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“Everything Around Here Belongs to the Kolkhoz, Everything Around Here is Mine”
Collectivism and Egalitarianism: A Red Thread Through Russian History?

PETER LINDNER and ALEKSANDR NIKULIN

Introduction
One of the peculiarities of Russian history in the 20th century is that it can be interpreted as the history of fundamental change as well as one of straightforward development. It requires only a slight shift of perspective to emphasize either the stability of cultural foundations that are not only concordant with the principles of the October revolution but actually have to be understood as one of the reasons that brought it about, or to see a historic break, leading to an entirely new political, economic, and social order. The more the continuity of a process that has its roots in the persistence of cultural norms and traditions is highlighted, the more likely it seems that the problems of transformation after the dissolution of the Soviet Union have to be traced back to exactly the same cultural norms and traditions.

“Egalitarianism” and “collectivism” are the decisive catch-words that constitute this continuity and pervade the history of rural Russia, the prerevolutionary land communes,2 and the Soviet collective farms. They set up a framework that gives meaning to the provision of a readily available framework for the interpretation of single events, and the use as a pattern for self-identification – that permits, in my view, the characterisation of “egalitarianism” and “collectivism” as a “meta-narrative” of the history of rural Russia. Consequently, the term should first be understood as a reflection of the fact that concepts such as these always bear the potential for reification (YANEY 1985, p. 33) rather than an overall judgement about a “right” or “wrong” depiction of reality.4 In short: They possess the power to influence attitudes towards the past, interpretations of the present, and politics for the future. How liberal reformers in Russia saw the collective farms and respectively tried to privatise and reorganise them after the dissolution of the Soviet Union is a good example of this.

The aim of this article is to break up the notions “egalitarianism” and “collectivism” and thereby the idea of continuity in the history of rural Russia by asking to which social norms, institutions, and practices they usually refer. We agree with SMITH (1989, p. 338), that studies of the socialist world, in particular, necessitate a refocusing of our “regional lens”, the paying of “due attention to those socio-economic and political processes which make places different”. This is notably true for rural Russia and the village communities before as well as after 1917 and we therefore put special emphasis on territories and places, and the degree of their autonomy with regard to their integration into broader economic and political environments.

The first part of this paper provides a short outline of how the understanding of rural Russia is shaped by a variety of texts that are different in all respects – in theoretical and methodological approach as well as empirical foundation – except in their emphasis on egalitarianism and/or collectivism. It would be a challenge for an “Archaeology of Knowledge” (FOUCAULT 1972) to correlate these works, trace some main lines of argument, unveil common references and recurrent contexts, and point to hidden contradictions and the mechanisms of their incorporation. But, given the limited space here, only a fairly selective number of examples must suffice to characterise some key focuses of this meta-narrative. By focussing on their territorial moorings and their relationships to the outside world, the second and third section then explore the different ways in which collecti-
ism and egalitarianism as practices of everyday life were embedded in changing structural frameworks. As a vantage point for comparison, we take the time after the emancipation statute of 1861 and the Brezhnev period, because both preceded state attempts to overcome collectivism (the Stolypin reforms of 1906 and Gorbachev’s perestroika) and therefore stimulated new debates among scholars. Again, there is no place here to account for differences, for instance, between regions or the status of peasants (crown peasants, state peasants, landlord peasants), which are, without any doubt, of enormous importance. We conclude that collectivism and egalitarianism might not be the wrong denotations when used in specific contexts, but it is exactly these changing contexts that define their meaning, and consequently they can not be used as evidence for cultural continuity in rural Russia.

