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The Housing Problem or Rebuilding Russia¹

Patsiorokovsky, V. 2010, *The Rural-Urban Russia*.
Moscow: ISEPN RAN. 2010, pp. 390.

Books by Russian scholars devoted to modern Russia hardly attract widespread international attention even after the dismantling of the Iron Curtain and disintegration of the USSR a quarter of a century ago. This kind of scientific neglect is caused by several interrelated reasons which generally may be defined in terms of ethnocentrism, transfer of the centres of dominance that also reshapes linguistic borders and, consequently, marketing policy of the scientific production on a global scale.

In the case of the reviewed book, linguistic nationalism that is an integral part of ethnocentrism is displayed by the absence of a summary in English – a contemporary *lingua franca* in science, including the post-socialist space, and therefore, an entrance ticket to the international scientific community. At the same time, this kind of isolationism would be considered as a display of self-efficiency within the inner market if the book did not include the content presented in English. Hence, one may say that whether the author had the intention to disseminate his work outside the Russian speaking world as well or this linguistic inclusion is simply caused by the rules of scientific production in Russia that require a presentation of the titles in the foreign language at least. This continued linguistic peculiarity of most Russian scientific publications since Soviet times, probably only attracts the attention of those to whom the

¹ Two notorious aphorisms in Russian society are used in the title. The housing problem – Квартирный вопрос, see: "...ordinary people...reminiscent of the old ones, generally... only the **housing problem** has corrupted them..." Bulgakov. M. 1966 *The Master and Margarita*, translated by Mikhail Karpelson. Lulu Press: 2006: 97. Rebuilding Russia – Как нам обустроить Россию, see: Solzhenitsyn, A. 1990 *Rebuilding Russia: Reflections and Tentative Proposals*, translated by Alexis Kilmoff. Publisher: Farrar, Straus and Giroux: 1991 (1st edition).

transfer of the centre of dominance from the East to the West is a part of their social experience.

At the same time, the legacy of the dominance of the Eastern neighbour stimulates sincere interest to learn from original sources about what happened in the ex-metropolis in general and in the solution of the peasant question in particular. *The Rural-Urban Russia* promises such a possibility.

The main body of the publication was prepared on the basis of long-term applied research of the changes in living conditions in urban and rural areas of the contemporary Russian Federation. The book consists of an *Introduction*, four parts with very promising titles, such as ***Fundamentals of the Settlement Theory, Rural Development, The Rural Household, Control Future*** divided into 21 chapters, a *Bibliography*, *The URL addresses*, *Appendices*, *The Index*. However, a chapter on conclusions that are especially needed in a publication of so many pages is absent.

The author argues that an analysis of the territorial organisation of society in the frame of whether urban or rural sociology is limited and unpromising because the antithesis between a town and a village² is a natural basis for the spatial organisation of society (pp. 3-4). The natural antithesis between town and village cannot be eliminated as a matter of principle. Where the line between town and village is erased, both the rural-urban continuum and the prospects of demographic and social development of the relevant territorial entity are also destroyed. Hence, urban and rural areas should be recognised as the perennial forms of human settlement, which together constitute the rural-urban continuum. However, the village, more precisely, the lives of multi-generational families in the individual housing estate maximally corresponds to the primary needs of people, high quality of life and demographic development (p. 8).

The author formulates the main thesis of his work as *society has not faced the problems of depopulation in the demographic development until the various types of resources have been invested in the household*. Hence, in our [Russian] society a private person, a small business and a middle class can be established and gain authority only due to widespread domestic production (p. 11). The author notes that a housing disorder remains the most serious problem of many Russian households. He suggests that a solution to the housing problem is the key to the modernisation of our [Russian] society (p. 12).

² The author uses a word *ceho* that is usually translated as countryside. In the book there are no definitions of either the village or the countryside.

The author's statement that the refusal to discuss the works of the *classics* in the field of urban and rural sociology is caused by the striving to present personal ideas and concepts, seems rather ambitious (pp. 17-18). Thus, the idea of rural-urban continuum would be very interesting if it had not already been formulated in the last century. In this context, David F. Pockock, who in the 1970s argued that both village and city are elements of the same civilisation and hence neither rural urban dichotomy, nor continuum is meaningful, can at least be mentioned. The concepts of biosphere, biocoenosis, homeostasis, socio-and ethnogenesis are considered as correct for the theoretical basis of the proposed sociology of resettlement aimed to analyse and monitor the rural-urban continuum (pp. 34-35). The names of the founder-fathers of these concepts, for instance, Pyotr Semyonov-Tyan-Shansky (1827-1914) and Lev Gumilev (1912-1992) are at least "re-called", although 100 pages later and only in the context of the particularity of Russian civilisation.

