the wider context of the Cold War still have pertinence to the present day when ideology seems to clothe, if not inspire, armed confrontations and authoritarian forms of government. In that same distant period, when I was fortunate to

have been able to conduct fieldwork in collective farms in Siberia, I not only encountered from outside but also was to some extent enveloped by Soviet ideology and I tried to find some way to write about it (1983, 6-9, 230-231, 240-241, 359-363). However, I did not specifically address the question of my own engagement with anthropological theory and the way in which it influenced my approach to explaining the social effects of dominant ideology. This article reviews the intellectual formation then current among Western anthropologists, points to its deficiencies, and notes that even though the issues then debated about ideology still have some interest they were proper to their time. Since then, not only has anthropology moved on, but the world and the very purchase of “political ideology” has fundamentally changed. In this light I re-visited my fieldnotes and here I attempt with hindsight to reflect on my ethnographic experience and its relevance for today.

A central issue in the 1970s was the question of how the term “ideology” should be understood. In France, Louis Althusser had shaken the foundations of Marxist class-based certitudes by arguing that ideology is all pervasive and present throughout history: our values, desires and preferences are always inculcated by ideological practice and institutions (Althusser 1976). This break with the old Marxist position, “ideology as false consciousness inculcated by a ruling class”, lay behind the two main versions of ideology that prevailed among anthropologists (if they thought about ideology at all). One, which I identify with Maurice Bloch, who was British educated yet also steeped in French thought, used the term to refer to an integrated totality of social classifications and meanings that made communication possible and structured a prevailing social order (Bloch 1977). Alternatively, “ideology” referred to an explicit doctrine held by a politically dominant group to justify and mystify their own interests at the expense of others’, which was the position held by many British sociologists and anthropologists. The latter position, which separates ideology from the entirety of everyday assumptions, even if it attempts to suffuse them, makes it possible to describe some, but not all, societies at some periods as “having an ideology”. It sets up ideology as an object of potential resistance within the society and as an element in dynamically interactive political change. By the same token, ideology is conceptualised in such a way as to become a target of critique by scholars.

Although there were several attempts to bridge or combine the two viewpoints, notably by Edmund Leach and Maurice Godelier, they did not fully address the question of the relation between the understanding of ideology adopted and the positionality of the anthropological fieldworker. In the first (“Blochian”) case, when “ideology” equates almost to “culture”, an external anthropologist would have to be acknowledged as a member of a different ideological/cultural formation from that of the society studied. But that admission gave no grounds for political critique, only for description and analysis based on recognition of the difference of ideas and

values. The insoluble problem with this position, as pointed out by Asad (1979) in his discussion of Bloch, is that the implied ideological relativity provides no external criteria by which either to explain change or to justify critique. How is ideology ever shaken off if it is seen as powerfully all-embracing and self-reproducing? My own view is that if we are addressing states like the USSR or the USA in the 1950s-70s it makes sense to use the term ideology in the partial “having an ideology” sense that identifies a dominating discourse, its holders, its conditions of existence, and its limitations.

It could be argued that in those years a binary ideological divide was sharper and played a clearer role in the opposition between “the West” and Russia than is the case today, despite confrontation over the war in Ukraine. Ideological positions are no longer such clear binaries when the world scenario involves new and complex geopolitical alignments, the rise of China, and global concerns about climate change, environments, and access to resources.¹ But the Soviet Union when I did research there in the 1960s and 70s certainly “had” ideology in the sense just mentioned. Of course, as another colleague, Inna Leykin, has helpfully observed to me, the Soviet Union attempted to be ideological in the Althusserian-Blochian sense. The Party hoped to make the ideology so pervasive that it would provide Soviet people with a totalising cognitive map through which they could experience and understand the world around them. In many ways, it succeeded. However, as pointed out later in this article, the saturation could never be total. If that was the case with Soviet ideology in the 1950s-70s, the limitations of the reach of Putin era ideology are even more evident today.

However, as an anthropologist I did not come approach fieldwork in the USSR as an advocate or a theorist, Marxist or otherwise. This was the period of the Cold War, but despite that I was not equipped with an armature of Euro-American type “universal” human values or Marxist “laws” of objective rationality with which to prove a thesis or reveal oppression. I was an anthropologist one could say in Blochian mode. Indeed, Maurice Bloch had been one of my teachers at university. The impasse outlined above is the subject of this article. How does an anthropologist educated to think in terms of the *inter-relatedness* and mutual subject-constituting

1 I am much indebted to Dominic Martin for his comment on this point, which I have summarised as follows. The ideological separation/distinction between the so-called West and Russia today is less clearly defined and perhaps less intuitively experienced and appreciated by those who inhabit those ideological and geographic blocs. Today, authoritarian nationalism, alt-right attitudes, vague liberalism and sexual politics jostle with one another across the divide. Furthermore, global issues such as the effects of neoliberal capitalism, the so-called datasphere, and the emerging Anthropocene supply a ubiquitous background canvas that arguably has more purchase than any mere “political” ideology on either side.

processes of language, concepts, subjectivity, social institutions, economy, politics, ritual, and everyday activity deal with the existence of a self-segregated ideology – one that sees itself as a separate advanced vanguard acting upon the rest of “society” (defined as something other than itself, requiring improvement) and on no account as acted upon by that same imperfect society? And the million-dollar question in my case was: what are the implications when the studied people are seen to “have an ideology”? This is what I grappled with at a time when the Soviet ideology was generally perceived as alien and threatening, while my own intellectual formation was self-constructed (in an illusory way) as non-ideological in that sense, or at least as being academic and therefore free from the passions and convictions that lurked in other parts of my own society.

