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Original article

# Lured by oil and gas: Labour mobility, multi-locality and negotiating *normality* & *extreme* in the Russian Far North

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### ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the notions of *extreme* and *normality* among highly mobile and multi-local people who contrast themselves with the sedentary population: long-distance commute (LDC) workers in the petroleum industry of the Russian North. It explores how mobile and multi-local people negotiate emotionally and geographically distant spaces which are meaningful in their lives and suggests the concept of conscious acts of separation and connection as prerequisites for integrating the trio of distinct realms of a long-distance commuting life: *home–journey–on duty*. This article rethinks the problematization and exoticism of highly mobile and multi-local life-styles and considers the embeddedness of LDC in macro-political and macro-economic processes in contemporary Russia.

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## 1. Introduction

Since the late 1980s and particularly over the last two decades, long-distance commute (LDC) work has become increasingly significant in the Russian North in the provision of the workforce for the petroleum industry. The activities of resource exploitation, which are becoming ever more remote from urban agglomerations and shifting further towards and deeper within the Arctic circle, demand this increasing mobility and consequently a multi-local life-style—a trend which has prevailed for decades in other Arctic and subarctic regions as well. In Russia, LDC workers from non-northern regions are often cheaper than the local workforce due to the supplementary payments to which northern residents are entitled. This makes LDC attractive to an industry which today is enmeshed in the dynamics of a globalized neo-liberal market economy.

This article introduces an approach which captures mobility and multi-locality from the viewpoint of the constructions, perceptions and negotiated meanings of *normality* (Link, 1997; Link et al., 2003) and *extreme* (Saxinger, 2016, 2013), as well as the related process of how *mobility/multi-locality* and *sedentism* are distinguished from and intersect with one another (Saxinger, 2016, 2013; Rolshoven, 2004).

The paper marks a departure from a common perception, expressed in public and scientific discourse that the LDC life-style is problematic (e.g., Carrington et al., 2012; Bykov, 2011; FIFO man 2015; Vorkuta, 2012; Zapolyarka, 2012). One type of perception of the LDC life-style can be defined along the lines outlined by Russian *Gazprom*-related scholars (Ananekov et al., 2005). In their view, LDC is a form of making a living that is pursued by individuals only as long as the bearable maximum limit of hardship is not overstepped and the benefits continue to compensate. However, is it empirically valid to include LDC within the category of the *bearable* which presumes the notions of *extreme* and *abnormality*?

Therefore, in this paper, questions are raised as to whether it is legitimate to class such a life-style as “outside the norm”. In what ways do LDC people live out their lives in cyclic mobility and multi-locality to negotiate these central spheres of *home–journey–on duty*, thus turning this challenging life-style into an attractive and desirable one? Hence, the key research question is how mobile and multi-local people negotiate emotionally and geographically distant places which are meaningful in their lives. I suggest the following concept: conscious acts of separation and connection are prerequisites for integrating the trio of distinct realms of LDC life, namely, *home–journey–on duty*. These three spaces differ in terms of social organisation, duties and social norms (Saxinger, 2016).

I further propose to examine LDC not only from a macro-political perspective as has been the case in the (scarce) works of geographers (e.g., Markey et al., 2011; Storey 2001, 2010) and that

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of few economists (e.g., Borisov, 2004a,b) who discuss e.g., impacts of LDC for regional development and/or economic efficiency of LDC vis á vis mono-industrial towns (Bogudinova, 1981). Extensive multi-disciplinary corporate research has been conducted since the foundation of *Gazprom Dobycha Yamburg*, a subsidiary of *Gazprom*. These and other applied studies range from management strategies to economic factors, to medical and psychological issues related to LDC (e.g., Ananenkov et al., 2005; Andreyev et al., 2009; Korneeva and Simonova, 2014; Korneeva et al., 2015; Simonova 2014; Stammer and Eilmsteiner-Saxinger, 2010).

A closer look at the micro-level consequences of entrepreneurial and politically driven labour force management is necessary and has so far been widely neglected in international research. One exception is Spies (2006, 2009) statistical analysis of job satisfaction among LDC in the Komi Republic; his research is supported by my qualitative analysis which found that LDC is not a key factor in lower job satisfaction. It is rather a combination of how LDC is equipped and managed; for instance, it is a question of how much flexibility and quality of service is provided that contributes to the degree of job satisfaction. This is also related to the structural embedding of LDC. The interaction of insufficient labour laws and the absence of a trustworthy judicial system in Russia, combined with endemic corruption – as it is described by the workers – has led to the increasing precariousness of LDC, especially in the form of so called *wild commuting* (*dikaya vakhta*) in sub-contracting companies as it will be outlined below. Moreover, the state protectionist attitude to natural resources and this industry in Russia clashes with legally uncontrolled neo-liberal approaches to human resources. LDC under the conditions of wild commuting, occurring mostly in the sub-contracting sector, contributes to short-term and precarious careers, while high-quality managed LDC – as can be seen in international or in Russia's major corporate companies – supports high job satisfaction and lower labour force turnover. However, a key message from this study is – as from some of the few studies in the Canadian extractive industry sector (Storey, 1989; Heiler et al., 2000) – that mobile work such as LDC does not necessarily lead to deviance (e.g., divorce rates over the average or extensive alcohol and drug abuse) and that lower job satisfaction is embedded in a web of macro-, meso-structural and individual factors.