After reading the first pages of this book, those, who being familiar with Russian history and culture, may conclude that the housing problem is an almost eternal problem in Russia. In this context the next question about another "eternal problem" – bad roads, arises. The author, however, does not actually make a connection between the development of the countryside and transport system that is especially necessary when the united residential and natural-economic formation – local society (p. 94), or developed land – *селитба* in the author's words, is proposed. Undoubtedly, it is a "primordial" right of the author to the personal focus of attention.

Authors do indeed have many rights for self-expression, however they also have obligations. First of all, they should follow the rules of genre. As was announced, this book pretends to be a scientific text. However, the reader should wade through the author's verbiage, that would be appropriated rather at a political agitation or personal blog than in an academic publication, before something similar to scientific analysis is found. Undoubtedly, the author has a right to imitate the style and pathos of the famous Russian writers-villagers (писатели-деревенщики), for instance Valentin Rasputin, Vladimir Soloukhin etc, at the same time the author-scholar has a duty to correct the description of collected data and analysis. It seems that the author has a greater interest in recommendations than in the analysis of data. Thus, the recommendation to create scientific and industrial complexes of an agrarian profile on the border territories with the Baltic States that should attract Russian-speaking youth to settle the desolate territory (p. 56) is below criticism. The author does not present any grounded argument *Why* Russian-

speaking youth should return to the ancestral land and rebuild it? However, the idea itself of how to rebuild Russian North -West is worthwhile.

Obviously, demography, namely, birth rate issues is a new topic for the author. Moreover, it is used rather for demagogy which is very clear when the author speaks about the results of the Soviet family policy in 1981-1983 (pp. 54-55) without presenting official statistics or explanations of the fluctuations in the birth rate in the 1990s. If he were to read the works of Soviet demographers and family sociologists he would not be so optimistic in declaring a strong direct correlation between housing and the birth-rate.

The women's question in connection with demographic issues is another topic discussed by the author. This type of discussion provokes irritation rather than a smile when the word *gender* is included in the text speaking about the "natural" and "inevitable" labour division between the sexes in the rural household. The author declares that women's high level of education threatens the stability of the family. However, he does not indicate which type of family. Moreover, a significant educational potential accumulated in Russian rural households is considered as rather unnecessary to conduct small-scale farming based on manual labour, although he recognised that a high level of education would give more opportunities in the development of agribusiness in the countryside (pp. 155-156). The author notes the process of transformation of the rural family from the nuclear or two-generation families to the multigenerational families with mixed kinship and a strengthening of the patriarchal tradition in rural families. In solution of the depopulation issues, a rural multigenerational Dagestan family is proposed as a role-model for the rural Russian families, *a leading light* for next generations in the author's words (p. 177). In his proposals, the author goes further, for instance, he is perplexed by the ban on polygamous marriages in rural areas at least, and the secured rights to family planning, including abortion.

In spite of the above mentioned, let's say, very specific interpretation of the gathered data, the chapters devoted to Household Production, Sale and Service, *Social Differentiation and Rural Poverty* and *The Social Structure and Middle Class of Rural Society* (pp. 197-244) may be considered as "a pleasant exception" from the general style of the book. The author is able to demonstrate that the economic crises of 1998 and 2008 – ongoing, support his idea about the benefits of small-scale commodity production in the capitalist market economy and give a chance for the re-population of rural areas. Thus, everything related to the decline of the effective demand of the population – the inevitable growth of food prices, the shift of buying activity for small retail and open bazaars, etc.

provides development of small-scale commodity production and, as a result a general growth of production. The deterioration of the well-being of relatives in the cities stimulates the growth of output in the rural households. A return of some of the city relatives to “the family hearth and home” contributes to the rejuvenation of rural households.

In conclusion, one may say that this book is a collection of reports prepared for various agrarian programmes and policies in different years, and quite possibly, written by different authors, bearing in mind the different vocabularies and level of professionalism in the interpretation of data. The book differs by a blatant negligence in relation to the common but needed historical and political information, including definitions. That should be considered a serious deficiency especially bearing in mind that the book is designed for students studying sociology and economics. The book does not give proper information about *How* the Russian countryside “came to such a life”. The mention of the collapse of collective farms and the impoverishment of the rural population in the mid-90’s (p. 239) at the end of the book and, sometimes, of the impact whether of globalisation or reforms (which ones?) on the rural economy is not enough to understand the modern processes in the Russian countryside.

As was already mentioned this multi-page work is without conclusions. Hence, in spite of any intentions of the author, the reader is free to conclude that the author only succeeded in demonstrating that the irrational use of human resources is the norm of social reality in the Russian countryside.

