

THE PERFORMATIVE MACHINE: TRANSFER OF OWNERSHIP IN A NORTHWEST RUSSIAN REINDEER HERDING COMMUNITY (KOLA PENINSULA)¹

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Abstract

The article is based on longitudinal fieldwork with reindeer herders in the Kola Peninsula, northwest Russia. Its main ethnographic focus is SKhPK 'Tundra' (*sel'sko khoziastvennaia proizvoditel'naia kooperatsiia* – agricultural producing cooperative) of Lovozero. The main argument is that a state of communal affairs under the dominance of the state farm (*sovkhos*), during the Soviet period, privileged domestic economies of the farm workers to be supported by the collective assets of the farm. The authors see this state of 'private-in-the-collective' arrangement as 'sovkhosism' and view the present variety of rural organisational forms in Russia as greater or lesser departures from it.

Keywords: hidden privatisation, sovkhosism, crypto-entrepreneurship, reindeer herding, Kola Peninsula

Introduction

During the past decade an impressive variety of forms of ownership have been tried out in the Russian rural economy,² and the process seems to be far from over. In this the Russian rural economy – if not the entire economy of the Federation – is showing a difference in comparison to other post-socialist countries among the former East European satellites. In many of these the reforms in the rural sector were relatively swift, and collective ownership was quickly forgotten. In the Bulgarian case, which is closest at hand for these authors, a swift liquidation of former cooperative farms was carried out in 1991–1992, leaving in its wake hundreds of thousands of impoverished peasants as private owners of microscopically fragmented former collective assets. Some new form of cooperation was attempted, but it resulted mainly in the creation of private businesses by powerful new/old stakeholders, using the land of the new small owners.

This is a type of agricultural privatisation by governmentally imposed liquidation of former cooperatives, giving free rein to local or distant powerful actors to effect a redistribution of former public assets. The predominant result has been the impoverishment of the former cooperative farm members, and their virtual enslavement to new/old elite groups.

In contrast to this liquidation model, we observe something different in the rural sector of Murmansk Region (northwest Russia), and specifically in

reindeer herding. There is evidence there for a type of privatisation which is – relatively speaking – more benevolent to the low-level actors. These actors operate in an environment which is shaped to a considerable extent by their own short- and long-term strategies and thus, as we shall show below, their agency is more enhanced in comparison to other parts of the former Soviet bloc (see Gray 2005; Habeck 2005; Stammer 2005; Ventsel 2006). Those engaged in reindeer herding on the Russian Kola Peninsula can act through intense human networks to manage an effective – mostly informal – economy. Such kinship/friendship-based networks are discussed at some length below as being crucial in the local choice of a privatisation model.

The model chosen by local actors in Murmansk region is a type of hidden privatisation. Our basic argument is that this form of privatisation – by informal redistribution of public assets into private hands – is accessible not only to members of higher elite groups (as, for instance, in the Bulgarian case). In the context of our local case in Murmansk Region, ‘higher’ actors are the leaders in the administration of agricultural enterprises – former reindeer herding state farms (Rus. *sovkhos*, pl. *sovkhozy*), currently reinterpreted as agricultural cooperatives. By ‘lower level’ actors we mean those among the rank-and-file herders. In this case they are the leaders of the herding department, the vets, the crew or brigade leaders (Rus. *brigadir*, pl. *brigadiry*), or senior herders with positions of importance in the crews (Rus. *brigady*). All these positions are part of the organisational hierarchy of work positions in the enterprise. In order to give an idea of their relative positioning in SKhPK ‘Tundra’, we explain briefly its structure.

Cooperative ‘Tundra’ consists of several departments, divided on the basis of their main production, and an administrative office. The Reindeer Herding Department is only one unit of the whole enterprise. The leader responsible for its work is known in the local nomenclature as the Leader of the Reindeer Herding Department (Rus. *nachal'nik tsekh olenevodstva*). The Reindeer Herding Department is further divided into two segments on the basis of the geographic location of the grazing lands they use: the right and the left wing. Reindeer herding is carried out directly in the tundra by separate herding crews, or brigades if directly translated from Russian (Rus. *brigada*). Six brigades graze their reindeer in the right wing, and three in the left wing.

Each wing has a leader, who manages its work and coordinates the activities of the separate brigades: the senior zoo-technician of the wing, or as popularly known, the zoo-technician (Rus. *glavny zootekhnik*, or simply *zootekhnik*). The next position in the official work hierarchy of the farm is occupied by the senior vet (Rus. *glavny vetvrach*), and finally come the rest of the vet specialists. The Head of the Reindeer Herding Department, the zoo-technicians, and the vets take mediatory positions between the administrative leadership of the farm and the reindeer herders – the practitioners of much of the herding work. They belong to the administration insofar as they should

control and monitor the work of herders and ensure the completion of the production plan, on the one hand, but on the other hand, they are the only representatives of the cooperative administration that travel to the tundra and are in direct touch with the reindeer herds during corralling. In this way they also belong to the reindeer herding elite.

According to the official organisational structure of the cooperative, to each herding crew are attached a reindeer herd and a herding range. The main figure in the brigade is the brigade leader, *brigadir*, who is responsible for leading and organising the work of the crew. The rest of the positions in the crew, which usually consists of seven to nine people, are senior herder (Rus. *starshii olenevod*), junior herder (Rus. *mladshii olenevod*), and apprentice (Rus. *uchenik*).