Collectivism and egalitarianism: Meanings and contexts

A discursive superelevation of the egalitarian character of rural Russia has a long standing history. As early as the first half of the 19th century, the so-called “Slavophiles” emphasized the high valuation of the community in the land communes as the central trait of the Slavic people. They traced its cultural roots back to an unspoiled agrarian society and argued that “the Russian finds his real, genuine, the old Russian, slavic, pre-Petritien culture in the countryside, its bearer is the peasant” (Masaryk 1913, p. 214). August Haxthausen, the famous traveller and researcher by order of the later Prussian king Friedrich Wilhelm IV, had characterised this society using the notions of “equality”, “family community” and “patriarchy”. Gradually the aspect of patriarchy had faded out in most depictions and, instead, equality was highlighted and regarded thereby as a foundation for historical processes but not as their possible outcome or content (Goehrke 1964, p. 37). The fascination with the prerevolutionary land communes, which extended far beyond the inner circles of the Slavophiles, was essentially nurtured by this image of an equal and just rural society and received a highly moral undercurrent as it was juxtaposed to western liberalism, capitalism, and social Darwinism (Frierson 1993, p. 10, 101ff.): “We are not bourgeoisie, we are peasants ... we are poor in towns and rich in villages” as Alexander Herzen in 1856 put this moral superiority in an introductory article for his almanac “Polar Star” (Herzen 1856, p. VII). In this context, it is not surprising that obščina, the Russian word for the land commune, which emphasizes primarily the equal distribution of fields but is often used as a synonym for village communities (mir) in general, was invented within a scholarly discourse and was rarely used among the villagers themselves (Grant 1976).

The prominent position that the land communes held in public discussions as well as on the political agenda in the 19th century forced Marxism, too, to deal with this topic, namely with the question of whether the land communes could be directly transformed into the “higher form of communist property” (Male 1963, p. 234). Marx and Engels themselves addressed this issue in the foreword to the Russian edition of the Communist Manifesto of 1882 and stated: “If the Russian revolution becomes the signal for a proletarian revolution in the West so that both complement one another, then the Russian collective property in land can be the vantage point for a communist development” (Marx a. Engels 159, p. 576). Lenin’s approach was at once much more ambivalent and pragmatic, acknowledging that the land communes were an important part of the “rural condition” and necessitated concessions like those made after his death in the land decree of 1928 (Kingston-Mann 1983, passim). It was not until nearly a century later that Emmanuel Todd attributed to rural collectivism and egalitarianism an exactly inverse but much more central role in the implementation of communism. He sees them not as potentials that could have helped to implement the new order, but as the very reasons for its fast acceptance in Eastern Europe: Communism for him is the result of the “transference to the party state of the moral traits and the regulatory mechanisms of the exogamous community family” (Todd 1988, p. 33), which is characterised by equality between brothers (and authority of the head of a household).

The Slavophile position might be regarded as too essentialist, the Marxist as too pragmatic (in practice) and ideological (in theory), and Todd’s structuralism as too far from the realities of everyday life to allow for a more detailed analysis of the concrete routines and practices to which collectivism and egalitarianism as theoretical concepts refer. But this is certainly not true for an impressive number of recent publications that can be assigned to the loose framework of the “new paradigm in the study of the Russian peasantry” (Pallot 1999, p. 15; see also Kingston-Mann 1991).

1. These works are, first, characterised by a focus on the traditions, norms and rules that governed peasants’ everyday life at the turn of the century. They try to stay as empirical as the available sources allow and aim to understand peasants’ behaviour within its own rationality. And they put high emphasis on the peculiarities of the times, regions, and contexts of their subject. Collectivism and egalitarianism, although still prevalent in many of these works, lose their character here as an underlying attribute of peasant culture and become meaningful strategies for making allowances for the demands of a peasant economy as well as balancing them with the changing challenges of the outside world. To give a few illustrative examples, Pallot analyses, how “peasant attachment to collectivism” (1999, p. 249) translated into specific responses to the Stolypin reforms and those among the villagers who were willing to leave the commune. Frank (1987) and Worobec (1985, 1987) show the extent to which peasants’ customary law and popular justice were based on a differentiation between community members and outsiders and point out, that how popular justice was exercised tended to reinforce the inner coherence of the commune. Figes takes the communal ploughed land as a vantage point to shed more light on the “deeper sense of collective well-being and mutual responsibility” (1986, p. 95) than does the
prevailing concentration on the redistribution of land. And Atkinson (1990) directly addresses the question of how peasants’ ideas of justice and equality are rooted in an understanding that deduces the right to land from the willingness and ability to work it.