These questions debated in the 1970s still have pertinence for anthropologists today. Discussions around contemporary ideological dividing lines, such as the war in Ukraine or the conflict in Palestine and others around the world, have only sharpened previously emerged divisions about research agendas. A great variety of approaches are now argued for, from plain description, measurement and refraining from “speaking for” the other, to self-reflection, advocacy, participation in protest, publicising of injustice, calls to action, and the inclusion of the “non-human” in the field of the political. Amidst all of this, many university departments nevertheless attempt to maintain the position of their own freedom from ideology.² One basic teaching imparted to students of anthropology has been that to achieve scholarliness it is necessary at the very least to convey sources accurately, withhold judgement, and banish the use of tendentious language. This raises the question of whether the non-committal stance is ethical in extreme circumstances of war and violence. And is withholding judgement even possible? The choice to research and discuss a given topic (or not) even in the blandest terms is in itself the outcome of a kind of interest or unadmitted appraisal. There can be no single answer to such questions, and I wish to underline in this article my own retrospective reflexivity, to acknowledge the illusoriness of the “objectivity” I imagined I was free to exercise.

To explore these issues, it is instructive to look at anthropological experience – in this case, my own in relation to the Soviet Union of the 1960s-70s. In what follows I will first outline my “ideological background” and university formation. The remainder of the article will detail the blunderings and limitations of my actual fieldwork and draw some conclusions made after reconsideration of my fieldnotes. There

2 See the critique of “scholarly reason” by Pierre Bourdieu in his *Pascalian Meditations* (2000). Joel Robbins (2020, 94-104), taking inspiration from theologians who have thought deeply about these matters, has made a recent intervention about how anthropologists might be more explicit and debate their criteria of judgement in a climate when the stance of non-judgment or cultural relativism is no longer an option.

follows a discussion of subsequent visits to the same field sites in the 1990s – 2000s in the light of ideas produced by a revision in Bloch's thinking. Finally, I introduce some remarks about the relevance of all this to the contemporary situation in Russia.

AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL FORMATION IN THE 1960s

When I graduated from the University of Cambridge Department of Social Anthropology in 1965 the place was liberal, vaguely leftist, and anti-colonialist. It was free of bureaucracy and riven with disputes about anthropological theory, even though this was a time before the discipline in Britain had developed radical critiques of capitalism, gender, or race. My own family background was middle-class and definitely to the left, as my mother had been a member of the Communist Party until 1956; she resigned after the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian uprising. The Soviet Union was not at the forefront of my parents' concerns, and I do not recall them giving me any opinions about it. Anthropology, on the other hand, greatly interested my father, and we had books by Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead at home. I knew Orwell but had not read many of the major denunciations of Communism, such as Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom*. To me the USSR was the great unanswered anthropological question of the time: it was a vast realm of many cultures that had created a kind of society different from anything I had known. It had had a terrible past and was still forbidding, but by the mid-1960s the more liberal "thaw" under Khrushchev had happened. In what turned out to have been a brief gap, the country at that point seemed to have stabilised into a more liveable place that might even turn into what was later known as "the human face of socialism".

All this meant that I was open to, and accepted without question, the anthropological positionality instilled in us by the Department: that we must be "objective" and not partisan in our research. The nature of this "openness" would astonish research students today. My first postgraduate supervisor was the eminent Africanist Meyer Fortes, who had earlier been the supervisor of Maurice Bloch. Fortes instructed that preparation for fieldwork should be devoted to study of the language, previous descriptions, history and so forth of the people you were going to research. But there must be no detailed research plan, no devising of "research questions", and above all no introduction of theory, because all of that would introduce pre-suppositions and bias into the research. Likewise, completely absent was the bureaucratic apparatus of preliminary examinations, ratification of ethical guidelines, planned budgets and timelines, obligatory reports to supervisors, or medical and insurance documentation. No bibliography was required, ready to be deployed as evidence of theoretical preparedness and a guide to our research. We were to go to the field maximally open, like sponges, to soak up what we found.

The existence of Soviet ideology was the main reason why Fortes advised me not to go to Russia. He told me that I would encounter closed minds, Party propaganda, no one would speak to me honestly, and in any case, I would likely be arrested and deported as had happened to a previous anthropology student planning to work in the Caucasus. These warnings did not deter me. For in Blochian mode, I was ready to study the workings of the Communist ideology along with everything else. The independence allowed us graduates enabled me to make my own arrangements to get to Russia via a student exchange scheme.

THE ANTHROPOLOGY RESEARCH STUDENT IN MOSCOW

I spent a preparatory year in Cambridge reading up on a Siberian people then called the Yakut and expecting to research Yakut shamanism. But when I got to Russia as a graduate student in the Department of Ethnography at Moscow University, I was immediately told that I could on no account go to Yakutia, and that shamanism had been eliminated in the 1930s. I had to obey my Moscow supervisor on this point. This was my first lesson in “participant observation”: in an authoritarian regime one participates by also being a subject to authority. One complies, one lies low, one accommodates, and when possible, negotiates (in my case, a switch from Yakutia to Buryatia).