We argue that although the leading positions in the herding department of SKhPK 'Tundra' and the positions of brigade leaders or senior herders are elite at their respective levels, the 'lower' elites are generally men who have attained their positions through experience, skill and the ability to lead while avoiding conflicts, i.e. socially compatible persons, skilful in community politics. The higher elites attain rank in other ways. The distinction is important, because the very mechanism of the growing of brigade elites from 'below' – by personal skill and merit (not like administrators proverbially superimposed from 'above') – is significantly predicated on their position and relative success not only in the herding crews, but also in their local socioeconomic community networks. The claim is that in the process of hidden privatisation the best chances for advancement are held by those who lead in both their professional and intimate socioeconomic environments, these being partially or fully merged in the predominant case. This is equally true for the higher as well as the lower elites, with the difference that in the latter, the dependence is socially more intimate and part of daily life, as it relates to small village and brigade contexts.

Our findings suggest that in the former USSR, in this agricultural sector, a relatively high agentive role in the process of socioeconomic rearrangement is to be connected with an equally high degree of informal economic activity. Such activity is realised through the persistence of reinterpreted forms of former socialist enterprises and their private exploitation through intimate socioeconomic human networks ('installations', see below). For low-level actors the transfer of resource rights and access is more efficient by this way of creeping hidden privatisation than by governmentally imposed swift liquidation of the previous state property regime. A greater concern here than elsewhere for the retaining of social peace may possibly explain a socially more sensitive form of property transition.

The logic informing the federal and regional political and administrative elites is, however, well beyond the scope of our research. What we are concerned with is the ability of grass-roots elites to mould transition to their

advantage, in a way reminiscent of their ‘taming’ or ‘domestication’ (Creed 1995, 1998) of the previous system.

The analysis of the process suggests a much greater agency at the grass-roots level than commonly assumed. What we are concerned with here is how people are coping in a process of ambiguous and complex systemic change, by relying on their own analyses of the situation. In this way we attempt to improve understanding of culturally informed models of economic action (Gudeman 1986), while putting an emphasis on the agentive capacity of low-level actors (Hart 1973, 1992; Bird-David 1992; Wilk 1996: 128; Habeck 2005). The argument echoes, ultimately, aspects of Polanyian substantivism (1957), and an intellectual tradition which sees economic action as embedded in ‘a culturally-specific form of cosmology’ (Herzfeld 2001: 96). Following the theoretical work of Bird-David (1992), we suggest that the local model (hidden privatisation) is of use as a heuristic device for a more general understanding of the process of property transformation. (For a general review of the approach see Herzfeld 2001: 94–102.)

Site Specifics

Our ongoing research is being carried out with reindeer herders in northwest Russia (Murmansk Region).³ More specifically, it concerns the former state farm, *Sovkhoz* ‘Tundra’, based in the village of Lovozero, in the central part of the Kola Peninsula. ‘Tundra’ exists, at present, as an Agricultural Cooperative – *sel’skokhoziaistvennaia proizvoditel’naia kooperatsiia*. This is abbreviated as SKhPK – the acronym we shall be using henceforth, together with *sovkhov*, this being the appellation still used by the community.

Reindeer herding – of ‘Tundra’, and the adjacent cooperative ‘Olenevod’, based in the village of Krasnoshchel’e – plays only a very small part in the overall economy of Murmansk Region. It accounts for a tiny fraction of the regional economic output, and directly engages fewer than 200 people in its herding teams – the brigades. When working out in the tundra, the herders are dispersed over more than one third of the whole regional territory of 144,000 square kilometres.

Despite this tiny economic and demographic presence, reindeer herding supports a surrounding community of at least 5000 people, who are dependent in one way or another on the well-being of the herding cooperatives. The dependences operate on various levels. At village level, the cooperative – in our case SKhPK ‘Tundra’ of Lovozero (population roughly 4000) – is the only productive enterprise. Within this enterprise, it is in fact the Reindeer Herding Department (*tsekh olenevodstva*) which operates more or less profitably, while the remaining seven departments (dairy farm, sewing factory, garage, construction, meat processing, cereal crop production) are run at a loss, with the

meat-processing shop functioning only sporadically. To these mainly non-profitable departments we also have to add the massive, and expensive, administrative department. The people employed in the loss-making sectors account for a sizeable part of the working population of the village, and all drink the relatively cheap milk produced by the loss-making dairy farm.

The reindeer herding department, with its nine brigades or about sixty-four herders in total (the rest being in the neighbouring SKhPK 'Olenevod'), supports this heavy burden of loss-making jobs, but it can do only so much. The rest of the village expenses – electricity, heating, hospital, transport, communications, water supply, infrastructural maintenance – are taken care of by the municipal budget, which in turn relies on the regional one, and ultimately on the federal. The result is that the whole municipality (*raion*) is one of the most heavily subsidised administrative units in the Murmansk Region. In this it is not different from the myriad of other such units strewn over the vast territory of the Russian Federation. Villages, as well as whole towns, have come to face cyclically their electricity or heating being cut off because of unpaid bills, should subsidies from superordinate levels fail to materialise.