2. Second, most of these works build on the assumption of the existence of a separate peasant world (Cox 2002, p. 574; Pallet 1999, p. 15), a “microcosm dominated by local interests” (Mironov 1985, p. 458), a divide between “peasant and official culture” (Frank 1987, p. 265) and the “relative insularity of the Russian village” (Worobec 1991, p. 22), on “peasant particularism” (Seregny 1991, p. 341), “regional loyalties” (Johnson 1990, p. 90) and a “local society” with “local activities” and a predominant representation of “local interests of the village” (Altrichter 1984, p. 100). But these and many other similar formulations suggest a consensus, which, in fact, does not exist. They draw to a varying degree on spatial metaphors that serve to express three quite different aspects or concerns:

- A rejection of all kinds of universalist approaches, namely the subjection of their subject matter to the framework of Marxist or modernisation theory.
- An emphasis of the distinctive implications of agrarian livelihoods, often explicitly referring to the work of Scott and describing them as a “moral economy” (1976), the members of which had to rely on the “weapons of the weak” (1985).
- A highlighting of the fact that rural areas consisted, in the eyes of their inhabitants, of a mosaic of distinctive units in the form of land communes, each of which defines a separate sociospatial lifeworld for its members.

It is in the second and third of these concerns that the concepts of collectivism and egalitarianism are inextricably moored in a spatial construction of identity, building on the assumptions of highly localised economies and territorially disjointed village communities in rural areas.

The establishment of a socialist political system in Russia, then, provided for an entirely new point of departure. On the one hand, empirically founded research was, with some remarkable exceptions, such as Humphrey (1983), not possible for western researchers, and Soviet scientists worked mainly with different methodological approaches on different topics. On the other hand, egalitarianism and collectivism were now a central element of the official ideology and were therefore supposed to have become an integral part of Soviet culture after 70 years, especially in rural areas (Levada 1993, p. 66ff.). Some authors who worked extensively on the prerevolutionary land communes regard this as only the formalisation of what was popular culture before the revolution.

“Popularly seen as a war against all privilege” argues, for example, Figen (2002, p. 437) “the practical ideology of the Russian Revolution owed less to Marx – whose works were hardly known by the semi-literate masses – than to the egalitarian customs and utopian yearnings of the peasantry”. Following this argument, what looks like Bolshevism is merely the “expression of the traditional social relationships of the Russian society like the collectivist tradition of Russian rural culture” (Studer a. Unfried 1999, p. 90).

But more important, the highlighting of continuity in Russian history was considerably strengthened after it turned out that the privatisation of the collective farms met with much more resistance in rural areas than many had expected.5 This is most clearly expressed by Wegren (1994, p. 218f.), who has probably published, in the last ten years, more than anybody else in the West on the privatisation of collective farms with an average size of 43 ha, and the World Bank, together with the Moscow Agrarian Institute, worked out a model scheme for the privatisation of collective farms that clearly aimed not only at privatising but, beyond that, at splitting up the existing collectives (Lerman 2001).6 Reports about hostilities against private farmers, stretching from general scepticism over ostra- cism and theft (Van Atta 1993, p. 87), to burning haystacks and tractors (Hvön 1995, p. 18, 1998, passim) fitted only too well in this picture of an irrationally collectivist rural popula-

5 In July 1993, the then minister of agriculture Viktor Chlystun predicted euphorically the establishment of 600,000 - 650,000 private farms with an average of 75 ha land each, amounting to 20% of Russia’s agricultural land by the end of 1995 (Chlystun 1994, p. 339f.). In fact, in 1995, only 279,000 farms with an average size of 43 ha had been es-

6 “Feudal” itself is another widespread characteri-

7 This scheme was published as a “privatisation manual” (International Finance Corporation/The Overseas Development Administration 1995) in Rus-

8 Issues and distributed free to all collective farms in Russia.
munes8 were first and foremost an important fact that the land commu-
p. 21). This statement points to the
nion (referred to as the commune) responsible for fulfilling its tax obliga-
that the commune as a whole was
Although it was a response to the fact
‘eaters’ as a basis for calculation.
bbers, using families, male workers, or
redistribution of land among its mem-
ademic discourse – or at least the one
important manifestation of this terri-
cities on relationships of
egalitarianism and collectivism.
informal social control as a mecha-
ism to maintain effective order is a
common feature of small, localised communities all over the world (al-
though it might work quite differently in different places) and played a huge roll in Russian villages before and after the revolution, too. But beyond that, the land communes and their regular meetings (schod) gave the village communities an institutiona-
vised forum for the negotiation of interests with clearly defined roles, rights, responsibilities, and procedures.
The head of each household (bolsak) had the right to vote in the meetings, which elected an “elder of the estate” (starosta), usually for three years, and
openly representatives for other functions, such as tax collectors or guards. High emphasis was put on the unanimity of decisions and, after long discussions, could lead to the post-
pomement to a later time of controver-
sional questions (Zyryanov 1992, p. 30).
Surely, the land communes were far from an ideal democratic institution. Widows were, for example, excluded from the assemblies, villagers without land were admitted only when their immediate concerns were discussed (Kuchumova 1981, p. 337), and richer peasants tended to have an inordi-
ernism to maintain effective order is a

