

**Post-Soviet Social Capital:  
Evidence from Ethnography<sup>1</sup>**

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### Abstract

Social capital varies across societies; the character of social capital present in a particular society depends upon historical and structural conditions and behavioral patterns. This paper draws on ethnography to understand Soviet social networks and to uncover practices associated with maintaining and investing in social capital in the post-Soviet urban environment of Novosibirsk, Russia. Soviet policies helped create distinctive social network patterns of long-term, stable, dense homogenous social networks, with multiplex network ties utilized in long chains of indirect ties. Gift giving, spending time, and giving and reciprocating favors are important behaviors in maintaining social ties and thus increasing social capital. Russians invested heavily in social capital as an essential currency during the Soviet era. In the post-Soviet era wealthy residents of Novosibirsk can afford to discontinue social capital investments, while poor residents continue to invest in social capital as their sole or most reliable significant capital resource. Network patterns and cycles of obligation continue to give a distinctive post-Soviet character to marketization in Russia.

The concept of social capital has experienced a recent explosion of interest across the social sciences. Numerous studies in sociology, political science, and business tell us how useful social capital is in getting a job or in bettering business, improving emotional well-being or bolstering democracy. Some studies point out that there is more (or less) social capital in some places than in others (Fukuyama 1995), while others claim that there is less (or more) social capital today than in previous generations (Putnam 2000). Yet as with most heuristic constructs, the evidence found in the real world of social capital depends in great measure upon how the concept is defined. In one example, Fukuyama, drawing on his definition of social capital as an intangible “capability that arises from the prevalence of trust in a society” (1995: 26), decrees, without further evidence, that Russia is a society with low social capital.

This study begins by questioning that assertion. What does social capital look like in the Russian Federation? Is it actually perilously low? How is social capital built up in Russia? These questions are examined through ethnography in a large city in central Siberia. After sketching the contours of possible social capital in this urban Russian setting, this paper explores how people increase their social capital and the reasons people might do so under current social and economic conditions. This paper demonstrates how the nature of and particular investment in social capital, while in large measure persisting from the Soviet legacy of social and economic structures, is also shaped by the post-Soviet period, resulting in “post-Soviet social capital.” As this paper illustrates, using ethnography to investigate “really existing” social capital not only reveals otherwise obscured social facts but also better illuminates the concept of social capital itself.

## **I. Social Capital**

As a concept of recent vintage, social capital has suffered from rather too many than too few definitions being cast upon it. The concept’s origins have been analyzed elsewhere

(Schuller, Baron and Field 2000). There are nearly as many definitions of social capital as there are authors associated with this topic. As cited above, Fukuyama (1995) reduces social capital to a collective ethical virtue based on trust. Putnam, while acknowledging the relation to civic virtues, describes social capital more broadly, as representing "connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (2000: 19).

The discussion of social capital in terms of social networks, that is, in relations embodied in social structure, was advanced by Coleman (Coleman 1988; Coleman 1990; Coleman 1994). As part of his general social theory (1990), Coleman begins his discussion of social capital with the following remarks: "social relationships which come into existence when individuals attempt to make best use of their individual resources ... may also be seen as resources for the individuals," or in other words, social capital (1990: 300, 302). Social capital, or social-structural resources, includes trust and norms but only as these attitudes are embedded in concrete relations among individuals. As he writes elsewhere, "social capital is any aspect of informal social organization that constitutes a productive resource for one or more actors" (1994: 170). This social organization "facilitat[es] the achievement of goals that could not be achieved in its absence or could be achieved only at a higher cost" (1990: 304). The importance of social networks for the concept of social capital for Coleman is underscored by the fact that the key properties of social capital which he lists are properties of the social networks involved: closure, continuity, and multiplexity (1994: 170).

The work of Bourdieu concurs with the importance of networks for social capital (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Bourdieu writes: "Social capital is the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (1992: 119). While Coleman compares social with physical and human capital, Bourdieu focuses on cultural capital, economic capital and symbolic as the essential "species of capital" (1992) to which he

adds social capital. Bourdieu also emphasizes individuals' strategies, plans and semiconscious behaviors, or *habitus*, in which these forms of capital play crucial roles. Social capital is often utilized or mobilized in problem-solving strategies (Busse forthcoming), which requires that it be transformed into other forms, like other media of exchange. Yet unlike other resources, social capital, as inhering in social relationships, is often valued and acquired for its own sake and not solely as a resource for problem-solving strategies.

Like other species of capital, social capital is everywhere unevenly distributed, reflecting the stratification of the social structure in which it is based (Lin 2000). Similar to money, but differing from physical capital, social capital increases through circulation: the more often one uses it, the more of it one has, further hindering the disadvantaged. Yet social capital as informal social organization is also a friend of the poor: often those with fewest material resources are richest in networks of mutual support and obligation. It is these social resources which makes it possible for people to live through financial difficulties, as research in US inner-city ghettos (Kelly 1995; Stack 1974) and rural areas (Halperin 1990; Nelson and Smith 1999) suggests.

The most useful distinction among subsets of social capital of to date has been the one echoed by Putnam between bonding and bridging social capital (Putnam 2000). Bonding, or exclusive, social capital tends to "reinforce exclusive identities," homogeneity, and "undergird specific reciprocity and mobilizing solidarity" (2000: 22). Bridging, or inclusive, social capital tends to "encompass people across diverse social cleavages" and serves as "linkage to external assets and for information diffusion" (22).

If indeed social capital is only a collective ethic based on (generalized) trust, then Russia's social capital stock would be low, and its capacity for economic development likewise imperiled. The Soviet legacy has left a society with observed low levels of generalized trust (Misztal 1996) that make cooperation with strangers such as business deals and collective action difficult.

However, "connections," (*svyazi*) by whatever name, are an acknowledged vital part of Russian society: knowing the right people acts as the universal grease in an otherwise highly

inefficient bureaucratic machine. Inequality in distribution of social resources is also readily apparent in Russia, with a Soviet and even Tsarist legacy of contrast between those with access to power (*dostup k vlasty*) and those without. Any analytical description of this society must include some discussion of the role networks play in post-Soviet life. If social capital refers to resources available through networks or social structure, then an examination of daily interaction should reveal to what extent and what types of social capital exist in post-Soviet Russia.

As Suttles demonstrated decades ago (Suttles 1968), by examining daily interaction, ethnography can shed light on the social organization of people otherwise considered to have little, and illustrate the bases for social order where none is assumed to exist. How much "really existing" social capital researchers find depends on the definition they choose for this new concept and how that definition is measured.

## **II. Ethnography**

Social networks, the bedrock of social capital, have long been studied exclusively through quantitative methods, from name-generator surveys (Lin 1999) to advanced computer programs for illustrating complex interrelationships among individuals and groups. This quantitative research has laid the foundation for describing the shapes and contours of social networks. Social capital, with its definitional disagreements, has been studied in a wide variety of ways, from armchair theorizing (Fukuyama 1995) to surveys of voting, volunteering and other civic participation (Putnam 2000). Yet quantitative studies, counting relationships or behaviors, cannot measure the quality of those relations nor the role those relations play in daily life. Understanding the normative and moral components of those relationships, which transform existing networks into social capital, requires qualitative research *in situ*. Ethnography, with its emphasis on understanding individuals embedded in their specific social contexts, is ideally suited to explore a multifaceted concept such as social capital.

My ethnography is based on participant observation in a variety of everyday settings in Novosibirsk, Russia, where I lived from September 1999 to June 2000. Through trial and error, I

found settings in which my presence seemed natural or was readily explainable to local residents. As a scholar, I taught a sociology class at a technical college, and was treated as one of the regular faculty, invited to staff meetings and social events. As a volunteer, I worked with an umbrella non-profit organization founded by Americans and cooperated in a coalition effort by a number of NGOs to put on an annual third sector fair. As a church member, I attended church meetings in a local congregation of a US-based Christian evangelical church (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints). In roles expected of a foreigner, I was able to interact with Russians of different social and economic backgrounds and participate in their daily lives.

All of my interactions became the basis for fieldnotes, upon which the following accounts are based. Although I did conduct several open-ended, unstructured interviews, in comparing participant observation with interviews, I found the former to be a much richer source of information about social capital in daily life. The thick description which ethnography provides a better understanding of the character of social capital and the practices associated with its use and maintenance in contemporary Russia.

### **III. Novosibirsk**

The unofficial "capitol of Siberia," Novosibirsk at 1.7 million inhabitants is the third largest Russian city behind Moscow and St. Petersburg. Founded in 1893 as little more than a train stop on the trans-Siberian railway, Novosibirsk increased dramatically with the defense production centered there during the Second World War. It was selected for vital military airplane, tank and chemical weapons production precisely because of its distance from either war front, deep in the heart of Siberia.

With an urban economy based ever since the 1940s in the military-industrial sector, the city benefited greatly from a strong Soviet Union and suffers in a variety of ways from its collapse, including demilitarization, unemployment, emigration of highly talented people, and inflation. As a provincial city, Novosibirsk was dependent upon payments from Moscow for improvements and maintenance in urban infrastructure, transportation and housing. A second subway line

stands unfinished, with gaping holes where stations were planned, because subsidy payments from Moscow for public expenditure have been less forthcoming since 1991.