On a public level the first strong signs of the fact that the village was becoming insolvent came in spring 2003. Hot water was cut off in April, and only after much supplication to the regional budget was it eventually restarted in July. The meat-processing shop of the SKhPK was closed down because of unpaid electricity bills. Again for the same reason, the press publishing the *raion* newspaper Lovozerkaia Pravda was closed down in June – apart from the war years, this was the first time it had been closed down since its founding in 1937.⁴

These and similar developments have been seriously eroding whatever faith might have remained in redress from 'above' – that there is always a chance for the caring hand of the state to help the village. Some faith has remained, still. Various groups, mainly among the old-age pensioners – the war veterans, the veterans of farm labour, members of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation – sent open letters to the cooperative, with copies to the *raion* and regional administration. Strong appeals for 'serious measures to be taken' were made, but they seem to have had no consequence. One of the strongest such appeals demanded for 'the state' to resurrect the former *sovkhos*, to introduce increased control in herding, and generally to improve the situation, because:

(...) in the present atmosphere some employees are rapidly increasing their private herds to hundreds of head by unnatural means. This 'privatisation', inspired by the so-called 'democrats' from the Federal level, who have robbed the Russian people, can only lead to the total decay of the farm. (Veterans' Letter 2003)

The text is interesting not the least because the newspaper that published it – Lovozerkaia Pravda, mentioned above – is an organ of the *raion*, and the

materials published reflect the latter's current views. As is evident from this text, such views are at strong variance with pro-market reformist opinion and legislation coming from the federal level. Secondly, the authors of the document describe what we call informal or hidden privatisation as enrichment by 'unnatural means' (*protivoestestvennym obrazom*). How such enrichment comes about, and how the active herders see it, are our main concerns in what follows.

The appeals of the veterans remained unheard, and the conviction that the federal and regional governments do not care about the periphery was once again cemented. Other groups, in the first instance the Sami NGOs in Russia, find it more worthwhile to appeal to western Nordic institutions for aid (e.g. Afanasieva and Rantala 1993). Substantial efforts have been made in answer to such pleas, but with little effect beyond the urban scene. The National House of Culture in Lovozero (*Natsional'ny kul'turny tseñtr*) was moved to a renovated building, a Sami radio station with regular transmissions has begun functioning, as well as numerous other activities aimed at resurrecting and bolstering Sami cultural identity, all realised with Nordic funding. In a more day-to-day spiritual and earthly manner the Norwegian Mission of the New Life Church provides regular help to Sami people in the form of daily meals for the needy, clothes, care and advice. It is unthinkable for many other Sami and for non-Sami to turn to such a source with requests for support.

Thus various groups or individuals mainly among the elderly have come to rely on help and benevolence 'from above' or from abroad. At least they hope that such help would one day come. In the meantime, those who are currently active in the extraction of local resources, the reindeer herders, have to run the overwhelmingly predominant part of the domestic economy for, as the veterans quoted above have put it: 'If we lose reindeer herding, what will be left for the people of Lovozero?'. In this way the active herders, a tiny group as we have seen above, are critical to the fate of their surrounding community, or what may be called the herding dependants.

The definition of this group can be very broad indeed. It includes practically the whole population of the village, and also that of the other villages in the reindeer herding part of the peninsula. People, it has to be said immediately, may be herding dependants, despite the fact that they may see reindeer only once a year at the races during the annual Festival of the North (*Praznik Severa*). This takes place during a weekend in late March.

Herding may directly support the job of a person, for instance, that of a clerk in the administration of the cooperative. More indirectly, he/she may be dependent on a job for which much-needed subsidies are scrounged out of the regional budget. In this category one should put the numerous administrative offices in both the central village (Lovozero) and those in the three remote villages of Krasnoshchel'e, Kanevka and Sosnovka. The number of these offices is impressive even by Soviet standards and is likely to increase with

recent administrative reforms.⁵ We cannot pursue this topic any further here, but the sheer intensity of office jobs engaging predominantly the women of the village and the neighbouring mining town of Revda deserves a discussion in its own right. Such a discussion can only be begun here, pointing at the intensity of low-paid but richly social, predominantly female office jobs, as a crucial component of the socio-economic and cultural landscape of the Kola Peninsula, reflecting in a specific way the generally Russian one.

In such a context, a third category of reindeer herding-related jobs can be placed, those connected with its symbolic values and, importantly, those that are intertwined with Sami ethnicity. Here we place a new generation of offices, governmental or non-governmental, which draw on foreign, mainly Nordic, support for their functioning.

‘Installations’

All of these intersecting sets of dependences, in which herding plays an economic or symbolic role of varying magnitude, can be studied by available documentation and statistics, information gleaned from the municipal or regional press, various legislative documents, as well as by interviewing key stakeholders – the municipal administration, that of the SKhPK, the Organisation of the veterans of farming production, the Sami or Komi NGOs, etc. This knowledge is complemented on a more intimate level by personally knowing people and most of all, by sharing in their daily lives or, in other words, by following time-honoured paths of ethnographic observation.

The basic unit of analysis, at both levels of observation, is what can be metaphorically called ‘installations’. The metaphor is suggested by the modern sculptural form going by the same name and executed from a variety of materials, some of them moving parts, often with background audio-visual effects, multimedia screens, etc. The idea is that a private socioeconomic network with which we are concerned here is more like an art-form executed with materials of infinite cross-stylistic variety. This is to be seen in contrast, in the first place, with idealised formal socioeconomies in which, allegedly, the individual relies on a single job and has no impelling need to support domestic projects by seeking support from intimate and complex human networks.

The installation, secondly, is accentuated differently, and, we claim, in important respects from what is generally referred to as human networks, friendship networks, *blat*,⁶ etc. The emphasis here is placed on the dynamics of network seeking. The margin of potential loss is very great. Loss is frequent, but experimentation continues, notwithstanding, and here installations differ from transactional models, based on a more-or-less streamlined and predictable game of give and take. Striving for the ideal of establishing a network with a maximum of inside trust, reliability, efficacy and permanence, the installation-

person is constantly faced with disillusionment and the need for starting anew each time. The innovation and imagination of how to recombine immediately available human resources likens this social activity to an artistic one, and its fluidity defies attempts of rigid structural analysis.

