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THE SITUATION OF SOCIOLOGISTS IN RUSSIA TODAY

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1. Sociological training

Specialist training for sociologists in the Soviet Union has existed only since 1989. Before that time, sociologists were trained as economists, lawyers or psychologists. Usually, sociologists who completed their university course, received the degree of Doctor of Philosophy five years after beginning their post-graduate studies.

Sociological Institutes were in existence from 1964 and provided additional training. But, from the start, all posts in the Institutes were filled by conservatives and the teaching of sociology remained unchanged for over a quarter of a century. Since 1989, this trend has reversed. With the help of specialist organisations, sociological teaching has changed greatly and sociologists have begun to be recognised by name as *sociologists*.

The Association of Soviet Sociologists which was set up more than twenty years ago, has also played a part in the emerging recognition of sociologists. The Association was chaired by Tatiana Zaslavskaia who was also deputy and, for a time, adviser to M. Gorbachev. It must be said that the Association, which has leanings to the right, has criticised her for her role in relation to the Soviet President.

2. The Sociological Institutes

The Sociological Institutes are attached to the Academy of Sciences. The organisation is similar to the *Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique* in France. These institutes do not provide training as such. They are research organisations which are very important on account of their number and personnel. For a long time, political leaders have believed that science could be a vehicle for social change. That is why, since 1989, specialist training in sociology has been linked directly with support for *Perestroika*. It even pre-dated this movement. In fact, most people who consider themselves to be sociologists, hold

much more radical opinions than do the majority of political leaders, something which is not the case in other disciplines. In psychology, for example, it is probably the reverse.

Before *Perestroika*, sociologists communicated amongst each other, running all the risks associated with being seen to be taking up a position. Many sociologists were expelled from the Sociological Institutes. Moreover, in the period before *Perestroika*, the views of sociologists rarely had any real influence on the political or social situation. The directors of the Institutes continued to carry out Party instructions. The virtual witch-hunt of sociologists, which reached a peak in 1983, ended in 1986 when the very same people who had been expelled were invited to become directors of the Institutes.

This liberalisation was in line with developments in gaining access to information, to books and to sociological journals from abroad. Today, we can say that sociology, at university level, is regarded as an autonomous science. It is acknowledged that sociologists are capable, by themselves, of initiating investigations, of making predictions...

3. The professional situation of sociologists

As regards the employment sphere, sociologists have not yet succeeded in distinguishing themselves sufficiently from psychologists or economists. It must be remembered that the position of intellectual labour in the work market is very different in Russia than, for instance, in France. In reality, many jobs are available but there are very few people competent to occupy them because their training is so completely inadequate. In business organisations there is no clear distinction between the roles of sociologist and psychologist, although at the scientific and university level the distinction now operates very well. In fact, to be employable, the sociologist must be a member of the Sociological Association. That is a sufficient requirement. Initial training is not important. However, for these sociologists, evening courses are available. The courses last for six months and provide certificates which, although not the equivalent of a university diploma, suit both sociologists and employers.

These courses are run particularly by the Sociological Association but they may also be organised by cooperatives. The courses are usually taken by adults in the evening after work. Training is paid for by the employer. The evening course diplomas have no official status. On the other hand, sociologists who have taken these courses become members of the Sociological Association and in that way acquire legitimacy.

Real changes are taking place very quickly. Today, the profession of sociologist seems to be more prestigious, at any rate at the research level. It is even developing its own mystique. There is a strong wave of interest in this profession which is considered as one of the most intellectual.

In the workplace, things are still rather different. The sociologist does not earn as much as an engineer. But he has other advantages; for example, he is not obliged to spend eight hours a day at his desk. As regards the tasks of sociologists in enterprises, personnel directors have never been people with sociological training but rather retired KGB members. This situation is beginning to change. Sociologists who have taken additional training at evening courses are now applying for such jobs.

4. The Centre for the Sociology of Social Movements

I work as a researcher at the Centre for the Sociology of Social Movements at the Institute of Saint-Petersburg. This Institute is of very recent origin, having been set up in 1990. It is one of the gains of *Perestroika*. It was felt that it was easier to create a new Institute than to restructure an existing organisation. The Institute is part of the Academy of Sciences and only Moscow has anything like it.

The Institute consists of eighty people divided between seven Centres: the Centre for the Sociology of the Family, the Centre for Urban Sociology, the Centre for Studies of Public Opinion, the Centre for Studies in Education... The Centre for the Sociology of Social Movements analyses all the political groups and movements of various types which have been set up over these last years and which have been extremely important for the changes taking place.

The most important movement is called the Front; it was set up on the eve of the elections of 1989 by the opposition to the Communist Party. And it is this popular Front which won the elections. Most of the representatives on the Saint-Petersburg Soviet are popular Front candidates. There are also a number of less important groups and movements with a variety of ideological approaches: ecologists, nationalists... The right wing nationalist movement is very influential in Saint-Petersburg; it displays very clear monarchist and antisemitic tendencies. Our Centre collects all the information about these movements and we try to analyse it to understand the underlying meaning of current changes.

Specifically, I am in charge of several scientific projects, one of which is especially close to my heart. It involves conducting interviews with the leaders of different political movements in Saint-Petersburg. These interviews offer

quite a detailed psychological character study. I ask these leaders about their past, their previous careers, their motivations, about how they got into politics, their level of responsibility, the reasons for their actions, the effect of political life on their family relationships, how decisions are taken within the teams they have formed around themselves...

5. Personal experience

After studying at university, I worked in a psychiatric hospital. Essentially it entailed providing psychotherapy following tests. There I wrote my thesis which was based on a study of patients' family relationships. So I have changed my speciality and field of activity to some extent, but my previous experience has proved very useful.

I presented a proposal for a study of social movements in Europe and I was chosen to spend six months in France at the Centre for Comparative East-West Studies. What I appreciate most about the West, is the possibility of reading works which remain unobtainable in Russia, like the works of Touraine or Bourdieu... French researchers are interested in my proposal for a joint study of social movements in Saint-Petersburg. We are trying to organise a large project to look at social movements in the whole of eastern Europe. My French partners have expressed a deep interest and we have been able to lay the foundations for serious, long-term cooperation.

Note:

Alexandre Etkind is a sociologist attached to the Sociological Institute of the Academy of Sciences of Saint-Petersburg where he collaborates in the work of the Centre for the Sociology of Social Movements. Recently, he made a stay at the Centre for comparative East-West studies at the *Maison des Sciences de l'Homme* in Paris. During that time, he gave an interview to *La Lettre de L'Association Professionnelle des Sociologues*, Nouvelle série, No 2, décembre 1991. That interview appeared in French thanks to the help of the translator, Vladimir Soloviev. We are reproducing the essence of it here in English with the kind permission of the publishers of «*La Lettre de l'APS*».

(English translation: Betsy Thom, sociologist, London)

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