The city is the capitol of the agricultural Novosibirsk *oblast* (region), containing relatively fertile soil for Siberia, meaning that there are few food shortages in the city and that prices for domestic milk, meat and grain are reasonable. Yet prices for food beyond these three staples continues to rise faster than most salaries, and more and more people rely on the self-provisioning activities of growing potatoes, carrots, and other food on their own dachas for personal consumption or sale.

Novosibirsk has become the center of the growing formal and informal trade in the Siberian region. As the largest city east of the Urals, with the greatest concentration of transportation (rail, air and water), it becomes a logical center point for goods traveling from one part of Siberia to another, as well as the rapidly expanding trade from nearby Kazakhstan, Mongolia and China. Nearly all consumer goods available in Moscow are also available in Novosibirsk, since many of them travel from China or Korea through Novosibirsk to reach Moscow. Yet its distance from European Russia's western borders means that there is much less European and American business presence in Novosibirsk, measured in store fronts or direct investment, than in Moscow or St. Petersburg. Of the Western firms present, German firms are particularly well represented due to the presence of a German consulate in Novosibirsk.

Employment in Western-owned firms or joint ventures was on the rise until the crash of August 1998, since which time it has dropped dramatically, comprising a small fraction of total employment in the city. Participation, full or part time, in informal and formal economic trade and sales opportunities provides income for a significant portion of the rest of the city's residents. A few lucky or well-placed individuals have been able to benefit under gradually improving business conditions, running local businesses and turning a profit only by staying one step ahead of the tax inspection police and the mafia. The rest of the population make do on inadequate salaries or pensions by working through retirement or working multiple jobs. Most residents of

Novosibirsk still work in industry or trade inside privatized or state-owned enterprises, and a large portion of residents come from blue-collar occupations with only secondary general or secondary specialized educational credentials.

This primarily working-class town is also home to the third most prestigious university in Russia, Novosibirsk State University (NSU), a major technical university, Novosibirsk State Technical University (NSTU), and a wide variety of research institutes run by the Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences (SORAN), which has its headquarters in Novosibirsk. NSU, the institutes, and most of SORAN are located in an outlying *raion* (district) of Novosibirsk (Akademgorodok), spatially and socially isolated from the rest of the city. Many of these highly educated teachers, researchers and scientists continue to receive the low salaries that other state employees receive, near or below the publicly acknowledged poverty level, or "living minimum" wage.

During 1999-2000 the economy was relatively stable: inflation and prices continued to rise but at a slow and steady rate. There was much political advertising and discussion, since during this time there were national Duma elections and Yeltsin's resignation (December 1999), presidential elections (March 2000), and elections for the local governor of Novosibirsk *oblast* (won by the former mayor) and subsequent elections for Novosibirsk city mayor (won by the former vice-mayor). Yet except for local elections, these political events had little effect on individuals' daily lives.

Thus Novosibirsk, against the backdrop of a monolithic Soviet-era high modern urban landscape, has become a city of contrasts: of huge colorless concrete apartment blocks and tiny brightly lit kiosks and stores with goods of all descriptions; of wealthy new Russians and impoverished teachers; of young people buying European pop music and older people marching in Soviet-style May Day parades. Although the city is experiencing dramatic social change, Novosibirsk retains many features of its Soviet existence, from street names and high-rises to perduring social networks, in the post-Soviet present.

#### **IV. Social Structure**

In any society, history and social structure have influenced the context in which social networks are embedded. In the case of Novosibirsk, social networks have been influenced by several key characteristics of the Soviet Union. Here, I discuss only three: redistribution of housing and of employment in the command economy; shortages in housing and infrastructure investment; and Soviet ideological control. These factors created a society with low geographical mobility, low social mobility, and high social isolation, that have helped to form the stable, dense, multiplex, homogenous networks that characterize Novosibirsk today.

First, the command economy was at the very core of the Soviet experience. In redistributive economy, there could be no market for either labor or land (housing) (Polanyi 1944). A command economy inevitably leads to shortages (Kornai 1992), either a natural deficit or an artificial lack due to an inability to coordinate supply and demand. In the case of housing, the chronic shortage of units also reflected the low priority of housing for ordinary citizens, like other consumer goods, in Soviet economic priorities.

The need for central control over housing and the shortage of units resulted in a particularly stringent system of residential registration, requiring all citizens to have a permit (*propiska*) to live at a specific address in a particular city. Registration could not be changed without approval of authorities, and leaving one residence required having another to move to, an opportunity officially under the control of the state. Unofficially, people worked around these requirements by finding someone through their connections (social capital) with whom to exchange apartments or access to someone in power who could get their assignment changed. But the difficulties of making these arrangements and the disinclination of the state to permit voluntary relocation made for very low geographical mobility, from village to city, between cities, or within an individual city.

Because of the distinct geographical hierarchy in the Soviet Union (Zaslavsky 1995), the size and centrality of every village and city determined what access its inhabitants had to jobs,

consumer goods, housing quality and infrastructure (electricity, water, communications and transport). Hence strictly controlled geographical mobility also hindered social mobility: from rural and small town locations, moving up requires moving out, and the *propiska* system effectively limits both.

Low social mobility was also affected by the central redistribution of employment, with opportunities for placement and advancement formally managed only by state officials. Upon graduating high school or college, a student would either receive an assignment or choose from among assignments offered by the school. After dramatic upward mobility in early Soviet years (Fitzpatrick 1979), there has been little genuine either intra- or intergenerational upward occupational mobility since the 1960s (Fitzpatrick 1993; Lenski 1994; Matthews 1972).<sup>2</sup> In a society where social status and non-monetary material benefits are closely linked to occupation, this lack of mobility in employment has been synonymous with lack of social and economic mobility. Low occupational mobility has also been another factor in low geographical mobility: since employers could provide *propiski* to their employees, not changing jobs implies not changing city.

Officially, people went where they were assigned. Unofficially, people often sought to rearrange their assignments to suit themselves; such finagling usually took effort and the help of well-connected acquaintances (social capital again). Many Soviet-raised adults I met have some story about how they or a family member either avoided an assignment or got the assignment they wanted through intervention of some connection. In the Soviet era, career counseling was unheard of, and since Soviet education, as in Europe, tracks students into vocational or higher education at young ages, people tended to choose occupations already represented in the family. The tendency for occupations to run in families is a noted feature of life in Novosibirsk.<sup>3</sup> This has a positive aspect: since connections are crucial to arranging the most desirable assignments, choosing a profession in which family members work guarantees inside assistance.

Soviet job assignments were meant to be long-term, and though they never approached the rigidity of the "iron rice bowl" in China (Bian 1994), Soviet employment relations usually lasted many years if not a lifetime. The difficulties in rearranging assignments helped deter job-hopping, but long-term employment was also fostered by the social benefits assigned through the workplace, such as housing assignments, food coupons or special stores, not to mention the expected pension. Since people waited on lists at their workplace for durable goods such as refrigerators, cars, or larger apartments, shortages in consumer goods served to reinforce long-term employment.

Long-term employment has meant long-term, stable relations with work colleagues, relations that spanned years, even decades. Working with well-known colleagues in a stable collective has been a significant and valued experience for most people who grew up in the Soviet era. This is not to say that all colleagues are well liked, but the presence of a difficult person in a stable collective is accepted as is an irascible uncle in an extended family. I found that the desire for positive relations among at least most colleagues and a desire that those collegial relations endure over time are values shared by a large portion of the Soviet-raised population. Irina, just beginning her first teaching assignment, expressed to me apprehension lest any of her new colleagues not like her, because she felt keenly that acceptance by the collective of teachers was important to her enjoying her work. Olga, working in a candy factory, told me what makes her job bad is not the long hours or other conditions but the fact that the workers do not get along with her or with each other, that they are always bickering.

Many people in state-sector jobs with minimal pay, such as school teachers or doctors, told me that although they do not get paid enough to live on, they would not quit their job because of the good relations (*khoroshoye otnoshenie*) within their collective. Such stable work relations provide a comfortable (*udobno, uyutno*), warm (*serdechno*), and family-like work setting. Birthdays and holiday celebrations in the work collective are as much a tradition as family celebrations. The oft-repeated sentiment valuing positive relations suggested to me an additional

unspoken sense of mutual obligation to the collective and to maintaining those warm relations, both for their own sake and as a network to which one can turn in time of crisis, representing strong workplace-based social capital.<sup>4</sup>

Small families of high divorce rates and low birth rates, which have characterized much of Soviet history and the post-Soviet present, stem in part from severe housing shortages and low living standards (Hosking 1992: 397-398). Three generations of single parent, one-child families have resulted in small family networks truncated by divorce, similar to truncated networks among inner-city ghetto residents in the US (Stack 1974). In Novosibirsk, most people have one sibling if any, and on average one parent, one aunt or uncle, one grandparent, and one or two cousins.