As a major factor in social organisation, and especially of its inner innovative energies, the ongoing process of building and re-building installations provides important knowledge of current socioeconomic dynamics. For the moment we use this concept to attempt to capture a minimal socioeconomic unit based on kinship or para-kinship links. Para-kinship relations, ideally, possess the trust, sense of security, and permanence that kinship links imply. The constant search for this elusive ideal is captured by phrases like the Bulgarian 'trying to find one's mother and father', i.e. experimenting with networking to reach the ultimate security of intimate parental concern.

Offering this analytical tool we argue, firstly, that the property regime chosen by the herding community is one which rejects striking out as private herders, preferring a mode which may be called informal or hidden privatisation. Secondly, we claim that the community, functioning as open and fluid sets of networks ('installations'), is in a position of greatest agentive potential when in informal action. This explains why hidden privatisation is the preferred form of transition from a public to a private property regime. This is because the informal practice of hidden privatisation is the most suitable for coping with current circumstances without relying too much on benevolence 'from above' or from abroad. As we shall see below, it is ultimately predicated on a worldview in which agency by overt means is denied to the rank-and-file actors and agency is instead attained by subversion.

Subversion of the state by low-level actors is commonplace in the literature on state socialism, but it failed to pass the test posed by post-socialism. For, if everyone was trying to subvert the socialist state, why are so many not feeling liberated now that it is gone? Current realities reveal that the socialist state and the assets in its control have become, in modern times, part and parcel of a worldview, effected in daily practice, in which individual agency is extracted only on the basis of access to public (and, hence, by definition 'softly constrained') resources. It is more proper to speak, therefore, not of subverting the socialist state, but of working around it, circumventing it, while it firmly stays as a necessary pillar of that type of order. In this we follow analysis of the role of the socialist enterprise in a rural setting (Humphrey 1983, 1998, 2002; Creed 1995, 1998; Kideckel 1993; Verdery 1993, 1998). In a post-socialist context, agency of low-level actors derives, in this way, from a circumvention of a remnant of the former powerful state. In consequence, we are dealing with a cultural economics predicated on a modern cultural tradition of circumvention. This model – in respect of transformation of property regimes – can be posited, therefore, as a heuristic device applicable to a wide and diverse variety of cases.

In what follows we provide ethnography illustrating why a form of privatisation (hidden privatisation) may prefer an ideally indefinite preservation of some reinterpreted form of a socialist enterprise – a strategy, conceptualised as *sovkhoid* (Konstantinov 1997: 15–16; 2000). The specific ethnographic topic is suggested by the significance of heavy-track vehicles (Rus. *vezdekhod*, pl. *vezdekhody*) in local herding. The critical dependence on the ageing and destructive Soviet vehicle metonymically embodies the dependence of the equally ageing *sovkhoid* arrangement. The physical use of a publicly maintained machine for predominantly private economic purposes graphically illustrates the ideological disposition of *sovkhoid* and its implied economic strategy of crypto-entrepreneurship. Crypto-entrepreneurship, as developed by Konstantinov, is a private economic strategy that uses public property as a resource for individual extraction and is entangled with collectivistic ideology (Konstantinov 2002: 172–3).

Further, we use evidence from the winter reindeer harvesting campaigns of 2002–2005 to illustrate how public cooperative deer are recycled into private ones, and, crucially, how that is negotiated by key actors. We conclude by saying that the form of change of property regimes, which we call hidden privatisation, is motivated and most successfully conducted when a community is organised into intersecting and fluid human networks, whose economic action is based on some formal employment, but is predominantly informal. Against this background, we finally conclude that the herding community are active players in the change of property regimes and the construction of a new socioeconomic reality. According to a common presentation they feature mainly as passive victims of forces over which they have no control, but this view obscures rather than clarifies the whole picture, and blocks analysis. Discussions of the agentive role of the herding community, to which attention has increasingly turned recently, notably in Habeck (2005), are much more promising for the understanding of current complex processes.

The Categorical Significance of the *Vezdekhod*

By its appearance and erratic way of functioning the all-purpose track vehicle, or *vezdekhod*, is perhaps the best example of a living remnant of the post-war Soviet period. There are other relics too: the biplane An-2 (*anushka*), the perennial helicopter Mi-8 (*vertushka*), and, most of all, the ubiquitous Soviet snowmobile whose brand name ‘*Buran*’ (Eng. storm) has taken on use as a generic term for snowmobile. Still the *vezdekhod* retains a special place and that is not only because of its ugly appearance and unlimited ability to maul humans and tundra. The An-2 biplane and Mi-8 helicopter have become prohibitively expensive to charter (especially the latter), and have been mostly given up by herding cooperatives, but life has managed to go on despite this

sad loss. The *buran* can be replaced by draught-bucks and sled in adversity. The *vezdekhod* has remained, by contrast, irreplaceable to this day. Why so?

The answer seems to be in the carrying capacity of the machine – two to six tons according to type, its amphibious qualities, the low-grade diesel fuel it uses, and a way of maintenance and repair in which a primary role is assigned to the sledge-hammer (*kuvalda*). This is the technical answer. The more extended explanation, reflecting local economic ways, is that the *vezdekhod* is a publicly maintained vehicle which services private informal economies. Viewing the *vezdekhod* as a metonymic representation of the *sovkhos* contains a generative element – it may be predicted, as suggested by the ethnography, that a systemic change in property regimes will begin when the last *vezdekhod* expires. This leads us back to the current technical condition of the machines.

