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**Waterbirth and Russian-American Exchange:
From the Iron Curtain to Facebook**

by

Ekaterina Belousova

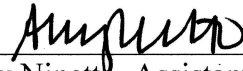
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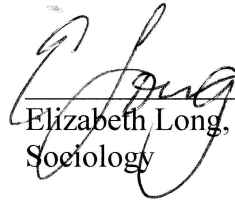
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ABSTRACT

Doctoral Dissertation

Waterbirth and Russian-American Exchange:

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by

Ekaterina Belousova

The doctoral dissertation “Waterbirth and Russian-American Exchange: From the Iron Curtain to Facebook” presents the social history of the Russian waterbirth movement, from the Cold War epoch to the present. One of the first ethnographies to examine Russian-American cultural exchange, this study fills a number of gaps in both Russian and American cultural history, bringing together the issues of religion, science, gender, body politics and the state. By drawing on interviews with Russian and American birth practitioners, as well as participant observation of the birthing practices on both continents, I seek to define their agendas for the development of alternative ideologies and practices, as well as their specific effects, experienced on both global and local scales.

In particular, I attempt to problematize the conventional narratives of globalization and biomedicalization, presenting “local” cultures either as passive victims of the dominant Western agent or rebels exercising futile resistance. Despite the turbulent effects of

Western intervention into the Russian value system and everyday practices, the local culture of Russia proved capable of producing, promoting, and communicating to the world particular models and schemes that proved to be viable, went global, and affected the vision of the body and self in the Western world.

By examining the case of the waterbirth movement, the project seeks to enrich current understanding of the information flows between Russia and the West. By looking at Russian and American utopian projects, which center on science, nature, tradition and globalization, and carefully tracing their sources, origins, mutual impacts and conflicts, we can get a better understanding of the formation and distribution of authoritative knowledge on global and local levels. An empirical study of this specific set of problems is expected to stimulate a valuable insight into the mechanisms governing the relationships between social orders, complex transnational identity formation, and global/local knowledge production in late modern societies.

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Part 1: INTRODUCTION AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Chapter 1: Introduction

Research Problem and Aims

In 1999, two women, the American journalist Aleshanee Akin and Russian homebirth midwife Daria Strel'tsova, coauthored a Russian book titled *Nine Months and the Whole Life: the Childbirth of the New Millennium* (Akin and Strel'tsova 1999). In an interview I had with Strel'tsova in 2001, she said that, while writing the book, she and Akin had consensus on almost every topic. The exception to this was strong disagreement they had regarding certain techniques of physical manipulation of the babies, which were widespread in the Russian homebirth community. Elsewhere, in a parenting magazine article addressed to the Russian reader, that argued against these techniques, Akin asks a question, "Why are we taking the risk of homebirth at all?" and then gives an answer: for the birth to be gentle, for the mother and baby to bond with each other (Akin 1999). Akin gives this answer assuming the essential ideological unity of the homebirth movements in Russia and America. What she didn't realize, is that, in fact, the "we" she used doesn't really exist, and the seemingly identical actions in different cultures could be based on different presuppositions, embed different meanings and reach for different aims (Klassen 2001a). The two movements on two hemispheres do have common concepts and beliefs; however, they came to adopt them in different ways, and their motivations can differ tremendously.

In this project, I investigate the case of the alternative birth movement in Russia within the

context of its relationship with a parallel American movement concerned with seemingly similar issues. By comparing and contrasting the two, I try to see exactly how ideas travel between “East” and “West.” The target of my study might be defined as imagined world “landscapes” (“ideoscapes,” “mediascapes,” as in Appadurai 1990, 1996) or the global “flows” (Castells 2010), such as the flows of information, images and symbols.¹ As Emily Martin demonstrated in her works, flexibility became a virtue in many spheres of social life, including materials, design and imagery (Martin 1994 and 1998b). Social theories of the global had to comply accordingly, providing more flexibility in the envisioning of the “new global economy.” Recently, the concepts of “heterogenization,” “interculturalism,” “hybridity” and “indigenization,” which presuppose the opportunities for “local” cultures to rework the global impact imposed on them and establish their own influence (Said 1979; Bhabha 1990; Hall 1992; Clifford and Marcus 1986, Appadurai 1990, Tsing 2004), found their way into the discussions of “global modernities” (Featherstone and Lash 1995). This flexible imagery of flows and currents in opposition to the rigid stigma of globalization is quite relevant to the essence of my research. Thus, waterbirth, a birthing technique imbued with growing popularity, gradually finding its way from US homes to birthing centers and even hospitals, is now commonly associated with concern about women's ease and comfort during labor and birth (hence the term “gentle birth,” used by Akin; cp. Harper 1994). Very few people now remember where the technique came from, and most would be very much surprised to learn that it was first introduced by Russians.

¹ While using the metaphor of flows, I do imply active participation of the people involved in and affected by globalization, who actively “define the landscape” and “carve the channels” for the moving streams. For the critical discussion of the meta-language and imagery that are used in social sciences in an attempt to address the complexities of “the global situation,” see Tsing 2000.

When waterbirth first appeared in Russia in the early 1980s, its proponents were primarily interested in developing new potentialities in humans, including physical, mental and psychical abilities. Breeding a new type of human by means of applying certain bodily techniques was their goal. This new generation of people was supposed to change the ecology of Earth - not only by dealing with the endangered natural environment, but also by addressing a variety of social and political problems. At the time, the fear of nuclear war was incredibly prevalent, and prevention of the potential Armageddon was justly seen as the main task of the humanity.

It is common to look at the Brezhnev era as a time when the socialist camp was completely isolated from the rest of the world. The metaphor of the Iron Curtain sufficiently exemplifies this belief. There seemed to have been a certain kind of informational blockade, working both ways and serving interests of both sides. On the official level, either one of the parties involved tried to prevent any possibility of informational exchange. The metaphors of “spreading the disease” and “contamination” could be heard in the media on both sides of the Curtain. According to the ideal typical description given to the two divided camps by Susan Buck-Morss,

The COLD WAR ENEMIES were deployed on an ontological divide, and what Churchill named the Iron Curtain became its geophysical manifestation. This boundary was defensive not only in a military sense, but in the conceptual sense that it prevented contamination from the imaginary perceptions held by the absolute “other.” The boundary had a different meaning for each side, as we would expect. For the political imaginary of nation-states, it cordoned off socialism, which was perceived spatially by isolating it spatially, in order to prevent its spread to the “free world.” For the political imaginary of class warfare, the physical boundary was understood as providing a temporal bulwark, protecting the nascent socialist societies so that they could develop in history uncontaminated by the economic and

social distortions of capitalism. Isolation was seen as a means whereby socialist regimes could remain autarchic and hence masters of their fate, providing TIME to catch up with the capitalist West in terms of production, while not falling back from the historical level that the political revolution had achieved. But in fact, the great divide served as well the unstated purpose of isolating the political imaginaries themselves, protecting each from being undermined by the logic of the other (Buck-Morss 2000: 35-36).

And yet the Iron Curtain was not closed hermetically; in fact, it was porous, leaving certain gaps unprotected. In the 1960s, the so-called Human Potential Movement, holding similar concerns as its Russian counterparts, started growing in America, and the two movements in the two enemy camps somehow found their way to inform and influence each other. Ideas, taking the form of oral communication, books, manuscripts and visual images, penetrated the curtain both ways and became adopted, rejected, filtered, selected, reworked, processed and applied. At Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California, which is known as the original epicenter of the Human Potential Movement in the US, a special American-Soviet Exchange Program was organized and successfully ran starting in 1980. In 1994, it transformed into the independent The Russian-American Center (TRAC). The work of these organizations was directed at establishing connections with the Russian counterparts working in the New Age domain, which presented a complex interplay of science, psychology and religion (Hickman and Murphy 1980; Thompson 1982; Anderson 1983; Kripal 2007).

The general focus of my research is the process of Russia's self-identification in relation to the West, which, among other issues, includes intercultural communication between Russia and the United States in the field of alternative childbirth methods. My objectives are to improve, clarify and contribute to the present understanding of the mechanisms at work in a

society that has not yet been subjected to a capitalistic transition, or is still in process of becoming familiar with the values, ideologies and practices of a Western capitalistic society. By looking at the case of waterbirth subculture and the affiliated fields, such as infant swimming, uses of breathwork in the context of transpersonal psychology, and special types of bodywork and physical training for the babies, my project seeks to enrich current understanding of the process of information flows between Russia and the West during the Cold War epoch and later, after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Looking at the Russian and American utopian projects, which center on science, nature, tradition and globalization, and carefully tracing their sources, origins, mutual impacts and conflicts is meant to help gain a better understanding of the formation and distribution of authoritative knowledge on global and local levels.²

The central research questions that inform this project include the following: Which social factors allowed certain ideas to be accepted and become authoritative? What was rejected and why? Where did the misunderstanding begin and lead to a conflict or to total or partial transformation of an idea or practice? What was the nature of the two local movements and the communication between them? By what means could this communication be organized and managed? These and other questions will be addressed in this study.

Fieldwork

My unusual situation as a graduate student at Rice was determined by the fact that I entered the program already having a particular project, a significant part of the fieldwork for

² Please see the discussion of the concept of authoritative knowledge on pp. 26-27 of this thesis.

which has already been completed. My current dissertation project builds on years of my ethnographic research in the field of birth, which I'd conducted – in Russia, the US and within the international alternative birth community. There were a few stages in my childbirth project, during which I concentrated on different theoretical problems and on work with different groups of subjects.

In 1994-1999 I studied the culture and discursive settings of Russian maternity hospitals in two major Russian cities, Moscow and St. Petersburg. This project only became possible as a result of the Western expansion into the Russian conceptualization of reality: namely, when the concept of *human rights* was first officially introduced to Russians, and the corresponding institutions were established. When the *Memorial* Society for Human Rights was organized in Moscow in 1989, it started a joint program together with the German Heinrich Böll foundation. The program recruited young social scientists, recent University graduates, to study human rights violations in all the domains of Russian life. In 1994, I had only just given birth to my older son and was completely overwhelmed by the oppression of women in the maternity hospital where I stayed. When an opportunity to work with the *Memorial* & Heinrich Böll program presented itself, I offered to study the culture of the Russian maternity hospitals as a contribution to their comprehensive collective project on human rights, and my proposal was approved for funding (see Eremina and Zhemkova 1996). This was the beginning of my work on the social aspects of birth.

For this project, I interviewed women who had given birth in hospitals, as well as some

medical professionals working in these institutions. Having started this inquiry as a part of a collective human rights project, I later continued this study on my own. It then became an individual ethnographic project that sought to analyze doctor-patient interactions, as well as the discourses of maternity and infancy in the USSR and post-socialist Russia. In the process, I shifted my focus from collecting historical evidence about the violations of human rights in the hospitals to the subjectivities of the narrators and the ways in which social memory is shaped and represented in narratives by means of various discursive strategies. I became strongly interested in the ways in which these narrative models were constructed, reproduced and circulated. A total of seventy five formal interviews were conducted at this stage. This material was the basis for a number of my articles, as well as my Candidate of Sciences dissertation thesis in Theory of Culture, which I defended in 1999 at the Russian State University for the Humanities, Moscow (Belousova 1998, 1999 and 2003a).

In 2000-2004, I continued my ethnographic research on birthing practices in Russia and conducted a new study, which was sponsored by the Open Society Institute (Belousova 2002a; 2002b and 2003b). Within the framework of this project, I interviewed Russian homebirth attendants, as well as people giving birth with their assistance - again in the cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg (this totaled forty formal and dozens of informal interviews). This time my goal was to conceptualize the homebirth movement within Russian history and culture, looking at its philosophical, religious and ritual grounds. Besides interviewing, I conducted participant observation by attending childbirth education classes led by Russian homebirth midwives, that represented various ideological trends, as

well as by directly observing homebirths. I consider this work the second phase of my birth project.

Having collected this material and completed preliminary analyses, I came to Rice in summer of 2004 looking to continue the work on my project on birth alternatives and seeking for a new theoretical lens that would help me interpret my findings. The fieldwork that I conducted in Russia provided me with the necessary information on Russia's participation in the intercultural exchange, which I discuss in this current thesis, and with the necessary connections and resources to research the input and response on the part of Americans working in the domain of alternative birth. Many of my Russian interviewees mentioned the occasions of Russian-Western exchange that they or people they knew had participated in, and cited the people, books and ideas traveling back and forth. The Russian stage of my research also helped me to map the US birth field and to identify the potentially interesting and productive contacts and points of exchange. By interviewing Russian birth activists and acting as a participant observer in the Russian alternative birth community, I became, to a large extent, aware of the particular interpersonal and inter-organizational connections in the East-West New Age centered network, as well as of the books and ideas that were influential in this field (Lewis and Melton 1992, York 1995, Hanegraaff 1996, Heelas 1996).

For the third, US based part of my fieldwork, I've been, first of all, interacting with the local midwives with various degrees of involvement - conducting interviews, attending childbirth education classes, working closely together as a homebirth midwife's apprentice

in Houston and as a birth assistant at a NYC based free standing birthing center, providing the services of a *doula* to birthing women, and (a few years earlier) by giving birth myself with an American homebirth midwife in attendance. I took part in a number of international midwifery conferences that serve as major educational and community building events that bring together midwives from all over the world. I also attended a number of local birth fairs in Houston, TX and NYC, which aggregated midwives and all kinds of specialists in the field of alternative birth practices (*doulas*, chiropractors, nutritionists etc.).

While in the field, I became a part of a very lively NYC *doula* community – a network that provided access to various venues in the childbirth domain. Participating in the monthly meetings of the Metropolitan Doula Group, Brooklyn Doula Group, Uptown Birth Professionals Study Group, special birth-related events and workshops, as well as the daily reading of mailing lists for the various doula groups, opened me to a whole new perspective on childbirth. I now saw some seemingly obvious issues in a completely new light. I completed the whole process of professional birth doula certification with the major doula certification agency DONA International, and attended dozens of births at various NYC facilities. In this way, I had an opportunity for hands-on participation in the process of Western birth. Seeking experience for my doula training, I found my way to a small, independent birthing center, where I worked as a birth assistant, helping midwives to do their work.

I established contacts with American practitioners who were in some way connected to the Russians involved in the waterbirth movement. While conducting my project in Moscow

and St. Petersburg, I compiled a list of printed resources that were published in Russia starting from the beginning of the movement's activity back in the early 1980s. An important part of these resources consisted of underground printout translations of Western sources which obviously influenced the participants of the Russian movement, in both ideology and practice. These were publications that discussed the methods of childbirth directly and indirectly (e.g., psychology books that help manage pregnancy, birth, baby care and family life in a particular way, spiritual and religious writings of Western authors that deal with childbirth and affiliated topics, popular scientific literature on evolution explaining the processes of human brain development, literature on alternative medical practices, etc.) The aforementioned ideas were all adapted and even conceptually reframed to suit Russian cultural needs. I constantly heard references to Western sources while conducting my interviews with the members of the Russian alternative birth community. Interestingly, many of the Western books translated into Russian were, in fact, secondary sources, in a sense; originally inspired by Russian ideas, the authors popularized them for the Western world and developed further on the Russian findings. By getting access to such books, Russians received valuable feedback, an extra confirmation of the validity of their work and benefitted from the new interpretations of the ideas they originated.

What interested me most, was tracing "the life of the ideas" and the ways, in which they travel between East and West, affecting the participants of the dialogue and changing en route. For my fieldwork in America, I decided to listen to the stories that "the other side" had to tell, meaning how American participants in this information exchange perceived their Russian partners and the very process of their communication. The project totaled

thirty semi-structured, open-ended interviews with key players in the Russian-American dialogue concerning childbirth alternatives, as well as participant observation of their activities, such as birth attendance, educational classes and presentations at professional conferences. My subjects were interviewed in their homes, at their workplaces, or at the conference locations. The questions asked prioritized tracing the spread of major ideas and influences; my interviewees were asked about their professional and spiritual genealogies and the ways they perceived the development of certain methods and trends in the realm of alternative childbirth. Particularly stressed was the matter of inter-cultural contacts and exchange. I chose to interview three distinct groups of experts for my study.

One group of my interviewees consisted of the American and European activists and authors who have first learned from and then influenced the Russian understanding of birth, body and consciousness through their writing, teaching, birth assistance and body work. Another group I chose to interview consisted of the Western authors and practitioners whose original books influenced the Russian “natural childbirth” movement. I had spoken with these two groups in order to learn how my interviewees, as active participants of the intercultural transfer, perceived and articulated the life of ideas on the move. The third group of my interviewees consisted of Russians who traveled to the West for their business or permanently immigrated and continued working in their field while living outside of Russia. I needed to hear their perspectives in order to learn how their work abroad became different and how its meaning changed (if at all) in a new cultural context. As planned, I conducted in-depth open-ended interviews with these groups of experts and further consulted with some of them as the necessity arose during my work on the manuscript. I

met many of my subjects at the major midwifery conferences and also at their individual seminars, which constituted an important site for my research and presented a great opportunity for participant observation. I mostly based my research on Russian and American material, but did incorporate a certain amount of information on Western European branches of the global movements, since it was necessary in order to situate my study within a larger context.

In addition to interviews and observation, archival work played an important role in my research. Using public and private archival materials, I focused primarily on the Russian-American contacts in the field of birth alternatives, tracing and writing down the history of these contacts, as well as evidence of Russian-American mutual ideological impact. I was honored to get access to private archives compiled by both academics and birth activists.

Description of the Research Site

My project involved multiple fieldwork sites. This methodological solution depended on the goals which I sought to achieve in the course of the project and, also, on the character of the information I needed to gather. Russia's biggest cities, Moscow and St. Petersburg, represented the first two loci of my study. I did extensive fieldwork in these cities during the early phase of my project, and later, I continued to consult with my former interviewees on the phone and by e-mail, as whenever I needed to clear up certain details and get their opinions on new issues arising in the Russian social realm.

For the last phase of my fieldwork project, I strategically placed myself in New York City.

The first reason for choosing NYC as a site was because the city and its boroughs host a big Russian community and thus present a great opportunity to observe Russian-American interaction in the particular domain of birth and in general. For me, a valuable point of entry into the field of birth on this continent was my work as a birth assistant at a local birthing center. This small, free standing facility, located in a largely Russian neighborhood in Brooklyn, was partly staffed by immigrant Russian midwives. There were also some Russian families among the clients of the center, some of whom were recent immigrants or exchange workers.

Another factor that made me choose NYC for my field research was its unique status of a big metropolitan city that hosts all kinds of major events and is located “on the crossroads.” Studying my subjects’ schedules of talks and presentations posted on their websites, I figured out that my potential interviewees tend to visit NYC (or at least New York State famous for its interest in New Age) throughout the year on various occasions - to teach seminars, present new methods or to take part in major events that bring together experts in the field. The people I had to meet were scattered all over the US, and I contacted them all by phone or e-mail and arranged meetings, the location of which depended on whether they’d arranged to travel to NYC or to one of the big conferences where everyone would gather. I used the opportunity to meet many of my interviewees at the major conferences and annual meetings, such as the Midwifery Today Conference, Gentle Birth World Congress, Belly and Womb Conference and other related events. I realized that meeting with people at conferences doesn't substitute meeting with them at their homes or the institutions they run. However, the conference environment did provide another unique

opportunity to meet people in groups and observe their interactions within the networks.

Whenever an opportunity presented itself, I also attended workshops, seminars and public lectures that my interviewees were giving in a reasonable proximity from my location.

Finally, in addition to live communication, I did extensive research on the Web. During the last decade, online communities increasingly attracted the attention of anthropologists, who were interested in studying the role of internet technologies in communication, the formation of new virtual identities, and the role of new media in the distribution of power within modern societies (Wilson and Peterson 2002). Online research was an essential part of my study. While working online, I focused on analyzing the discursive and visual means of representation. I studied the websites of my interviewees, as well as those of their organizations and, of course, their blogs and their public presence in social networks. I collected and systematized information on key people and organizations, and mapped the complex networks of subjects and communities. I tracked a fair amount of Russian and American Web forums, blogs and mailing lists that discussed issues related to childbirth and spirituality. My online work helped me to stay afloat and have first-hand information about many important social processes going on in Russia - even though I couldn't be there in person. "The people's media" made it possible for me to witness the processes as they originated and changed, including even subtle shifts in opinions and tastes – without any of the filtration that most of the official media in Russia put their information through. Official media served for me as another type of resource, equally valuable in its own way.

“Follow the Conflict” Method and My Subjectivity

After giving birth to my older son Simon in 1994, I became progressively interested in the cultural processes surrounding birth as an event and social phenomenon. For the past 17 years, I have been around the field of birth in various capacities. I have taken on different roles in relation to birth; sometimes these roles informed one another, and at other times the differing perspectives and positioning led to conflict. Careful analysis of these exchange processes and conflicts lies at the heart of my research. Actualizing George Marcus's "follow the conflict" methodological principle (Marcus 1998: 94-95), I started looking at my own reactions and restrictions, inadequacies and misunderstandings, exaltation and disgust in order to understand the intercultural communication and discourses about childbirth in the contemporary world. I soon realized that discourses and practices surrounding childbirth are very fluid nowadays. They spread quickly, changing along the way and transform into something new, their current shape depending on their new contexts. They penetrate long-standing cultural systems and settings, strike their roots and mutate so easily, that soon you are unable to recognize their initial impulse.

It happened that I grew up and matured during a time, when the ways of passing the knowledge about childbirth were questioned more than ever. While my mother did things differently from my grandmother, she was much more confined in the ways she saw family values, gender roles, and reproduction in general. Like many women in my own generation, I moved away from the practices passed to me by my family and constructed an alternative reality for myself and my kids. I wouldn't have been able to do it alone, however. This conscious building of new patterns and connections, the search for new meanings and values, was only possible as a collective effort of many active participants to free ourselves

from the dominant social norms and produce a new setting that we believed to be more adequate, fair and successful.

In February-March of 1986, the 27th Communist Party Congress marked the official beginning of *perestroika*, the political and economic restructuring of the USSR. A few months later, I left my parents' home in then Soviet Estonia and went away to study at the University in Leningrad, the second largest city in Russia. Thus, the beginning of my independent life coincided with the introduction of major reforms in the country that would very soon disintegrate and take on a different name. Little did I know that, in a few years, I wouldn't be able to enter my native Estonia without an official invitation and a visa. I will never forget how, soon after Estonia gained independence and established a visa regime with Russia (in 1992), I tried to persuade the Estonian border patrol to let me in, arguing that I was born in Estonia, spoke Estonian, and presenting them with my passport, issued by Soviet Estonia. I was turned away in the middle of the night on a bridge over the Narva River, which divided the two now separate countries. I had to find a way back to the train station in the dark, so I could then return to the city, which had just changed its name from Leningrad back to its original pre-revolutionary name, St. Petersburg (in 1991).

After the USSR collapsed, American and Western European discourses about body and health penetrated Russia's "information field," as the New Age practitioners would put it. When the Iron Curtain fell, my horizons expanded even further, as I started to make trips abroad. Eventually, my two half a year long visits to the US in 2000 and 2003, before I came to live here permanently in 2004, became very important for broadening my vision of

cultural differences and prepared me to carry out my current project. Thanks to these visits, I had an opportunity to witness the major disagreements on important topics surrounding health issues, gender and reproduction in different cultures.

There were “big moments” of sudden realization, and there were smaller discoveries along the way. I trusted my feelings to register the cultural conflict and thoroughly reflected on its nature. Whenever I encountered uneasiness, felt uncomfortable or confused, I could tell there was a major ideological clash between the belief system that I, to some extent, represented and embodied, and the one I had just encountered. One example of a “major” realization was my sudden understanding that the majority of homebirth midwives (and parents) in the US were not concerned with birthing in water, as opposed to their Russian counterparts. Another striking moment was my discovery that many homebirth midwives who I’d met in the US were pro-choice advocates. Their core values, I realized, were based on a cultural logic very different from the one that shaped the values of the Russian homebirth midwives. Being a mother and a researcher, I’ve interchangeably identified with multiple cultural models and switched between them. By reflecting on my personal emotional reactions to cultural heterogeneity, as well as communication problems and gaps, I utilized them as a valuable tool in my methodology; they constitute a significant part of my study. In this dissertation I tell the story of the differences in cultural perspectives on childbirth and the affiliated practices that I happened to embody or witness over the course of the years. All these perspectives were caused and paralleled by crucial changes in Russian history, the global economy, and the events of my personal life in the context of these changes.

Anthropology of Birth and Politics of Reproduction: Major Debates in the Field

Since the 1980s, when many women anthropologists turned to birth research, the bodies of scholarly knowledge about birth grew exponentially. Here, I would like to mention a few ongoing dialogues in the field of anthropology of birth and reproduction in general, that are especially relevant to my research. The importance of these few topics led to the publication of several collections that bring together major specialists in the field and centered around one particular idea or concept. I list here the most important collections and monographs as well as the major review articles that summarized the preceding work and proposed new directions of research.

Throughout the 1980s, a lot was said within anthropology on the cultural shaping of the female bodily processes. Consequently, a need emerged to reflect and generalize this experience, and to propose new guidelines and a new agenda that would be relevant at the time. The task was accomplished by Faye Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp (Ginsburg and Rapp 1991), whose review still remains one of the most influential analyses of its kind. Ginsburg and Rapp brought together under one umbrella the whole female reproductive cycle - starting with menstruation and ending with menopause. This “holistic” approach, which was first introduced by Emily Martin (Martin 1987), was not yet widely adopted at the time. In the 1980s, the anthropology of reproduction consisted of anthropology of birth as one big subfield and multiple scattered works dealing with other phases of the reproductive sphere (and the corresponding decision making) - such as abortion, pregnancy loss, menstruation etc. Ginsburg and Rapp addressed all of these issues together, in a meaningful

sequence and as belonging to one big anthropological field – the female life cycle, or reproduction.

The second important innovation was an attempt undertaken by Ginsburg and Rapp seeking to move reproduction from the margins of anthropological research to its heart.

The authors' new contextualization of reproduction made it into a meaningful tool that enormously enhanced our understanding of the organization of social life in general.

Ginsburg and Rapp also proposed to apply the concept of "politics" to social management of human reproduction. The study of reproduction helps to better understand the structure of power relations within a society and the issues of negotiating agency and resistance, as well as the hegemonic forms of knowledge versus the marginalized ones. The authors demonstrated that the issues of reproduction, if properly contextualized, can reflect and expose a variety of social problems, such as issues connected with class, gender and race, as well as the capitalistic mode of production and postcolonialism.

Another innovative feature of Ginsburg and Rapp's work was their epistemological move to produce the "anthropology of anthropology," i.e. the anthropology of science and knowledge production. Ginsburg and Rapp discussed how and why the particular questions that were previously posed in the field of anthropology of reproduction were asked, and not others, as well as why the mode they were asked in, the design of the research methodology and the angle of the researcher's gaze were as they were. The authors proposed that the two factors that most influenced the field of anthropology of reproduction back in the 1980s, was firstly, the emerged feminist movement and second, the rapid globalization and

medicalization in Western way of local reproductive practices. These two major influential factors invaded the field, informing the choice of topics and their interconnection. When, in 1986, a milestone collection *Writing Culture* was published (Clifford and Marcus 1986), self-reflection entered the field of anthropological writing; this proved to be a very useful move for pointing out new agenda and demonstrating the then unclear character of the previous topic choices in the field. It made possible the epistemological shift directed at studying multiple aspects of the phenomenon of reproduction.

The new directions of study proposed by Ginsburg and Rapp included the study of biomedical discursive practices and their impact on local forms of knowledge, studies of reproduction as an aspect of bigger contests for hegemonic control, research on negotiation of cultural practices and resistance to innovations at global and local levels, and marking the points where gender policies intersect with other aspects of social hierarchies. All of these approaches feature the same methodological angle: namely, studying intersections, interconnections and the mutual impact of social problems, while carefully preserving the historical and sociopolitical context. Looking for the possibilities for practical, applied use of the proposed studies, the authors pointed out that thorough critical evaluation of policies is required in order to better understand local/global situations and make adequate practical recommendations.

Several years later, Rapp and Ginsburg attempted to implement the aforementioned theoretical and methodological principles in an interdisciplinary collection *Conceiving the New World Order: The Global Politics of Reproduction* (Rapp and Ginsburg 1995). In their

introduction to the collection, they explained their perspective on the social aspects and implications of reproduction, this time, however, going into more specific details and case studies, as they had succeeded in engaging a substantial research team of feminist scholars that brought together a variety of topics and approaches in the framework of this innovative project. The editors proudly declare that they represent a specific female perspective on reproduction, one that takes back from men the authority to make analytic claims on their female selves, bodies and identities (Ginsburg and Rapp 1995).

The main point of the collection is that reproduction is always culturally patterned, and by looking at reproductive practices we can gain powerful insight into the nature of broader social relations and phenomena. The key concept of the collection is “stratified reproduction,” a term introduced by one of the collection participants, Shellee Colen, in her keynote chapter (Colen 1995). Stratified reproduction stands for the power relations by which certain categories of a population are empowered to reproduce, while others are discouraged as a result of certain political, economical and sociocultural factors. Some groups maintain access to the economic and informational resources necessary for reproducing, while others are cut off. In the era of globalization these power relations are said to cross geographical and social boundaries. Analysis of these power and knowledge networks is presented as a highly political enterprise.

Another key topic of the collection concerns the global and local aspects of reproduction. Rapp and Ginsburg called for social scientists to abandon analyzing particular cultures as separate units; they instead suggested implementing a transnational study of the global

picture and the mutual interconnections of peoples and cultures. In the introduction, Rapp and Ginsburg speak about the mutual character of information exchange between the Western world, which spreads its influence globally, and the local cultures, which are also able to exercise a certain influence on the West (cp. Said 1979, Appadurai 1990 and 1996). For example, they point out that the current popular attachment parenting practices and technologies such as *snugli* baby carriers first originated in Africa, and from there spread to become profitable businesses and techniques in the West.

The articles in the collection didn't put much focus on the actual impact of the "locals," however. Through the collection, we mostly see the cases when the global flows of westernization oppress and dominate local cultures. Still, a few authors did concentrate on the resistance of the locals – e.g. the black population in the American South in Gertrude Fraser's piece (Fraser 1995. 1998), or the Inuit community from the O'Neil and Kaufert article that managed to organize a locally based midwifery service in spite of Canadian policies that prescribed them to leave their homes and travel long distances seeking hospitalization and biomedical treatment (O'Neil and Kaufert 1995).

In 1998, anthropologist Robbie Davis-Floyd and the professor of Science and Technology Studies Joseph Dumit co-edited another important collection named *Cyborg Babies: From Techno-Sex to Techno-Tots* (Davis-Floyd and Dumit 1998). The collected articles focus on the concept of the cyborg, introduced by Donna Haraway in her *Cyborg Manifesto* (Haraway 1991). Cyborgs are imagined as "symbiotic fusions of organic life and technological systems." Haraway suggested using this concept as an analytic tool that helps

to explore social phenomena in the era of technology's increasing domination in all the spheres of human life.

The idea introduced by Haraway concerns the relationships between nature and culture (a topic that has a long history in anthropology beginning with Levi-Strauss (see Ortner 1974; MacCormack 1980; Strathern 1980, as applied to gender). By introducing the concept of the cyborg, Haraway contests and deconstructs the nature/culture binary and the "naïve" euphoric or dysphoric narratives (including the ones produced in academia), where nature either benefits from culture's progress or is endangered and ruined by its advances.

Haraway explains that there is no "pure nature" anymore: only symbiotic unities consisting of organic and technological elements. All of us are cyborgs, to a certain extent, since technology long ago became an integral part of our existence.

Robbie Davis-Floyd's interest in this twist is understandable. In her own book *Birth as an American Rite of Passage* (Davis-Floyd 1992) as well as in her later articles and edited collections, Davis-Floyd had brought up the discussion of the "technocratic and organic bodies," which she envisioned as certain systems of perceptions and beliefs commonly viewed as oppositional. In her writings, Davis-Floyd provided graphic tables where she opposed certain elements of one system to the corresponding ones of another. She also posited that the contemporary technocratic society seeks to communicate technocratic values to its members by ways of sending various symbolic messages, "body as machine" being one of the most important ones (cp. Corea 1986; Wagner 1994). Thus, hooking up of a birthing woman to an IV pole in a hospital symbolizes the control that the technocratic

American society seeks to exercise over one's members, and the feeling of total dependency it tries to evoke.

A technocratic system, we are told, seeks to repress all of the natural and organic that people still have in them, i.e. their physiology, hormonal processes, instincts and emotions. A certain highly conscious part of the population somehow manages to resist technology's dominant role and either resists the fall into fallacy due to their natural memory of "how it all should be in fact," or by learning to master their inner abilities and return to the "initial" harmonious relationships between the body and mind that precede the Cartesian split. They then become members of a social movement that says "no" to the technocratic invasion, seeks to "restore" the holistic beliefs, and practices "natural life," purified of technology's presence.

In the keynote chapter of *Cyborg Babies*, written in a form of a dialogue between the two editors (Davis-Floyd 1998), Davis-Floyd confesses, that she was shocked when she first encountered the "new paradigm," as she puts it, introduced by Haraway's cyborg concept. Davis-Floyd explains how confused and frustrated she was as she realized that her own writings fell back into the older, outdated paradigm. She embraced Haraway's idea, however, and applauded it, even deciding to gather an interdisciplinary research team of scholars who would be eager to engage this experimental work and contribute a case study to the understanding of the cyborg concept.

Davis-Floyd did embrace the cyborg concept with certain reservations and uneasiness, though, due to its moral implications. She was concerned with the “seductive potential” of the “cyb” part in an individual, which could leave them no other choice but to submerge deeper and deeper into the realm of technology. She acknowledged that we are all cyborgs nowadays, but she also called out for the preservation of our right and ability to choose between our organic and technological parts here and there, because she believes that certain technological practices can cause real damage. It’s very cool to analyze the human-machine symbiosis of a woman hooked up to the electronic fetal monitor, she states, but it’s not very cool that the price she may pay for being that kind of cyborg is an unnecessary cesarean (Davis-Floyd and Dumit 1998: 274).

Emily Martin explains in her chapter, that, in a certain way, the notion of a cyborg is a useful therapeutic tool that could be used for empowering people instead of making them fall into dysphoric narratives (in terms of Michie and Cahn 1997) of the natural paradise lost (Martin 1998a: 136-139). Davis-Floyd herself regrets that she was unable to use the cyborg image as a positive visualization technique when she felt totally disempowered during a cesarean that she had to undergo with her first baby. In order to heal that trauma she immersed herself into the natural paradigm and birthed her second baby in a completely “natural” way, at home. Haraway offered another way out of the crisis: a resignification (in Judith Butler’s terms: Butler 1993) of the whole event, with calmness stemming from an understanding of the relative character of any values and judgments.

Rayna Rapp, too, contributed a chapter to *Cyborg Babies*, which also appeared as a chapter in her book on prenatal diagnostics (namely, amniocentesis: Rapp 1998 and 2000), used by pregnant women. According to Rapp, both class and ethnicity play crucial roles in the way the purpose and results of the tests are explained by medical staff to their patients, as well as the way the patients manage the gained knowledge and make (un)informed decisions. American society is highly stratified, and so is access to resources that inform women of their choice options and the possibility to resist biomedical conceptualizations and value systems instead of accepting them by default.

The issue of language choice and the metaphors at work is an object of constant interest for Emily Martin, both in *The Woman in the Body* and *Flexible Bodies* (Martin 1987 and 1994). She contributed to the *Cyborg Babies* collection with a piece on the construction, in certain discourses and representations, of the idea that the female body is defective, as it fails to establish adequate immune defenses (Martin 1998a). Martin calls out for action, suggesting therapeutic use of positive language and imagery that would present women as good and strong, thus empowering them.

In 1997, the collection *Childbirth and Authoritative Knowledge* brought together the work of the leading American scholars in the field of birth studies (Davis-Floyd and Sargent 1997a). The key concept of “authoritative knowledge,” on which the collection was centered, had first been introduced by acknowledged “midwife to the anthropology of birth,” Brigitte Jordan (Jordan 1997). In 1978, Jordan published her book *Birth in Four Cultures*, where she exposed Western biomedical practices as just another culture-based

approach among many others (Jordan 1993). In the keynote article of the collection, Jordan presented the concept of authoritative knowledge as a system of cultural beliefs and attitudes that simply enjoy the authoritative, unquestionable status in a particular society. While, in contemporary Western postindustrial societies, authoritative knowledge is mostly obtained and monopolized by the biomedical establishment, which values a highly technologized approach to birth management, it also coexists with other systems of knowledge that might be considered authoritative by certain social groups (e.g., low-tech midwifery model of care or the mother's own intuition and inner knowledge). These multiple contesting systems of knowledge are in constant interaction: they define themselves in relation to the other and produce mutual impact. The idea standing behind the collection was to observe and make an empirical account of this interaction, using ethnographic materials of many cultural traditions worldwide. The collection presents different modes of interaction between the Western biomedical, traditional and modern oppositional systems of knowledge: the spread of biomedical hegemony (Georges 1997, Browner and Press 1997), the multifaceted resistance of a particular culture to medicalization (Szurek 1997; Davis-Floyd and Davis 1997) and the preservation of viable indigenous systems of knowledge (Bieselle 1997).

In 2001, Davis-Floyd's article on intuition, which explored the complexity of modern midwives' knowledge systems (Davis-Floyd and Davis 1997), was expanded in a special issue of *Medical Anthropology - Daughters of Time: the Shifting Identities of Contemporary Midwives* (Davis-Floyd, Cosminsky and Pigg 2001). In the introduction, the editors pioneered the term "postmodern midwife" and offered a description of the ideal

typical midwife (in terms of Weber 1949) who negotiates and uses multiple systems of knowledge, creatively developing a synthetic conglomerate of ideas and practices. The postmodern midwife consciously resignifies the hegemonic biomedical practices, putting biomedical techniques into new contexts and surroundings. Using examples from eight different cultures, the contributors analyzed the political, economic and cultural factors that shape the interactions of traditional birth attendants, professional midwives, biomedical authorities, international agencies and the consumers of health care.

A collection *Consuming Motherhood*, which was issued in 2004, explores the phenomenon of reproduction in relation to production and consumption (Taylor, Layne and Wozniak 2004). While the production part was extensively studied in scholarly literature since *The Woman in the Body* (Martin 1987), which analyzed the representations of birthing women as machines intended to produce quality goods, the consumption part received much less attention in the anthropology of reproduction. The collection presented controversial arguments that made the scholarly community feel uneasy about modern reproductive practices under capitalism. The authors approached the phenomenon of motherhood from different angles and showed how people, services and goods inevitably become commoditized in a capitalist society. A number of articles examine how, in the face of capitalism, certain groups resist commodification, and illuminates complex ideological negotiations between the mainstream and countercultural value systems. For example, in Davis-Floyd's article, the agents are midwives undergoing certification process (Davis-Floyd 2004), and in Pamela Klassen's – mothers who struggle to fit the birth commodity market into their spiritual non-materialistic ideal of birth and maternity (Klassen 2004).

Klassen is also the author of the monograph, *Blessed Events: Religion and Home Birth in America*, where she explores the systems of meanings that nowadays underlie the choice of a homebirth in America (Klassen 2001a). The book shows how different the motivations, values and ideologies that inform the seemingly homogeneous phenomenon can be. Leftist feminists and religious adherents to patriarchal family values alike resist the mechanistic biomedical vision of their bodies and try to construct their own experiences through spiritualist or religious interpretation. Not unlike Davis-Floyd's *Birth as an American Rite of Passage* (Davis-Floyd 1992), Klassen's book was critiqued for singling out the perspectives of white middle class women, while not providing enough room for the voices of the American poor, who often don't have the choice between biomedical treatment and the services offered at the holistic birth market (Blum 2003).³

Anthropology of Russian Birth

In 1997, Robbie Davis-Floyd and Carolyn Sargent wrote in their introduction to the collection *Childbirth and Authoritative Knowledge*: "Little literature as yet exists on contemporary transformations of childbirth in the former Soviet Union and its neighbors; this is an area that cries out for anthropological research" (Davis-Floyd and Sargent 1997b: 13). In the course of the past ten years, a certain amount of work has been done in this field. Beverley Chalmers contributed to *Childbirth and Authoritative Knowledge* with a

³ Due to the specifics of the discussed social phenomenon, in this thesis I mostly concentrate on the habitus of Soviet intelligentsia and the post-Soviet middle class. However, my previous work on hospital birth and mainstream attitudes toward mothering in Russia incorporates perspectives of a more diverse sample of the Russian urban population (see Belousova 1998, 1999, 2003a).

chapter on recent tendencies characteristic of the Eastern European approach to childbirth (Chalmers 1997). Chalmers was, at the time, a consultant and coordinator of maternity and child welfare programs at the WHO, UNICEF and a few other international agencies with a mission to control maternity issues worldwide and introduce policy changes they considered relevant. Her chapter is especially interesting as a self-reflection of an agent of the Western intervention into post-socialist cultural practices. She herself traveled extensively as an inspector and educator, giving talks and lectures in the countries she was responsible for. Chalmers offers us a critical account of the poor condition of the birth practices in the post-socialist countries and then discusses the possible paths to improvement. According to Chalmers, one of the difficulties of the health care reforms being implemented is not only the contest among local and Western systems of knowledge, but also a simultaneous presence of two interventions from the West – the standard medicalization and the more humane woman-centered WHO initiative. When WHO intervenes, it often finds out that the site had already been affected by the mainstream biomedical system and the affiliated consumption campaign. Chalmers states: “Just as the UNICEF / WHO BFHI movement takes hold in these countries, the infant formula manufacturers knock on maternity house doors” (Chalmers 1997: 274). Chalmers recognizes the ethnocentric nature of intervention and calls out for the culture-sensitive approach. From her point of view, the interventions should not be imposed without the previous analysis of cultural practices and living conditions in that particular country. Otherwise, she believes, they can bring more harm than good. Chalmers hopes that the efforts of the agencies she represents have a good potential of being accepted in the post-socialist countries, as people there are open to and actively seek change.

In 2005, anthropologist Michele Rivkin-Fish, a former participant-observer of the WHO campaign in the post-socialist world, published the first comprehensive monograph on Russian women's health issues, titled *Women's Health in Post-Soviet Russia: The Politics of Intervention* (Rivkin-Fish 2005). Back in the 1990s, the author served as a consultant to WHO's mission in St. Petersburg, Russia and simultaneously collected ethnographic material for her dissertation at the institutions dealing with women's health, medical policies, and sexual education. She was looking at the way neoliberal reforms were carried out in these spheres of Russian public life. The idea of the Western institutions' intervention was to build a civil society in Russia that would mimic Western organizational patterns and follow Western cultural logic. As these innovations related specifically to women, Western feminist values were thrown on the table, calling to the individual responsibility of subjects (e.g., paying for medical care) and to granting women the rights that are agreed to be essential in the Western world (e.g., right to abortion).

In the process of her research, which involved interviewing policymakers, medical practitioners, local activists and female patients of the public health care system, Rivkin-Fish came to the conclusion, that, paradoxically, supposedly democratic reforms caused even deeper inequality and oppression in Russian women's lives, as they were made more vulnerable, dependant and denied of their basic needs. Consequently, biomedical power gained more strength, and the process of further medicalization was set successfully on its way. The author looks at the social mechanisms that made this seemingly positive project cause such big problems for the Russian population; she tries to explain how the East-West

communication works, and why the beliefs of the two worlds clash, producing quite an unexpected effect.

Rivkin-Fish states that, from the very beginning, the young Soviet government imposed a set of collectivist values on its subjects - a process that was later persistently promoted. At the same time, this ideological system completely discredited its moral economy among the Soviet, and, later, Post-Soviet citizens, who had developed deep distrust in state institutions. Already in Soviet times, the Russian subjects' resistance to the state power went inwards, and any kind of agency was believed to be possible only on a personal level, and never in the public sphere. Consequently, when Western democratic intervention showed up, seeking to promote the value of individual responsibility, these strategies made people avert from activism and social action even further.

Interestingly, both medical authorities and female patients agreed on the cause of the poor state of affairs in the domain of public health. It is always the individual who is to be blamed for the lack of moral and personal responsibility. It is always the individual who has to change themselves, and then the whole system of relations around them would supposedly change. What Rivkin-Fish found out, was that the government and its institutions were never thought of as needing to undergo change; this idea seemed unimaginable. No one really thought that change would ever be possible beyond the personal scale, and so never counted on social justice and state support. It was always the citizens themselves who were subject to policing by state institutions, including internalized oppression.

Rivkin-Fish suggested some new strategies of intervention, which she based on her knowledge as an anthropologist and feminist scholar. She proposed that the intervening institutions (namely, WHO) should explore local cultural logic and make policy decisions only having considered the local context. She also suggests that the communication of ideas shouldn't go just one way: the exchange should be mutual, as the insights based on the beliefs of the "others" are capable of benefitting Western self-reflection.

One of the major changes Rivkin-Fish proposed was reframing the image of Western feminism itself so that Russians could benefit from its ideas. She notes that the Western institutions in Russia have been quite unproductive because of the culturally incompatible language and imagery that they sought to promote overseas. This cultural incompatibility is the reason why the image of the Western feminist is highly unfavorable one; most Russian women don't want to associate with it and help to further spread the values of its unpleasant clichéd character. Rivkin-Fish believes that this image marginalizes the feminist discourse overall in all the spheres it reaches, especially, in the "local" cultures of the postcolonial world, where feminism is often seen as a threat to the widespread patriarchal "family values."

Rivkin-Fish proposes to rework the very language and imagery of Western feminism in order to both make it more flexible (in terms of Martin 1994) and more appealing to the rest of the world. She suggests leaving alone the discourse of women's rights, which often proves unappealing when exported to other cultures. She also suggests to leave alone the

pro-abortion rhetoric and pronatalist tendencies at the moment, and to work instead with the Russian population in the domain of birth, since that is what they seem to be more interested in. She proposes making Western intervention more democratic, more attentive and more sensitive to cultural differences. Making this claim, Rivkin-Fish understands her vulnerability in the eyes of many Western feminists. She makes a very unorthodox statement when she suggests entering a coalition with pronatalists and supporters of patriarchal family values in Russia, but she does this assuming that these groups have potential to become valuable allies of the Western intervention efforts. After all, they are the most socially active part of the Russian population and could potentially be helpful in the promotion of social (as opposed to individual) responsibility. Even though Rivkin-Fish proposes to change the methods and directions of Western intervention into the Russian policies and cultural practices, she does believe in a necessity for the intervention itself.

Rivkin-Fish's reasoning brings into mind the essay by "curious feminist" Cynthia Enloe on production and consumption of sneakers, where she talks about the arrival of the Reebok company to Russia in the framework of market intervention (Enloe 2004). While Reebok presented itself as a company deeply concerned with observance of human rights and even gave out awards to certain dissidents, in fact (together with other sister companies) it made the life of Russian people, and Russian women in particular, much harder, contributing to class and gender inequality and to the aggravation of social stratification. The problem was that Russian people perceived the advent of Reebok as a feature of the new, modern Russia, and the desire to be included made them cut out money from their modest salaries to buy Reebok sneakers for their family members (two month's salary for one pair of shoes,

according to Enloe). Rivkin-Fish calls for experts in the field of social sciences to educate the Russian general public and policymakers about this misrecognition (in terms of Bourdieu 1994) of existing problems and to provide advice for the critical evaluation of the processes they participate in. This idea resonates with George Marcus's vision of promoting anthropologists as socially active public experts and policymakers (Marcus 1998). Robbie Davis-Floyd perfectly conforms to this vision: she serves on the boards of various policy-making organizations that work on developing and changing childbirth policies in the US and worldwide (e.g., Global Mother/Baby Friendly Childbirth Initiative; Midwives' Alliance of North America; Midwifery Certification Task Force and others).

In her article "The Effect of Perceiving 'Weak Health' in Russia: The Case of Breastfeeding," anthropologist Cynthia Gabriel addresses the issue of breastfeeding in Russia, in an effort to explain the failure of the WHO breastfeeding campaign that met resistance and even sabotage in Russian hospitals (Gabriel 2003). Gabriel explains that the Russian cultural beliefs about breastfeeding utilize the metaphor and rhetoric of "weakness" as applied both to people's health and, on a larger scale, to Russia as a state (cp. Gorer and Rickman 1949: 222). During her participant observation in the Russian hospitals, Gabriel observed that both post-Soviet women and babies are perceived as weak because of the presumably bad quality of food, ecological pollution, and stressfulness of life in the times of transition. Consequently, breastfeeding is postponed after the birth in order to give some rest to both the mother and the baby. According to Russian medical beliefs, successful breastfeeding depends on rest and a well supplemented diet, and the correlation between the supply and demand of milk is not at all known. Thus, all the

procedures and policies of baby care in Russian hospitals don't take this factor into account and persistently inhibit successful breastfeeding. While sincerely supporting the idea of breastfeeding, the Russian medical staff technically destroys the practice, and again, in a vicious circle, receives a confirmation of the human weakness and disability. Mother's milk is the first source of nutrition in life, and is a highly mythologized substance with strong cultural symbolism that permeates many spheres of Russian social life. The idea of weakness travels to the public discourse about the Russian nation as a whole, which is often said to be "dying." Gabriel's hope is that her culturally sensitive observations will help to establish communication and dialogue (she consciously avoids the rhetoric of one-sided intervention) between Russian maternity medicine and the international health policy promoters like the WHO.

In her recent doctoral dissertation *Transforming Selves and Society: Women, Spiritual Health, and Pluralism in Post-Soviet Moscow* (Honey 2006), anthropologist Larisa Honey explores the values of the (mostly female) groups that practice alternative healing and pursue spiritual growth. Challenging the widespread representation of Russia in the West as a homogenous bastion of patriarchal values that lacks any sense of democracy, she draws attention to the individual experiences of common women, who do not consume the state and the Russian Orthodox church's official patriarchal, pronatalist, anti-Western rhetoric. They do, in fact, cherish pronatalism and motherhood, albeit in a different sense: as a path to spiritual development. Honey warns against the application of Western frames to the Russian case, while prizing her subjects, who observe eclectic New Age practices, as adherents to the ideals of true democracy and pluralism. Independent of the official

institutions and indifferent to them in general, Russian women see the way out of crisis in the step by step, consistent work of self-improvement. Honey's observations thus parallel the ones made by Rivkin-Fish about the primacy of individual responsibility among Russian women, which she discussed in the article "Change Yourself and the Whole World Will Become Kinder" (Rivkin-Fish 2004).

The works discussed constitute virtually the entire corpus of work on reproduction and birth in Russia. The Russian case, however, is still absent from the major collections on the politics of gender and reproduction in Eastern Europe (Gal and Kligman 2000a and Gal and Kligman 2000b) and worldwide (Rapp and Ginsburg 1995; Davis-Floyd and Sargent 1997b). In order to include Russian birth into larger debates on the subject, I need to account for the ongoing debates in the social sciences that look at birth practices in different cultures for an understanding of larger social, political and economic processes characteristic of that particular society and its role in the global picture.

Theoretical Gaps and Directions of Russian Birth Research

One of the directions of my research is using the Russian case to complexify the theory of production, distribution and consumption of the knowledge about birth on global and local scales. Since little research has been done on the reciprocity of exchange and the East enriching the Western practices, Russia, as the homeland of the waterbirth method in the early 1980s, presents a unique opportunity to study local knowledge going global.⁴ It has

⁴ Another alternative childbirth method, which was exported to the West from Soviet Russia, was psychoprophylaxis of the late 1940s, popularized by Dr. Fernand Lamaze

been acknowledged that the Russian case was virtually absent from the recent discussions of globalization (see McCann 2004). According to McCann, there are a number of studies in the vein of “transition” theory that constitute the Eastern-European wing of globalization literature, but they mostly approach the Russian situation using Western neoliberal logic. By using this approach, they fail to find relevant frames to understand Russian cultural logic and explain why the transition didn’t go as planned. By conducting my empirical study, I seek to contribute to the discussion of Russia’s unique place in the global economy, drawing on lived experiences of my interviewees and being sensitive to the Russian inner logic.

Secondly, the model of Western technoscience intruding into local traditions needs to be contested, as science and technology take on various shapes and respond to often contradictory ideological and epistemological presuppositions in the New Age era (Hess 1993). There is no one science; there are multiple parallel sciences that often contest one another. Pure "natural" tradition, too, no longer remains (Haraway 1991). Local knowledge is diverse and dispersed, and may incorporate certain versions of science and technology, and the Russian example illustrates this with great lucidity. Back in the 1980s, the male members of the Soviet intelligentsia used their knowledge of science and engineering to create many methods and devices, which, through proper management of childbirth and infancy period, were supposed to improve human nature itself. This is why we should discuss the contesting systems of knowledge, including the scientific component, and look at how they compete with, enrich, and affect each other. Looking at this dialogue also

and hence known in the West as Lamaze method (Bell 1981, Michaels 2007). Today, not many people remember where it originated.

brings forward the interplay of the deterritorialization of science (in terms of Deleuze and Guattari 1983 and 1987), as opposed to the claiming of national identity through it (e.g., "Russian method" as an epithet for waterbirth). While deterritorialization has been studied in relation to official science and its experts (Ong 2005, Ninetto 2001), the fringes of science which blur with parapsychology and New Age spirituality are still waiting to be explored.

Third, the Russian case provides a possibility to add to the discussion of gender dynamics under socialism and after its end. One feature that makes Russian birth unique is the different involvement of the two genders into the management of birth; this factor has a potential to question and restructure the discussion on patriarchy and power in the domain of birth (see Rothman 1989, Martin 1987, Davis-Floyd 1992). While the vast majority of Ob/Gyns in Russia are women, the alternatives in childbirth back in the early 1980s were initiated by men and practiced by the representatives of the two genders equally. Looking closely at the power relations and the operations with childbirth-related knowledge in Russia, we see that Russian influence on Western practices (and vice versa) has potential to reveal certain social tendencies that weren't explored so far. Thus, in my thesis, the old question "Is female to male as nature is to culture?" (Ortner 1974) benefits from a new twist.

Fourth, the problem of class/social group distinction (as in Bourdieu 1984) presents quite a unique disposition in both the old Soviet Union and the new post-Soviet Russia. The concept of "stratified reproduction" relates to the distribution of knowledge about birth

among different social groups in Soviet society. Certain subgroups of the Russian intelligentsia thus had partial access to the knowledge and ideas produced in the West and were able to communicate back regardless of all the obstacles presented by the Cold War. The part of intelligentsia that entered a dialogue on childbirth with the West should be seen in the context of all the other social groups that participated in any virtual dialogue with Western ideas and values, as they were more or less adequately translated by different media. For this discussion, Elfimov's (2003) analysis of the social place and structure of the Russian intelligentsia provides an original foundation; in my thesis, I outlined this issue in more detail with particular attention paid to the possession and manipulation of knowledge.

Yet another issue that awaits discussion is the problem of agency, resistance and activism, as presented both in the anthropology of birth and in post-socialist studies. It is common to romanticize the resistance of Russian women (men are usually absent from the picture and seen as passive) and treat it as spontaneous activism in the struggle for democracy, albeit located in the private sphere (Rivkin-Fish 2004 and 2005; Honey 2006). Another approach posits that cynicism became a mode of resistance in the late Soviet period, since it was the only way to cope with the inevitable compliance with state control (Yurchak 1997, 2005). I feel that a new perspective should be utilized in the process of revealing the interplay between the performance of citizenship, national identity and activism. It is important to closely examine the conceptualized values that Western anthropologists imposed on the Russians (the ones connected with democracy, social activism, feminism, etc.) and note the way they were perceived through Russian cultural meta-language and inner cultural logic. I

hope that my position as a representative of Russian culture, who is also familiar with major trends in Western social thought, provided me with an opportunity to find appropriate meta-language and achieve successful intercultural translation of the relevant ideas and concepts. A number of American anthropologists, having worked in Russia before me, reflected on the way their subjects perceived them as foreign observers, and on the way Russians spoke about themselves in relation to Western ways of life (e.g. Ries 1997, Pesmen 2000, Patino 2008). Their observations present a valuable source for the kind of intercultural translation that I am trying to accomplish.

As a multi-sited project (in terms of Marcus 1998), my research brings together and juxtaposes the two loci, Russia and the US, that have not yet been examined in conjunction. The long-standing political tension between the two countries makes this case interesting and unique. Not just did Russia and the US have a dialogue between themselves: this dialogue defined the cultural geography and discursive setting of the whole world in the second part of the 20th century. Katherine Verdery argues that during this time the Cold War was a “form of knowledge” and “organization of thought” for the entire globe:

Although I am partial to neither oversimplification nor the martial imagery of that account, there is no doubt that the Cold-War relationship between the two superpowers set the defining stamp on the century’s second half. More than simply a superpower face-off having broad political repercussions, the Cold War was also a form of knowledge and a cognitive organization of the world. It laid down the coordinates of a conceptual geography grounded in East vs. West and having implications for the further divide between North and South. Mediating the intersection of these two axes were socialism’s appeal for many in the “Third World” and the challenges it posed to the First (Verdery 1996: 4).