In addition to the Soviet imperative to control redistribution of housing and employment, the imperative for ideological control through isolation has also influenced Soviet social network development. First, the need to keep Soviet citizens from the "contamination" of capitalist ideas included preventing any chance of meeting with foreigners. Prohibitions of contact with the West and strict controls on emigration minimizing "exit options" (Hirschman 1970) limited the choices for network members to fellow Soviet citizens. Second, whether intentional or not, the government's low priority for investment in communications and transportation infrastructure, which makes contact across the country or even across regions difficult, has resulted in isolation even from fellow Soviet citizens. Along with low geographical and occupational mobility this internal isolation has helped to contribute to the segmented, cell-like nature of Soviet society which can still be observed today. Russians have long been spatially and socially isolated from each other and the rest of the world.

Social isolation has specific effects on social networks. Like the roots of a potted plant, social network chains turn in on themselves when they reach a barrier. Social isolation leads to homophony in group composition, but also to even greater homogeneity in shared worldviews and shared values about how things "should" be. Information about the outside world cannot flow into a group that has no contacts with other social groups or the outside world at large. In

terms of social isolation, life in the former Soviet Union was similar to life in US ghettos, where social isolation from mainstream society has been high and is increasing (Wilson 1987). This similarity of situation may explain why post-Soviet social capital shares some similarities with the social capital found in US ghettos (Kelly 1995). In Russia, results of decades of social isolation can be seen in remarkably uniform social attitudes<sup>5</sup> and a noticeable intolerance for different ways of life.

In summary, Soviet control over housing and employment distribution, shortages and isolation created long-term employment relations and stable, long-term residence patterns, leading to small, stable, and dense social networks, more than usually homogenous. Thus economic and political conditions, by allowing or preventing social interaction along particular lines, influence the shape social networks take.

## **V. "Post-Soviet" Social Capital**

In present-day Novosibirsk, social networks on the whole are dense with high closure (high incidence of people in one network knowing each other), high multiplexity (comprehending a wide range of activities and services), and high continuity, characteristics of effective social capital (Coleman 1994). Individuals are tightly bound up in "webs of affiliation" (Simmel 1955) with greater emphasis on strong than weak ties, resulting in densely knit clusters (Wellman 1988). Limited network membership has meant that people use their existing ties for a wide variety of uses, leading to multiple uses of the same social ties. Drawn primarily from workplace, school or residence, networks tend to be extremely homogenous in social and economic composition. This leads to mobilizing long chains of indirect ties (Lonkila 1997) which are established in order to find someone with the necessary skill or access that is lacking in one's own group.

Though social networks in general tend to homogeneity, Soviet conditions have led to unusually homogenous small groups, sharing not only occupation or neighborhood but also political opinion and life experiences. Long exposure to Soviet-only social networks created a

large shared repertoire of knowledge among network members, a huge field of taken-for-granted ideas and experiences (Berger and Luckmann 1966). This extensive taken-for-grantedness continues to characterize social interaction in Novosibirsk.<sup>6</sup> Despite the isolated, clustered, cell-like nature of society, norms of behavior and attitudes are widely shared across the population.

As in Russia generally, in Novosibirsk there is a sharp distinction between friends (*druzya*) and acquaintances (*znakomie*). In Novosibirsk face to face contact is privileged over mediated forms of contact (letters, phone, email), and people often see their close friends or family members at least once a week if they live somewhere in the city, even when this requires long travel on public transportation. Despite, or perhaps because of, small family size, family bonds continue to be highly valued in Russian society, and people sacrifice much to keep the ties they do have. People tend to limit themselves to two or three close friends and only a small circle of acquaintances. Many find it difficult to meet new people and if they did would be slow to incorporate them into their small, stable, fixed groups.

Although the historical conditions of the Soviet Union are distinctive, the resulting social network patterns are not unique. There are several other historical situations which have also led to high closure, high multiplexity and high continuity of social networks. Geography can be a factor, such as living on a remote island or an inaccessible mountain village. Economics can be a factor, as in urban ghettos or rural area, where people are too poor to leave and overall conditions poor enough to discourage in-migration. Culture, particularly traditions that discourage moving around and reward solidarity, can also create a situation of high closure and high continuity of networks. In medieval Europe, for example, transport was slow and difficult and traditions encouraged people to stay put, developing much the same type of closed, stable networks. Some choose social isolation and others have it forced upon them, but the resulting networks are similar.

Research, particularly by anthropologists, has well documented norms and customs of people living far away in small, isolated groups: islands (Geertz and Geertz 1975; Malinowski

1984), European villages (Banfield 1958; Wylie 1974), African villages (Turner 1967). The content of the norms varies from place to place, but the overall form is similar. High continuity in a given set of people with high closure results over time in specific behaviors becoming fixed as social norms. These norms are then reinforced by copious amounts of informal social control, dispensed by old men, old women, or whichever general busybodies the culture prefers. Again, the specific content varies but the form is the same. In each case, the networks are shaped by the geographical, economic, physical or social conditions, and in each case, how individuals use the networks, how they tap into their social capital, is influenced by what kind of social networks they have at their disposal.

In the case of the Soviet Union, ideology and communist control took the place of geography or economics. Soviet control of all aspects of citizens' lives transformed a gigantic country of rapidly growing cities and even more rapid industrialization into the social equivalent of a myriad of tiny islands or isolated mountain villages, an archipelago of social clusters in a sea of mass society. Despite urbanization and massive industrialization, Russian social life in even its largest cities suggests more of the village or island than it does America's ideas of urban life as contrasted with small town life (Hummon 1990).<sup>7</sup> Using place as an identifier of type, "post-Soviet social capital" shares many similarities with "small town social capital" or "island social capital," these isolated, closed, continuous, multiplex networks with strong norms and social control.

## **VI. Investment in Social Capital**

This section examines behaviors and norms practiced in Novosibirsk which serve to strengthen social bonds, mutual reliance and obligation, thus increasing the quality of social capital. Because social capital is both a resource and valued for its own sake, these behaviors can be undertaken either as conscious "investment" in social capital or as enjoyable activities, depending on the person, the specific behavior, and the situation. In daily life, which tends to evade precise categorization, motives for social capital related behaviors often mix enjoyment of

socializing and awareness of reinforcing obligations. Because these are difficult to disaggregate, in this paper, I refer to all activities that could increase social capital as social capital investments, without regard to motive.

How people invest in social ties depends on whether the social network involves vertical or horizontal ties. Horizontal social capital is found in ties among socially equal people, or individuals of similar socio-economic position. Vertical social capital, in contrast, resides among pairs of socially unequal individuals, such as patron-client ties (Eisenstadt and Roniger 1984). Certain practices are associated with strengthening a relationship with someone in a superior position (currying favor through bribes or gifts, behavior that is commonly called "corruption" in the West, though not seen as such in Russia), while different behaviors are used for strengthening positions of social equals (developing a friendship, for example).

In Russia, cultivating vertical social capital includes giving bribes or gifts to officials. A widespread practice throughout the former Soviet Union, giving to officials within reason was seen as a normal part of getting anything done (Millar and Wolchik 1994). So accepted was it that people held shared understandings of the proper words, behaviors and typical amounts used when giving such gifts. Bribing officials was but one of the actions related to the indigenous concepts of a "useful acquaintance" (*poleznoye znakomstvo*), *blat* (connections, or "strings"), or obtaining something *po blaty*, (by "pulling strings"). *Blat* refers to the influence a person has through access (*dostup*) to someone who has control over resources or decision-making. *Blat* is similar in usage to the Chinese notion of *guanxi*, or influence, which has been discussed in recent qualitative research on China (Yan 1996; Yang 1994). Because *blat* has received extensive treatment in a recent work on Russia's "economy of favors" (Ledeneva 1998), based also on qualitative research conducted in Novosibirsk, this research focuses instead on the less well examined practices of investing in horizontal social capital, or relations among equals.

### Creating New Ties

There are two basic forms of investing in social capital: creating new social ties and maintaining and reinforcing existing social ties. In Novosibirsk, I noticed much less of the former than the latter behavior. Soviet social structure affected people's behavior by allowing them opportunities for reinforcing friendships, maintaining work collegial affiliations, and repeated interactions with long-term neighbors, while restricting opportunities for meeting strangers. Making new acquaintances was very difficult in the Soviet system.<sup>8</sup> This resulted in generations of Soviet citizens with well-developed habits for retaining friends and useful acquaintances, but with poorly developed habits for making new acquaintances.

With *perestroika* and the subsequent regime collapse, there has been a dramatic increase in opportunities for making new acquaintances, though still fewer than in the open societies of the West. As an outsider, I continually met new people in Novosibirsk and had ample opportunity to observe Russians' reactions to meeting strangers. I frequently noted that many people, from various socio-economic backgrounds, have difficulty using these newly provided opportunities to meet strangers. It is particularly difficult for older residents of Novosibirsk to make new acquaintances. Young people (*molodyozh*) have an easier time making new acquaintances, both because this is common in their stage in the life cycle and because the Soviet system at its most expansive has had less impact on their behaviors than that of previous generations. Yet on the whole there is a marked reluctance to take the initiative in greeting strangers, a preference to stick to known others in mixed groups, and other behaviors that can seem rude or standoffish to Americans.