The ideologies on both sides during the Cold War dictated that for citizens of Britain or the USSR there was no neutral position. In principle, the supposition in Soviet security services was that students from the West were not sponges but more like heat-seeking missiles. Anyone crossing the Iron Curtain not as a tourist must have been sent for an investigative purpose.³ Luckily, however, this supposition did not seem to be strongly held by my gentle and genial professor in the Department of

3 This meant that my role as a student of anthropology was seen by many people I met in Moscow as likely to be a cover-up. The question I remember being asked endlessly was “Who sent you?” When I answered that it was my own decision to come (which it was, because my Cambridge supervisor was against my going to Russia) an expression of disbelief crossed people’s faces. I had to be a spy of some kind, as Sheila Fitzpatrick (2013) and Katherine Verdery (2018) document for their sojourns as research students in the USSR and Romania. I should add that before our little bunch of British students set off for Russia we were given a briefing by the Foreign Office, during which we were told to expect entrapments by the KGB; and it was also made clear that while we British were genuine students, the exchange bunch coming from the USSR had assuredly been sent as spies. This was the Cold War, after all. I remember laughing off the Foreign Office briefing as we walked out of the building. But as students in Moscow State University our rooms were indeed bugged, our conversations listened to, and a few of our group were trapped, drugged, arrested, and deported by the KGB.

Ethnography of Moscow University. There I was seen rather as misguided, a wrongly instructed student who needed to be educated.

Ethnography at that time was institutionally placed as a minor branch within the Faculty of History. It was thus regarded as a subdiscipline subject to the laws of dialectical materialism and the inevitable stages of historical development. By attending lectures, I caught a glimpse of what would have been my academic formation had I been a Soviet citizen. My main task, as far I could understand, would have been to know and demonstrate the operation of the Marxist historical laws by means of ethnographic investigation and then fine tune the resulting theories as they applied to a particular case. But I was not ready to abandon my Cambridge education. I took the characterisation of ethnic groups in Russia in terms of ancient modes of production, the delineation of class struggles, the types of domination and so forth simply to be relativised as "Soviet ideology". The classes were indeed rather dogmatic, but I now think that I should have tried harder to learn from them. One class did teach me a lesson. It was about Bronislaw Malinowski, who was still a heroic ancestral figure in Cambridge. His work had been taught to us as a remarkable and insightful advance in anthropology, even if his functionalist theory was seen as misguided. In Moscow Malinowski's anthropological discoveries were barely mentioned, since they were overshadowed by the fact that he was a stooge of colonialism and consequently failed to analyse correctly the imperialist conditions of his fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands. Initially shocked, I could digest at least part of this idea. Gradually I began to see that the Buryats, allocated as my research topic instead of the Yakuts, should not be approached as an isolated pristine "society" but were no less implicated in external forms of domination than the Trobrianders. Still, just as I was convinced that Malinowski had not been a stooge, in my naivety I neglected to think about whatever ideological currents (in the Blochian sense) I would be bringing to my fieldwork in Buryatia.

FIELDWORK IN BURYAT COLLECTIVE FARMS IN 1967 AND 1975

It is worth elaborating on the point I made earlier about the impossibility for a fieldworker to be altogether outside the ideological formation of an authoritarian regime. Although I was privileged in many ways by being a British citizen (able to leave Russia if I wished, given favoured accommodation, not subject to punishments and privations), I was also subject to the generation condition of mystified subordination of Soviet citizens. From some enigmatic realm my research task (study Buryat kinship), ethnographic sites, timetable, and field research supervisor-minder were all decided for me. These conditions also applied to my field supervisor, the respected Buryat Tibetologist Ksenia Maksimovna Gerasimova, who had been allotted the task

of accompanying and taking responsibility for a foreign student in uncomfortable farms she was happy not to have to live in herself. She, like I, had to give written and oral reports (*otchet*) to hierarchical seniors on the fulfilling of these tasks.

In this sense, I was already somewhat attuned to and incorporated in the fringes of the Soviet system; to be more exact, I was living in ideology while not “having” that ideology. Still seeing myself in the “sponge” mode, I tried to blend in. I tried to lie low; I wore a collective farm type work jacket (*vatnik*), sometimes a headscarf like most women, and in winter (1974-5) felt boots (*valenki*). I was happy when the farmers took me to be the young field assistant of Ksenia Maximovna. I tried to pay close attention to what I saw – though that wasn’t easy, because of the huge amount of vodka I was plied with. I tried to absorb what the farmers wanted to talk about: hard work, the targets, their wages, what they had built and achieved, and kinship and families. They did not talk about religion unless I asked specifically, and then they pretty much always talked about it as something that belonged to the past.

If fact, these two collective farms were set up as local actualisations of the Soviet ideology – even though that was not all that happened in them as I discuss later. The Soviet state ideology when I reached the field was not an unchanging monolith, but an amalgam designed for the agricultural sector stacked up over the decades from sources garnered from Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin and most recently Khrushchev.

From Marx, the “labour theory of value” held sway. Each farm consisted of around 3,000 population, several villages and hamlets, and a huge area of land. The members had to work in the jobs they were allocated and could not leave the farm without permission. They were paid by hours of labour they devoted to their tasks, topped up with bonuses for productivity and the achievement of targets. The workers had massive workloads. For example, a shepherding unit of 2-3 workers had to manage a flock of 700-800 sheep and was exhorted to achieve high targets of lambs per ewe and weight of wool and meat. If a single sheep was lost, the shepherd had to pay personally – and remember this was Siberia, with terrible winter storms and plenty of wolves, so sheep were always being lost. For such faults, shepherds were publicly reprimanded and could be punished in various ways. If they achieved high results, on the other hand, their photos would go up on the “honour board” in the centre of the farm.