The richness of these partner/enemy relationships and their importance for the rest of the world make the case of Russian-American exchange really special. Following the

development of these relationships during Cold War and in its aftermath should help to reveal some important mechanisms and patterns defining social orders, the relationships between them and the global situation.

The most productive ethnographic work is done while researching multiple sites in conjunction and considering their historical dynamic. The most insightful ethnographic observations emerge when we look at borderline phenomena, where the new and the old, the global and local, the mainstream and the countercultural transgress into one another. We can then observe how the nature and rules of the complex intercultural exchange become different when the class/group dynamic changes in at least one of the sites. We can see what kinds of values and domains of knowledge this change affects. We notice how these concepts and knowledge blocks start working differently while imposed on or absorbed by another culture, organized in a wholly different way. We witness what happens with the status and operation of the initially marginal, countercultural phenomena going global. This kind of “thick” reflexive work has great potential to make ethnography of the global a valuable and useful intellectual enterprise. The long and tumultuous relationship between Russia and the West (with the US being, for Russia, the most important Western counterpart) awaited extended discussion that would address all of these complexities. I hope to have completed this task, at least partially, in my thesis.

Finally, my work focuses on the problems that arise when several fields within anthropology are brought together, combining the interplay of science, religion, and alternative medicine with studies of the state and state policies, the post-socialist transition

and globalization. Following the legacy of Ginsburg and Rapp (1991, 1995), I place the unique Russian case into the very center of complex social networks, and examine the new and previously unrecognized tendencies characteristic of the intra- and intercultural social and cultural connections that are then revealed. An empirical study of this seemingly very specific set of problems has potential to stimulate an insight that would help understand more general principles that govern the relationships between social orders, complex transnational identity formation, and global/local knowledge production in the late modern societies.

Dissertation Outline

The dissertation is organized around the four major utopian projects, which the history of the Russian “natural childbirth” movement highlights: those of science, nature, tradition and globalization. In Chapter 2, I provide the historical context of the movement and outline the factors, contributing to its origination, and its major time periods and transformations. The following four parts correspond to the four utopian projects in question, which did not necessarily follow each other chronologically and at times overlapped. Nevertheless, all four of these radical utopian projects, oftentimes expressed as forced, exaggerated and wild developments, were deeply grounded in the social/historical processes taking place in Russia and in the world at large.

Part 2, which centers on the science utopia, brings together two different aspects of this project. Chapter 3 provides a brief history of utopian thought in Russia, from the Middle Ages to Soviet times; it primarily concentrates on techno-scientific utopias as presented in

Russian philosophy, fiction and mass culture. In Chapter 4, I proceed to discuss the particular social group, the Soviet techno-scientific intelligentsia. By building on Russian utopian ideologies of the past and its own unique class subjectivity, the representatives of this group managed to promote particular ideas and values in the Soviet society, which eventually resulted in the “natural childbirth” movement.

Part 3 goes on to discuss nature and the natural, yet another powerful utopian project lying at the very core of the “natural childbirth” movement’s ideology. In Chapter 5, I explain how the members of the “natural childbirth” community understood and conceptualized the natural – a concept used even for self-reference by the group. In Chapter 6, I concentrate on the major utopian goal of the movement: the production of a new type of subjects envisioned as ultimately natural beings. By drawing on pre-revolutionary Russian ethnographic material and my own recent interviews, I show how the “natural childbirth” movement radically reframed and inverted the traditional Russian childbirth ritual while leaving its basic structure intact.

Part 4 focuses on the movement’s intellectual work with yet another utopia – the one venerating tradition. In Chapter 7, I discuss how and why the concept of tradition became so centrally important for the Russian population after the collapse of the USSR, and how “inventing” tradition anew and compiling new hybridized systems of knowledge and practice later became an essential part of the “natural childbirth” movement. Further, in Chapter 8, I concentrate on the gender roles and identities of both the male and female “natural childbirth” attendants, and the ways in which Russian folk tradition and popular

culture shaped and defined these roles.

Part 5 discusses the utopian project of globalization through the prism of the “natural childbirth” and “human potential” movements in Russia and the US. In Chapter 9, I discuss how traditional Russian and Western values were contested and negotiated over the production of new Russian citizens – babies - throughout the history of the Soviet state and later, after its collapse. In Chapter 10, I concentrate on the actual interaction between Russian and American representatives of the sister movements, and the ways they influenced each other, built on each other’s findings, suffered from cultural misunderstanding and engaged in ideological conflicts. Finally, I discuss the Internet era and the ways in which the advent of the World Wide Web and transnational social networks changed and redefined the relationships between the overseas partners, creating new types of identities, new ways of communication and new potentialities for exchange.

Chapter 2: The History of the Russian “Natural Childbirth” Movement

The Medicalization of Russian Birth

In Russia the mass migration of labor and birth from the home into the hospital occurred shortly after the Socialist Revolution of 1917. Although the process of the scientific reconceptualization of the body and medical intervention into bodily practices through the introduction of public health initiatives started in the major Russian cities long before the October Revolution, the process went very slowly and encountered a lot of obstacles. In the cities, obstetrics education programs and first maternity hospitals for the poor appeared as early as the late 18th century, and were first facilitated by the European doctors who were invited to Russia in order to plan and lead the medical reform (being part of Petrine westernization efforts). Later, the control of these facilities shifted to the newly emerged Russian medical specialists seeking to replicate a European doctor and implement new, rational systems of scientific knowledge. The most prominent of the early obstetricians was Nestor Maksimovich-Ambodik, the author of the first comprehensive treatise in obstetrics in Russian (Maksimovich-Ambodik 1784-86). Although medicalization efforts were implemented (obstetrics textbooks were written, medical specialists were trained, and a few maternity hospitals were opened in Moscow and St. Petersburg), the whole process progressed very slowly, and, until the beginning of the Soviet period, there were still very few hospitals that specialized in obstetrics, and, even then, only a small percentage of (mostly poor) urban women gave birth in these facilities (Levi 1950, Podorova 2000: 14).

In the villages of the vast agrarian country of Russia, Western biomedical intervention took even more time and effort. In the late 19th century, a body of school trained midwives (*akusherki* - from French *accoucheur*, “an obstetrician”) was created through the newly emerged female education programs. After completing the training, young female graduates, usually belonging to the group of mixed social origin (*raznochintsy*), were sent to work in the Russian villages, where they had to compete for authority (mostly unsuccessfully) with traditional birth attendants (*povival'nye babki* or *povitukhi* - “old swaddler women”) (Ramer 1978, Demich 1889a, Demich 1889b). Historian Samuel Ramer provides a comprehensive account of this early intervention initiative of Western biomedical regimes into the Russian peasants’ daily practices (Ramer 1978). Basing his research on archival documents, Ramer follows the late 19th century discussions of the medical policymakers regarding the training of new group of medical professionals, the midwives, to serve in the countryside. In his article, Ramer focuses on class matters in the production and distribution of knowledge about the body and the legitimate ways of its treatment. He traces the implementation of a number of projects in the domain of Russian public health that sought to adequately supply trained midwifery personnel to the villages. Training the peasant girls for these purposes completely failed: while they were expected to move back to the villages upon the completion of their training, they would always quickly return to live and work in the urban environment, in spite of all precautions and attempts to “conserve” them and make them to continue self-identify as peasants. At the same time, the urban girls were not eager to go to the countryside either, and their sentiment was only amplified by the fact that, on arrival, the peasants would ignore their presence and continue to use the services of traditional village healers instead. The last possibility, retraining

traditional birth attendants, was even less successful, as it only managed to lower their status in the eyes of their clientele. Besides, they would then be operating on two contradictory systems of knowledge that could hardly coexist within the same practice. Only after the October Revolution Russian society became (at least partially) ready to host the medicalization in the countryside and able to establish a certain routine in medical governance of the villages.

The mass transfer of birth into the hospitals both stemmed from and reinforced the Soviet re-conceptualization of the ideas of maternity and female health which were widely discussed and debated in the early 1920s. An entire set of social measures and policies was introduced in order to promote the emerging network of state hospitals and reduce the authority of traditional birth attendants and healers (Holland and McKeivitt 1985). As a result, medicalized birth in hospitals very quickly became the accepted norm, and the traditional birth attendants, with their entire body of knowledge and scope of practice, were marginalized and virtually ceased to exist as birth providers. While home births transpired occasionally in faraway villages well up to the 1950s, they were mostly attended by medically trained professionals that didn't rely on the traditional knowledge about the body and old village birthing practices (Ransel 2000). As the setting of birth changed, the traditional body techniques and physical treatments of birth were replaced by the medical science-based ones taught by obstetrics textbooks. The practical experience of traditional Russian midwifery, which used to be largely "holistic" and intuitive, was largely neglected, and no attempts were made to integrate it into the modern practice of obstetrics.

The rapid transition to these new practices can be explained by major changes in the Russian people's perception of the world, of human nature and the organization of the human body. Such conceptualizations were formulated on the official level and spread around by the multiple tools of Soviet propaganda. Soviet authorities consistently and thoroughly promoted positivist and materialist thinking, and the new Soviet mentality was officially secular, with atheism strongly promoted in mass media, schools and workplaces. The destruction of churches and severe repression of the clergy were part of the war against any perceived threat to the materialist outlook. Russian popular faith was a complex phenomenon, presenting a mix of Russian Orthodox and pagan elements. In this melting pot, pagan rituals and beliefs were commonly perceived as essentially Christian, and people experienced difficulty in differentiating one system from the other. In the official Soviet discourse, all pagan customs of the time were decried as superstition, and those who practiced them were harshly criticized. A conscious effort was also made to create new secular rituals in place of the Christian and pagan ones (Glebkin 1998).

The private life of Soviet citizens was generally scorned and ignored. The family circle was hardly hermetic; the Communist Party had the right to regulate the life of the family, approve marriages and divorce proceedings, discuss cases of adultery in public and recommend models for the proper organization of family life.⁵ Childbirth, too, was treated as public event, since it constituted the beginning of a new citizen and subject, who would soon be expected to perform certain functions within the social system. Maternity leave

⁵ See Kharkhordin 1999 on practices of moral accountability of subjects in the Soviet society throughout its existence.

was brief, and shortly after their birth babies were sent to public nurseries, where they'd receive a proper communist upbringing.

Positivist thinking became dominant in medicine, and it left virtually no room for any kind of integration of holistic ideas. Biomedical techniques now formed the sole basis of medical treatment, and only the body was cared for, while the psychological and spiritual dimensions of illness were rejected altogether. The progressing separation of medical knowledge into narrow specialized fields furthered the treatment of particular organs in isolation from each other, while the links between bodily functions were largely ignored. Holistic attitudes in healing, that presuppose a multidimensional view of the person as a whole being and an inseparable part of the universe, were largely dismissed as un-scientific and thus irrelevant. The mechanistic view of the human body promoted and advertised the concept of a norm and of possible deviations from it. Within this new biomedical model, the process of birth was regarded as a predictable mechanical process that required standardized interventions in cases that deviated from the norm. Thus, throughout the Soviet period, routine medical intervention into the process of birth expanded and grew as a perceived norm in theoretical obstetrics literature, in the practice of the maternity hospitals and in the lay public's perception of birth. The discourse of risk, which inevitably accompanies medicalization (see Kaufert and O'Neil 1993, Lupton 1999, Rapp 2000, Lock 2004, Georges 2008), strengthened in the USSR, and eventually birth started to be regarded, both by medical staff and the general public, as a dangerous enterprise requiring extra strict supervision and management by university-educated specialists. The birthing women, their family members and their communities were now seen as lacking the

required expertise to give birth on their own, and the legitimate knowledge about birth and its proper handling was now concentrated in the hands of the birth experts - of the properly trained and ideologically loyal medical professionals.

The Alliance of Maternity Hospitals and the State: Policing the Subjects

During the Soviet period, no private hospitals existed in Russia or the Soviet republics, and even when the commercial medical services became available after *perestroika* (mostly in bigger cities), the majority of the Russian population couldn't afford them. As post-Soviet class stratification grew, those who were more educated, more oriented toward Western values and better off financially, started looking into paid alternatives to state medicine (mostly, in the form of commercial wards and service packages within state hospitals). These packages tried to replicate some of the Western birthing models, including the presence of fathers at birth, "rooming in" (staying in a private room with the baby, as opposed to multiple mothers staying together in one big common room while the babies were separated from them and taken to the nursery) and, generally, more formally respectful treatment of the birthing woman as an individual with her own rights and choices. The latter was hard to arrange even for a large sum of money, as the models of doctor-patient relationships were deeply ingrained in institutional practices. Meanwhile, the majority of population was either unaware of these options, didn't value in them, or simply couldn't afford these privileges, and so had to continue using the conventional system characteristic of the most Soviet maternity hospitals across the country.

While I was conducting the interviews for the first stage of my ethnographic project in 1994-1999 (the one focusing on hospital birth practices and attitudes), the new commercial alternatives had just started to appear, and in my informants' narratives I could see the Soviet patterns continuing into post-Soviet reality. While speaking about their birth experiences, which covered the period from the mid 1930s to the mid 1990s, my female interviewees reported their essential rights to have been roughly violated in state hospitals at all possible levels. The first post-Soviet commercialized delivery wards did not guarantee the protection of birthing women's rights and dignity. At the time of my interviews, the discourse of "human rights" had only just come to Russia, and women were eager to integrate the concepts of human rights, women's rights and consumer rights into their laments (especially, the ones who were younger and more educated). Many of my interviewees expressed strong disappointment with the authoritarian separation of mothers from their newborn babies, doctors ignoring their opinions while making decisions on the methods of treatment, the prohibition to meet their husbands and relatives during the hospital stay, the abusive medical intervention into the process of birth, the general rude treatment, and the poor living conditions. Listed here are some references to my interviewees' negative experiences with hospital policies and the attitudes of the medical staff:

They didn't tell me anything about my baby: all the doors were closed; you couldn't get information from anyone (Tatiana F.).

They bring him [the baby] swaddled, and there is no possibility to even have a look at him naked. You can't see if he is clean, or what he looks like, or if he is taken good care of (Svetlana V.)

Throughout my life, when I asked what medicine I am taking, they answered me in a rude manner. Therefore, I became kind of allergic to hospitals, and this time [at the maternity hospital] I tried not to ask any questions at all (Vita).

There were only two days a week when they allowed relatives to visit us, and only at definite hours. You had to shout out of the ward window otherwise (Angelina).

My husband was standing under the window at the moment, and when my daughter was born, he shouted: “Who was born?” – and they shouted him back that he now had a daughter (Nina).

They just deceived me. They said: “Don’t worry, we won’t rupture you[r membranes]”, because I had already asked them not to [perform an amniotomy]. <...> The [female] doctor said: “See my hands, I have nothing in them, I only got to have a look”. And then she ruptured [them] (Asia).

They [maternity hospital medical staff] take us for pigs. They didn’t give a damn. I mean, they treat us like cattle (Liudmila S.).

These accounts express the strong dissatisfaction women feel with the situation in which information about the birthing woman’s own body and health issues is concealed from her while her own and her baby’s bodies are handled in an authoritarian manner. Ultimately, it was not just the body of a birthing woman that became the object of manipulation in the Russian state hospitals - it was also her soul, which the medical institutions sought to straighten and discipline in a proper way (cp. Foucault 1995).

Under the Soviet regime, human bodies were constantly policed in various ways. Medical policing was an important part of this system. From childhood, we learned that we were accountable for the very circumstance of having a body: compulsory medical check-ups, immunizations and various prophylactic measures were part of the bureaucratic routine in daycare centers, secondary schools, universities, and in the workplace. I recall hearing the first relevant mentioning of Ob/Gyn practice when I was ten and attended fourth grade. A friend of mine, a boy two years older than I, told me a big secret: during middle and high school years, as a part of the compulsory routine medical check-ups organized by schools

annually, all the girls would be brought to an Ob/Gyn's office at the specialized *polyclinic* for teens, where "they" would fully strip you of your clothes, rudely palp your breasts and then make you get into the examination chair in order to check if you were still a virgin. If it turned out that you were not, this information would be passed further to your school's officials, and some unspecified horrible consequences would follow.

While this was not the first time I encountered the idea of state power intervening with my body as a child, this was the first time when I felt that my body, including my intimate sexual and reproductive organs, didn't fully belong to me, but were actually parts of the huge bureaucratic machine and, hence, needed to be accounted for. For me, this was extremely scary and humiliating, but, thankfully, for some reason, I never personally encountered the routine Ob/Gyn check-ups during my middle and high school years. Perhaps, our school wasn't participating in the program, or maybe the story was just a piece of school lore. Even so, we girls always knew and believed that it *could* happen at any time, since the social surveillance practices were securely in place. This understanding was one of the most important reasons not to have sex during high school years, as all the girls knew very well that Big Brother was constantly watching. My worries proved to be exactly correct when I finally had to visit an Ob/Gyn office during my student years at St. Petersburg State University at the age of nineteen: besides providing medical service, the "women's consultation clinic" (*zhenskaia konsul'tatsiia*) performed the functions of moral police and a pedagogical institution responsible for keeping a record of your immoral behavior and teaching you a good lesson for misbehaving. Indeed, there was a lot of power

demonstration and intentional humiliation integrated into the (mostly female) doctors' and nurses' practice.

When I was working on a project about the practices of hospital birth in Russia, one of my interviewees contributed her case, which featured a St. Petersburg male Ob/Gyn who, as she recalled, threatened the women staying at the hospital's postpartum ward that he would put F grades (*postavit dvoiki*) into their medical profiles for lack of compliance with the hospital's rules and his personal demands:

And then there was this Dr. Pasternak, who threatened us all that he would put F grades in our medical charts. As far as I understand, they did put those grades into your chart – for your behavior and the like – depending on how you behave while giving birth and later, in the maternity ward. He said: “If you won't behave, you won't get your sick leave money from your work,” or some other kind of payment we wouldn't receive. Oh yeah, they did make those threats” (Veronika).

Nobody knew how exactly it was all supposed to work and what exactly this was about, but everyone felt somehow nervous and uncomfortable. These women didn't know where exactly these F grades would end up going later and how these records might affect their future.

Such cases (of which I have recorded multiple examples) show that Soviet women experienced very ambivalent feelings in regard to their own bodies, their supposed accountability as individuals and the issues of “ownership” and parents' rights in regard to their babies. An important question in feminist critique, “who do women's bodies belong to?” (Petchesky 1995), is very relevant here. Soviet women were not exactly sure who their bodies belonged to. They didn't feel (and it never occurred to them) that they could just stand up and leave the facility without any explanation. They were unable to change their

medical provider, as there was, in fact, no choice (all Soviet citizens were assigned a particular medical institution and a “zoned” doctor (*uchastkovyi vrach*) according to their registration, *propiska*). They knew, that, as a result of any non-compliant behavior, they could lose their job, or membership in an organization (e.g., in the Communist Party, Komsomol youth organization, etc.), and that their behavior could be condemned at a collective meeting after a public discussion of all the minor details of their alleged misdeed. They also knew that they could be deprived of certain benefits in the workplace. In their reality, anything was believable – even grading adults’ behavior with school grades in medical charts. Soviet medicine was tightly connected with the state apparatus, exchanged information with it and was oftentimes used as a state-induced penal system (as was the case with the Soviet psychiatric institutions which were often used for the isolation and compulsory treatment of political dissidents). Soviet medicine was a part of the state power apparatus – the department policing, manipulating and ultimately forming the Soviet subjects in the domains of the body, health and reproduction.

Although women were often strongly dissatisfied with their maternity hospital experiences, they normally didn’t exercise any form of active resistance to medical authoritarianism. Women just felt helpless when facing unwanted and conflicting situations, and most of their dissatisfaction and resentment was channeled into laments about the terrors of childbirth - a distinct genre of women’s lore. In these narratives, the violence of the state/medical machine was essentialized as an unavoidable part of the birthing process. In other cases, the disciplinary intention of the birthing ritual proved to be highly effective: after participating in the symbolic interactions of a hospital birth process with its complex

interplay of power and knowledge, women ended up internalizing the values as intended and continued to reproduce them later in their social lives (cp. Davis-Floyd 1992). In such cases, the authority of the medical personnel wasn't even questioned, and their ignorant behavior was justified by reference to a certain necessity. Very often, women would complain and portray themselves as victims in relation to impersonal hospital policies, medical regimes and harsh living conditions, while rationalizing the rude and authoritarian behavior of particular nurses and doctors in the classic Stockholm syndrome manner. Overall, resistance to medical power was mostly passive, and usually expressed only post factum (cases of direct confrontation on the spot were rare). Women generally allowed such interventions to go on, perceiving them as a necessary sacrifice in giving birth to a baby. By submitting to this situation, by the very desire to preserve it (keep the job, keep the benefits, keep the Party membership), the birthing women and their partners complied not only with the health-related policies of medical institutions: they complied with the entire Soviet regime with all of its power dispositions, to which the medical procedure of birth was part and parcel.

Resistance to State Induced Medicalization: the Emergence of the Russian “Natural Childbirth” Movement

While all the attitudes and tendencies described above persisted through the late Soviet period, survived *perestroika*, and can still be found now, in 21st century Russia, certain groups, with their own alternative systems of knowledge and scope of practices, appeared and started growing in the margins of late Soviet society. In the 1960s, a considerably small group of Soviet parents stood up against the alliance of state and biomedicine – the alliance

aimed at exercising biopower through controlling bodies, including women's and babies' bodies at birth. This active resistance took the form of a movement that sought to demedicalize and debureaucratize childbirth - to take it out of medical/state control. A principal point of this new movement was the necessity to avoid any kind of medical intervention into the process of pregnancy, birth and early baby development whatsoever, so as to provide babies with the most beneficial environment to be born in. While a "natural childbirth" movement appeared in the U.S. around the same time, the Russian movement arose and developed independently and was based on somewhat different values, pertinent to the specific conditions of the Soviet social environment.

Using the classification of birth models introduced by Robbie Davis-Floyd, the American "natural childbirth" discourse attempted to mediate the oppositions between dominant (technocratic) and alternative (holistic) models of medicine (Davis-Floyd 1992:155). The American concept of "natural childbirth," which is associated with the name of Dr. Grantly Dick-Read (Dick-Read 1933 and 1984), implies labor without painkillers and a basic intention to work with biomedicine in an attempt to "humanize" it (which corresponds to Davis-Floyd's "humanistic" model of medicine). In the Russian movement, however, the parents who described their activity as "natural childbirth" sounded considerably engaged by what Davis-Floyd called the "holistic" model of medicine (see Davis-Floyd and St. John 1998) and were radically opposed to any collaboration with the representatives of official medicine and the ideological system of biomedicine itself. While, according to the American usage of the term "natural childbirth," birth can take place in a hospital, and medical intervention in general is allowed, sometimes to the point when anything except a

cesarean section is considered “natural” (Michie and Cahn 1996), the strong point of the Russian “natural childbirth” movement was giving birth outside the hospital – either at home or out in nature. One of my interviewees cited the words that she had once heard from the founding father of the Russian “natural childbirth” movement, Igor Charkovsky: “Let the Soviet woman give birth anywhere – any place would be better than a maternity hospital” (Ekaterina). Thus, in the early stages of the “natural childbirth” movement no compromise with the official medical institutions or the medical model was possible, as the participating parents sought to completely dissociate themselves from the medical power apparatus.

In order to illustrate the importance of dissent and the avoidance of compromise with the medical system (the idea so dear for the “natural childbirth” movement’s participants at its early stages), I’d like to mention one case from my fieldwork. One of the pioneers of the movement, a self-trained homebirth midwife, almost refused to continue my interview with her after she learned that I was going to interview some other homebirth midwives who she considered renegades. She expressed strong resentment toward these other midwives due to their readiness to suture a birthing woman’s perineum in case any tears were left there after the birth; in her opinion, such intervention would make the very idea of natural birth completely profane and turn the whole thing into a heavily medicalized enterprise. According to her conceptualization of the birthing process, a birthing woman must open up completely, so that no tears would ever appear in the first place, and the role of a midwife should be mostly “spiritual” - helping a birthing mother to enter a new dimension of consciousness that would ensure complete relaxation.

During the 1970s, even before the official launch of the out-of-hospital “natural childbirth” movement, more and more people in Russia became involved in informal community organizations known as “family clubs” (*roditel'skie kluby*). These community groups provided opportunities for like-minded parents to socialize, discuss things related to alternative health-centered lifestyles and engage in alternative health management practices. Beginning in 1980, these people started giving birth at home in water – either on their own or with people already experienced in homebirth as attendants. They also promoted alternative patterns of health treatment and childrearing. The participants of the movement believed that prospective parents should be prepared for the childbirth and parenthood both physically and spiritually by means of certain bodily techniques, exercises and practices, and that the best way to maintain such a demanding lifestyle was to join a community of families with similar aims, where the more experienced people could coach the newbies, and everyone would support each other.

In the 1970s and early 1980s the “family club” initiative was an underground dissident movement. For the participants and their families this was, to a large extent, a struggle for privacy, for personal and familial autonomy. The movement’s participants claimed that they did not want to share responsibility for their own health and family life with state institutions like antenatal clinics, hospitals, nurseries and schools. They called their philosophy “conscious parenting” (*soznatel'noe roditel'stvo*), pointing out that they consciously release the Soviet state from its self-proclaimed “responsibility” to take care of their personal health issues, family matters and their children’s socialization. Birth and

childrearing were seen by the group as very special events in the life cycle of the family. Unassisted birth with only family members present was their ideal, but already experienced people would sometimes help others give birth free of charge. Proselytism and dissemination of information about the benefits and useful techniques of “natural childbirth” was instrumental to their practices. The ideologists of “natural” or “conscious” childbirth insisted that the private family event of childbirth demanded both parents’ personal responsibility for the birth process and its outcome, and that this responsibility should never be shared with or controlled by authoritative institutions such as maternity hospitals.

Since contacts with official medicine still occasionally took place for one or another reason, the representatives of the movement sometimes found themselves in situations where they had to take a stance and initiate an open conflict with the medical personnel of the clinics. I’ve heard many narratives of young parents exercising resistance to doctors’ power in one or another way. One of the most dramatic stories was told to me by a father who had to forcefully lock the doctor who was trying to keep the new mother and baby at the hospital, in the doctor’s own office. He then grabbed his wife and the newborn baby and voluntarily left the premises, without his wife and baby being officially released. From the perspective of the ordinary Soviet citizen, who always obeys doctors’ orders and prescriptions, this act was extraordinarily brave, because, as stated earlier, the patients of the hospitals didn’t usually know their rights and were easily persuaded by the medical personnel that they weren’t allowed to exercise their will with their baby or even with their own body (including leaving the hospital at will). The participants of the “natural

childbirth” movement, however, had already started questioning the doctors’ authority, reclaiming their bodies and their babies as their own property and reserving the birth process as a private, closed family matter. Having the support of a whole community of like-minded people, some of whom had already claimed this new power and identified with the new ideological paradigm, inspired and encouraged newcomers and created a certain sense of solidarity, of collective effervescence, of the topsy-turvy world where the alliance of state and medicine appeared as turned down and disempowered while private individuals (and the nuclear families they were part of) regained their rights and autonomy.

Ideology and the Ultimate Utopian Goals of the “Natural Childbirth” Movement

In addition to the concerns about privacy and autonomy discussed above, another important part of the “natural childbirth” movement’s ideology was the rehabilitation of the spiritual dimension of human life. The participants of the movement viewed the human body as inseparable from the spiritual – the concept that was understood differently by various groups at different stages of the movement’s history. In the early days of the movement, the conceptual framing of birth had an eclectic nature. Childbirth customs from many different world traditions were gathered from sources of varying reliability and deliberately woven together by the ideologists of the “natural childbirth” community. One of the early members of the movement critiqued this “omnivorous” tendency in an interview which I conducted with her a decade after she had joined the movement:

In their minds, there is total confusion. Some things they somehow remember, and other things they’ve read somewhere, but this knowledge is anything but systematic. For example, they happen to read some kind of medical literature about the placenta, and it’s mentioned there that in folk belief the placenta is used as an amulet. So they say: “Wow! We have to tell people about this, we must share this information!” So all [their knowledge] is based on jumbled-up facts (Alia).

In the movement's early stages, elements of Russian Orthodox rites coexisted in "natural childbirth" practices with the newly "rediscovered" pagan Russian beliefs, myths borrowed from the ethnographic descriptions of various primitive societies, the elements of modernized Eastern practices (such as Yoga and Zen), and the ideas and methods of transpersonal psychology. This kind of "general spirituality" is known as a central feature of the so called New Age paradigm (see Lewis and Melton 1992, York 1995, Hanegraaff 1996, Heelas 1996). Combining bits of various unorthodox beliefs with widely acknowledged, scientific facts, "natural childbirth" proponents created a complex conceptualization of humanity, the human body and human spiritual essence. Childbirth was considered an important event along the spiritual path of the baby, the mother and the whole nuclear family. In consequence, social institutions needed to be prevented from intervening with this integral process at any level, since such intervention could potentially ruin the essential spiritual transition for the parents and, most importantly, for the baby.

The fall of socialism liberated and enhanced the Soviet people's need in and interest for spiritual matters. In a transitional time when they felt increasingly vulnerable, people could now openly seek supernatural help. Mass baptism and the rehabilitation of the Russian Orthodox faith were characteristic of *perestroika* period and its aftermath; the same was true for sects of various kinds, magic and psychic healing (Stephens 1997, Borenstein 1997, Lindquist 2006). Healers, sorcerers, astrologists and hypnotists became extremely popular at this liminal time. The most popular of these "sensitives" (*ekstrasensy*), such as Anatoly Kashpirovsky and Alan Chumak, used to address the whole country and offered healing sessions on national television. As private business became legal, numerous small

publishers and newspapers began specializing in books on dreams, the interpretation of omens, folk healing and the supernatural. These changes in public consciousness drew more people to “natural childbirth,” as Igor Charkovsky, the leader of the “natural childbirth” movement, and some of his allies and disciples had the reputation of possessing certain extrasensory, paranormal powers, such as healing abilities, clairvoyance and telepathy. The practice of lay birth assistance acquired the name of “spiritual midwifery” (*dukhovnoe akusherstvo*) in the “natural childbirth” community, since it focused on the spiritual guidance of parents. The term itself was borrowed from an American homebirth midwife Ina May Gaskin’s book “Spiritual Midwifery” (Gaskin 1975), although it was reframed and reinterpreted by Russians in a new way (see Chapter 10).

Opposing their vision to the official treatment of an individual as a unit of the state, the participants of the “natural childbirth” movement believed that humans belonged not to a particular state, but rather to the whole universe and thus, as planetary citizens, were primarily responsible for the well-being of the Earth as part of the all-encompassing cosmos. Within the “natural childbirth” ideology, humans were seen as deeply integrated into the natural world’s processes and connections. The human body was considered cosmically oriented and axiologically heterogeneous, with certain organs and bodily functions intended for communication with the all-cosmic unity. Within this paradigm, human beings became responsible for supporting the world by maintaining “natural” connections with it, as well as by avoiding and preventing any “artificial”, “unnatural” ones. In order to be capable of taking on this ambitious mission, they were supposed to develop certain extra-sensory abilities that would allow them to telepathically

communicate with the universe on multiple levels. Truly conscious parents were supposed to bring up a new generation of people capable of resisting the destruction of the world, which threatened it as the inversion of “natural” processes, global pollution and, ultimately, the anticipated nuclear war.

This ecological concern of the “natural childbirth” community was especially strong during the early, Soviet stages of the movement’s activity. The worries about the fate of the Earth, and the desire to partner with similar movements in the West were very powerful behind the Iron Curtain. This was the time when, in spite of all the obstacles, Russians sometimes managed to meet with visitors from the West concerned with similar issues and to exchange information with them (Ostrander and Schroeder 1971, Krippner 1980, Hickman and Murphy 1980). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, during *perestroika*, the pan-ecological focus of the movement remained important, but shifted its focus somewhat. While the West sighed with relief after the communist threat was eliminated, the eschatological expectations among the general public in Russia increased even further, and discussions about impending disintegration and collapse in all the spheres of public life (medicine, education, business and finance, agriculture, public transportation etc.) could be heard everywhere (Ries 1997). Nancy Ries called such narratives, constantly reproduced during *perestroika*, “*polnaia razrukha* stories” (“the stories about complete disintegration”). These attitudes, especially beliefs about pollution of the natural environment with pesticides and radiation (undoubtedly affected by the recent Chernobyl catastrophe), provided stable grounds for the ecological concerns expressed by the “natural childbirth” supporters. It seems, however, that at this particular period the attention of

many “natural childbirth” activists’ attention switched from keeping in mind the whole planet to only their country and their role in relation to the Russia they envisioned.

During and after the 1990s, as Russian Orthodoxy regained its power in Russia, and the nationalistic tendencies among Russians greatly increased (see Kornblatt 1997; Knox 2009), the very idea of “spirituality” in relation to “natural childbirth” was largely reinterpreted. Along with Russian Orthodox beliefs and practices, many pagan beliefs and rites were recreated, newly constructed and merged together. In spite of all the restrictions and prosecutions of the Soviet era, the Russian Orthodoxy, traditional healing and folk beliefs were always preserved on the fringes of Soviet society. Grandmothers baptized babies in secret from their parents and taught them the main prayers and the basic tenets of Christianity. As the Soviet reign concluded, the majority of the population, which had been brought up as atheists or at least non-religious individuals, immediately felt the urge for identification with their “roots,” which resulted in mass baptism.⁶ Following the trend leading from the multicultural New Age paradigm toward a more exclusive, nationally oriented project, the later stages of the “natural childbirth” movement oriented the concept of “spiritual midwifery” more towards a Russian Orthodox kind of spirituality (that was more often than not merged with various pseudo-Russian, newly invented “traditions,” however this whole situation went largely unrecognized by the members of the movement). The “spiritual” in “natural childbirth” was then reinterpreted in a Russian Orthodox context, as the Holy Spirit of the Christian tradition. For many, the “conscious

⁶ Although 69% of the Russian population currently identify as Christian, only 11% attend church at least once a year, and 47% never go to church at all, according to Russian Levada Center.

parenting” now had a new meaning and a new major goal: the “restoration” of the old Russia and the traditional Russian family through performing supposedly traditional practices and actually *being* these imaginary Russians (cp. Anderson 2006). The new utopian project of restoring tradition became enormously popular and spread around quite quickly, largely displacing the naturalist utopian project from its central position in the ideology of the “natural childbirth” community.

“Parenting Schools”: Professionalization and Commodification of “Natural Childbirth”

As the post-socialist transition progressed, various industries previously run by the state either disintegrated or became privatized. A major redistribution of the workforce took place; people adapted to the social and economic changes, considered new careers and looked for means to survive and support their families. The “natural childbirth” community was strongly affected by all these changes: some of the leading figures, who used to be active in organizing their peers, teaching birthing and child rearing techniques and assisting at births, realized that their methods and approaches could be patented and commercialized. By this time, they had been helping other families to the extent of becoming quite professional in dealing with the birthing process. Now that running a private business became legal and was quickly normalized, they too could set up their own small businesses. Thus, in the early 1990s, the first commercial “parenting schools” that sought to prepare future parents for pregnancy and birth in the most “natural” and “spiritual” ways were set up. Officially, such businesses were only allowed to teach “pregnant couples” how to give birth in accordance with the philosophy and ideology of the schools’ leaders, since

assistance in out-of-hospital births was still prohibited by the state. In spite of all the restrictions, however, after getting the couples prepared for birth, the “instructors” of the “parenting schools” also assisted illegally at home deliveries. Thus, little by little, the dissident, countercultural “natural childbirth” movement that had featured free help between the peers and a “gift economy,” became more of a typical capitalist enterprise, featuring commodification of care and the provision of newly conceptualized “services” (cp. Davis-Floyd 2004, Simonds, Rothman and Norman 2007, MacDonald 2008).

From the early 1990s on, the pattern continued, and the number of parenting schools constantly and steadily grew. In the capital cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg, new parenting schools, that stemmed from the older informal groups started to open. Inspired by the approaches of certain schools and seminal figures in the two capitals (who traveled to other towns with lectures and seminars and also invited interested people from the Russian provinces to their headquarters), more and more parenting schools opened up in the bigger Russian provincial cities. New parenting schools opened in Tver, Nizhnii Novgorod, Ekaterinburg, Novosibirsk, Khabarovsk, Vladivostok and other major Russian cities. Many of these parenting schools developed their own original courses on “conscious conception,” pregnancy, “natural childbirth” and children’s early development. The fees for these courses varied widely, with the ones offered in the capitals being much more expensive, and prices constantly grew.⁷ The schools started conceptualizing their activities as

⁷ In the early 2000s, a prenatal preparatory course in a typical Moscow center usually ranged from \$100-350, while now it costs \$150-500. The fee for assistance in childbirth (which was always illegal, so all payment arrangements were informal) was always more flexible and could be offered on a sliding scale depending on the financial situation of a

providing a distinct range of “services,” and the entire framing of “natural childbirth” became different, now featuring new capitalist logic and corresponding capitalist values, including the interconnection of supply and demand and the value of freedom of an educated consumer’s choice. The demographics of the group changed extensively, as the representatives of the emerging middle class started joining the former intelligentsia, freelancers and bohemians who were the original members of the “natural childbirth” movement.⁸

The very first “parenting schools” preserved an initial tendency toward a mixed, eclectic, multicultural approach to homebirth. The “instructors” of these schools taught future parents modernized and stylized Eastern ritual practices and philosophical concepts (*chakras, mantras, karma* etc.). These notions, inevitably reinterpreted in the new contexts (cp. Alter 2004), coexisted peacefully in their worldview along with their interpretation of Russian traditional customs and the developments of modern science. Their special interest in ecology and the preservation of the natural world was reflected in the names of the schools: “Family Ecology” (*Ecologiia Sem’i*), “Aqua” (*Akva*, connoting waterbirth), “Aqua-Marina” (*Akva-Marina*, a pun on ocean birth and the name of the school’s leader, Marina Dadasheva), “Pangaea” (connoting the pan-planetarian and chthonic aspects of the birth myth). Later, when the Russian Orthodox trend became popular in “natural childbirth” community, the titles of many of the schools run by Russian Orthodox midwives started connoting Christian symbols and concepts: “Nativity” (*Rozhdestvo*),

particular family (typically \$200-500 in the early 2000s and around \$1000-2000 nowadays).

⁸ For the discussion of complexities of defining Russian middle class, the concept unknown to Russians until the collapse of the Soviet Union, see Patino 2008: 66.

“Peal of Church Bells” (*Blagovest*, also connoting Annunciation - *Blagoveshchenie*), “Baptismal Font” (*Kupel’* , presenting the idea of waterbirth in terms of baptism). Some other schools had names of pagan origin but reinterpreted from a Christian standpoint, like *Beregina* or *Rozhana*, both connoting deities from Slavic demonological pantheon (Tolstoy 1995; Ivanov and Toporov 1995a, Ivanov and Toporov 1995c) (read more on this trend in Chapter 7).

While both “natural” and “traditional” trends remained present at the later stages of the movement and provided choice options for clients with various tastes and beliefs, the New Age branch became less popular and/or started primarily focusing on the Orthodox elements within the multi-cultural medley of options. At the same time, many of the Russian Orthodox midwives condemned the New Age type schools, their practitioners, their methods and ideologies as wrong, harmful and sinful. Some of these midwives would refuse to work with the families who were not properly baptized Christians. Hiring a Russian Orthodox midwife presupposed a whole package of services, including a certain scenario with its rituals and practices that would allow the families who newly identified as Russian Orthodox Christians to experience a reconstructed traditional Russian birth and, through participation in this experience, become part of Russian history, culture and tradition.

Russian “Natural Childbirth” and Globalization

Many of the important Eastern concepts and practices came to Russia through the Western adaptations of the New Age movement. “Natural childbirth” ideologists paid a great deal of

attention to similar movements in the West and appropriated many ideas for their own purposes, including them into the complex patchwork of reterritorialized beliefs and practices. They eagerly sought out, translated and home-printed books written by western homebirth and waterbirth pioneers, incorporating many of these practices into their own work. Thus, Grantly Dick-Read, Frederick Leboyer, Michel Odent, Ina May Gaskin, Sondra Ray and other key figures in the field of alternative childbirth ideologies and related practices in the West became authorities among the representatives of the Russian “natural childbirth” community – some of them even before the fall of the Iron Curtain (Dick-Read 1984, Leboyer 2002, Odent 1994, Gaskin 1975, Griscom 1989, Ray 1985).⁹

At the same time, the original idea and practice of waterbirth (which happened to be almost the exclusive method of out-of-hospital birth in Russia, to the extent of becoming synonymic with “natural childbirth” and homebirth) became an essential feature of the Russian branch of the movement, which distinguished it from the similar “natural childbirth” and homebirth movements in other countries. Waterbirth became Russia’s signature, its unique contribution to the larger global movement; the technique was exported to the West and enthusiastically embraced by the most radical birth practitioners as “the Russian method.” The representatives of the American Human Potential Movement perceived Russia as a country with a special, unique mentality and highly spiritual culture capable of teaching the West important secrets of existence. Until the fall of the Curtain, Russia preserved this reputation along with the cultural capital that it ensured.

⁹ Available Russian translations of the Western books are listed in the bibliography next to the original works.

However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, this disposition changed. Russia's authority as a nation, including authority in spiritual matters, faded overall. At the same time, systems of knowledge and values shifted in the US, which resulted in advent of some new discourses. America was quickly moving toward becoming a more politically correct and risk-free country. Thus, many of the intense, radical body techniques introduced by Russians (such as winter diving, baby-yoga and "dynamic gymnastics") started to be seen as wild, ridiculous, criminal and in need of reframing. Waterbirth was rebranded from a very rigorous ordeal, intended to breed a new race of strong, enduring subjects, into a "gentle" technique that works to ensure the comfort of the mother at birth and mildly eases her pain. From the standpoint of stratified reproduction, waterbirth was apparently expropriated by the American middle class and made suitable for its ideological and cultural needs. Waterbirth was commodified in many ways; it also found a way to medical facilities framed as commercial service.

At a certain point after *perestroika*, when new Russian middle class was formed well enough to become a distinct social force and promote its own values and choices, waterbirth, in its westernized version, started returning to Russia as a form of knowledge and practice. A number of foreigners, who had once come to Russia in order to learn new techniques, wrote books and produced documentaries about "the Russian method." Now these secondary western sources, with their particular wordings and framings, were being translated into Russian, thus affecting the spread of Western values and attitudes. Now that Russia lost its authority and eagerly engaged in self-victimizing discourses, the Western origin of the informational resources communicated additional legitimacy to the practices

promoted in them. In its “gentle” and commoditized version, waterbirth was consumed by the new generation of middle class Russians, who usually couldn’t care less about the original purpose and mythology of the movement. This process of back and forth transplantation of waterbirth was accompanied by a series of misunderstandings and conflicts, caused by ideological, aesthetical and moral contradictions, between Russian and Western practitioners.

The advent of the Internet to Russia and the accompanying spread of social networks brought the problem of Russian-Western communication to a whole new level. First by communicating with their émigré compatriots around the world on the Russian-language net services, and later by joining the global networks (such as Facebook), Russian Internet users discovered a whole new world of possibilities for sharing and borrowing ideas. The Russian “natural childbirth” community was deeply affected by this change, as new configurations of exchange practices quickly emerged and developed. Russian homebirth midwives and their audience became part of the transnational movement for “natural childbirth,” which featured the free circulation of knowledge and practices and the creation of complex hybrid assemblages. Although part of the Russian “natural childbirth” community stayed faithful to traditionalism and cultivating Russian national identity, a big part of the community abandoned their imaginary roots and began moving toward adopting new, cosmopolitan values.

Now, having provided a short glimpse of the movement’s history, its immediate background and its particular features and periods, I will move on to discuss the few

mentioned aspects of the movement's ideology and history in more depth and in a more extended cultural context. All these ideas and affiliated practices will be discussed against the backdrop of the wider social processes going on in Russia, as well as beyond its borders. The communication and exchange with the West will be shown mostly from the Russian standpoint, however. In the following four parts, I will discuss four major utopian projects at the core of the Russian "natural childbirth" movement, which defined its essence and direction. In Part 2, I will discuss the first utopian project, built around the idea of techno-scientific progress, which led to creation of the movement and informed its early development. I start this discussion by outlining the historical development of utopian thought in Russia and the ways it treated scientific innovations.

Part 2: SCIENCE AS UTOPIA

Chapter 3: Science Dreams

The Domain of Hope

A few years ago, upon reading my dissertation proposal, one of my former professors asked me a question: why did I choose to study these “crazy” people as the subjects for my dissertation research, and why am I so fascinated with their idealistic views and projections? If I was interested in birthing practices, why did I decide to study the crazy and unusual ones, rather than looking at the beliefs and practices of the respectable biomedical establishment or the marginalized but at least somehow recognized group of professional nurse midwives working in the hospitals? Looking for the answer to this seemingly simple question made me think more deeply about the social situation discussed in my study and about my own personal interest in this inquiry. What is so mesmerizing about a group of people engaged in the megalomaniac project of transforming and transcending the very human nature, dissolving the eternal boundaries of interspecies communication, discovering the ultimate human potentialities, and exploring the relationship between humans and the universe?

The specificity of hope is always charged by the cultural and intellectual history of the particular locus. There are some common traits between the local manifestations of hope, but every local version absorbs and incorporates the multiplicity of previous cultural experiences of hoping and acquires a certain kind of *couleur locale* (cp. Miyazaki 2004, Crapanzano 2004). Thus, the Russian way of dreaming would be somehow different from

the dreaming methods of other cultures. There are certain local ideas and practices that are securely embedded in a particular dreaming method; they define proper and appealing ways of dreaming and make one reject the particularities of foreign hoping regimes.

Trying to account for my fascination with my research subjects, I responded that I could think of my interest to this particular kind of utopia as stemming out of my own Soviet upbringing. In the Soviet Union, the dominant atheistic ideology, penetrating citizens' minds, and the energy of the repressed hope were channeled through a variety of media. The secularized spirituality could be felt here and there, starting from the belief in Russia's special path with its unique spirituality (*dukhovnost'*) and ending with political, scientific and cultural projects that were utopian in essence. In his book *Russia in the Shadows* (1920), Herbert Wells called Lenin "the dreamer in the Kremlin," and these "winged words" of his were widely cited in the Soviet times. The epithet used to be a popular and loved one, as it somehow emphasized the global brotherhood of the dreamers on Earth in a positive way.

Many utopian projects preceded, surrounded and followed the grand utopian enterprise of the "Great October Socialist Revolution" of 1917. One of such major projects that Wells discussed in his essay was the electrification of the whole Soviet country. Wells doubted that such immense project could be accomplished in reality and criticized Lenin's ambitious plan. Another topic he discussed with Lenin concerned the construction of the new type of modern cities - "garden cities," as the revolutionary poet Vladimir Mayakovsky once referred to them. Mayakovsky's poem "Khrenov's Story of Kuznetskroi

and the People of Kuznetsk” (1929), which glorified this utopian project, used to be an important part of the reading curricula at secondary schools throughout the Soviet period:

Storm clouds
 run across the sky,
 the rains
 compress the gloom.
 Under an old cart
 workers lie about.
 And water above and beneath
 hears the proud whisper:
 “In four years
 the garden city will be here!”

Interestingly, Wells said in his essay that Lenin openly disapproved of the utopists “as all the Marxists do,” while Lenin himself clearly engaged in his own utopia. Lenin criticized “the utopian socialists,” such as Robert Owen, Henri de Saint-Simon and Charles Fourier, and opposed their ideologies with his theory of more reliable, “scientific” socialism. However, as I can remember, the names of the utopian socialists were always present in history textbooks and used to be respectfully discussed as important intellectual predecessors of the Soviet incarnation of socialism. The exploration of language and imagery that connoted utopia and dream in Soviet times should help explain the contradiction. Why did Lenin distance himself from the utopists and who did he oppose in particular? How did he regard his own project in the utopian-socialist historical context? Apparently, this contradiction lay primarily in the domain of language and tropes, and, consequently, the presentation of the whole communist project.

Russian Attitudes toward Dreaming

Here, I'd like to briefly discuss the Russian connotations of such concepts as dream, hope, utopia and some other relevant concepts. I will also discuss the charismatic power of a dreamer figure in the Russian culture. Why is dreaming so attractive and under what circumstances does it start to be seen as dangerous or harmful? In Russian culture, the four Saints *Vera*, *Nadezhda*, *Liubov'* and their mother *Sophia* present an honored group of holy martyrs. The mystical entities personified by these female characters (Faith, Hope, Love and Wisdom, respectfully) were discussed and interpreted in a symbolic manner by the Russian religious philosophers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, such as Vladimir Solovyov and Pavel Florensky. Some of the oldest Russian cathedrals were modeled after the St. Sophia Cathedral in Constantinople and bore the same name. In secular Soviet society, these concepts (still thematically connected) were reinterpreted as representations of various manifestations of the human spirit.

In the 1960s and 1970s, intelligentsia's idol, poet-singer Bulat Okudzhava re-actualized these names, returning to them the mystical symbolism of the pre-Soviet era. He managed to do it in his unique manner, communicating spiritual meaning within a secular context and never using direct religious references, but always pointing out to another dimension, which made his songs so special and appealing for the intelligentsia. Later, in post-Soviet times, the virtual relationships with the mentioned Saints/entities (Hope in the first place), often helped people to deal with the insecurities that they faced during the difficult and traumatizing experience of transition. In her last book, my mother Elena Dushechkina analyzed the anthroponymic naming tendencies of the newly established businesses in St. Petersburg in the 1990s. The name Victoria was most popular, and the runner up was

Nadezhda (Hope) (Dushechkina 2007). This simple sort of sympathetic magic helped people to keep their spirits up during the painful times of the post-Soviet economic restructuring.

Social utopias had already been portrayed in medieval Russian literature, where an Eastern country (such as India in *The Tale of the Wealthy Land of India* dated 12th/early 13th centuries) was commonly depicted as prosperous and having a just social order (Dmitriev and Likhachev 1969). Magical faraway lands were depicted in Russian folk legends, which sometimes reflected actual experiences of various peasant groups and religious sects (Klibanov 1978, Chistov 2003). The underwater world was once presented as a utopia in the legend about the invisible city of Kitezh which, according to the legend, submerged under the waters of Svetloiar Lake while being attacked by the Tatars. Only those whose soul and heart were pure, could find their way to the city of Kitezh. The myth of the prosperous country of Atlantis presents a relevant cultural parallel; however, it doesn't bear the same moral significance. The invisible city of Kitezh is one of the important connotations of underwater life in Russian culture. Later, I will discuss the underwater utopian projects in more detail.

Later in history, the social utopian ideas shared by the Russian nobility were heavily influenced by European utopian thought. Thus, during the second part of the 19th century, utopian visions of the social organization presented in Russian literature were rooted in the works of the European utopian socialists. The idea of creating a just social order for the peasants long remained at the cutting edge of the nobility's self-imagined tasks and, later,

of the emerged intelligentsia of mixed class origin (*raznochintsy*). Two of the major Russian literary utopias were Nikolay Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?* (1862-63) and the last part of Nikolay Nekrasov's *Who is Happy in Russia?* (1865-76). Serfdom in Russia was terminated in 1861, but the peasants were released without any land coming into their possession. Leo Tolstoy tried to apply these dreams of enlightenment and justice by building a utopian space for his own peasants. Dreaming and projecting about the future of Russia and humanity at large were essential features of the Russian intelligentsia's very existence and sense of purpose. Thus, the ideology of the Russian revolution, to a great extent, exploited the experience and spirit of the Russian millenarian sects (Etkind 1998).

I have already mentioned the Russian revolutionary utopia and the futuristic moves and projections that followed the revolution. The language itself became a target of a utopian project (cp. George Orwell's "newspeak") shortly after the revolution. Many symbolic changes were introduced, like claiming certain linguistic rules or even specific letters to be connected with the tsarist regime. New derivation and abbreviation rules were introduced. A new canon was proclaimed in literature as well: the major slogan of the time was to "throw" all the authors associated with the old regime "over the board of the liner of contemporaneity" in order to facilitate the creation of a new body of Soviet literature, free of old canon rules and stylistic limitations.

It turned out, in fact, that the selection criteria for the new literary canon were not based on the creative value of the considered works. The goal of the selection and consequent presentation of literature was to instill Soviet values and verbalize moral judgment of

certain disapproved types of behavior. While dreaming and idealistic projections were often approved and praised in different spheres of life, some of dreams could be reinterpreted in a negative way, denounced and severely punished as dangerous subversive activities. Thus, there appeared to be two kinds of dreaming. One was considered productive, creative, reasonable and realistic (even scientific, as in Lenin's "scientific communism"); this kind of dreaming would be considered worthwhile. According to the official ideology of the Communist Party, it made total sense to sacrifice one's life for the sake of a good and valid social project that was seen as pursuing common good.

This positive image was constantly opposed to the idea of unproductive, senseless, unrealistic and passive dreaming. The prototypical image of a dreamer who dreams just for the sake of dreaming (considered a total waste) was, for example, represented by the character Manilov in Nikolay Gogol's *Dead Souls* (1842). The term *manilovshchina* ("Manilov-like behavior") became a certain moral label and was discussed during secondary school literature classes as an example of passive, wasteful, purposeless dreaming. The European utopian socialists' projects were seen as exemplifying good dreams spent in vain. In reference to them, the very term "utopian" was turned into a somewhat negative epithet that presupposed unrealistic expectations that had no real, solid base. Lenin opposed this "utopian" kind of socialism with his own "scientific" one (later, "scientific communism" was presented as a self-contained discipline, taught at schools and colleges, and constituted a field of study for entire research institutions).

It is important to note that, during Soviet times, the curricula at secondary schools were centrally unified and approved by the state. This meant that every kid, regardless of their diligence at school, was exposed to the same body of literary images during Russian literature classes, the same names and associated information in history classes, and the same scientists and discoveries in science classes. All the people receiving a Soviet education, regardless of social distinction, shared the same basic cultural baggage (which could be extended in the case of intelligentsia): same names, same stories, same interpretations (the latter could be further critiqued and mildly altered by alternatively-minded school teachers).

The agenda of ridiculing unrealistic utopias was reflected in the language used during discussions of such projects. A pun, which any Russian can hear, connects the word “utopia” to “*utoplennik*,” a Russian term referring to a drowned person. This widely used pun refers to the impossibility of utopian projects in principle: it adds to the initial Greek meaning of the word, presupposing, that there is no *topos* where this perfect existence would be possible.

Nevertheless, futuristic hopes penetrated all spheres of the new Soviet society, including science. While, under tsarist regime, Konstantin Tsiolkovsky’s space-related inventions were not given any serious consideration, under the Soviet regime he received state support and acknowledgement. The image of an unrecognized provincial inventor, a certain crazy genius, working on extremely important scientific advances from which all of humanity

should benefit, was an essential part of the critique of Russian social reality in Russian literature of the second half of the 19th century.

For example, Aleksandr Ostrovsky in his drama *The Storm* (1859) portrays the deeply stagnated provincial Russian city of Kalinov, where the mechanic Kuligin (his real historical prototype's name was Kulibin) is working on *perpetuum mobile* without any social support or appreciation. This case was always addressed in secondary schools' literature classes, and the story of Tsiolkovsky was undoubtedly shaped by this archetype. The idea was that the new Soviet government gave homegrown inventors of lower class origin the opportunity to present their discoveries and make them strategically useful to the whole nation.

Utopian Philosophy and Science: Russian Cosmism

Having discussed the cultural connotations of hoping and dreaming, I now turn to the sources of the “natural childbirth” movement's utopian ideology and particular texts that have been instrumental in its development. It seems productive to look at the activity of the founding father of the movement, Igor Charkovsky, in the context of Russian ideas about dreams and utopias in the field of science, and also in the philosophical trends that informed it. Considering the impact Charkovsky's historical predecessors in scientific experimentation had on his own original project, the analysis of the images of “crazy” dreamers and inventors in Russian culture should help to clarify firstly, his own imagemaking strategies and positioning, and second, the popular perception of his approach, including his early success and later decay.