8 There is no place here for a general description
of the land communes, their history, and internal structures. For a very condensed overview with references to further readings, see Eklof (1981) and

9 Zemljacestvo refers to friendly relations among
zemlaki; persons from one’s native village or regi-
on (Burd 1991, p. 92; Johnson 1990, p. 91). For Burds, migration became such an important factor for the peasant economy that it necessitated a
change in the conception of “community”, genera-
ting a “third culture” (Burd 1991, p. 53, 55).

10 Local self-government is also often criticised for
being corrupt (Persson 1989, p. 21ff.), although dis-
tinctions are necessary here: Many reports refer to the local level, the higher unit of self-government
where relationships were far less personal and
mechanisms of social control much weaker.

11 An additional important duty before the introduc-
tion of an universal military service in 1874 that
was also – like the collection of taxes – imposed on the commune by external authorities and invol-
ed a lot of bargaining among villagers, was filling the local quota of recruits for the army.
of providing bureaucratic supervisors for peasant communities (Pearson 1989, p. 22). The newly created “rural societies” (sel’skoe obščestvo; sometimes referred to as “village societies” or “village communities”) did not always coincide territorially with the land communes, which posed many administrative problems in the following decades. But, in most cases, the existing institutions took over the new duties, which meant, de facto, that many of the former rights and responsibilities of the landlords were transferred to the land communes (Atkinson 1983, p. 22ff.). The elected representatives of the communes became members of higher-level administrative organs (zemstvo and volost’) and were, in return, responsible for the proper observance of the new laws in their villages. Duties, such as the maintenance of the infrastructure in the villages and some welfare functions were now officially handed over to the rural societies.

This legal-administrative situation set up a structural framework in which concrete practices of collectivism and egalitarianism were always embedded. “Neither the zemstvo nor the government can help the people if they do not work and care for themselves” (quoted in Figes 1986, p. 91) as one councillor at the time put it – and the commune was quite aware of that. Because they were collectively responsible for the fulfilment of external duties, in most cases any preferential access to the scarce local resources for one peasant would have meant disadvantages for all the others. When the commune tended to heavily control the acquisition of additional income from external sources (e.g. from labour migration to the cities), this was done not to keep to an abstract ideal of egalitarianism, but rather to avoid for its members additional burdens which could have originated from absenteeism and abandonment of land. The measures taken ranged, in this case, from the levying of a “departure fee” and annual payments, to refusal to issue the necessary passport, and the seizure of the property of the migrant (Burds 1991, p. 66ff.). But there seem to have been no general efforts to avoid economic stratification.12 Another example that represents a deep inroad into private property rights was communal interference in traditional patterns of property devolution. But here, too, the reason was that it was necessary to maintain self-supporting, tax-paying households because of the commonly imposed tax obligations (Worobec 1991, p. 42ff.). In still other cases, communal activities were not as tightly bound to demands from the state or the landlords as was the case with taxes and military service. But they were usually also based on the need to share the burden for commonly used goods or infrastructure that otherwise simply would not have been available:

To ploughing a part of the land communally was widespread at the end of the 19th century, and, except for paying taxes, the revenues were used for building grain stores, maintaining the school and the church, or supporting widows and orphans (Figes 1986).

Most of the activities that reinforced communal identity were not decided from a “higher authority” within the commune but involved permanent processes of forming opinions and bargaining. The communal assembly was merely the formal organ that had finally to reach a decision, but it relied heavily on local “public opinion” (Mironov 1985, p. 444). That processes of bargaining characterised the relationship with the landlord, his representatives, or state officials, too, is shown by Bohac (1991), who tracks these negotiations in great detail for the Manuilovo estate in the Tver province between 1810 and 1843. In a reciprocal process in which the commune played the role of a mediator, the local public developed its shared understanding of and position towards the outside world. The pool of common resources, common responsibilities, and a social institution essentially based on common participation made for the origin of what could be called a localised discursive formation, which was “public” in every sense of the word. It developed its own notions of “right” and “wrong”, which were impressively displayed in the sometimes cruel practices of peasant self-justice (samosud). The appliance of different standards for insiders and outsiders (Frank 1987, p. 241; Worobec 1987, p. 290) and the conviction that offences that threatened the agrarian basis of subsistence, such as horse theft, were not sufficiently punished by official law (Frank 1987, p. 264; Worobec 1987, p. 282) can be interpreted as expressions of that.

