

Potato Ontology:
Surviving Postsocialism in Russia

Nancy Ries

The Occasional Papers of the School of Social Science are versions of talks given at the School's weekly Thursday Seminar. At these seminars, Members present work-in-progress and then take questions. There is often lively conversation and debate, some of which will be included with the papers. We have chosen papers we thought would be of interest to a broad audience. Our aim is to capture some part of the cross-disciplinary conversations that are the mark of the School's programs. While Members are drawn from specific disciplines of the social sciences—anthropology, economics, sociology and political science—as well as history, philosophy, literature and law, the School encourages new approaches that arise from exposure to different forms of interpretation. The papers in this series differ widely in their topics, methods, and disciplines. Yet they concur in a broadly humanistic attempt to understand how, and under what conditions, the concepts that order experience in different cultures and societies are produced, and how they change.

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Potato Ontology: Surviving Postsocialism in Russia

Among the hills, among the pits,
A boorish frill-necked birdie sits.
It lays eggs – a gift from God.

Traditional Russian riddle; the answer is potato. (Sadovnikov 1995 [1876]:125)

The potato should be a major component in strategies aimed at providing nutritious food for the poor and hungry. It is ideally suited to places where land is limited and labour is abundant, conditions that characterize much of the developing world. The potato produces more nutritious food more quickly, on less land, and in harsher climates than any other major crop—up to 85 percent of the plant is edible human food, compared to around 50% in cereals.

United Nations Website declaring 2008 the “International Year of the Potato.”

During field research in Russia since perestroika, I have studied local conceptions of citizenship and practices of sociability in conditions of rapid social change and class stratification. This has led me into many conversations about the everyday science of frugality, with people in Moscow, Yaroslavl, Vladimir, Tver, St. Petersburg, and other places. Open-ended ethnographic conversations have revealed complex patterns of mutual engagement within communities and integration with the postsocialist labor, service, and commodity markets. Many times I have thrown in broad, admittedly loaded questions like “how do you survive?” or “how do people in Russia survive?” With all the force and immediacy of commonsense, more often than not people have blurted back “potato”: *kartofel*’ or its diminutive *kartoshka*. “We survive on potato.” “*My zhivem na kartoshke*.” “Russia lives on potato.” “If not for our potato plots, I do not know how we would survive.” Social scientists have recorded such statements in Russia and the former Soviet Union throughout the two decades since perestroika. So for instance, Sarah Ashwin quoted a coalminer in the Kuzbass region saying “what is 100 percent true is that we’d die without our allotments [of potato land]” (1999: 170).

Such declarations about potato survival appear frequently in the Russian news media as well; especially in provincial regions, newspaper stories cheerfully celebrate this “population feeder”—*kormilitsa*—while others reflect on the bitter ironies and insecurities of postsocialist poverty.¹ The weekly national paper *Argumenty i fakty* published an article in 1997 titled “How we survive without money” which avowed that “...almost all Russians, from night watchmen to Academicians, grow their own potatoes!” (Sivkova 1997). A full decade later, despite modest but steady increases in standards of living, it is not uncommon to encounter texts like the letter to a regional newspaper in Siberia, in which a pensioner laments “How will we get through the winter without our potato?” after a broken city water main flooded his cellar, miring his one hundred buckets of newly harvested potato in mud (Myshkin 2007).

For a few years, I have been asking people directly about potato, observing potato practices in various contexts and collecting potato narratives and artifacts. I toured central Russia for several weeks in 2003 with a team of Cornell potato scientists, visiting institutes, seed factories and inspection stations, commercial and state farms, and garden clubs from Kolomna to St. Petersburg, discovering a complicated and contradictory potato picture. That trip taught me much about tuber pests, blights, and reproduction, and the illustrious histories of Soviet “hero-varieties” like Lorkh and Udacha, but also revealed much about how potato circulates in epistemology and practice.²

Though the minutiae and everyday pragmatics of potato are ethnographically compelling, I employ potato here as a means of thinking through certain constellations of politics, economics, and discourse at work in Russia, as well as the rest of the postsocialist world. In some measure, these social constellations are contingent on the basic botanical traits of potato, and on the agricultural practices which derive from those traits. But they are also products of specific historical experiences and debate. This paper moves across and between some of these pathways, aiming to ascertain both what potato means and what it *does* in society. I usually refer here to “potato” without a definite or indefinite article, to convey some of the sensibility and anthropomorphism inherent in the Russian collective noun *kartoshka* (from the German *kartofel*) which can signify the whole universe of potato, or just one tuber.³