More than once, someone introduced me by name to a group, yet did not introduce group members to me by name, nor did others volunteer their names to me, neither in the group setting nor afterwards. In the department where I taught, I was never introduced to part-time teachers who stopped by occasionally or came to meetings. For the other teachers they were a part of the taken-for-granted landscape, so it did not occur to the full-time staff that either the other part-time staff or I needed an introduction to one another.

At meetings of the church congregation I attended, people kept to themselves and did not greet newcomers, which is uncharacteristic for this church's congregations in other locations. Even young people at church had difficulty approaching others their own age who were new to their Bible study or social events. As recent converts to this new religion, many Novosibirsk members have difficulty in adopting this church's cultural norm of outgoing friendliness.<sup>9</sup>

A Western-funded non-profit umbrella organization, the Siberian Civic Initiatives Support Center (SCISC), was founded by two American activists almost six years ago to foster democracy in Novosibirsk through encouraging the growth of grass-roots organizations. Seeing voluntary association as central to democracy, leaders of SCISC consciously design their meetings and seminars (on topics related to starting and running non-profit organizations) to allow attendees to meet each other and socialize through interactive sessions and during coffee breaks. In my observations of such meetings, I noticed that newcomers to the seminars kept to themselves and were less likely to introduce themselves to other attendees during free time. This was not because they were shy, since the same people participated freely in group discussions led by the facilitator, which is somewhat like a classroom setting. They seemed uncomfortable only with the more unfamiliar opportunity for informal socializing with unknown persons. In contrast, people who worked at the Center, or had been coming to seminars at the Center for some time, showed both more willingness and more ability in voluntarily initiating contact with unknown others.<sup>10</sup>

Seeing this contrast, I recognized this reluctance to greet newcomers as a lack of ability due to lack of practice. Actions which middle-class Americans associate with politeness, extending a hand or at least introducing oneself to a stranger, is in fact a skill, developed and reinforced through the practice of continually meeting new people, that arises from the geographical and social mobility so distinctive to American society.<sup>11</sup> Without geographical and social mobility, there have traditionally been few strangers for Russians to meet, and hence residents of Novosibirsk lack practice in making their acquaintance.

Part of the difficulty in meeting strangers, or of incorporating them into their small groups, arises from the deep-seated distrust of strangers prevalent in Novosibirsk. Though there is relatively little crime in Novosibirsk by global standards for a city of its size, there has been a significant increase in crime, particularly theft, since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The fear of unknown others and general distrust is of long standing, earning Russia the reputation of being a nation low in generalized trust (Misztal 1996) or a "low trust" country (Fukuyama 1995). However, this mistrust is not always inappropriate, since at one time those unknown persons might have represented or betrayed them to the KGB, while today, those unknown persons might wish them bodily or financial harm.<sup>12</sup>

As both a stranger and a foreigner, I experienced Russian reactions to both simultaneously. Mostly, reaction to my Americanness was positive; with few exceptions, people in Novosibirsk are interested in Americans and many were fascinated by meeting in me their first genuine American. Yet my foreignness did play a part in individuals' suspicions and disinclination to include me in social groups.<sup>13</sup> This suspicion of foreigners by people raised in a closed society influenced my choice of settings in which foreigners and particularly Americans were welcomed and accepted.

Foreigners who try to conduct scholarship or business in Russia know the difficulty of trying to obtain access, permission, approval, or registration by working through bureaucratic channels. However, another common experience is the way that the same approval or registration can be rapidly expedited once the outsider has established positive relations with a staff member or well-placed individual who can make the appropriate phone calls and other arrangements. I noticed the difference in willingness to be helpful after there was some social or human contact rather than merely an official contact. Many outsiders can attest to the sensation of having finally broken through a wall of resistance after establishing a social contact, through well-placed gifts, pleasant conversation, or the sharing of food and drink (see below).

Maintaining ties so precariously won becomes an important priority for anyone, Russian or foreigner, who desires a decent life in post-Soviet Russia.

### Maintaining Social Ties

In contrast to creating social ties, behaviors used for maintaining and reinforcing horizontal social ties in Novosibirsk are numerous and well developed. This paper will discuss only three: favors, giving gifts and spending time, particularly in connection with food. These behaviors have been extensively developed over the Soviet period, and though there are some changes with marketization, these habits are robust enough to survive at least for some time under changed economic conditions.

### *Favors*

Using favors in relationships is based on social exchange, characterized by unspecified and diffuse obligations for return and an undetermined time frame for reciprocation (Blau 1989). Social exchange requires confidence in the partner's future behavior, or interpersonal trust, which is developed through repeated interaction. Although it is true that generalized trust (Govier 1997; Misztal 1996), or "out-group" trust, is very low in Novosibirsk, trust of friends and acquaintances, or "in-group" trust, is very high, because of the decades of repeated interactions and exchanges within the consistent small groups which allow people to build trust.

Favors are one way of both testing and reinforcing interpersonal trust. One common favor, often used to initiate a cycle of favors, is borrowing money. In a cash-based society, such as post-Soviet Russia, people are often in need of cash—for example, to tide them over until their next payday.<sup>14</sup> Some prefer to borrow money only from neighbors, others from coworkers, some only from family, and still others prefer not to borrow at all. But most people find that they must borrow some money at some time, not unlike poor peasants or urban dwellers around the world.

Wage arrears, when employers delay payroll for weeks or even months, a noticeable feature of the Russian economy after the 1998 economic crisis, is an especially crucial time for borrowing money from network members. With no cash but what can be gleaned from

moonlighting, workers who suffer wage arrears must constantly run around borrowing and repaying sums of money. Of course, the more widespread the wage arrears, the less cash is available in the network, and in particularly difficult times, there might be no cash to borrow. Repaying borrowed money when promised is important when cash is tight in the network as a whole. One person's delay to repay causes the second to borrow from a third who does not really have any spare cash but cannot refuse the favor because of long-standing social obligations. One shock to such a network demonstrates how tightly coupled together individuals are, and how little room for slack there is in a network with few other resources.

College students described loaning not only money but also books, clothing and other personal items for temporary use, as not uncommon for young people in other societies. Favors also include assistance in daily tasks and chores, and since so many tasks in Novosibirsk require actual physical effort, there are countless favors to ask. Planting and harvesting at the *dacha* (summer cottage) usually requires the participation of extended family members, and those without sufficient family might ask a friend for help in exchange for some of the produce.<sup>15</sup>

People approve of asking favors when necessary, and of granting those requests whenever possible, since everyone recognizes the absolute necessity of occasional assistance. However, some, understanding the cost of reciprocation, try to minimize their outstanding obligations by asking for help only in extreme cases. Others initiate favors (volunteer to help) in a calculating (*koristnii*) manner, expecting that the favor will be need to be repaid and thereby creating a sense of obligation in the recipient, consciously making more "credit slips" [Coleman, 1990 #49]. This is one way that some Russians make conscious investments in their social capital. Because favors are a key currency by which friendships are made, maintained and demonstrated, many Russians do not appreciate when someone manipulates this "currency" in a calculated (*koristnii*) way to gain "credits." Offers of help that seem genuine (*nastoyashchii*) or unselfish (*beskoristnii*) are more appreciated and put less strain on the sacred nature of friendship.

The time delay between favor and reciprocation is crucial, forming the crux of social exchange (Blau 1989). That is, a favor that is immediately repaid forms no credit. Only a delay between a favor and its reciprocation creates the sense of obligation so essential to social capital. This delay weaves people into a never ending cycle of helping and being helped, doing favors and having favors done. This web of obligations can feel safe, stable and secure, the only "sure thing" in an uncertain world, where the collapse of the state and the economy has brought inflation, unemployment and other uncertainties.<sup>16</sup>

For some, this web might seem stifling or restricting, and these might try to minimize their obligations to others. But in Novosibirsk past and present, no one has survived without help from network members, and receiving this help, which is unavoidable, builds up social obligations, likewise as inescapable. After an appropriate time delay, a friend or family member can ask for help in return, which both discharges the obligation and creates an environment in which either party may ask for help in the future. As the cycle continues, individuals' social capital continually increases, and so their stake in remaining in the web also increases. Many who were raised in Novosibirsk express apprehension at the thought of anyone moving from the city in which they were raised. Not only does this express discomfort at the unaccustomed geographical mobility but also a sense of being defenseless when bereft of the networks of mutual obligation and affection that have been built up over a lifetime. Geographical mobility wipes out social capital savings the way runaway inflation eradicates bank accounts, and for some the loss of social capital would seem the greater threat.

### ***Gift Giving***

A three-year old boy, Nikolai, putting on his coat and hat at the end of daycare, talks excitedly with a boy of his own age. As they prepare to leave with their respective parents, Nikolai hands his friend a small plastic toy he found, with the words *ya tebye podaryu* ("I gift [this] to you").<sup>17</sup> In a similar situation in the U.S., a child might have simply said "here, this is for you." Yet in the encounter in Novosibirsk, the child emphasizes the "gifting" aspect of the

exchange, imbuing the toy with the meaning of recognizing a relationship. This verbally deliberate presentation of a gift seems to be in clear imitation of gifting behavior that Nikolai has observed in adults around him.

