



Producers' cooperation within or against cooperative agricultural institutions? The case of reindeer husbandry in Post-Soviet Russia



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ABSTRACT

With the advance of economic neoliberalization along with the green economy paradigm that aims to alleviate rapid climate change, discussions of the rationale of cooperative organization of food production have come to the fore. This paper contributes to the scholarly understanding of motivations for cooperative organization of production by taking up empirical illustrations from the European North of Russia, where despite expectations of privatization after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the cooperative organization of reindeer husbandry often persists, as a heritage of the Soviet state enterprises (*sovkhozes*). The paper aims at advancing the analysis of cooperative reindeer husbandry and its rationales employing ideas within the field of substantivist economic anthropology of postsocialism that started with Karl Polanyi's vision of the embedded economy (Polanyi, 1944). Further, I have employed the ideas of the renowned study by Caroline Humphrey of Soviet state farms as total social institutions (Humphrey, 1998) as well as Stephen Gudeman's dialectical approach to the economy (Gudeman, 2001). The analysis shows that the cooperative organization of reindeer husbandry reproduces the economic and social patterns that were developed in the Soviet period, perhaps also adapting and incorporating elements of traditional indigenous social orders. Such social arrangements and the accompanying moral values are embedded in the reindeer herding economy, and it is their persistence that indigenous people achieve through adhering to cooperative values.

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"Economy is made up of a contradiction. We live in a double, conflicting world, which is economy's tension. Shot through with practices and ideologies, with competition and mutuality, with antagonism and community, economy encompasses more than that most economists and everyday dogmas allow, and it is more complex than most anthropologists realize." (Gudeman, 2008, 4)

1. Introduction

With the advance of neoliberal economy and rapid climate change, the questions of nature use and protection and the organization of food production have come to the fore once again. How can we achieve satisfactory protection of biological diversity and reduce fossil fuel and CO₂ emissions while increasing production and enhancing wellbeing in rural peripheries of Europe that have

traditionally been involved in agriculture (Mills, 2012; Renting and Van Der Ploeg, 2001; Renting et al., 2009; Groot et al., 2007)? How is localized production, like agriculture, influenced by global schemes of neoliberal economic transformation that benefit from unregulated markets (Forney and Häberli, 2015), or by effective environmental management (Torre, 2006)? These questions put agricultural producers' cooperation in the centre of discussion, whether from the perspective of the human capacity for economic cooperation beyond self-interest, from this capacity's transformation during the recent decades of Western individualism and autonomous domination (Restakis, 2010; Sennett, 2012), or from the perspective of its problematic nature when entrepreneurial behaviour, efficiency, and the protection of property, including in natural resources, is in question (Stock et al., 2014).

This paper will contribute to the debate on food production cooperatives, and more specifically on the motivations for cooperation, presenting an original case study: post-Soviet cooperative reindeer herding. As an indigenous economy, reindeer herding is a specialized adaptation to a highly particular environment, and is in this sense always local and culturally specific. Indigenous reindeer

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herding traditions often have long and diverse histories and in this sense reindeer herding economies are imbedded in the symbolism and cultural identity of many Northern communities. Nevertheless, Soviet policies achieved an unthinkable unification inside the sector and with other agricultural branches. Reindeer herding in the North from the Kola Peninsula, Russia's border with the West, to Chukotka, the Far East, reproduced a model of organization of production common with all other Soviet regions, and spheres of agricultural production, like dairy farming or wheat growing. Similarly, post-Soviet reindeer husbandry shows many tendencies and problems that are shared with other areas and economies in Russia. In this way, the questions that cooperative reindeer herding raises by embodying the tension between economic production and cultural and social formations are of more general relevance. Importantly, I contest a misguided belief in the power of economic rationality and profit maximizing behavior in cooperators and point out the importance of other-than-economic factors. The case of reindeer herding cooperation reveals the complex and unstable relationship of economic and social motivations, or in Gudeman's words, the dialectic of mutuality and the market (Gudeman, 2008). In view of this complexity, I aim to join other contributors to this special issue in searching for theoretical approaches and synergies in cooperative economic activities that do not disembodied it from its social environment for analytical simplification and easy political solutions, but instead reveal existing contradictions, inconsistencies, problems, and finally, our failures to solve them.