From Engels and Marx came the principle of social equality. The collective farms were in fact socially and materially egalitarian relative to any other society I have been in. The Party Secretary and the Chairman’s families lived in the same kinds of houses, sent children to the same school, ate the same food, spoke the same language, and had obligatory “targets” and “indicators” like everyone else. They had use of a car, rather than a horse and cart like the ordinary farmers, but not as their private property.

Women worked equally if not more than men, children were cared for communally at kindergarten and a boarding school. Private property was down to a minimum: no one owned any land or even the house they lived in. Household livestock was strictly limited. So was commerce. People were paid partly in kind (butter, meat, grain, etc.) and there was little they could do with any money they earned, for the *kolkhoz* shop was virtually bare and towns were distant. The socialist "cultural" emphasis of Marx was there too: both farms had a panoply of schools, kindergartens, and a culture centre. Everyone except the very elderly was literate, was encouraged to read, educate their children, learn an instrument, put on plays, take part in festivals, etc. One of the collective farms even had its own separate music school.

If all that was the Marxist legacy, the Lenin-Stalin dirigiste one was there too. The production targets were planned down to the last detail according to Leninist ideas of scientific rationalism and Stalinist goals of supplying produce to support industrialisation and urbanisation. The farms had extensive staffs of planners, technicians, accountants, and lowly bookkeepers making a tally of everything. From Stalin, the farms exemplified the principle of Party discipline, universal surveillance, punishment for infringements, and reporting of misdemeanours. The strictness and hierarchy went all the way down to the shepherds and milkmaids. The members of each team were ranked (1st, 2nd, 3rd shepherd, etc.).

As for anthropological positionality, Ksenia Maksimovna and I saw the same things, but we saw them through different epistemic paradigms. Someone would remark about marriage practices. I saw what was interesting to me as an anthropologist, "exogamy" for example. Through the lens of historical materialist categories, she saw a "survival of the past" (*perezhitok proshlego*), a remnant of old clan society that should be swept away.⁴

BEYOND IDEOLOGY

The top-dog locally was undoubtedly the Chairman of the farm. However, by 1967 this leading role had been subject to an ideological revision, as I discovered from re-reading my fieldnotes. With his campaign against the "cult of personality", Khrushchev had introduced an ideational shift to displace absolutist Stalinist forms of leadership among powerful heads of production. Officials in the collective farms were at pains to point out to me that the Chairman's nomination had to be positively voted for by farm members, that there was a specific regulation limiting his tenure, that complaints about him could be made to the Party, and that rules were in place

4 For a study of the Soviet ideological concept of the "survival" applied to religious beliefs and activities, see DeWeese (2012).

to ensure that he did not pack influential positions with his relatives and cronies. It is possible that the implementation of all this was largely gestural or performative, as Yurchak (2006) argued was characteristic of late socialist society in educated urban settings. But I have no evidence that this was so in remote rural Siberia in the 1960s. My impression was that people were sincere in their respect for the Soviet ideology. “*My verili!* (We believed!),” a Buryat friend fervently assured me later. Comparative evidence comes from Sonja Luehrmann’s description (2011) of the enthusiastic embrace of “ideology” and “propaganda” to describe their own activity by culture workers in a collective farm in the Volga region in the 1960s. They saw their work of “agitation” as valuable, creative, and responsible: giving lectures in outlying dairy farms, posting slogans or information sheets, or indeed hanging the portrait of Lenin in a respected location.

However, this could not be all there was to the situation. The “having an ideology” approach I have adopted here supposes a complex human subject that does the “having”, one composed of diverse, including non-ideological, elements, unlike the Althusserian subject that is wholly constituted as such by means of the ideology. At the time, however, since I was operating with the early Blochian idea of ideology as akin to political culture, I could only make the rather banal observation that while the carriers of the Soviet state ideology (the Party Secretaries, farm Chairmen, “culture workers”, etc.) were all Buryats, the ruling ideas had nevertheless come to all of them from outside as a corpus invented long ago and elsewhere. The Buryats were consenters to an ideology brought to them from Russia. It was not until I returned to my notes and discovered some pages a farm accountant, Synge Sanzhiev, had given me in winter 1974-5 that I began to think more about how the separate identity of the “subject of ideology” could also be understood in individually human rather than ethnic terms.

Sanzhiev was an erectly standing, granite-jawed man in his early 60s. A day or two after we talked, he came round of his own accord to give me two blurry, closely typed pages containing his autobiography. It was carefully organised by date. Summarising, it showed he had been born in September 1911 in a middling herding family in the Barguzin district. At the age of 10 he was able to attend a local school for four years. He then herded livestock in his father’s household farm until age 20. In 1931, collectivisation was imposed. Sanzhiev was sent to a 3-month course in bookkeeping and immediately got a job as bookkeeper of the Urzhil collective farm in Bayangol in the Barguzin district. After holding the job from May 1931 to March 1932, he was appointed Chairman of Urzhil. But this post lasted only a few months and in June 1932 he was demoted to become bookkeeper in Karl Marx Collective in Bayangol. In April 1939 he was elevated as chair of the Bayangol *Selsoviet* (district council) but this position too was cut short, for in November the same year he was made head of the accounting scrutiny board back in Karl Marx farm. Five