The importance of gift giving as a practice of social cohesion is eloquently laid out by Mauss in his analysis of "archaic" societies (Mauss 1990). The fundamental principle behind gift giving is obligation: the obligation to give, the obligation to receive, and the obligation to reciprocate (1990: 13, 39). This three-fold obligation applies not only to tangible presents but also gifts of food or assistance. Research in China has also highlighted the importance of gift giving for maintaining social ties and creating debts of obligation among individuals (Yan 1996; Yang 1994).

To "gift" (*podarit'*) is an important verb in Russian. It is used frequently in Novosibirsk, even on non-holiday occasions. This verb marks an action of generosity, and when used, indicates to the receiver that the object is neither loan nor sale. Alena, who sells souvenirs and trinkets at a small counter in the bricolage of a post-Soviet department store, gifted (*podarila*) me some sticks of incense when I visited her at her sales counter one day. By verbally labeling the action as gifting, she marked the object as a present, not a sale. Through the object and her behavior she was expressing her role as "host" and I her "guest" at her shop counter.

That the concept of gifting is not limited to this city is illustrated through an episode which took place in Omsk, a large city twelve hours west of Novosibirsk by train. Shortly before national elections in December 1999, Natalia, who was running for a government office, gifted small wallet-sized paper calendars, printed with the party's name and her face, to friends and acquaintances. She was gifting these calendars after church meetings one day when I was visiting a congregation of the Church of Jesus Christ in Omsk. When I reminded her that political advertising was not permitted in the church, she said with surprise, "I'm not permitted to give gifts (*podarit' podarki*) at church?" Though supporters of various political factions distributed such small calendars as advertising in the subway and on street corners in several

cities, Natalia chose to interpret her own action toward friends and acquaintances at church as gifting and not as politically motivated. In her mind, these calendars presented an opportunity to increase good will through small gifts to her acquaintances at no cost to herself.<sup>18</sup>

In Novosibirsk, people give significant gifts for major occasions and small items at other times, but always within the context of an existing relationship. The most important holidays for gifting are birthdays, New Year's Day (January 1)<sup>19</sup> and International Women's Day (March 8). Naturally, what gifts people give depends on their financial means. Yet presents also carry a Soviet legacy: the chronic deficit of consumer goods meant that even the simplest supplies, clothing or hardware once made excellent gifts because of their scarcity.<sup>20</sup> Today's rich abundance of merchandise has eliminated much of the search cost for presents: consumer goods can be found everywhere, though one does have to learn where to look for which types of goods. Yet prices for merchandise often put it out of reach for some of the population, hence modest, simple gifts continue to circulate among circles of new post-Soviet poor.

Gifting must take place in context—at an appropriate time, within an existing relationship, or a combination of both. Small items like incense and pocket calendars can be given within an existing relationship on any occasion, but larger gifts must wait for an appropriate time. In the US and other countries, missionaries of the Church of Jesus Christ frequently give away a book of scripture (*The Book of Mormon*) to anyone expressing interest in their church. In Novosibirsk, missionaries found people unexpectedly hesitant to take books, even when interested in the message. Instead these American missionaries (mostly young men and women in their early twenties) hand out pamphlets (the smaller the better) or photocopied pages to those who express interest in learning about this "new" church. The missionaries learned (perhaps without recognizing it) the local sentiment that an object as significant as a book cannot be simply handed off outside the context of a special occasion or a preexisting relationship. A gift implies social ties and potential reciprocity. Residents of Novosibirsk do not share the attitude more common in the US to see the object as "just a book." Instead they continue to imbue it with meaning as a

marker of a potential relationship, of having an intrinsic value beyond its worth as a commodity (although books are also not inexpensive items). By continuing to bestow meaning on objects, including a relationship with ties of obligation, residents of Novosibirsk resist the relentless march of capitalism toward the impersonal nexus of cold hard cash and the reduction of the objective world to mere commodities.

The missionaries have begun giving these books on the occasion of someone joining the church, an occasion which residents of Novosibirsk deem suitable for gifts. Baptism into the church is treated by many locals as an occasion like a birthday, accompanied by visiting, cake and well-wishes: hence gifts, though not necessary, are socially appropriate. Furthermore, by the time a person joins the church they have usually developed a social relationship with missionaries or other members. The new convert sees the gift as a marker of the new relationship, and often desires the person presenting the book to write an inscription in it.<sup>21</sup>

Presentation style is crucial in marking the object as a gift, the action as "gifting," and the occasion as something significant. As Mauss explains of elaborate presentation styles: "The aim of all this is to display generosity, freedom, and autonomous action, as well as greatness. Yet, all in all, it is mechanisms of obligation, and even of obligation through things, that are called into play" (Mauss 1990: 23). Since gifts in Novosibirsk are not necessarily wrapped (due in part to the long history of paper shortages), the manner of delivering a speech and the care taken in the "presentation" are the social means to mark the item as a gift and the action as gifting.

In formal gift giving in Novosibirsk, the gift is held in both outstretched hands of the person who is presenting the gift, who stands facing the recipient and makes a speech prepared for the occasion. The speech usually includes well wishes (see below) and rehearsal of the reason or occasion for the gift. The recipient then takes the present in both hands and makes a speech in return, beginning with gratitude at being so honored.

This behavior was especially noticeable on the occasion when a youth volunteer organization opened an affiliate office in the regional library of a small village in the Novosibirsk

*oblast*. With the one village journalist in attendance, the city NGO representative formally presented in outstretched arms a packet of office supplies to the director of the village's new youth volunteer center (the village's head librarian). Purchased with grant money, these imported Western supplies were materials that the village director could never have afforded nor even acquired in her village. Such a significant gift could not simply be dropped off, but needed to be formally presented, accompanied by snapshots, applause and champagne.<sup>22</sup>

At the same occasion, the local government representative (the village's deputy mayor), who was present, donated several boxes of a popular chocolate candy as his way of congratulating the new volunteer center. He was content to tell them about the candy donation, but several other people in attendance insisted that he also follow the ritual of presentation, symbolically handing the chocolate boxes to the director of the new center. Since this involved taking the half-dozen boxes out from the cupboard in which they had already been stored, "presenting" them and then stowing them back in the cupboard, fulfilling this ritual was important enough to some in attendance that they go out of their way to do so.

Not only is boxed chocolate (especially this popular local brand) a universal gift, but his speech further emphasized the fitness of the present: it represented his wish for them to have many visitors and similar events (for which chocolates are an important instrument of hospitality, along with tea, as discussed below). The chocolates, which had been previously gifted to the village mayor's office, 1) had been a gift to him, 2) were his gift to the new volunteer director in hopes they would later become 3) a gift of hospitality to future visitors of the center. In Novosibirsk, a box of chocolates is not just a box of chocolates.

In an informal setting, such as a birthday party with friends or colleagues, the presentation is also preceded by a speech, which may be serious or funny, and then the present is brought out and given to the recipient. Standing and using both hands, though not unheard of, is not required in informal groups. At the college where I taught, collective faculty celebrations are relatively informal, due to the long-term personal relationships among the small teaching staff. Of the five

full-time teachers, three had studied together, and they all had many years of mutual relations. All the female teachers were presented small gifts for International Women's day by their male colleagues, who presented the gifts with limerick-like "certificates," demonstrating the collegial and humorous relations among the small cadre of teachers.<sup>23</sup>

Rules of presentation apply not only to presents, but also to wishes (*zhelanie*), which are also "gifted" as a means of reinforcing a relationship. To mark off the wish from ordinary conversation, the person begins with "I have a wish for you," and then states three wishes, sometimes using old-fashioned, fairy-tale-like language and usually in a "recitation" tone of voice. "Wishes" have often been thought out in advance, much like toasts at a wedding. Wishes typically include health ("strong Siberian health" *krepkoye sibirskoye zdorov'e*) and some type of good fortune appropriate to the time of life, whether many children, grandchildren, or long life. Wishes rarely refer to financial wealth, but usually encompass some type of spiritual and emotional attributes such as happiness, inner peace, faith, or hope. Wishes are sometimes presented in the speech along with tangible presents, and sometimes alone, but when "presented" as described above are considered socially equivalent to gifts.<sup>24</sup> In the church congregation I attended, composed mostly of poorer individuals, wishes often replaced gifts that they were unable to afford. In settings of equals, because people recognize *zhelanie* as gift suitable for reinforcing relations, acknowledging occasions and relationships is not destroyed by the lack of money.