This paper departs from a supposed paradox. For roughly twenty years of democratization and privatization of the economy in Russia, there has been an expectation that reindeer herding will become predominantly private under the influence of its pre-Soviet history, the Nordic model, foreign financial support, and the severe economic crisis in the sector that followed the withdrawal of state care. In contrast to such predictions, based in the belief that private ownership ensures better management, efficiency and profit, reindeer husbandry in many areas continues to be organized in cooperatives or other forms that derive from Soviet state enterprises. My field research in the Russian North indicates that cooperatives have undergone revival in the 2000s even in areas where collective reindeer herding dissolved in the early 1990s, such as Evenki and Nenets Autonomous Region. Popular explanations of this paradox in the 1990s were ideological conservatism, lack of entrepreneurial spirit and initiative, and laziness, or the repressive nature of post-Soviet economic and political governance over indigenous minorities. Scholars have also pointed to the material advantages of cooperative organizations through the keeping of private animals in the collective herds (the so-called personal reindeer), which insures that the costs of private production and risk of loss are guaranteed informally by the cooperative (Konstantinov 2015, Habeck, 2005; Stammler, 2005; Gudeman, 2008; Ziker, 1998).

While this paper takes seriously such explanations, it aims at advancing the analysis of the alleged paradox by looking into further advantages that cooperative organization of reindeer husbandry brings to local society and economy. I depart from ideas of substantivist economic anthropologists about postsocialism that build on Karl Polanyi's vision of the embedded economy (Polanyi, 1944), and Caroline Humphrey's study of Soviet state farms (Humphrey, 1998). These ideas point to the significance of the cooperatives' social and economic values for the reproduction of local communities. Because of space limitations, this article only briefly mentions details of social relations and practices in economic cooperation. Instead it presents ethnographic material and examples that show the impossibility of differentiating the economic from the social in cooperative production (Vladimirova, 2006). Cooperatives challenge the common-sense delineation of a sphere

of individualist economic interest, i.e., the sphere of the economy from relations of sociality, friendship and sharing, and the emotions inherent in them. In order to grasp this complex socio-economic environment, I borrow theoretical insights elaborated by the economic anthropologist Stephen Gudeman, who suggests an inclusive definition of the economy as consisting of two realms: community (the house), where relations of production and exchange are long-term, and things are done for their own sake, and the market, which revolves around short-term relations of materially-oriented character (Gudeman, 2008).

In this article I analyse data from field studies of two cooperatives in the Russian Arctic: Cooperative Tundra in Murmansk Region and Cooperative Friendship of People (*Druzhba Narodov*), in Nenets Autonomous Region. Both reindeer herding cooperatives are inheritors of Soviet State Agricultural Enterprises (*sovkhoses*) that were reorganized in the early 1990s by a central directive into cooperatives. In both cases, while resources have been divided and shares allocated to all previous employees and present cooperators, the enterprises continue to be run centrally through a hierarchy of job positions established in Soviet times (Vladimirova, 2006; Konstantinov and Vladimirova, 2002). No herder has claimed his share of the reindeer and tried to go private, as far as I know. At the same time, with the state withdrawing its financial help and patronage role, both cooperatives suffered severe economic crisis, including loss of resources such as reindeer, grazing land and machinery, and loss of status as a highly ranked economic institution that provided well-paid and respected jobs and was a stronghold of indigenous culture. Nevertheless, Cooperative Tundra continues to be one of two surviving reindeer production units in Murmansk Region, despite a few attempts to start private reindeer husbandry that Nordic Sami and NGOs initiated and shouldered financially. Sami people, the indigenous ethnic minority of the region, have not been successful in revitalizing ethnic reindeer herding. The two existing reindeer herding cooperatives in the region also employ people of mixed ethnic origin, beyond the historical herders Sami, Komi and Nenets. The difficulties that private and kinship-based enterprises experience have been the subject of previous publications (Vladimirova, 2006, 2014a).

In contrast, people from the Nenets Autonomous Region (roughly 1000 km from Murmansk) as well as indigenous Nenets in general, are some of the few indigenous groups that have managed to revive many elements of traditional economy, including reindeer herding and nomadic lifestyles. Reindeer herding in the region exists under different organizational forms, from unregistered ownership, to indigenous clan community ownership and management (known as *obshchiny*), to cooperatives and even state-managed farms. Scholars have compared, analysed and attempted to explain these developments among Nenets (Golovnev and Osherenko, 1999; Stammler, 2005; Khariuchi, 2001), but I only engage with this in a limited way below. I focus on Cooperative Friendship of People because of its structural similarities with Cooperative Tundra. Its present situation reveals the persistence of the collective organization of herding, despite all negative predictions and the traumas that collectivization caused to indigenous populations in the late 1920s and the 1930s. Forced appropriation of reindeer, grazing lands, and other possessions, relocation of people and forced sedentarisation, separation of families, and imposed education of children in boarding schools are only some of the atrocities which Soviet rule brought to indigenous peoples and cultures (Slezkine, 1992, 1994; Vakhtin, 1992; Ssorin-Chaikov, 2003; Golovnev and Osherenko, 1999).

A central directive in the early 1990s provided that all Soviet reindeer husbandry state and collective farms should be reorganized into cooperatives. Soon after that many new possibilities were provided by law and different regions and enterprises took

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