months later in April 1940 Sanzhiev found himself appointed first secretary of the Komsomol (youth section of the Communist party) of the Karl Marx. After only three months, he was side-lined to head a milk production brigade. Nevertheless, five months later in November 1940 he was elevated to Chairman of the Karl Marx Collective. In August 1941 he was enlisted in the Soviet army, serving initially in an evacuation hospital in the Buryat capital Ulan-Ude. Here misfortune befell him, as he was arrested, through the fault of investigative officers of the KGB as he added. He was held in prison from 1942 to 1943 under investigation. Released, rehabilitated, and allowed to keep his precious Party membership, he was sent to serve first in the artillery near the Chinese border and then from June 1943 to February 1945 in special forces in Belorussia supplying provisions to partisans operating behind the German lines. Returning to Barguzin after the war, he found himself again engaged in a series of yo-yo moves in the Karl Marx Collective. From Chairman of the farm, plunged down to "ordinary *kolkhoznik*", back to bookkeeping, elevated to chief economist, a spell as Party Secretary, and demoted again to chief planner, he was approaching retirement when I met him.

What are people *doing* when they seem to be just saying something – is this giving information, reminding, blaming, or "performing" an ideal of citizenry (Sántha and Safonova 2011), or what? Sanzhiev gave me no explanation when he handed over the pages. Now the worker's autobiography was a Soviet ideological form, a record of a worthy life of labour, and as Hellbeck has argued "a means by which citizens could come to think of themselves as conscious revolutionary subjects" (Hellbeck 2001, 341). But Sanzhiev's autobiography did not follow a standard form, and very unusually for 1974 included accusation of "fault" by the KGB. It contained none of the expected ideologically tinged statements of having been forged as a subject by the Revolution and collectivisation. What these pages wordlessly tell us is that while the organisation of the farm remained a coherent ongoing structure, the life of this man had a different temporality, one of sharp breaks and unsought turbulence. Yet no one in 1974 regarded such an actual zig-zag life experience as exceptional. Sanzhiev's life was intertwined with the collective farm, the institutional carrier of the ideology, and he proudly listed his medals and honour certificates at the end of his biography. But part of his life and his sensibility must also have consisted of non-ideological stuff: fear, apprehension, frustration. Fear, one could say, was an *effect* of the brutal Soviet methods of transmitting ideology, without itself being part of the doctrine. I didn't write about this in my first book (1983; but see Humphrey 2003 for subsequent thoughts). Fear in the 1960-70s was hidden behind tactical silences, equanimity, and a sort of jollity that was also present. But through later conversations I realised that terror was inculcated so early in people's lives that they assumed its implicit presence as a barely conscious substrate. A friend told me that when he was at kindergarten

aged four there was a portrait of Lenin on the wall. One day he had a pencil and a bit of paper and idly sketched a copy. Of course, his picture didn't look at all like Lenin. When he proudly showed it to the teacher, she went white and hissed at him: "That is forbidden! Never, never do that again!" He was terrified and shrank away. The dread of committing an incomprehensible ideological error never left him.⁵

The point here is that, on the other side of an ideological divide, you don't know what the fears are going to be or where they will lie. But it is also difficult to gauge the sincerity of feelings of positive loyalty and respect. The Chairman of the collective farm in Selenga was Zhamso Vankeev, a physically commanding figure of archetypally patriarchal dominance. Condescending to Ksenia Maksimovna and me, whom he probably saw as annoyingly irrelevant visitors, he seemed to have an iron grip over the farm. He certainly had enough power to be a tyrant if he wanted.⁶ I carefully wrote about him under a changed name and in neutral terms that poorly conveyed the controlling effect of his presence (Humphrey 1983, 120-22, 344-6). It was a surprise when many years later Vankeev's family sent me a copy of a book they had edited about him entitled *Khozyain Zemli* (Master of the Land). It was full of loving and admiring accounts of his life and achievements from a wide range of people. "He was a hard man" (Bur. *Berkhe khün baigaa*) wrote one woman, "but with his devoted efforts he created the farm and when he became a Hero of Socialist Labour we were proud of him" (Sem'ya 2014, 196). The aim of this book is to place Vankeev in the geographical-cosmological-social micro-world of the Iroi valley in the basin of the river Selenga; the first half is devoted to the mountains, pastures, history, clan genealogies (including Vankeev's own), varied ethnic groups, songs and rituals, and its long ago destroyed Buddhist monastery, even listing the full names and ranks of the 48 lamas remaining in 1935. A further statement would have surprised me had I known about it back in the 1960s. According to a family member, Vankeev was "although a Communist of war vintage, a religious (*veruyushchii*) man. He worshipped his ritual birthplace (*toonto*) and the sacred mountain Burin Khan" (Sem'ya 2014, 129). Veneration of this kind of holy site is inculcated through kinship from childhood. One contributor to the book said that Vankeev "lived in the *kolkhoz* like in a family" (2014, 120).

Contemplation of Sanzhiev's and Vankeev's lives returns me to theoretical issues raised at the beginning of this paper. How does one explain *living in* and *breaking out* of ideological structures? Maurice Bloch changed his understanding of ideol-

5 Later he found out that only licensed artists were permitted to represent Lenin and the other great leaders, and then only in approved ways. Non-standard images were regarded as insulting to the great leader, or possibly subversive.