During a typical trek from tundra-camps to village, in this case from 28–30 June 2003, a distance of 100km was covered in two days by two machines. There were thirteen separate breakdowns of varying magnitude of which the breaking of a track was the most common. The crews of the machines – a crew consisting of the driver (Rus. *vezdekhodchik*) and his assistant (*naparnik*) – never rested during the whole journey – around forty hours from beginning to end. On the credit side, the machines successfully carried home people collected from the various tundra bases of four different brigades. There were forty-two souls shaking on the tanks – herders, former herders, women (wives and/or camp-cooks (*chumrabortitsi*), and children, as well as sixteen dogs, sitting amid or on top of fellow passengers, or running after the tanks as the mood would take them. Apart from the humans and dogs, the tanks carried needed spare parts and tree trunks (for getting out of swamps), salted fish and meat in barrels, dried fish, antlers, birch-tumours (Rus. *kap* – sellable for artistic woodwork), pelts and personal belongings. By far the most important item was the salted fish and meat, in reference to which one of the herders said that the whole village had been waiting for the *vezdekhody* since about a month before our departure. A simple count of the salted fish and meat alone was made by us and revealed an average of two barrels, a hundred kilograms at least, per herder, which brought the whole amount to some two and a half tons per machine. The fish, meat and other sellable commodities enter the informal economy of the village, but the transport vehicles, their repair and maintenance, their fuel, as well as drivers' salaries and other infrastructure necessary for the extraction of fish, meat and other resources, all of these expenses are covered by the SKhPK, alias the *sovkhos*.

The fish, one of the most important items during the spring/summer season, is abundant in the lakes and rivers and constitutes an unrestricted resource for those who could reach deep into the tundra (in the herders' case *ex officio*) and most importantly, take the salted catch back. The same applies to just about everything that can be extracted from the tundra, and in all cases these are



Figure 1: *The vezdekhod is used to transport herders and their families, as well as salted fish and meat*

heavy things – wooden barrels of salted fish or meat, plastic barrels with berries or mushrooms, antlers, pelts, building materials, including clay for building stoves, and scrap iron (Rus. *makulatura*) collected around the tundra from old *vezdekhodi* that have been abandoned.

The machines themselves belong to the era of agglomeration – of the creation of big state farms, *sovkhozy*, out of smaller collective farms (Rus. *kolkhoz*, Pl. *kolkhozy*). This was the early 1970s, but even then many of the machines were bought second-hand from the military and refurbished for herding needs. The *vezdekhod* thus embodies both the beginning of agglomeration, and the link with the military, agglomeration and the massive military presence of the Cold War era being two major themes in the local cultural process. They are both symbols of gargantuan size and unlimited power, with the implication that access to these gargantuan assets can solve just about any problem. Access is by personal linkage, i.e. by having in one's network of connections or kinship links – the complex referred to here as 'installation' – a person who can effect access, as the major precondition of informal exchange or *blat* (Ledeneva 1998, 2000). Agency is thus to be understood, in the system of these concepts, as the ability to extract from the powerful through a personalised network, or in the ability,

to work around the powerful, to circumvent them. It is clear, that since the currently powerful constitute such a precious resource they are critically necessary. Seen from this angle, one may well understand the universal hatred among the local community of Gorbachev, his restructuring and his destruction of 'the power of the former Union'.⁷ As a symbol, therefore, the *vezdekhod* underlines the critical dependence of low-level actors on access to 'softly constrained' public resources (Kornai 1992). In the same way that the cooperative *vezdekhod* is 'softly constrained' to allow massive private use (and is thus constantly overloaded), the whole former state functioned to feed private economies.

The Performative Machine: Working Chamber

The *vezdekhod* may be seen as the mechanical metaphor of the *sovkhos* and the ultimate symbol of sovkhoizm itself, the carrier of crypto-entrepreneurship. Crypto-entrepreneurship, in its turn, is perhaps most graphically seen in the working chamber of counting/harvesting enclosures (corrals). The enclosures are complex structures, composed of a receiving hall (Rus. *zal*), into which the herd is funnelled by two outer wings. Most of the halls are designed to take in a herd of up to 2000 head. From the receiving hall, fragments of the herd of several hundred head at a time are separated and moved into a smaller partition, from where further diminished fragments of ten to twenty head at a time are led into the working chamber (Rus. *rabochaia kamera*).

In this chamber a careful look is taken at the animals, while they are stampeding around a small group of herders. The chamber is not big – some ten metres in diameter on average. After checking, the animals are let into a number of other pens, according to the decision taken about them – in the first place, whether they go back into the herd and are let free, or are destined to be slaughtered. The slaughter fragment (Rus. *zaboiny kusok*) is divided into a collective (*sovkhosny*) and private part, and these go to separate pens. These animals are subject to differing slaughter procedures and, subsequently, trading, a topic we shall not pursue here. From the point of view of the present article, a previous decision-making procedure is more interesting: how are decisions about private animals taken, when many of their owners are not present at the corralling?

The question is prompted by the following important feature of the situation. Private owners, especially elderly pensioners, and particularly the old women, who may own just a few head of deer, or in some cases only one, cannot be driving from corral to corral all the winter in the hope that their deer would turn up somewhere. Clearly the decision – should their deer turn up after all – has to be made by persons who are taking care of their interests and can act in their name. To this vital point we shall turn again below.