In one form or another, the Soviet state had always actively participated in the production and distribution of “societal hope” (Hage 2003) and nourished the subliminal fantasies of the Soviet people. However, the degree of attraction to dreaming and idealistic projections varied through the course of the Soviet era. In 1961, during the 22nd Congress of the Communist Party, Khrushchev came up with an openly millenarian slogan: “The current generation of Soviet people will live under Communism.” From the 1960s through mid-1970s, when Charkovsky started his experiments, there was an *acme* of hopeful expectations, both in general and specifically regarding science and scientists. The images of “physicists” (seen as the representatives of “exact” sciences), as opposed to “lyricists” (humanities affiliates) were presented in a romantic way (Vail’ and Gennis 2001). In 1961, the first Soviet *sputnik* was launched, and then in 1962 the first *cosmonaut*, Yuri Gagarin, successfully completed the first ever space flight. These were important landmarks in the popular understanding of the man-nature relationships. Anything seemed possible and achievable at the time.

Charkovsky’s ideas had direct and indirect connection with space colonization. It is possible to trace the origins of Charkovsky’s ideas back to the lineage of “Russian cosmists.” The most influential representatives of “Russian cosmism” were Nikolay Fedorov, Konstantin Tsiolkovsky and Vladimir Vernadsky (see Hagemeister 1997, Groys, Hagemeister and von der Heiden 2005). Among the Western philosophers, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin is connected with this trend through his work with the concept of the

noosphere. This connection is most important in the genealogy of the “natural childbirth” utopia (Teilhard de Chardin 2008).

Nikolay Fedorov, known for his “Philosophy of the Common Task,” was a Russian religious philosopher who wrote in the late 19th to early 20th centuries. Fedorov proposed overcoming death and restoring all the dead who ever existed. He saw real possibilities to do so through the uses and applications of science. Sometimes the ideas of cloning techniques are associated with his anticipations of life chains. Obviously, all these myriads of former dead would need to live somewhere; from this sprang his idea of appropriation of new territories and new modes of existence. The latter included the necessity to find new resources required to supply the humanity with food, oxygen and energy. Space and ocean colonization were imagined by Fedorov as a plausible solution for human expansion to neighboring territories.

Fedorov spoke about human adaptation of their newly acquired abilities to live in previously foreign environments; this was possible through developing resistance to the harmful factors of the environment including full regeneration of tissues, up to immortality. Fedorov’s teaching about the necessity of mutation of the human species in order to get in accord with nature and to reach total harmony, undoubtedly affected Charkovsky’s vision, directly or indirectly. Fedorov wrote:

All the sky spaces, all the sky worlds will become accessible to man only when he’ll be able to regenerate himself from the primordial matter, such as atoms and molecules, because only then he’ll be able to inhabit all the existing environments and to take all the possible forms.” (Fedorov 1982: 501)

In Russia, Fedorov's legacy remained important throughout the 20th century and affected many of the later utopian projects (see Young 1997).

Konstantin Tsiolkovsky was a multidisciplinary scientist influenced by Fedorov's teaching. He began experimenting in the 1890s, when he launched his studies of space and the related problems, looking for the possibilities of space colonization. While before the October revolution Tsiolkovsky's discoveries were not widely known or supported, and he worked independently (making his living as a school teacher in the Russian province), he immediately received full support from the new Soviet state. Tsiolkovsky was a very prolific writer, and he published a great body of work. He searched for ways to make it possible for humans to survive in different environments, and his work in this area included the issues of gravity (which were relevant to the underwater birth enthusiasts).

There is evidence that Charkovsky read Tsiolkovsky's work, cited it and sought to continue his line of experiments and reasoning. The article about the "amphibian boy" Vasia Razenkov, who was reported to beat the world record by swimming 20 miles nonstop in 15 hours in 1992 (Burachevsky 1998: 9, Gurianova and Zheleznova 1997: 14), discusses the kinds of reading which Charkovsky had recommended to Vasia's mother Margarita, a faithful follower and companion of his:

From Tsiolkovsky's work "Biology of Dwarves and Giants" Rita learned about the beneficial influence of the weightlessness on the human development; how it makes perfect humans by affecting the strength of their muscles and elevating their mental capacities. However, Tsiolkovsky wrote about these issues relating to other planets with different gravitation conditions, while Charkovsky directed his attention to the Ocean (Kriukova N.d.).

The colonization of previously uninhabited milieus and utilizing their resources was at the center of Charkovsky's project; for him, the developments of Russian cosmism seems to have been a very important, if not primary, inspiration.

Vladimir Vernadsky is considered another representative of the "Russian cosmism." He was a university professor with multiple interests in science, and was well supported by the Soviet state. Vernadsky, too, was interested in new energy resources for humans and in space colonization (especially the utilization of the solar energy). He is most famous for his theory of the three major universal domains: *geosphere*, *biosphere* and *noosphere*. The theory of the *noosphere* went through a new phase of popularity in the Soviet Union after French philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's book, *The Phenomenon of Man*, where he builds on Vernadsky's ideas, was translated into Russian (Teilhard de Chardin 1965).

The theory of *noosphere* is very much relevant to Charkovsky's vision of the universe. References to a collective informational field, a certain common *nous*, were heard pretty often in Charkovsky's talks, as well as in the remarks of his followers. A devoted disciple of Charkovsky, "spiritual midwife" Marina Dadasheva explained it to me this way in her interview:

Thank God that Charkovsky's ideas were so much in accord with women's desires. They were so adequate, so humane and relevant, that in the 1980s women started bearing their children at home. Charkovsky's ideas were spread in a natural way, I believe - that is, through the informational dimension of the words, thoughts and actions. And, I think, the atmosphere itself just absorbed this information, and women got it not on the level of words, but on the level of knowledge of their bodies.

Although people who channeled the noosphere discourse often weren't aware of its origin, the connection to the cosmists shouldn't be overlooked, as within Russian "natural childbirth" subculture some of their visions became commonplace.

The ideas of the Russian cosmists were brought into dialogue with the West quite early in the 20th century. Mystically oriented philosophers, such as George Gurdjieff and his pupil Peter Ouspensky, were well known in Europe and the US in the first half of the 20th century. Even today, Gurdjieff's groups are still active in the US. When the emissaries of Esalen Institute traveled to Russia back in the 1980s, they were surprised to find Gurdjieff's groups similar to those that they had at home:

Everywhere we went throughout the Soviet Union, in Soviet Central Asia and Soviet Georgia, just as in Moscow and Leningrad, we found encounter groups, meditation circles, Gurdjieff groups, parapsychology clubs and similar communities of affiliated interests (Thompson 1982: 35).

Significantly, Fedorov was known to be one of Ouspensky's major influences, so not only we observe the succession of the pre-revolutionary and Soviet utopian cosmologies, but also a long-standing interest of the West in the Russian utopian projects.

Soviet Science Fiction as Text of Hope

Along with the developments of utopias in scientific writings, there was another medium in Soviet Russia that was well suited to support the futuristic expectations of the Soviet people regarding the domestication of nature and unsettled space. Science fiction became extremely popular in Soviet Russia in the 1920s and 1930s (Geller 1985, 1994): the classics of this genre, such as the novels *Engineer Garin's Hyperboloid* by Alexei Tolstoy (1926-27, new version 1937) or *Professor Dowell's Head* by Alexander Belyaev (1925, new

version 1937) juxtaposed Soviet science, aiming at perfection of humanity, to “bourgeois” Western science, only interested in profit. The previously discussed negative meaning of utopia as failed dream was often applied to the fantasies presented in the works of Western science fiction.

By way of polemic with H.G. Wells (and citing the epithets that Wells used in his depiction of the Soviet Russia), the famous Soviet science fiction author Alexander Belyaev wrote in 1933, relating to the opening of Dneproges, a major electric power station (an ultimate result of the long and difficult “domestication” of the big Ukrainian river Dnepr symbolizing “wild nature”):

Can you hear this – you, famous author, unsurpassed science fiction writer, visionary and prophet able to see the future, a specialist in social utopias? The fantastic city is built!.. Compare it to your own cities in the shadows. By no means is it your Wellsian city! Your utopian cities will remain on the pages of your highly entertaining novels. Your “dreamers” will never “wake up.” Here it is - the city envisioned by “The Dreamer in the Kremlin.” You lost the game! (Belyaev 1933)

And yet there was room for such Western authors as Wells in the Soviet literary canon. His status was ambiguous since some of his ideas and visions were interpreted as ideologically cognate. The thing that Wellsian and Soviet science fiction approaches had in common was a structuring of the narrative around a certain moral idea, as well as concern about the just organization of future society. Wells himself pinpointed this feature of his writing opposing it to the majority of Western science fiction works, which, he claimed, were intended for pure entertainment.

For the Soviet system, it was strategically important to have allies in a foreign camp – both in order to expose the West’s inferiority with proof from the inside and to produce an

illusion of Soviet society's open nature. Wells's novels were published in Soviet Russia in enormous circulation. When Wells came back to Russia in 1934, he met in Leningrad with the Soviet authors who specialized in the popularization of science for the masses. When Wells was presented with the numerous copies of his translated and published works, it was a great surprise for him:

When the laughter caused by this conversation calmed down, Wells was presented with three heavy packs of his own books, which were issued in the USSR starting in 1917, along with a certificate stating that the total number of copies published exceeded two million.

Wells: Thank you for this very valuable and pleasant gift. Two million! This is much more than the number published in England during the same time period. A really, really pleasant surprise! (Mishkevich 1998)

Starting in the 1920s, Alexander Belyaev became very popular among the native Russian science fiction writers. He came out of a clerical family and engaged in all kinds of activities before the October revolution. He started writing considerably late (already in Soviet times) and was very prolific, quickly gaining nation-wide popularity. Belyaev was very interested in writing about all kinds of scientific advances and always tried to go into the tiniest detail while writing his descriptions of scientific inventions. In his writing, as well as during the meeting with Wells, Belyaev and his colleagues denounced the discrepancies in the depiction of the imaginary mechanisms in Wells's works. Belyaev began to write about space colonization and became very interested in Tsiolkovsky's work. The two men became acquainted, and from their discussions Belyaev gained knowledge about the details of actual scientific experiments. In the 1930s, he wrote a few novels about space travel and exploration, as well as a biographical sketch about Tsiolkovsky himself. Tsiolkovsky wrote an introduction to one of Belyaev's novels, *A Jump into Nowhere*

(1933), in which he evaluated Belyaev's novel as the most scientific amongst all the science fiction books ever written by either Soviet or Western authors (Sokolova 1981).

One of Belyaev's novels deserves special consideration in the current discussion. This book, *The Amphibian* (Belyaev 1928, 2001), was highly praised by Wells, who said he was jealous of its success (Mishkevich 1998). The book's plot revolves around the character of Ihtiandr (Greek for "Fish-Man"), an amphibian man created by genius Professor Salvator by means of a hybridizing operation. Salvator's idea was to implement the modernist project of human perfection and to start colonizing the ocean. He appeals to the unity of onto- and phylogenesis: since mammals once evolved from ocean dwellers, all mammals had at some point passed a stage in development when they had gills, but through evolving they later lost this useful organ, along with the ability to live under water. Professor Salvator decides to improve the human nature by providing a man with the opportunity to exist in two different environments: on land and in water. Ihtiandr was not the sole experiment of Salvator, however: the scientist had a laboratory where he experimented with different animals and their potentialities (an allusion to real interspecies experimentation attempted in the research laboratories of Soviet Russia (see Rossiianov 2002 on human-ape cross-breeding in the late 1920s).

The experimental work with bodily tissues and organs had already been imagined by Fedorov in his writings when he discussed the regeneration of tissues. Tsiolkovsky discussed at length the problem of human perfection to the point of eugenics: it was a "humanistic" project that aimed to bring happiness to all of humanity. He believed that all

living creatures (and even species) that lack viability and health should be impeded in their desire to procreate. Tsiolkovsky imagined total elimination of all the “unreasonable” animals so that there would be no imperfect beings left in the universe (Tsiolkovsky 1992).

Belyaev’s novel and ideas had much impact on the Russian utopian thought of the 1960s, when Charkovsky’s movement started to form. In 1961, the film adaptation of *The Amphibian* was produced. The film had stunning success among Russian audiences:

During the premiere at the “Russia” movie theater [the biggest central movie theater in Moscow at the time– E.B.] at the end of 1961, the spectators extruded giant glass windows and stood in the passages between the rows. During the first quarter of the year the film was shown, it collected an audience of 67 millions (Cherniavsky 2002).

This was a time of common euphoria in regard to the development of new human possibilities through scientific innovations. Space just had been explored for the first time, and even the most ambitious, unbelievable scientific projects seemed possible. In Durkheim’s terms, it was a time of collective effervescence (Durkheim 1995). The actor Vladimir Korenev who played the role of Ichtindr in *The Amphibian* immediately became a sex-symbol and set a standard for male beauty for the entire generation.

By the time the movie came out, Charkovsky had already started his water experiments with animals. His idea was to eliminate the fear of water in animals, so that they could live in water environment. Charkovsky worked with various “land” species, such as cockroaches, cats, mice and chickens. In my interview with him, Charkovsky said that he was not working with those animals alone. The setting of his bio-lab pretty much

resembled the laboratory of Professor Salvator and featured interspecies experiments which produced weird animal mutants.

In 1962, around the time of the film's boom, one particular event inspired Charkovsky to include humans in his underwater experiments. His own daughter Veta was born prematurely, underweight and not fully developed. The girl wasn't expected to live; the doctors said there was no hope for her survival. Charkovsky then took on the responsibility for her life and placed Veta into a water environment. She did well and soon started feeling much better. Charkovsky's idea was to eliminate gravitation and thus release Veta's innate "energy potential." Veta continued living in water for several months, and eventually she became a healthy and agile baby. This case opened the way for Charkovsky to continue his experiments on humans in search of new potentialities (Sidenbladh 1982).

Although revolutionary and seemingly progressive, Charkovsky's experiments resonated with the reactionary Soviet anti-Mendelian theories of heredity introduced by academician Trofim Lysenko in the 1940s. At that point, a huge campaign was carried out against pro-genetics biologist Ivan Michurin, whose approach was previously cultivated in Russian science. Lysenko contrasted Michurin's ideas by offering a Lamarckian twist on the dominance of the milieu in defining the inheritance of acquired characteristics in species. According to his theory, by altering the living conditions (i.e., the milieu), science can alter the ways in which the living organisms develop. Under Stalin, the popularity of this idea could be explained primarily by its ideological loyalty to the principles of Marxist-Leninist

logic. Georges Canguilem commented on this connection in his article on the historical meanings of the milieu:

In justifying the spontaneous character of mutations, Mendelian theories of heredity tend to moderate human, and specifically Soviet, ambitions to completely dominate nature and the possibility of intentionally altering living species. Finally and above all, the recognition of the determining influence of the milieu has a political and social impact in that it authorizes man's unlimited action upon himself through the medium of milieu. It justifies hopes in the experimental renewal of human nature. In this way, it appears, at the first sight, to be progressive. (Canguilhem 2001: 23)

The idea of the milieu was at the very focus of Charkovsky's utopian project, since by using the water environment he hoped to change the very nature of the human species. His ideas' coincidence with the basic ideological motivations underlying Lysenko's project shows how much even dissident projects during Soviet times were informed by the Soviet utopian project itself, and how, in spite of the revolt against the power of the state, the waterbirth revolutionaries still remained a product of their Soviet upbringing.

Besides hope and dreams, Charkovsky's project could be framed by another concept widespread in Soviet culture: *derzanie* or *derznovenie* ("daring," "audacity"). *Derzanie*, in Russian, connotes *hubris* in a somewhat positive way. *Derzanie* was a common name for young pioneer groups and children's clubs during Soviet times. This agency and the corresponding emotional experience were highly praised and were often communicated to children in an attempt to make them internalize Soviet ideology. *Derzanie* presupposes a revolt against supreme power; such attitude can be observed in Professor Salvator's case, since he saw his project as an open challenge to the Creator. In other cases, *derzanie* was often seen as a challenge to wild nature and its spontaneous forces (as it happened with the Dneproges electric station), or a challenge to the stagnated order of life, the rigid dogma.

The flight of Icarus was often used as an emblematic match of the *derzanie* concept. Notwithstanding the unfortunate ending, the plan of escape using the engineered wings and the very flight high in the air were considered worth trying. The Soviet writer Maxim Gorky was Lenin's personal favorite and was canonized among his contemporaries. His romantic poem "The Song of the Falcon" (1899) was steadily featured in secondary school anthologies of Russian literature and was assigned to be memorized by heart by all Soviet children. The poem presents the dialogue of a dying Falcon, who spent his life passionately fighting up in the sky, and the Grass-snake, who prefers a carefree existence in the warmth and moisture of the soil. In the end, the dying Falcon jumps down from a cliff seeking to get a final taste of the kind of happiness he praises, while the Grass-snake doesn't approve of his passion and remains in his native damp gorge. The sea waves at the bottom of the cliff sing a laudatory song to the Falcon:

You died. But in the song of the brave and strong of spirit you will always remain a living model, a proud call to freedom and light! We devote this song to the madness of the brave!

Thus, certain courageous kinds of madness were regarded as desirable in the dispositional field of human moral qualities. At some point in Belyaev's novel, Professor Salvator is sued for his experiments, and, while delivering his final word, he claims to be proud of being a dreamer/madman who is open to new possibilities and brave solutions.

Charkovsky's project can be definitely framed as an example of *derzanie*. Here the modernist project of pursuing the perfection of humanity found its ultimate form. The project was a Tsiolkovsky influenced eugenics-based experiment that attempted to breed

“the new race.” This newly produced form of humankind, consisting of physically strong intuitive psychics (in Charkovsky’s circle they were referred to as “sensitives”) would at the same time be ultimate moral subjects capable of taking care of endangered life on the planet Earth and in the whole galaxy. According to this deeply ecological project, in the future, not only the human race would need to transcend the boundaries of their species, but the whole *noospheric* field surrounding the Earth, i.e. the “level” of thoughts, feelings and energies (“information”) would need to evolve and harmonize in order to eliminate the destructive tendencies and prevent the long awaited World War 3.

Above, I have discussed the connotations of dreaming in Russian culture along with some major utopian projects in the Russian history, which effected and informed the “natural childbirth” movement’s ideology. I have also discussed the ideological and aesthetical frame through which the “natural childbirth” movement was seen and judged by its participants as well as outsiders. I will now talk about the more immediate social context surrounding the creation and development of the “natural childbirth” community.

Continuing to follow the link between science and dreaming, I now move on to the discussion of class dynamics in the late Soviet Union and the ways in which the ideologies of Soviet scientists were influenced by the wider social processes characteristic of the late socialism.

Chapter 4: The Scientification of Health

Bourdieuian Lens: Promoting Class Subjectivity

While Charkovsky's underwater experiments started in the early 1960s and were influenced by the collective effervescence of liberation and hope characteristic of Khrushchev's Thaw, the "natural childbirth" movement itself didn't form until later. The movement's core group first assembled around the Moscow and Leninrad-based "family clubs" of the 1970s and expanded as they began to give birth underwater in 1980. Thus, although the idea was conceived and certain methods were initiated earlier, the movement emerged and gained strength only under Brezhnev, in the last decade of the socialist order, which preceded *perestroika* and the eventual disintegration of the USSR.

The system of attitudes and practices exercised by the members of the "natural childbirth" community was unusual and exotic when compared with the outlook and behavior of not only the majority of the Soviet population, but even of the Soviet intelligentsia, the social group which it arose from. I would like to look into the factors that made possible the spread of Charkovsky's ideas and the assembly of a whole group of people around these principles – a group of people with a very distinct and highly unusual at that time set of attitudes toward body and health. In order for this change to have taken place, certain social processes, which affected particular groups of the population and caused significant shifts in their value systems, had to transpire under late socialism. Here, I would like to look at the group dynamics during late Soviet period, as well as at the particular processes responsible for the shifts in common values. I will look at the class dynamics through the

prism of the Soviet intelligentsia and illustrate the ways this group changed and transformed in light of the major social events and processes that took place in the country.

According to Pierre Bourdieu, attitudes toward the body must always be studied as an issue connected with numerous other social practices, as a part of group habitus. Changes in the dominating ideas about body management are tightly connected with the system of classes, social groups and their fractions as they struggle to promote the bodies and bodily practices which, from their point of view, are legitimate and morally righteous. In his article “Sport and Social Class,” Bourdieu writes:

Since the relative autonomy of the field of bodily practices entails, by definition, a relative dependence, the development within the field of practices oriented towards one or the other pole, asceticism or hedonism, depends to a large extent on the state of the power relations within the field of struggles for monopolistic definition of the legitimate body and, more broadly, in the field of struggles between fractions of the dominant class and between the social classes over morality. Thus the progress made by everything that is referred to as ‘physical expression’ can only be understood in relation to the progress, seen for example in parent-child relations and more generally in all that pertains to pedagogy, of a new variant of bourgeois morality, preached by certain rising fractions of the bourgeoisie (and petty bourgeoisie) and favouring liberalism in child-rearing and also in hierarchical relations and sexuality, in place of ascetic severity (denounced as “repressive”) (Bourdieu 1978: 827).

By looking at certain bodily practices, I seek to trace social group dynamics in the late Soviet Union and observe the way these changes relate to the larger processes of Russia’s modernization.

Destruction of the Body as an Act of Resistance

Bourdieu defines two poles in the treatment of the body: asceticism and hedonism - strict bodily discipline and “laissez-faire.” In Soviet society of the late 1970s and 1980s, a

different kind of binary could be observed: discipline as “positive” maintenance of the body (the attitude promoted by the state), as opposed to active destruction, consistent ruining of one’s body and health. The latter was associated with a spiritual search and brought to mind the lives of the saints with their practices of mortifying the flesh. Looking at these two attitudes, it is difficult to tell which is more “ascetic.”

The destruction of the body by all kinds of harmful practices (heavy drinking, heavy smoking, deliberate ignoring of the safety regulations etc.) was very understandable as a means of resistance to the state’s invasion into people’s private lives. The state sought to impose the officially approved means of body treatment on the population in order to produce “docile bodies,” a process thoroughly explored by Michel Foucault (Foucault 1995). Describing the mutual impact of body positions and ideology, Bourdieu writes:

The gesture, according to the paradox of the actor or the dancer, reinforces the feeling which reinforces the gesture. Thus is explained the place that all totalitarian regimes give to collective bodily practices which, by symbolizing the social, contribute to somatizing it and which, by the bodily and collective *mimesis* of social orchestration, aim at reinforcing this orchestration (Bourdieu 1990: 167).

Thus, the seemingly natural counter-action against the state’s orchestration was sabotage, destroying the very “vehicle” of power imposition.

The active mortification of the body could be found across all classes of Soviet society. Heavy drinking among the Soviet (especially male) population was one of the major factors leading to premature death. While among the working class and collective farmers this practice didn’t get much reflection, the members of intelligentsia thought about it a lot, and even created a certain myth around it, a narrative that connected the active destruction of

the body with spiritual search and self-sacrifice (cp. Pesmen 2000, Ries 1997). One of the most significant examples of such reflection in Soviet times was presented in Venedict Erofeev's poetic novel *Moscow to the End of the Line* (*Moskva – Petushki*), which enjoyed cult status among the Russian intelligentsia (Erofeev 1992). This dark and pessimistic book could have never been published in the Soviet Union due to censorship restrictions, so the manuscript was transported to Israel, where the first edition appeared in 1973.

In the book, Erofeev's protagonist, an alcoholic named Venichka (a namesake and *alter ego* of the author who died considerably young of throat cancer) goes on a train trip from Moscow to Petushki, a station in the Moscow region, drinking various chemical substances containing alcohol (many of them not intended for drinking) along the way under strange and mystical circumstances. This literary journey (a genre, developed in Russian literature beginning in the 18th century) corresponds to a certain spiritual trip, bringing to mind the medieval "visions" genre, which portrayed the posthumous wandering of a soul. The narration presents the protagonist's flow of consciousness, incorporating numerous Russian and Soviet clichés, cultural references and symbols. Altogether, the book presents a certain "encyclopedia of Russian life" (an expression once coined by literary critic Vissarion Belinsky to define Pushkin's novel in verse *Eugene Onegin*). At the end of the journey, Venichka is martyred and, as the New Testament subtext plays an important role in the narration, Venichka's existential drinking trip is compared with the Christ's path to Calvary.

Venichka suffers unbearably when he drinks his deadly cocktails consisting of various cheap eau-de-colons and other alcohol-containing chemical substances, but drinking, for him, is inevitable, imminent and essential: it is a search for redemption. Venichka's inner monologue is transpersonal in essence as it presents the all-Russian collective unconscious, and his path is imbued with deep moral and religious meaning. As a certain Christ, Venichka is sacrificing himself for the sake of humanity.

I mentioned this literary example as a radical embodiment of the idea of self-destruction. In reality, the degree to which the intention to harm oneself was conscious and the levels of actual harm could vary. However, the tendency was always present in one or another form within late Soviet bodily practices. When I began my independent life at the age of 17 and entered university to study humanities, I was immediately introduced to a whole set of unofficially prescribed practices, all of them imbued with deep moral meanings. You had to smoke not just heavily, but practically non-stop, drink a lot (it didn't matter if you already felt bad, you had to overcome yourself in the manner of Venichka), and you had to abstain from physical exercise by all means. Exercising and excessive movement were considered a certain evil: the only two proper positions of the body in space were lying on a sofa with a book or sitting at a kitchen table with a cup of strong coffee (or tea) or a glass of vodka (or wine) facing a big ash-tray full of still fuming cigarette butts.

Here I need to mention another prototypical character of Russian literature, Ilya Ilyich Oblomov from Ivan Goncharov's novel *Oblomov*, named after the character (Goncharov 1978). The action of the book takes place in the late 1850s, with Oblomov representing the

old nobility and the older social schemes giving way to modernization. Throughout the book, Oblomov lies around all day long in his worn bathrobe, passive and nearly motionless on his famous sofa. His counterpart, a Russian-German entrepreneur named Stoltz, is active and productive, and he wins the prize in the end – a girl named Olga (metaphorically, Russia herself, we must assume). The image of Oblomov presented an important archetype in the Soviet cultural memory and, consequently, in our self-reflection during our student years in the mid- to late 1980s.

In order to be relieved of the exercise, which was part of the university curriculum, you had to prove that you were a victim of a serious illness. Because of this, all kinds of mental illnesses were seen by students as desirable and advantageous (they also helped boys to escape the two-year mandatory military service). The more serious the illness, the more prestigious it was. Schizophrenia, bipolar and paranoid disorders – anything would do. Caring about health was considered improper and materialistic/anti-spiritual.

In case of illness you were supposed to visit a doctor. At the time, the only available form of medical treatment, the state one, was free of charge, so visiting a doctor did not present much of a problem. Since the medical system was an important part of the government's policing apparatus, tightly connected with educational institutions and workplaces and heavily bureaucratic, we had to pay plenty of such visits. Official medicine had a somewhat contradictory status in our eyes: on the one hand, the doctors belonged to the state machine and were evil, but, on the other, they were instrumental in our practices of simulation and sabotage (cp. Yurchak 1997). And, ultimately, when real medical help (getting legitimate

knowledge about the state of our health) was necessary, the way to deal with it was to go see a doctor (we always needed those sick leave papers from them anyway).

Disciplinary regimes in the medical institutions were pretty strict, and the boundaries between power institutions were blurred in the perception of the Soviet subjects. As Nancy Ries demonstrated in her analysis on the use of pronoun “they” in Russian discourses referring to authoritarian institutions, the degree of awareness Russian citizens had of the actual structure and hierarchical order of the Russian power institutions was quite low. Oftentimes, no one knew how everything worked, who was responsible and who was to blame (Ries 2003). The inability to distinguish between different kinds of authority resulted in the unawareness of one’s own actual rights and liberties. The story of the maternity hospital doctor who intimidated “disobedient” women by threatening to put “F” grades into their medical charts is a perfect example of this (see Chapter 2). Women suffered all kinds of humiliations and human rights violations at medical facilities. Most women were kept in the hospital for almost a week after giving birth, but they couldn’t even imagine that taking the baby and going home was an option – they didn’t know exactly who their own and their babies’ bodies in fact belonged to (cp. Petchesky 1995). In order to escape the state discipline and state power invading your body, there seemed to be no other means to reclaim your body other than to damage and destroy it.

The Rise of the “Physicists”

Somehow physicists are favored.
Somehow lyricists – neglected.
The reason lies not with the dry calculation,
The reason lies in the world-ruling law.

It means we didn't reveal
 Something which we had to!
 So it means they are weak wings,
 Our sweet iambi,
 And our horses
 Don't fly up like Pegasus...
 That's why physicists are favored,
 That's why lyricists – neglected.
 It is self-evident.
 There is no point in arguing.
 So it's not even offensive,
 But rather interesting indeed
 To observe how like foam bubbles
 Our rhymes fall
 And the grandeur, with dignity,
 Retreats to the logarithms.

Boris Slutsky. Physicists and Lyricists
 1959

It was in this seemingly hopeless situation that a newly formed group of Soviet subjects opposed the officially promoted idea of positive, constructive relation to health with yet another mode of positive relation to health, which was very unusual and original, to the point of being perceived as exotic. These people weren't just concerned with health issues: they made health their primary organizing principle. The self-imposed disciplinary practices they engaged in were unbelievably tough. They were out disciplining their bodies day and night with exhaustive exercising, strict diets, winter diving and barefoot walking in the snow. While the majority of intelligentsia was cynical, conforming to the system through keeping parts of their bodies public for state intervention while simultaneously misrecognizing this fact and suppressing the very awareness (Yurchak 1997), the smaller group within this class openly expropriated health and body-related issues from the public sphere. Certain events and processes had to precede the arrival of this new ideological trend in the Russian philosophy of the body.

It looks like at a certain point a divergence in the habitus of different social groups within the Soviet class system, which had already existed for a while in embryonic form, became noticeable and visible. Although throughout the decades following the October revolution various measures were officially taken to keep the social practices of different groups unified in the officially classless society, the centrifugal social forces continued their underground work, and, in spite of all the obstacles, various social groups developed their own practices and, ultimately, something that could be seen as a group habitus. The rapid development of science after WW2, its real, visible success in restoring the national economy and growing political influence of the Soviet Union stimulated growth of the so called “technical intelligentsia” that developed a very unique habitus, different from that of both the “humanitarian” intelligentsia and that of the working class. The essential feature of the preceding mode of class coexistence in the USSR was a certain artificial and enforced “egalitarianism” of life conditions, which sought to achieve an explicitly announced communist goal: “the abrasion of class borders.” Although the part of the pre-revolutionary Russian intelligentsia that managed to survive during Stalin’s terror certainly preserved some distinctive peculiarities from their original way of life, it largely had to share their *Lebensraum* with the proletarians. During and right after the war, at the times of common mobilization and unification, this worked out quite naturally.

At the same time, the emerging technical intelligentsia of the 1950s challenged another long-lasting kind of unity. The “old” Russian intelligentsia presented a group of “harmoniously” educated people, their education combining profound scientific and

technical awareness with the knowledge of history, literature and art. Many important Russian public figures, such as Fedor Dostoyevsky, were trained as engineers, for example. New times and new needs, however, called for an acceleration of the pace of production, which, in turn, required the rapid preparation of narrowly trained personnel. This demand created a social body of engineers, mathematicians and scientists whose education focused on one subject area (such as engineering, biology or chemistry) and did not include extensive studies in the humanities. While literature and the humanities did remain extremely important in the USSR at all times, mainly because of their use as a propaganda vehicle, even their authority was shaken during this period of fascination with the new opportunities in science.

In the late 1950s to early 1960s, an important public debate took place all over the country – in mass media, literary discussions and in the form of public events in the workplace. The debate was called “the argument of physicists and lyricists.” The main provocative idea posited by the dispute was that the “older” forms of world cognition and description, which were so widely praised for such a long time, were no longer relevant. The new knowledge would take the “dry” form of precise formulae, laws and algorithms. These were supposed to be the only vehicles of “legitimate knowledge” (see Lyotard 1984). Any kind of knowledge about the world that had a more amorphous, “poetic” form would be seen as frivolous, not serious enough and failing to contribute to the general body of knowledge about the world. Thus, the long-lasting Russian tradition that sought to integrate humanities and sciences, which was traced back to 18th century poet-scientist Mikhail Lomonosov, was quickly abandoned.

“Lyricists” tried to defend themselves somehow, but for them, too, the victory of the “exact sciences” was obvious. In the beginning of the 1960s, the famous semiotic summer schools took place, hosted by Professor Yury Lotman and his colleagues from Tartu University in Soviet Estonia. Their important innovation concerned bringing the methods of structural analysis, mathematics and cybernetics back into the humanities. The humanities, thus, sought to prove the legitimacy of their existence and their usefulness. Although the majority of the participants specialized in the humanities, the summer schools also invited mathematicians to take part in the sessions and instructed the general audience about opportunities to incorporate the methods of “exact sciences” into the studies of the structure of poetic forms, myth and folklore.

All in all, however, resistance was futile. “Physicists” were active, they were needed, they were mobile. In popular culture, the images of physicists were presented with a certain flavor of romanticism. They were determined, they were reliable, they performed dangerous tasks. They could even die, sacrificing themselves for the sake of scientific discovery. A popular film from those times, *Nine Days of One Year* by Mikhail Romm (1962), portrayed a nuclear physicist (played by the national favorite of the 1960s, Alexei Batalov), who enters some prohibited space in a laboratory where an experiment is in progress, gets exposed to radiation, and then awaits his death. Batalov’s character is presented in a somewhat romantic way, despite of the fact that he did no good to anyone by entering that closed room. However, he was still perceived as having “served” science and “sacrificed” himself for the sake of it. On the contrary, the images of humanitarian

intelligentsia appeared in comedic films that featured impracticality, otherworldliness, and a certain autism. One popular example is the character Shurik from Arkady Gaidai's comedy series: he presents a clumsy, spectacled philology student, whose complete mess of a life is full of hilarious situations.

In addition to their original field of competence, scientists now claimed rights to make judgments and decisions in regard to a wide spectrum of social issues, and started presenting themselves as certain moral and legal arbiters. The activity of academician Andrey Sakharov is one telling example. Sakharov, who was dubbed "father of the hydrogen bomb," ended up being seen as the *sovest'* ("moral consciousness") of the Soviet people and demonstrated a certain moral example for everyone to follow. He was also seen as a martyr for truth after he was exiled from Moscow. Another academician, Petr Kapitsa, refused to work on developing a nuclear weapon for Russia in 1946. Up until Khrushchev's Thaw, he lived under home arrest at his summer house near Moscow. Speaking about the role of scientists in the state's structure, Kapitsa said:

In order to govern in a democratic and legal way, every country absolutely needs to have independent institutions that serve as arbiters in all the constitutional problems. In the US, this role is performed by the Supreme Court, in Great Britain - by House of Lords. It seems, that in the Soviet Union this moral function falls to the USSR Academy of Sciences (Vail' and Genis 2001: 104).

Thus, Soviet science became an institution of great authority and was expected to solve all kinds of problems connected with governance and development (and the other way around: all the ideological projects now had to be based on a solid scientific platform). One of these was an essential utopian project of modernity - improvement and perfection of society and mankind (cp. Dubin 2004: 41). The united efforts of a group of narrow

specialists were not enough for such a complicated project, however. The scientists' ambitions and self-confidence made it so that, working on the project, they started developing science-based lay expertise in other branches of knowledge,¹⁰ and even developed new, synthetic, marginal branches of science in between the traditional disciplines (e.g. bioenergetics). The utopian idea of the perfection of humanity was worked on in these newly created "pockets" of marginal science that emerged at the intersections of the few officially legitimate branches of science.

Scientific Utopia: The Perfection of Man

Igor Charkovsky and some of his immediate followers belonged to a particular subgroup of multidisciplinary specialists within the technical intelligentsia that worked on the margins of science and in between the disciplines. For them, the perfection of man was a problem to be solved by means of reason. The nature of man was to be analyzed and calculated; then the harmful factors that precluded humans from perfect functioning would be eliminated, while the optimal conditions for proper functioning would be empowered and established. Overall, it was a very mechanistic approach to humans, seeking to optimize the process of production. The central idea was to "increase" and "open" human "potential" to its very limit. The recipe of creation of this new man was calculated in scrupulous details; precise techniques replaced abstract verbal reasoning about the man of the future. Optimization techniques would be applied to all the constituents of a man: the body, mind and spirit.

¹⁰ Cp. the origination of "strange sciences," such as psychology and pedagogy, as discussed in Foucault 1995: 226.

The new bodies were to become healthy, strong and enduring. First of all, the body of the disciplined subject would be constantly exposed to exercise, in a way that was scientifically justified and supported in every detail. In Charkovsky's experiments, time was thoroughly calculated; this was the Foucauldian time "penetrating the bodies" (Foucault 1995: 152). Following this logic of optimization, water was chosen as the optimal living environment for humans due to utilitarian, rational purposes: saving people from the impact of gravitation and associated stresses, it was supposed to help humans save energy and provide optimal conditions for achieving a perfected human's "real," "original" potential. Special technologies and techniques were invented in order to help the bodies accustom to the new activities that would help them achieve perfection (such as adaptation to the water environment). All kinds of body aids, complex machines and innovative devices were put to work for this purpose.

The potential of the human mind would also be unlocked, and the human intellectual capacities were expected to increase to the point that every man, freed from the unfortunate obstacles of previous conditioning, would become a genius. When contrasted with bodily training, it is less obvious what kind of achievements were expected of the mind, and what kind of upper limit was sought. It was apparent, however, that the study of brain functions was an important part of research on human potential and a topic of constant discussions in the marginal scientists' legitimating discourse. At the time, all kinds of mental training techniques gained popularity – such as mind-body connection trainings (*autotrening*), speed reading (*skorochtenie*), memory perfection, etc. In the field of progressive academic humanities, the studies in neuro-linguistics became a fancy and prestigious field.

The third important human constituent, the spirit, also appeared to be manageable and was seen as subject to optimization. The scientification of spiritual and religious life, as an essential feature of modernity, was invented long before the late Soviet period. Theosophy of the late 19th to early 20th centuries, with its idea of synthesizing science, philosophy and religion, is just one telling example. However, during this time in Soviet history, there was a strong reactualization of these connections and this mode of “collaboration” between science and the spiritual domain. The work of Helena Blavatsky was rediscovered as an authoritative source of knowledge, and inspired the group of scientists working on improving the human nature. Multiple bodily techniques and mental exercises were supposed to help maximize “spiritual potential,” such as the opening of the third eye, as well as in the development of intuitive and energetic abilities in humans, such as clairvoyance, telepathy and extraordinary healing abilities.

Charkovsky’s group belonged to a larger movement, largely represented by the technical intelligentsia, which pursued all the aforementioned goals. In Russia, this larger movement didn’t receive any distinct name, while the idea of “reserves”, “resources” and “potential” were obviously at its heart. In the US (which favors the idea of distinct brands) a similar trend was named the Human Potential Movement. Esalen Institute, founded in 1962, became a prototypical bastion of the Human Potential Movement in the US.¹¹ This movements’ strong connection with and dependence on the major tendencies of modernity

¹¹ Note a strategy to present a marginal New Age organization as an academic institution for legitimating purposes; later many such “institutes” appeared around the US, including Light Institute, Star Institute and others.

was outlined by many scholars studying the New Age movement (Anderson 1983, Kripal and Schuck 2005, Kripal 2007). Thus, one of the main features of the HPM discourse was excessive technicality, which, in its turn, reflected the major tendency characteristic of “mainstream” technocratic culture (York 1995: 13).

This technicality did not necessarily imply the use of machines (although the latter were undeniably popular among waterbirth practitioners). Techniques, in the Maussian sense, that use the body as a primary instrument, most commonly served the movement’s major goals (Mauss 1979: 104). Effectiveness, an important feature of any body technique, according to Mauss, was subject to measurement and maximization by means of constant rigorous training. Another definitive feature of any Maussian technique is its traditionalism. In the case under discussion, a new tradition based on new scientific discoveries had to be established in order to transmit and spread the newly invented body techniques. In 1934, Mauss first presented his work on body techniques, in which he pointed out the necessity to study physiology and body reflexes in order to understand the nature of psychological effects, the “mystical states” and “communication with God” (Mauss 1979: 122). This task was the very focus of the late Soviet marginal scientists' research.

So what was the teleology of the Russian analogue of the Human Potential Movement?

Where would all of this newly released human potential be directed to? There was a whole set of ideas at work, connected with moral issues, social responsibility and conscious constructive activity. The movement’s devotees established a new, virtual type of citizenship, tightly connected with moral values. Morally opposed to performing their

duties as the citizens of the USSR, they felt responsible for the “future of the humanity,” and took it upon themselves to free the world of wars and harmonize people’s relationship with nature. Later (in the 1990s), these claims were largely narrowed down to the future of the Russian people (see Chapter 7). The term “genocide” was often applied to the social conditions preventing Russian people from reaching their “optimal potential,” and restricting their mental and physical abilities to the “bottom level.” In one of his newspaper interviews, Charkovsky ranted:

For decades we've lived under conditions of organized genocide. After the Great Socialist Revolution, vast masses of population momentarily grew extremely poor – just like us nowadays after *perestroika*. Currently, the second stage of our annihilation is under way. The first one, in the form of communistic bullshit, man has already survived – like hemorrhoids, like an STD. People adapted to the circumstances and even somehow managed to keep balance. Now they are breaking man’s spine. It looks like people were supposed to be annihilated. The whole class of peasantry was destroyed – they shot everyone who was able to work, allowing only degenerates to stay alive. At that period of time agriculture meant everything! And then there was the intelligentsia! So, basically, yeah, they did a lot. However, no one so far looked at this one thing – the mass castration of NEWBORN people. Spiritual and intellectual castration. Our maternity hospitals are the machine of an organized genocide (Charkovsky 1999).

An important task of the new movement was preventing the nuclear world war – the last war of them all. The idea of producing a new generation by exposing the infants to tough disciplinary practices was connected with moral education and the expectations that the future generation will be able to perform certain tasks directed at maintaining the safety of the whole planet. Charkovsky and his followers believed that babies born at the maternity hospitals were cared for improperly, weakened, pampered, and, ultimately, set on their way to degradation during the most important moment, when all the primary instincts and imprintings needed to be set once and forever. In order to make things work properly, Charkovsky suggested the use of various technologies that would assist babies in

developing properly and extend their potentialities. These technologies appeared not only as the mechanical ones described by Foucault:

... it is rather a collective and obligatory rhythm, imposed from the outside; it is a “programme”; it assures the elaboration of the act itself; it controls its development and its stages from the inside (Foucault 1995: 151-152).

Oftentimes, these methods were seen and presented as technologies of a whole new level - *information* technologies. These new technologies were based on the studies of human and artificial intellect.¹²

The officially promoted Soviet bodily discipline, too, was largely intended for military purposes. In 1931, a special three-stage national sporting program was introduced in the USSR that operated until the country’s collapse: the so called the GTO norms/standards (abbreviation for “Ready for Labor and Defense” – “Gotov k Trudu i Oborone”). The famous physical culture movement of the 1930s took the form of military parades. Mass public gymnastic performances intended to demonstrate the power and unity of the Soviet country (a young country represented by the young, beautiful bodies of the gymnasts) (Roubal 2003; Makoveeva 2002; Riordan 1977). Military vocabulary and metaphors always invaded physical culture and sports language throughout history, but even more so in the USSR (Elistratov 2005). The pun played on the homonym pair *snariad* as “sports equipment” and “military shell,” was widespread in the Soviet poetic rhetoric. Here is a quotation from the famous “March of the Gymnasts” (1938), which applies these military tropes to gymnastics and sports:

We need to remind our enemies

¹² Cp. the reference to the “programs,” which the majority of people were supposed to acquire in the future, as cited by Charkovsky in Chapter 5.

That at the first sign of danger
 We'll replace our sports equipment [*snariady*]
 With sabers, grenades and bayonets!

Sometimes it is difficult to say where defense ends and attack begins. Interestingly, the products of the “natural childbirth” disciplinary technologies, who were supposed to stand for “world peace” (a widespread Soviet cliché), were often also discussed with the same military language, such as the verb “to conquer” used by Charkovsky in his talks and interviews. The degree of impact of the Soviet ideological structures on the self-representation of the “natural childbirth” movement was largely misrecognized by its devotees. The peace rhetoric, neighboring with various military representations, is just one telling example. It is necessary to stress that the “natural childbirth” movement was not isolated from the rest of Soviet society. The people who took part in it were the same workers of the “scientific-research institutes” (*nauchno-issledovatel'skie instituty* or *NII*) and military enterprises, and who were often obligated to join the Communist Party or Komsomol youth organization, to sit in the Party meetings, to pay dues and take part in the communist loyalty parades (the so called “demonstrations”) (see Yurchak 2005). Although revolutionary and quite radical in their ideology and practice, the marginal scientists, including the ones promoting “natural childbirth,” were still products of the Soviet system, bore certain traits of the Soviet mentality and used Soviet symbols and rhetoric – although, oftentimes, inverted and placed into new contexts.

Ultimate Health

The idea of achieving the optimal potential and mobilizing the body's reserves was one of the tropes actually present in official Soviet propaganda for quite a while. In the early

Soviet discourse, already, these ideas accumulated in one major concept: health. In Soviet Russia, health came to be treated as a certain fetish. Seen as almost material, it was represented in various art genres and rituals of Soviet life: mass gymnastic shows, sculptures of young athletes on display (similar to the prototypical “girl with a paddle”), all kinds of propaganda posters and young pioneers' songs (Dushechkina 2001). Health was envisioned as a special, vital force - one that could help achieve all kinds of goals. Thus, in the official Soviet discourse, “health” was intended to help fight an imaginary foreign enemy. Early Soviet health propaganda concentrated its efforts on prevention (“prophylaxis”) by introducing major sanitary hygienic principles, exercise and physical conditioning, such as procedures that involved exposure to cold. For the latter, the same term was applied as the one signifying steel tempering: *zakalka*.

The new conceptualization of health in the 1960s caused it to become an object of more thoroughly calculated technological manipulations. While a set of physical exercises and a bucket of ice-cold water poured on one's head to start the day were seen as generally good for health and almost obligatory as disciplinary means (they were prescribed in schools, pioneer camps, broadcasted on the central radio every morning, etc.), these measures of “prophylaxis” were not sophisticated and justified by scientific evidence. Health enthusiasts of the new generation, being techno-science experts themselves, tested the intuitive knowledge about the value of exercising, swimming and “tempering” by providing detailed explanations of the bodily mechanisms at work and the psychosomatic effects of the particular practices. In order to get scientific explanations for certain bodily mechanisms, they arranged experiments with animals, as well as with humans. The results

produced in the end took the shape of complex formulae, schemes and tables, where all the factors were presented in corresponding system units.

In the modern era, health gradually became defined by its relation to “life itself,” a particular form of vitality (Agamben 1998, Rose 2006). When the hard times of wars and famine, during which the only major concern was the people’s survival, were over, the next concern for the Soviet citizens, especially children, was to possess “health.” The official slogan “A healthy mother – a healthy baby” was always a widespread cliché in the USSR. But what was the exact meaning behind the concept of “health,” and what kind of features did it presuppose? Various ideas and expectations defined it at different times in history and within different usages. An important aspect of “health” is its normalization through rhetoric and representation. When you look at a baby formula portraying a supposedly healthy baby with chubby arms and legs, you get an idea of what a healthy baby should look like. By contrast, breastfed babies look thinner due to the nutritional characteristics of breast milk, and the proponents of breastfeeding will seek to convince you that breastfeeding is the only healthy choice, and that a truly healthy baby should be thinner than the one advertised on the formula.

When the problem of mortality was overcome, the normalization of health came into play. At a certain point after the war, the development of Soviet babies became calculable and started being assessed according to tables that ascribed certain abilities and skills to particular age groups. The Soviet healthy baby had to be a “normal” baby: it had to reach its potential up to the degree of the normalcy acknowledged and prescribed by the trained

and medically certified specialists in baby development. In line with the Soviet program of five-year state economy plans (*pyatiletki*), the production of health was now also planned out. Ironically, although the “natural childbirth” enthusiasts were often opposed to the Soviet regime in general, their professional participation in the state program of “techno-scientific progress” seems to have led them to embody the absurd Soviet idea of “fulfillment and over-fulfillment of the plan.” They were not satisfied with just “normal,” shared manifestation of health in their babies: they wanted to completely overcome the possibility of illness on the one hand and any factors restricting the unlimited release of human potential on the other.

Cynicism and Disappointment in the Science Utopia

By the late 1970s, the enthusiasm of the 1960s turned into cynicism. Soviet propaganda tended to remain “unseen” or “unnoticed,” and the very process of decoding its meaning was largely rejected by the citizens. It was very difficult for me, and for the many Russian academics in the West that I spoke with, to start taking Marx seriously, as we still remembered the communist bullshit about productive forces and industrial relations that we were supposed to learn by heart in our secondary school years. It was something you learned to work with as a cliché without going into deeper contact with this alienated knowledge that was compulsory in nature. Our mental rejection of this information was one of the coping and defense mechanisms. It was almost impossible for us, high school students, to understand the purpose of the Communist Party plenums and the Party Program when we were made to produce reports on these texts at school. The greatest efforts could not make us see in these texts anything but an absurd set of syntactic chunks -

a certain cut-up. One of my classmates was a successful student and always got As on her Party plenum reports. This was because she had a photographic memory and could memorize many pages without necessarily trying to understand them.

In the important novel *Marina's Thirties Love* of key Russian postmodernist writer, Vladimir Sorokin, the narration starts with a realistic portrayal of the life of a young, intelligent woman named Marina, who soon falls in love with the Party Secretary of a big plant. She ends up working there, and gradually certain changes take place in her consciousness. First, the portrait of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (a famous Russian émigré author and cult figure of the dissident movement), which decorated her room, had to go. Then Marina's conversations with her co-workers gained a form of continuous recitation of Soviet clichés. Gradually, the text turns into a verbatim recording of the Party plenary meeting, under its General Secretary Yuri Andropov. This part of the novel is supposed to represent an archetypal example of the total dissolution of human consciousness in this absurd discourse.

This defensive process of cynical rejection also affected a person's relationship to health. There was no point in training and exercising your body anymore, as there was no valid goal to achieve. The resulting self-destruction, which was discussed earlier, was constantly and successfully being practiced by Soviet citizens, despite the morning gymnastics programs broadcasted on national radio and all the posters praising "the healthy way of life." The national favorite Russian bard of the 1970s, Vladimir Vysotsky, composed a satirical song "Morning Gymnastics" (1968), where exercises were metaphorically

paralleled to Soviet social stagnation (i.e., running on the spot). It was OK for him to sing his song, however, as by that time the cynicism reached all walks of life, and even “the ones up there” were free of any illusions and didn’t expect anybody to take Soviet propaganda seriously.

Since the late 1970s, members of the Soviet technical intelligentsia started applying to foreign asylums in hopes of leaving Russia. Some of them awaited approval for years, while others received application denials and became “*refuseniks*” (*otkazniki*). Both categories had to continue living in the USSR, albeit deprived of their major rights (the opportunity to work for the state, which was basically the only available option at that time) and losing the support of friends and acquaintances who feared to maintain such compromising connections. This was a gloomy and hopeless time for many. The main tendency was a feeling of stagnation: there seemed to be no hope, no faith, no salvation/solution, no way of exercising agency.

The status and reputation of science and scientists seemed to have lost its romantic appeal. In the dystopian world of Brezhnev's Russia, pursuing a utopian vision was regarded as an absurd anachronism. The discourse of communism served as a certain parody - an anti-advertisement strategy that reminded people of the impossibility of any utopia, any miracle. Thus, grand utopian projects in the domain of marginal sciences started to be seen as impossible, ridiculous and wasteful. No one wanted to believe in the colonization of the ocean or outer space. Marginal scientists, including Charkovsky, turned into certain weirdo curiosities - strange and marginal people who work on achieving the obviously impossible.

Even under Brezhnev, however, countercultural attitudes did not die out completely, but merely left the public sphere. Small groups of enthusiasts, following the effervescence legacy of the 1960s, were preserved at the margins of the Soviet society, where they kept producing new types of knowledge. They no longer presented any major social, cognitive or ideological tendencies, though, but merely became relics. The cult of science, the praising of rationality and technicality were abandoned along with the romantic flavor that the image of science once possessed. The “physicists” of the 1960s gave a big push to interdisciplinary scientific research and experiments, including Charkovsky’s explorations, but after the fallback the field was marginalized and lost all the opportunities to inform mainstream knowledge and interact with mainstream institutions. From now on, agency could only be exercised in private and public spheres as a deeply marginalized underground movement.

After the collapse of the Soviet order, the technical intelligentsia became vulnerable, the research institutions grew poor, and their isolation and alienation from global scientific developments gradually became obvious to everyone. More and more, people chose to speak about their reality using the tropes and imagery of general disintegration – the feature discussed at length by Nancy Ries in her book on Russian communication practices during *perestroika* (Ries 1997). Many scientists had to seek new careers and new ways of supporting their families in the emerging open market conditions.¹³ Some organized little

¹³ In their collection of articles titled *Intelligentsia*, Russian sociologists Lev Gudkov and Boris Dubin discuss “the departure” of the intelligentsia group in the past two decades.

“cooperative” firms, with bigger or lesser degrees of success. Others felt powerless and useless after losing the previous stability, purpose and routine, and found that they had nothing better to do than become alcoholics, get chronically ill and die. At the same time, refugee programs became available, and a great percentage of Soviet technical intelligentsia “drained” to the US, Israel and Europe.

The current successors of the old technical intelligentsia in the field of exact and natural sciences constitute a very different social group in contemporary Russia, with a very different habitus. Many of them receive “flexible citizenship” in global science, and thus are welcome to work in different parts of the world (Ong 2005; Ninetto 2001). This social group joined the emerging Russian middle class, with all of its newly forming westernized practices. This new group would never engage in the kind of marginal experimental practices characteristic of the former Charkovsky’s group. Nowadays, there are newer versions of “natural childbirth” practices available in Russia, which don’t have much in common with the preceding ones except for the practice of waterbirth. The set of practices surrounding “natural childbirth” is now framed as a consumer product targeted at the new Russian middle class, which is largely engaged in the globalized western ideas of health and body management (including gyms, shaping, fitness and many other practices transplanted to Russia from the West in the 1990s and 2000s).

In the 1960s and 1970s, Soviet technical intelligentsia experienced first a rise and then a fall in its influence and popularity. However, during the short time of its success, it

They point out that the group underwent strong professional differentiation and lost common cultural grounds that it once used to have (Gudkov and Dubin 2009).

managed to promote and share with the wider community certain ideas about the body and morality. It managed to make popular and communicate to wider circles the ideas of calculable, technical health, connecting it with certain positively coded moral values (rationality as conscious development, progress as ultimate “good,” citizens’ responsibility, etc.). As the group lost its influence and eventually disintegrated, the popularity of calculable health decreased, and a more loosely structured intuitive healing based on more fluid models of body and health became widespread in the new Russia.

As the group lost its influence and eventually mutated into new class forms, the popularity of its older ideas, ideological framings and aesthetics decreased, and new, different models of body and health spread in the new Russia.

However, before discussing these further mutations and transformations, I need to examine other aspects of the original ideologies of the “natural childbirth” movement, which grew out of the subjectivity and legacy of the “physicists.” Although it is common to juxtapose nature and culture (to which science is supposed to belong) as contradictory concepts and essences, the pioneers of the “natural childbirth” movement (scientists and engineers) appropriated the concept of nature and placed it into the center of their project (the perfection of humanity). In Part 3, I will explain why the “physicists” approached the concept of nature, seeing it in the most radical way. By following their cultural logic, I will examine how the founders of the movement envisioned the natural, why the concept of nature was placed at the core of their utopian project and what ultimate goals they pursued.

Part 3: NATURE AS UTOPIA

Chapter 5: The Meaning of the Natural

“Natural Childbirth” as an Autonomous Act: “Birth as We Know It”

In this chapter, I concentrate on the “natural childbirth” community’s self-representation, which makes it necessary for me to discuss specifically Russian connotations of the natural. The main meanings of the Russian word signifying “natural” (*estestvennyi*) are “normal”, “typical”, “accepted” and “right”, as opposed to “unnatural”, “abnormal,” “odd” and “wrong.” The adjective meaning “normal” (*normal’nyi*) is often also used in an effort to gain a higher status for the alternative and marginal “natural childbirth” ideology. Another important basic meaning of the word “*estestvennyi*” is “related to nature,” “essentially belonging to nature,” “primordial” as opposed to “artificial,” “culturally constructed,” “invented by mankind.” By using this word, the “natural childbirth” movement appeals to nature as an authoritative instance. The Rousseauan concept *l’homme naturel* was usually translated as “*estestvennyi chelovek*” - that is why the word “*estestvennyi*” sounds quite natural in the context of the natural versus cultural dichotomy and back-to-nature discourses. However, in addition to the common meanings of the adjective “*estestvennyi*” listed above, this word has acquired a few very specific meanings and connotations in the Russian “natural childbirth” discourse, which I discuss at length below.