6 In the 1970s a violent incident that needed to be covered up happened in Vankeev's farm and I was not allowed to return there.

ogy during the 1970-80s, moving away from the Durkheimian-Maussian theory of the social ("ideological") determination of perception and communication. He switched to the "having an ideology" position, restricting the use of the term ideology to knowledge about social life that cannot be derived from everyday experience but instead is transmitted through institutions specifically dedicated to that purpose (Bloch 1985). Ideological state apparatuses, such as schools or political parties, systematically undermine sensory perception and tacit everyday knowledge in their attempt to render people receptive political subjects (see discussion in Luerhmann 2011). But they can never succeed totally. Bloch argued for the inevitable presence of a psychological-emotional-bodily substrate that is out of kilter with and untouched by ideology, and also for the existence of "non-ideological thoughts". The validity of this argument is borne out by what was gradually revealed to me concerning the actual experience of Vankeev and Sanzhiev. Different conceptions of time are involved. Sanzhiev was a devoted Communist, yet he lived in the contradiction between the breaks and reverses of his helter-skelter individual life and the ideological insistence on linearly advancing rational progress. For Vankeev, certain Buryat rituals might be "survivals of the past" but for him in his actual life, they had a timeless efficacy.

The character of consent and dissent within ideological domination was intensely debated at a seminar about social change held in 1976 in King's College, Cambridge, attended by major luminaries of the European and British social sciences.⁷ Maurice Godelier insisted that neither the existence of "non-ideological" experience and ideas expounded by Bloch nor everyday dissent can bring about change in the dominant ideology. He gave the example of the Baruya people of New Guinea, where women were subject to a kinship ideology of male domination. Women should feed their husbands, do the work in the fields, have sex with their husbands, and so forth. Godelier saw during his fieldwork that in fact, they often resisted. They often did *not* provide the husband's food, did *not* do the weeding, and refused sex. But this everyday revolt did not change the ideology nor the threat of violence that went along with it. The women continued to agree with the male ideology because they had no theory or consciousness of their social condition with which to question it. In such a situation, he maintained, violence and consent are always co-present. Round the seminar table, there seemed to be a glum acquiescence. But Bloch objected. He argued that it was wrong to conclude that change to ideology could come only from outside. Even in the most subjected group of people not only is there non-ideological bodily-psychological experience but also the presence of non-ideological ideas. And out of somewhere, probably following a radical change in the mode of production, there would appear a different phenomenon, the revolutionary counter-ideological

7 Maurice Godelier, Edmund Leach, Ernest Gellner, Jack Goody, Edward Thompson, Arnaldo Momigliano, Maurice Bloch and others took part. See: <https://sms.cam.ac.uk/media/2683583>

ideas that would bring about the collapse of a dominant ideology. Godelier immediately gave way; no longer referring to the Baruya, left to their patriarchal fate, he now said that he had written all along that consent could turn into dissent and that ideologies contained internal contradictions, a topic on which I have written in the case of conflicts within the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party (Humphrey 2008). In other words, he and Bloch arrived at agreement.

COUNTER IDEOLOGIES

Listening to this debate now and thinking again about my subsequent visits to the Karl Marx collective in Barguzin, I realised that it suggested several heuristic tools with which to get a better understanding of my fieldnotes. These include: “human experience”, such as Sanzhiev’s visceral experience of the arbitrariness of subjectification, and “non-ideological ideas”, such as Vankeev’s conception of the sacredness of a mountain. In my fieldnotes I also discovered “dissent” and “counter-ideological ideas” and “revolutionary thinking”.

I first returned to Barguzin in 1990,⁸ a turning point when *perestroika* and *glasnost* were under way, but the Soviet Union still existed and the Karl Marx collective farm seemed prosperous, with new roads and buildings. What had evaporated was fear. Dissent was openly expressed, for example about a demand that funds collected by a local Buryat organisation should be rendered to the state and then redistributed according to official priorities. Revolutionary ideas also swirled around. Some were philosophical (“We have been misled by technology; we need a revolution in values and a new ethical relation to nature”). Some were unreal (“Set up a Buryat parliament based on clans, so everyone will know who they are and who represents them”) and some not so (“Buryats and Russians must be treated equally”). Most surprising to me was the popularity among diverse people from farmers to intellectuals of “counter-ideological ideas”, by which I refer to statements from “other” ideologies that differed radically from Soviet values but without necessarily proposing a political agenda. My next visit was in 1993. By this time Bloch’s “change in the mode of production” and the demise of the Communist Party had now happened, but they did not have the radical effect in the Buryat countryside he might have predicted (Humphrey 1998). Regret at the loss of the Soviet order was more evident. Few talked of freedom or argued for multi-party democracy. People yearned for a single line of control, to which complaints could be made and which was powerful enough to sort out problems effectively. Enthusiasm for “revolutionary ideas” seemed to have withered away.

8 I took the chance to visit the farm on my own for a few days following a conference about environmental issues held on the shores of Lake Baikal not far away from Barguzin.

Still, my fieldnotes document the unquestioning enthusiasm for “counter-ideological” thinking. There was an overall turn to positive reevaluation of Buryat-Mongolian history, language, and culture. The Barguzin collective farm had reconsidered its own history and built a museum at its own expense. Prominent in the display was Elbegdorj Rinchino (1888-1938), a nationalist revolutionary native of Barguzin, who had become a leading Communist politician in Mongolia but was purged in the 1930s as a pan-Mongolist and nationalist. Previously unmentionable, now he could be celebrated as a “great man” of the locality. A more startling counter to the overall rationalist-enlightenment aspect of Soviet ideology was the sudden popularity of magical, religious, and prophetic thinking. In the Barguzin farm they had kept alive the memory of Soodoi Lama (1846-1914). As a monk he had travelled to Tibet where he received advanced Buddhist teachings and returned to establish a Buddhist monastery in Barguzin. It was destroyed in the 1930s. What people were most keen to tell me about was not only his magical powers: he could change the weather, bring fertility, avert epidemics, etc., but also his prophecies. He was not an ordinary human but an enlightened being with access to eternal verities. Soodoi Lama had prophesied that men in leather clothes would come and redistribute all the property, and those who would come to power would be called “red”. They would be able to hold on for a hundred years, and then their ideas would be forgotten. Soodoi Lama’s ethical teachings were also widely known among the villagers.