Besides being the place where the decisions about slaughtering (*brakovka*) are taken, the working chamber functions as a decision-making mechanism in a number of other important ways. One such is the separation of deer for castration during the autumn/winter corrals. This decision has numerous implications connected with the draught-sled capabilities of an individual herder, those of a brigade team, of a team dependant, or of an owner of private deer, wishing to fatten a reindeer for future slaughter. All of these decisions must be effected in the working chamber and, in most cases, made on the spot.

A most vital part of the decision-making process concerns, however, the issue of unmarked deer, or of 'whole-eared' deer (*tseloushnie olen'i*). These deer appear increasingly in the working chambers of various corrals, due to the fact that calving campaigns and early calf earmarking, dependent on them, have become, as a practice, almost a thing of the past (Vladimirova 2006). Another consequence of this process of alienation between herd and herders – or, as the herders put it – of 'the deer going wild' (*odichanie olen'ei*), is the current absence of discrete brigade herds migrating over well-defined brigade territories. The former brigade herds have merged during the recent decade into huge composite herds, reaching over 10,000 head in some cases. One of the consequences of this tendency is that those herders who are custodians of herding interests have to be present at, ideally, all corrals or send their representatives to them.⁸ While the pensioners or other absentee owners clearly cannot command such performance in this way, the brigade leaders or their deputies are all highly motivated to be present in all the various working chamber sessions. This arrangement, which is a characteristic feature of herding, is, of course, not specific to the Kola post-Soviet herding situation discussed here. What distinguishes the Kola situation from especially the Nordic cases is that the working chamber performs not only as a decision-making and performative forum concerning a variety of the usual herding interests. An overarching current function is the critical role it has for the process of what we have called here hidden privatisation. This form of ownership transfer can be considered as the central part of current crypto-entrepreneurial practices in this sector of northwest Russian rural economies.

A Discursive Mystery

While important decisions are made at the sessions described above, and not only made but instantly performed with a flick of a knife, it remains unclear how the great multitude of interests, intersecting in the working chamber, are negotiated. Our field experience does not register anything resembling a formal meeting at which suggestions are made and discussed, and decisions are taken to mutual satisfaction. The nearest to this is the Monday meeting of the SKhPK managing board – called, metonymically the 'management' (*pravlenie*), at

which problems of the cooperative are discussed together with members in responsible positions, who are closer to herders' interests than the rather detached administration. The latter is represented by the Director, his three Vice-Directors, the Head Accountant, the Head Economist, and the Head of the Personnel Department. At these meetings the Administrative Office meets with the Reindeer Herding Crew, a juxtaposition well captured by Habeck (2005) in his distinction between *kantora* (office), and *brigada* (herding crew). The point of intersection between these two groups of interests (existing in a complementary love-hate relationship) is defined – in administrative terms – by the key positions of the Head of the Herding Department (*nachal'nik tsekh olenevodstva*), and the Head Vet (*vetvrach*). Besides this pair, there are other members of the Board of Managers, and consequently members of the Monday *pravlenie* meeting, who are *brigada* rather than *kantora*, in Habeck's phrasing. This is the middle-range herding elite, represented at the meeting by one of the vet technicians (*zootekhniki*), and by one herder from the group of brigade leaders. It is important to note, that to the best of our knowledge, the owners of private deer include all reindeer herders, the herding elite composed of the brigade leaders, the vet technicians, the Head Vet, and – at the pinnacle – the Head of the Herding Department. The owners of private deer that are not employees of the cooperative at the moment (mostly retired pensioners from the Reindeer Herding Department, or heirs of such), or those who work in the other departments of the farm, including the administration, are a minority.

Insofar as corralling sessions are concerned, the Monday *pravlenie* discusses them on what can be called the macro-communal level. The main concern is for the meat-plan (*miasoplan*) to be fulfilled, so that the herding department ensures a profit for the whole enterprise, which in turn contributes to the welfare of the whole community – the 4000 inhabitants of Lovozero. The *pravlenie* meeting does not – and cannot – discuss the numerous other problems of the community on a micro level, such as what happens with the private deer of this or that owner.

More general questions concerning private ownership have dropped out of recent discussions. These questions concerned whether or not there should be a limit to the ownership of private deer – so far there is none, and whether or not to impose a fee paid to the SKhPK for its herding of one's private deer. In both cases the status quo has been preserved in favour of increasing private ownership – i.e. there is no limit to the size of one's private herd, and there is no fee either.

The main problem of how to manage strategically and tactically the process of hidden privatisation cannot be discussed at the *pravlenie* meetings for ideological reasons. Despite the fact that various groups within the community, like the Veterans of Herding mentioned above – bring up the issue and send letters of protest to the cooperative and from there all the way up to the Murmansk

regional authorities, officially this form of privatisation is not recognised as existing. In this way, its hidden character is formally cemented by silence. Losses to the cooperative herd are routinely attributed to devastating raids of poachers from towns or military bases. It is very recently that the Agricultural Committee of the Murmansk regional government has recognised informal activities of the herders themselves as poaching. In an interview to the Murmansk electronic newspaper *Murmansk News*, regional governor Yurii Yevdokimov said: 'The greatest problem for reindeer herding is the poachers – from among the reindeer herders themselves' (*Murmansk News* 18 January 2006). This is how the regional administration has finally come to acknowledge the reality of hidden privatisation. In a typical manner, the solution offered is the setting up of a 'reindeer police' force which is called to bring order to the tundra.