The Powers of Potato

Potato is a strange and contradictory thing. It appears to multiply itself magically underground, yet entails grueling and tedious labor to plant, protect, harvest, transport and store. One of the most lumpen foods, it can be transformed in countless ways, to produce culinary delights (and McDonald’s fries). Interviewed for a Moscow business and politics magazine, *Profil*, an elegant Russian governor’s wife bragged about her husband’s virtues, one of which is his knowledge of one hundred ways to cook potato (“Vtoraia polovina” 1998). Beyond its versatility, potato’s nutritional yield is unsurpassed by any other vegetable; it is rich in vitamins, minerals, protein and complex carbohydrates (Salaman 1949: 121-125; Lang 2001: 31). Poverty and war have taught many populations that with just a small amount of dairy fat, humans can survive indefinitely on potato. But the very qualities which make potato beloved and revered across cultures also make this food a tool of political leverage or profit in the hands of states and elites.

The physician Redcliffe Salaman touched on this in the conclusion to his 1949 magnum opus *The History and Social Influence of the Potato*, with a strong statement about potato and power:

If for any reason, good or bad, conscious or otherwise, it is in the interests of one economically stronger group to coerce another... that task is enormously facilitated when the weaker group can either be persuaded or forced to adopt some simple, cheaply produced food as the mainstay of its subsistence. The potato, being the cheapest and one of the most efficient single foods man has as yet cultivated in the temperate zones, lends itself readily to the task. The potato can, and generally does, play a twofold part: that of a

nutritious food, and that of a weapon ready forged for the exploitation of a weaker group in a mixed society. (Salaman 1949: 600)

While the cynicism and teleology that Salaman imputes to the powerful in this telling may be overdrawn, it is nonetheless clear that potato systems, practices, and ideologies do play a significant role in sustaining and stabilizing the particular inequalities characteristic of postsocialism, in Russia and beyond. In the early 1990s, the Russian government distributed land rights and encouraged increased subsistence farming as a cushion during market reforms. “Not for the first time in Russia’s history,” note Judith Pallot and Tatyana Nefedova, “the state was looking to personal food production for assistance in a difficult situation” (2003: 41). The political and economic contexts of such policies have been examined in detail by social scientists, but the net result is that almost two decades after the end of the USSR, subsistence farming remains an essential part of agricultural production in Russia, with potato as a central component.⁴ Comparable self-provisioning systems are ubiquitous throughout the former Soviet Union and Soviet bloc countries, from Central Asia through the Caucasus, the Baltics to Bulgaria.⁵ It is crucial to query the sources and entailments of these mass-scale practices of postsocialism, and to examine modes of elite support for systems that keep populations marginally fed and very busy while the collective wealth of nations is privatized and concentrated.

Although I am mapping out those geopolitical continuities in a larger project, for the moment I want to zoom in on the space of a single Russian dacha kitchen, where an experience with apples in 2001 pointed me towards potato.

Tanya is a retired flight attendant, with thirty years of international flying on Aeroflot; she proudly exhibits photos of herself serving Fidel Castro on a flight from Havana to Moscow—she was an elite *stiuardessa*. Her husband is a plastic surgeon in Moscow. Their daughter is in law school. Tanya says that her family’s cash income is only \$150 per month but it is most certainly higher; there are many good reasons to under-report earnings. Through timely apartment swaps in the early 1990s, Tanya managed to acquire a large year-round dacha and two Moscow apartments which are rented out. Her family is relatively well-off; they have harbored their resources and managed their portfolio of opportunities in modestly entrepreneurial ways.⁶ They have TVs in every room, elegant furniture, a nice car.

Tanya careens around her kitchen. She is sorting apples from a huge sack a neighbor had given her to make applesauce to last the winter. As we talk, she pulls out four shriveled, decaying apples, which I assume she will discard. Instead, she moves these—to my eye uselessly rotten—apples to an empty space on the counter so they will not infect the good ones. This sorting is common in Russian kitchens: Tanya will salvage whatever good spots there are in these rotten apples to throw into her vat of applesauce. I am surprised at this only because *to my mind*, Tanya has enough resources—and enough perfect apples—to be able to throw the mushy ones into her compost.

Perhaps a paper on potato ontology should not linger on these apples, but since potatoes are “*pommes de terre*” I hope readers will forgive this botanical metonymy. The underlying mode of being in the world is the same, a largely unspoken, even unspeakable frugality embodied in everyday labor, foundational to the concatenation of nutritional, physical, discursive, and political-economic processes I call potato ontology.