Although the end of the 19th century was surely a time of profound changes for the land communes, they kept many of their basic characteristics, at least until the eve of the Stolypin reforms of 1906; collectivism and egalitarianism as social practices of everyday life remained embedded in local public discourses that arose in response to a considerable degree of autonomy in meeting the requirements of high external demands on the one hand, and of a strongly localised economy on the other. These four aspects determined their very meaning and changed dramatically after the integration of the Russian countryside into the Soviet system.

“Vremja zastoja” – Time of the standstill: A double standard system at its height13

“Everything around here belongs to the kolkhoz, everything around here is mine” – this refrain from a famous Soviet song from 1947 celebrates the achievements of socialism and describes the situation after the revolution; at least formally it is not entirely incorrect. The members of a kolkhoz, in contrast to the workers on a state farm, owned all the capital of their farm in common except for the land which was given to them for temporarily unlimited use. But when villagers quote this sentence today, often
with a wink, it means that everything that belongs to the collective farm can be 'used' for personal auxiliary farming, borrowed in the best and stolen in the worst case.

The double entendre of this sentence sheds, in a symbolic way, a very accurate light on the situation in the collective farms. The introduction of the *kolkhoz* system made a deep and enduring inroad into the existing social and economic order in the villages. It represents the attempt to break up their localised character, to control them in a much more comprehensive way than had been the case under feudalism, to integrate them economically into the scheme of the planned economy and to foster the identification with the socialist normative system. But the fact that the sentence “everything around here belongs to the *kolkhoz*, everything around here is mine” could be quoted with full pathos at any official occasion as well as with a completely different meaning among friends makes clear that this attempt neither succeeded entirely nor led to a real amalgamation of the prerevolutionary land communes with the new collective farms. Instead it established, we would argue, a quite ambivalent relationship between the state, locally represented by the *kolkhoz*, the village community, and the private households. Cast now in the context of privatisation, this relationship is often called rural collectivism and egalitarianism.

This ambivalence was to a high degree nurtured and maintained by the sometimes antagonistic, but mostly symbiotic relationship between wage labour on the collective farm and personal auxiliary farming. After the revolution personal auxiliary farming as well as the collective farms were considered a transitional phenomenon that would, over the years, give way to state property as the highest form of property but by the time of Brezhnev attempts in this direction had already been abandoned. Private life and a private sphere, which ideally were also to disappear in a socialist society had now become uncontested elements of the Soviet everyday life and constituted a powerful niche for the individual (Studer a. Unfried 1999, p. 108, fig. 4). What Zaslavsky (1982, p. 126) calls the “historical compromise” of the Brezhnev-era – abstention from mass protests in exchange for stable prices, zero unemployment, and modest improvements in standards of living – assumed on the collective farms the shape of an informal tit for tat. In spite of their miserable wages, the workers showed up more or less regularly at their workplaces and sold part of their privately grown products to the farms if they had problems fulfilling the state delivery plans. In return, they received various kinds of support for their personal auxiliary farming. This symbiosis existed in principal on a fully legal basis: The third “Model Collective Farm Charter” (see Brunner a. Westen 1970), which had been approved by the All Union Congress of the Kolkhoz Farmers on November 27, 1969, stated that the collective farms had to support the personal auxiliary farming of their workers (art. 42), for instance by helping them to buy cattle or supplying them with pastures (art. 43). It even allowed the distribution of land to persons not employed by the farm but living on its territory (teachers, medical orderlies, employees of the village administration …), which was quite an important detail for the all-inclusive territorial power of the *kolkhozes* (art. 44). However, the concrete shape of these arrangements was rarely fixed in written form; instead it was either negotiated between the collective of workers and the farm management or agreed upon individually. These agreements opened up a huge arena for informal bargaining where the interests of the workers as farmers and of the chairman of the farm as a state representative collided. And the unofficial understanding of “everything around here belongs to the *kolkhoz*, everything around here is mine” makes clear where the workers had their priorities.