It was now Soodoi Lama who provided a kind of truth that was an alternative to the governmental version found in *Pravda* (“Truth”) newspaper – especially as that publication was shortly to split into different entities under diverse ownership. In other Buryat communities, it was shamans who came forth with the spiritual verities of cosmological-natural processes. Mathijs Pelkmans in his book *Fragile Conviction* (2017) documents the uncertainty and wavering enthusiasms in Kyrgyzstan where no single ideology among a plethora of alternatives (nationalism, neoliberalism, Pentecostalism, atheism, Islam and shamanism) was able to replace the all-encompassing Soviet ideology. In Buryatia Buddhism is divided and likewise is one among other belief systems; it pertains to only part of most people’s lives and thoughts. But the dominant monastic version has a robust institutional history in the region, and it has by now (re)built monasteries, temples, or shrines in almost all centres of population. In 1990-93, the Buryat farmers were already using Buddhist thinking to place a new idea in mainstream discourse. This was to relativise the entire Communist politico-social experiment by inserting it as a passing phase in a far longer Buddhist chronology. It was now just a period in the latest vast eon of degeneration of faith and morality, an era that would only be overturned far in the future by means of the accumulated meritorious deeds of humanity. When I revisited Barguzin again several

years later, I found that the collective farm had dissolved. But the good deeds had begun, notably by rebuilding Soodoi Lama's destroyed monastery.

TOWARDS THE PRESENT DAY

When I began writing this article, I had almost forgotten that in 1990 I paid a visit to Ksenia Maksimovna in her apartment in Ulan-Ude. My notes on that reunion are a reminder that anthropological positionality is shifting and relational. By 1990 I had published a monograph and Ksenia Maksimovna, no longer my "minder", was a very senior academic. We had an interesting conversation about anthropological matters in which it was clear that we would no longer necessarily see the same ethnographic facts differently. Now, Ksenia Maksimovna reminisced about our time in the farm as a joint trial and adventure. It was "us" against the farm authorities, who in her view had not given us due respect. Rather than treating us as honoured visitors we had been provided with ordinary accommodation and food (we shared a house with a milkmaid). The earlier condition of political fear having evaporated, Ksenia Maksimovna also railed against the pressure she had been under from as high as the regional (*Obkom*) Party, which had hauled her to a meeting to criticise her insufficient control of my activities.

What is the relevance of all this for anthropology and ideology today? The conditions in Russia at this time, when a terrible war is being waged in Ukraine, are quite different to those I encountered in a relatively peaceful era of East-West international relations. Then, it was ethically justifiable in my view for an anthropologist to describe everyday Soviet life in a non-judgemental way.⁹ That attitude was underpinned not only by my own background and education described earlier, but also by involuntary ignorance: in the 1960s-70s it was systematically hidden from me that a prison camp was located not far from the Barguzin farm, and that former exiles were among the workers in the Buryat collective farms, existing in conditions of social exclusion (Humphrey 2001). Maybe I should have known, but at the time I did not. Like many anthropologists, whether or not I "had an ideology", depending on how readers define this term, I did have values that turned away from the "totalitarian" interpretation of the Soviet Union,¹⁰ and did register the complexity, indirectness

9 It could be argued that a certain distantly underlying common heritage of enlightenment thought was shared between the European system of values of Western anthropologists and the Soviet project of social transformation, and that this would provide grounds for looking with a certain "objectivist" understanding at mid-Soviet rural attempts to create a socialist society.

10 Both Russian and Western authors have argued recently that the Soviet establishment of state hegemony by means of terror, purges, incarceration, etc. justifies the use of the idea of totalitarianism, which however can be studied in new ways (see for example Oustinova-Stjepanovic 2020).

and multivocality of life there. These values inclined me towards respect for the toils of the farmers and hopefulness as regards the prospects for a more humane version of socialism in Russia. But that entire situation, the socialism, and the hope, have long ago evaporated.

Today, it is not just that the global political alignments are shifting and that existential world problems loom over Russia as over other countries, but that the conditions for anthropological research in ideologically dense situations have become much more challenging and in war-time Russia, practically impossible for non-citizens. The current (2023) state ideology has increased in stridency and pervasiveness with the war. For collective farmers in the 1960s-70s “tuning out” from state ideology was possible for swathes of time: the radio could be switched off, there was no television, newspapers arrived weeks late, and no one had a private phone; indeed, some remote farm settlements had no electricity. In those days there was only one state ideology around and party theoreticians had had decades to hammer it into an apparent monolith. But post-1991 many different interest groups and political parties developed their own ideologies. They roamed the world of ideas to produce previously unimaginable concatenations that yoked together nationalist, leftist, rightist, fascist, aesthetic, ecological, gender-focussed, religious, anarchist, geo-strategic, and neo-imperialist ideas in new and strange combinations.¹¹ As Fabrizio Fenghi (2020) has commented about the National Bolshevik Party, the aim was to shock, provoke, and make new connections by uprooting the old structures of ideas rather than to establish monolithic consistency. For now, however, the “undesirable” (for Putin) ferment of ideas has been squashed. The war has enabled the Kremlin to stamp on heterodox phantasmagorias and to impose the authoritarian, unitarian, nationalist and xenophobic state ideology that seems “necessary” and “right” at a time of war.¹² Even cleverly disguised infringements of the peremptory new norms have become dangerous, so, all the more perilous is providing answers to curious anthropologists.