One teacher at NSU told me that among her acquaintances (primarily other teachers and researchers) people have stopped having birthday dinners in the post-Soviet era, because they cannot afford to cook the large quantities of food they would have traditionally made for their guests. In the church congregation, they socialize primarily over herbal tea and cookies, and not over entire meals as they might have before. None of this group seemed ashamed by having only light fare to offer. Perhaps it is because they did not know each other under more prosperous

circumstances, but it is certain that they recognize that the other church members also can only afford cookies, and they may find comfort in the equality of poverty.<sup>25</sup>

Because the obligation of reciprocity presumes financial equality, maintaining friendly relations with people of unequal financial means is difficult. If one person extends a favor or gift, the second responds in kind at a later date. If the second is unable to reciprocate in some way at a later time, this person remains indebted, and what was friendship becomes over time a vertical, or patron-client, tie, or the relationship itself is terminated. This painful divide among former equals can be seen across Russia as it polarizes into rich and poor. People who have acquired a great deal of money find it difficult to socialize with former friends who have remained poor. The less wealthy are embarrassed to be in company with newly-wealthy friends, since they can never receive a gift from their wealthy former associates without it becoming vertical social capital, because they cannot reciprocate in kind. Thus the increasing stratification in Novosibirsk is gradually undermining the cohesion of preexisting social groups, demonstrating one effect of marketization on social capital.

### ***Spending Time***

The idea of spending time for impression or relationship management exists across societies.<sup>26</sup> In the U.S., employees might come early or stay late to make a good impression with the boss. For Russians, spending time at work is an action directed at colleagues as well as at management, since the opinion of the "collective" is at least as important as the boss's, both professionally and socially. Preserving good will in the collective and keeping the collective's good opinion is worth many sacrifices.

Good relations with colleagues, an important value for Soviet-raised adults, are maintained through spending extracurricular time together—eating lunch together, taking breaks for tea together, sharing hobbies. Being willing to cooperate and go along with the group is an important characteristic in a society as collectivist in spirit as Russia. Even, or perhaps especially, when the pay is bad or non-existent (during periods of wage arrears), people continue going to work in

order to cooperate with and support the collective, or because one "owes it" to the group. Behind the Russian behavior of working without pay, which is so mysterious to Americans, is a feeling of group obligation and the recognition that time together is a crucial ingredient in investing in social capital. Workplace social relations are often more important to Russians than the wages they might receive, since the wages are often inadequate in any case.

### *Birthday Celebrations*

In informal relations, spending time together is considered a type of gift giving. In the case of a birthday of family members and close friends, one is expected to visit them at their home. For cost reasons, celebrations nowadays involve only the host's family and close friends, with the host providing all the food and drink. Family visits at home might be prearranged or by invitation, but are often sufficiently taken-for-granted that no official invitation is issued. Alexander, in his early thirties, an employee in a non-profit organization, told me of his personal discomfort at "just dropping in" for birthdays. He knew that his family would be offended if he did not come, so he has developed the habit of calling first to confirm. Alexander would ask his brother Sergei, "What time will you be home so that I can come by?" Sergei never issued invitations, since for him an "invitation" would violate the taken-for-granted nature of family birthday visits.

With relatives or friends scattered in different parts of the city (wherever they had been assigned housing), celebrations that last for hours, and long trips on public transportation (it takes up to two hours to traverse the city), visiting for birthdays can occupy an entire day or well into the night. One student visited her cousin at the far end of the city for her birthday and had to plan to stay overnight because she could not leave the celebrations in time to catch the last bus home.

Among work colleagues or students, birthday celebrations usually involve the entire group, and are generally a collective invitation. For my colleagues at the technical college, this group was six full-time teachers, one secretary, one graduate student (considered of "lecturer" rank), and me. When arranging when to celebrate birthdays, every effort was made to choose a time

when the most people could come to the department, but with almost everyone working a second or third job, this was not always possible. In these hectic times, colleagues are not offended if someone could not come because of obligations at another workplace. Gifts are not usually exchanged for birthdays, but it is important to come to share the tea and cake.

For college students, the relevant social group is the one with whom they take all their classes.<sup>27</sup> The students in my class, two groups of 15 each, gather in a local café to celebrate each other's birthdays. Again, material gifts are not expected on birthdays, but attendance at the celebration is obligatory. The birthday person (*imennik*, or namesake) hosts the party (paying for the food, setting the table), as a gift to his guests. Others are expected to come and give the reciprocal gift of spending time sitting at the party, eating, drinking, and being social. But, following the law of reciprocity, one is committing oneself to host these same people at one's own birthday or holiday celebration.<sup>28</sup> Mutual birthday invitations are ideal examples of social exchange, since by definition they involve a time lag until the next person's birthday. Someone who chooses not to attend the party is either socially excluded from the group or is willingly neglecting that social tie.<sup>29</sup>

It is difficult to describe the level of obligation people feel on such occasions. Peer pressure, among all age groups, is generally much stronger in Russia than in America, and the expression "one should" (*dolzno*) carries strong impact with most Russians. One should attend the party to which one has been invited, and having gone, one should also invite that person in turn. Similar to the potlatch, the obligation to give the party is strong, but the "obligation to accept is no less constraining. One has no right to refuse a gift, or to refuse to attend the potlatch" (Mauss 1990: 41).

### *Drinking*

Spending time often includes food and drink. To outsiders, the most common Russian stereotype is drinking vodka together, but vodka is but one choice in a realm of food and drink meant to solidify social bonds. Vodka is usually the drink of choice for Russian men, either

alone or among groups of men, but Russian women drink significantly less than their male counterparts, and in general far less than women in America. As a woman, I was not required to share vodka with men, nor was I eligible to attend the male-only events at which vodka was required. Gatherings of only women, whether at home or at work, rarely have vodka or other spirits, and if so, only for toasting, not getting drunk. Mixed company events, including holidays, birthdays and other special occasions, usually include vodka, wine or other spirits for the purpose of making toasts, with champagne being the requisite toast for the New Year.<sup>30</sup>

Though excluded from all-male events, as a female ethnographer I had access to gatherings where only women were present, and attended several, in both homes and public places. Women's gatherings often included a prior (or spontaneous) invitation to drink tea, although the phrase "*chai popit*" (lit. to drink tea) covers a wide range of actual beverages (tea, coffee, herbal tea, mineral water, and juice) and accompanying foods (cookies, bread and jam, rolls, sweetbreads or cake), depending on the income of the hostess, the occasion, or the food at hand.<sup>31</sup> To "drink tea" together is an important mark of 1) hospitality, of the hostess to a guest, or of 2) mutuality, a mark of shared identity, such members of the same work collective or other shared characteristic.

One women's gathering was an "invented" shared characteristic. Marguerita, a retired woman who has been instrumental in voluntary associations in Novosibirsk for many years, saw the difficulty women have in making new acquaintances. From her vast network of acquaintances built up from years of running various charity events, Marguerita arranged annual evenings based upon a simple theme: name parties, inviting women with the same first name on the saint's day of that name.<sup>32</sup> Though the invitees are not initially personally acquainted, they all know Marguerite personally and a few brought a guest. I was invited as a guest to the Galina name day evening. Accommodations were sparse, the table improvised, the fare not sumptuous, but women expressed feeling warmth and familiarity at the evening. They face each other around

a table set with cookies and tea and a toast of vodka not as strangers but as acquaintances of acquaintances. That fact, together with the friendly nature of the tea ritual, makes for a relatively "warm" and comfortable atmosphere. Some of these women meeting for the first time exchanged addresses by the end of the evening. The name day teas are a non-threatening invitation providing a rare opportunity for women to increase their social capital. Marguerite's innovation follows the socially appropriate bonding activities including the ritual of tea.

An essential element of the drinking tea ritual is that however meager or abundant the supply of any food or drink, it is divided into at least as many portions as guests attending, so that everyone has a piece (preferably equal in size). I have seen cakes, cookies, sweetbreads, and oranges cut into the smallest possible pieces simply to ensure that everyone can have a piece, however tiny, of every item. Tea is the perfect staple for such gatherings because it is almost infinitely expandable: if more people come, or seconds are requested, there is always more hot water for the tea leaves, and always something to sweeten it with, long after the food is exhausted. Habits which date back to years of shortages reinforce the idea of equality within the group who have gathered. The sharing inherent in the tea ritual emphasizes the importance in Russian society of the equality that should exist among horizontal ties.

Tea is a ubiquitous feature of women's gatherings, but it is not limited only to women; drinking tea is also common in mixed-gender gatherings, especially at work. Tea and cookies are often served after faculty meetings at NSU. When a special guest came to speak to an institute at NSU, tea and cake were served afterward. Tea, coffee and cake, along with champagne and open faced sandwiches followed the gift-giving at the NGO opening described above. Some of my visits to NGOs were strictly business, while others involved sharing tea and bread and jam or other sweets. The offer of tea or coffee with cookies in a workplace setting marks the difference between a "friendly" meeting and a "hostile" meeting, and marks the difference between "us"

(who share tea) and "them" (who do not). As with birthdays, those who purposely exclude themselves from the ritual of tea drinking, on a lunch break or after work, also exclude themselves from the social bonds forged thereby.