The parallel existence of two completely different but highly interdependent and spatially intermingled forms of production became one of the crucial characteristics of Soviet agriculture. The emergence of a respectively divided public sphere was its logical consequence. In a paradoxical way the mode of its formation parallels on a micro level of villages what has been described as the establishment of a civil public sphere in eighteenth- and nineteenth century Western Europe (Habermas 1989). Unlike city dwellers, the livelihood of the *kolkhozniks* was still highly contingent on the utilisation of their private property, their small plot of land, and the sale of their products at more or less free prices in so-called *kolkhoz*-markets. For this, they depended heavily on the help of the collective farm, and, as private producers, they raised claims that often tended to be ‘informal’ if not illegal. This created a sphere, which We would call “private-public”14. It could be found in the daily meetings of neighbours and friends, mostly in the kitchens of private houses and centred around prices on the local market, the availability of products on black markets, the compensation for having a *kolkhoz*–tractor work on one’s private plot of land or for borrowing a chainsaw, or in the risk of getting firewood from the nearby forest, etc. Exchange of information as well as reaching a consensus about many crucial questions of the village life were the functions of this private-public sphere.

On the other hand, more closely tied to the *kolkhoz* and in part to the rural administration, an “official-public sphere” was established in the villages. This sphere mirrored the integration of the village communities into the political, economic, and ideological realm of the state. It had its place in the general meetings of the members of the *kolkhoz* and in *kolkhoz* festivities as well as in the so-called cultural centres, the village chorus, and in the youth organisation of the Communist Party. Of course, this sphere served in part as an instrument for the maintenance and reproduction of state power, but it was nevertheless not only for show but was as “real” as the private-public sphere. The nationwide Soviet ceremonies, for example, on the 1st of May had become as important a part of everyday life as the orthodox holidays, which were celebrated in spite of all official attempts to sup-
press religion. Needless to say, the official-public and the private-public spheres were, in reality highly overlapping. It is much easier to separate them analytically than in social practices, but, even so, both reflected different, often contradictory, however simultaneously valid standards of power and legitimacy.

But the collective farms in rural areas were much more than sites of production and supporting infrastructure for personal auxiliary farming. They acted as comprehensive social institutions – referring to Goffman (1972, p. 11), some even call them “total institutions” (Gambold Miller 2001, p. 152; Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology 2001, p. 82, 127) – that structured daily life on a spatially defined field of responsibility. The already mentioned third “Model Collective Farm Charter” attributed to them the duty to “improve the living conditions in rural areas” by building clubs, libraries, sport facilities, and educational institutions, to support the schools and kindergartens with the education of the children, to organise communal feeding, to back the village ambulances and doctors, to facilitate public transport and to care for public infrastructure, such as streets, electricity, gas, etc. (art. 41). This all-encompassing character of the kolkhoz – it affected everybody living on its territory and involved many facets of everyday life – is responsible for the fact that patterns of relationships, which in urban environments usually define far reaching social networks, shaped in the countryside the character of the local community as a whole. Only in this way could it become a true point of reference for identification, determining the meaning of “we” in rural environments.

The differences between the kolkhozes and the situation in the pre-revolutionary land communes are obvious: In fact, the villages were still confronted with high demands from outside, but they had lost their autonomy in meeting them. It was no longer the collective of all households that was held responsible for the payment of taxes, the delivery of products, and decisions about crop rotation, but the chairman of the collective farm as the local representative of the state. Not by accident, chairmen were often posted from other regions. Starting with them, all kinds of demands and regulations trickled down through a sophisticated hierarchical system to each single worker. Now the state was no longer “outside” but had become present within the community in everyday interactions and was integrated even into personal auxiliary farming insofar as the ability to work one’s private plot depended on the support of the collective farms. What had been the local public sphere represented by the communal assembly and its elected elder had split up into a state-bound sphere of collective activities and a sphere of representation of private interests with differing standards of legitimacy. Finally, practices of peasant self-justice, which had so clearly expressed the peasants’ poor integration into state structures, disappeared during Soviet times.