Although the term “natural childbirth” was coined by a male doctor, Grantly Dick-Read (Dick-Read 1933), the concept was embraced and appropriated by the Western feminist movement of the 1970s, which fought, among other rights, for the woman’s freedom of

decision in regard to her body. The attempts to control women's "nature" on the part of the male doctors (representing "culture" and artificiality) led to the widely used pun "male practice/malpractice," which denotes the violent male intervention into and control of female health and bodily matters (Mendelson 1981, Corea 1985). Ironically, the tendency to associate the natural with the feminine and the female body with primordial nature was long considered an anti-feminist discourse, and was the subject of heated debates – both in political activism and in the social sciences (Ortner 1974). From the dominant male mechanistic point of view, historically inherent to science and medicine, the male body was envisioned as the original model, "the perfect machine" - precisely because female bodies, seen as more tightly connected with nature, behaved less predictably, were subject to fluctuations and deviated from the original model in various ways. Analyzing this common difference in the cultural conceptualization of male and female bodies, Robbie Davis-Floyd writes:

The male body is metaphorized as a better machine than the female body, because in form and function it is more machine-like – more consistent and predictable, less subject to the vagaries of nature (i.e., more cultural and therefore "better"), and consequently less likely to break down (Davis-Floyd 1992: 52).

However, in spite of wide recognition of the sexism inherent in the association of women with nature, other Western feminists saw "natural childbirth" as a means of empowering women and proudly used the very term "natural" as a self-reference.

While definitely empowering the new parents, the concept and practice of "natural childbirth" in Russia lacked the specific feminist connotations characteristic of its American counterpart. Traditionally, the vast majority of Soviet physicians and particularly Ob/Gyn specialists were women. That's why the opposition "male practitioner vs. female

patient” was not equally relevant in Russia. Significantly, in many stories, the leader of the “natural childbirth” movement, Igor Charkovsky, was presented as a certain patriarch and hyper-masculine figure, and this image had mostly positive connotations (see more on this in Chapter 8). It’s widely known that Charkovsky was accused of sexual harassment while teaching and practicing in the United States, but Charkovsky’s followers referred to this episode as to a false accusation, a misunderstanding, or as a malevolent plot of American technocrats serving the interests of the medical establishment. In Charkovsky’s own remarks, a strong, even sexist male perspective is often obvious; for instance, he once referred to women as a herd of sheep supposed to obediently follow their shepherd:

Women are unable to think and they don’t want to understand anything. They behave like sheep and act in accordance with ancient instincts, which come from the animals. They don’t even know why they can’t catch such easy things. That’s why a man has to prepare everything in advance. <...> Men, however, do nothing, while women behave like a flock... (Sargunas and Sargunas 1992: 24).

Although later in the history of the Russian “natural childbirth” movement women took over the homebirth midwifery practice and established leadership within the community, this movement originally did not imply a struggle for women’s rights, and no explicit feminist rhetoric was ever used in its self-representation.

Because of the absence of a feminist note in the Russian “natural childbirth” discourse, female identity was considered in the context of a New Age holistic paradigm rather than from a political perspective. This New Age model regarded sexual intercourse, conception and childbirth as a complex holistic experience of the nuclear family as a whole and focused on the new mother as a part of this unity. From this point of view, medical intervention was seen as harmful, because it held the potential to destroy or significantly

damage the birthing woman's sexual integrity, her feminine power, her positive body image and her spiritual experience while she was in the midst of an important rite of passage to motherhood. Referring to one of her own hospital childbirth experiences, "spiritual midwife" Marina Dadasheva explained it to me in this way:

"In fact, all those medical [vaginal] check-ups on women after birth, you know...They check them, but they don't care at all about their femininity, their sensitivity, the birth canal...The body of a woman is rather sensitive, and [it's really harmful] when they start turning your core inside out with all those metal tools..."

Here the image of aggressively used technological instruments invading a female body sore from the recent birth and causing damage to the woman's psyche is being opposed to the natural essence of childbirth, free of any intervention and good "as nature itself conceived it."

In the Russian "natural childbirth" discourse, as well as in its Western counterpart, biomedicine, in the course of its evolution, is believed to have been gradually corrupted and diverged from its original, natural models and techniques. The most commonplace of all the anti-medical discourses is that medical theory and practice have developed from nature-centered attitudes to the culturally constructed "human interests," making treatment easier, more comfortable and more effective. Notwithstanding the "natural childbirth" movement's critique of overmedicalization in the treatment of various diseases and health-related problems, the case of childbirth stood out to them as a special, because pregnancy and birth to them weren't an illness, a condition requiring intervention. Birth was seen as a "normal," "natural" condition, as part of the female life cycle, and it was only natural to leave it alone, while the medical establishment didn't want to let go of it and continued

exercising the unwanted control. Here is how Ilya, an enthusiast of the “natural childbirth” movement, presented contemporary medicine as “unnatural” in the context of childbirth:

Gradually, it [medicine] left behind its original natural essence and became more and more artificial...In the end, [medically trained] birth assistants stopped seeing childbirth as a natural process; they started seeing pregnancy as an illness and childbirth as a dangerous operation.

Seeking to move away from this vision, people opposing medical intervention started giving birth outside of hospitals, either on their own or with just their peers in attendance. They radically broke with the “artificial,” intrusive practices of biomedicine and engaged in what they saw as a “return” to the original, “natural” ways of birthing - the way “it was meant to be.” One of the new, contextual meanings of the epithet “natural” as applied to childbirth was “autonomous,” “out of hospital” or “at home.”

Waterbirth: Initiating Naturalization

In addition to meaning “autonomous,” the adjective “natural” acquired another new meaning in the Russian “natural childbirth” movement: it connoted birthing in the water. “Natural childbirth,” along with the adjective normal in this context, became synonymous to waterbirth. When, after completing a preparatory course with “spiritual midwife” Tatiana Sargunas, I was on my way to the US, planning to give birth, Tatiana offered to give me the contact info of American midwives who practice birth assistance “in a *normal* way,” as she put it. It was obvious that for Tatiana waterbirth (which is not as widespread in the US as it is in Russia) was the only “normal” option.

The ideology of the Russian “natural childbirth” movement presupposed not only that waterbirth was natural, but also that it was *the most natural* way to give birth.

Charkovsky's follower Lev Burachevsky wrote in his book "Homo Delphinus" that popularizes Charkovsky's teaching: "Properly arranged birthgiving in water is a totally natural act, which can't harm a newborn" (Burachevsky 1998: 31). Male midwife Oleg Tiutin made even stronger statements in his two interviews with "Spid-Info" newspaper: "Some people prefer waterbirth, as many women find it more natural, and they are quite right" (Podkolodny 1992a), and again: "They [parents] often practice waterbirth - this is more natural and softer [easier] on the baby" (Podkolodny 1992b). One of the major benefits of waterbirth is supposed to be the lack of gravitational shock when a baby, long protected by amniotic fluids in the sack, is suddenly exposed to the powerful effects of gravity. "Natural childbirth" supporters claimed, that, historically, as all living creatures once lived and gave birth in water, there was no sudden exposure to gravity at birth for the offspring of any species. The newly acquired necessity to deal with the "gravitation shock" was believed to steal the resources that the newborn's brain and body would otherwise save for a better purpose, such as rapid development and growth, as well as mastering exceptional, paranormal abilities.

Some opponents of the waterbirth ideology, representing conventional biomedicine, tried to prove that the thesis about waterbirth being natural was logically incorrect. Dr. Ailamazian, a Professor of St. Petersburg State University, stated in his interview:

Among the mammals, only whales, dolphins and hippopotami give birth in water, precisely the species that spend most time in water and are well adapted to it. But this is not true as far as man is concerned. From this point of view we can rather call waterbirth unnatural (Ailamazian N.d.).

Other opponents of waterbirth, however, did consider it to be "closer to nature." They argued that our contemporaries had changed so much since the time when they were

“natural people,” that nowadays they most probably do need some more artificial, “unnatural” settings to give birth in. Here are the words of a homebirthing mother, who preferred to give birth not in water, but in her own bed:

That’s why we left the bathtub: we just didn’t want to prevent our child from having this [gravitation] shock. [We did it] because it is disputable, whether it is actually good or bad. Maybe, people have left their original natural condition so far behind, that now it’s better to actually experience this shock (Liubov’).

Believing contemporary human nature to have gone completely unnatural, the supporters of waterbirth proposed a different solution. Instead of disposing of the “natural” approaches to birth and relying on technocratic methods, action would be taken in order to return humans into their original, “natural” condition; this was considered especially helpful for restoring contemporary women’s ability to give birth naturally. Such a “return” was supposed to be achieved by means of establishing a special set of attitudes toward body and health management. According to Ksenia Ryndich, the former director of the “Family Ecology” parenting center,

Birth became so problematic because the contemporary civilized woman lost the qualities which she, as a woman, was supposed to have. It is necessary to return a [modern] woman to her natural condition” (Rebenok rozhdaetsia 1992).

The whole purpose of the “Family Ecology” center and other “natural childbirth” parenting schools was to develop special intervention programs that would return women and their families to those “original”, “natural” conditions.

When discussing the history of the “natural childbirth” movement, its participants claimed that, in Russia, the idea of waterbirth had preceded the idea of giving birth outside of the hospital. One of the early enthusiasts of the Russian “natural childbirth” movement

explained to me that people around him started practicing homebirth precisely because it was impossible to arrange waterbirth in hospital settings:

First of all, the idea appeared to give birth in water – well, there was Charkovsky and his crowd. As hospitals provide no possibility to give birth in water, they naturally came to the idea of homebirth (Ilya).

This statement, however, doesn't look truly credible: Charkovsky himself made a lot of anti-medical statements, and the most likely push towards homebirth and waterbirth was that people who broke with state biomedicine needed some alternative ideology and practices to follow.

Giving birth out of the hospital, without medical intervention, was necessary but not sufficient in order for an act of birth to be considered completely natural; giving birth in water was what made the real difference. Midwife Irina Martynova, who claims to have helped Igor Charkovsky arrange the few very first cases of waterbirth in Moscow back in 1980, called these first water deliveries “a return to natural birth.” Irina specifically marked the importance of this particular moment in history despite the fact that, according to her, unmedicated homebirths had been already practiced in Moscow by a certain group of people. According to Irina, however, these pioneers of homebirth were not satisfied with mere demedicalization of the birth experience and craved to incorporate more “nature” into their lives as parents:

They already had a feeling that there was something wrong with our medicine, but it was not completely clear yet what in particular that was. Some of them tried to give birth at home on their own, without the doctors' assistance. But not in water yet. <...> Having met with these people, we found out that they had a strong desire to deliver their children “in a natural way,” but they had neither methods worked out for such births nor the experts who could help in preparing for and assisting such birth (Martynova 5:2).

Charkovsky and his supporters, including Irina, satisfied this group's need for “naturalization” and provided them with a clear ideology to follow and elaborate rituals to engage in.

In an attempt to provide waterbirth with a necessary authoritative background, the early proponents of waterbirth appealed to human ancestors representing different historical periods that were supposed to be “truly natural.” Appeal to the imaginary past, which was presented in different ways and forms as needed, served to confirm the legitimacy of the waterbirth method as the only truly natural way. One of the ways to promote waterbirth as a natural technique was to announce that in certain ancient cultures waterbirth was the preferred way of birthing – either the commonly used method or one reserved for special circumstances. One of the newspaper articles about Charkovsky and his method stated:

He found some historical evidence of waterbirth being practiced in ancient Egypt in order to make the delivery easier. To say more, in one of the manuscripts Charkovsky found the information that in the pharaohs’ times there was a ritual of waterbirth that the future priests’ mothers were prescribed to follow (Vasinsky 1994).

The particular culture that was reported to have once practiced waterbirth might have varied, but in order to satisfy its legitimating purpose, it needed to be appealing, exotic, and the more ancient – the better.

Delving deeper into the history of mankind, the supporters of waterbirth pointed to the fact that all life on Earth originated in water. Consequently, the original human ancestors, “truly natural” beings, used to live and procreate in the water environment. Reportedly, at some point, many species were forced to leave the oceans by some aggressive prehistoric sea

monsters, and this is how the fear of water was permanently imprinted into the minds of the species that later developed into humans (this also happened to many other land species). According to Charkovsky and his followers, consistent and skillful work with this pre-programmed fear of water, reproduced at the level of brain programs, can help the human brain recollect its ancient programs, which can then result in the development of certain non-human (or, rather, superhuman) physical, mental and spiritual abilities. Charkovsky and his disciples deliberately took on this primary utopian task: to free humans from the acquired unnatural “programs” that were inscribed in their brains, and by so doing to allow humans to return to their natural condition. This tremendous change, which starts at the level of conditioned brain processes, would open the way for humans to enjoy new possibilities, including the ability to live in various environments and develop new abilities, many of which humans would share with animals (conceptualized as truly natural beings and thus worth following).

Certain sea mammals, such as whales and especially dolphins, gained a unique authoritative status among “natural childbirth” activists. While they were representatives of the natural world and preserved the “natural” qualities and patterns of behavior, dolphins were believed to be very close to humans in terms of intellect, level of consciousness and social responsibility. In the terms coined by Donna Haraway, dolphins became certain “significant others” - a “companion species” - for waterbirth practitioners (Haraway 2003 and 2007). While the group sought to become as enlightened as dolphins, one could say that they simultaneously engaged in “an unlimited and groundless anthropomorphization of the animal,” which even places the animal above man and in certain way makes a “super-

man” of it” (Agamben 2003). Since the early days of the waterbirth method, the dolphin was used as its symbol and referred to as a totem and protector of the waterbirth community. For this group, the dolphin served as a live reminiscence of the natural paradise once lost. According to Charkovsky, in order to help humans get rid of the fear of water, which largely prevents them from returning to their original, natural condition, pregnant and birthing women should work on having their not-yet-born embryos and newborns establish telepathic contact with dolphins by means of special meditations, water exercises and staying in and under water for hours on a daily basis.

By connecting with the dolphins (and through them with the natural world in general), babies conditioned by these techniques were supposed to eventually gain access to a powerful source of universal energy and primordial knowledge. Explaining the purpose of establishing human-dolphin contacts, Charkovsky’s follower Lev Burachevsky wrote:

Rearing children in the water can open new perspectives for human evolution. Establishing telepathic contacts with dolphins and their powerful bio-energy, relying on their help in birth, on communication and friendship with them, is the way to creating a new man with higher physical and probably even higher spiritual abilities (Burachevsky 1998: 44).

Thus, for the pioneers of the “natural childbirth” movement, the most important goal of waterbirth and the consequent water training was bringing a radical shift into the process of human evolution. As a result of applying the waterbirth method, a new generation of humans was to be produced (or a “New Race”, as Charkovsky put it) that would all share special powers and intuitive abilities:

Prenatal training is not only important for physical exercise, but it also helps to open the inner vision, the “third eye” - that is the abilities now called “paranormal” <...> These abilities have to become a norm, but now they still look like something supernatural (Sargunas and Sargunas 1992: 16-17, 27).

In the early years of the “natural childbirth” community, its participants expected the waterbirth method to work exactly this way, and musings about the special abilities of “waterbabies” were quite a common feature of “natural childbirth” narratives. It was widely believed, that waterbirth was practiced in some ancient civilizations, and that this method was reserved for producing a special type of citizens. It was said that such people would need the extraordinary abilities, which they developed as a result of being born in water, later in life, while performing important political and/or spiritual duties. Igor Charkovsky claimed that waterbirth was the preferred method of giving birth to Egyptian priests. Homebirth midwife and author Daria Streltsova said in her interview that waterbirth was used in ancient Egypt in order to stimulate special abilities in children who were supposed to form the ruling elite:

They have some special abilities, waterbabies... Waterbirth used to be practiced long ago - not for everybody, but for the babies supposed to know more than ordinary people – like, you know, pharaohs...

While believing that in the distant past waterbirth was reserved for the privileged few, the pioneers of waterbirth in Russia regarded their own project as a more democratic one, intended to evolve as many people as possible. Within the waterbirth utopia, humanity would “evolve” together, and no one would be left behind.

The problem of exclusivity did exist, however, within the “natural childbirth” movement. It concerned adults and children who have not been born in water and who have not received proper water training as babies. Now that waterbirth was considered a norm, the common way of birth in the maternity hospitals was represented by the movement’s participants as a

deviation from it. Consequently, children born in a hospital started being seen as deviants in comparison with “properly” born, “normal” “waterbabies.” A newspaper article about “spiritual midwife” Marina Dadasheva stated:

Charkovsky and his successors regard children born in maternity hospitals as disabled, even if the doctors say they are healthy. And if we compare land-born babies and “waterbabies”, we will see that it is true. “Waterbabies” can swim from the very beginning; they learn to stand and walk at only a few months old, before the regular babies can do it. They almost never get sick; they have rapid intellectual development and strong artistic abilities (Korovina 1993).

While telling me the story of a popular “natural childbirth” instructor, his colleague referred to him as a “cesarean baby-boy” (*kesarenok*); she further explained that all his active engagement in “natural childbirth” was a certain compensation for the damage that he had suffered at the moment of his own birth. From her reference, it was obvious that such a person can never recover completely, and, no matter how hard he works, doesn’t have a chance of acquiring the same level of special abilities that waterbabies enjoy just from being properly born and trained in water. The products of the old-fashioned birth and upbringing didn’t stand a chance of being part of “the new race.” Their noble and ambitious task was to pave the way for this “new race” and help the newly produced humans evolve into more natural beings that are more deeply connected to the universe.

Natural Childbirth as a Holistic Act

According to Charkovsky’s original vision, the extraordinary abilities of waterbabies had to serve a larger, ultimate purpose. Their accumulated physical and spiritual potential was to be used for achieving an important common goal: restoring “natural” conditions in the world and establishing a new, environmentally conscious world order. When grown up, waterbabies were supposed to defend the natural world from the various threats that it

would have to face, such as unconscious, irresponsible use of its resources, pollution, and, ultimately, World War 3, which was widely anticipated by the Soviet people in the 1980s. Being strongly connected to the natural world as a result of natural birth and upbringing, waterbabies were believed to be able to intuitively feel the emergent danger and to successfully conquer the human intentions potentially harmful to the Earth. Speaking of the mission that people of the “new generation” were expected to take on, Igor Charkovsky said:

These beings have a very strong feeling of the world around: they feel when some malpractice against the planet Earth is taking place and experience pain. <...> Such children have a stronger energy, stronger psychic and physical abilities. If the “atomic reaction” starts and these programs will be accepted by many people, these children will be able to conquer the arms race. That’s why creation of the New Race is considered so extremely important (Sargunas and Sargunas 1992: 14, 38).

Aside from war, there were other anticipated disasters threatening the well-being of the Earth, which “the new race” was supposed to take care of. Unconscious, irresponsible treatment of the planet and its resources was seen by the pioneers of the movement as an extremely dangerous threat to the very existence of the natural world. The advent of a new, conscious generation of people was supposed to help restore the cosmic unity of the world, of the ruined “natural” connections, and establish a holistic vision of the universe.¹⁴ The tropes of “connections” and “links” between everyone and everything as a part of the cosmic unity were widely used in the “natural childbirth” movement’s rhetoric. The proper way of coming into the world, such as supposedly natural childbirth, was seen as a powerful holistic act that unified the universal elements, the fragmented pieces of human consciousness and the artificially separated spheres and parts that constitute the world. Lev

¹⁴ The trope of “connections” is also often used in American midwives’ narratives (Davis-Floyd and Davis. 1996: 246-248).

Burachevsky, wrote in his book “Homo Delphinus”: “Entering the world should be extremely gentle, harmonious, humanistic, incorporated into the natural connections” (Burachevsky 1998: 31). A newspaper article about Charkovsky’s follower, “spiritual midwife” Marina Dadasheva features the description of an ideal natural birth as a powerful act of cosmic integration that ties together the fragmented elements of the cosmos:

A person was just born, and at the same moment received as a gift all the World, the Sky and the Earth. Happy is the man who keeps the feeling of safe connection with everything in the Sky and on the Earth (Korovina 1993).

While the very moment of birth was seen as a central, crucial moment that determined the events that would follow, the integration of the new baby into the cosmic connections was supposed to start even earlier, before the baby was even born. By means of meditation and immersing herself into the realm of the natural, the future mother was seen as helping her baby to become a conscious part of the natural world. As midwife Marina Dadasheva explained in her interview, “it is important to communicate with the Cosmos, with the Earth and with Nature during pregnancy.” A series of particular techniques was supposed to help pregnant women achieve extended states of consciousness and allow them, their embryos/fetuses and, later, their newborn babies to communicate with the cosmos on multiple levels. For pregnant women, these techniques included meditation, yoga, holotropic breathwork, rebirthing and ice-diving. For the newborns, it was the so called baby-yoga, “dynamic gymnastics,” underwater trainings and various cold-tempering procedures (keeping babies naked at low temperatures, ice-diving and playing in the snow).

In the “natural childbirth” ideology, the human body was seen as cosmically oriented and axiologically heterogeneous, having special organs originally intended for cosmic

communication. Charkovsky called the female uterus “a resonator of cosmic communication,” for example (Sargunas and Sargunas 1992: 33), and midwife Tatiana Sargunas referred to the placenta as “a cosmic antenna,” while Irina Martynova presented it as “an energy generator.” In my interview with “natural childbirth” instructor Svetlana Abramova, she told me about an art therapy session that she offered to the pregnant women that took classes at her center, where the women were supposed to imagine and draw the visions of their future labor and birth. One of the pregnant women attending the session created an image of a placenta integrated within the field of cosmic connections:

Once, we were drawing childbirth. Last time, one of the girls had a very beautiful meditation, it was gorgeous. She used to be a silent one, one of those who never spoke [in classes], who never shared with us any striking images, just nothing. And all of a sudden she came up with something really special. Shine, cosmic space, stars, and, at the same time, a baby is being born – it was so beautiful... It must have been an image of a placenta. She compared a placenta to a multicolored aster, kind of.

Svetlana presented the painting as an insight a woman gained in a state of deep meditation, when she actually felt the unity of the macro- and microcosm, the inner and the outer world, the domain of humans and cosmic space. A special organ belonging to both mother and baby, the placenta with its cord was supposed to serve as a mediator and a certain channel that allows connection between the inner and outer worlds. In all known cultures around the globe, the placenta deserved special treatment; adopting some of these ethnographically reported techniques and synthesizing new ones, the participants of the Russian “natural childbirth” community developed their own special placenta rituals that sought to properly frame birth as an act of cosmic integration and unification.

Especially popular in the early days of the movement, the so-called “lotus birth” ritual became one of the most important practices involving the placenta. In the “lotus birth,” the umbilical cord was ideally not cut at all, and was instead left to dry and fall off on its own, but a variation that some parents preferred was to wait for 24 hours after the birth and then cut the cord. The idea behind the ritual was to allow a certain “energy cycle” to be completed without intervening. As a result of this practice, a lotus-born baby was supposed to receive the full amount of cosmic energy from its placenta, most of which would have gone to waste if the cord had been severed too early. In lotus birth, the placenta is seen as a certain storage device which receives and accumulates cosmic energy, while the cord serves as a channel through which this energy is transferred to the baby. Appealing to ancient Slavs as original lotus birth practitioners, midwife Irina Martynova attempted to rationalize the underlying mechanisms of the ritual:

Our ancestors, the Slavs, practiced waterbirth. They used to cut the cord at sunrise. The placenta is an energy generator, you know, and they were solar people...¹⁵

While a full lotus birth was considered ideal in the “natural childbirth” community, in reality, lotus birth was logistically difficult to perform, so the time interval before cutting the cord was usually reduced to several hours. In the end, while the timing itself might have varied, preserving the cord intact until the placenta came out was a common point and *sine qua non* of any birth aspiring to be “natural.”

Ultimately, rituals around the placenta centered on arranging the proper redistribution of matter and energy in the universe. According to ancient sympathetic magic beliefs,

¹⁵ No reliable historical evidence of this ritual being practiced by Slavs can be found in ethnographic literature.

separated parts of a human body, such as hair, nails, blood, etc., should not be left unattended at any time, because they could be easily used as a means to inflict evil spells on their former owner (Frazer 1940, Douglas 1984). These kinds of beliefs are still widespread in Russia, and, although they are often called superstitions, their methods of preventing the evil eye are strictly followed in order to avert potential harm (Ovchinnikova 1998: 235). The placenta is a part of the human body that presents a certain “leftover” after the act of birth, when both mother and baby are considered especially vulnerable and exposed to all kinds of harmful influences. Consequently, the placenta after birth needs to be hidden in a safe place, completely absorbed or fully annihilated. A Russian-American woman discussed with me the necessity of properly disposing of a placenta after birth, pointing out the crucial importance of its complete and final disappearance:

What did you do with the placenta? It is quite important, you know. If your midwife has not taken care of it, she must be a bad midwife; she should have taken it with her. They have to take it to the hospital [after homebirth], and there are those special yellow bags there, which are cremated in a special oven so that nothing remains, absolutely nothing.

The traditional Russian ritual of burying placentas is the most typical way of dealing with this issue in the Russian “natural childbirth” community. One of the women I interviewed, who had buried her baby’s placenta, referred to the old Russian belief that the placenta must be buried under a tree which (with its traditional symbolism) corresponded to the gender of the baby:

In fact, you must bury it, the placenta, you know. A boy’s one under an oak, a girl’s under a birch (Natalia).

Another “natural childbirth” enthusiast referred to the magical function of burying siblings’ placentas together in one place:

We buried the placenta. Just buried it in a park, and that was all. Vasia's one we buried in the Kuskovsky park, and Aniuotka's - at the same place. Now they will become friends [for life] (Ekaterina).

The burial of the placenta has a powerful symbolic meaning: by being buried, the placenta returns to the world of nature, and, remaining there, it continues to maintain the connection between the baby and the natural world, serving as a mediator and securing the continuity of this link. While people born in the maternity hospitals never knew how exactly their placentas were disposed of and, consequently, (according to the "natural childbirth" practitioners' logic) were "programmed" to neglect the universal connections, through the act of "conscious," "natural" birth, parents received an opportunity to symbolically reestablish the original ties between themselves, their progeny and nature.

Another way to deal with placenta was for the parents to cook and eat it in communion. Considered somewhat extreme, this method was less popular, but still steadily used within the community. Eating a placenta ensured safe preservation of the remnants of birth within the family. Eating placentas from births that happened outside the family circle was seen as an improper and harmful act, as it contradicted the idea of the placenta staying within the family. Stripping the placenta of its sacred meaning and treating it as ordinary meat was seen as irresponsible, harmful and unacceptable. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, during food shortages, it could easily happen that after opening a freezer and finding there only a plastic bag with placenta (which was a common way to temporarily store it after birth) a friend or peer helper could accidentally or on purpose cook, eat and share it with others. Given the communal spirit of those times, when birth was not yet commercialized and people casually helped each other, this situation was not uncommon. In addition to

transgressing the symbolic boundaries of the family, by eating a stranger's placenta a transgressor could also open the way and let in some foreign energies and "information" that could then contaminate and harm the eater. In his interview, former husband of a "natural childbirth" attendant disapproved of her habit to casually eat placentas of women whom she had assisted in childbirth:

She, actually, started eating all those [other women's] placentas, like ordinary meat, which one probably should not do (Ilya).

A placenta integrated through nutritional absorption was expected to restore the energy of a couple exhausted from tiring birth thanks to the unique nutrients allegedly contained in it. According to "natural childbirth" instructor Svetlana Abramova, she was persuaded to eat her baby's placenta by her midwife who had highly praised its healing qualities:

And, as far as eating placenta is concerned... We actually ate ours. And when we were told about this [practice] – I was told that it happens - before the birth I was positively against that. But we finally did it, and my husband also took part in it quite easily, although he is a vegetarian. Dasha ["spiritual midwife"] recommends eating it after hard labor, because it contains microelements that help to recover.

Through proper management of the birth process, "natural childbirth" ideologists tried to achieve an ambitious utopian goal: to connect everyone and everything in the world, from tiny microelements contained in placenta to the cosmos full of planets and stars. These connections would be established on multiple levels and planes. The "natural childbirth" ideology envisioned humanity from a universal perspective, the organizational levels of which included the realm of elementary particles, simplest organisms, plants, animals, the Earth, and the cosmos. In addition to their physical representation, "nature" and the "cosmos" acquired new transpersonal and metaphysical connotations within this system of views (an interaction of elements and energies, matter and spirit). Given this complex view

of the world and the multitude of elements that constitute it, the most important self-proclaimed task of “natural childbirth” promoters, ever-present in their rhetoric, was restoring balance, harmony and reintegrating the whole world in all of its dimensions and levels, in every possible particularity and detail.

Among other layers, this theme of total connection and integration could be traced to the level of personal integrity and social interactions. By means of promoting “ideal birth,” the adherents of the “natural childbirth” ideology sought to restore the forcibly ruined connections between the body, mind and spirit. On a social level, they also sought to repair the connections between individuals, within families, among social groups and, ultimately, between all humans. “Spiritual midwife” Marina Dadasheva presented “natural birth” as a means to integrate all the human psychological “processes” in one and to unite otherwise separated human beings:

It simultaneously became obvious to me that birth is a sexual process, rather than the process of separation from the male principle, from the husband, from the baby, from the family.

While narrating her own life story, another “spiritual midwife,” Katia Ivanova, explained how “natural birth” helped her to establish a “natural,” close bond with her daughter and, in the end, unified her family:

I have two daughters - Masha and Dasha. I gave birth to Masha in a maternity hospital, and to Dasha - on my own. And now when I feel sick, when I have a headache or I am just worried - Masha, the one born in a maternity hospital, misbehaves, as I am unable to properly react to her behavior. But Dasha, the homeborn one, feels my pain and feels sorry for me. Our souls are not separated from each other. That’s because I have been with her at the most terrible hour she ever had - the first hour of her life. And after that I also didn’t leave her. Our biological fields remained united. I didn’t betray her, and now she doesn’t betray me. That’s a psychological issue. In a maternity hospital, a baby is born, but at home, the family is (Lyskov 1992).

Given such an ambitious, such an important task of establishing total universal affinity and integration, the ideologists and practitioners of “natural childbirth” came to see what they were doing as their duty and all-important mission. When the initial period of communal spirit waned, and most experienced people suddenly found themselves helping other families give birth as their primary occupation, they started framing their coming into the profession of “spiritual midwifery” as a certain spiritual path. As soon as “spiritual midwives” started growing in recognition and fame, all kinds of stories about miraculous events accompanying their work appeared and became part of “natural childbirth” lore. Their special abilities and powers became widely recognized, and their special mission and path was eagerly acknowledged by those whom they helped. “Spiritual midwives” won respect, worship and, sometimes, pious trembling within the “natural childbirth” community. This kind of attitude on the part of birthing women and their families was understandable: by attending a relatively small and narrow event of birth, the leaders of the movement and its practitioners took on a task as big as the world itself, unifying its separated elements.

I have now discussed a certain number of meanings and contexts of the word “natural,” as applied to childbirth, that were used by the founders and early members of the “natural childbirth” community. In the “natural childbirth” movement’s discourse and self-representation, the term “natural childbirth” has acquired some very specific implications, such as “no intervention homebirth” (which it shares with the American “natural

childbirth” movement, albeit lacking the feminist connotations), “waterbirth” (considered the proper, original way of giving birth) and “cosmically integrated birth” (humans maintaining natural connections with the universe through holistic management of the birthing process). In all these meanings and contexts, the same self-representation strategy of normalization is present. In order to declare new attitudes as natural, one has to start by declaring common and shared ones as unnatural. By using in self-reference the term (“natural childbirth”), a marginal, alternative, countercultural movement attempted to gain authoritative, legitimate status.

Chapter 6: Into Nature

Conditioning Babies: From Nature to Culture

Having discussed the contextual meanings of the natural in the Russian “natural childbirth” community, I now need to show how exactly the establishment of the naturalist utopia was envisioned by its promoters, and what particular steps were seen as necessary in order to actually implement this project. How is it that, by using the methods of “natural childbirth” and “natural parenting,” modern humans were supposed to become truly natural beings? What methods were seen as instrumental in producing the new kind of citizens who were expected to carry on the all-important mission of total, ultimate universal integration? How exactly was the process of human development conceptualized, and what was required of parents and the community in order to ensure a successful outcome? Below, I will show how, by building a new body of knowledge and establishing new routines, these radical utopian visions were exercised within the “natural childbirth” community.

In all the known cultures of the world, the social production of babies was performed through multiple ritual actions. By looking at the symbolism of the relevant rituals and texts of a particular culture, we can reconstruct the ideas and beliefs that informed these actions. First, I will discuss the symbolism surrounding birth and baby rearing in Russian cultural traditions, and how it informed the perception of the newborn baby in Soviet and Post-Soviet times. The marginal group of “natural childbirth” activists consciously and abruptly broke with the older traditions and developed a radically different conceptualization of the mechanisms underlying human development. While creating their own unique understanding and program of action, the “natural childbirth” community

abruptly abandoned many of the traditional ideas and corresponding symbols that managed to survive even such a major disruption as the socialist revolution of 1917 (including the consequent modernization and complete change of public discourse). While discussing the pre-revolutionary traditions of childbirth and baby rearing in Russia, I rely mainly on the published ethnographic literature of 19th and 20th centuries.

Russian ethnographers, having analyzed the semiotics of traditional Russian rituals, agree that the newborn baby was perceived and presented as not yet fully belonging to the human world, to the domain of culture (Baiburin 1993, 1996, 1997, Mazalova 2001). There was a cultural tendency to perceive the baby as a certain “alien,” as a representative of “the other world.” In order to transcend into the human domain, the baby had to perform a series of culturally prescribed steps, or transformations. On the one hand, the baby had to prove, step by step, that it was developing as a “normal” human and thus belonged to the human world, but on the other hand, the members of the community were obligated to help the baby overcome this set of “obstacles” that lay between the human and inhuman realms. The “alien” qualities of a baby were coded in two major ways: by referring to it as either a demonic entity, or an animal, which signified the “natural” world (Sedakova 1994: 21). The baby’s behavior and development were evaluated through apposition to strictly set norms. A newborn had to demonstrate to the community that it had not been substituted by evil forces during the period of utmost vulnerability and potential exposure following the supposedly impure act of birth (Vinogradova 1995). Any kind of deviations in the baby’s appearance and behavior, or any discrepancy between the baby’s age and the expected signs of growth were seen as proof of its demonic nature. “Anomalous” children were

feared and rejected in their communities, which sought to get rid of such babies or assign them a lifelong marginal social status (Agapkina 1994).

At the same time, techniques were developed in traditional Slavic societies that sought to prevent or correct this allegedly anomalous appearance and behavior in babies. A series of rules regulated a pregnant woman's behavior in order to prevent unwanted qualities in future progeny (Tolstaia 1995). During labor and immediately after delivery, both the parents and the midwife performed a particular set of ritual actions. Ultimately, the entire period of infancy (in its original meaning) was marked by a series of magical actions that the parents and the community as a whole consistently performed so that the baby could develop in correspondence with accepted norms. Symbolically, the baby's transformation into a human being was seen as a step-by-step "opening" of its organs. This opening was supposed to help in developing the bodily and mental functions seen by the community as truly human - most importantly, the ability to grow, see, hear, walk, think and speak (Baiburin 1991: 260). An entire set of ritual actions functioned to complete the process of the baby's development and annihilate its "non-human" features. These actions were encoded as a symbolic removal of obstacles that prevented the newborn's body from functioning "properly."

As it was many times shown by anthropologists of reproduction, birth continues to be a highly ritualized event even in postindustrial nations, and many of the actions surrounding it can be seen as (unconscious) reproduction of traditional ritual models (Davis-Floyd 1992). The very idea and ways of addressing certain bodily standards in newborns in

contemporary urban Russia corresponds symbolically to those characteristic of traditional Russian peasant culture, as described by ethnographers of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Much like the pre-revolutionary peasants, the Russian pediatricians of today have accepted norms for development; they use special tables that link certain ages to the development of certain skills. There is also a particular set of common procedures intended to promote further socialization of a baby and its gradual advancement to the “normal” adult human condition (including massage, immunizations and various types of therapy, among other measures). Primarily, the control over actions taken to ensure proper and timely development of babies is given to the representatives of the medical profession - doctors, midwives and nurses. While primarily drawing from scientific and popular sources of medical knowledge, Russian medical staff is much more likely to resort to traditional methods of treatment than their Western colleagues. Being familiar with folk models and methods doesn't compromise the authority of even the most established doctors, and, on the contrary, contributes to their popularity (Ovtchinnikova 1998). At the same time, the functions of control and evaluation are performed by lay members of the community, namely older women who experienced birth firsthand and successfully brought up their own children (Shchepanskaia 1996).¹⁶

The standards applied to babies' behavior and the timeline of the development of their most important skills are very strict and rigid. At a maternity hospital, a baby gets measured and

¹⁶ The privilege given to older women, which allows them to control the domestic sphere and exercise authority and pass moral judgment, can be widely observed beyond the domain of reproduction (Ries 1997, 71-72). Nancy Ries defined this way of power distribution as “maternalism”: in it, the domestic world of the Russians is seen as centered on “the all-controlling, all-managing, all-giving mother” (Ries 1997, 75).

weighed right after birth, at which point APGAR scores for five major parameters are taken. Later, during the so called “newborn patronage” - scheduled visits to the children’s polyclinic - the baby is regularly weighed, and its development is checked against a timeline of the “normal” scheduled achievements; by reaching these checkpoints, a baby gradually moves closer to the state of a “normal”, legitimate human being. Many additional actions intended at promoting the baby’s further socialization and reducing or eliminating anything suspicious or dangerous associated with the world of wild nature take place at this time. Medical and parental intervention, which seeks to aid and improve babies’ development during the first months and years of their lives, is, in general, much more intense in Russia than in the US. From the Russian point of view, American babies would be seen as neglected and left all alone without any external help, direction or guidance, while, according to the Russian model, a baby needs to be constantly bettered, stimulated and worked on by medical specialists, parents and members of the community.

Most of all, the contemporary urban population is concerned with possible “retardation” in a baby’s development. Firstly, this applies to baby’s skills and abilities (such as sitting and standing up, walking and speaking), which they are supposed to learn at the “normal” age. Secondly, the “improper” methods of baby treatment by the parents may also cause anxiety and disapproval on the part of the community; it is considered worrisome, for example, if a baby nurses or uses a pacifier for “too long,” or if it is not potty-trained at a particular age. While such a strong anxiety may be partially explained as a modern development, i.e., state control over the production of new citizens (see Foucault 1995), in the Russian context the magical subtext of these ideas can never be disregarded. This superstitious nervousness and

impatience concerning the baby's assumed "retardation" can easily be recognized as a fear inherited from old folk tradition, since immobility and failure to grow were once seen as typical features of a demonic creature substituted for a baby (Vinogradova 1995: 316; Vlaskina 2001: 75). At the same time, a baby's "advanced" development also causes anxiety nowadays (e.g., if the baby learns to stand up too early, it is said that its legs might become crooked, or if a child learns to recognize letters too early, it is believed that reading might lead to "spoiling one's eyes"). Correspondingly, in traditional Slavic societies, abnormal "early" development of a baby was also regarded as dangerous; it was thought that a baby, if it was able to move its eyes right after birth or bend its legs early, or if it appeared to be too smart in its early days, was abnormal and would not stay in this world for long (*ne zhilets*) (Sedakova 1997: 10).

Contemporary Russian culture inherits this vision of an infant as an incomplete person and a certain liminal creature, which, by definition, is susceptible to danger. Consequently, birth and infancy are strongly associated with the necessity of constant medical control. The most widespread connotation of giving birth are the medical manipulations that are performed by medical staff in maternity hospitals, which is typically seen as the only legitimate and safe enough setting to handle this unpredictable and dangerous process. Parenting, in this mindset, necessarily implies close contact with medical institutions, and its effectiveness is measured by the parents' success (or failure) at gradually eliminating the multiple physical and developmental "defects" that plague the baby. The discourse of pathology as applied to childbirth and baby development is widespread both in Russian medical and lay parental settings. At the same time, the view of the baby as an incomplete

person is connected with the popular idea that babies cannot understand, know or feel anything for a certain period of time (e.g. cannot see, hear, or feel pain). Such a conception of the baby provides legitimacy to performing disturbing and painful manipulations to which it is subject during birth and right afterward (cp. Chamberlain 1998 on American parallels). Such perceptions also make parents mistrust a baby's emotional expression, and they often start to interpret its behavior as chaotic and irrational. As a result, parents often ignore their baby's cries as default baby behavior even though they are caused by actual problems (such as hunger, need for attention and pain).

Although the newly emerged Russian middle-class introduced some new attitudes and practices of baby rearing that promoted the "humanization" of a baby (seeing it as more complete, human, and even a citizen in its own right), this is a very recent phenomenon that is characteristic of only a limited part of the population in Russia's bigger cities (see Chapter 9). The majority of Russians still largely follow the Soviet model of baby rearing, with its reproduction of "traditional" Russian practices of step-by-step development, which eventually leads to the baby's integration into the community and humanity at large. An adult is always seen as wiser, more knowledgeable, more conscious, and, ultimately, more socially useful, than a baby. Within this frame, a baby has nothing to offer to the community; seen as unconscious and undeveloped, as still a part of nature rather than human culture, it is largely seen as passive and thus always on the receiving end of communication. In order for a baby to develop its own value that goes beyond the default parental love, a baby needs continuous help from the adult members of the community - it needs to be cultured.

Waterbabies: Sinking into Nature

During the late Soviet years, mainstream views on baby development were confronted by a new marginal system of attitudes and beliefs concerning the nature of newborn babies. The members of the “natural childbirth” community who advocated this approach sought to prevent their babies from becoming human in the common, casual meaning of the word. This new vision was based on Igor Charkovsky’s ideas of maximizing the so called “human potential.” In the 1970s and 1980s, sister movements were growing in Europe and the US, but nowhere were the ideas and practices concerning manipulations of babies so radical, the trainings so intense, and the end results so counted on. Additionally, in the West, the alternative parenting as part of the democratic Human Potential Movement provided space for pluralism of interpretations and methods, while, in Russia, waterbirth and the subsequent rigorous underwater trainings of the babies became an essential part of a very specific and authoritarian kind of work intended for stimulation of extraordinary, paranormal abilities in babies.

Interestingly enough, the major points of the traditional birth rite were preserved by “natural childbirth” advocates, while all the ritual actions and their meanings were radically reframed and symbolically inverted. According to “natural childbirth” practitioners, a “normal” birth was supposed to happen under water, and only children born this way could be deemed “normal.” Such children were seen as more advanced than the adults who had already missed this opportunity and superior to the children born “in captivity”. Children

born the right way were regarded as special beings with a superior consciousness, able to teach and guide adults in many ways. "Spiritual midwife" Marina Dadasheva explained:

A baby comes to Earth not just to get the experience needed to proceed with the evolutionary process or accomplish a certain [preset] program. Its main goal is to communicate the knowledge about the harmony of the Universe to its parents. We need to learn to perceive a baby not as a silly little simpleton that is only just learning to make its first steps, but as a wise Teacher that quite recently was a part of the Superior Consciousness (Dadasheva 1994; 26).

The representatives of "natural childbirth" community referred to babies born "naturally" as to extraordinary people or even super-humans. The so called "waterbabies" (*vodnye deti*) were expected to possess some extraordinary features that could be seen negatively, as a sign of dangerous deviation, within a traditional, mainstream paradigm. The activists of the movement went even further, claiming that total deviation from the shared cultural norms of development and behavior was the ultimate goal of their pedagogical approach, which they called "conscious parenting." From their point of view, the goal of the parents and other community members was not to help a new baby to part from nature by means of gradual socialization, but to help a newborn immerse even deeper into the realm of the natural.

The basic steps that traditionally mark a child's passage into the domain of the social were rearranged by "natural childbirth" activists, and were now supposed to happen differently than in traditional Russian society, or in any other culture around the globe. This new approach featured unprecedented revolutionary courage and self-confidence in assuming that the break with tradition will not prove fatal (as any traditionally-oriented parents would see it), but, on the contrary, would greatly benefit everyone involved. "Spiritual midwife"

Marina Dadasheva explained the implied beneficial mechanisms at work using authoritative discourses of psychology and medical science:

From the days of Adam and Eve, people gave birth on land, and thus developed certain behavioral and survival stereotypes that were recorded in the reactive memory of the [human] body. When a baby is born in water, in such a new and allegedly alien environment, the older genetic stereotypes fail to reproduce. Completely new skills and a new adjustment mechanism are necessary. In its brain, new groups of neurons get turned on, and multiple connections are set between the central and peripheral nervous systems, which requires creativity on the part of the organism. The consciousness extends, the intellect is heightened, and the special conditions which enable the development of ultimately unusual abilities are set. The spectrum of adaptive functions in a person who was not traumatized at birth and received plenty of new possibilities is unlimited (Dadasheva 1994: 13-15).

The development of this new, unlimited potential which humans as a species never possessed before required people to abandon the old, worn out methods of care and conditioning and introduce radically different approaches and conceptualizations. In the next few subchapters, I will discuss how the representatives of the “natural childbirth” community broke with traditional ideas about human development and proposed new alternatives. I will also explain why exactly they needed to revise and resignify the particular key moments of baby growth and maturation (including the corresponding methods of baby care) that have been long considered the most important steps of newborns’ successful advancement.

First Cry and First Breath

The baby’s first cry is a good example of such an important developmental checkpoint; it is also supposed to be the first action a newborn performs after arriving in the human world. In Russian traditional culture, the first cry was usually seen as an indicator of the baby’s nature (showing whether it was a human being or a substituted demonic creature), and

demonstrating its vital capacity and personal character traits (Sedakova 1999). The moment of the first cry was often referred to later in person's life, when the biographical narrative, which sought to tie all life events together logically and symbolically, was being constructed about them. This attention to the circumstances and character of the first cry and their symbolic interpretation is still widely relied on in Russian culture, and can be often heard in popular claims, such as: "It was all at once clear he wouldn't live long" or "We immediately realized she would have a very strong character."

Traditionally, voice and ability to produce sound serve as an essential attribute of human beings as opposed to the silence attributed to the creatures of the "other" world (Baiburin, 1993: 211, 207). In the traditional childbirth setting, a birthing woman, as well as her baby, is perceived as being in a liminal phase between the two social statuses (Davis-Floyd 1992); that's why the woman is expected to keep silent and refrain from crying, screaming and complaining. In the Russian maternity hospitals, this traditional requirement is strongly reinforced, this time, however motivated by physiological rationalizations (like "stealing" oxygen from the baby *in utero* or "poisoning" it with stress hormones). In the course of a traditional birth ritual, a newborn baby was seen as being somewhere in between the two worlds – "human" and "inhuman." The baby's first cry used to be considered the first signal of its arrival into the "human" world, and, even today, the first cry is deemed something positive and awaited, so when it happens, it is met with joy and approval on the part of whoever is present. In maternity hospitals, when the baby doesn't cry immediately after birth, it is often stimulated to do so with a good spank.

On the contrary, in the “natural childbirth” community, the cry of a baby after birth was usually reported as rare and unwanted. It was associated with the pain of the first breath, when the newborn’s lungs opened at once, sharply and unexpectedly. Allegedly, one of the most important advantages of waterbirth is a gradual passage of the baby from the water environment, which surrounded it in the uterus, through the water of a bathtub or a pool, and only then up to the air. This way of handling the transition was believed to be more beneficial for a baby’s healthy development, as it provided the baby with the opportunity of several minutes under water – the time that could be used for relaxation, rest and accumulation of energy for the final transition into a completely new air environment governed by its own laws. This short stop was said to be crucial for saving and restoring the baby’s energy resources after the long and difficult journey, and the energy saved this way could be better used to acquire paranormal abilities.

In their book “Birth in Joy,” two female disciples of Igor Charkovsky described the benefits of such gradual passage in this way:

It is already proven that birth in water affects baby’s health in a positive way. While being born, such a baby doesn’t experience the stress caused by the abrupt temperature change and by the so called hydro-stroke that happens at the moment of transition from the null-gravity state in the water into the air: remember that up to the moment of birth it happily swims in the amniotic water. This way the baby will also avoid the disturbance caused by the abrupt exposure to light and sound. The baby’s first cry is always a cry of pain, as its tiny lungs unfold abruptly and painfully at the moment it starts to breathe. If born in water, the baby gets an extra chance to get ready to face this ordeal (Gurianova and Zheleznova 1997: 105)

The rhetoric of saving energy for the sake of developing some extra human potential was at the very heart of the “natural childbirth” discourse. The members of the movement largely shared the model of the body that Robbie Davis-Floyd described as “holistic” – a model

that envisions the human body as an energy field (Davis-Floyd 1992, Davis-Floyd and St. John 1998). They cared about the proper use of the human and universal energy resources and brainstormed methods of saving energy and productively accumulating it. Saving the baby from exposure to unnecessary stress was a very new and revolutionary development at the time of its advent. This was never a point of concern either in Russian traditional culture, or within mainstream modern views. By managing the baby's energy as a part of universal, cosmic energy at the initial stages of the baby's development, the "natural childbirth" group's concern reached far beyond person-centered, individualistic frames, and sought to preserve balance and harmony between the energy essence of the new human being and nature itself.

Eyes and Vision

In traditional Slavic cultures, newborns were symbolically presented as "closed," meaning blind, deaf, and insensitive. This is why newborn babies were often compared with kittens, whose eyes open only a few days after birth. In rural Ukraine, there used to be a special rite called *ochedirini* ("tearing the eyes open"), intended for helping a newborn baby to open its eyes (Baiburin 1991: 260; Mazalova 2001: 113). Commenting on these traditional customs, contemporary Russian folklorist Natalia Mazalova makes a positivist claim: "In reality, during their first days of life, newborn babies can't see and hear well: they can't focus their eyes and react only to sharp stimulation with sound and light" (Mazalova 2001: 113). Many of the women's narratives about their hospital birth experiences that I collected for my earlier project on hospital birth in Russia referred to the closed or hardly opening eyes of their babies.

By contrast with these mainstream birth accounts, “natural childbirth” narratives often refer to the wide-open eyes of the newborn babies, as well as to their curious glances and the eye contact they eagerly establish with their parents right after the birth. Here is an account of one of the homebirth dads about his son’s first minutes of life outside the womb:

Sveta drew him [in water] close to herself. He opened his eyes wide and glanced for a while. You could feel how the first sensations were filling him up. Looking at him, I felt how important they were for him. For a long time, he quietly rested on his mother’s breast, looking around, partially immersed into the warm water of the aquarium (cited in Akva 1985: 37).

Thus, not only do “natural childbirth” activists claim that newborns can see well, but that they are also able to accumulate, interpret and rework the information about the world that they are exposed to at the moment of birth, and that those first experiences are most important because they get forever imprinted in the baby’s psyche.

“Natural childbirth” practitioners argue that the assumed blindness of the newborn babies is caused by the bright illumination of the labor wards.¹⁷ They state that babies should be born in semi-darkness, and all the sources of bright light must be turned off (cp. Leboyer 2002). “Spiritual midwife” Tatiana Sargunas explained it to me in her interview:

A baby reacts to light while yet in the mother’s belly – approximately starting from six months of gestation. Or, rather, it reacts to light even earlier, but the definite reaction starts at this point: if you direct a bright light at the mom’s belly, the baby will squint, frown and otherwise show it doesn’t like it. And when they are born into the bright light of those bright [hospital] lamps, they obviously don’t like to open their eyes. But if you dim the lights, they start opening their eyes, looking around and familiarizing themselves with the new environment.

¹⁷ Another explanation of the newborns’ temporary “blindness,” often cited by “natural childbirth” practitioners, is the antiseptic medicine dropped into babies’ eyes right after birth as a part of hospital routine.

Using candles in place of electric lighting is recommended at the moment of birth. Unlike traditional culture, which ascribed special symbolic importance to the passage from the dark “another” world into the lit human one (Baiburin 1997: 8), the “natural childbirth” ideology deemed the opposition irrelevant. Here, again, they proposed a slow and gradual transition, rather than initiating the baby into humanity as quickly as possible. On the contrary, they enjoyed and eagerly used the metaphor of an “alien” as applied to a new baby, and pointed out that just a short time ago the baby was part of “another” world where it was more closely connected with nature. Thus, being part of the “inhuman” realm became regarded not as something scary and unwanted, but rather as something positive. Such a “visitor” was still marked by a close connection with nature and, with the help of the human collective, wouldn't divorce from it in any way.

Measuring the Body

In Russian traditional culture, one of the important steps of a rite of passage was a ritual measuring of the body. By doing this, the physical body was newly created as a “cultural” reality, and its owner acquired new social status (as it happened with an infant after birth or a deceased person after death). In traditional culture, the human body was supposed to serve as a “measure of all the things;” that is why newborn babies were measured using such bodily-coded measurement units as the length of a belt (Nikiforovsky 1897) or a midwife’s forearm (Surkhasko 1985: 33). Measuring played an important role in prognostic practices, as it provided an opportunity to make judgments about the baby’s viability (Shchepanskaia 1996: 416). Sometimes, weighing a baby during a period of illness was also used as a means of diagnosis (Svirnovskaia 1998: 242). Measuring was seen as a

serious intervention, given the traditional belief that the powerful symbolic act of measuring may cause harm or even death to the measured person in the near future (Sedakova 1999: 114; Svirnovskaia 1999: 71). Measuring had magical functions in traditional Slavic cultures and was widely used in healing practices (Svirnovskaia 1998). It was believed that taking a measurement of the body could inhibit further growth forever.

In contemporary maternity hospitals, the measuring of babies is a procedure of great importance. It seems to symbolically “turn on” of the program of growth. This ritual action aims to estimate the correspondence of the baby to the norm and to construct the baby’s first identity (as well as the new parents’). The first questions about the new baby, aimed at its social recognition and integration, are concerned with its gender, weight and height. In the “natural childbirth” community, measuring babies, although practiced occasionally, did not play such an important role. In this group, different sets of questions were commonly asked in order to properly identify the baby and its parents, focusing on the level of implied “naturalness” and autonomy. One of the birth stories published in Akin and Strel’tsova’s book *Nine Months and the Whole Life* has a report of typical questions asked after the birth in the “natural childbirth” community:

After the birth, L. [the dad] attended a class on the principles of dynamic gymnastics at the moms’ school [that his wife and quite possibly he attended during her pregnancy]. [The following questions were asked:] Did you guys give birth yet? Yes, we gave birth. At home? At home. Under water? Under water. Unassisted? Unassisted. (Akin and Strel’tsova 1999: 340).

Many of the parents refused to weigh their “naturally born” babies, and especially measure them, referring to the unpleasant sensations an infant experiences from the unnecessary unnatural stretch. As one of the parents explained in her interview,

We didn't torture him with all kinds of tests and measurements. It should be prohibited to measure the height of a newborn baby during its first days of life. It shouldn't be stretched at all, because it is so used to a curled-up position which it maintained in the uterus (Alia).

Thus, the bodily measurements were not at all important in justifying, legitimating and constructing the "natural childbirth" process and the baby as its product. What was important was keeping it natural - intuitively obtained information being more valuable than supposedly "objective" quantitative data. In order to complete the transition, a baby didn't need to become an accountable, quantifiable, predictable and controllable unit of social structure. The state/medical governmentality model disgusted "natural childbirth" practitioners quite enough. They wanted to see their kids as part of natural world, wild and free.

The Order of Steps

Another important step that marked the baby's transition into the human world in traditional Russian culture was learning to walk. Walking, as well as speech, was regarded as one of the most important cultural traits of a human being. Many magical actions were performed in order to make a baby start walking in time. First of all, such actions included the regulation of a pregnant woman's behavior: she was prohibited to sit with her legs crossed as well as eat meat coming from animals' legs. Special ritual wishes concerning walking were made at particular transitional moments - right after baby's birth or later, while weaning an infant from the mother's breast. There was also a special ritual called "cutting the bonds" (*pererezanie put*), in which a symbolic cut was performed in order to free the child's legs from invisible hobbles that inhibited them from walking (Sedakova 1996). The age when a child makes their first steps is recorded in the cultural memory of a

contemporary Russian family; the circumstances of such event are remembered and narrated repeatedly on certain occasions (Razumova 2001: 288).

Traditional culture pays close attention to the order in which a child acquires major cultural skills. When a child started walking before talking, it was believed that such a child might “step on their own speech” and thus create an impediment for starting to walk. If a child was smarter than other children of the same age, it was predicted that they will mess up or delay their ability to walk (Sedakova 1996: 286). Any kind of deviation from the standard development of a body (such as baby teeth coming in irregularly) was seen as dangerous and could serve as a valid proof of the baby’s inhuman nature (Kabakova 2001: 55).