The introduction to the theoretical embedding and the methodological framework on which the analysis of the ethnographic material is based is followed by the conception of LDC with a look outside Russia where LDC – also called fly-in/fly-out (FIFO) – operations are practiced. In the next section, the practices of separation and connection as an integrative act are analysed. This follows a presentation of the heterogeneity of the people involved and their types of work. Subsequently, the notions of *deviant* (Freilich, 1991) and *problematic* life-styles are discussed as well as the constructedness of the idea of having an *extreme* life and working under *extreme* conditions. This section includes a discussion about not seeing the LDC workforce as static *human resources*, but rather actively including them as stakeholders in dialogues in order to facilitate the relationship between local communities and incoming transient workforce as well, in order to enhance the organisation of LDC as a labour force management system. Finally, an analysis of practices of realisation of LDC is presented and the issue of embeddedness of LDC into macro-political and macro-economic processes is raised.

## 2. Theoretical and methodological embedding

The interpretation of the ethnographic material for this article is embedded into theoretical conceptions of the social constitution of *mobility* (cf. Büscher and Urry, 2009; Sheller and Urry, 2006; Olwig and Sørensen, 2002; Trager, 2005) and multi-locality (cf.

Hilti, 2009; Rolshoven, 2006, 2004; Rolshoven and Winkler, 2009; Schier and Jurczyk, 2007; Weichhart, 2009) as well as of *normality*, *flexible normalism* and *proto-normalism* (cf. Link, 1997; Link et al., 2003; Lingenauber, 2008). As shown in this article, LDC workers live a *flexible normalistic* life. That term denotes alternative and dynamic normalities that circle around the centres of mainstream ways of living and thinking. *Proto-normalism* in turn denotes static normality of behaviour and values on an average scale within a majority society. In the latter, boundaries are fixed between deviance and normality. Hence, flexible normalism considers a variety of normalities with fluid boundaries of minority normalities oscillating between centre and peripheries of norms, thus normalities are constantly negotiated; they also have the potential of approaching the average centre and becoming majority norms.

The majority of studies on human itinerancy in the theoretical mainstream refer to transnational migration (e.g., Castles, 2007; Messina and Lahav, 2006; Glick-Schiller et al., 1992; Stalker, 2000; Vertovec, 2007). The anthropologists Olwig and Sørensen (2002: 2) criticize the [ . . . ] *prominence of concepts like nation state and transnationality in contemporary migration studies* and urge for a broader conceptualisation of movement to include a variety of human mobility, including domestic mobility. [ . . . ] *The ways in which making a living links up with larger-scale patterns of population movement, the range and variation on mobility that such movements involve, the social institutions and networks facilitating and sustaining mobile livelihoods, and the social and spatial practices of mobile populations* (Olwig and Sørensen, 2002: 1).

The data on which this article is based can be seen from the perspective of making and appropriating places and social spaces (cf. Cresswell, 1996, 2004; Ingold, 2007; Löw, 2001, 2008; Massey, 2005; Thrift, 1983, 1996). These places and spaces are strongly related to the symbolic meanings of oil and gas and the ways in which they are extracted. In this way, the resource attracts people to the North and they develop an emotional and social relationship with its spatial materiality (Saxinger, 2015), i.e. the evolution of a network of materiality, technology and people (cf. Latour, 1993; Law, 1992). I shall raise questions regarding anthropological political economy (cf. Ferguson, 2005, 2010; Wolf, 1982), and how LDC on the micro-level relates to and is embedded into a larger macro-level structural context in terms of the people, the state and the industry, all of which are subsequently embedded into the world market of raw materials.

This study is based on ethnographic research undertaken between 2007 and 2010, focussing on LDC workers, their families and their broader societal environment, and employing mobile and multi-local field-work. I accompanied the commuters mainly on commuter trains as well as on aeroplanes, travelling several times back and forth (over 25,000 km in total) between Moscow and Novy Urengoy in the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous District (YNAO) at the polar circle. On some of the trips I stopped in various cities of the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous District (KMAO) such as Surgut and Nizhnevartovsk. In addition, I spent time in the *home* or *sending regions* of central Russia, such as the Republics of Mari El, Chuvashia, Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, as well as in commuter hub towns of the North. I visited large stationary workers' camps, such as Yamburg run by *Gazprom*, as well as small mobile camps in the sub-contracting construction sector. On the basis of a mixed methods approach, I collected quantitative data from employees at two anonymous (state-related) companies ( $n=117$ ) and from students of the State Technical Petroleum University in Ufa (UGNTU) who come from families with a minimum of one LDC parent ( $n=145$ ) (Saxinger et al., 2014). The quantitative data provided cues for the interpretation of the qualitative data which was then analysed utilising interpretative anthropological methods (cf. Geertz, 1973, 1983, 1993; Ingold, 2000, 2011; Turner and

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