“The notion of a Soviet cultural tradition may seem peculiar – even repugnant – to some. However, seventy years of active cultural and economic formation produced institutional forms particular (or particularly adapted) to Soviet society” argues Allina-Pisano (2003, p. 5). Especially in rural areas, a specific normative entanglement of “labour”, “income”, “justice” and “authority” seems to me to be a central part of that and raises serious questions about the assumption of a continuity of collectivism and egalitarianism. On one of the now restructured collective farms where I worked, the chairman earns not only approximately 20,000 $ a month, but he also holds a position of uncontested authority on his territory. In a patrimonial manner, he determines the project for restructuring the former kolkhoz into an agro-holding company as well as the maintenance of the infrastructure in the village, but he also sets rules of behaviour in public spaces, advises workers to clean their private courtyards, or gives a loan to one household but refuses it to another. Driving around in his Lada car, he once told me how much he would like to have a big Toyota jeep instead. When we asked him why he did not just buy one, he answered: “What would that look like – the chairman of a kolkhoz in a Toyota jeep? I bought one for my son who lives in the city but I can’t show up with a car like that here in the village!”

This short statement illustrates that it is less the highly unequal distribution of authoritative resources, than the public display of wealth that the chairman fears would really damage his image: Less his arbitrary interferences into the private matters of his workers, than the obvious fact that he brings in more money than one could earn with ‘honest’ labour. Being subjected to strict hierarchies was an integral part of the Soviet system and hardly put into question; income, however, was tied to a rather quantitative understanding of “labour” and “production” which would not allow for a truly pronounced differentiation. Even in pure theory, this did not mean egalitarianism in the sense of equal payments for everybody – “for good work, for better results – higher wages” states, for instance, the “Model Collective Farm Charter” (art. 27). In relative terms, “big” socioeconomic differences, which could be found in each Soviet village, were usually accepted as long as they were traced back to hard work and abstinence from drinking. However, it restricted the corridor of socially accepted income variations, and it is not by accident that one of the most pejorative denominations in the official Soviet terminology – “speculator” – stands for a person who earns money without working.

Under the very peculiar circumstances that distinguished agricultural production in the Russian countryside in Soviet times, this specific linkage of a “just income” with a quantitative and easily comparable understanding of labour was highly problematic and influenced the character of the communities as a whole. A substantial share of the income of each household was the result of its personal auxiliary farming activities for which the preconditions were often set in

15 The existence of a local community and that kolkhoz workers were also private producers constitutes two preconditions for the origin of a public sphere fundamentally different from the situation in urban contexts. They are widely neglected in works dealing with the topic of a public sphere in socialist societies (see for example Forest a. Johnson 2002; Garidel 1997; Grützmaccher 2002; Kniwayophen 1955, 1997; Oswald a. Voronkov 2003; Rolf 2002; Schlogel 1998; Sharpton 1989; Studler a. Unfried 1999).
bilateral agreements, partly discussed with others, but far from transparent to everybody. This, to some extent, hidden character of the individually differing arrangements for personal auxiliary farming, led to a comparatively high mistrust towards socioeconomically different states that can not be real-ised, socialist ideology, they are part of a difficultness and egalitarianism for the difficulties. It is all too obvious to blame collective farming and marriage celebrations. That the representatives of the collective farms lived in the villages, had their own children in the village schools, and were themselves dependant on help for their plot of land served to guarantee a real balancing of their functions. The resulting positive feeling among villagers of being tied together via the kolchoz as a localised welfare mechanism contributed substantially to the evolution of a new kind of communal identity. One might call this “collectivism”, but I doubt that it can be interpreted as an indicator for continuity.

Conclusion
It is all too obvious to blame collectivism and egalitarianism for the difficulties encountered in the privatisation and restructuring of the collective farms in Russia. As key concepts of socialist ideology, they are part of a past that privatisation aims to overcome. And, as the essence of a century-old rural culture, they constitute obstacles that can not be removed overnight. As plausible as these arguments are, it is necessary to contextualise them by relating them to concrete social practices and their structural environment. Once we do this, it seems to me, the image of continuity that the transhistorical use of the term evokes dissolves, and the stereotype of collectivism becomes a multitude of collectivisms, which are not unified by a superordinated idea, but differentiated by the figurations and arrangements they depict. This is not to neglect a certain degree of path dependency in the actual developments in the Russian countryside, but rather to call for searching for the path on the ground instead of using outdated, prerevolutionary maps or never realised, Soviet sketches.

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