Nowadays, too, it causes anxiety to the parents when a baby does not sit up at a proper age, or learns to stand before sitting up, etc. In the “natural childbirth community,” it was considered important for children to learn certain things earlier than “ordinary” kids. The early representatives of the “natural childbirth” movement took pride in their babies’ achievements and eagerly demonstrated them in public. Here is an account of one of the community meetings during the early days of the movement:

A two month old baby stood without any external support on the palm of Igor Charkovsky’s hand. Led by the trainer’s hands, he performed acrobatic tricks that not many of the adults could handle, such as various kinds of complicated flips. A six month old girl confidently marched with her bare feet along the tile floor, her hands holding nothing other than her own pacifier (Dmitruk 1991: 144).

While praising this early ability to walk as signs of extraordinarily fast baby development, the traditional attitudes to the baby’s first steps were all inverted in the waterbirth group. The formulaic phrase cited by the “natural childbirth” practitioners, which promotes “swimming before walking” eventually became the identifying slogan of the movement.

Swimming, rather than walking, became the primary ability that needed to be acquired, and this ability was the one used to estimate the children's potential from the very start.

According to their parents' vision, the waterbabies were born to live a new and different life: they were seen as "different" creatures, and they had some special tasks and missions to perform in the future.

Water was supposed to become the natural environment for this "new race." In order to reach this goal, parents had to follow a certain program of actions. A pregnant woman had to overcome her primordial fear of water by means of meditation and special water training. A baby had to be born under water and stay there for a while before transitioning to the air environment. After birth, a baby had to be treated daily according to specially designed water training methodology in order to develop the capacity to live in water and experience it as a primary, native environment. Waterbabies were taught to get accustomed to eating, playing and even sleeping in water (Dmitruk 1991: 144-146, Sidenbladh 1982). They were also trained to perform long-term marathon swimming sessions. In 1992, a one and a half year old boy named Vasia Razenkov set a very special record that was even reportedly included into the Guinness Book of World Records by swimming over 33 kilometers within 15 hours nonstop in a regular secondary school's swimming pool (Burachevsky 1998: 9; Gurianova and Zheleznova 1997: 14). The advancement of waterbabies toward becoming a certain new water species amazed people both within and outside the community; in newspaper articles, Vasia was often featured as "the amphibian boy."

Changing Human Nature

The water trainings were intended to achieve an essential change in human nature by improving the immune system, developing the physical capacities of the body and stimulating various organs and bodily systems. First of all, the baby had to merge deeper into the domain of nature, with special attention paid to the bodily and behavioral patterns of water animals. The dolphin, perceived as a mysterious, highly-organized creature, played an important role in the mythology of the waterbirth community. Pregnant women were supposed to try to imitate dolphins and get to know them better by swimming and communicating with them, so that the baby, already *in utero*, would internalize some of the dolphins' patterns. Families who were located far from the seashore and didn't have a chance to communicate with dolphins directly had to meditate, holding in mind their images and seeking to establish and maintain a telepathic contact with them. It was believed that these methods helped to "turn on" certain programs of dolphin-like behavior in the baby brain. Thus, waterbabies were formally inoculated with certain features characteristic of sea mammals.

Secondly, water training was supposed to stimulate a child's supernatural abilities, such as extreme sensitivity, intuition, or the opening of the so-called "third eye," which allows a certain kind of a mental vision. These abilities were thought to be achievable by means of special practices that resulted in the temporary separation of the soul from the body and could be accessed through such techniques as prolonged underwater swimming sessions and especially ice-hole diving. Here is how the leader of the waterbirth movement, Igor Charkovsky, explained this concept and the mechanisms at work:

When a baby is immersed into such [ice cold] water, its soul leaves the body and goes on a journey to later return. These states [of consciousness] are very important for the baby. The baby acquires the experience of entering and leaving these states, and this experience will surface later, at an older age. One way to get into those states is the experience of the yogi, but it is possible to practice earlier, while a baby still hasn't lost these capacities, which usually happens as a result of exposure to our barbaric education system that just completely ruins [the inborn human potential]. Such abilities should be a norm, but right now they seem to us a miracle (Sargunas and Sargunas 1992: 27).

In traditional culture, the ritual practices that symbolically represent death are normally used only by marginal members of the community or ritual specialists. Ordinary people, too, sometimes symbolically represented the dead during certain marked ritual moments, such as rites of passage or healing ceremonies. Even temporary presence in a liminal space was believed to be very dangerous, and deliberate use of such serious practices was restricted. While it might look like the temporary death practices were used by Charkovsky and his followers randomly, in fact, they were a part of a special quasi-shamanic initiation. Later in life, the babies initiated in this way were expected to become bearers of special energetic, physical and intellectual abilities. They would be able to move in between worlds and the states of consciousness, and be responsible for regulating specific relationships present on many planes, just like shamans. Unlike shamanism, however, the “natural childbirth” movement did not reserve these abilities for the chosen ones; it envisioned extending every person's potential in a search to eventually change human nature itself.

Weak and Strong

One of the main symbolic characteristics of a newborn baby in Russian traditional culture was its alleged softness (Baiburin 1996; Mazalova 2001: 113). By accentuating this quality,

a baby was opposed to a “hard,” “bony,” not yet fully human embryo – the qualities mentioned in many traditional oral texts, such as riddles, lullabies, and spells (Baranov 2001: 21-22). A number of special ritual actions were intended to provide a baby with the hardness that used to be seen as the defining quality of an adult person. In contemporary Russian mainstream parenting culture, this belief corresponds to the vision of a baby as a weak and fragile creature that eventually develops strength and endurance.

In the waterbirth community, newborn babies are seen as enduring, strong, and tough from the very beginning. It is said, that, if improperly treated after birth, they gradually get weaker and lose their original strength. Midwife Marina Dadasheva in her interview comments on this process of gradual degradation:

Of course, the babies are consistently dressed too warmly, and so it happens that the natural inborn defense mechanism eventually turns off. Babies are stronger than us; they can endure much more severe temperature swings, physical burdens, etc., but any natural mechanism that is not requested gradually shuts down. That’s why, after three months of life in a sterile environment, a baby becomes open to infection. After three months of existing at the same room temperature, without even a draft from the window, a baby becomes open to any draft, to any cold and gets sick all too easily.

While, in traditional culture, as well as in modern mainstream culture, the socialization of a child is seen as necessary and beneficial, the members of the waterbirth community tend to support the preservation of the human organism’s original inborn functions and its primordial reflexes. The traditional idea of “passage” was still relevant for waterbirth practitioners; however, babies were supposed to proceed within the natural realm, and all the social skills were adjusted to this new purpose. This naturalistic point of view can be

exemplified by a reference to animal behavior as a certain model voiced by pioneer of the waterbirth movement, Tatiana Sargunas:

And here at once all the receptors turn on as well as all the capacities that will later flourish and provide their fruit. When a baby is born, it's important to ensure that it hears music or particular words, and that tactile contact is established at this moment. You can touch all over its body, the little bones, or pat it on its back. You have probably seen how, when a kitten or a puppy is born, a mother cat or a mother dog licks the little puff, rolling it around in its amniotic sac, without any concern that her baby will feel pain or discomfort. She massages and turns on her baby's entire body without any such concern. The baby squeaks while the mother dog keeps pressing it with all her might. This squeezing is instrumental in turning on a baby's psyche, its body and the awareness about having this body that it will from now on be able to use.

Tatiana evoked these parallels as part of her prenatal program for new parents, which sought to teach them proper ways of taking care of a new baby. Within this frame, parents were taught that a newborn is inherently strong and able to handle intense stimulation, hence, parents shouldn't be afraid to harm it. Rigorous physical stimulation was presented as an essential part of "normal" childbirth typical of the natural world, and thus necessary for further "naturalization" of babies.

Dressed and Naked

In traditional Russian culture, dressing was one of the important actions which introduced a baby to the human world. The first clothes a baby wore had deep symbolic meaning; it could be a father's old shirt or pants, or rags and swaddles that were not really clothes in the full sense, and, like a shroud covering a corpse, indicated the liminal status of the newborn baby. Wearing "human" clothes, at least before baptism, was normally restricted (Popov 1996: 466). In modern Russian maternity hospitals, white swaddles, rather than manufactured baby pajamas (that look more like "real human clothes"), are still in use. A birthing woman is also dressed in a white gown provided by the hospital, which symbolizes

her temporary deprivation of humanity and social status (Davis-Floyd 1992: 82). When leaving the hospital, which is an important checkpoint on the way to the human world, a Russian baby is provided with special ritual clothes for the occasion: the so-called “envelope” and a blue or a pink ribbon, encoding the child’s gender. In the more westernized part of Russian society, this ritual dress is being pushed out by the manufactured baby pajamas, which are now used right after birth. Swaddles, in this context, are seen as restrictive and traumatizing to the baby’s psyche (see Chapter 9).

Traditionally, the naked body (like the naked body of a bride washed by her girlfriends before the wedding), as well as white covers (like swaddling bands or a shroud), marked a liminal creature. Undressing the baby - symbolically taking away their protection - was considered dangerous because of possible exposure of the evil eye (Golovin 2001: 48). The waterbirth community did not adopt this belief and claimed that babies benefit from staying naked as much as possible. Dressing babies as humans would symbolically include them into the social world, which was not seen as a legitimate goal of the community. The parents claimed that wearing clothes tends to weaken the natural capacity of the body to adjust to changes in temperature. Swaddling, too, was considered extremely harmful; not only was it considered an impediment for the baby’s further development, but it also threatened to harm its inborn primordial abilities.

Heat and Cold

In Russian traditional culture a newborn baby was kept warm. In winter, babies were wrapped in sheepskin blankets, or even occasionally kept in the oven (Popov 1996: 466).

Sleeping on top of the oven was very common for kids in a peasant family. In modern mainstream culture, there persists a fear that a baby might get cold: it is dressed in warm clothes, and prematurely born or ill babies are put into intensive care units, where high room temperature is constantly maintained.

Waterbirthers behave in just the opposite way; they highly esteem “tempering” procedures. Right after birth, many midwives pour a whole bucket of ice cold water on the mother holding the baby to her breast. The associated stress is supposed to start the mechanism of thermoregulation that helps the human organism to successfully adjust to any temperatures and circumstances, and thus stay healthy even under the tough Russian weather conditions. Tremendous success is ascribed by the waterbirthers to these cold water procedures and their positive influence on their babies’ wellbeing. One of the waterbirth moms told her story:

There were no problems [with the baby] at all. When she was born in water, she got a full bucket of ice-cold water, right from the tap, poured over her. And you know what? She never got sick. Not once up to two years of age. I mean, at all. She never sneezed, not even once (Liuba).

It is worth mentioning that, according to Russian beliefs, people get sick not from viral infections, but from the exposure to cold itself. The principles of prevention and strengthening of the human adaptation mechanisms by means of intentional exposure to cold were popular in the USSR, even beyond the waterbirth movement. This community, however, applied the technique even to very young babies, who were normally seen as too young for such stress. They also conceptualized the benefits of “tempering” to include not just immunity related processes, but a wider spectrum of bodily and spiritual abilities.

“Tempering” was performed rigorously on a daily basis, and the ice-hole swimming events

involving babies became one of the favorite community activities back in the 1970s, when the movement was just forming.

Different Babies

All the cited examples demonstrate how the basic features attributed to babies in traditional culture and paralleled in modern mainstream practices are inverted in the “natural childbirth” community. In their ideology, traditional socialization was substituted with “integration into nature,” or “naturalization.” The types of behavior seen as positive were those that stimulated the baby to submerge deeper into the realm encoded as the domain of the natural, such as the animal world (learning from the dolphins) and the “cosmos” (learning to live in a realm beyond the material world).

In traditional culture, “abnormal” and improperly socialized babies always met rejection and attracted superstitious gazes. For example, in the mid-1920s, the babies treated with new Soviet rituals that were brought in to replace the Orthodox ones were looked upon by “normal” baptized peasants with ultimate disgust. One of the informants of the ethnographer Elena Eleonskaia expressed her attitude to such babies in this way:

An unbaptized baby – yuck! I think they are impure. You can offer me piles of gold for kissing such [a child], but I never will! (Eleonskaia 1994: 196-197).

Diverging from the norm and seen as “alien,” waterbabies were at times also stigmatized by the mainstream community. The very nature of waterbabies was uncertain to the outsiders, and meeting babies who were so different in so many ways often made “ordinary” people feel disturbed and uneasy. Igor Charkovsky told a story about one such conflict:

The mother of this girl called me recently, crying and telling me that her child is considered abnormal in the daycare center because she (Mashen'ka) doesn't talk to anyone, turns away from the teachers. But she just doesn't like them, and she doesn't know what to talk about with them, as she sees no [valid] content in them. There are a lot of [social] problems with such kids (Sargunas and Sargunas 1992: 16).

Bringing their kids up in an alternative way and consistently implementing this utopian vision of "naturalization" wasn't an easy task in the conservative Soviet society. Although the continuity of Russian traditions was once interrupted, the reliance on traditional schemes of action was quite strong, and a craving for a consistent, prescribed tradition was omnipresent.

As time goes by and rituals get adapted to new contexts, all of the innovations and modifications tend to affect only the surface layers related to their form and expressive means, while the core of the ritual remains stable (Davis-Floyd 1992, Baiburin 1993: 11). Modern mainstream birth culture and the neo-traditionalist trend in homebirth midwifery either utilizes traditional models without even noticing, or consciously creates new syncretic practices based on traditional schemes. The revolutionary, futurist waterbirth movement was unable to fully escape the traditional patterns either. The major points of the extended birth ritual, including baby rearing routine, stayed unchanged, while each of the basic steps in the baby's development was inverted and reframed into its complete opposite.

In the late 1990s and 2000s, many crucial changes took place within the community. Waterbirth ceased to be the only legitimate form of alternative childbirth; homebirths,

whether in bed or on the floor, came into use for the first time in the history of the movement. Gradually, even within the waterbirth wing, the water trainings became less rigorous and lost its function of breeding “the new race.” Charkovsky’s ideology and practice received strong criticism on the part of the newly emerged group of professionalized homebirth midwives. By this time, the first generation of waterbabies grew up, and it became clear that the futuristic ideas about the amphibious people didn’t really work out as planned. Unlike the revolutionary pioneers of the waterbirth movement, the new midwives started positioning themselves as traditionalists, saying that they practice “traditional births” (as opposed to the epithet “untraditional,” which was applied to them by the mainstream and the media) and claiming to draw on the experience of the traditional village birth attendants of the past (*povival’nye babki*). Within this “invented tradition,” all the key points of the ritual treatment of a newborn were reinstated. In the following two chapters, I will discuss how the neo-traditionalist trend stemmed from the “natural childbirth” project, and how the concept of tradition was utilized and imagined within this trend.

Part 4: TRADITION AS UTOPIA

Chapter 7: “Russian Orthodox” Midwives: Inventing Tradition

Tradition, Passed and Imagined

A few years ago, while talking to an old friend, I had a sudden realization. We’d met in Leningrad back in 1988 and became close friends. She immigrated to the US during the refugee wave of the early 1990s, and, since the borders were now open, we stayed in touch despite the distance. We enjoyed each other’s company on many occasions, in some ways reproducing our old Russian ways in America: sitting late at night in her kitchen, drinking one cup of tea after another and having insightful and intimate conversations on every possible topic, from politics and religion to children and family. One night, we happened to talk about the rites of baptism. My friend, born in 1966 in Leningrad to a family of technical intelligentsia, was baptized as a child. Now we were discussing the fact that I wasn’t: my parents and grandparents were all atheists, and the option of baptism wasn’t even considered. At some point in the conversation, my friend said musingly: “I just don’t understand it! Even if they weren’t believers, didn’t they want to give a baby another layer of protection? With a baby, you should use any means available to you, anything at all in order to protect it!”

At this moment I realized the apotropaic function of baptism in Russia. I recalled the many stories I had heard about babies being baptized secretly from their atheist parents by their grandmas or nannies back in Soviet times. Many Soviet citizens weren’t believers, but they still “religiously” performed certain sets of operations with newborn babies that were

prescribed by the longstanding tradition, including some Christian rituals, some pagan superstitions and the mixture of both (the so called “folk Christianity.”) The latter seems to have been in place for ages, since long before the Socialist Revolution of 1917. Soviet citizens reworked these traditions according to their understanding, reinterpreted them and placed them into new contexts. The basic schemes of the ritual they performed remained surprisingly stable, even with all the social and cultural changes that took place in Russia throughout the 20th century.

While Soviet citizens tended to think of their country as fairly modernized, the nation still maintained powerful real and imaginary ties to the pre-revolutionary peasant traditions. These ties were real in the sense that the massive flow of the rural population into cities never stopped since the abandonment of serfdom in 1861. Certain periods in Russian and Soviet history were more productive in this respect than others. Most of my secondary school classmates back in the 1980s came from families of rural origin; their parents belonged to the first urban generation and, during the summer months, many kids in our class went to visit their grandmas that still lived in remote Russian and Ukrainian villages. My classmates’ families lived a mixed habitus that was not yet fully formed and presented a mix of shifting and unstable values and practices.

One cannot claim that such practices are simply the exact continuation of pre-revolutionary rural traditions. As Nancy Ries puts it in her book on Russian discursive practices during *perestroika*,

A culture is a “web of significance” (Geertz 1973: 5) that is constantly woven and rewoven, continually integrating all sorts of historical changes and innovations.

Any bits of linguistic or other “cultural” expression observed in Russia today are thus products of an infinitely complex set of influences and causes, some national – historical, others local, familial, or idiosyncratic” (Ries 1997: 22-23).

Acknowledging this complexity and multilayered character of the cultural practices of Soviet and post-Soviet times, I will concentrate on the presence of the “national – historical” part of the Soviet cultural substrate, as it was incorporated into the dominant ideology and practices. These schemes were integrated both subconsciously (at the level of reproduction of the general ritual schemes) and consciously (when explicitly citing Russian “traditions” and either building on them, or rejecting and symbolically inverting them in a utopian search for new models). Before I proceed to discuss particular cases and examples, I would like to provide an introduction to the social mechanisms and circumstances that ensured the incorporation of “tradition” into modern Russian culture - as a set of values and practices, as well as an imaginary concept and rhetorical tool.

As mentioned earlier, the connection of urban traditions to the village rituals was real in the sense that, for many years, the village population persistently migrated to the cities in search of jobs and a better life. The cities, on the other hand, expanded, absorbing the adjacent villages. Many of the newer neighborhoods in Moscow and St. Petersburg still bear the names of the villages that they consumed. The process of urbanization, accompanied by the integration of village values and oral texts into urban discourse, is not specific to Russia alone. Julie Taylor illustrates it beautifully through the case of Buenos Aires in her book about the culture of tango in Argentina:

Through the first decades of the twentieth century, construction was the city’s major industry. Time after time a burgeoning city center obliterated its limits. Asphalt and concrete covered the barrios, the neighborhoods that were half city and half country <...> Tangos often sing of the man who comes back to his barrio with the hope that

it might have escaped change. Most of all, such a man returns to search for his mother and the values he deserted along with her when he was seduced by the city and its women” (Taylor 1998: 6).

Although Russian culture also poeticized the opposition between the city and village ethos in ethically charged ways (as in Sergei Esenin’s poetry or Vasily Shukshin’s prose), the division was less polarized, as the two social modes were never completely separated. Interestingly, the survival of village values in the city was somehow supported by the Communist Party agenda, which promoted “the elimination of the borders between the city and the village.” It is doubtful that Party officials would want to do away with the borders completely and allow Russian Orthodoxy and “dark superstitions” to contaminate the cities, but the peasants’ outlook found its way into the cities anyway.

One of the popular epithets applied to Moscow in popular discourse is “the big village.” During Soviet times, when state and city planning initiatives promoted social integration, people of different classes had to live in very close proximity, sharing the same apartment buildings and, often, even the same (communal) apartments (see Utekhin 2004, Boym 1994). The city neighborhoods weren’t segregated either; they were predominantly mixed. An intelligentsia family could live in the center of the city in a nice prerevolutionary building, albeit sharing an apartment with working class families or recent village migrants. As an alternative, they could get a new apartment on the outskirts of the city in a newly built apartment building (*novostroika*), where they would have more privacy, but would also be further from the cultural resources of the city and suffer from the sordidness of the new project cityscapes.

One thing was obvious: the different strata of the Soviet population lived in unprecedented proximity, influenced each other, and were deeply and inescapably permeated by one another's habits and habitus. In her book on magic practices in Russia, Galina Lindquist describes a case when her infant son was treated for hernia by a traditional healer on the outskirts of Moscow back in 1979:

His [her son's – E.B.] paternal grandmother, who lived on one of the residential estates on the outskirts of Moscow, suggested consulting a neighborhood healer ('*babka*') who, luckily, was well known for being a specialist in treating hernias. When I mentioned this therapeutic option to my parents, they were indignant: surely I was out of my mind to fall prey to silly superstitions and to cart the child off to some strange den, certainly dirty, unhygienic and highly dangerous for small children who were prone to catch all kinds of infections! I was ashamed of my own pusillanimity, but my little boy kept screaming all the time. Thus, keeping it a secret from my parents, we took him to the *babka* anyway. The healer turned out to be a stout woman in her mid-forties, who received us in her tiny apartment in a prefabricated apartment block, in one of the numerous vast areas of Moscow's '*novostroiki*', recently constructed on the site of outlying villages, but already dilapidated and slum-like in appearance (Lindquist 2006: 31-32).

Lindquist describes how the healer successfully performed her job, reciting "spells or prayers or a mixture of these" and making certain passes with her hands without even touching the baby. She treated the baby in the room containing many icons as well as a burning icon-lamp - something that stood out to Lindquist (who came out of an intelligentsia family) as an unusual practice. Exotic or not, the option to interact across class lines was always readily available. Lindquist could easily access the information on folk healing options and on where to seek them, and could actually cross the barrier and engage in the seemingly alien cultural practice. There was also the cultural openness that allowed her to consider the option, to somehow "believe" in its possible efficacy and, in the end, to publically acknowledge the success of the *babka's* methods.

Connections with traditional village life were imaginary in the sense that, within Soviet cultural politics, they were often idealized and constructed as a certain authentic model for urbanites to follow and draw wisdom from. This discourse was strongly promoted by the official Party propaganda, which presented traditional Russian people of the past as wise, strong and grounded - people we were all indebted to for our existence. For example, Russian language, literature and history classes at a secondary school consistently cited and discussed Russian proverbs and folk sayings. This practice was intended to instill the idea of respect for Russian traditional peasant wisdom into our heads. Also, the literature selections that formed the Soviet literary canon taught at schools always concentrated on those works that discussed the virtues and suffering of peasants, and lessons were planned and writing exercises scheduled to specifically address the topic of Russian *narod* (a complex concept, here basically meaning “peasants”, “simple people”).¹⁸

In the official Soviet discourse, the Soviet Union was presented as having two major social classes, and, while workers were the leading, “hegemonic” class, the collective farm peasants were regarded as their partner class, almost equally important. In the Soviet constitution, a third, somewhat marginal group of “the people’s intelligentsia” was also listed, but within the official discourse it didn’t qualify for the status of a separate class. In his book on Russian intellectual culture, Alexei Elfimov comments on the text of the Soviet constitution:

The words *workers*, *peasants*, *collective farmers* would consistently pop up in every chapter of the text, in some tricky ways alternating with the notions *citizen* and *people*, whereas the word *intelligentsia* would be meaningfully dropped out in every case” (Elfimov 2003: 26).

¹⁸ For an extended discussion of the concept of *narod*, see Pesmen 2000, Ries 1997.

The two giant figures of Vera Mukhina's famous sculpture "Worker and Kolkhoz Woman" (1937), portraying a male worker and a female collective farmer, hold a crossed hammer and sickle, the same tools that symbolically represented socialist labor on the Soviet national emblem. We encountered these suggestive images very often, many times a day, in different contexts and public spaces. Additionally, we were often reminded that today's workers came out of yesterday's peasants.

Another way that Russian traditions were idealized was through organization of stage performances, which were part of musical and theatrical shows, as well as seasonal celebrations. Such performances could involve songs and dances in traditional Russian peasant costumes or winter celebrations featuring famous Russian three-horse open sleigh (*troika*). Certain folklore characters, artifacts and texts could serve as examples of not so much popular, but rather mass culture, and presented rather a loose, modern reconstruction of the authentic texts, than a continuation and reproduction of old traditions. This kind of work with the concept of "Russian tradition" was an essential part of the Soviet patriotic project actively promoted by the government. Nowadays, cultural reconstructions of this kind are re-actualized with new enthusiasm and sponsored generously by the government, local authorities and, many times, successful businessmen and companies.

With the collapse of the USSR, as the Russian Federation became a separate country, the processes seeking to construct, establish and instill Russian national identity into Russian citizens' consciousness quickly gained strength. If the earlier discourse about the "internationalist friendship" of the people of the "brotherly Soviet republics" was somehow

holding back the Russian nationalist discourse (and I myself, for one, performed a Georgian dance in a Georgian national costume at the school celebration of the Soviet Union's anniversary at the House of Soviet Military Officers back in 1982), today there is not so much rhetoric heard that would praise internationalism. At the same time, Orthodoxy, "Russian traditional culture" and the "Russian national idea" are being protected, promoted, sponsored and performed eagerly in the capital and around the country. Initially, the aggressive rise of Russian nationalism was, in a certain way, a reaction to the Soviet internationalist project: it was led by the desire to get rid of anything reminiscent of Soviet cultural politics, including the promotion of multiculturalism (Ries 1997: 178; Castells 2010, 3: 37-46). Xenophobia, including racism, anti-Semitism, and especially Islamophobia directed against the Central Asian *gastarbeiters*, who are quickly populating Russia's biggest cities, are now some of the most disturbing problems in Russian society.

It would be incorrect to think that national identity was always imposed on Russian citizens "from above." The Russian people were, in fact, very eager to embrace this newly acquired part of their cultural selves. Back in the late 1980s and 1990s, the dominant majority of Russia's population started declaring themselves as believers, specifically Russian Orthodox, while, in fact, many of them didn't know how to "cross themselves" properly, weren't familiar with the liturgy and the New Testament, and couldn't properly discern between Orthodox Christianity and the many Christian sects that appeared in Russia during the period of *perestroika* and social turmoil. Nor could they discern between many of the Christian and the pagan beliefs and practices that they eagerly pursued. The discourse of

newly acquired Russianness and of “our Russian ancestors” as role models permeated all spheres of life, including social structures such as the institutions of politics, media, education, medicine, and the family.

The appeal of tradition can be seen in the very fact that, despite all those years of official atheism, the majority of Russians are still very superstitious. Universally, superstitions get stronger in those domains where humans are more vulnerable and exposed, such as during transitions and major passages of the life cycle. Childbirth is one such important life cycle event that is still surrounded by rituals seeking to magically protect the participants, ensure their wellbeing, and carefully guide the new baby through the social passage in order to achieve a desired end result (proper socialization). Given that childbirth is so heavily ritualized, it presents an especially good opportunity to see how traditional practices are worked on in contemporary Russian society.

The “Russian Orthodox” Midwife: New Identity, New Practice

The fall of the Soviet Union was a crucial point in the construction of Russian national identity. The internationalist conception of the Soviet State as a “family of peoples” was no longer relevant, and Russian nationalist and fundamentalist movements appeared on the scene and gathered strength. The development of Russian national identity was accompanied by the rehabilitation and revitalization of the Russian Orthodox Church and Christian traditions. References to Russian peasants and the Slavs of old as “our ancestors” could often be heard in Russian nationalist discourse.

These processes deeply influenced homebirth ideology. In the mid-1990s, a new trend appeared in the homebirth movement: “Russian Orthodox” midwifery. Some midwives who had previously venerated nature and practiced eclectic traditional customs reinterpreted their vision of childbirth and midwifery in such a way, that Russian Orthodox principles and traditions became the central focus of their work. Professor Nikolay Zharkin, the head of an experimental clinic in Volgograd, has been practicing waterbirth since 1996 and identifies his activity as “spiritual midwifery.” He comments on the main principles of a “Russian Orthodox” understanding of the birth process:

Our experience demonstrates that the rehabilitation of Russian Orthodox traditions of childbearing underpins the provision of not only gentle, but even enjoyable childbirth (*partus felix*), that leaves a permanent impression on the hearts and minds of mothers, babies, fathers and anyone who witnessed this event. These traditions include a lot of elements, but the most important are the following: love and trust in God; a prayer to the Mother of God, who protects mothers in childbirth; realization, that a child, while not yet born, belongs to God, and that it already has a soul, which is able to experience all the human feelings of joy, pain, fear and so on. This is a perception of childbirth as the Miracle of the Savior’s birth, the birth of the Savior of Her maternity (sic), which is repeated in every mother. And when the mother’s soul unites with the baby’s in childbirth, and both are protected by the veil of the Mother of God, it is hard to imagine that any kind of medical complications might occur (Zharkin, N.d.).

Appeals to the power of nature were now interpreted as sinful and dangerous. “You shouldn’t ask for health from – who knows what – from [some uncertain] ‘nature’!” said Liudmila Vasil’evna, the leader of the Baptismal Font (*Kupel’*) parenting school in St Petersburg. “Eastern” practices and terms were rejected and claimed to be harmful when used by Russians. Zharkin tells the following story concerning the danger of applying “Eastern” practices to those with a “Russian Orthodox mentality”:

A Russian Orthodox woman was due to give birth to her second child. She was advised by her midwife to attend classes in a group practicing transcendental meditation. There she was given a mantra for meditation. The medical record of

her pregnancy showed nothing unusual, nothing out of the ordinary. She had had no problems giving birth to her first baby. Her current pregnancy also developed initially without any problems. Only in the last month did she start to feel a general weakness that got worse. She didn't go into labor on the due date, and there were indications of fetal postmaturity. So she roomed in our clinic to speed the start of labor. Pharmacological treatment and acupuncture, normally effective when applied together, didn't have any effect in her case. As she'd reached forty two weeks and there still were no indications that she was ready to give birth, the question of Cesarean section arose. In the course of further conversation, details of her [new] spiritual practice came to light, something the patient had not mentioned previously. With her approval a priest was summoned to take her confession, during which she revealed the mantra. He advised her to pray with all her heart to the Mother of God, which she did. Labor started the next day without it having to be induced, and finally she gave birth to a healthy baby (Zharkin, N.d.).

Some of the "Russian Orthodox" midwifery supporters insist on the primacy of the Russian tradition on Russian soil, at the same time rejecting any suggestion that the traditions of other peoples inhabiting Russia equally merit preservation. Ultimately, it was the "consolidation of the Russian (or the Russian Orthodox) family" that was proclaimed as the new task for the homebirth movement, since it would result in the "restoration of Russia" itself:

Once there was a case when a doctor came in for a home visit. He was a Jewish guy. He saw those kids who'd been delivered at home, and he said: "If everybody gave birth at home, we would see Russia reborn (Oleg).

The main thing is to preserve the family, bring people to the faith, and restore Russia. Let children be devoted to the Russian soil. May parents love their children, children their parents, and all of them love Russia. Then Russia will really be (Liudmila Vasil'evna).

The main focus of our club is on the reinforcement of the family, so that it will not be destroyed but instead expand with strong and healthy children, and so that families will preserve the spirit of Russian Orthodoxy. <...> We want to see people and organizations who care about the survival and consolidation of the Russian family (Stepanova 2001).

As a result, waterbirth and infant swimming needed a rationalization supported by the authority of the Russian Orthodox ideologies. Thus, leading homebirth ideologists started associating waterbirth with the healing power of immersion during baptism. The founder of the movement, Igor Charkovsky, voiced the following opinion tying the two events together:

Russian Orthodox culture is more developed than western. According to Russian Orthodox custom, the baby is immersed in water on the eighth or ninth day of his or her life. The mystery of baptism solves a baby's health problems better than any medical discovery (Charkovsky 1999).

In fact, for many of the parents attracted by the "natural childbirth" idea, it was precisely the Russian Orthodox flavor of parenting schools that turned them into supporters of homebirth.

Along with Church tradition, numerous pagan Russian childbirth practices have been widely adopted, as midwives were not really aware of their pagan character and interpreted them as Christian ones. In reality, the rural midwife was once perceived as an ambivalent figure in Russian villages. On the one hand, they were believed to be witches, possessing supernatural powers and staying in contact with demonic forces (Kabakova 2001: 76).

They used spells and magic widely while assisting at birth. Midwives voluntarily acquired marginal status in peasant society, as by attending births, they shared in the alleged impurity of the birth process (Levin 1991).

However, traditional midwives often denied their being in possession of supernatural powers, practicing magic or being in contact with the powers of evil. The members of the village community, too, often perceived them as mediators between the woman in labor

and the heavenly forces (Listova 1989: 146). Rural midwives largely used Christian ritual objects such as crosses, icons, holy water, and myrrh, in addition to reciting Russian Orthodox prayers. The extreme piety of the midwives has been widely noted. Contemporary urban “Russian Orthodox” midwives are also largely perceived as dealing with heavenly forces. Although special psychic abilities are often ascribed to them, there is a tendency to speak about them using Christian terms. Since dealing with “unknown forces” and supernatural phenomena has been long perceived as sinful and dangerous, it is considered necessary to reject the idea of a midwife with inner supernatural abilities and ascribe them to divine guidance instead.

The midwife’s entry into the profession is also seen as a result of heavenly guidance, as a gradual recognition of her spiritual calling. Midwives interpret certain events in their lives as signs from heaven, indicating the necessity to abandon their previous profession to begin “serving” people. Homebirth midwife Irina Martynova shares her own story:

Much later, when I already felt I was being guided from above, I began to understand that my own baby was sent to me from Heaven, a gift. The Lord presented me with this child as a reward, because I had succeeded in understanding my mission on earth, even though at that time I hadn’t been baptized. I appeared able to understand what God wanted me to do. He led me towards gentle, natural childbirth, and I was capable of listening. <...> I was due in about four or five weeks at that time. It meant that conception had taken place in April, right after the first baby I had delivered myself! What a surprising coincidence! Later I understood that the Lord had given me this gift because I had chosen the activity, for which I had been sent to this world. <...> On the 8th of January, I gave birth to a little girl, who was later given the name of Anna, in accordance with my grandmother’s wishes. Much later I learned that the 8th January was a holiday: Midwife’s Day! And now my [daughter] Anna is studying midwifery, too (Martynova 2000: 10).

Midwives associate themselves with the holy laborers (*podvizhnitsy*) and describe their work as service (*sluzhenie*). Some of them claim they do not care when, or even whether,

they are paid by the parents they have assisted. “It’s OK, God will take care of me,” said Irina Martynova when I asked her about the payment for assisting at birth. Another St. Petersburg midwife, Liudmila Vasil’evna, emphasized that the main reward a midwife gets for her service is being mentioned in the new parents’ prayers.

A “Russian Orthodox” midwife is supposed to obtain a priest’s blessing before assisting at a birth. Practicing midwifery without such a blessing is seen as improper, because births in this case lack supportive protection. Irina Martynova put it this way:

You must have a priest’s blessing to be a midwife. I did. Liudmila Vasil’evna, Ol’ga Ivanovna and Alena did, but Lena Ermakova – she didn’t. She works somewhat in the American style.

Thus “working in the American style” may be seen by the Orthodox Midwives as something sinful, a situation where a midwife relies too much on the rational factors, such as her own skills, knowledge and abilities, while, according to them, there is another, sacred dimension to childbirth that should be properly observed.

Although “Russian Orthodox” midwives sometimes have to look after people outside of the Russian Orthodox Church, they strongly prefer to work with Russian Orthodox Christians. “It is easier to work with people who ‘speak the same language,’” said Natalia Gliantz, an early education specialist at the Nativity (*Rozhdestvo*) parenting school. Irina Martynova explained that a Christian mindset is supportive during birth, since pride (*gordynia*), which is regarded as a grave sin in the Christian religion, prevents parents from experiencing feelings that are seen as helpful during labor. Thus, according to her, complete penitence and humility are essential for achieving timely dilation and coping with labor pains. Midwife Marina Dadasheva claimed that working with unbaptized parents and babies is

harmful for midwives. When this is the case, a midwife might be tempted to ascribe her success to her own skills and not to God, something that Marina recognizes as sinful pride on her part:

Sometimes you deliver a baby and come home quite pleased with yourself, but then everything starts going wrong, in your own family and so on. The reason has to be pride. That is why I prefer not to deal with unbaptized babies. Today I was going to work with a sick child. I asked the mother to have him baptized by today. But she didn't do it. So I had to delay the session, and wait until the baby had been baptized. Humility brings peace to the soul.

A pregnant Christian mother-to-be is advised and expected to receive absolution, communion and a priest's blessing before childbirth. These actions are believed to be necessary in order to make labor easier for the woman since "God is punishing a woman in labor for all her sins" (Anna). Midwife Marina Dadasheva comments further:

First, we devote a lot of time [at our prenatal classes] to talking about faith, the divine channel and Christianity. Communion and confession are essential before childbirth. They really act as a form of purification before birth; they should take place. And the mystery of confession, of course, gives a lot to a woman. She comes to the birth without fear, or pain in her body (I mean, spiritual pain).

Absolution and communion are also supposed to protect the baby from sharing the mother's psychological problems:

Before I was due, I went to church and confessed so that the baby would arrive in this world without any problems - at least, without my problems... So that he wouldn't share my problems. I wanted him to have no problems; may he live in peace, live his own life, and follow his own fate (Ira).

In Russian village traditions of the past, the birth of babies with mental and bodily disabilities brought into question the mothers' behavior. When such a child was born, the mother was asked how she had sinned (Bernshtam 2001: 103). Significantly, it was believed that God chose a punishment that corresponded to the sin. I found this belief

reproduced in contemporary “Russian Orthodox” midwifery. Midwife Irina Martynova commented on the birth of a baby with Down syndrome as follows:

I think that the woman’s job was involved. It was a sign from God. This woman worked in a psychiatric clinic, and particularly with Down syndrome children. Then she herself gave birth to a Down syndrome child. Maybe, there was something she did wrong when she was working there. Maybe she treated her patients badly. That’s how it goes - how you sin, that’s the way you’ll be punished (Martynova 2001: 71).

It is considered important for a mother-to-be to ask her relatives to forgive her, and for her to forgive others (*prosit’ proshcheniia, proshit’*). This practice was once widespread in traditional Russian childbirth practices. Although it reflects Christian values, it is not part of Church doctrine. Contemporary midwives suggested a rational, psychology-based explanation of this practice: the psychological relief is expected to ease the woman’s anxieties, encourage her to relax and thus promote timely dilation:

You know, one of the customs is spiritual purification before birth. I mean, forgiving any offenses you’ve caused and asking people to forgive you. There is something similar in Russian Orthodox tradition. I don’t think it’s just a rite. People say it’s difficult giving birth without it. It can easily be explained from a psychological point of view. [Birthing without forgiving] prevents a woman from giving birth normally, from proper dilation. And, most of all, resenting the man, the father [is harmful] (Svetlana Abramova, the director of “*Zhemchuzhina*” (“Pearl”) parenting school).

The ritual also has other explanations, albeit in a more mystical vein: there is a tendency to trace superstitious, mystical connections between life events. Thus, forgiveness provides for a successful birth, because keeping secrets between the spouses may result in health problems and even the death of the baby:

Her [midwife’s] main idea is as follows: “The woman gives birth the same way she lives in general.” You should solve your family problems before birth. Once there was a woman who had had lots of abortions and hadn’t told her husband about them, and her baby died in birth (Ksenia).

Another important Russian traditional practice was for the woman in labor to say farewell (*proshchat'sia*) to her relatives and neighbors, as well as to cosmic entities, such as the sun and the night. This formula was reported to initiate the birth ritual in the past (Vlaskina 2001: 65). As a rite of passage, childbirth ritual suggests the symbolic death of the mother. Thus, saying farewell here echoes the funeral ritual. Today, death symbols are also incorporated into views on childbirth: "Father Vladimir Tsvetkov usually says that you should prepare for labor and birth as you would for death," says midwife Liudmila Vasil'evna.

The Orthodox Church has an ambivalent attitude to homebirth. However, there are priests who sympathize with it and support particular parenting schools. Whenever possible, a priest is invited to bless the place where the birth is expected to occur. The room is cleaned and purified, and icons, icon lamps, and candles are put in place. The priest listens to the parents' confessions and blesses them:

Right before the birth the priest came to see me. He heard my confession again, and my husband's as well. There were a lot of icons in the bathroom, as well as in the room where we were with the little one after the birth. It was a kind of coincidence: before all that I didn't believe... I mean... Everybody has their own personal God, more or less close to them. But these events changed everything. It was as if I'd been hypnotized. And the priest prayed too. And said: "Don't be afraid of anything". <...> I wasn't worried about the possibility of infection, as the water had been blessed (Ira).

The priest's blessing during the birth is reported to help women with difficult labors and give them extra strength:

Once I saw a woman in labor. Before the blessing she was practically fainting. She clearly wasn't going to be able to cope. She looked so pale, almost blue... Then the priest came and purified the bathtub with holy water. The girl sat up straight, she did, and gave birth five minutes later (Natalia).

“Russian Orthodox” midwives pray during childbirth. It is said that midwives’ prayers “reach their destination” (Ekaterina cited by Viktoria). Prayer is considered “a powerful therapeutic device” (Natalia). Certain saints are seen as patrons of childbirth, and some specific icons are seen as especially supportive, particularly those depicting the Virgin Mary. Thus, the icon “*Bogoroditsa Feodorovskaia*” (Feodorovskaia Mother of God) supports maternity; “*Pomoshch’ v rodakh*” (Help in Birth-giving) protects women in labor; “*Znamenie*” (Our Lady of the Sign) helps prevent the umbilical cord from getting entangled; and “*Mlekopitel’nitsa*” (Milk-Giver) promotes successful breast-feeding. Praying to the icon of St. Virinea helps to prevent postpartum hemorrhage. St. Nicholas is believed to protect people in and on water (relevant in the case of waterbirth). St. Panteleimon the Healer cures medical problems in general, including those related to birth. Other female saints such as Sts. Anastasia, Catherine and Barbara are seen as patron saints of women and birth, just as they used to be in traditional Russian culture (Popov 1996: 443; Naumenko 1998: 28; Nekrylova 2000: 58; Bernshtam 2000: 101). Paraskeva-Piatnitsa was especially venerated in traditional Russian society as the patron saint of female activities, marriage and childbirth. She is the Christian “successor” to the pagan Slavic goddess, Mokosh’, having taken on some of her functions and attributes (Slashchev 1995; Ivanov and Toporov 1982; Ivanov and Toporov 1995b). In Russian folklore, Paraskeva is sometimes presented as a rural midwife (Maksimov 1994: 426-427). Nowadays, Paraskeva-Piatnitsa is considered the patron saint of midwifery, and her icons are often used in homebirth:

By then, her older daughter, Masha, had painted and presented me with an icon of Paraskeva-Piatnitsa, the patron saint of my service. <...> I knew this saint looked after me in my work, and for ages I’d been dreaming of getting her image to have with me when I go off to attend women in birth. And so the Lord gave me the icon

of Paraskeva-Piatnitsa via this family who painted icons, through these Russian Orthodox connections (Martynova 2000: 11).

“Russian Orthodox” midwives bring special icons to the birthplace to help them in their work. Ksenia (who is not a Christian) commented on her midwife’s practices, “She uses particular icons and prayers, which help her to go deep into the birth process. She is a magician, and these are her magic objects.”

The parents also pray during labor, and their relatives go to church to pray for a safe delivery, writing the mother’s name on the liturgical prayer lists. One Old-Believer mother said that she and her husband used to recite spiritual verses during childbirth in a somewhat ecstatic manner, which was seen as inappropriate by their “Russian Orthodox” midwife:

We did everything differently. We shouted: “Theotokos, have mercy on me!” (*Bogoroditse, pomilui!*) and so on. Oleg recited various canons. It was all based on a religious premise. The bathroom was full of icons; all the candles were lit. <...> While in labor, I kept shouting not “mommy, mommy!” but “Theotokos, have mercy on me!” So there really was special energy around. And when I gave birth, I suddenly broke into song. I had suddenly acquired a voice – an absolutely splendid one. And with all my strength I began singing spiritual verses and prayers. Our midwife nearly fainted (Natalia).

After the baby is born, the midwife is expected to perform the ritual ablution (*omovenie*). In the early stages of the “natural childbirth” movement, considerable emphasis was placed on the positive physiological effects of water procedures, such as pouring cold water on the baby (*oblivanie*). This action supposedly stimulates the bodily mechanisms responsible for thermoregulation, an effect acknowledged by “Russian Orthodox” midwives. However, for them, the emphasis was on its religious and ritual aspects, given that, in Russian traditional culture, rural midwives practiced water immersion (*pogruzhenie*) of the baby for protective purposes (Dobrovol’skaia 1998: 20; Kuz’muk 1998: 18; Vlaskina 1998: 16). While

praying, the contemporary midwife pours some holy water into a bucket of regular water. She then says “In the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,” pours some water over the baby’s head and body, and immerses the baby’s feet into the bucket of water. Then she pours all the water in the bucket over the baby and says “Amen.”

In some cases, in the absence of a priest, rural midwives performed a ritual known as *povitusheskoe kreshchenie* (the midwife baptism ceremony) (Listova 1989: 148-49). It involved the reading of special prayers and naming the baby. Nowadays, some of the “Russian Orthodox” midwives have been blessed by their priests and allowed to perform this ritual:

Babies are baptized straight after birth, using holy water. She’s been given the priest’s blessing for this. She recites a prayer, pronounces the name right away, and pours a bucket of ice-cold water over the baby. When you give birth, she turns off the light, not like in hospitals, where there are incredibly bright lights. Here there are only candles, icons and icon lamps. Everything is pure and blessed (Alina).

This ritual is considered an emergency baptism, no substitute for the actual ceremony. It is expected that the baby will later be properly baptized once again, in church. However, after this ritual has been performed, the baby is considered protected during the period before the real baptismal ceremony takes place. The “midwife baptism ceremony” is especially relevant in cases where the baby’s life is in danger. If the baby dies before official baptism by a priest, a Church funeral service can still be held, because the child has already been baptized by the midwife.

According to church doctrine, as well as in the popular beliefs of many societies, postpartum blood flow made women ritually impure (Listova 1996). Consequently, there

were certain church and popular traditions that imposed special prohibitions on the mother and those who attended the birth. There were also rituals of purification reintegrating ritually impure people into the community. As the tradition of having babies at home had been abandoned, contemporary liturgical books do not contain prayers for the purification of the house, the midwife, or those present at the birth. When homebirth established itself as a tradition related to Russian Orthodoxy, the need arose for prayers of this kind. A St. Petersburg priest who favors homebirth, Father Vladimir Tsvetkov, is said to have found a mass in the archives written (1651) by Patriarch Iosif, which contained a special cycle of eight prayers for the purification of the place where the birth has occurred, of the midwife, new mother, the people who have attended the birth and the baby when first laid in a cradle. Now some priests that support homebirth use these prayers on a regular basis. In Russia, as elsewhere in the Christian world, a new mother was prohibited from entering the church for forty days. This tradition is reenacted today, with the new mother being purified on the fortieth day, when the baby is baptized. Along with this prescribed timeframe, there was also a tendency to baptize babies as early as possible, usually from three to nine days after birth, given that so many died very young. Today, by contrast, the baptismal ceremony is often delayed until the baby is a few months old.

Dancing with Pagans

Along with Christian-based practices, homebirth midwives incorporate many ritual practices and techniques associated with pagan Slavic heritage, but “Russian Orthodox” midwives rarely see the distinction and tend to frame them as Christian. In fact, the practice of Christianity in rural Russia was never clear of the pagan elements; it was always an

assemblage of Russian Orthodox and pagan beliefs (Levin 1991). History and folklore studies dealing with this issue tend to call this phenomenon “folk Christianity” or “double-faith” (*dvoeverie*). Midwives who work with pagan lore use herbs and potions rather than allopathic medicines in their practice. They also encourage women to use all kinds of amulets.

At parenting schools, pregnant women are often taught to embroider baby shirts with traditional Russian designs, which present old pagan symbols that are supposed to magically protect the baby’s health and well-being. Ekaterina describes her experience while taking a class at one of the Moscow parenting schools in mid-1990s:

I also used to embroider little motifs on Niutka’s clothes: a baby hat and a diaper. They showed us how to do it. These are our specifically Russian motifs – milk rivers with jelly (*kisel’nye*) shores. So that you have plenty of milk. And then you have to sew little shoots and flowers, so that the baby shoots up. All kind of ancient Russian motifs. It is fun. This diaper hung over Aniutka’s little bed for ages, the diaper and the baby hat.

The reactions of the expectant parents to neo-traditionalist developments were mixed. Here is an account by Viktoria, who attended the same parenting school as Ekaterina:

And in all this mess there I was sitting and embroidering a baby shirt with all those solar symbols. And I got really miserable about it. What happens if I don’t do it? They [the childbirth instructors] just take it for granted you’re going to stop wearing T-shirts, embroider a Russian shirt with motifs, if possible get baptized, and then everything will be OK.

Considering herself a modern person, Viktoria was skeptical about this kind of framing and questioned the whole traditionalist project at its very core.

The names of parenting schools often refer to Christian symbols: “*Rozhdestvo*” (Nativity), “*Blagovest*” (a peal of bells, the word has the same roots as in “*Blagoveshchenie*”

(Annunciation), and, thus, the name of the school connotes the Christian context of childbirth), and “*Kupel*” (“Baptismal Font,” presenting the idea of waterbirth in terms of baptism). However, some schools also have names that are pagan in origin but are reinterpreted from a Christian standpoint. For example, one of the Petersburg parenting schools is called “*Beregina*”. The word “*beregini*” referred to multiple pagan female deities and had been interpreted etymologically by different ethnographers to mean water, hill, or mountain spirits (Tolstoy 1995; Ivanov and Toporov 1995a). However, the word was adopted by this school's founders in its singular form, and re-etymologized to suggest its connection with the verb “*berech*’” (to take care of). In an interview with me, the school’s director, Olga Vinogradova, rejected any connection between the semantics of the name and old pagan deities and instead interpreted it as an epithet applied to the Mother of God, who is believed *to care for* pregnant women and mothers in childbirth. Zhanna Tsaregradskaia, the founder of “Rozhana” parenting center, interprets their name as a “Slavic” word meaning a woman in labor. However this word seems to be derived from the word *rozhanitsy*, a term applied in pre-Christian Russia to pagan female deities associated with childbirth (Ivanov and Toporov 1995c).

The bathhouse was the traditional location for the delivery of babies in the villages. It was perceived as a very special, highly charged space, possessing both sacred and demonic connotations at the same time (Baranov 2001). In Russia, the Yuletide divinations took place in the bathhouse. It was supposedly dangerous for a woman in a liminal state (such as during labor, and for forty days after the birth of her baby) to visit the bathhouse alone. If she did, she was at risk of being suffocated (*zadavit*’) by an evil spirit, and her baby could

be replaced with a demonic changeling (*podmenysh*). Since childbirth was seen as the mother's journey to an "alien" world, it had to be symbolically established in the spatial code of the childbirth ritual. As the symbolic representation of that "alien" world, the bathhouse was perceived as a distant place, even though it was located not far from the house.

It appears that contemporary Russian bathhouses in the cities do not possess demonic connotations within the homebirth community, and are primarily associated with purification. The future mother's soul is expected to be purified through confession and communion. In addition, she is physically purified by the steam of the bathhouse.

According to Ira's explanation, "Spiritual preparation takes place in church, while physical preparation - in the bathhouse." Midwives rent rooms in public bathhouses for several hours a week and there meet with the pregnant women in their care. Some of the midwives also use the bathhouse as a place where their clients can listen to lectures, do exercises, share problems, and receive regular checkups. Others claim, however, that preparatory classes should not interfere with the true purpose of the bathhouse. Such people suggest that bathhouses should be used only for purification procedures, communication, and relaxation. Midwife Liudmila Vasil'evna critiqued the methods of another parental school in St. Petersburg:

They also arrange checkups there in the bathhouse. I'm opposed to that. In a bathhouse you should stay relaxed. It should take an hour or so to do a careful checkup on one woman. How can that fit in?

An expectant mother is supposed to go to the bathhouse as well as to church right before her due date in order to ensure that she is pure for birth – both in her spirit and her body.

Since women cannot give birth in the public bathhouse, they generally use their own bathroom as the birthplace.

In the past, rural midwives performed numerous magic practices to hasten dilation and make labor easier; for example, they recommended that women in labor unbraid their hair, untie any knots in ribbons and belts, and unfasten any clasps (Firsov and Kiseleva 1993: 139-40). “Help in Birth-giving” is the only icon that portrays the Virgin with her hair uncovered. This loosening symbolically represents the “unbinding” of the uterus (Baiburin 1993: 94), corresponding to the release of the major reproductive forces on the macrocosmic level (Vlaskina 2001: 67). Rural midwives also opened anything normally kept closed, such as doors, windows, gates, locks and boxes, with the aim of helping the birth along (Naumenko 1998: 33). While in the past these actions belonged to the domain of magic, today they are explained as psychological necessity. It is assumed that this radical ritual opening will subconsciously affect the woman, helping her to release the child. Midwife Tatiana Sargunas explains:

Such a thing as untying knots, unbraiding the hair etc. works on the inner “clamps”. <...> It works as a gestalt, as a myth, like entering some special space – unbinding those knots. I don’t tell women that they necessarily have to open everything when they go into labor. I am not fanatical about these things. However, while I was attending one particular woman at birth, I said [to her relatives]: “Go and open everything”. That woman did have some kind of an inner “clamp” (Sargunas 1998).

When in labor, Russian village women were expected to keep moving, walking in circles and changing positions (Vlaskina 2001: 67). One of the well-known means of hastening prolonged labor was for the midwife to lead the woman around a table located at the center of the house (Firsov and Kiseleva 1993: 140; Naumenko 1998: 33). Contemporary

midwives have re-appropriated this technique. They explain that it helps a birthing mother reach extended states of consciousness, which is seen as helpful and necessary during labor and birth. Viktoria mentioned that her labor was progressing slowly, so in order to speed up the contractions she was made to walk in circles around the room “until she felt like she was inside a wheel.”

Homebirth midwives regard the lithotomy position exclusively used in hospitals during delivery as obstructing the progress of labor. The upright position is preferred and seen as helpful. The necessity of staying in a vertical position constituted an important element of the semiotics of labor. During the ritual, the female body was viewed within a universal, macrocosmic context. The upright position was seen as putting the woman in a symbolic relationship with God on the one hand and the earth on the other.¹⁹ The supine position during labor was seen as physiologically harmful and ethically improper (Baranov 2001: 17-18). Nowadays, semi-sitting and squatting positions during active labor are popular, and they are easily achievable in a bathtub, where most Russian homebirths still occur.

One interesting example of how contemporary midwives rework traditional ritual elements is through folk singing with an “open voice,” which is seen as helpful in the process of labor. It is said that if a birthing woman sings this way, it helps to hasten dilation, provides help during the second (pushing) stage of labor, and assists the woman in coping

¹⁹ Commenting on the semantics of the lithotomy position in American culture, Robbie Davis-Floyd claims that it has axiological meaning. It symbolizes the worship of male-connoted technology (babies born of science and technology must be born “up”) as opposed to the women’s natural world (which is associated with “down”) (Davis-Floyd 1992: 124).

psychologically with labor pains. Midwives present this technique simultaneously as an old tradition and a new discovery, a technique having both a physiological and a psychological basis. In her article “On Working with Voice During Labor and Birth,” homebirth midwife Yulia Postnova explains:

We owe our contemporary state of knowledge about birth traditions and the possibility of using the voice to the Dmitri Pokrovsky Ensemble. Based on the material collected on numerous folklore expeditions and what little has been written on the subject, a method of entering the birth process via the voice has been devised. It is quite unique [phenomenon] in the contemporary civilized world (Postnova N.d.).

Dmitry Pokrovsky’s Ensemble is a famous folk music group whose repertoire was collected during numerous expeditions to Russian villages. Simultaneous reliance on the authority of both tradition and science proved to be a very effective rhetorical device in post-Soviet Russia (Ovchinnikova 1998: 235). The songs collected by Pokrovsky and his group, however, were not initially intended for use in childbirth. An important element of the Russian birth ritual was for the birthing woman to keep complete silence, since in a symbolic realm she temporarily left the human world and consequently lost all human characteristics, including her own voice (Sedakova 1999). It was also believed that the less people knew about the woman's being in labor, the easier the birth would be. As can be seen from the folk singing case, contemporary midwives incorporate traditional practices into completely new contexts, create new symbolic ties, and seek to provide rationalizations from a scientific and psychological standpoint.