The negotiating ability of the *pravlenie* is limited by its engagement with the more general problems of day-to-day running of the cooperative, and is also hemmed in by ideological self-censorship, despite grudging acknowledgement of 'certain weaknesses', i.e. internal poaching. Where does the community negotiate crucial interests, specifically about what is done at corralling sessions, apart from and beyond administrative rhetoric?

The Tundra Setting

The *pravlenie* meeting takes place in the sober atmosphere of a Monday morning, in the elegant Finnish-furnished and spacious office of the Director. The tundra *pravlenie* – to coin a corresponding term – can only take place in the huts built close to the corrals. These are rough places. In the centre of a typical hut there is a Russian brick stove, cracked on every side and filling the single big room with smoke. On one side there are wooden boards serving as tables, with benches and low stools on both sides, in lieu of chairs. The tables are littered with the individual cutlery of each herder, tins and jars, leftovers of grilled meat and ribs, pieces of bread, and overfilled ashtrays made of used tins. All the rest of the room is covered with plank platforms serving as beds. The tiny window is never opened, and the room is full of smoke from the stove and from the cigarettes of the herders who are, almost without exception, heavy smokers of the cheapest untipped cigarettes on the market. Each hut is meant to take in a brigade, the corral workers needed for the session, as well as the periphery of dependants, traders and visitors. At any one time there are about twenty people in the huts, drinking tea at the tables, or sleeping on the plank platforms. One can hardly see anything because of the smoke, the dim light of electric bulbs, and the clothing and boots drying on racks around the stove and at the foot of the sleeping platforms. It is to be noted that while female tent workers (*chumrobotnitsy*) work at many of the brigade bases and sometimes

non-working women with their children are there also, corral bases are almost exclusively men's places: women are not seen there.

The absence of women has a certain connection with the fact that at corralling time there is an almost incessant drinking of alcohol. Once a corralling session begins, there is a constant train of snowmobiles taking carcasses from the corralling, and bringing in vodka from the village. The snowmobiles are dubbed 'spirit-carriers' (*spirtovozy*) for this purpose, and corralling sessions are known as a time of limitless abandon when it comes to drinking. During one corralling we observed (February–March 2003), the drinking began in early February and lasted for over forty days, during which time a majority of herders drank steadily from day to day, until the Head of the Herding Department became delirious and consequently had to spend the months until the summer in hospital. During the corralling itself, i.e. in the working chamber, it is not uncommon to see herders working in various stages of inebriation, especially after the first day.

It is difficult to imagine how the multitude of interests we have mentioned above can be discussed and negotiated in this setting. We have to imagine a situation in which bonuses to salaries are stampeding around a group of people, many of them not quite sober, and they attach them on the run to their own earnings or to those of close or distant dependants. The current price of a carcass of deer can be estimated to be around US\$70, at fifty roubles per kilo of carcass meat. When a herder puts his private earmark on an unmarked animal that appears in the working chamber, that means an increase of earnings by at least two thousand roubles. Given current salaries of 4000–7000 roubles, and average pensions of 3000 roubles, this is an increase of some serious proportion. And yet, apart from the rather tipsy state of the participants, and the incessant drinking back in the huts, the corral is a fairly orderly affair, no rows or other forms of conflict can be observed. The general impression is of a fair and even distribution of the resource. The latter is formed by transferring *sovkhov* deer into private hands, but this seems to be a controlled process. The ultimate evidence for this is that private herds are growing in a way which takes care that the *sovkhov* continues to function, instead of being swiftly bled to death.

A role in this is certainly played by the overseeing responsible figures for the Reindeer Department: the Head of the Department and the Head Vet. It should be noted that these are the persons whose individual stock of private deer is biggest at the moment – reaching upwards of 300 head each, and growing. When one thinks about private stock, the phenomenon of replaceability of private deer should also be considered, since with a *sovkhov* herd around, losses from the private herd are easily replaced. In this way a private herd in a *sovkhov* arrangement is a much bigger asset than in a real private situation (like in the Nordic countries). In addition to the role of the *sovkhov* as an all-purpose vehicle (*vezdekhod*) carrying crypto-entrepreneurship

through all imaginable obstacles, private deer replaceability may have a lot to do with the fact that the herders prefer hidden to overt privatisation.

The Head of the Department sits perched in his booth, overseeing the working chamber activities, with the Head Vet beside him. A third controlling figure is the Counter (*shchetnik*) of the private deer. Some sort of order and fairness of distribution is attained by the various brigades taking turns in marking at their respective corrals. Thus, the unmarked deer would be fair game during the first day for the brigade which has driven the herd to the corral for whom the corral has been designed. The Porosozero Corral, for instance, was built for processing the herds of Brigades 1, 2, 8 and 9, but a composite herd of some 12,000 head (see Note 7) was found and brought in by Brigade 9 in December 2002. Consequently, this brigade had the first pick during the first day, and only later came the turn of the other brigades attached to this particular corral. When these brigades go to another corral in the area – for instance the adjacent Sem’ostrov’e Corral belonging to Brigades 1 and 3 of Krasnoshchel’e’s ‘Olenevod’, Brigades 1 and 3 would have the first pick on consecutive days, while the other brigades will only take care of their own animals and those of their dependants (personal communication).