In summary, maintaining friendship, family and workplace bonds require favors, visiting for birthdays and giving presents. Most of all, it requires a not insignificant investment of time on countless occasions. Time to stay after work for tea, time to meet a friend for a social evening; time to help someone cook food for other guests; time to watch her child or visit with an elderly mother. Time to help with the myriad little requests that form part of the taken-for-granted essence of interpersonal relations. However, with so many time-intensive daily activities (cooking from scratch, growing and harvesting food, hand-washing clothing), time is often a commodity in scarce supply. Living in Novosibirsk, I learned to recognize the not-insignificant time constraints on network size. Residents of Novosibirsk have only a small number of friends (*druzya*) because of the time and energy it takes to maintain a friend relationship.

## **VII. Reasons for Investing**

If friends and family take so much time and energy, and time and energy are increasingly scarce as people hustle (*krutitsya*) to make a living, why do residents of Novosibirsk continue to invest in their social ties? Only an outsider would ask a question like that, for most Russians cannot imagine life without their friends or family, since they play such a central part in their emotional and social lives. To anyone who has lived there, it is obvious that social relations have a significant value in daily life in Novosibirsk, lending a richness and warmth to otherwise dreary and difficult days.

Some people bemoan the fact that their birthday celebrations are no longer what they once were, that invitations are fewer and dinners rarer as the cost of food outstrips more and more incomes. Yet gifting, birthday celebrations, drinking tea, spending time, and doing favors continues despite increasing demands on time and energy. In addition to the emotional and cultural value placed on social relations, from the local point of view, investing in social capital is

also a rational decision when viewed as embedded in local structures of opportunity (Granovetter 1985). Social capital remains one of the most useful, and the most widely distributed, resources in contemporary Novosibirsk.

As with social structure, reasons for investing in social capital in Novosibirsk have been influenced by the Soviet legacy. In a shortage economy based on redistribution and personalistic favors, money was not crucial for obtaining hard-to-find items but social capital was.<sup>33</sup> Because of the money overhang (Kornai 1992), with more money than goods to buy, social capital determined who got ahead and who remained behind. Shopkeepers gave away the last consumer goods to the shopper who kept friendly relations with them; bureaucrats assigned jobs or housing to people who gave them gifts, similar to the situation in China (Yang 1994). Social capital was the most important currency in the Soviet Union; therefore, maintaining it and using it developed into a highly cultivated art.

As mentioned above, social capital, like other forms of capital, grows in circulation. As this type of "money" circulates, it creates more "money." The use of social capital creates reciprocal obligations, or credit slips, and the more they are used, the more are created. To an outsider, Russians seem to have more social capital than other people. This is because they do—Russians have been building up social capital their entire lives by investing in it and using it.

In the post-Soviet era, some in Novosibirsk continue to make significant investments in social capital because they have to, while others are investing less, substituting other forms of capital. In a marketizing environment, money becomes more important to solving problems. Although increasing numbers of people are being left without this resource, a money-rich person is able to invest in financial capital, and, if economic conditions warrant confidence, can ignore investment other forms of capital, including human and social capital.<sup>34</sup> This is occurring on a gradual scale in Novosibirsk and elsewhere, as wealthy people sever ties with poorer neighbors or former colleagues. Not only does inequality strain the relationship, but the rich can afford to let networks of mutual obligation atrophy because they no longer need to ask for favors, since they

can buy anything they need. For perhaps the first time in Russian history the rich can simply buy what they need, like some Americans. On the other hand, people poor in financial capital invest in social capital as the primary form of capital available to them, similar to poor people around the globe (Halperin 1990; Kelly 1995; Scott 1976; Scott 1998).

People in Novosibirsk also continue to invest in social capital because they perceive it as more secure than their alternatives. Inflation, bank failure and unpredictable unemployment trends make financial capital a risky investment for many, whereas a Soviet lifetime has taught people that social capital is always reliable. Too poor to take financial risks, like many peasants (Scott 1976), some people in Novosibirsk choose the conservative route and continue traditional investments in social capital. Investments in social capital, using existing money to reinforce social ties instead of "getting ahead" makes sense in such a setting, just as it makes sense in US ghettos (Kelly 1995; Stack 1974).

In the post-Soviet period, Soviet social capital is both influenced by and influences economic and social change. First, some people who are benefiting by marketization are shedding their old Soviet social capital in favor of newfound financial wealth. In contrast, those not gaining from marketization are relying on social capital even more desperately—as they fall further behind in the money game, social capital becomes more essential to survival. Yet as described above, traditional ways of increasing social capital involves gifting and feasting, and people who cannot afford to do that anymore can be excluded from some of their former networks, except for persons as poor as themselves, who accept the substitutes of poverty (such as tea instead of dinner). This segmentation of networks into groups stratified by financial capital is not strange to the US, but is new to Russian society and is rapidly increasing (Silverman and Yanowitch 1997). Large numbers of people (perhaps a third of the city) are poor enough that they will soon be left with no resources but their networks, networks that consist increasingly of persons as poor as themselves, thus mirroring the economically-induced social isolation of the US ghetto (Wilson 1987).

Second, the dense, multiplex, clustered, tightly woven webs of affiliation and obligation lead to a certain social inertia—people doing what they always have done because they owe people favors. This social inertia functions as one of the few sources of social stability in an environment where political and economic conditions are perceived to be unusually uncertain and unreliable. Obligations to others influence economic behavior in countless ways. For example, what an individual will spend money on (consumer behavior), whether they stay with their old work collective or seek a new job (labor force participation), whether to go in to business or loan a friend money to do so (enterprise creation), are economic decisions that, for most Russians, rest primarily on their preexisting obligations to others. The choice described above, of remaining with an employer despite long-term wage arrears, often rests on perceived obligations to the work collective. Employers and enterprise directors who enjoy a relatively stable, docile workforce, unlikely to mobilize a strike even in the worst conditions, are reaping the benefits of decades of investment by individuals in their workplace-based social capital.

As Russia moves from a command economy based on redistribution toward a market economy, it will retain elements of redistribution and exchange (Polanyi 1944). For some, social exchange helps them compensate for a lack of money, the way previously it compensated for shortages of goods. For others, mutual social exchange will persist because people are caught up in webs of social obligation not easily broken or paid off. Investments in social capital will continue, influencing the economic choices people make in this new market economy. The persistence of significant amounts of social exchange and reciprocity in this “post-Soviet social capital” as the economy transitions from state socialism will help create a distinctive Russian or post-Soviet form of capitalism.<sup>35</sup>

### **VIII. Conclusion**

Definitions do matter, especially in the beginning. Future scholarship relies on initial research to establish concepts that better explain observed reality. Ethnography documents

observed reality from the perspective of those who live it, thus contributing to the further accurate development of theoretical concepts.

If social capital refers only to civic virtues, saying Russia is low in social capital adds no more knowledge than saying it is low in generalized trust, and obscures, rather than reveals, essential social facts in the Russian Federation. Using a network-based definition of social capital instead, high levels of social capital are observed in Russia today. "Post-Soviet social capital" consists in large measure of bonding social capital, which excludes others and keeps society divided into cell-like small groups. As in other locations, historical events and economic and political conditions in Soviet society have interacted with individual habits and practices to create a society strong along dimensions of bonding social capital yet low in bridging social capital, not unlike the condition in US inner-city ghettos.

Previous need for social capital explains the level of prior investment in social capital, and ongoing cycles of obligation and current need help explain the contemporary investment in social capital. Social capital, far from being a universal currency, is context-specific in form and use, embedded in a particular social, structural and cultural environment. Reports of the nonexistence of social capital in Russia have been greatly exaggerated, to the loss of observers seeking to advise Russia, and to the community of scholars attempting to better define social capital.

## Endnotes

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<sup>2</sup> During the later Soviet years, many employers experienced frequent turnover, as people fiddled with their assignments until finding one they liked (Hosking 1992) (386). Though people moved from one employer to another, they tended to remain in the same occupational niche, unlike occupational movement in the US, with its lower emphasis on specialization.

<sup>3</sup> I noticed the tendency for occupations to run in families especially with doctors: every doctor I met has a parent, aunt, uncle, grandparent who was a doctor as well, in what I called "doctor clans."

<sup>4</sup> The nearly universal labor force participation by both men and women, mandated by the Soviet constitution and reinforced by public opinion, means that in families, both men and women have their own work collectives for most of their adult lives. In case of intact families, spouses have double the number of people to whom they can turn for assistance. In the all-too-frequent case of divorce Russian women are less disadvantaged than divorced US homemakers, since the former still have their own workplace-based social capital to fall back on.

<sup>5</sup> My first hint to the uniformity of Soviet attitudes was interviewing Russian-speaking émigrés to the US shortly after the collapse of the USSR (Busse 1994).

<sup>6</sup> As a visitor, I often lacked crucial information about daily life that local residents do not think to explain, since they are used to assuming so much shared knowledge.

<sup>7</sup> Research on Russia thus provides an opportunity to rethink the common stereotype between urban and small town life that was based on the uniquely American experience.