After the third stage of labor, the birth of the placenta, is finished, a number of ritual actions can be performed with it and the umbilical cord. In Chapter 5, I have already

discussed how the placenta was treated in the earlier days of the “natural childbirth” community, before the issue of replicating Russian tradition emerged. “Russian Orthodox” midwives have introduced and stylized some new rituals presented as a continuation of the original Russian traditions. For example, Irina Martynova makes a point of tying the cord with a coarse thread, three times. While tying the three knots, she recites the prayer, “In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.” Clamping the cord is regarded as harmful by homebirth midwives because it is believed to cause umbilical hernia. The baby’s cord is then wrapped in a *kosynka* (a three-cornered piece of cloth). When it dries and falls off, the parents usually keep it. Some midwives recommend keeping it in a *ladanka* (a small purse containing sacred objects, worn as an amulet) together with a small icon of the baby’s patron saint.

Although the midwife sometimes cuts the cord herself, the baby’s father generally performs the procedure, according to custom. However, the data on traditional Russian childbirth reveals that this action was previously usually performed by a midwife. This is evident in one of the traditional epithets applied to a rural midwife: “the cord cutter” (*puporezka*). One of the traditional rituals that did actually involve the baby’s father was wrapping the newborn in one of the father’s old shirts [Popov 1996: 465-66; Baiburin 1993: 43-44; Kabakova 2001: 97-99]. Nowadays, both of these rituals involving the father are rationalized as a psychological as well as a physiological necessity. Svetlana Abramova, the director of “*Zhemchuzhina*” (“Pearl”) parenting school, explains the necessity of such actions this way:

You see, I never practice any particular rituals, and I wouldn't advise anyone else to do so either. Wrapping the baby in the father's shirt just serves to transmit the

father's [friendly] microflora to the baby. It just transmits to the baby the maternal and paternal energies and microflora. As for the cutting of the cord, I can see it's a very important symbolic thing for a man. It's such an important process... I can't explain why. I think it influences male psychological patterns; the very fact that he's been allowed to touch the baby, and even more, to take such a significant action.

The baby father's participation in contemporary homebirth procedures seeks to reproduce certain aspects of the Russian traditional *couvade* ritual. A man was supposed to share his wife's pain, and a set of ritual practices were performed in which male labor pains were symbolically represented. The husband was supposed to groan together with his wife, and various pain-inducing acts were performed on him, such as the midwife tying a thread around his penis and tightening it during every contraction (Kabakova 2001: 67). Nowadays the husband is involved directly in the birth process; he is supposed to join with his wife in breathing, groaning, vocalizing, relaxing, and pushing together with her through the contractions. A young father, Igor, recounts his embodied experience during his baby's birth, which he shared with his wife:

Through the contractions, I experienced very special sensations. At first, I hardly realized what was happening to me. The water was full of Svetlana's energy, and it transferred all her feelings, pains and complications to me. Like her, I had abdominal pain. I had back pain. Between contractions, I relaxed as well, all the pain went away, and I felt a degree of relief (Sargunas 1992).

The rituals involving the placenta constitute an important part of the contemporary homebirth ritual. While, in the early days of the movement, some parents used to eat the placenta for its nutritional value, "Russian Orthodox" midwives do not approve of this practice and suggest burying the placenta in a park or in the countryside under a tree (a ritual without any known equivalent in Russian tradition). Alia, a homebirthing mother of two, explains:

The placenta is to be kept in water, until it is clear whether the baby will have complications. If there are any, you should keep it longer, changing the water from time to time. Just let it live in warm water for a certain length of time. Then the father has to bury it in a lonely place, it's the father who must do it. There are some rituals of this kind. These aren't pagan birth rituals, but folk ones.

Other midwives suggest burying the placenta under the corner of a country house (*dacha*), a ritual that did exist in the Russian villages. Holding a funeral for the placenta, especially on the fortieth day after the baby's birth (a traditional period of the ritual transition and purification in Russia), reflects the popular perception of placenta as a certain living creature, a double of the baby itself. Tasha mentions the timeframe and procedure for her placenta's burial, bringing in a rational explanation for the delay:

The placenta should be put into the freezer. It was necessary to keep it for some time. Just in case the doctor needed it for analysis. Anyway, we kept it. And then we buried it under a tree, when forty days had passed, I believe (Tasha).

In the hospitals, placentas were (and still are) "alienated" from the birthing families - they never really get a chance to look at them closely and can't control the ways of their placentas' disposal. Homebirth midwives and parents returned the placenta into the center of the childbirth ritual and made a point out of its symbolic importance. The cultural history of the placenta is just one telling detail that shows how, with the advent of different trends in homebirth midwifery, the conceptualization of all the details of the ritual have dramatically shifted to fit a new ideological and aesthetic scheme.

A number of midwives consciously work on "restoring" traditional peasant practices of baby care. For example, Zhanna Tsaregradskaia, the head of the "Rozhana" center, suggests that the baby should be kept at home for forty days after birth and should avoid any contact with visitors other than immediate family members. This old custom was

originally explained by fear of the evil eye during the period of the baby's special vulnerability – i.e. before baptism. Tsaregradskaia, however, explains this practice in terms of child psychology, stating that the baby is not yet fully ready for contact with a wider world of strangers. Tsaregradskaia also insists on the necessity to keep the baby swaddled in a small cradle, asserting that the baby is used to the tightness of the mother's womb and feels uncomfortable when kept in a big open space with its arms and legs free (Tsaregradskaia 2001).²⁰ This point of view is not shared by those who follow the older “natural childbirth” trend in homebirth midwifery, who think that babies should be kept naked, and able to move freely, preferably outdoors. According to the latter group, from the time babies are born, they should swim in a large bathtub and perform specially designed physical exercises. However, in a matter of years, Tsaregradskaia's traditionalist approach grew very popular, and many fans in Moscow, the provinces, and even the Russian immigrant population abroad supported her ideas. I met one such mom when I worked as a birth assistant at a free-standing birthing center in New York.

After the birth, traditional village midwives used to “repair” (*pravit*) the baby in the bathhouse using special massage and manual therapy. Contemporary urban midwives claim to have “returned” to this practice. New Age style midwives name this kind of bodywork “baby-yoga,” as it builds on particular yoga postures (see Trunov and Kitaev 1993). “Russian Orthodox” midwives, however, reject this kind of framing, insisting on using traditional Russian language and metaphors. “You really shouldn't use those foreign words. There are Russian words for it. [In Russian peasant culture] they used to call it “crumpling”

²⁰ For a detailed discussion of Russian swaddling practices and their meaning see Chapter 9.

(*komkat'*)," Liudmila Vasil'evna told me disapprovingly. As with many other old techniques, all the body positions, maneuvers and exercises had to be "reconstructed" (or rather reinvented) by "spiritual midwives" in accordance with their own experience and their current understanding of human physiology and bodily processes.

Once the birth is over, the parents are expected to give the midwife some presents, as well as pay her for her services. The gift symbolically represents an exchange of values (Mauss 2000): in the case of childbirth it is exchange between the "human" world that receives a baby and the "alien" one, receiving compensation via mediator, a midwife. In such exchanges, money tends to function in a symbolic way. Midwife Irina Martynova mentioned that people who do not pay their midwife properly may fall sick. In her experience, one birthing family that had treated her badly lost the apartment in which they had lived, along with all their possessions. On the other hand, it is said, the midwife should not feel resentful when she receives less money than she had expected. Liudmila Vasil'evna made an observation, that when a midwife is not satisfied with the amount of money she receives, certain problems might occur in her practice, including infant sickness and deaths. These beliefs show that midwives are still perceived as ritual specialists and mediators between the human and the "other" world.

According to Russian village traditions, the cycle of birth rituals that incorporates the new member into the village community concluded with a baptismal dinner. The "midwife's porridge" ritual (*babina kasha*) took place over dinner. The midwife cooked some sweetened porridge, and then collected payment for it from the guests. In this way the

community rewarded the local midwife and formally thanked her for providing it with a new member, thus maintaining the fertility of the community as a whole (Listova 1989: 157-160; Kabakova 2001: 111-115). Elements of *couvade* were incorporated into the festival: plenty of salt was put into the new father's porridge. In some places, the pot containing hot porridge was tied to his abdomen, and the guests bashed it with sticks (Kabakova 2001: 113).

In some modern parenting centers, the *babina kasha* ritual has been rediscovered and is actively practiced. Here is a description of this custom as practiced in the “*Dragotsennost*” (Gem) parenting school:

Commentator: Kirill is nine days old. He was born here, in the waters of the Black Sea. Today his parents, Stanislav and Tat'iana, have arranged a festival in his honor. Everybody has come to eat some sweetened porridge and drink wine. According to tradition, a father of a baby has to eat the first spoon of porridge. Plenty of salt and pepper is added. Supposedly, by eating this disgusting dish, the father takes upon himself all the troubles the baby might otherwise have had in the future. (Vas'kova 2001)

After the ritual meal, the midwife presents the new baby to the whole group. This presentation is accompanied by jokes and laughter that were an essential part of all fertility rituals in the Russian village traditions.

The ritual actions performed by contemporary homebirth midwives should not be seen as a direct continuation of the village traditions of the past. Since the folk tradition of midwifery had been once destroyed and abandoned, contemporary homebirth midwives, responding to the urgent request of their clientele, had to create the whole tradition anew, compiling it

from multiple available sources. However, in order to give more authority to their practices, they had to present their actions as a continuation of the traditional village practices of the late 19th – early 20th centuries. “Russian Orthodox” midwives claim that they practice “traditional childbirth,” rather than “non-traditional childbirth” (the term used by the medical establishment as applied to homebirth). In their efforts to recreate a monolithic body of tradition, the new, “postmodern” midwives are trying to collect and bring together multiple fragments of information about traditional midwifery and childbirth, thus creating complex bricolages (cp. Davis-Floyd, Cosminsky and Pigg 2001). However, recreating the old tradition can’t be anything but a utopian project: while working on this patchwork, contemporary midwives have to tie together bits of fragmented knowledge, provide rationalizations, fill in the lacunae, reinterpret vague customs of the past and add newly invented practices, often based on recent scientific advances.

Although the actual forms, which ritual actions take nowadays, have been altered and reinterpreted, the newly compiled “traditions” preserve the main archetypal structures of the ritual in its classical form. When people speak about their embodied experiences as ritual participants, these patterns can be observed pretty clearly. During childbirth as a rite of passage, its modern participants feel deeply integrated into a body of universal connections. Thus, midwives’ self-identification as priestesses, their idolization by new parents, the superstitious treatment of placenta, the elevated status of a new mother, and the accounts of the extended states of consciousness (including out of body experiences), represent archetypal structures of ritual at work, as perceived and embodied by its modern participants. As do seeing oneself as part of humanity, or one’s own nation throughout all

its history, speaking directly to God and observing the invisible ties connecting seemingly distant events. Particular elements of a traditional ritual might be interpreted and reproduced quite differently from the original. From a historical perspective, the “tradition” that midwives claim to follow shows a break in lineage; it hasn’t been practiced continuously for centuries and was just recently reinvented. And yet, the modern ritual continues to function as originally intended: it communicates to the initiates the core values of their society, ensuring the proper placement of people within their community and the imagined universe at large.

In his discussion of the “invented traditions,” Eric Hobsbawm calls them a “symptom” capable of indicating larger social processes underway; he calls for analysis that would reveal “why, in terms of changing societies in changing historical situations, such needs came to be felt” (Hobsbawm 1983: 307). The roots of Russian national revival lay first in the long-standing repression of Russian national identity during the years of Soviet multiculturalism, which was imposed from above, and later, under the pressure of building a new identity in the middle of the political turmoil and disintegration of the Soviet empire. Using the private, intimate event of childbirth as its vehicle, the Russian nationalist project asserts and reinstates itself and affects Russian citizens on very deep and intimate levels. In the following chapter, I will show how gender and national identities come together and affect each other in the “natural childbirth” community.

Chapter 8: Gender, Tradition and Popular Culture

“Natural Childbirth” Attendants and Gender Dynamics

As mentioned earlier, one of the most important historical contexts of the American term “natural childbirth” was the feminist discourse that identified the technocratic paradigm of modern medicine with the male principle (Arms 1977; Corea 1985; Martin 1987; Davis-Floyd 1992). Correspondingly, in the American movement against the medicalization of birth, any kind of medical intervention into the process of birth was described as a male practice, while wild nature was identified with the female principle. In the Russian cultural context, by contrast, the concept of “natural childbirth” lacked any feminist connotations. As I've mentioned, the vast majority of Soviet physicians, and Ob/Gyns in particular, were women. Thus, the “natural childbirth” movement did not originally sound like any kind of struggle for women’s rights par excellence.²¹ The movement was based on values and presuppositions which were not openly articulated as feminist, and its leader and cult figure was a charismatic man, Igor Charkovsky. Charkovsky never focused particularly on women, the birthing mothers. His focus was mostly on the production of a particular kind of babies: by training women to give birth in water and, later, making their babies swim

²¹ In the US, along with the feminist movement, there have been other motivations for the recent growth of popularity of homebirth, which in some way parallel the Russian patriarchal framings of the homebirth project. Speaking about alternative birth movements in North America, Pamela Klassen argues: “Sometimes this performativity [of gender] results in a reiteration of gendered norms at odds with feminist goals [as it is in the case of conservative Christian and Jewish homebirthing mothers, who support patriarchy and female domesticity – E.B.], but it also has the capacity to lead a variety of women to a sense of bodily empowerment that pushes them to political action - to “go against society” in opposition to medicalization.” (Klassen 2001b: 804).

and exercise underwater, he intended to create of new generation of people, a “New Race.” The final product of this particular type of upbringing, the superpeople produced in the end, were supposed to be able to live in water as well as on land, in addition to having some very special psychic abilities and thus be capable of saving the Earth from destruction due to awaited ecological crisis and nuclear war.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, when a new Russian identity was being formed, ideas such as following Russian folk and religious traditions became quite important for the participants of the movement. As an ultimate task of the group, the idea of saving the planet was replaced with the idea of reconstructing the old Russia, Russian traditions, and the Russian family. Within the homebirth movement’s ideology, this trend went hand in hand with the reassignment of gender roles within the movement. These changes reflected the larger social processes underway that were characteristic of the rapidly changing Russian social reality.

Originally, there was no gender differentiation in homebirth assistance: men and women used to do it equally. In the early 1980s, the “natural childbirth” movement’s participants were mere enthusiasts with no medical background, altruistic and ready to assist others in home deliveries. They practiced birth attendance for spiritual benefits: to promote the idea of homebirth, to enlighten other people, and to make them happy. They were also concerned about their own spiritual growth by engaging in this volunteer activity. Many of them did not make birth assistance their primary occupation. They merely helped their own wives, relatives and friends when the occasion called. Ilya, one of the male pioneers of the

movement, explained it to me the following way: “See, there was no special concept of a ‘midwife’ at that time. There was a concept of a “more experienced person.” A lot of families did not invite a birth attendant at all and gave birth on their own. This was considered the best way, as labor and birth were seen as an intimate process belonging to sexual life of the family.²² Homebirth midwife Marina Dadasheva explained the connection between birth and sexuality, emphasizing the importance of both partners’ contribution to the process of birth:

Naturally, we devote a lot of time to teaching the culture of sex. We pay special attention to these issues since the very beginning [of the training]. First, both woman and man must be energetic during conception, pregnancy and labor. Second, they should practice sexual mysteries at the level of subtle spiritual vibrations. The baby is the third one involved in all this, because giving birth to a baby is the most intense sexual process, the highest point in the relationships of the two – and, later, three – persons.

Gradually, a number of Charkovsky’s successors, who were mostly women, made homebirth midwifery their primary occupation. Their activity acquired more and more features of a professional job. During perestroika, when private businesses became legal, parenting schools and centers started to become organized and licensed. Currently, some of the schools require that their employees become certified midwives by receiving medical training and by graduating from specialized medical community colleges. While, previously, the parenting school instructors performed multiple tasks, professional differentiation has now been implemented, and different complementary jobs are regularly assigned to all participants. People working at parenting schools have become more narrow specialists, teaching one or another particular subject, such as physical exercises for pregnant women, non-medical healing, baby swimming, “early development” of babies,

²² For a discussion of the “unassisted birth” movement in the US see: Shanley 1994; Griesemer 1998; Freeze 2008.

etc., and every course now has its own distinct price. As these developments occurred, homebirth without a midwife became less popular. Birth attendants, who once promoted unassisted birth at the early stages of the movement and trained the inexperienced in giving birth on their own, now insisted on the necessity for a midwife to supervise the process of birth, presenting the unassisted birth as an unsafe practice. Larisa speaks about her acquaintance's experience with one of the Moscow's parenting schools in mid-1990s:

I know a girl who was also trained in a group of this kind. They regarded labor and birth as a private family event in which no strangers should participate. However, now they have slightly changed their attitudes: they have been made responsible for their business. To the families giving birth for the first time, she [a midwife] recommends giving birth with their instructors attending. But if somebody gives birth for the second or third time, then she gives her blessing for them to do it on their own. Well, she says, let somebody just sit in the kitchen; let your husband be the only one who stays with you during labor. But just let someone [experienced] deliver the baby: what if your husband gets lost and drops the baby when catching it, for instance? Just to be on the safe side.

In the mid-1980s, "natural childbirth" attendants started identifying their activity as *dukhovnoie akusherstvo* ("spiritual midwifery"). The term "spiritual midwifery" presupposes that pregnancy is a very special path belonging to spiritual life of the family. Labor and birth constitute a unique spiritual event and a rite of passage for new parents. Thus, the aim of a midwife is to enlighten the couple to the holistic idea of conscious childbirth, i.e. responsible, careful and loving perception of the entire process in its unity. The midwife guides the family down this path, helping the parents to gain important spiritual experience along the way. As "spiritual midwife" Marina Dadasheva puts it,

As you have seen already, spiritual midwifery doesn't mean a mere birth attendance. It is not as much about birth, but rather about renaissance, acquiring integrity and gaining physical as well as spiritual health (Dadasheva 1994: 30).

As “spiritual midwifery” became a more and more professional domain, the very term “spiritual midwife” gained a second meaning with somewhat pejorative overtones (“a lay midwife”; “a midwife without formal medical education”). Alia, a pioneer of the “natural childbirth” movement, referred to her own identity and placement within the community in this way:

This was a proper example of *spiritual* midwifery, as, lacking [medical] education, I could be no other type of midwife but a *spiritual* one (Alia).

As the movement developed, men were gradually pushed out of the midwifery domain. The perception of men in midwifery became ambivalent, and even the authority of Charkovsky was questioned. Nowadays, his activity is often described as a dangerous and irresponsible experiment. Daria, a homebirth midwife, explains her attitude this way:

I think everything was OK in the very beginning, until he crossed a certain line. There is a certain boundary, you know. He crossed it. He stopped regarding babies as a self-consistent value; he made them a mere material for his experiments. <...> He did not care anymore whether the baby survives... You shouldn't make anyone your guru. Nobody forced the parents to give him their babies [for water trainings]. They gave him their babies without any doubts. I don't know if they really had no doubts, however they did nothing to get their babies back from him.

Another homebirth midwife, interviewed in a film about waterbirth, seconds this opinion:

Reporter: Yulia considers Charkovsky to be an immoral person. In her opinion, he regards pregnant women and babies just as a material for his experiments, some of which are really dangerous for their lives.

Yulia Postnova [homebirth midwife]: Probably he understands this deep inside himself, but he still tries, he goes on with his experiments. That's what I call crime (Vas'kova 2001).

Each of the quoted midwives runs her own successful practice, and for each one it seems to have been important to declare her disagreement with Charkovsky's “male” approach, which placed the interest of his utopian project over the health of particular babies. Such a

radical shift in the overall framing of homebirth attendance is indicative of some larger social processes, which took place in Russia during and after the *perestroika* years. These conflicts and disagreements demonstrate the wider conceptualizations of gender roles and expectations within Russian society. In the rest of this chapter, I seek to explain the process of sudden decay of male domination within the “natural childbirth” community and transfer of power and authoritative knowledge to female midwives.

Popular Culture and the Process of Crystallization

In his book *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, Peter Burke develops the ideas of Leopold Schmidt concerning the mechanisms of image construction in popular culture. In popular oral tradition, there are a number of primitive folklore character-masks, such as a Saint, an Outlaw, a Warlock, a Jew, a Witch etc., each one possessing a set of particular features. At a certain point, a real historical person, due to his or her special characteristics and actions, starts being associated with one of these folklore types. Then the process of *crystallization* takes place, over the course of which the person acquires more and more features of that particular folklore character. Sometimes complex images appear, which combine the folklore motives characteristic of different popular characters (Schmidt 1963: 306, Burke 1978: 149-177).

Gender plays an important role in the process of image construction. In the case of “spiritual midwifery,” different sets of character features and motives are applied to male and female midwives. It appears that the victory of the female line in Russian homebirth midwifery can be partly explained by the increasing need in the “natural childbirth”

community for some particular values and corresponding symbols associated with the figure of a childbirth attendant and seen as necessary in order to support the mythology and self-representation strategy of the group. Below, I'll discuss what kinds of elements the complex images of contemporary "natural childbirth" attendants consist of and how they operate in the homebirth community's representations and narratives.

Igor Charkovsky in Myth and Legend

Throughout the decades of the "natural childbirth" movement in Russia, the name of Igor Charkovsky has been surrounded by many stories and legends. He is the most important, prototypical figure among the Russian "natural childbirth" attendants, attracting rumors and myths of all kinds. Charkovsky was often described by his followers as a Learned Man, a Galileo-type genius scientist who made a discovery that turned the whole world upside down. Gradually, as other ideas became more central for the "natural childbirth" crowd, people both inside and outside the community started to regard him as a Genius Madman, or a sort of Don Quixote, due to his utopian idea of moving all human beings from land into water. Charkovsky was reportedly known for criticizing his female followers, the "spiritual midwives," for stopping halfway: according to him, while they did facilitate and attend water deliveries, after the birth, they failed to take the next step in order to help transform the water-born babies into full-fledged amphibians.

Through these and other legends, Charkovsky has acquired certain features of a popular character, a Learned Man, in the lore of the "natural childbirth" community. However, oral tradition can never be satisfied with the realistic figure of a Scientist, and so continues to

seek out miraculous interpretations.²³ The Learned Man needed to find a miraculous source of power and knowledge. A real historical person, Doctor Georgius Faustus from Heidelberg, is a famous example of a similar process of a historical scientist acquiring mythological features (Burke 1978: 171, 172). Charkovsky was widely reported to have gained some kind of esoteric knowledge about the power of water while reading ancient Egyptian manuscripts, despite the fact that he wasn't an Egyptologist, and, therefore, wouldn't have been able to read Egyptian hieroglyphs.

Gradually, Charkovsky has acquired the characteristics of a sorcerer in “natural childbirth” lore. In her interview, homebirth midwife Olga Vinogradova told me that Charkovsky had “the eyes of a magician.” In Russian folk beliefs, sorcerers were described as having a special kind of eyes. You could easily identify a sorcerer, since he was supposed to have dark eyes, and there was no reflection of people or objects to be found in them (Firsov and Kiseleva 1993: 129; Mazalova 2001: 150-153). Dark eyes and dark hair were considered signs of a special kind of blood ascribed to sorcerers. Charkovsky's appearance, which coincided with this description, provided a good basis for the accumulation of mythical features.

In the mid-1980s and early 1990s, during *perestroika*, interest in magic and psychic phenomena increased throughout Russia. Healers, sorcerers, astrologists and hypnotists became extremely popular. The most popular of these used to heal the whole country, by being invited onto the programs of the main TV channels. Charkovsky became quite

²³ In regard to the popular perception of science as magic and the figure of scholar as sorcerer in contemporary Russia see: Ovtchinnikova 1998: 198-211.

famous: a number of newspaper articles were published on the healing power of waterbirth, and several TV programs were shown discussing his work. Charkovsky was believed to be able to cure not only the complications associated with childbirth, but many others as well by means of specially designed water exercises. He also used to cure psychological problems by means of holotropic breathwork – a breathing technique intended to give a person a chance to be reborn in order to cure the trauma of his or her own birth.

Charkovsky also believes in supernatural causes of illness. Referring to a woman with whom he held healing sessions during his stay in the US, he told me: “The doctors were feeding her all kinds of expensive medicine. However, any Russian traditional healer (*babka*) would immediately have seen that it [the woman’s illness] was caused by an evil eye.”

Nevertheless, Charkovsky rather preferred to present himself as a scientist, assigning psychic duties to another member of his team. At the beginning of his career as a birth attendant, he used to invite a special “sensitive,” Vladimir Ivanushkin, to the water deliveries he assisted. During the birth, Ivanushkin was responsible for the psychic dimension of the process. Erik Sidenbladh comments in his book about Charkovsky:

Volodya has participated in Igor’s underwater deliveries to help ease the mother’s pain and reduce bleeding, and to accelerate the expulsion of the afterbirth. He also claims he has the ability to help prevent infections and to protect the child from potentially harmful environmental influences (Sidenbladh 1982: 64).

Homebirth midwife Irina Martynova, who helped Charkovsky during the very first water deliveries in Moscow, shares the kinds of issues that Ivanushkin was responsible for as a member of Charkovsky’s team:

We also had an outstanding man working with us, who had extraordinary abilities. Today they would call him “psychic” (*ekstrasens*), but at that time this word was not that popular in our everyday life. We used to call him a “seer” (*vidiashchii*). He would lead his hand along your body, not even touching your skin, and tell you where the pathology was located. His sensitivity worked like X-rays. Volodia – this was the name of our “visionary” assistant – “saw through” the women who wanted to give birth with us in attendance. He told us what was wrong with them, what was to be cured, and he even described the course of upcoming labor and birth. He always appeared to be right. All his “predictions” came true, we trusted him, and it helped us in our work: if Volodya said it would be OK, then not to worry, so it would be (Martynova 2000: 5).

In spite of Charkovsky’s efforts to redirect the public’s attention to a professional psychic, this did not help him much in preventing his own activity from being seen as magical. In their book *Birth in Joy*, two female followers of Charkovsky, who worked with him closely, wrote:

There are many legends telling who Igor Charkovsky, in fact, is. There is a version that he is a white magician. There is a version that he is a sorcerer, one of the most powerful sorcerers of our times. There is a version that he simultaneously exists in two worlds – our own and another, parallel, invisible one. The most appealing version is that Charkovsky is a dolphin-man, and that he has some mysterious connections with the dolphin civilization. But we consider the whole thing to be simpler. Igor Charkovsky is just a man. Just a man who is far ahead of us spiritually, and that’s why he is different. And that’s why he is able to establish contact with the dolphins. He just goes to the seashore and calls them. And they come (Gurianova and Zheleznova 1997: 12-13).

In rhetoric, the technique of representation used here is known to imply exactly the opposite. When you say: “it’s just a man,” people immediately start thinking that it’s not a man at all. Charkovsky is presented here as a sorcerer who has obtained power over animals, which are perceived as water spirits, and is able to speak their language.

On the other hand, the reference “just a man” was frequently applied to Jesus Christ. This expression is even used in Mary-Magdalene's song in the rock-opera "Jesus Christ

Superstar." Many people from the "natural childbirth" community saw Charkovsky as a messiah, who came to change the world by means of waterbirth. His self-proclaimed goal was to restore the cosmic unity of the world, to repair the destroyed "natural" connections, and to establish a new ecology-centered and holistic attitude toward the world. As a spiritual teacher, he was often presented as surrounded by many disciples. When the midwives he taught became critical of him, rejecting his methods and attitudes, he accused them of betraying him personally, as well as their common mission. The image of Christ betrayed by his apostles is a basic model used in such narratives. One of Charkovsky's disciples, "spiritual midwife" Marina Dadasheva, claims to be the only devoted disciple and heir of his legacy, the only loyal, faithful student who didn't betray the Teacher.

Another role ascribed to Charkovsky is that of a wrongly sentenced criminal - a martyr who has suffered for Truth. Lawsuits against him were initiated a few times, both in Russia and the US, but he always managed to escape by hiding from the court. In 1996, Charkovsky was accused of sexual harassment while he was practicing in the United States. However, Charkovsky and his supporters reject his guilt, pointing out that people fighting for the truth have always been wrongly accused and persecuted.

At the same time, in many stories about him, Charkovsky appears as quite a hypersexual figure, a kind of Zeus. He is said to have had sexual relations with many women in the "natural childbirth" community, including the ones whom he assisted at birth. He is said to have had a lot of children by different women, both in Russia and abroad. In this respect, Charkovsky was perceived as a common lover and a common father of the whole

community. Symbolically, Charkovsky represents a sexualized male principle, located at the center of the “natural childbirth” community, which gave birth to the original idea and the community itself, and patronized it ever since. In general, Charkovsky was perceived as a certain cultural hero, a Prometheus, who provided people with new valuable knowledge about waterbirth.

Charkovsky is also well known for his condescending treatment of women. He considered women to be powerless and irresponsible without male guidance. Once, speaking about women incapable of permanently nursing their babies under water (something that he considered necessary for proper development of the babies), Charkovsky compared them to sheep who were supposed to obey their shepherd (Sargunas and Sargunas 1992: 24). Thus, the father-founder of the “natural childbirth” movement put “male intellectual abilities” above “female natural instincts.” In his opinion, women were ineffective and helpless without proper organization of the birth process by intellectually and psychically capable men.

Certain male birth attendants who followed Charkovsky shared some of his features. Oleg Tiutin can be compared to Charkovsky due to his reported sexual treatment of pregnant and birthing women and a lot of children resulting later from this attitude. Aleksandr Naumov presents himself as a Truth Warrior. He published a huge compendium on home waterbirth, which is composed in the form of an accusation of Moscow’s main Ob/Gyn, Yury Bloshansky, and reports the many crimes that he supposedly committed against the Russian people (Naumov 2001). Mikhail Trunov, who has designed special courses of exercises for

pregnant women and babies and co-authored a popular book on natural baby rearing titled “Baby Ecology” (Trunov and Kitaev, 1993), acquired the image of an Eastern-type spiritual teacher, a guru. Alia, one of Trunov’s former students in a prenatal training program, shares her vision of him:

Misha behaves like a guru. I mean, Misha can sound smart talking about karma, you know, chakras and stuff; I really respect him. He is quite a guy – he has a very deep understanding of how an Eastern person’s psyche works. He took Wu-Su training for many years, and the things he taught us... You see, he trained me when I was pregnant with Denis, then eight years later while pregnant with Tasia. And you could see that Misha did not waste his time. He developed a completely new vision of a body, a completely new vision of it, absolutely new. You could see that he penetrated so deeply into what Eastern people do with their bodies, into what they do with their minds.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, all of the aforementioned male birth attendants were quite popular in the “natural childbirth” community and worked independently. However, Tiutin later switched his focus from birth attendance to administration work. His former disciple and a leader of the “Pearl” parenting center, Svetlana Abramova, comments on his decision by essentializing gender roles:

It seems to me that he just got tired of this kind of life, and now he wants to try some other rhythm of life. <...> I think that a woman assists at birth better [than a man]. I think so. Even watching Oleg, who delivers babies so softly, so gently. But a man always remains a man, and this process frustrates him. Only a woman can go deep into it.

Naumov and Trunov also switched to occupying lower-profile positions in the parenting schools managed by female midwives. The loosening and decline of the male domination and power in the homebirth midwifery field is both acknowledged and obvious.

The Popular Image of the “Spiritual Midwife”

The “spiritual midwives,” first formed in the shadow of Charkovsky’s legacy and later established on their own, also gained certain features of popular characters in the “natural childbirth” subculture’s narratives and in the media (newspaper articles and TV programs). As discussed earlier, in Chapter 7, in Russian peasant culture, an image of a rural midwife was ambivalent. On the one hand, midwives were perceived as witches with supernatural abilities and the power to contact evil forces (Kabakova 2001: 76). They used spells and magic widely in their practice, and voluntarily acquired a marginal status in society. Since they were present at birth, they also shared the alleged impurity of the birth process (Levin 1991). A number of sources emphasize that some of the midwives in fact were “sorceresses” (*znakharki*) (i.e., used to appeal to evil or unknown forces), and some were not. Ethnographic data proving that midwife-sorceresses were especially respected and widely sought after (Firsov and Kiseleva 1993: 140; Popov 1996: 447) coexists with claims that such midwives caused fear and were avoided (Listova 1989: 146). On the other hand, claims that traditional midwives had supernatural abilities, practiced magic, and contacted evil forces were also denied. They were often seen as mediators between the woman in labor and the heavenly forces (Listova 1989: 146). They largely used the objects of Christian cult (cross, icons, holy water, and myrrh) as well as Russian Orthodox prayers. The extreme piety of rural midwives was widely cited.

Contemporary homebirth midwives are often referred to as witches. “We gave birth as it is supposed to happen, with a witch (*ved'ma*),” said Anton in his interview. Oleg called the midwife who helped their family at birth an “enchantress” (*volsheb'nitsa*) due to her intuitive healing abilities. Homebirth midwives are believed to possess a certain esoteric

knowledge. Some of them are presented as hereditary witches from the countryside, like Katia Ivanova, the leader of the “Little One” parenting center. When I asked Svetlana Abramova, the director of the “Pearl” parenting school to comment on the rumors of Katia’s witch origin, she seemed to be somewhat jealous and said:

It’s just a beautiful story, a legend, you know. Each midwife probably has her own beautiful legend. I have heard that her grandmother used to be a traditional midwife in Karelia. There are legends, in fact, that Katia is a witch, that she practices magic, something of that kind. I really don’t know. I myself also have had such relatives, my great grandma was also a midwife and assisted women at birth. She used to take my grandma with her to the birthplaces. My grandma had eight children; not all of them were born at the maternity hospitals, only several of the last ones. And this topic of childbirth has always attracted me, ever since my childhood.

Thus, preserving the marginalized dynastic profession adds a lot of prestige to a midwife’s reputation, presupposing the inheritance of some secret knowledge and supernatural abilities.

Extreme intuitive abilities and clairvoyance are some of the qualities that are often ascribed to homebirth midwives. Many stories circulate in the community about midwives predicting future events. Natalia explained to me how she perceives her midwife, Liudmila Vasil’evna:

And the psychic thing is involved here, anyway. I mean, Liudmila is a real psychic, very real. <...> She told me such an interesting thing: “Your baby will have a very strong character,” she said, “she will let you feel it eventually”. I said: “Liudmila Vasilievna, how can you determine a child’s character, having held her in your arms for just five minutes?” Not to say that she [the baby] was behaving nastily at that moment, she was not behaving in any special manner. She looked like a normal baby, like a very kind one, by the way. She was smiling gently, lying there and looking at us with her little eyes. Liudmila replied that she had a big experience and so on and so forth. But in fact, she is just a real visionary.

Many of the Russian “natural childbirth” stories concerning the midwives’ intuition are typologically similar to American narratives collected by Robbie Davis-Floyd and

Elizabeth Davis for their article on the concept of intuition in American homebirth midwifery (Davis-Floyd and Davis 1996). In fact, some of these motives, models, and framings could have been transmitted to Russia through underground Russian translations of the American homebirth midwifery and New Age literature.

Homebirth midwives are often seen as possessing special “power” and “energy” and as able to manage energy processes. A midwife’s “energy management” is described as a direct donation of energy from a midwife to a woman in labor. Natalia spoke of her birth, attended by midwife Liudmila Vasilievna, a leader of the “Baptismal Font” parenting center in St. Petersburg:

Liudmila Vasilievna gets rid of this extra energy that she possesses by giving it away to people in great amounts. When she assisted me in birth, it was *her*, in fact, who was giving birth. A baby had a loop on her neck, and the labor was hard. And she yelled: “Do it, do it!” and I got a feeling that I was growing stronger. For sure, it was Liudmila who gave [this power to me].

Although the rhetoric of energy is very widespread, “Russian Orthodox” midwives avoid this terminology and instead speak about their abilities using Christian code. “Don’t ever call it energy. It is called a God’s grace (*blagodat’*),” disapprovingly said Anna, client and friend of Liudmila Vasilievna, when I naïvely asked her about energy exchange between a midwife and a birthing woman. The midwives tend to reframe their special “gift” so it can be seen in a Christian context. Dealing with “unknown forces” and supernatural phenomena is perceived by “Russian Orthodox” midwives as sinful and dangerous. It is considered necessary to reject inner supernatural abilities and put them in God’s service.

Natalia explained it further about her midwife:

Liudmila Vasilievna - she is a kind of psychic, Later she rejected it and became a disciple of Father [Vladimir] Tsvetkov, who is known for baptizing babies by

means of complete immersion <...> Liudmila is one of these people, you know, a Christian zealot. I mean, when she rejected her gift as a psychic, she accepted pure orthodoxy from Father Vladimir. That is why she now has a very strong energy.

“Russian Orthodox” midwives often identify themselves with another folklore character – a Holy Laborer. They tell about their coming into the profession as a result of a heavenly calling. They interpret certain sequences of events that happened in their lives as signs from heaven, which had indicated the necessity to leave all their past engagements behind and start serving people. Irina Martynova commented on the beginning of her work as a midwife: “I managed to understand what God wanted me to do. He led me to gentle, natural birth, and I was able to hear it.” (Martynova 2000: 10) Another midwife, Marina Dadasheva, said: “In several days, I understood that this was my *path*, and my entire family went along that *path* and started to prepare. <...> And we promised each other that, having just come into this thing, from that point on we’d start working.”

The midwife’s power is described as a possession of a certain “channel” connecting mundane events with the heavenly realm. It is presented as a vertically oriented energetic flow that links a woman in labor with the heavens. Viktoria tells a story about her birth with the midwife Yulia Postnova in assistance:

And then, when Yulia came, I only could watch all this with an open mouth. I had a feeling as if I had eaten some acid [LSD]. I was witnessing a real, essentially spiritual, midwifery. Yulia came in and said: “OK, now take off the hair ribbon.” When the ribbon was unbound, the character of the labor changed. “OK now, let’s start singing – o-o-o...” she said – and I felt that the contractions, which used to be irregular and slightly interfered with each other, at once were synchronized and went on that way. I felt like Yulia was using a tuning fork that made a lot of different notes come into harmony with each other, and all the contraction peaks stabilized into one line. <...> I saw Yulia putting the icon on the shelf and saying the prayer “Rejoice, o Theotokos, Virgin full of grace.” And then I saw and felt some kind of chaotic energy hanging over it all, which once again made everything

synchronized and strictly arranged. You get a feeling of some caressing entity which falls from above and which, thanks to its purity, is able to arrange it all, and everything goes on easily. [It's like a] certain continuous tube – never before had I seen such bioenergetic phenomena. <...> Katia used to say that Yulia's prayers reach their destination. Before this, I did not understand what she meant. At that moment, I got the meaning. I had witnessed a person in possession of a high-level channel (Viktoria).

Homebirth midwives emphasize the importance of their function in the birthing process as a ritual specialist. They claim that their main task in the process is playing the role of ritual mediator, rather than providing technical assistance. Midwife Tatiana Sargunas explains how she sees it:

And the last important thing, which I have already mentioned, is the role of a midwife in birth as a master of space rituals, of ritualizing space, as a guide carrying a woman along the middle way ('I do something – something is happening to me'). Her main role is not to do things like checking the dilation. I have learned how to do all that stuff. I am not a doctor, but I picked it up from my personal practice, things like checking the fetal heart beat and other things at the physiological level. I am speaking about the things traditional midwives (*povitukhi*) used to do. At some point I realized that the main thing in it is ritual space and helping a [birthing] woman to get into that space (Sargunas 1998).

Proper management of the birth ritual requires that the mother's inner psychic abilities turn on and help her in labor and birth. By some people's accounts, a certain "light cloud" is reported to emerge over the head of a birthing mother. This vision is associated with a famous iconographic topos - a nimbus over the head of the Virgin with the Child. The light is regarded as essentially real, but difficult to see. While people are unable to see it, the light can be discerned when developing photos taken during the birth (cp. Sidenbladh 1982:

64). Alina speaks about her vision of the "energy cloud":

She (a midwife) has obtained a priest's blessing. She reads a prayer, and announces the name of the baby, and pours a bucket of cold water on him. In contrast to the hospitals, with all those bright lights, she turns off the light. There are candles, icons, icon lamps - everything is clean and good. I am not an exception to the rule,

for there are many pictures showing a certain entity over the head of a new mother sitting in a tub right after the delivery. I was really surprised, because it couldn't be just an optical illusion.

Besides relying on female inner strength in birth, homebirth midwives appeal to another supportive authoritative instance - tradition. They claim that traditional ritual practices play a great role in our life and make much sense from a psychological and physiological standpoint. Contemporary midwives, being educated women from big cities, arrange to visit the countryside in search of authentic folk knowledge about childbirth management. Having a few traditional midwives' secrets under their belt helps them get ahead of the competition with colleagues, since knowing traditions firsthand is considered prestigious. Midwife Tatiana Sargunas told me that one of the homebirth midwives whom she previously trained recently went to the countryside and brought back to the city some special rituals and techniques which she wasn't eager to share with anybody. "They are keeping it as secret as if it were their last treasure," Tatiana said disapprovingly.

In the end, there are two types of knowledge cited that contemporary homebirth midwives draw on: external knowledge, the knowledge of tradition, which can be acquired by becoming a part of an imagined lineage, and the natural, inborn knowledge that lies within themselves. Both kinds of knowledge are presented as essential female knowledge, which radically differs from the male, conceptual, rational knowledge that draws heavily on science and technology, and features big narratives and universal generalizations - the kinds of knowledge Charkovsky was so good at generating. These two types of midwives' knowledge are specifically presented as belonging to and inseparable from the female domain.

Traditional Russian birth, which midwives seek to reproduce, belonged to an essentially female sphere, and prescribed particular roles for females as ritual participants. At the same time, Russian Orthodox code, too, prescribes certain types of appropriate female models of behavior within the family and wider community. These models were widely cited and replicated by some of my interviewees. On the other hand, midwives constantly encourage women to address their natural, inner, original, intuitive, chthonic, grounded knowledge of the birth process. They call upon women to tune into and get in touch with their female nature. As powerful leaders and facilitators, midwives often use their own childbirth experience for encouragement of the birthing women they serve. Russian homebirth midwives are strict pronatalists and condemn abortions. Typically, they have much more than one or two children (which is the norm in Russia). For example, midwife Marina Dadasheva has eleven children, Katia Ivanova has eight, and Tatiana Sargunas has four. Midwives exemplify and embody a powerful, fertile female nature. In their classes and trainings, they show video-recordings and pictures of their own (often unassisted) deliveries, thus demonstrating the safety, ease, and beauty of the birthing process. The concept of a strong female nature is specifically designed to give birth plays a major role in the conceptual framing and rhetoric of childbirth within the community. Thus, the images and symbols emphasized by female midwives promoted a new kind of vision of the birth process in “natural childbirth” subculture - one opposed to the earlier male intellect-based models. These new female-centered visions were secured by the authority of two powerful protective entities: nature and tradition.

Above, I have discussed a number of popular character types and models that serve as elements of contemporary male and female childbirth attendants' image construction. These types and models stay in symbolic relations with certain values which shifted throughout the course of the community's history, reflecting the major social changes affecting Russia. At the very origin of the "natural childbirth" movement, there was a need for a Demiurge responsible for its creation, a powerful wizard capable of supporting the community by performing miracles, a mighty hero able to obtain key substances and perform heroic deeds, a common loving and indulgent Father to take care of his wives and children, organizing and centering their lives, a Learned Man capable of discovering and proving new and essentially right laws of nature. The community needed Charkovsky to provide it with the original impulse, intellectual support, with logos, power, and law.

Later, as the movement gained strength, female symbols associated with the stability of natural order and connection with Mother Earth, as well as with the special purity and holiness of mothering-related processes, became more relevant for the movements' participants. The movement started seeking the power of birth inside the essentially strong nature of the female, seen as close to a chthonic reproductive energy and, at the same time, able to establish contacts with the heavenly forces patronizing childbirth. Rather than revolutionary intellectual ideas, essentialized women's qualities began to be regarded as supportive of birth. Female symbols and women folklore characters, such as a Witch and a Holy Laborer, appeared to be more adequate and more responsive to the community's representational needs at this particular moment of its development. However, the time of

Creation and the mythological Golden Age, when the pioneer of the movement and his first followers started their work, receives special respect from the “natural childbirth” practitioners. This initial period remains an important part of the “natural childbirth” community’s social memory, an essential element in its self-understanding and self-representation.

In Part 5, I will proceed to the discussion of how the traditional and traditionalist schemes within the Russian “natural childbirth” movement became a site of contestation with Western ideas and practices. First, the fall of the Iron Curtain and, later, the advent of the Internet opened Russia to the invasion of new discourses and practices – and allowed it to export hers too. This nexus allowed for the production of interesting dynamics and forms, which further affected virtually everyone and everything. Although globalizing tendencies were strong, Russian nationalism never ceased to exist. It is important to understand that my discussion of the uses of “tradition,” followed by the analysis of Russia’s international encounters and involvement in transnational flows, doesn’t exactly correspond to a chronological sequence of events: many of the contradicting and rivaling forms coexist and overlap in the same time and space. We can instead speak of certain tendencies, of impure, flexible forms and the perpetual interaction between them.

Part 5: GLOBALIZATION AS UTOPIA

Chapter 9: Russian Swaddling

Swaddling Revisited

At the beginning of the dissertation, I mentioned a Russian pregnancy guide written by American journalist Aleshanee Akin and Russian homebirth midwife Daria Strel'tsova during Akin's stay in Russia in the 1990s. Unhappy with certain methods of baby treatment she had observed in the Russian "natural childbirth" community (namely, "dynamic gymnastics" and "baby yoga"), Akin addressed the Russian reader in an article published in a parenting magazine. There, she harshly critiqued these, as she put it, "unnatural procedures." From her point of view, Russian homebirth attendants were too eager to introduce these insufficiently tested, experimental techniques. Further, she hypothesized that they were being used by young Russian parents in order to juxtapose their experimental methods of parenting with the former Soviet "system-driven approach" toward baby rearing; by so doing, they aimed to produce a different, nonconformist type of personality. Seeking to interpret the Russian "natural childbirth" community's interest in and fascination with the aforementioned techniques, Akin goes back in time and refers to the situation of the new parents' own birth, infancy and upbringing. According to Akin, subconscious and repressed memories can cause the new parents to revolt against past rigidity and ignite their desire to provide alternative settings for their own babies' growth and development. In her magazine article, Akin writes:

It is likely that the ones most tightly swaddled as babies, brought up in cramped matchbox-style apartments by overprotective parents and the personality-erasing, Leninizing school system, are driven by the irresistible desire to twist and plunge the babies just in order to make them different (Akin 1999).

Writing culture on babies' bodies by encoding them with various meanings has been an essential part of all cultures throughout history (Mead and Newton 1967, Jordan 1993, Davis-Floyd and Sargent 1997a, DeLoache and Gottlieb 2000). However, the modern condition introduced new forms of production and distribution of knowledge along with new forms of governmentality. One of the major self-referential terms used by the Russian “natural childbirth” community since its very origin in the late 1970s to early 1980s was “conscious parenting,” the emphasis being on informed choice and autonomous knowledge production. Using a variety of informational resources, Russian parents were expected to develop lay expertise in the sphere of childbirth and baby management by assembling pieces of deterritorialized knowledge and putting them into practice (cp. Ong and Collier 2004). Realization of the essential utopian project of modernity, perfection of man and society, was seen as the teleological end to this project. The supermen to be produced in the end were envisioned as ideal citizens, capable of taking care of the planet Earth, which was seen as endangered by the awaited nuclear catastrophe (Sargunas and Sargunas, 1992: 38).

Evoking personality in conjunction with swaddling, Akin seems to refer to the (in)famous “swaddling hypothesis” developed by Geoffrey Gorer with the help of Margaret Mead in the late 1940s (Gorer and Rickman 1949; Mead and Métraux 1953; Mead 1954).

According to these students of “national character,” who conducted studies of cultures at a distance, the development of the so-called Russian national character was largely influenced by the methods of treatment applied to Russian babies. According to Gorer and Mead’s observations, Russian parents alternated their parenting practices between tight

swaddling of the babies (accompanied by an indifferent emotional attitude on the part of the caregiver) and short periods of bodily freedom during the moments of nursing and bath (accompanied by warm affectionate communication on the part of an adult). Supposedly, such contradictory experiences led to an early fixation with the previously mentioned patterns and to the production of a unique personality type. Further, this treatment pattern even affected physical appearance, allowing a trained observer to infallibly recognize a "Russian": Gorer reports that Mead successfully taught him to recognize Russians (who had been swaddled as babies) by their posture (Gorer and Rickman 1949: 211).

I am interested in revisiting Russian swaddling because, although the theories of “national character” formation are no longer in effect, baby swaddling (and baby management techniques at large) still present an important site of formation, claiming, or rejection of Russian national identity. The analysis of the imagery surrounding the baby's body is a key to understanding a whole set of interconnected social and cultural issues such as class, gender, ethnicity, citizenship, modernization, etc. Examining contemporary Russian ideas about the nature of a baby can shed light on the broader social, economic, and cultural processes present in modern-day Russia. It is surprising that such a tiny cloth wrap can tell us some of the most interesting stories about major social powers and global encounters. Considering the lack of recent anthropological literature on babyhood (see Gottlieb 2000), this kind of study has the potential to offer a new perspective on the nature of transnational communication.

My analysis focuses on the transcultural transmission of ideas that are part of the global

flows (Appadurai 1990 and 1996, Castells 2010). I am interested in how and why certain ideas and practices originate, become popular, travel, get adopted and reworked, and sometimes even come back to reterritorialize themselves in new, modified versions. My goal is to capture and analyze these ideas in movement, showing how the global situation is much more complex than simple, one-sided westernization, and how “locals” exercise their agency by ways of creative invention and promotion of indigenous ideas, as well as reframing of the adopted ones. The multisited design of my research project (Marcus 1998) (since I worked simultaneously in Russia, the US and in the highly charged informational space in between the two cultures) served my goals in the best way possible.

Producing Russian Babies

In all of the interviews and printed materials I used for this project, the desire to locate Russia and Russians on the imaginary world map was inevitably present. Western attitudes toward baby rearing were first implemented in Soviet Russia shortly after the October Revolution by the revolutionary intelligentsia class, who had access to Western sources of knowledge and were already largely emancipated from Russian traditional attitudes (Gorer and Rickman 1949: 119-121; Mead and Callas 1955: 182). Soviet nurseries incorporated many Western beliefs (e.g. feeding babies at particular assigned times), even though many of the "progressive" ideas never left the domain of theory (that is, children in nurseries remained swaddled). Russian doctors who survived the post-revolutionary transition and happened to stay in the country belonged to a class largely influenced by the West in their upbringing and education, and were well-read in Western medical literature. Their role in bringing in Western biomedical knowledge was widely appreciated, as they contributed to

the new Soviet project of revising public health policies (Holland and McKeivitt. 1985, Ransel 2000).

Childbirth in early Soviet society quickly started to be seen as a kind of industrial production, and the work of producing a quality product had to be put under strict industrial control (cp. Martin 1987). Consequently, biomedicine was assigned to exercise much more extensive supervision of the childbearing process. John Rickman reports that during his work in Russia in 1916-1918 as a rural doctor, peasant families rarely called for medical professionals or went to the hospital if their child got sick. The infant mortality rate was very high, and baby wellbeing was not at all associated with the idea of medical treatment (Gorer and Rickman 1949: 223; Mead, Rickman and Gorer, 2001). With the advent of the industrial model for reproduction, however, such “malfunctions” gradually became less and less acceptable, and industrially efficient biomedical models of body and health spread even to faraway villages.

Following this intervention, the two channels of passing knowledge about birth and babies merged together, especially in the major cities. For example, my grandmother (born in 1908), who had already been instructed about her reproductive health by her gynecologists and about the health of her babies by pediatricians, and was thus, to a large extent, divorced from the female oral tradition, passed her knowledge about baby rearing to my mother, as was required by the traditional model (vertically, from mother to daughter). Elder females managed to preserve their authority for a long time in terms of actual decision-making and guiding new mothers in the domain of baby care. Currently, the structure of a Russian

family is more and more influenced by the shifting class dynamics of Russian society.

Responding to the change in socio-economic conditions, more and more social groups tend to produce nuclear families, while excluding the elder generation (cp. Gabriel 2005).

However, when I started my research in the mid-1990s, many groups of even urban populations still tended to include their parents and in-laws (or, rather, it would be more appropriate to say that the parents and in-laws “kept” their grown-up children, even grandchildren, in their own apartments). Thus, a certain continuity of tradition in the sphere of everyday life (*byt*) and daily practices was still in place; however, the knowledge of the elders was already of a hybrid nature.

In the early 1970s, a new pedagogical campaign originated in Russia: Dr. Benjamin Spock's *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care*, first published in 1946, was translated into Russian as "Rebenok i ukhod za nim," issued in enormous circulation, and caught the attention of the Russian public (Spock 1946). The fact that a male doctor from an enemy camp was considered an appropriate figure to teach Russian moms the proper ways of raising Russian babies under the Cold War regime is hard to explain and deserves close attention. It is likely that Spock's promotion campaign was connected with his peace activism during the Vietnam War. Whatever may have been the secret of Spock's unexpected promotion to a leading authority on the production of Russian babies, his book undeniably appealed to the intelligent Russian reader as an icon of “modern” advice. Dr. Spock soon became a major pedagogical authority, and his work was quite well integrated into the Russian popular knowledge regarding baby rearing. My female interviewees recollect that reading Spock back in the 1970s was a relief: he was rational, and he "calmed

them down," suggesting particular solutions and steps, soothing their anxiety (which resulted from uncertainty about proper child care methods), and helping them reach pedagogical success in mechanistic detail. Spock's book was a perfect example of governmentality in action, featuring "meticulous observation of detail" (Foucault 1995: 139-141): it discussed every minor, imaginable aspect of baby management over the course of its 779 chapters.

As time passed, popular attitudes toward baby management changed along with the social group dynamics and the affiliated values. However, the authority of personalized Western advice persisted ever after. In May 2002, Moscow performance artist Psoy Korolenko organized a performance titled "Incineration of Harmful Books" at the Zverev Center of Contemporary Art in Moscow. The idea of this interactive performance was for everyone to bring and burn a book that had influenced them profoundly and, by so doing, eventually caused some kind of harm. Before burning the books, participants had to tell their stories, explain what kind of harm had been brought into the world by the "harmful" book, and read aloud a particularly "harmful" passage. One young woman brought Dr. Spock's book. She explained that she had psychologically traumatized her older son (who was born ten years earlier, in 1992) and ruined their mother-son relationship by heeding Dr. Spock's counsel. In particular, she referred to his advice not to pick up a baby from its crib when it was crying at night, asking to be nursed. The woman deeply regretted following Spock's instructions, and claimed that she had now developed more humanistic approach to baby care. Someone from the audience asked her: "And according to whom did you raise your

younger child?" "Dr. Sears," she replied.²⁴

This example demonstrates how closely Russian attitudes toward babies were connected with, influenced by, and followed around the processes underway in the Western world. The same books became popular and bestselling among the reading public, although possibly somewhat later. It might seem that Russia was almost caught in a net of globalization, and that local systems of knowledge merely gave way to aggressive Western expansion, but this was not precisely the case. In fact, a complex negotiation of the cultural models took place in various locations. One previously mentioned example was the practice of passing knowledge down through the female line in the family, which meant that Western biomedical model was digested and incorporated in some new, altered way. Another case is exemplified by Russians producing and exporting to the West their own, brand new knowledge, such as psychoprophylaxis, picked up in the 1950s by Fernand Lamaze and now known all over the world under his name (Bell 1981, Michaels 2007), or waterbirth, long known in the West as "the Russian method" (Ray 1985: 110, 173). Yet another type of local agency was the conscious resistance to acculturation and the practice of juxtaposing newly constructed "Russian" ways of life to the foreign invasion.

In this chapter, I discuss the different ways in which Russians present and see themselves as Russians through engagement in reproduction and baby care. Perpetual dialogue with the West has always been an essential feature of Russian culture. The Westerner/Slavophile

²⁴ Dr. William Sears is an American humanistic pediatrician and author of a number of books on baby rearing published since his first bestseller *The Baby Book* came out in 1993 (Sears et al. 2003). He became popular among Russian parents in the 1990s, following the shift in parental attitudes and affecting further change.

polemic is still very sound these days; suffice it to look at Russian blogs, the main site of open cultural polemics (see Gorny 2009). The West has long been seen as a certain axis in relation to which Russian citizens orient themselves. On the Western side, too, dialogue with the East as an exotic, Oriental partner was important. In the New Age era, this was precisely the mindset that made Russia so attractive, thanks to its alleged mysticism and spirituality. This orientalizing vision helped to spread the popularity of waterbirth and associated techniques in the Western world. This attitude also inspired Western emissaries of the New Age (the representatives of Esalen Institute and others) to visit Russia and establish informational exchanges with local New Age activists (Hickman and Murphy 1980; Thompson 1982; Anderson 1983; Kripal 2007). It was a complex exchange, with each side building on the other's findings.