An unmarked deer might get a brigade earmark rather than a private earmark. The proportion between these two possible alternatives determines the fortunes of the *sovkhov*, and, ultimately, of sovkhovism itself, as a mixture of quasi-Soviet and market economy. Currently this proportion is reaching the fifty-fifty mark. About 4000 head are reported missing from the *sovkhov* herd annually, the losses being attributed to poaching, predators, etc., but in reality the figure reflects mostly what goes into private herds (mixed in with the cooperative herd).

The question about how the discursive mystery is solved requires further investigation. Here we only point out the main outlines of the problem, because it presents very serious challenges for the fieldworker. For a person who is a non-smoker and a non-drinker the winter days of corralling can often seem endless, and at times unbearable. The problem is compounded by the fact that exactly when a corralling may occur, if at all, might be learned only at the very last moment and thus one must be on the alert constantly. These are, however, only logistical problems, as well as problems of physical and psychic endurance. What is theoretically challenging is the ability of the community to negotiate interests by discursive strategies of a very special character. These strategies seem to be founded on a shared set of understandings, in other words on fairly stable shared meanings of right and wrong. These meanings are performed in the working chamber, and in this way it can be seen as the cultural revealed in a performative utterance.⁹ This is, in other words, the nearest to seeing how a cultural process is enacted in reference to specific economic objectives.

Conclusion: the Performative Machine

The performance of the working chamber attracts attention by suggesting itself as a clear example of a cultural model informing economic action. The presence of a stable cultural model (sovkhoism) is borne out by the absence of necessity for any formal discussion or planning. As we have shown above, even if there was a desire for such to be arranged, it is difficult to see how this could be done in the setting at hand, and given various obstacles to such a form of discourse – alcoholism being a major one of them. The situation, as observed by us during recent fieldwork, suggests that instead of formal discussions or planning, the performative machine is functioning by stable shared understanding and acceptance of modes of conduct, and an overall strategy which aims at ideally indefinite preservation of the model (sovkhoism). The system seems so stable and uniformly shared that it requires very little discursive action to propel itself – sporadic hints at what is to be done, last minute notice, some remark, a gesture. A lot more fieldwork has to be carried out to gain a firm hold on this process, but, even at this stage one can suggest a hypothetical premise. It is concerned with the problem of the traditional – it may not be where we are ‘traditionally’ used to looking for it. Sovkhoism suggests itself as a much more stable tradition, than anything that dates before, even so late as the 1960s or 1970s. Finally, a study of the working chamber as a conflictless performative machine may infuse some new blood in the currently anaemic state of the concept of shared cultural meanings as part of the proverbial controversy around culture.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this article has been published as a working paper in the Max Planck Institute Series, as Konstantinov (2004).
2. An overview of the main forms can be found in Jernsletten and Klovov (2002: 34-37; see also Klovov 2004: 55-92).
3. Longitudinal field research with reindeer herders in the Kola Peninsula was begun by the first author in 1994 with the support of the Norwegian Council for Academic Research (NFR). Since 2001 it has continued with Vladislava Vladimirova within two research programs: RENMAN, ‘The Challenges of Modernity for Reindeer Management: Integration and Sustainable Development in Europe’s Subarctic and Boreal Regions’, an EU Project; and ‘Post-Soviet Political and Socioeconomic Transformation Among the Indigenous Peoples of Northern Russia: Current Administrative Policies, Legal Rights, and Applied Strategies’, a Swedish research programme at Uppsala University financed by The Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation. We are much indebted for the support of our research generously provided by the Department of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology at Uppsala University, and particularly to Professor Hugh Beach, the project leader, for advice, encouragement and personal support. The observations and thoughts which provoked the writing of this paper are the result of a total of fifteen months of fieldwork between 15 January

2003 and 10 October 2005 in the central part of the Kola Peninsula. We are grateful to the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle for generously supporting our work in 2004 and 2005 in our capacity of affiliated researchers with the Institute. Our sincerest gratitude goes to the herders of Brigades 1 and 8, and their brigade leaders Ivan Chuprov and Vladimir Hatanzei. Our fieldwork would have been impossible without the moral and logistic support of Vladimir Golovin, Head of Hydrometeorological Station 'Kolm'iavr'.

4. The closure lasted only for a few months, and the paper has been appearing regularly ever since.
5. As of November 2005 a new municipal distribution of Murmansk Region came into force, resurrecting some municipalities that were liquidated in the agglomeration reforms of the late 1960s.
6. Blat is the popular Russian concept signifying relations of legally unregulated reciprocity and exchange during the Soviet time. It has been discussed in the literature on the Soviet Union since the 1950s (Berliner 1957: 182–206), but the most thorough study of blat is the monograph by the sociologist Alena Ledeneva (1998).
7. In the words of our informants: '*Kakuiu stranu razbombili!*' ('What a country they have destroyed!'), said with great indignation.
8. In the winter corralling of 2002 (14 December), a composite herd of approximately 12,000 head was driven for processing to the Porosozero Corral in the centre of the Kola Peninsula. The main body of this composite herd consisted of the deer of Brigades 1, 2, 8 and 9 of the 'Tundra' Cooperative (SKhPK 'Tundra', Lovozero), as well as of Brigades 1 and 3 of SKhPK 'Olenevod' (Krasnoshchel'e), but included fragments of varying size from practically all brigades on the peninsula. Consequently, each brigade of the two former state farms had sent its representatives to the corralling.
9. A performative utterance is when an action is performed by uttering a statement, i.e. of the type 'I name this ship "Queen Mary"'. We may thus see earmarking as a non-verbal performative utterance, and the ear-mark as a statement ('This deer belongs to me').

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