<sup>8</sup> The challenges of meeting strangers outside one's own circle became the subject of several Soviet films. The plight of a single woman with no official avenues for meeting nice men was the subject of a classic Soviet movie *Odinokaya Zhenshchina* (Single Woman), where the protagonist puts up a handwritten personal ad on a light pole. Despite her comically disastrous results, her neighbor in a similar situation by the end of the movie repeats her example.

<sup>9</sup> This cultural norm of almost extreme outgoingness can be seen as deriving from the church's theological admonition to welcome newcomers to the fold that marks this church as it does many other strongly evangelical religions.

<sup>10</sup> For one American organizer who had helped found SCISC five years earlier, this change of habit, from keeping to oneself to initiating contact, was one marker of success in their efforts at

building democracy through voluntary associations and grassroots organizing.

<sup>11</sup> Even in our own highly mobile society, many people must learn these “friendly” behaviors as adults. Some argue that the real benefit of an MBA is the practice in “networking” behavior so critical for subsequent business success.

<sup>12</sup> Multiple chains on apartment doors, locked entryway (*podezd*) or hallway doors, demonstrate the fear of strangers that has only increased with increased freedom, lowered police surveillance, and increased poverty. Yet where strangers may be observed, group social control over behavior is still very strong, hence the frequent phenomenon of willingly passing coins through various strangers’ hands to pay the bus conductor, since everyone’s actions can be observed.

<sup>13</sup> Having previously lived in Moscow (in 1994), I found the distrust of foreigners slightly more pronounced in Novosibirsk than in Moscow, which makes sense, since most residents of Moscow, unlike those in Novosibirsk, have seen many foreigners and are more likely to be personally acquainted with one. In Novosibirsk, as a foreigner, I felt the least welcome among a group of senior citizens, and most welcome among young people.

<sup>14</sup> Cash is essential to life in Novosibirsk because credit cards and other electronic payments are almost unknown in Novosibirsk. Salaries, usually calculated and paid monthly, are most often paid in cash.

<sup>15</sup> According to local tradition (based on local weather patterns) potatoes must be planted one certain week in the spring and harvested one certain week in the fall. Potatoes, easy to grow because they require only minimal attention during the growing season, are time intensive in planting and harvesting, so during that week, nearly half the city, it seemed, was out helping someone plant potatoes. Sometimes produce from the *dacha* is offered to friends or work colleagues who did not help (such as when there is more harvest than one family is able to consume or preserve), an offer considered gifting in the context of social relationships (see below).

<sup>16</sup> Zaslavsky, writing about the post-Soviet period, states: “The current mood is also characterized by the widespread belief in the unpredictability of the immediate future and the growth of a general anxiety and lack of certainty” (1995: 134).

<sup>17</sup> The verb *podarit*, indicating the object is not a loan nor temporary giving, has the same result as a child in the US saying “you can have this for keeps.” What is interesting in indicating permanence is that the Russian boy marks it clearly as a “gift.”

<sup>18</sup> Both these items—incense and wallet-size calendars—sell for 2 rubles on the street. Other small items that were given freely—paying for a friend’s bus ride or buying an ice cream or roll—were also 2 or 3 rubles. This seemed to be the amount that one could give freely, with no occasion. These small acts of generosity go a long way to create good will among friends and acquaintances, a quality valued for its own sake in Novosibirsk, but which also has the unintended consequence of increasing an individual’s social capital.

<sup>19</sup> In a tradition begun by Soviet leaders wishing to draw attention away from the religiosity of Christmas, New Year's Eve has been the major occasion for gifting since the Revolution. New Year's Eve is the time children are visited by *Ded' Moroz* (Father Frost), the traditional Russian equivalent of Santa Claus or Kris Kringle. Presents are typically exchanged within families on New Year's Eve, friends usually celebrate the occasion within a week either before or after New Year's Day.

<sup>20</sup> Glaeser (2000) points out that the increase in consumer goods has made the old socialist-era goods seem cheap and shoddy and embarrassing by comparison in the new unified Germany.

<sup>21</sup> This phenomenon of religious books becoming gifts is a good example of the appropriation of the same material object in very different senses in different cultures. In the LDS church, books are utilitarian, a means to an end, in this case the end of propagating doctrine. Members are encouraged to write in and mark books of scripture (in ways some other religions might consider a desecration) in order to more fully comprehend doctrine. Missionaries in Novosibirsk strive to encourage people to learn doctrine by means of books, but many members in Novosibirsk have a strong reverence for the books as gifts and often do not read them enough to appreciate their contribution to doctrinal understanding.

<sup>22</sup> In this case, this present and its presentation underscored the hierarchical and benevolent relationship between the city NGO and the poor village affiliate, a patron-client tie, but the behaviors are similar to "horizontal" gifting.

<sup>23</sup> The men received similar humorous presents on the corollary "men's holiday," the Day of Defense of the Fatherland. This holiday, February 23<sup>rd</sup>, was designed originally to honor those who served in the army, but since male conscription is nearly universal, and in corollary to the growing popularity of International Women's Day, Defense Day has become to be celebrated as a "men's day."

<sup>24</sup> At a pensioner's holiday gathering, I was honored as a guest by being "gifted" a song. One of the women took my hand and announced to me in front of the group that she was going to gift me her favorite song, which she then sang for me as we stood together in front of the group.

<sup>25</sup> In a different setting (of an NGO), at a women's gathering to drink tea, one woman voiced the opinion that during the Soviet era "we did not know we were poor, but we were happy." Several in the group readily agreed with this sentiment. A woman who taught at a medical college described the pauper-like wages for teachers, and the lack of resources in the college (for essentials like paper or books), but said that the staff were very congenial together. It seemed to me that she was implying that their jovial relations not only made up for their collective poverty, but in a way was caused by it.

<sup>26</sup> Time and spending time has a different meaning in socialism and capitalism. As Glaeser illustrates, West and East German police officers had different understandings of spending time (Glaeser 2000). West German police understood a "good" worker as an efficient worker, who might finish faster and leave early. For East German police, in contrast, efficiency was not

relevant; a “good” worker was one who put in the longest hours and spent the most time at work. Russians share the notion of extensive time with East Germans who were raised under socialism.

<sup>27</sup> In college, students are assigned from their first day into groups within the major; they take all their classes (about 30 hours a week) for five years with this same small group. A student might drop out, but otherwise the composition remains the same. This forms a group as cohesive as any long-term work collective; ties with one’s small group from college often endure a lifetime. For students, *odnoklassniki* (entering university the same year) indicates just an acquaintance, while *odnogrúpniki* (in the same small group) implies a very different, very close association.

<sup>28</sup> “One must voice one’s appreciation of the food that has been prepared for one. But, by accepting it one knows that one is committing oneself. A gift is received ‘with a burden attached.’” (Mauss 1990: 41)

<sup>29</sup> When they requested to leave early for the party, I asked if they all attended birthday parties of all their group members. The general consensus was yes, they did, but Angela, who has her birthday over the summer (when school is not in session), complained that they could never get a group together when it was her birthday, (in the tone of the forgotten younger sibling). While she was complaining about the lack affection and inclusion in the group that having the group attend the party demonstrates, she was also suffering from an inability to reciprocate for the times she had been a guest at the parties others hosted.

<sup>30</sup> Drink is not cheap in Russia, especially certified good-quality alcohol (in contrast to the relatively less expensive home-brewed alcohol of dubious quality), so very often in groups the alcohol was minimal due to limited financial means.

<sup>31</sup> The basic drink for such gatherings is tea, most often brewed from loose tea leaves. Although coffee is becoming more common, it is still seen in some circles as a foreign drink. Tea is often accompanied with rolls, sweetbreads, cookies or cake, depending on the occasion, with cake being reserved for birthdays and holidays. To serve breads and cakes “dry” (without tea) is unthinkable—it somehow violates an important part of the ritual.

<sup>32</sup> Of the range of possible women’s first names, most Soviet parents were extremely conservative in their choices, resulting in a high concentration of a very few names. In Novosibirsk the most common are Olga, Tatiana, Ludmilla, Galina and Natalia. Marguerita’s teas take place on the saints’ days of the old Russian Orthodox church calendar. Women named Tatiana, for example, would be invited to tea on St. Tatiana’s name day, and so forth.

<sup>33</sup> As the Soviet-era saying goes: *ne imey sto rubley, a imey sto druzyey* (don’t have 100 rubles, have 100 friends). The post-Soviet equivalent of the Soviet proverb has become: *ne imey sto druzyey, a imey sto dollarov* (don’t have 100 friends, have 100 dollars). Those who don’t have 100 dollars seem to have returned to the friends.

<sup>34</sup> This syndrome, of ignoring investments in other resources because of a surplus of financial capital, also explains a common feeling of children of extremely wealthy parents that they needn’t bother studying (investing in human capital) because everything can be bought for

money. This is beginning to affect Novosibirsk, as children of the newly wealthy pay large college tuition payments—in a system of formerly free higher education—and feel that they have already purchased a college diploma and therefore do not need to study for it.

<sup>35</sup> This is similar to the way that social and cultural factors have influenced the development of a distinctive Asian form of capitalism (Chandler 1984; Hamilton and Biggart 1988; Orr, Biggart and Hamilton 1991).

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