Divided by The Ural Mountains into a European and an Asian part, Russia presents a unique location of mixed identity; this has long provided ground for various "geopolitical" movements praising the special location of Russia as the heart of Eurasia. From the Western point of view, Russia is seen as "East." However, the vast majority of intellectual life of Russia is concentrated in the European part, which makes Russians think of themselves as of Europeans. I was very surprised when I first saw Russia listed among the Asian countries in an American geographical atlas. Never before had I thought of myself as related to Asia in any way; I had visited the Ural Mountains once in my life, but had never gone farther East. As a self-declared Western country, Russia has its own imaginary East, represented by former Soviet Central Asia, and also India, Tibet, China and Japan. Russians strongly identify these few foreign Eastern countries with spiritual life, and the

relevant thematic products, such as tourist packages, martial arts and yoga classes, as well as clothes and other commodities, which are sold successfully these days in the "spiritual marketplace" (see Kripal 2007 on American parallels). Interestingly, this kind of East often (though not always) comes to meet Russia not through direct contact, but thanks to the cultural capital that the West has ascribed to it. Thus, for the East to become valuable in Russian eyes, it has sometimes required Western authoritative approval; such sanction was sufficiently provided starting in the 1960s, when Russians communicated with the Western seekers of human potential through the gaps in the Curtain.

By looking at all these cases, I seek to complicate the current vision of globalization affecting Russia. In the sphere of medical belief, it's not just the advent and spread of Western biomedicine and Western value systems that is pushing local knowledge away from the scene. Global flows can cast ashore various things that can assume different forms than just mainstream phenomena. Various forms of heterodoxy and local resistance to the mainstream can also go global. One such case is exemplified by the New Age movement, which emerged in the US as a certain social alternative (to biomedicine, to Christianity, to classical psychoanalysis, etc.), and later developed a specific consumer-oriented form based on capitalist market rules. This form is currently successfully imposed on and absorbed by local versions of resistance to orthodoxy worldwide. The New Age turned global, incorporating chunks of deterritorialized knowledge and arranging them according to the needs of socio-economic hegemony.

Class Dynamics and Body Techniques

Swaddling is just one, but a very telling body technique, within which a whole spectrum of cultural attitudes is reflected. Swaddles (*pelenki*) are perceived as powerful symbols representing Russian tradition; they can be regarded as good or evil depending on one's subjectivity. Among the women I interviewed for my first project, those who gave birth before mid-1990s did swaddle their babies and were mostly pro-swaddling. However, the women who gave birth later already started using disposable diapers (which Russians call *pampersy*, after the Pampers diaper brand). At that time, *pampersy* had just recently appeared in the pharmacies and were incredibly expensive relative to the low wages of the day. At the same time, Western-style baby clothes appeared on the market. The latter had previously been produced in Russia only for babies who had started to crawl and were called "crawlers" (*polzunki*). Now, smaller sizes intended for newborns began to be imported to Russia, sold in stores, and passed on to friends for secondhand use. Still, everyone expected a baby to be swaddled at least for a limited amount of time: babies were swaddled in the maternity hospitals anyway, whether you wanted it or not, so in popular iconography a newborn baby was usually represented by an image of a tight white wrap with only a little face looking out.

Swaddling was once the norm. However, this paradigm was shifting right in front of my eyes. Some people had already heard that, in the West, babies looked different; there were rumors circulating about babies dressed as adults from the very moment of birth. Here is one such account:

By that time my friend had given birth in France, and one difference that I learned about [from her story] was that she received the baby immediately and they let in all the relatives for a two-hour period! They piled her bed with flowers, and kissed her all together - the thing that is absolutely impossible in our country. And the detail

that absolutely struck all of us was that the baby was dressed in a little pajama and socks right away. Absolutely no swaddles were used (Larisa, gave birth in 1994).

So, at a certain point during the 1990s, swaddling was questioned. Performing modern selves required new, "progressive" ways of baby management. Class belonging and access to resources (both informational and financial) played a major role in the decision-making. As one young mother explained,

Throughout my pregnancy I was sewing all kinds of swaddles and baby shirts (*raspashonki*). I've made a whole pile of fabric diapers, which I am now giving away to my friends since I don't need this amount. I started using disposable diapers (*pampersy*) because my mother-in-law said that we won't lag behind the Western world, so she was willing to pay for these (Ksenia, gave birth in 1994).

Perestroika came along, with the reconstruction of the class system as one of the most significant manifestations of social change. Former Soviet intelligentsia, merging with the quickly forming middle class, took on the task of voicing and representing the public's opinion. Soon, Russian people unexpectedly found themselves surrounded and bombarded by new discourses and value sets. The visual imagery around them was changing very fast. Just a short time ago, a stiff neatly swaddled package would have been seen as a proper and positive explication of child care:

Children were looked after in an absolutely perfect way. For night nursing they were brought swaddled in some interesting manner, with the ends of swaddles tied over their heads (Aleksandra, gave birth in 1994).

Now, the time had come when the direct and explicit stamp of Foucauldian power on babies' bodies had started to provoke resistance. The tight swaddling techniques were commonly referred to as "soldier" positions; now, this image has stopped being seen as attractive and appropriate:

After that incident I stopped letting them [hospital staff] swaddle the baby. There were two shifts of nurses who were in charge of weighing and swaddling the babies.

One shift did a normal job, while another swaddled the baby in such a way that he lay there like a tightly belted soldier with his eyes ready to pop out (Inna, gave birth in 1995).

Resistance to this rigidity, normalization, and technicality was developed on multiple levels - from challenging hospital officials to restructuring power relations in the family. The knowledge of the elders, which they sought to pass on to their children, was now largely resented and rejected. Young parents started developing their own lay expertise and turned to parenting magazines as more authoritative sources of knowledge. They also eagerly read child rearing manuals, which were translated from English in enormous quantities, in response to the high demand. New grandparents, with all their body of acquired knowledge, oftentimes felt abandoned and rejected. The conflict grew larger as it snowballed.

Here is just one telling example demonstrating the struggle around the first symbolic manipulations with the baby between younger and older generations. A young educated couple was in constant conflict with the young woman's parents, but at the time of their child's birth (1993) they couldn't yet imagine separating from the elders. Recalling the first days following the birth, Lena told me:

My relationship with my parents had already been strenuous, but now it was completely spoiled. I remember the moment when we got out of the car [coming home from *roddom*]. My dad was waiting for us near the house. He immediately picked up [the baby], he didn't bother to think that maybe it would be better for me or for [husband's name] to carry him. And he went upstairs. There my mom and aunt jumped out howling, they grabbed him and took him to another room. And then I got it - that in their understanding it was grandma who should take care of the baby, as my grandma took care of me. So now my mom was expected to do everything. I was supposed to stand there watching, and maybe eventually they'd let me come close. And I said "no" right away, I told them I'd swaddle him myself. And there was terrible offense and scandal (Lena, gave birth in 1993).

Within a year or two, the couple had already left the woman's parents' house and formed a nuclear family. Such a short period of time was enough for this kind of step to become imaginable and normal. The couple was able to gain more independence because the socio-economic conditions in Moscow at that time provided an opportunity for employed young people to rent separate apartments.

Changing Values, Changing Imagery

To a large extent, the conflict that had emerged was a battle for access to information. The idea of the value of information was quickly absorbed and incorporated into post-Soviet society. Mothers started challenging doctors' monopoly on knowledge by asking them pointed questions, which provoked aggressive defensive reactions on the part of doctors and nurses. Swaddling stood for concealed information about the baby. Oftentimes in the first hours or even days following the birth, mothers didn't know where exactly the baby was located in the hospital building and what was going on with it. Many of my interviewees reported that they felt abandoned by the medical personnel who refused to answer their questions about the baby's condition after birth. When babies were brought in for nursing on schedule, the mothers were not allowed to un-swaddle them, and this was again seen as an issue of information access:

Of course, all the time you spend in *roddom* you are very nervous, as the baby is brought in only for nursing. You can't see him in between nursing times; you don't know what's going on with him. He is brought in swaddled, and you don't have any opportunity to see what he looks like, if he is clean, if he is taken good care of... (Svetlana V., gave birth in 1990).

Another important development was the expanding discourse of human rights. In 1989, the

Memorial Human Rights society was established in Moscow. With the advent of this concept and discourse, women's rights began to be articulated in a new way, including the right to receive information and to make decisions regarding their babies' or their own treatment. At the same time, a new concept, and, importantly, a new word, *servis* (from English "service"), was adopted by Russians. The perception of hospitals as power institutions merging with the state and intended to police subjects was reframed by the new middle class as a business providing services and satisfying customers' needs. However, according to the logic of "stratified reproduction" (Rapp and Ginsburg 1995), one can still get an absolutely Soviet-style experience at the hospital – if one fails to fit into the newly emergent niche. And still, the advent of the Western biomedical market model accompanied by shifting values and concepts changed the power balance in the system overall.

The discourse surrounding babies' own rights appeared around this time as well. The notion of a baby's personhood shifted tremendously, and this change, to a large extent, happened due to major developments in psychology studies and practice worldwide.²⁵ Humanistic attitudes toward babies spread across the social strata; however, the main agents reproducing them were educated people gradually joining and forming the emerging new middle class. In popular perception, images of babies acquired more and more anthropomorphic characteristics. Now, babies were expected to be able to experience complex feelings and adult-like emotions, suffer from isolation and unmet needs, and develop psychological traumas (which were supposed to reach them later in life in the form

²⁵ In regard to changing conceptualizations of childhood and the perception of children's personhood in Europe throughout the centuries, see Ariès 1965.

of post-traumatic stress disorders). For a long time babies had been seen as dumb, unconscious, and even unable to experience pain; this kind of vision permitted the performance of full-scale operations on babies without anesthesia (see Chamberlain 1998). This understanding changed radically and abruptly.

Not only did babies begin to be seen as conscious subjects, but even embryos started being recognized as people with their own emotions, memories and fears (Verny 1981, Chamberlain 1983, Bertin 2003). The research in this field is developed by many members of the Association of Pre- and Perinatal Psychology and Health (APPPAH), founded in the US in 1983. This organization is still marginalized by American biomedical lobbies, and many mainstream childbirth professionals do not take it seriously. The major tension around APPPAH's activity can be explained not only by the dominance of a materialistic, empirical approach to body and health in the US, but also by the contested notions of the personhood of babies and embryos (Petchesky 1987, Conklin and Morgan 1996, Morgan 1999, 2003, 2005), especially in the framework of pro-life and pro-choice debates. However, despite of the obstacles, this "humanistic" trend managed to shift certain major attitudes and affect mainstream visions of fetal and neonatal development both in the US and abroad.

As a result of this paradigm shift, the rigidity of the swaddling practice, along with other means of disciplinary regime of the *roddom*, became seen as an unreasonable and inadequate baby care techniques. The discipline was not rejected altogether as such, but the particular forms of discipline started to bear unwanted meanings and involve inappropriate

symbolism. In the new paradigm, legitimate bodies looked another way – and definitely nothing like soldiers. The task of producing citizens by means of particular body techniques did not go away with the denouncement of swaddling: it just became performed and symbolized in a different way.

Bodies, Flexible and Docile

Emily Martin describes an alternative that caught the popular imagination of the West and reached into all the spheres of social life, all rhetorical and visual representations - from fashion design to job qualifications. Flexibility became widely popular whether it was a characteristic of a new polymeric material or the quality of a person (Martin 1994 and 1998b). Flexibility stood in opposition to straightness, rigidity, and technicality, whether physical or metaphorical. In the world of babies, one example of the advent of this trend was the introduction of baby carriers (originally an indigenous practice, which was picked up by the Westerners and went global, affecting Russia among other countries). More conservative people, who were used to seeing swaddled babies laying on their backs on flat surfaces, were appalled and disturbed when they first saw baby carriers: they expressed concerns that the baby's spine might be deformed. Dim lights, pastel-colored clothes and accessories, opting for "gentle" birthing and smooth transitions - all these practices are in one or another way associated with flexibility (cp. Harper 1994). One concept related to flexibility is fluidity, a major metaphor in the waterbirth community (Szpak 1999). Another one is continuity: the book *Continuum Concept* by Jean Liedloff (1975) introduced Western parents to the idea of "attachment parenting" as practiced by the "primitives," featuring fluent merging of forms into one another as the parent's body fused with the

baby's in the course of daily life.

The practices of “baby yoga” and “dynamic gymnastics,” which Aleshanee Akin critiques in her article, exemplified the principle of flexibility in an extreme, radical form. During “baby yoga,” which is performed right after birth, the baby's spine and limbs are twisted so that the “energy blocks” caused by the long and difficult journey through the birth passage would be released. This technique is believed to be necessary in order to launch all the vital organs and systems of the baby’s body. This intervention looks extremely strenuous for the baby: it turns blue and seems to go into a trance. The ability to be able to achieve altered states of consciousness serves as yet another rationalization for this technique; “baby yoga” serves as a kind of pseudo-shamanic initiation. All American natural health practitioners and midwives with whom I had an opportunity to discuss these techniques disassociated themselves from these practices, saying that they look like child abuse and might be dangerous.

Unlike “baby yoga,” “dynamic gymnastics” is performed on babies daily, often a few times a day, until the kids become too heavy to lift. This is a specially designed set of exercises that resemble acrobatic tricks, in which an adult holds a baby by its hands and feet alternatively and spins it according to certain elaborate patterns. The implied purpose is to make a baby’s limbs strong and joints flexible; at the same time, the baby builds character, bravery and endurance. “Natural childbirth” practitioners say that this routine quickly becomes fun for the babies and serves as a kind of play and communication with parents. Opponents of the practice, however, say that babies’ joints become eventually too loose

and their self-protection instinct turns off (Eniutina 1999). While “dynamic gymnastics” might eventually become a type of family fun, initially it is seen as a hard but necessary work on the part of parents in order to discipline their babies.

While these techniques cultivating flexibility might stand in direct opposition to the rigid routine of swaddling, at their very core they serve the same purpose. Both kinds of techniques ensure the production of “docile bodies” (Foucault 1995: 138). However, the “natural childbirth” community's bodily practices were presented in the context of freedom and liberation. When met with these manipulations, participants in the movement failed to recognize in them another form of power imposition. This seemingly new approach merely seemed like an inversion of the totalitarian Soviet treatment of the body. Another analogy would be the treatment of the adepts' bodies in a totalitarian sect. Possessing some special knowledge, the leaders of the movement exercised almost unlimited power over the adepts, who complied obediently. Igor Charkovsky, the main authority and father-founder of the movement, went far in his experiments. Several babies were reported to have died in the course of his rigorous water trainings, and some of their parents accepted this situation without questioning his authority. One of the Russian “spiritual midwives” told me how she and her husband had to stay strong in order to resist Charkovsky's requests: he wanted her to give birth not just in water, but in an ice-hole in which pregnant women would go swimming under his guidance.

Although presented as a manifestation of freedom, in many ways these power relationships were inherently despotic. Some Western observers, attracted by their “spiritual” essence,

were absolutely fascinated and gladly borrowed from the Russian experience (Szpak 1999). However, it seems that initially these practices were accepted only by the most radical wing of the Western New Age. The inherent rejection of democratic values and difference in the relation toward authority aggravated the misunderstanding between the Russian and American New Age practitioners. "Spiritual democracy" has been an important value at Esalen and among representatives of the Human Potential Movement. Apparently, the very structure and design of the Russian "natural childbirth" community did not meet these kinds of criteria. In the Russian movement, essential human rights (both babies' and parents') were not respected well enough.

Pavlov's Conditioning: From Dogs to Babies

In the late 20th century, along with the contestation of the babies' psychological nature and legal rights, another widely discussed problem was the physiological constitution of the babies. In neonatal physiology, attempts were made to rationally explain the harm caused by swaddling and promote physical activities and various kinds of exercise for babies (Arshavsky 1990). Active promotion of physical exercises and radical restraint of movement through swaddling constituted the two polar extremes in the spectrum of baby management practices. While traditional folk understanding of the reasons for swaddling concerned only bodily matters (preventing the baby from harming itself, forming its legs to be straight, etc.), modern rationalizations always took into account various kinds of behavioral, neurophysiological, and psychological reasoning. Lab experiments were supposed to provide legitimate status and justification to these theories.

Experiments with movement impediment started in the early 20th century, testing both animals and humans. In 1917, Ivan Pavlov developed his theory of the "freedom reflex": he noticed that the dogs he worked with reacted strongly to a stand he constrained them in, with visible changes in their nervous system, featuring elevated anxiety levels and attempts to resist the constraints (Pavlov 2001). At the same time, an American behaviorist, John Watson, published the results of his experiments on human babies: the infants in his study reacted to the actions of adults, who were tightly holding a certain body part of theirs, with the behavioral and physiological patterns that he interpreted as a manifestation of "rage" (Watson 1919, Greenacre 1956: 502). Multiple behaviorist studies featuring human babies followed during the 1920s. In 1936, Hans Selye discovered stress reactions while working with immobilized rats; his study primarily focused on endocrinology and hormonal change in rats affected by stress (Selye 1956). In the 1950s, Henri Laboret discovered the "action suppression" mechanism: rats unable to react to stress with resistance or escape developed complex physiological reactions caused by stress-induced hormonal secretions, evidenced by elevated blood pressure, among other effects (see Odent 1994).

Many discussions relevant to my project explicitly refer to the cited studies of movement impediment in one way or another, depending on the angle from which the discussants approach the problem of baby management. Thus, Gorer dubbed Pavlov (along with Boas and Freud) a crucially important predecessor to his study (Gorer and Rickman 1949: 197). He was also aware of American behaviorist studies like Watson's, and his concept of "diffuse guilt" and "depression" as a result of swaddling immediately brings to mind Watson's "rage" as an emotional reaction to constraint. Mead and Gorer never mentioned

animal reactions in order to explain and justify their findings. Gorer preferred to stick with human psychology and the unconscious, dwelling on Freudian and, later, Kleinian psychoanalysis. However, starting in the 1960s, animal behavior became an important point of reference in the discussions about the proper techniques of baby care, including freedom and restraint.

Pavlov's findings were very important for elaboration of the mechanisms of early Soviet pedagogy as a means of organized citizen production. Later, they also became instrumental for designing the principles and techniques of baby rearing in the "natural childbirth" community of the 1980s and 1990s. Waterbirth, the most common birthing technique in the Russian "natural childbirth" community, developed out of Igor Charkovsky's water experiments with animals. Using various stimuli that produced conditional reflexes, Charkovsky made certain "land" animal species (chickens, cats, mice) and, later, humans move into water for birthing, nursing, sleeping, playing, and basically spending their life in a water environment. One of the important Pavlovian stimuli was making babies accustomed to water by nursing them exclusively under water (Sidenbladh 1982). In order to achieve this purpose, sophisticated machines were invented and built according to Charkovsky's engineering designs. Attached to multiple tubes and flotation devices, the babies in Charkovsky's care turned into little cyborgs (cp. Haraway 1991; Davis-Floyd and Dumit 1998). The design of these complex devices, intended for the purposes of "proper" baby conditioning, is discussed at length in Lev Burachevsky's book *Homo Delphinus* (Burachevsky 1998).

The key question in all these experiments and discussions concerned the connection between three things: the physiology of the baby's reactions, the proper techniques of baby care that can influence desired reactions, and the culturally varied views of the babies that inform baby care in different societies. Gorer touches on this issue in his book, discussing the specifically Russian idea that the baby is so strong that it might easily cause harm to itself, and must therefore be swaddled. According to him, this perception of a baby is vastly different from that of European Jews, who swaddle a baby in order to protect it, since it is seen as weak and fragile (Gorer and Rickman 1949: 222). In the Russian "natural childbirth" community, babies were seen as inherently strong. They were intentionally subjected to very harsh conditions, which were supposed to make them even stronger and healthier. These procedures included, for example, adjustment to cold by means of various ice-cold water procedures, rigorous physical exercise and oxygen deprivation by means of underwater training. Here, the Russian perception of babies, previously observed by Gorer, resurfaced: babies were seen as naturally strong. Russian babies were believed to adjust to temperature changes and underwater training better than babies of different nationalities. In his interview with me, Charkovsky explained that this strong "Russian genotype" was formed by many generations of Russians being baptized in ice-holes by means of full immersion.

By contrast, the prevalent American point of view regarding infant adjustment is that babies cannot manage their own temperature well immediately after birth, and thus need to be kept warm. This vision is equally reflected in the methods of all childbirth practitioners, from mainstream medical doctors to homebirth midwives. Unlike a Russian home-born

baby, onto whom a bucket of cold water is poured right after birth in order to "start the natural mechanism of thermoregulation," an American baby is either taken into an incubator (in hospital birth) or covered with several blankets, which are pre-heated in the oven (if the baby is born at home). Its temperature is constantly checked in short intervals of time. At the births I witnessed in the US, I kept asking childbirth practitioners why they were so concerned with the baby being warm and told them about the Russian practices involving cold. Everyone thought these attitudes absolutely inappropriate from a physiological point of view: "They just can't regulate their temperature - it's an undeniable fact!"

The practices of today's Russian hospitals reflect the Western understanding of baby temperature regulation, while the idea of the healing power of cold is saved for older children. As stated earlier, the idea of "tempering" has been very popular since the early Soviet period, and was spread by means of official medical propaganda in schools and pioneer camps (Dushechkina 2001). At the same time, *zakalka* was taught by some alternative healers and gurus, such as the famous spiritual teacher Porfiry Ivanov, who started practicing various forms of "tempering" in the 1930s and was canonized by the "natural childbirth" community much later, in the 1980s (Ivanov 1992; Sokolova 1998). The belief in benefits of cold was cited as one of the main arguments against swaddling (Arshavsky 1990, Nikitin and Nikitina 1990, Trunov and Kitaev 1993, Burachevsky 1998, Naumov 2001). The best possible management of the baby, according to the speakers defending "natural" attitudes, was keeping it naked. Other physiological rationalizations for the abandonment of swaddling, which the members of the "natural childbirth" community

claimed to be important, were the need for constant sensory stimulation of the baby and the prevention of muscle atrophy that swaddling allegedly caused.

Democracy vs. Patriarchy

It would not be fair to speak about swaddling without mentioning its relation to gender and to the Russian assignment of gender roles. Swaddling and taking care of the swaddles (such as their production and then washing and ironing) was historically seen as specifically a woman's job. It is necessary to state that the following discussion is about handwashing, as that was mostly the way swaddles were cleaned until recently. To illustrate the serious nature of the issue, I will cite one of the interviews mentioning the technologies of taking care of the swaddles in Soviet times:

It was a huge job, because you had to rub every swaddle on the washboard from every side, then you had to repeat everything the second time. After that you had to boil the linen in a bucket, where only this particular baby's clothes were washed separately. After that the swaddles were dried and ironed from both sides. Oh, that was an enterprise you would be scared to imagine now. You had to boil and iron everything for six months (Elena, gave birth in 1969).

Not every family I interviewed was equally obsessed with this kind of washing, but this was believed to be the proper way, and this example serves to give a picture of the ideal.

As I looked through my interviews, I noticed several important connotations of men in relation to the laundry chore. First, "washing swaddles" was a highly loaded symbolic action and a rhetorical figure that stood for taking care of the baby and general commitment to the family. The one who washes swaddles gains a certain moral capital (possibly the "capital of a victim"). One young father was reported to be "ready morally and physically to wash swaddles" (Svetlana V., gave birth in 1990). Another married man showed

commitment to his extramarital partner by paying her regular visits, during which he would wash swaddles for the baby they had in common (Angelina, gave birth in 1995). A third woman complimented her husband with the words that "for the whole seven months" she "didn't wash a single swaddle" (Anastasia, gave birth in 1992). Another woman told a story about her husband's reluctance to have a baby because of the fear that he "might be made to wash swaddles" (Ksenia, gave birth in early 1990s). Thus, a man who is ready to take on such a dirty and supposedly feminine duty demonstrates a sign of real responsibility and commitment.

There are also interesting accounts of the "washing swaddles" concept with respect to sexuality. Washing swaddles contradicts a woman's role as the sexual partner of a man. It takes a woman into a "lower" state of mind and damages her appearance. A woman washing swaddles cannot be sexy or appealing:

No perfume any more, just nursing, washing, swaddles, baby care. Hands are not good any more, and there is nothing of me left - I died. There is just a baby, and I don't need a husband now. And he doesn't need me when I look like that. Just horrible, horrible (Galina, gave birth in 1962).

On the other hand, a man who symbolically subjects himself to washing swaddles also loses his sex appeal:

Immediately I realized that from now on he would interest me only as a comrade in our common struggle. As a person who could now get up at night when the baby cried, who would wash the swaddles, who would do this and that. When [husband] tried to humbly crawl in my direction at night, I would be very surprised - what's going on here? It's only this struggle that matters now! Comrade, what's wrong with you? (Lena, gave birth in 1992).

These were quotes from my first ethnographic project on maternity hospitals, so they represent mainstream attitudes, not marginal ones. As for the homebirth movement, the

distribution of work between the parents was more equal and the men's involvement in baby care was much stronger. In the “natural childbirth” community, a great deal of emphasis was placed on the sexuality and spirituality of birth and parenthood, so everyday family life was organized and seen in an alternative way, including resistance to state and mainstream values, spirituality, self-consciousness, and self-improvement. Cultivation of these values made “natural” parenting a more mutual and egalitarian partnership than it usually was. However, there was a certain specificity in practicing gender roles in the Russian alternative childbirth movement as compared to its Western counterpart.

The main ideologists of the movement when it originated in Russia were men, and they largely instructed women in how they should properly manage their bodies, their pregnancies, and their babies. Homebirth in Russia didn't grow out of the women's health movement, as was the case in the US. It was introduced by men, who provided the intellectual fundament for alternative childbearing and baby-rearing. Charkovsky himself at times behaved condescendingly in relation to women. Chapter 5, above, contains a published quotation from Charkovsky in which he referred to man as a shepherd whose directions women (chaotic, nonsensical and unable to think for themselves and thus compared to a flock of sheep) needed to follow without any doubts or questioning. Thus, from the Western standpoint, the Russian “natural childbirth” movement lacked and failed to support gender equality.

Reterritorialization and Claiming National Identity

In the 1990s, when Western alternatives to swaddling began to appear, including baby

clothes and disposable diapers, swaddles acquired a new symbolic importance as prototypical Russian baby clothing. If there was a need to perform Russianness, swaddling presented a great opportunity. One of the interviewees told me about the campaign during which the Moscow government, personified by the then Moscow mayor Yury Luzhkov, granted every new baby a set of swaddles upon leaving the *roddom*; as one of the mothers mentioned, "Luzhkov gave us all a set of swaddles as a gift: five thick swaddles and five thin ones" (Yana, gave birth in 1995). This PR action seemed like a symbolic gift intended to properly program new parents and instill core society's values in them. A semiotic reading of the situation might be that the state is making sure that the initiation of a young mother and a baby proceeds in a proper, traditional Russian way. Later, producers of *pamparsy* started distributing disposable diapers for free in maternity hospitals for promotional purposes. Today, no one would be surprised by receiving a pack of Pampers, while receiving a set of swaddles would be charged with symbolism. As is clear from the previous discussion, swaddles were always used as a sort of fetish or token, but as time passed their symbolic link to Russianness became more and more established.

Reproduction around the world proved to be one of the important sites of resistance to globalization and means of claiming national identity (Rapp and Ginsburg 1995). The 1990s were marked in Russia by the growing authority of the Russian Orthodox Church, the reinforcement of various nationalist discourses, and the growing aesthetic value of pseudo-traditional design. The ideology, rhetoric, and aesthetics of the homebirth movement shifted accordingly. A new trend, Russian Orthodox midwifery, replaced the good old multiculturalism and eclecticism of New Age "spiritual midwifery." One of the

major changes in homebirth ideology and practice was a return to swaddling, which was now aesthetically charged. In Chapter 7, I listed a quotation from my interview with Ekaterina, a young mother of two who had fun with embroidering baby swaddles with the stylized Slavic symbols. This activity was offered as part of her prenatal preparation at the “Gem” (*Dragotsennost’*) parenting school in Moscow in 1999. This feeling of “fun” was produced by intimate relationships and imagined “reconnections” with archaic Russian tradition. The fact that all the pieces of this “tradition” were collected from unreliable sources and compiled in a new way as a postmodernist project is largely unrecognized both by the midwives who claim to be “recreating” tradition and the women who, by engaging in such practices, established a mental connection with their imaginary Russian ancestors (most often presented either as ancient pagan Slavs or as Russian Orthodox peasants of the 19th century).

Given this imaginary opportunity and conceptual framework, women began to seek out rational explanations for swaddling in the organization of Russian peasant customs. Thus, the local Russian knowledge regarding baby care attributed to “our ancestors” or “our great grandmothers” gained very high status as a manifestation of “folk wisdom.” Some of the midwives started traveling to faraway villages in search of old practices surrounding childbirth and baby care. Those who brought back pieces of folk wisdom and those who claimed to have village healers among their ancestors became extremely popular. The folk customs brought to the cities were then rationalized according to recent developments in child psychology and physiology. Zhanna Tsaregradskaia is particularly famous among the Moscow midwives for her incorporation of folk rituals into her highly sophisticated system

of baby management. Tsaregradskaia explains the necessity to swaddle the babies, saying that, for a certain period of time after birth, babies need a replication of the environment they had experienced in the uterus:

Our wise grandmothers were well aware of the feelings of the newborn babies, that's why they invented swaddling as a means of making the transition from one environment into another as gentle as possible (Tsaregradskaia 1997).

Being tightly surrounded by fabric, the baby calms down, since it has previously been accustomed to the bodily restraint provided by the uterus during pregnancy. Tsaregradskaia suggests keeping babies indoors for 40 days, which was once the length of the purification period for the new mother and baby when they were seen as especially vulnerable. Again, she explains this rule with the grandmothers' wisdom, which inhibited them from introducing a tiny baby, highly addicted to restriction, to the open space of the big world around them.

The Russian traditionalist branch of homebirth midwifery mostly targets the middle class. A childbirth education course usually costs \$150 to \$500, which only considerably wealthy people can afford. Also, the parents would need to be educated enough to be able to appreciate the creativity of the course design and the authors' ability to rationalize folk beliefs using the advances of modern scientific knowledge. Oftentimes, the audience attending the prenatal courses is reluctant to proceed with the homebirth idea and ends up in the commercial wards of the pricey capital hospitals, oriented towards the Western biomedical model of care. I tracked a number of maternity blogs on the Web where discussions of childbirth/child care-related issues take place. The Western rhetoric of choice and control is already there. The process of influence intensifies as new sources of

East-West communication, such as blogs and social networks, put Russian-born people on all continents in touch with each other. With the Russian middle class having had this access to information and exchange since the late 1990s, it is now often difficult to tell where the Internet user is currently located, since the ideas, beliefs and values have been deterritorialized so profoundly.

Reproduction and child care are valuable indicators of the social processes unfolding in society. One of the key processes under discussion is a shift in the class structure of Russian society, which affected the promotion of certain ideologies, practices, and tastes. The emergence of the new middle class after the collapse of the Soviet Union was instrumental in promoting a new set of values and attitudes. My goal in this chapter has been to complicate current understandings of the mechanisms of global-local interaction by showing how various groups in the Russian society comply with, resist, negotiate, and work creatively with the small fragments and whole packages of deterritorialized knowledge. In this process, class distinction plays an important role, since access to information, financial resources, and authoritative status affects the ability of social groups to promote particular trends and ideas.

Thus Soviet intelligentsia and, later, the newly formed middle class became the main agents promoting Western values, simultaneously contesting and negotiating them. They also successfully exported to the West some original Russian ideas and methodologies. In this Chapter, I analyzed the ways in which Russians manifest their national identity through

their choice of cultural practices, which they deliberately select from a postmodern medley of available options. I tracked the production, distribution, and consumption of cultural knowledge, which takes hybrid forms in complex assemblages; it needs to be flexible in order to satisfy the multiplicity of basic ideological needs that arise in Russian society, which faced the necessity of interacting with the global community while surviving the trauma and uncertainty of a major social and economic change.

Chapter 10: Russia and the West

American Interest in Russia: The Era of Citizen Diplomacy

In late 1960s America, a new generation of dreamers resignified the conservative concept of the “American dream.”²⁶ Among many relevant social phenomena, including the hippie movement, the interest in Eastern practices, the experiments with psychedelic experience, and new forms of art and music, the Esalen Institute was founded in 1962 in Big Sur, CA and quickly became the epicenter of the emerging human potential movement. Esalen absorbed and collected together those interested in transcending the boundaries between the physical and the spiritual, body and mind, man and nature.

One of the important binaries that Esalen sought to mediate was the one between East and West. Esalen-based people were very engaged with Eastern spiritual/bodily practices. They exercised their agency, actively participating in the deterritorialization of beliefs and practices, and did a lot as catalysts of this process. Soviet Russia, for them, counted as another Eastern, Asian country, though many Russians from the European part of the USSR would be very surprised by this classification. However, at least from a distance, Russia was mythologized and exoticized as a land with a certain Eastern spiritual

²⁶ A thorough discussion of the history of American utopian thought is beyond the scope of this thesis. To carry out such a project to its full potential, it would be necessary to discuss the social dreams in American history, including all versions of millenarian movements, as well as the mainstream Protestant logic pertinent to capitalism (Weber 2002); the aforementioned intellectual developments preceded the Human Potential Movement of the 1960s and the New Age fantasies of the following decades.

mentality. In an interview with the *New Age Journal*, one of the two founders of Esalen, Michael Murphy, explained:

My theory is that the Soviet Union has more people gifted in the expression of occult powers like telekinesis than any other nation. The stupendous Russian energy for mysteries is bound to find its expression in a return of the repressed. Like a jack-in-the-box, these energies spring up in all kinds of ways. I've come to believe that the Soviet Union is erupting with these energies (Thompson 1982: 36)

The first contacts between Esalen and Russia were established in 1971, when Murphy visited Moscow in order to meet with Soviet scientists, who actively conducted experiments on parapsychology. Several visits by Esalen representatives followed in the 1970s and 1980s. The American visitors were engaged with the futuristic ideas and developments of their Soviet counterparts, who were working at the margins of the officially recognized disciplines. In 1977, Murphy published *An End to Ordinary History*, a novel, in which two representatives of the two countries meet to witness and discuss with each other the manifestations of mystical powers, as well as human potentialities (the story, in fact, reworked Murphy's autobiographic material). The Russian spy Vladimir Kirov introduces an American publisher, Darwin Fall, to the mystical teachings of the one of military-affiliated esoteric schools in Central Asia:

Human beings are linked to amphibians coming ashore into a larger range of elements in a more complex space. We are to this larger earth, the school maintains, as fish is to land and air: just as fish don't know any other world than water, we humans take our earth to be the only physical world. Through disciplines including meditation at a secret mosque in Central Asia, initiates discover that they have supraphysical organs through which they can experience a larger range of phenomena – a richer, freer world waiting to be explored and inhabited (Murphy 1982).

Here, Murphy presents the teleology of the human potential development in almost the same way the representatives of the Russian movement did at the time. Esalen was very

concerned about preserving the peace between the two countries. In 1980, a special American-Soviet Exchange Program was organized at Esalen; in 1994, it was transformed into The Russian-American Center (TRAC), an independent institution associated with Esalen (Anderson 1983, Hickman and Murphy 1980, Kripal 2007). Esalen affiliates defined the activity and focus of the center as “Citizen Diplomacy,” or “New Age Diplomacy.” On a lay, nongovernmental level they were trying to enhance understanding and good relationships between the two countries, to eliminate the negative stereotypes of the “other,” and to establish collaboration in various spheres.

Murphy and his group sensed war and hostility on a “noospheric,” telepathic level of existence. They saw war and peace (and even their artifacts, such as bombs and missiles) as certain mystical entities available for communication. All the matter and energy in the world were seen as consisting of the same elemental structures, and these very elements and structures should have undergone complete transmutation in order to establish a new, harmonious world suitable for common living. Murphy said:

What I propose in *An End to Ordinary History* is that bodily transformation – or better yet, the integral mutation of form and consciousness – cannot happen until the United States and the Soviet Union make peace. I believe that the atomic bomb is a perverse expression of the transmutation that wants to happen all over the earth. Because our energies are not turning toward our larger destiny, the planet stands ready to destroy itself. If a Martian psychiatrist came here, the chief presenting symptoms he would encounter are the 50,000 warheads which America and Russia have aimed at each other! This is why both Darwin Fall and Vladimir Kirov feel such a sense of urgency and passion for their respective nations to take the next step in human evolution (Thompson 1982: 39).

While the Americans were gaining access to the mystical experience and scientific developments of the Soviets, Russians, in turn, seemed very interested in sharing their

discoveries with the West. Through this narrow channel that somehow circumvented or penetrated the Iron Curtain, they gained access to the outer world from which they had long been separated. Some of the Western popular science and science fiction books had been translated into Russian throughout Soviet history; however, there was severe censorship and selection. The Citizen Diplomacy movement was supposed to be a case of direct, unmediated exchange. Murphy told me that every time they went to Russia or returned home, their suitcases were overloaded with books and unpublished manuscripts.

At first, the communication looked like an exchange of more or less equal partners. However, especially after the collapse of the USSR, Western attention and interest were increasingly perceived to be bringing Russians the legitimacy they had long desired in vain. The opportunity to move into an international arena, no matter how marginal, was experienced as a legitimization of their knowledge and recognition of the validity of their discoveries and themselves as practitioners. Suffice it to look at the long list of Western-affiliated titles and positions accompanying Charkovsky's name in his later publications and public presentations: "President of WATER - World Aqua-Culture for Therapy, Ecology and Research"; "Doctor honoris causa in Human Services of Sierra-California University", etc. With respect to the earlier days, authors writing about the "aqua-culture" often point out that this or that participant of the movement is now working in the West at such and such university.

There was also another curious thing that revealed much about the circumstances of this exchange and its mutual benefits. At the peak of the waterbirth and aqua-culture's

popularity in the 1980s, many Westerners became very interested in the developments of the Russian movement. Waterbirth, first introduced in Moscow in 1980, became known as the “Russian method” and, as such, was a matter of interest in the West. A year and a half later, in 1981, the first several waterbirths took place in the US (Donahue 1982, Star 1986). All of these early births were influenced by the Russians. A few documentaries about Russian waterbirth were filmed by Westerners (Daniels 1986); Russian waterbirth also made its way onto American TV and into newspapers (and this is how some American pioneers learned about its existence). Several Western authors either wrote about the Russian impact or studied with the Russian “instructors,” and wrote about what they learned from this experience as well as about the very theory underlying these practices (Sidenbladh 1982). Soon some of these books, like American Sondra Ray’s *Ideal Birth* (1985) or Belgian Isabelle Gabriels’s *Aquarius* (Gabriels 1988) were translated into Russian, published underground, and circulated in the form of photocopies, providing legitimacy and support to Charkovsky’s teaching.

Suitcases of Books: The Reception of Western Ideas in Russia

So what was in the suitcases of books mentioned by Murphy, which were transported illegally back and forth through the gaps in the Curtain. Here I will mention a few examples of the Western texts and authors that influenced the Russian movement at its very core and transformed it into something even more unique. Interestingly, all the utopian ideas that found their way to Russia were immediately reinterpreted, recontextualized, and reframed. In no time, they became very different from the original concepts, and the logic underlying their emergence and legitimacy was changed and inverted to help incorporate

new pieces of information into the complex assemblage of local ideas and practices. As an ethnographer, I was always puzzled when faced with such transformations, and it took me some time to figure out what had happened and how exactly the concept was altered. Following such cases proved to be a successful methodology in understanding the mutual relationships and informational exchange between Russia and the West.

The Perinatal Matrices: Stanislav Grof

Over the course of my work with American midwives, it was a great surprise for me to learn that the majority of American homebirth midwives have never heard about the theories of Stanislav Grof. In Russia, Grof is the major influence in homebirth circles, especially among the first generation of homebirth midwives (the so called “spiritual midwives”). Grof, originally from Czechoslovakia, who in 1967 immigrated to the US and became an active participant of the Human Potential Movement (joining Esalen in 1973), wrote a few books belonging to the corpus of literature that was translated, reproduced manually, and distributed among the people close to Russian homebirth circles.

Grof’s books focus on the idea of healing oneself through revisiting one’s birth over the course of a certain spiritual journey aided by use of mind-extending techniques, such as psychedelics or special “holotropic” breathing patterns. Revisiting the event of one’s birth, a person can see what kinds of traumatic experiences accompanied their arrival into this world, the point that is believed to be central in the formation of the person’s character, patterns of behavior and, consequently, the type of life experiences the person will encounter later in life.

Grof confronted Freudian concepts (which, as a trained Freudian analyst, he originally relied on) from the point of view of the so called “new paradigm” (Grof 1975, Grof 1985). He placed the beginning of human consciousness and, consequently, the first traumatic experiences and memories into a much earlier stage than Freud. According to Grof’s vision, an unborn baby in the womb already has feelings and memories that later become forgotten and repressed, but that still affect the person’s emotional life, mindset and behavior. The process of childbirth becomes a pivotal moment in the formation of an individual, as crucial fixations are believed to develop depending on the circumstances of labor and birth.

Grof introduced the idea of the so-called “perinatal matrices”, the four consecutive mental states actualized during the process of birth, each of which can be lived through in a peaceful or traumatic way. The first matrix corresponds to the presence of the baby in the womb, when it senses a friendly welcoming cosmos, of which it is an integral part. This state of bliss can be disturbed by unfortunate circumstances, such as the mother contemplating an abortion or other sources of stress. It is believed to be important for the person’s healthy development to have a happy and undisturbed experience during the first perinatal matrix.

The second matrix is activated when labor begins and the initially friendly universe starts to expel and torment the baby, so that it at a certain point loses hope in the benevolent world it once belonged to. It then completely surrenders to this new inescapable situation of

ultimate evil and the loss of the peaceful and welcoming home. While frightening and painful, this experience is also believed to be necessary in order for an individual to go through the ordeal in a proper way. It is said, that a person deprived of this experience might lack of a certain universal stage in human development that must later be resolved and repaired over the course of third and fourth perinatal matrices.

The third stage starts when the baby sees “the light at the end of the tunnel” and realizes that it has to make an effort to get through. From the physiological point of view, this phase corresponds to the pushing stage in labor. The hope comes back, and the baby commits to relying on its own strength and endurance. Again, it is important not to intervene at this point and to allow the baby to finish this important gestalt in the proper way. If at this point any intervention happens (like a C-section), and the baby loses the chance to make it on its own, this unfinished action will leave an imprint of helplessness and despair in its psyche and impart the feeling of ultimate failure.

The handling of the fourth stage is of utmost importance. When the baby is done with its titanic efforts and finally comes out, it may encounter two scenarios. Ideally, it will be welcomed by the loving hands of its mother and get on the mother’s belly, and thus the initial universal harmony will be restored; all the suffering and fear it just went through will be rewarded. In this case, the baby will develop trust in the fairness and benevolence of the universe. On the other hand, if it is forcefully taken away from its mother and tortured by means of multiple medical procedures, it will develop an understanding that the original

paradise is lost forever, that it is all on its own, and that this unfamiliar and unfriendly place is a reality that it will now have to deal with.

Grof suggested that an adult person goes back to revisit the circumstances of their own birth over the course of a therapeutic mind-extending session, witnessing and realizing all the intervening factors, and is born once again in a better, even ideal, way. It appears that, in the US, this idea and the corresponding practices stayed in the domain of psychotherapy and never became a part of alternative childbirth ideologies. However, within the Russian homebirth community, Grof's ideas became central, grounding and provided support for the very idea of waterbirth. When you claim that the events taking place during pregnancy, labor, and birth can forever change the very nature of a person being born, you begin to take every moment very seriously and feel yourself accountable for every small detail in daily life, thoughts, and practices.

The reception of Grof's ideas provided an additional justification for the adherents of the Russian waterbirth movement, who, believing that a lot depended on this very moment, placed the event of birth at the very center of their ideology. The whole idea of using water in birth corresponded to the idea of restoration of the harmonious universe of the mother's belly outside of her body upon birth (cf. the peaceful, "oceanic" images of the first perinatal matrix in Grof's teaching). After the hard, scary and tiring journey through the birth canal, the baby should have been rewarded by getting back into a friendly water environment, reminding it of its 9 months' peaceful existence in its mother's amniotic sac. The opportunity to have a moment of rest, to stay for a while in a certain blessed relaxed

state, was believed to be essential for the proper and peaceful start of the baby's life in this world.

In an interview with me, Grof mentioned that nowhere in the world were his ideas as popular as in Russia. He explained that, in his opinion, this interest could be explained as a matter of the Soviet people being long deprived of the opportunity to practice spirituality in any form. Referring to the people he met during his first visits to the Soviet Union, Grof used the expression "spiritual hunger." People had been striving for the spiritual for so long that they were ready to take very high risks in order to get a bit of fresh air and free thought. Grof told me that he was amazed and touched when, during his first visit to Russia, he was presented with a copy of the underground translation of his book into Russian, typewritten and distributed secretly within a narrow circle of adherents.

Russian people also ran their own sessions of holotropic breathwork, and every homebirth attendant and every parent-to-be was advised to undergo the treatment in order to heal trauma, break the cycle of reproduced patterns, and be able to properly welcome new babies into this world without projecting their own negative and unhealthy experiences onto them. It was said, that free babies should be born with the help of free and healed adults. Working through one's own problems was an integral part of the childbirth preparation classes run by "spiritual midwives" and the male leaders of the Russian homebirth movement. "Going back" in order to release all past traumas was a sine qua non of such preparation.

Interestingly, the initially Western idea of releasing one's traumas before birth resonates for Russians with a similar idea encoded in Russian folk practices and reproduced by the Russian nationalist project. In Russian childbirth traditions, it was long believed that a pregnant woman has to release all the tensions she has, ask everyone to forgive her, and forgive everyone who had offended her in the past. In the discourse of the Russian homebirth movement, ideas are often coded in a few different ways, and the Western concept of trauma paralleled with the Orthodox idea of forgiveness is a good example of such interplay of differently encoded ideas.

Getting to know the Russian branch of the homebirth movement first, I didn't realize for a long time that American homebirth midwives form a group that is very different historically, ideologically and in terms of their actual practice. When I mentioned the name of Grof to them, there was usually no reaction, as the name and ideas sounded unfamiliar. Also, the idea of working through one's primary traumas during pregnancy in order to prepare for the birth was not met with much enthusiasm, as it seemingly went beyond the scope of midwifery practice in America.

As a rule, American midwives spend much more time with pregnant women than doctors do, and they tend to touch on many issues in women's lives that are not necessarily "medical" but might have a relevance to the possible course of birth. Thus midwives "screen" women to gain information on what to expect in labor and give women useful advice on many occasions. While I have witnessed midwives performing certain techniques of psychotherapy, such as intentionally causing cathartic insights and making women cry as

part of a healing process, psychotherapy and work with pregnant women's traumas is rarely manifested as an open and purposeful tactic within the practice of midwifery.

Once, when I observed prenatal visits offered by an American homebirth midwife, a young pregnant girl came in for her first visit. She seemed to be somehow uptight and reluctant to open up during the conversation. She looked gloomy, didn't smile, and seemed to avoid eye contact. When the midwife was about to check her on the examination chair, she, as usual, asked the girl's permission for me to stay in the room, and the girl refused. I stepped out respectfully. Later, when the client left, the midwife complained to me that she had a bad feeling about this coming birth. She said that while observing the woman's behavior during the pelvic exam she got the impression, based on her previous experience, that this young girl had been molested as a child. However, she didn't talk about her impressions with the woman and seemed not to know what to do.

I responded that, in Russia, spiritual midwives would have started working with the issue right away, so that by the moment of birth the issue would be hopefully resolved and healed. I also said that Russian midwives would assume working on this painful problem as their primary job, not an optional one. They would never allow a woman in this condition to go into labor carrying this heavy psychosomatic load. "Interesting," said the midwife musingly, "Very interesting. So you think I should say something? Maybe I should..." At this moment I realized how differently American homebirth midwives conceptualize their duties and responsibilities. They primarily see themselves as responsible for the successful outcome of the upcoming birth (a physically healthy baby and a healthy mother). This

contrasts with the Russian midwives' focus on the growth of the "spiritual potential" of the mother, baby, and entire family, in which the process of birth is a trampoline, an opportunity to master oneself, and to give the baby an extraordinarily powerful start in life.

While the American homebirth movement that started in the 1970s partially overlapped with local countercultural movements (which often included spiritual search and corresponding practices), it was much more informed by the growing feminist movement and the liberation of women: their bodies, and themselves. The Russian homebirth movement of the 1980s and early 1990s, while not very interested in feminist values, was much more concerned with the ideas of not just counterculture, but specifically the counterculture represented by the Human Potential Movement. The American HPM had a much stronger, more complex, and more multifaceted thought-generative effect on Russian homebirth subculture than on American homebirth midwives and the women they served.

Spiritual Midwifery: Ina May Gaskin and the Farm Midwives

Another American development that had an important influence on Russian homebirth was the hippie movement - in particular, the ideologies of early hippie communal living. Ina May Gaskin's book *Spiritual Midwifery* not only affected Russian hippies, but became a classic among the entire Russian homebirth community ever since its underground translation was first distributed in the homebirth circles in 1986. The book communicated ideas that were so cognate to Russian homebirth practitioners that even the fact that Ina May spoke about and practiced regular on-land birth, not waterbirth, somehow went unnoticed. For the early Russian homebirthers, there was no question about where to give

birth: water was seen as the only legitimate option, and this choice was abundantly supported by scientific, pseudo-scientific, rational, and intuitive evidence.

During her interview with me at the Farm commune in the spring of 2006, Ina May told me that, when she first visited Russia, people kept asking her: “Please tell us about your experiences handling waterbirths! Tell us about the waterbirths you run at the Farm!” These questions surprised her, as neither she nor other midwives ran waterbirths at the Farm. She explained to me that there simply wasn’t much water on the Farm, especially in its early days, when the commune members had started cultivating the large empty piece of land that they just made their home, so there were not many opportunities to handle waterbirths.

The Farm is a very famous intentional community in Tennessee that constituted the largest hippie commune in the US in the 1970s. In 1970, a group of about 400 hippies left California in a procession consisting of 50 school buses and 40 or so other vehicles and started their year-long voyage across the country. The procession was called the Caravan. Living in buses, they visited many cities and towns, where they met with people, gave public speeches, and disseminated their ideas. In 1970, they found a place where they decided to settle down as a commune (see Traugot 1994). Since then, they have been living near Summertown, TN. Nowadays the Farm community is no longer a “real” commune in terms of economics and property ownership, as many of its members work outside of the community and are responsible for supporting their own families.

When the Caravan started its journey right after the onset of the Sexual Revolution, some of the girls were already pregnant or got pregnant on the way. Since the hippies were opposed to interactions with official institutions, and didn't have any opportunity to pay for medical care, they started attending each other's births. Ina May was one of the first women who started doing this, and she eventually became the leader of the newly formed group of young women who gradually developed lay expertise in the field of midwifery and became midwives through practical training and occasional apprenticeship with local doctors.

The Farm Midwives' ideology was based on the philosophy synthesized by the Farm community's leader, Stephen Gaskin, who also happened to be Ina May's husband. Back in San Francisco in 1967-1970, Stephen led a very popular series of public lectures called Monday Night Class, addressing a variety of issues from political activism to spirituality (Gaskin 2005). At certain times, the class brought together more than a thousand attendees. During the Caravan journey and later on the Farm, Stephen continued to serve as an ideological leader of the group, making important decisions and providing spiritual guidance. In her introduction to *Spiritual Midwifery* (Gaskin, 1975), Ina May thanks Stephen for being her teacher and guide, even in the field of childbirth assistance and midwifery that eventually became framed as a primarily female domain.

Childbirth was believed to be a spiritual event that involved multiple subtle factors, influences, and connections. As opposed to the conventional medical model of birth first described in detail by Robbie Davis-Floyd (Davis-Floyd 1992), the Farm community

regarded the birthing process as an event primarily involving the production and movement of energy flows. The concept of “juice,” the vital energy that a person had to develop, keep at a high level, and share with loved ones and, eventually, the whole community, was at the center of the Farm’s ideology. The proper distribution of juice was considered when making such big decisions as the structure of family relationships at the Farm and the organization of marital regulations. Early on in the history of the Farm, the decision was made to unite everyone in monogamous couples, where a husband and wife should share “juice” with one another and the kids. Also, each member of the community was expected to give “some” to the fellow members (Kern 1993).

The process of birth was seen at the Farm as a moment of manifestation of the powerful energy that comes from and involves everyone present in the field of birth. The uterine contractions were encoded as “energy rushes.” People present in the room were believed to create an energy field that could help the baby transition into this world successfully. The members of the family shared “juice” among themselves during childbirth. This kind of vision was one of the first Western attempts to encode childbirth as a sexual event. Ina May wrote: “Birthing energy is so high and feels so good that the couple will sometimes get involved in how good it feels and neglect to call the midwife” (Gaskin 1975: 48).

The very idea of claiming one’s body and one’s baby as one’s own, thus expropriating them from the domain of institutional control, was (and still is) seen as quite revolutionary. The idea of challenging the mechanistic medical approaches to the body with the vision of it as an energy field was also a very new thing in the West. Ina May’s first book, *Spiritual*

Midwifery, contained dozens of birth stories collected from Farm parents and their midwives, which described childbirth based on this new conceptualization. The book was illustrated with psychedelic graphics presenting various manifestations and flows of energy. It also featured a lot of beautiful photographs showing parents and babies going deep into the meditative process of self-cognition and sharing positive vibrations with each other.

The style of the book's original psychedelic graphics affected the illustration style of some of the early Russian homebirth literature (like *Akva* almanacs published by Russian homebirth pioneers Tatiana and Aleksei Sargunas). Ideas of the primacy of energy flows and energy-based interactions in childbirth were also integrated and embraced by the early Russian homebirth crowd. However, what was most important and had the most impact on the Russian homebirth movement was the very term and concept of "spiritual midwifery," to which Russians gave new life and new interpretation. For Ina May and the Farm midwives, while the spiritual part of the birth process was important, it was made clear that the midwives should master the purely medical skills as well, learning new techniques of handling birth complications and working in alliance with certain open-minded doctors (and even learning from them some tricks of their medical craft). Russian homebirth pioneers were much more militant and demanding in this respect. For many of them, the very necessity of, for example, stitching the perineum tears indicated a problem and jeopardized the "spiritual" nature of the whole process.

If a woman was unable to “open” fully without tearing, and the birth attendant was unable to support and guide her properly, while there was a need for a medical intervention such as stitches, the whole enterprise was seen as failing to represent the ideal of birth originally planned by nature. A “spiritual midwife” should provide a spiritual guidance, helping the woman and the whole family on their path to spiritual life through the sacred transition of childbirth. When someone failed to accomplish the ideal, they could be harshly criticized for the lack of commitment to achieving an “ideal birth,” as well as their closed-mindedness, rigidity, and spiritual numbness. During my fieldwork in Russia, I encountered such critical remarks on many occasions, as applied to both parents’ and some homebirth midwives’ assumed “failures.” These failures were not about anyone’s death in birth, but rather about ending up with a medical intervention. Self-proclaimed “spiritual midwife” Marina Dadasheva explained:

A spiritual midwife can always be a guide and an aid in your birth. And of course she ensures the safety of birth by her presence at birth and the mere fact that she comes to a birth without any drugs and any instruments. Her heart is her instrument, or her hands, but definitely not any of the medical things. You have just witnessed the birth of a baby [We had just watched a video recording of a birth with Marina in attendance – E.B.]. What kinds of instruments can you use here but just gentle touch?

When Marina learned that I was going to interview many more Russian “spiritual midwives,” she became resentful and didn’t want to talk any more, as she believed them to be “strikebreakers” and allies of the “medical system.” Any birth attendant resorting to the medical model of birth was considered a traitor.

Later in the history of the Russian homebirth movement, when homebirth midwives entered midwifery schools seeking professionalization, the term “spiritual midwife”

acquired a somewhat pejorative meaning. It began to denote a midwife without formal education, who took no medical responsibility and would be unable to perform basic medical procedures that might be needed at birth. However, during the early years of the homebirth movement, the maximalist claims were made specifically to distance oneself from the dominant model and raise one's spiritual resources in order to achieve a pure ideal of birth uncontaminated by dominant ideologies.