This means that advancing study of contemporary ideological forms and providing reflexive, yet as far as possible “objective”, accounts of how they work is ever more

11 Certain influential ideologies emerging in the 1990s-2000s have been analysed by Fabrizio Fenghi (2020). He describes how the “ultra-ideology” of the New Bolshevik Party concocted an innovative, “paradoxical” medley that embraced the revolutionary legacy of Bolshevism, Stalinist culture, the ideology and aesthetics of Italian Fascism, German Nazism, as well as strands of various Western counter cultures. Fenghi (2020, 10-11; 80-81) argues that this saturation of contradictory ideologies was a way of denying the possibility of a normalized, “unideological” society based in a generic vision of an imaginary Western democracy.

12 Commenting on the blocking of social media and closing of the remaining independent news outlets, Maksim Samorukov (2023) writes: “In pre-war times that seemed to the powers a risky step with unpredictable consequences. The war quickly dispelled those doubts – this crackdown has become not just possible but also somehow obvious, so that to object to these measures would be strange.”

urgent. Russian researchers have recognised this. Two examples, admittedly from the pre-war period, are particularly relevant to this article because they discuss both the scope of ideology in 21st century Russia and the question of the “observer”. Sergei Prozorov (2005) sees conservatism in the Putin presidency as an ideological hegemony in Russian politics. His Foucauldian approach sees this hegemony as a “discursive system of dispersion” and a space of self-definition by its practitioners. For Prozorov the multiple strands of left and right mentioned above are emergent practices within the overarching conservatism. He argues that they have an inherently specifically Russian rationality emerging at a time of profound historical discontinuity and innovation that cannot be collapsed into the “complacent quasi-universalist rationalism” of the observer (2005, 123). If Prozorov thus seems to insist that the observer should abandon his/her academic rationalism to track “Russian discourse” Anna Kruglova (2017) makes a different argument that considers the observer explicitly as an anthropologist.

Both Prozorov and Kruglova write of ideological “hegemony,” which returns us to the issues raised long ago in the spat between Bloch and Godelier. For Kruglova, Marxism is not just the powerful and dominant ideology of the Soviets but has evolved and continues to evolve as a *vernacular* version of itself, “further modified by a broad range of people who use it to build, explain, and make sense of their ordinary worlds” (Kruglova 2017, 760). Not unlike Prozorov’s use of the term hegemony, Kruglova’s is a Gramscian usage; it brings up again the question of whether ideology is something people consciously “have” (as a removable, contestable part of their thinking) or is constituted simply as visceral and affective common sense. Kruglova answers this question by differentiating between the former state ideology of Marxism and the everyday Marxism that seeped from it. This latter vernacular Marxism “goes beyond ideology by encompassing not only ideas and beliefs but the whole lived social process organized in practice by specific and dominant meanings and values” (Kruglova 2017, 764). While that formulation sounds familiar from earlier in this article, Kruglova adds a most interesting thought about the observer: his/her tools of anthropological analysis, such as the very concept of “ideology” (not to speak of “class,” “capitalism,” “exploitation” and so forth), share an intellectual genealogy with vernacular Marxism and use the same local categories that elicit visceral reactions. Anthropology in such circumstances has a recursive character. The problem is that in the world of Kruglova’s interlocutors “political economy is not a matter of analytical optics but rather the default human condition, where every process is social and a type of production” (Kruglova 2017, 769). This observation inserts a sliver of difference between the anthropologist and her respondents. The article goes on to discuss examples, such as inventive local usage of the adjective *material’nyi* (“having material substance”) to describe thoughts and words. As one interlocutor said, thoughts affect objective reality just like any physical matter would

– for example, they can cause magical harm (Kruglova 2017, 769) – an elaboration of Marxist materialism that was clearly foreign to Kruglova herself, for all her upbringing in the household of a Soviet culture worker of the creative kind described by Sonja Luehrmann (2011).

Prozorov and Kruglova provide examples of theoretically aware and self-reflexive approaches that are possibilities in the study of ideology in Russia. Both authors see the presence of ideology as a challenge for creative interpretation and suggest some form of co-production of knowledge with interlocutors. But these works were written before the power-grip imposed by war mentality in Russia. Similar studies addressing the real life of “Putinism” as an ideology could only with great difficulty be carried out within the country at present (2023). It is worth noting that these two writers are now based outside Russia and have turned their attention away from Russia itself. Ideology has become toxic, almost too hot to handle in a self-reflective manner, and from both sides it casts its shadow over whatever is written about it. A plea for the relevance of this article is that something similar was true even in Soviet times. My attempt to write a straightforward account of the collective farms (1983) was banned in the Soviet Union¹³ - for revealing too much reality - and was also criticised in the USA - for the book’s perceived sympathy with Soviet socialism. That impasse, in which conflicting ideologies make urgent demands on the writer, is only more pronounced today.

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13 The book was consigned to the *spetskhran* (special collection) of the Lenin State Library along with dissident and other banned literature. Books in the *spetskhran* had a separate catalogue; they were mostly not even registered in the internal list used by librarians and certainly were not to be found in the public catalogue.

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