When visiting Ina May at the Farm, I brought her a stack of pages - a photocopy of the Russian translation of her book *Spiritual Midwifery*. The pages had turned yellow, and were worn out: this copy had been passed down through the hands of many Russian readers before it came to me. I tried to explain to Ina May how her words were reinterpreted in Russia, but could not explain it all in this short time. Some things you need to see with your own eyes in order to comprehend them fully. Ina May's book explains suturing techniques and has instructions on what to do if a transport to the hospital is unavoidable. According to the Farm's statistics based on over 20 years of practice (1979-2000), 4.9% of birth cases ended up with a transport (subdivided into 3.6% non-emergency and 1.3% emergency transports) (The Farm's Statistics N.d.). This is a very low percent of transports, and it suggests that in these few cases a transport was considered really necessary. In Ina May's opinion, transporting a woman to a hospital in cases of utmost necessity does not make a midwife less spiritual or opportunistic, as long as she stays true to her "vows." Conscious energy work and devotion is what makes a spiritual midwife one of a kind, and, according to Gaskin, she should continue this work while suturing a woman or accompanying her to the hospital ward.

Over the years, Ina May did work with the mainstream, influencing and educating the general public and medical professionals. She became the most famous homebirth midwife in the US and for years served as President of MANA (Midwives' Alliance of North America), the biggest midwifery association in the nation. In 2003, she published a birth and pregnancy guide for the mainstream audience (Gaskin 2003), and in 2009 received an honorary doctorate for her work demonstrating the effectiveness and safety of midwifery practices. The requirement to withhold any medical intervention, the opposition between "spiritual" and professional midwives and the Russian Orthodox connotations of the "spiritual" midwife's practice were all new interpretations ascribed by Russians to Gaskin's original concept. After its transplantation to Russia and placement at the center of heated debates and discussions in the "natural childbirth" community, the concept of "spiritual midwifery" started a new life in its new incarnation, according to the inner logic of the discourse of which it now became an essential part.

The Post-Soviet Exchange

During Soviet times, communication between Russian and Western alternative childbirth practitioners was close to an ideal; it was a certain imagined community, where people from different countries were ready to freely share their ideas and energy with each other. The end of the Cold War and the advent of the market relations to Russia presented the participants of the intercultural dialogue with certain difficulties in communication and brought in new situations of competition and conflict, which previously had not emerged or been seen as such. At a certain point in the 1990s, when the activity of "natural childbirth"

practitioners became largely commercialized and entered the market in the form of newly conceptualized “services” (*uslugi*), the character of the Russian-Western communication considerably changed. The Russian partners started feeling that they were being “used” by foreigners, and that their intellectual property (a new, but appealing concept) was being utilized to the foreign partners’ profit, while they, the producers of new, original ideas and techniques, did not benefit in any material way. Outlining the major tendencies characteristic of the post-socialist condition in Europe, Katherine Verdery states:

Second, all across Europe we see struggles over property rights, not yet resolved in favor of individual ownership but suspended, rather, in a state of ambiguity; this is happening as new questions about property rights appear in numerous arenas elsewhere, concerning (for example) the Internet and surrogate parenthood (Verdery 1996: 230).

Learning to define for themselves and negotiate the issues of the new concept of property was, at times, a painful and ambiguous task for post-Soviet subjects.

At this point, the Russian attitude toward foreigners coming to learn about Russian practices and ideas became suspicious and watchful. Russian practitioners realized that they happened to be in possession of some unique knowledge, a know-how which might be worth a lot of money if properly marketed. Along with the laws of the market economy, the core ideas and values of Russian society changed, and many social phenomena and processes started to be modeled and conceptualized using the metaphors of commerce and consumption. The non-profit logic largely characteristic of late Soviet society started being transformed and replaced by the logic and language of the market. Quite a few of my Russian interviewees expressed bitter resentment toward profit-driven Westerners coming

to Russia from the corrupted “world of capital” in order to appropriate and reclaim their original ideas and intellectual achievements.²⁷

For example, there was once a case in which Russian film footage was used to produce a new film in America about Russian methods of birth. In it, Russians were presented as intuitive, mystically oriented, energetically powerful people, i.e. with strong overtones of exoticization. The dedication to family values, the strength and beauty of the Russian women, and the idealistic aspirations of the Russian midwives abounded in the American movie. Tatiana, the main character in the film, amazed American audiences with her beauty and exalted aims. In the movie she gave birth on her own, unassisted, like a goddess, under their admiring gazes. The atmosphere of harmony and spirituality in this deeply private and ecstatic family experience served as a dream, a fantasy for a Western viewer, exemplifying the role of Russia as the subliminal counterpart of the West (cp. Groys 1993: 245-259). By the time I first watched the American film, the ideal woman portrayed in the movie had become an aging single mother of four and lived in her modest apartment in a multistory building on the outskirts of Moscow, feeling resentment and bitterness and trying to come up with ways to provide for her family. At that time, other midwives had turned out to be more successful in the birth market, while she had somehow been marginalized. The movie sells well in America and continues to inspire American women to obtain “the ideal birth” experience for themselves. The American producer of the film is now considered a leading authority on waterbirth issues in the US.

²⁷ For the discussion of the negative connotations of for-profit trade and commerce in Soviet times see Humphrey 2002: 58-62.

At one of the midwifery conferences I attended a few years ago, I met a waterbirth midwife, a native of another communist country, but currently living in the US, who was deeply engaged with the idea of the birth utopia. She is fascinated with the idea of ocean birth and the mystical experiences achieved while swimming with wild dolphins. Like Tatiana, she had been pushed out to the margin of the waterbirth domain when it became more of a business than a countercultural movement. Both women praised their dreams too strongly to be integrated into the new, more rational and moderate vision of waterbirth popular today. As the now-American midwife spoke about the woman from the Russia-based movie, she started sobbing and called Tatiana her sister. They'd never met in reality, but Tatiana perfectly embodied her sublime dream.

The aforementioned American film belongs to a whole series of films about “the others” birthing practices. These films use the images of supposedly “natural” third-world women giving birth in order to produce a fantasy for an American middle-class female audience that had grown tired of biomedical interventions and the bourgeois habitus and is now seeking more spiritual and autonomous lifestyles. Other films about birthing in Mexico and Latin America presented birth in a highly aestheticized primordial way. For example, a popular film entitled *Birth in the Squatting Position* portrays dozens of Brazilian women, beautifully lit, giving birth unassisted in a small, cozy, homelike birthing center. The purpose of watching these movies is to affiliate oneself with a dream located in a culturally intact indigenous land. Russia was portrayed by the Americans in this way, despite the fact that all of the births took place in Moscow, an international metropolis, and most of the women in the movie had university degrees.

In 1992, a group of American midwives launched the “Russian Birth Project,” the purpose of which was to bring American student midwives over as interns at the Russian maternity hospital in St. Petersburg. It was presumed that Russians were not as obsessed with technology as Americans, and, hence, a more “natural” and “traditional” approach to childbirth assistance could be learned from them. I met one of the former students of the project, who also happened to be an anthropologist, at one of my first Anthropology conferences in America. That’s when I first heard about the exoticization of “the other”: her talk was critiqued for that approach by my anthropologist friends. It is truly amazing how the organizers of the project managed to create a well-sold fantasy out of such a radical disciplinary institution as a Russian maternity hospital, which merely lacked certain technological opportunities available in the West.

Russian “natural childbirth” practitioners traveling to the West also faced and initiated conflicts with respect to copyright issues and intellectual property. One of my interviewees immigrated to the US in the early 1990s and was immediately embraced by a major American institution studying early development in babies. He worked there for a year, teaching his colleagues the methods of baby swimming and training children in water. After a year of work, he was told that his services were no longer needed. My interviewee feels that he was just “used,” and that the valuable information that he possessed was taken away from him to profit someone else. He feels deep resentment as he continues his work as a healer and baby swimming instructor in a big American city.

An important task for me as an ethnographer was to capture the very moment when the cultural misunderstanding began. It would be useful to listen to the point of view of the early development institution in order to determine why they fired my interviewee. This story of cultural conflict has good potential for shedding light on the nature of intercultural communication and global/local dynamic. In the fall of 1996, Charkovsky himself was accused of sexual harassment while offering a healing session in Massachusetts, and, after being bailed out by his Russian followers, fled back to Russia - after three years of seemingly successful practice in the United States. Examining conflicts is extremely useful, as they highlight the points where certain sets of cultural problems collide. Why would a marginal Russian scientist first be brought to the West and granted honorable titles and privileges – only to be pushed out of the country later on, at the center of a huge scandal? Charkovsky is now almost forgotten in the US, his particular methods either demonized or derided. What actually happened there? What kind of information does his story give us about the Russian-American cultural communication?

I assume that the conflict was caused by the rapid social change and corresponding shifts in value systems on both continents. The Americans who originally attended healing sessions similar to ones that Charkovsky offered in Massachusetts did not belong to the mainstream public. It was a seemingly marginal group of people interested in radically alternative healing practices. However, at this point in history, the New Age became established to an extent where even mainstream middle class citizens started participating in previously obscure practices. Having encountered treatment that they considered offensive, they were appalled. On the other hand, marginalized people, the “weirdos” who previously were the

target group of the mystical healing sessions, now internalized the mainstream idea of political correctness and, too, could become offended by Charkovsky's seemingly sexist actions. The boundaries of the old New Age culture started to blur; Italian scholar Massimo Introvigne even argues that it mutated into a completely new phenomenon, "the Next Age," implying a departure from the original ideological points and presuppositions of New Age and its integration into and engulfment by mainstream aesthetics, ideologies, and practices (Introvigne 2001).

The body of a woman whom Charkovsky supposedly touched inappropriately had already been resignified by this time in a political correctness framework. Seen as an abuser from the newly developed Western perspective, Charkovsky just didn't get it. In the old days, it all used to work pretty smoothly, and everyone seemed happy. Now, the ideas about body ownership and the associated personal rights changed even in the last bastions of the New Age and counterculture. The gender-mixed naked bathing at Esalen is still in place; however, the very spirit of the original happenings can't be reproduced: it's a replica. Esalen is now a largely commercial institution, successfully marketing and selling New Age style events and goods. To add another case, a Russian acquaintance of mine boasted about having been the only naked girl at the Burning Man festival in Nevada. When we once got together at a party organized by the Houston "burners," one of the male guests seemed to have touched her inappropriately. A huge scandal followed. Thus, eventually, the spirit of *communitas* gave way to structure (see Turner 1995).

A similar process transpired with political correctness as applied to children and their rights. The unusual bodywork techniques that Charkovsky's followers imposed on babies in order to radically transform their human nature (keeping them under water, bending their bodies in different directions, and exposing them to cold) just couldn't be interpreted in any other way than child abuse in the newly emerged framework. It is still easier to do this in Russia than elsewhere; however, the newly emerged middle class that came to replace the old intelligentsia and inherited the practice of "natural childbirth" is largely under the influence of the Western models and attitudes and is, therefore, actively reinterpreting the original idea and setting of waterbirth.

In America, the ideas of a baby's personhood and autonomy came into practice much earlier than in Russia. During my meeting with Michael Murphy, I asked him how he and his colleagues perceived Charkovsky's work with the babies. Murphy, who was always deeply interested in every possibility to develop human abilities (see Murphy 1992), responded in a reserved way. As he explained, he and his Esalen colleagues could not take on the risk of the possible complications that might occur. He said that, in the US, they "would have never been allowed" to perform such risky experiments on babies. "But how about the development of human potentialities?" I asked, "Doesn't the end justify the means?" To this Murphy replied very seriously that, in his understanding, the development of human inner abilities is something that an adult, a grown-up person should cultivate within himself rather than imposing these rigid schemes on youngsters.

Here lay a very important distinction between the two branches of the Human Potential Movement on two continents, based on two different types of logic: the collectivistic logic exercised by Charkovsky (consistently working on breeding “the new race”) and the individualistic one informing the mindset and practices of the Esalen people. The latter emphasized the development of inner abilities in every person, ultimately leading to their personal enlightenment. In the early stages of Russian-American exchange, Americans were completely charmed by Russian “spirituality.” As the conceptualization of risk, safety and abuse developed, in the mid-1990s and 2000s, Americans were no longer ready to forgive the “wild” Russians for their reckless and careless behavior, and started branding it as fanaticism. On the other hand, Russians grew unhappy with the West’s preoccupation with the discourses of risk and political correctness, which, to them, looked like an obstacle in the way of achieving their ambitious goals. This tension continued to mount for quite a while, until the developing Russian middle class, which now constituted the main audience of the “natural childbirth” approach, started to adopt more and more of those Western values, until a certain critical mass was reached. One major historical event affected this process more than anything ever before and since: in the mid-1990s Russia joined the Internet.

The Information Age and the Rise of the Network Society

At this point, more and more Russians started to find themselves in a very new situation, and a new stage of Russia’s relationship with the West began. The more educated, well-off people in the bigger cities started connecting to the World Wide Web. At first, Russians primarily worked with local, native resources - given that English was taught at secondary

schools very poorly and most people couldn't read and write in it fluently, as was the case in some other Eastern-European countries. However, with the advent of the social networks and blogosphere in the early 2000s, people gained access to the blogs of their compatriots, writing in Russian from all over the world. In 2001, an American blog environment, Live Journal, was discovered and quickly became occupied by Russians – to the extent that in 2007 it was bought by a Russian businessman, started to be operated by a Russian management team, and a significant part of its content moved to servers located in Russia.

While, in America, Live Journal was populated by teenagers and never became a significant phenomenon in wider American culture, the increasing popularity of Live Journal among Russians brought this project to a whole new level. Before the advent of Live Journal's Russian segment, Russian Internet ("Runet") consisted of multiple separate, disconnected webpages run by different people and organizations. Live Journal provided a new environment, where all personal pages and communities were connected under one interface and organizational principle. From its very beginning, Russian Internet became quite a unique phenomenon, occupying an important space in the complex field of Russian cultural production (in terms of Bourdieu 1993). In the 2000s, the blogosphere became one of the most active parts of the Runet. Research showed that an average Russian blogger was more mature and more educated than an average American blogger. As opposed to American usage, Russian Live Journal attracted lots of public figures, politicians, famous writers and journalists, artists, musicians, and other types of intellectuals (see Gorny 2009, Schmidt, Teubiner and Konradova. 2006).

When Russians had just started populating Live Journal, back in 2001, the initial impulse was free exchange of information, networking, and sharing independent creative projects. The Russian segment of Live Journal quickly united many free-standing web projects on a common technical platform, strongly promoted the blog post genre, and eventually became a dominant environment in the Russian blogosphere. However, after Live Journal was suddenly purchased by a Russian entrepreneur, it immediately started being used toward commercial ends. As a field of cultural production, Live Journal produced its own elite and popular bloggers (*tysiachniki*, meaning “thousanders,” connoting the size of their audience). After the independent Live Journal became more of a commercial enterprise, many of the most popular bloggers received good offers from Live Journal’s management and started posting hidden advertisements and product placement in their blogs. Commercial ads started being shown to free users of Live Journal. These and other circumstances, including censorship on the part of Live Journal’s abuse team, have eventually led to its decreased popularity by the year 2011 and have made a significant part of its users switch to other platforms and social networks.

In addition to personal blogs, Live Journal hosts many virtual communities centered on every thinkable theme and interest. The topics of childbirth, maternal and infant health, and parenting issues are consistently present both in personal blogs and in multiple Live Journal communities that present sites of interaction between users, various ideologically engaged groups, and contesting discourses about body, gender and personhood. Reading through the threads, one can witness heated discussions and power struggles over what kinds of knowledge should be deemed authoritative and legitimate. If we map the field, we see

certain tendencies in Live Journal that correlate with and are representative of certain trends and ideologies in society at large, however limited by the fact that certain strata of the Russian population are still computer illiterate and don't have access to the Web.

The most popular Russian birthing community in LJ is ru_perinatal, which currently has more than 11.5 thousand members. The discourse of this community mostly represents mainstream views on childbirth that are largely representative of Russian women from the newly emerged middle class. The discourse of the community is heavily medicalized, permeated with numbers, ratios, medical abbreviations, and the names of various tests and allopathic drugs. The very name of the community, ru_perinatal, is based on a scientific term denoting the period of pregnancy "around the time of birth." Here, pregnancy and childbirth are presented as medical events which are regulated and controlled by doctors. The majority of posts are written by pregnant women seeking advice on their conditions, problems and concerns. There is a visible hierarchy within the community, since certain members have medical degrees and certifications, while others have developed solid lay expertise based on self-education, independent research, and personal experience as an educated, intelligent patient.

Even lay experts providing their advice use a very sophisticated medical vocabulary, and parallel the official medical point of view quite closely on the causes of health problems, methods of treatment, and the distribution of power within the doctor-patient relationship. They seem to have learned this language perfectly well and offer their own suggestions not in order to challenge medical authorities, but to share, reproduce, and further develop

medical knowledge. Aside from asking and giving medical advice, another popular genre in the community is an account of accomplished childbirth, which usually features a list of multiple “pathologies” and “complications” and expresses the need for a mechanistic treatment of such problems by means of various medical procedures. The stories in this community tend to minimize the agency of parents and give credit for the successful outcome of their birth to medical professionals and the medical equipment at their disposal. Even if the participants are often dissatisfied with the help they received at the hospital, they rarely question the very models of childbirth management in society at large or in a medicalized hospital setting in particular.

Even in the less medicalized Live Journal communities the medical language prevails, supposedly adding to the authority of the speaker and making her “more of an expert” in the field. This is how the community named *lyalechka* (“little one”, currently having about 7.5 thousand members), which focuses on the support of breastfeeding, where the audience of *ru_perinatal* naturally drifts after giving birth, defines its standpoint: “We think that breastfeeding is very important for the mother and baby, and so we help each other in the beginning stages of breastfeeding so that it would be pleasurable to everyone and successful from the medical point of view” (*positive_mama* N.d.). Thus, the idea of the primacy of the medical point of view is completely embodied by the community moderators and goes without notice.

On the other hand, western bureaucratic organizations responsible for setting public health policies are given credit and respect in Live Journal for their humanistic approach towards

common health care problems around the world. The World Health Organization is seen as an acknowledged authority, and a group of women seeking to humanize public health and maternity issues are willing to play by its rules and act according to their regulations. This is how the “natural parenting” community *positive_mama* (totaling 598 members) defines its goals and ideological platform:

Our community abides by certain rules in order to maximize the comfort of communication and guarantee a high degree of safety of mothers and babies. [...] To be a positive mom means not to harm your baby. Consequently, a positive mom is well aware of the norms set by WHO and tries to follow the style of bonding with the baby [set as a norm by WHO – E.B.]” (*positive_mama* community profile N.d.)

Such degree of trust and loyalty demonstrates a desire to join an alternative paradigm within the medical discourse, represented by WHO, which, while calling for a reform of public health practices, stays within the biomedical discourse featuring the concepts of risk, safety, intervention, and statistics (cp. Rivkin-Fish 2005).

Ru_perinatal and other mainstream online communities demonstrate the current norm in terms of ideas and values characteristic of an average Russian Internet user. And these values continuously shift, as they are affected by the interactions within an international online community in which Russian-born women from all the continents simultaneously participate. There are especially many Russian Live Journal users in the countries to which Russians have recently migrated en masse, such as the US, Canada, Israel and a few European countries. There are also Russian women living in Australia, Asia and Africa who contribute to and are influenced by Live Journal; all the continents are represented there in one way or another. By daily communicating with their peers abroad, the Russian users of Live Journal face multiple new ideas and values, which their immigrant

correspondents absorb from their immediate foreign environment. These values might concern anything and everything – the idea of the family, the concept of motherhood, the perceptions of the body and the proper ways to bring up and educate children. Oftentimes these influences go unnoticed, but they steadily and continuously do their work. This influence should not be seen as one-sided or purely westernizing: rather, it should be regarded as a constant mutual exchange and a creation of one global hybridized culture.

Sure enough, the “natural childbirth” group also got its own space, its own Live Journal community. In fact, there have been multiple attempts and a number of thematic communities, but one of them proved to be especially successful and eventually led to the creation of new forms of social organization and cultural production.²⁸ In 2006, an online community known as *rodi_doma* (“birth at home”) was organized in Live Journal by the user *causaria* (currently, it has close to 2000 members). This community provided a space for (primarily female) users interested in and practicing “natural childbirth,” and served to share information, post blog entries, ask questions, and offer advice. The username *causaria* belongs to Katerina Perkhova, a young Moscow journalist raised and educated in Tomsk (Siberia). Her husband Philipp, a photographer and web-designer, comes from a Moscow intelligentsia family: in one of his blog posts, he mentioned that his parents attended Moscow State University, the major university in the country. This young, educated couple, which today has three young children, belongs to the newly formed Moscow

²⁸ One interesting parallel in American culture is the case of Steward Brand, who, seeking to build a network of countercultural connections, switched between different forms of media, created unprecedented forms of virtual communication, and ultimately changed the public perception of the role of computers and Internet in Americans’ life (see Turner 2006).

middle class. Similarly to the users of the medicalized Live Journal communities (ru_perinatal and others), who eagerly embrace Western middle class ideas and values, Katerina and Philipp's rhetoric and representational strategies suggest that they too are influenced by the Western middle class habitus, albeit by its more marginal, alternative section, namely, the descendants of the old New Age group and counterculture's legacy. This is the point where the New Age (or Next Age, in terms of Introvigne 2001) goes global, and it should be worthwhile to observe this connection at work.

At the Crossroads: Loyalty and Resistance to the Global

Being a member of rodi_doma and an active Live Journal blogger myself, frequently posting about social aspects of birth, one day I received a private message on Live Journal from causaria, who had read my materials and wrote to express her interest in further collaboration. She explained that she was going to create a new and previously unparalleled project in Russia: a parenting magazine called *Home Child*, which would replicate *Mothering*, an American magazine quite popular among “naturally” inclined parents. I agreed to participate in the project, and wrote two articles for the second and third issues. It turned out that, in addition to me, Katerina had invited many other members of the rodi_doma online community to write for her magazine. Many people who wrote for the first few issues gained authority by posting popular blog entries and building their reputation specifically on the Web, among Live Journal users. Soon my photo and short intro were published on the new magazine's website, along with other “experts” supporting the magazine. Thus, the first authors who joined and provided their work were mostly Live Journal bloggers, but, after the first few issues of the magazine were published, I found

many new names on the list, including Russian homebirth midwives and key figures of the European and American alternative birth and parenting movement.

When I received the first issue of *Home Child* magazine, I was surprised beyond my expectations. Over the course of my interviews with Russian homebirth midwives in the early 2000s, I had gotten used to the idea that their ideology and aesthetics were closely connected with Russian nationalism and traditionalism. Surprisingly, in the first issue, Russian themes didn't dominate: there were a lot of stories and perspectives from different countries. The thing that surprised me most of all was that the issue contained an interview with an immigrant "mother-expert" from Israel, who is an Orthodox Jew and raises her children according to Jewish traditions. From my previous fieldwork experiences, I had become so used to nationalist and overtly anti-Semitic remarks mentioned in passing, that this article, accompanied by beautifully made, glamorous photos of Jewish kids and their mom with her hair covered, looked absolutely unreal. I then understood that some important changes must have happened within the community and in Russian society at large, if a fancy parenting magazine freely sold around the country could now afford to publish materials about "traditions" other than those of Russia.

I realized that the newly formed middle class in the bigger cities, for and by whom the magazine was created, had become largely cosmopolitan and started to position itself as a transnational entity. I also saw that the new magazine's primary goal was to spread and promote the idea and aesthetics of the global even further, to reach wider audiences and convert them into this new faith. The magazine evidently acted as an agent of globalization

and made the idea of the global its primary focus and frame. Examining the semiotics of the images of globality in Western product advertisement and “self-health” literature, Jacky Stacey explains:

Global culture in this sense is an aspiration, a fantasy, a desire as well as a marketplace and systems of flows and exchanges. Global subjects are constituted through the promise of a transcendent mobility, allowing them to move freely across time and space, joining the transnational flows of other objects (images, information, products) (Stacey 2000:141).

Home Child magazine became a reflection of this new tendency, the medium and agent of the new situation, producing and spreading the fantasy, the ultimate utopian vision of a global world free of national distinctions and boundaries.

Such cosmopolitan aspirations and frames are indeed utopian, since they can never reflect reality in a socially relevant and complete way, considering all the complexities.

Cosmopolitanism has been widely critiqued for its blindness to cultural difference, its uncritical treatment of “local” problems and “erasing” the multiple individual and group stories connected with issues of gender, class, and race (cp. Nestel 1994-1995). These stories and their grounding in particular socio-historical circumstances, oftentimes connected with a dark colonial past, inform these groups’ unique perspectives, which are at risk of being neglected and lost in cosmopolitan narratives. On the pages of *Home Child*, young and beautiful middle-class moms advertise “traditional” Eastern clothes (some models openly branded as “colonial”). All of these clothes are rich in color, bringing to mind Michael Taussig’s discussion of the affiliation of bright colors with ethnic “otherness” (Taussig 2009). The young moms in the photos wear their babies in “slings” – simple cloth devices that help to keep babies attached to mothers’ bodies as they engage in

various domestic activities. This body technique was “rediscovered,” i.e., appropriated from the “primitives,” successfully marketed, and turned into a widespread practice among middle-class parents around the globe (the approach known as attachment parenting” – see Liedloff 1977).

As Stacey points out in her article about global appropriations of nature,

The constitution of global consumer culture operates through a series of paradoxes which might be crudely summed up as follows: the global condenses through expansion, unites through diversity, and authenticates through hybridity. (Stacey 2000: 109)

The images of the generalized East, orientalizing and exoticizing of the “other,” are an essential feature of *Home Child* magazine, which aspires to bring multiple diverse cultures together under one global umbrella. The imagined East, however, is being introduced to Russians by Western designers, the producers of tastes and brands. Representations of the imagined West are also present in the magazine: occasionally, you can see a European professional woman, who is typically marked as such by being dressed in a much less colorful way. All the products and ideas in the magazine are targeted exclusively toward the new Russian middle class: people from the lower strata wouldn’t be able to afford the designer products, nor would they be interested in purchasing them and changing their lifestyles in order to fit the magazine’s vision.

In addition to publishing *Home Child* magazine, in 2010 Katerina established the Inter-Regional Public Organization MAMA (a pun abbreviation meaning “mother”), the primary goal of which is to help promote the legalization of homebirth in Russia according to

Western, primarily American models.²⁹ MAMA bases its approach on the experiences of the American-based midwifery organization, which positions itself as global: Midwifery Today. This organization produces a magazine under the same name, which addresses the issues relevant for the (primarily) homebirth practice of midwifery and organizes professional development conferences for midwives all over the world. The speakers/experts at these conferences come from different countries: not only the US, but also Mexico, Latin America, and Europe. These international conferences happen a few times a year, each time in a different country and city. The interactions between the participants at these gatherings produce a globalizing effect: by bringing new knowledge and perspective on birth to a certain country, the speakers change the ways in which midwives in this country approach birth. Thus, one of the regular participants in these conferences, a midwife from Mexico, introduces a traditional Mexican technique with the use of *rebozo* (a type of scarf) over the course of her presentations, and now this method is widely used not only in those countries where conferences took place, but also in all the countries where the attendees of the conferences came from. Midwifery Today is a perfect agent of globalization, taking pride in performing the task of global unification of knowledge about birth (Fannin 2006).

The year 2010 witnessed a very important event in the Russian “natural childbirth” community’s history. Katerina Perkhova got in touch with the core group of Midwifery Today, and brought the conference to Russia for the very first time. She also started publishing a translated Russian version of *Midwifery Today* magazine concurrently with

²⁹ The abbreviation MAMA (Mezhdunarodnyi Alians Materei i Akusherok) translates as Inter-Regional Alliance of Mothers and Midwives.

Home Child. Until this moment, Russian “natural childbirth” practitioners had participated in international conferences only occasionally. During Soviet times, traveling to conferences had been largely impossible. Later, it was difficult because of the language barrier and, as a consequence, the weakness of ties with sister movements abroad. A big gathering featuring midwives from both the US and “the global South” caused an immense shift in perspective among the Russians: it was simply mind-blowing to many. The event attracted a lot of attention and interest within the Russian community, and over a hundred midwives and interested parents attended the Moscow event. Reports from the conference were published in *Home Child* and on its website, and the recordings of the major talks, translated into Russian, are now being sold by the *Home Child* Internet store. The very special culture of Midwifery Today and its unique subjectivity as a globalized, hybrid entity has come into contact with the entire body of knowledge about birth built by Russian midwives throughout the years of the Russian “natural childbirth” movement’s existence. The following year, in June of 2011, the second Midwifery Today conference took place in Moscow and aggregated around 200 midwives and parents from different countries.

Although many Russian homebirth midwives embraced the opportunity, some with more traditionalist approaches weren’t happy with the new situation. Thus, certain members of the independent Russian midwifery organization named APA (Association of the Professional Midwives of Russia, created in 2010), apparently resented the shift in authority and power within the Russian community. These midwives started criticizing the activity of MAMA and *Home Child* magazine and sabotaging their globalizing initiatives. Apparently, many of the more “conservative” Russian midwives didn’t want foreign

midwives to teach them new ways to replace the methods that they had acquired with much difficulty (including going to the villages for fieldwork and conducting other types of research). Many such midwives had already developed a comprehensive system of knowledge, which they had successfully marketed, and the advent of new trends threatened the very validity of their systems. This was an opposition not only to Midwifery Today, but also to MAMA and *Home Child*, who were making an apparent attempt to dominate the field.

At some point in 2010, I opened the webpage of the online community *rodi_doma* and noticed a new interface. Then I realized that not only was the interface different, but the content had changed too. Previously, the Info section about the community had explained its interests in a general way, saying that it was a community of people interested in homebirth and affiliated practices, and providing a short list of member “experts” (midwives, doulas, and veteran moms). However now the Info page read:

The community *rodi_doma* belongs to the inter-regional public organization Interregional Alliance of Mothers and Midwives. We believe that a natural and gentle birth is the best gift that parents can give to their beloved child. We feel that family’s choice regarding the place of birth, the method of birth, and a birth attendant should be protected by the state, supported by society, and ensured by well-prepared specialists such as certified professional midwives (CPA) and doulas (helpers in birth). We are convinced that only being united as parents and midwives will be able to create a professional, convenient, flexible system that will ensure individualized help to families and collaboration with state organizations. Sign a petition to the President [of Russia, asking for the legalization of homebirth] at the website mama-help.me. MAMA – this means you and us! Please, sign the petition to President, join the organization, make a donation. Support the right of every mother and every child to have a free and natural birth at home, maternity hospital or a birthing center! (*rodi_doma* community profile N.d.)

This was intense! The community had been sustained over a few years, and about two thousand of its members, all with different voices, opinions, and perspectives, had

contributed their texts and discussion comments. As a member, I had believed that this community was built spontaneously, and that we all were part of it, that we made it, that it existed because we all had an impulse and felt a necessity to contribute. Now it was suddenly privatized – with all our texts and voices already in it. The community’s “owner” took an initiative to say who we were, what we wanted, and what we should aspire towards. And these needs and wants were framed in a very specific way, according to the conceptualization of the birth process, gender and family, the valid purposes and goals in life characteristic of the American middle class models and frameworks. I expected an outrage on the part of community members; however, no explicit reaction to this change ever followed. Either it went unnoticed, or the members just agreed with the “owner” and accepted the cited values as their own. After all, they were already prepared to be flexible after all the previous interventions into the Russian birth knowledge system.

After securing a certain degree of authority and legitimacy, MAMA initiated the campaign toward the legalization of homebirth in Russia. The Midwifery Today conference was organized in a very official place: The Public Chamber of the Russian Federation. Representatives of official medicine and policymakers were invited. After the conference, the representatives of MAMA met with a group of policymakers at the Moscow City Council (Duma) in order to discuss alternatives in childbirth – something completely unimaginable previously. Perkhova worked hard trying to change the underground status of homebirth and to promote it into the mainstream. Even though homebirth has a very unfavorable reputation among the general Russian public, and aggressive campaigns against it regularly appear in the media, at this point, it started to seem like maybe, just

maybe, the path already tested by the Western homebirth midwives might be applicable to Russia as well.

Although there were people who supported MAMA's campaign, joined the organization, and paid a substantial membership fee, in general, Perkhova faced passive attitude and sabotage on the part of many "natural childbirth" practitioners. First of all, MAMA wanted to legalize homebirth on its own terms; based on policies of the biggest American midwifery organization called MANA (Midwives' Alliance of North America), MAMA prepared a document that could serve as a basis for the reform of birth regulation in Russia. APA didn't support this move and even accused MAMA of stealing some conceptual content from APA's website. Apparently, APA did not want to allow MAMA to lead reform on its own terms. On the other hand, many of the midwives and parents pointed out the possible negative outcomes of the proposed legalization of birth, due to the specifics of the Russian situation. Understanding the advantages of unregulated birth and the freedom that came with it, they argued that keeping birth in the grey, unregulated zone would benefit both midwives and parents. Forming an alliance with official medicine (historically affiliated with the repressive machine of the Soviet state) and allowing it to impose limiting and bounding policies on the unpredictable, chaotic natural process of birth looked like a lame opportunity to many. Most of the dialogue participants in Russia didn't have firsthand knowledge of how birth regulation happened in the US and Canada, and what price the midwives and mothers had to pay. Knowing the details and outcomes of these processes personally, I realized that, in the Russian case, the consequences of legalization might have been even harsher (cp. MacDonald 2008, Bourgeault, Benoit and Davis-Floyd 2004, Davis-

Floyd and Johnson 2006). Considering the level of corruption in all spheres of the Russian bureaucracy, this sword could have been easily turned against the homebirth community itself.

Perkhova was seriously disappointed with the resistance she met and the reluctance of community members to participate in the process of change. Her tone in her appeals to the community became discontent; she attempted to shame the passive community audience, and even asked whether its passivity indicated that she should now shut down the community (which was suddenly presented as her property) along with its two thousand members and accumulated body of content. Some people responded, but apparently there weren't enough enthusiasm. Suddenly, all the activity around the potential legalization just froze. The Live Journal community *rodi_doma* stopped being as active as it once had been. All the conversations and discussions of the legalization just stopped, and I was left wondering what had happened. Suddenly, I noticed an unusual amount of activity on Katerina and Philipp's accounts on another social network: both of them had recently joined Facebook.

The Global Network

Russia went on Facebook quite late; there were a few successful local networks functioning in Russia, and, until recently, that was sufficient. Russian intellectuals, "the creators of content," used Live Journal, since it was well suited for posting long, elaborate blog entries. People who were less interested in creation and more in merely sharing information produced by others used another network, *Vkontakte* ("in contact"), which fully replicated

Facebook but was better suited for sharing pirated content such as music and films. Older and somewhat more conservative people used a network called Odnoklassniki (“classmates”), which doesn’t allow many options beyond posting photos and sending each other messages. In addition to these three major networks, less successful projects were introduced every now and then, but these three remained the dominant online networks for the past decade.

The advent of Facebook seems to have responded to the dynamics of social processes on the Russian Web and in the world at large. Life became faster, blog entries shorter, and visual content began to replace elaborate essays and lengthy philosophical deliberations. Quite a few Russians now use both Live Journal and Facebook. The accounts are connected, and, if they want to write a longer entry, which Facebook doesn’t allow, people just post a link to their blog. All in all, however, the genres of online interaction have visibly changed, with preference given to brevity and express exchange of information. Secondly, and most importantly, many Russians have felt a necessity to join a truly global network, which encompasses not just Russia but the whole world, and where they would share one space with the representatives of all nations. Although Russian users of Facebook write mostly in Russian, they can respond to their compatriots abroad, who are writing in English, or to foreign acquaintances, by commenting in English. The social network users who switched to Facebook seem to have been more cosmopolitan initially (and this is how they made this choice), but by joining Facebook, the truly global network, they became affected by global influences even more deeply, becoming involved in multiple connections that required them to exercise new kinds of choices in a variety of new

situations. This new sense of belonging also gave them completely new and previously unimaginable opportunities for networking.

At some point, I noticed that Perkhova was adding lots of new “friends.” Every day, when I opened my friend feed, I saw that Katerina Perkhova had added another 50 people to the pool of her “friends.” Some of the people she was adding were from Russia, but most of the names were foreign. Being well aware of the history of *rodi_doma*, *Home Child*, and MAMA, I realized that Perkhova must have some new project in mind. She was consciously building a new community, a new network, and she was working on it tirelessly, on a daily basis. Thus, in a very short period of time, she added to her friend pool hundreds of people from all over the world - alternative birth practitioners, midwives, doulas, holistic health care providers, experts, visionary authors.

Simultaneously with their virtual migration to Facebook, Katerina and Philipp migrated physically. They first visited and then moved to Dahab, Egypt, which is one of the major centers of international downshifting movement. After the new Russian “office generation” was created, a contrasting tendency developed: many people grew tired of alienating lifestyles and opted for simple living – whether in the Russian countryside, or in cheaper countries with good climates and interesting cultural heritages, such as India, Thailand and Egypt. The idea and practice of downshifting was at the very core of Katerina and Philipp’s new project. A while ago, Katerina posted an ad in one of the *Home Child* magazine issues, suggesting the creation of a commune that would unite like-minded young people interested in “natural childbirth and “conscious parenting.” A visit to Egypt helped the

couple realize that they would like to set and run this commune in Dahab, on the shore of the Red Sea. Although other locations were proposed, Dahab was chosen for its beautiful mountains, deserted sea shores, and “friendly Bedouins.”

The new commune was framed as a *Home Child* magazine club and, later, as an international educational project named Open School. “Open” or “free” schools are a type of democratically organized independent educational units that don’t adopt strict curricula, instead following the interests of children. The most famous and prototypical of such schools, Summerhill in the UK, has been in practice since 1921 and overall has shown impressive results. There are many such schools scattered across Europe. In the US, free schools have been present since the late 1960s; about a hundred of them are currently open across the country. My own children attended Manhattan Free School for a while, and I served on its Board; from this experience I gained firsthand knowledge of these institutions’ ideology and practice, with all their affiliated aspirations, frameworks, problems, and outcomes. My first article for *Home Child* magazine was about the “unschooling” approach, which included the discussion of free schools. By writing this article, I might have inspired Katerina and Philip’s early contemplations of this project (later, there were other authors who popularized this approach in the pages of *Home Child*). Both free-schooling and child-led homeschooling serve as a logical continuation of homebirthing (including such “anarchist” practices as unassisted birth): both of these stages in kids’ socialization opt out of the organized, rigid system imposed on families by mainstream society and the state.

Relying on the opportunities offered by Facebook, Katerina managed to make the Open School a truly international project. Its location at the center of international downshifting, where people from all over the world come together, provided an ideal base for making the Open School a site of multicultural exchange. Its acceptance of families from different countries ensured the further facilitation of such an environment. Successful communication was envisioned as possible by making English a priority language, which all kids in the school would eventually have to learn, since all the classes and activities would be conducted in English. The project started its work in the fall of 2011, when the required number of families paid their share and came to Dahab to join the club. So far, the children of group members are still very young, and more kids are expected to arrive in the near future. Just after the project was launched, Katerina gave birth to her third child - at home, in Dahab. The cosmopolitan aspirations of the group are rhetorically and visually represented in public space in the typical *Home Child* manner: in Facebook photos, we can see young, beautiful, happy people living their cosmopolitan dream – parents riding on camel humps to the Red Sea shore, kids learning to play ethnic drums from the local Bedouins, and lots of colorful clothes and draperies with ethnic designs.

This happy, beautiful multicultural paradise, already accessible in this lifetime, is the last utopian project to be discussed in this study. Having left its imaginary “roots” behind, a considerable part of the Russian “natural childbirth” community turned their gazes toward the global dream. The images of beautiful people riding with their healthy kids on camels’ backs towards a bright future are a perfect representation and an ideal image of “global nomads,” members of a transnational cosmopolitan community with a very special

subjectivity (Ahmed 2001; D'Andrea 2007). The development of a global nomadic identity requires denouncing one's old attachments to grounding oneself in one particular locus; instead, it requires cultivation and fetishization of the movement itself, of flexibility, of globality as such. By drawing on this new belonging to the site of the global, located everywhere and nowhere in particular, global nomads become able to create a new type of community together with other like-minded individuals and exclusive of those who are still fixed in one place (Ahmed 2001). This is why the members of the Dahab commune went through a rigorous selection process in order to make sure everyone was on the same page in terms of class subjectivity.

Although the Dahab commune presently has a particular grounded location, its potential mobility and flexibility is constantly emphasized in the online materials advertising the group. As an educational project, Open School seeks to produce a new type of subjects, whose purposes are seen in the context of the globalized world. Open School kids are expected to be raised internationally and educated in English by teachers from around the globe. In one of his postings, Philipp mentioned that he just had to make this move, having no other choice left, since he so loves his "little idlers" (*oboltsy*). He claimed that, in Russia, he wouldn't have been able to offer his kids the way of life and the kind of education that he and Katerina considered proper for them. The commune is still very young, and its purposes are not yet clearly defined and articulated; it is yet to be seen exactly how the adult members of the commune will envision their kids' future and what kind of adults they would like them to become two or three decades from now. For now, "freedom," "happiness," and global flexibility for the kids in the future seem to be the

major goals that young cosmopolitan downshifters from the Dahab commune are trying to achieve.

We have yet to see whether the migration of the Perkhov family and their new affiliation with the global will affect their involvement in the politics of birth in Russia, whether they will ever come back to continue their work on the legalization of birth, direct the change from abroad, or abandon their interest in Russian developments altogether and shift their focus to more international projects. At the moment, *Home Child* magazine continues to be issued as before, and the activity on Russian local online networks still persists in one form or another. Although Katerina doesn't post anything online concerning Russian politics, Philipp is strongly involved in current political discussions about the most recent events in Russia: the "Snow Revolution." The precision with which Philipp follows the details of these recent events demonstrate that he still has a strong emotional investment in Russia and cares a lot about its future. Philipp supports the "democratic" anti-Putin coalition and would like to one day see Russia free of corruption, shadow economy and falsified elections. Some of the readers of *Home Child*, however, argue with him online, defending their nationalist and anti-Western positions; this shows that the "natural childbirth" community is still ideologically split and diverse.

The Perkhovs are not the only ones who have "gone global"; many of the heroes of this thesis have ended up living and working abroad. Igor Charkovsky moved to Israel; there, he has a decent audience of people who trust him with their babies, and he willingly performs his underwater routines on them. He also travels to Egypt and other nearby

countries to do his underwater sessions. He was invited as an honorary guest to Midwifery Today conferences in Moscow in 2010 and 2011. Midwife Marina Dadasheva married an American instructor of the *Tao* a while ago. They live and practice in Thailand, but also spend part of their time in their house in Vermont. Midwife Tatiana Sargunas lives in Moscow; from time to time she is invited to assist at childbirths abroad. I saw the pictures of Tatiana assisting at a waterbirth in a swimming pool of a gorgeous villa in the Caribbean, which a rich Moscow dad-to-be had rented for his wife to give birth in luxury. Midwife Daria Strel'tsova became an authority on unassisted birth and is the leader and moderator of a Russian unassisted birth community in Live Journal. She also takes interest in bringing the Western concept and profession of *doula* to Russia and leads new doula trainings. "Russian Orthodox" midwife Irina Martynova attended the two Midwifery Today conferences in Moscow and, from what I have seen in conference photos, emotionally connected with American midwives. Like Irina, some of the regular Midwifery Today speakers (Eneyda Spradlin-Ramos and others) identify themselves as "Christian midwives," so she may have felt an affiliation with them on this level.

Recently, I visited the website of Midwifery Today and checked out the biographies section, which I hadn't done in a while. I was quite surprised by the new layout, as I discovered an entire fifteen Russian midwives' profiles listed among others. The ways in which Russian midwives present themselves in English to the Western world differs considerably. While some list courses read in the Western institutions as major achievements, others speak about their expertise in the "ancient" folk midwifery practices and their being "knowledgeable in Russian traditional culture." Both strategies would

appeal to the Western audience and look authoritative in their own way. Most of the midwives tell in their profiles about their role as pioneers of the waterbirth movement and are ready to share their experience and skills with the West. The Russian “natural childbirth” community seeks access to the Western colleagues, and now, three decades after the invention of waterbirth, they still have a lot to offer to the world in this particular niche. Local knowledge is in demand in the global markets, and the exchange continues successfully.

Final Thoughts

The four utopian projects, the four dreams which I have discussed in this thesis - the ones of science, nature, tradition and globalization - can be seen as historically bound and in some ways consequential, but they often overlapped and coexisted. They mark the major historic periods of the movement, the four visions that informed it and reflected its aspirations through different stages, according to the logic of the social developments and the ongoing events in the country and in the world as a whole. Although I started this discussion with an explanation of the roots of utopian thinking in Russia since medieval times, the primary focus of my attention in this text is on the second half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st. If I were to define the particular moments in history that frame my research in time, I would say it goes from *Sputnik* to Facebook. The launch of *Sputnik* was a symbol of the triumph of the physicists who, figuratively speaking, gave birth to the very idea at the center of the “natural childbirth” community. Facebook, an ideal example of a global social network, marked a time of mutation and dissolution of some specifically Russian discourses in the pool of globalized knowledge. The time that

lies ahead will bring some new cultural assemblages and new identities that we cannot even imagine at the present moment.

Following the legacy established by Ginsburg and Rapp (1991), who were first to pinpoint the heuristic value of studying reproduction as a site of socio-political processes and power struggles, I approached the case of the waterbirth technique as a phenomenon that helped to illuminate larger social and political processes and tendencies in Russia, the U.S. and at the global crossroads. By looking at the particular, seemingly narrow case of waterbirth, I observed much larger problems characteristic of late modern societies, pertaining to East-West relationships, global flows, transcultural knowledge production, formation of political and social imaginaries, performance of gender, and class mobility. Below, I'd like to briefly list my contributions to a few subfields within anthropology and social sciences at large, which I meant to achieve by completing this project.

One of my contributions to the discussion of international communication within global studies is telling a completely new story of relationships between Russia and the U.S. I concentrate on the discussion of an aspect of these relationships, which was never discussed in depth before. In my project, I challenge the standard narrative of the two superpowers, the two irreconcilable enemies. This image long occupied the imagination of people and nations worldwide and became an essential part of the way the world was envisioned. As Katherine Verdery mentions, the Cold War was a "language" and "form of knowledge" which informed the cultural geography of the whole world and defined its coordinates (East – West) (Verdery 1996). The widely cited metaphor of the Iron Curtain

connoted complete isolation from the space lying behind the Curtain. Susan Buck-Morss stated that the Curtain served to isolate the very imaginaries of the two worlds, so that they wouldn't be able to contaminate each other's (supposedly diametrically opposite) visions (Buck-Morss 2000). The story that I tell is an untold story of partnership, exchange in ideas and mutual enrichment between Russia and the West (misunderstandings and conflicts were part of this process too, being a virtually unavoidable part of any intense partnership). Ultimately, I attempted to show the kinds of social mechanisms which made this exchange possible.

In particular, I look at the mechanisms of transnational knowledge production and show how certain ideas travel around the globe. Looking at the empirical material of my interviews with waterbirth practitioners and their allies, I analyze the ways in which deterritorialized knowledge journeys from one locale to another and gets accepted, rejected and replanted along the way. In my project, I contest the commonplace narrative about globalization as a West to the rest of the world flow and show, instead, that there are many ways and opportunities for the local cultures to contribute to the Western and global bodies of knowledge and enrich the conceptualizations of reality in other cultures, even those usually considered more "developed." In the domain of reproduction, Russian developments in waterbirth and, earlier, psychoprophylaxis (the latter rebranded as the Lamaze method in the West), are two particular examples of the local Russian ideas and practices going global and gaining international appreciation. I show how local imaginaries can be really powerful and appealing, and how they indeed "contaminated" the Western visions despite all the efforts applied to isolate the two worlds from each other.

While the globalization literature primarily concentrates on powerful mainstream phenomena going global (such as Western science and medicine intruding into local systems of knowledge and practice), my study shows that marginal phenomena also have a potential to go global. The emergence of a marginal, alternative New Age movement in 1960s America created the opportunity and space for all kinds of unusual, radical practices, which were then spread internationally. Thus, in my thesis, I show how the origination of the Western New Age became one of the factors which paved the way for the transnational knowledge transmission. In order to ensure the opportunity for cultural transmission and reception, the two sites participating in exchange must have some kind of cultural capital in each other's eyes. In addition, these locales must feature certain agents, i.e. particular social groups, which would be interested and instrumental in promoting the new types of knowledge to foreigners. In my particular case, Russia's symbolic capital as a highly "spiritual" country attracted the interest of the New Age movement participants in the West, while the group of Soviet intelligentsia had both willingness and resources to establish and maintain productive contacts with their Western counterparts, despite all the obstacles created by their governments. Intelligentsia happened to be the medium in the seemingly closed Soviet society, which allowed communication to occur and even flourish. The representatives of the Soviet intelligentsia managed to produce the ideas and projects that were eagerly embraced and quickly spread by the interested parties in the West.

More specifically, my project offers a new perspective on Russian post-socialist transition (the field that is often presented as an Eastern-European branch of globalization theory). As

a rule, the literature on post-socialism is very dark and pessimistic. There is a certain conventional discourse seen as suitable for discussion of post-socialist events in the Western social sciences; such narratives normally center on disintegration, survival, trauma and loss. Although there is a lot of truth in such descriptions, there are always other truths to discover that might be equally relevant. In my study, I tell quite a different story, as I focus my attention on the brighter side of human existence: hopes, dreams, aspirations, and on people actually living their dreams. I look at the mechanisms at the very core of Russian utopian thinking, and the ways in which the emergence of particular utopian visions corresponded to major events in Russian history. I then theorize how exactly the Russian utopian projects were translated into the Western utopian thinking modes, and how it was at all possible for the two parties on two continents to meet and enrich each other in particular ways (or reject and misunderstand, for other reasons). I tried my best to present the Russian case to the Western scholarly community (which, of course, operates its own language and conceptual apparatus) in a new way, preserving and explaining the Russian cultural logic as much as possible.

Another goal of my dissertation has been to critically address the representation of post-socialist Russia in Western social sciences that relies on the discourse of “failure,” which reveals certain ethnocentric overtones. It is very common to hear that the post-Soviet transition failed: democracy failed to be established; Russian intelligentsia failed to become an elite, lead the country in the right direction and propose adequate reforms; Russians were too passive, and, instead of being actively participating in the reforms, turned cynical, passive and pessimistic. Consequently, we are told, Russia needs more Western

intervention, and the West should arrange it in one way or another (it's just a matter of method, but the necessity of intervention itself is beyond doubt). Such discourses were communicated even by the most insightful anthropological analyses in the West. Some American scholars reported being irritated by Russians who tended to complain and blame the government instead of taking a stance and becoming active themselves. In my project, I make a point of drawing on the Russian inner logic and showing why Russians felt or behaved the way they did during the time of major reconstruction. I problematize the very concepts of social agency, activism and citizenship as exercised by Russians. In my thesis, I show how social agency could be exercised in an alternative way: instead of becoming pessimistic or cynical, particular groups of Russians exercise agency and feel their responsibility as planetary citizens, the citizens of the natural world, the citizens of revived old Russia or conscious cosmopolitan nomads. Russians don't see democracy, activism and citizenship responsibilities in the same way as Americans, so we shouldn't essentialize these categories and seek to conceptually frame Russian practices and attitudes using very specific Western concepts, which, in this case, might have quite a limited applicability.

Moving even deeper, from the discussion of Russian society at large to particular fractions within it, I sought to contribute new observations and analyses regarding Soviet/post-Soviet social class dynamics. Through the prism of my narrow case, I look at wider class dynamics in the Soviet and then Post-Soviet Russian society. As these dynamics changed, different groups and class fractions gained more power at particular moments in history and promoted different kinds of ideas and practices. In my project, I closely followed a particular segment of the Soviet and then Russian society and examined the processes that

accompanied the major change - from the rise and fall of the Soviet technical intelligentsia during the late Soviet period to its disintegration, mutation and the formation of the new westernized middle class in modern Russia.

Gender dynamics are always inseparable from class-related social processes, and, in my thesis, I paid special attention to the interpretation and performance of gender in Russia, and the ways in which gender norms and roles changed along with the major historical shifts and influences. Looking at the case of the Russian “natural childbirth” movement, I problematize the way in which certain gender patterns are commonly approached in the anthropology of reproduction. In Russia, gender dynamics unfolded differently than in the West (where women’s main point was to resist medical patriarchy), starting with the fact that most of the Soviet doctors, and Ob/Gyns in particular, were women, and it was male engineers who challenged them, seeking to control their wives and other females around them. Later, however, the same women who men sought to guide in childbirth developed their own agency, professionalized as self-trained homebirth midwives, challenged men within the movement, gradually pushing them out of the field. The Russian case shows that the Western model of struggle for women’s reproductive autonomy from biomedicine is not universal, and that local movements can develop following their own cultural logic. In my study, I show how gender stereotypes in the “natural childbirth” movement were reinforced by certain gendered visions characteristic of folk traditions and popular culture, and how gender roles were reascribed with the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the advent of the neo-traditionalist tendencies.

The last contribution of my project that I'd like to mention is the analysis of the role of "the new media" in creating new identities and new types of citizens and social groups, as well as the use of such media for ethnographic analysis. The current "Internet revolution" in Russia effects rapid change of ideas and values in all spheres of life in all social strata (Vartanova 2004). Social networks are spreading with enormous speed, with more and more people becoming involved and affected: Russia and Egypt were recently named as the two countries around the world where people joined social networks most actively in 2011 (Pew Research Center 2011). The recent rise of political activity among Russia's population wouldn't have been possible just a short time ago; the uses of the Internet and social networks for political organization in Tahrir Square and the Occupy Wall Street movements set examples for the Russians, since it all happened in a virtual space they were also present in. In her analysis of the recent Russian mass protests against falsified elections and abuse of power by the current political administration, sociologist Ella Paneyakh pointed out the rapid change of political subjectivities among Russia's citizens, which resulted from the growing use of social networks. According to her, the previously apolitical, passive, and morally degrading lumpen class of Russia (*bydlo*) has been rapidly "civilized," mobilized, and opened up to Western values and practices (Paneyakh 2001). By joining public space in the form of social networks, people get in touch with many contesting discourses and feel the necessity to affiliate themselves with a certain position and standing. The acquisition of a public persona, and the reputation that comes with it, influences people to make politically oriented choices and display them in public. Journalist Maxim Trudoliubov explained how social networks, as sites of ideological contestation, help develop respect along with mutual understanding and the ability to reach

consensus. According to him, “the Net” has become a new fluid, flexible form with the potential to defeat “the Pyramid” (the rigid vertical hierarchical structure of the Russian state) (Trudoliubov 2011).

Although, at first glance, the oppositional movement in Russia might be interpreted by the West as a plain example of the spread of Western liberal influences, in fact, it presents a very complex mixture of multidirectional and oftentimes diametrically opposite aspirations and outlooks. These range from Western-style liberalism to radical nationalism and many varieties of national philosophies in between. All these groups are represented in “the new media” and are using them in their own way. It is important to consider the variety of their premises and complex interactions between the groups, and avoid the homogenized presentation of them in social analysis. Even the considerably narrow group of “natural childbirth” supporters has major disagreements on the very basic understandings of the purpose of their parenting project in relation to larger political strategies. In my project, I sought to address this complexity and carefully follow the multiplicity of my informants’ logics and outlooks.

Ideological trends change in history along with class dynamics. Many aspects of social changes discussed in this thesis, featuring ideas and practices, values and aspirations, have occurred alongside the mobility of particular social groups. While the Internet serves as an agent of change, effecting the hybridization of the local knowledge and practices, the Net itself presents a set of cultural practices which can and should be closely observed in order to track and interpret the processes of social change. I strongly believe that, these days, any

and every anthropological research study should include an online inquiry along with traditional on-site fieldwork. This new type of research is not just multisited, it's multidimensional. Current research implies work with the multiple personae of our subjects in different dimensions, contexts, and affiliations. In a face-to-face interview, our subjects will express themselves in a different way than on social networks, in which one person might perform multiple different personae with different agendas and subjectivities – such as on Live Journal, Vkontakte or Facebook. The work of an ethnographer becomes extremely complex, multilevel, and hypertextual, requiring flexibility, rapidity, and multitasking. Our aim should be to find a new medium, format, and method that would allow us to consider all these dimensions at once and tie them together, so that they could inform, enrich, and enlighten our analysis.

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