Without my asking for it, after she sorted the apples, Tanya gave me the grand tour of her house and gardens, and we lingered long in the garage where no car could ever fit amid the shelves of stewed tomatoes and peppers, pickled cucumbers and salted cabbage—a meticulously ordered shrine to the products of her labor, far more than her small family could use in the course of a year.

Tanya did not grow potatoes herself in 2001; she devoted her garden and her time to vegetables, fruit trees, berries, and flowers. But every year she buys many kilos of potatoes at the rural market just after the harvest, when they are cheap and fresh, to store for use through winter. This is a common practice: people who do not grow potatoes buy them in large quantities, “to get through the winter.”

I had asked her that day while we were cutting apples to explain how most people get by, and her answer was “of course, we [all] survive on potato.” Tanya’s family clearly did not live on potatoes when I was there, and they probably never had. Yet despite all evidence to the contrary (a kitchen overflowing with store-bought delicacies alongside the homegrown food), she insisted that potato was the most important thing. What are people like Tanya saying when they declare that they, their families, and their society live on potato? What is she doing when she stores potatoes to last the winter?

For a small portion of the population, potato survival is a literal reality. For many others, potato is both capital and currency, with substantive and symbolic immediacy relative to the dominating forms of postsocialist capital. Potato is also a discursive frame, which summarizes the mysterious, multiplex, always evolving strategies of survival that families, networks and communities deploy. Uniting these different realities and registers, potato is a powerful vehicle of what critical theorist Margaret Morse calls “the exchange of values between different ontological levels and otherwise incommensurable facets of life, between two and three dimensions, between language, images, and the built environment, and between the economic, societal, and symbolic realms of our culture” (1990: 100). In the rest of the paper I follow potato across and between levels and realms of public narrative, everyday practice, politics, and memory.

Potato Subsistence and Subjectivity

Although specific statistical measures may vary, and although there are methodological disagreements among analysts of poverty in postsocialist Russia, several stark economic factors are clear: between 1990 and 2000 the real value of average cash income was halved, precipitating a profound, even historically unprecedented peacetime decline in the standards of living of the population (Clarke 1999: 6).⁷ Steady economic growth after 2000 has improved conditions for many, but even in 2004 roughly half of the population of the Russian Federation lived on the ruble equivalent of \$5.00 or less in wage income per day, and in that year, twenty percent lived on less than the average subsistence minimum of \$3 per day.⁸ In 2006, the average monthly pension was only 2726 rubles, or \$100.⁹ Relative to the US or the EU, housing and utility costs throughout Russia can be quite low, but market prices for food and the costs of other commodities are comparable or higher.

Such indicators of the scope and depth of postsocialist poverty make it tempting to take people’s pronouncements about potato survival literally. Indeed, having declined slowly in the decades after World War II, reliance on homegrown foodstuffs soared during

perestroika. It continued to rise through the 1990s and has remained high across the entire country.¹⁰ Citing Goskomstat figures, Pallot and Nefedova note that household production “accounted in 2001 for a staggering fifty-four percent of the total value of agricultural production in the Russian Federation” (2003: 41).

One even more surprising number jumps out from federal statistics, and is cited constantly in the media, by agronomists and economists, and by people at large: family plots produce ninety percent of all potatoes and eighty percent of all other vegetables grown in Russia.¹¹ This percentage changes little from year to year, and it is particularly notable that despite improvement in economic conditions since 2000—with wages rising every year and the wage arrears problems of the 1990s somewhat diminished—the already high household share of potato and vegetable production actually increased slightly (Wegren 2005: 9). Rural subsistence farmers and weekend dacha growers consistently produce over thirty million tons of potatoes per year. As Clifford Gaddy and Barry Ickes point out, this is more than all the farms of the US and the UK combined (2002: 168). Even more surprising is that this huge quantity of potatoes is grown largely without artificial inputs, and with little mechanization. Manure is the main source of fertilizer, few pesticides or fungicides are applied, Colorado beetles are picked off by hand, and most tilling and harvesting are done by human labor (Filippov 2000). These remarkable realities of everyday potato growing were stressed constantly—and with ironic national pride—by the Russian potato scientists and agriculturalists I visited in 2003. One of the country’s leading potato pathologists posed it as a rhetorical question, ripe for pondering in this context. He asked, “where else but in Russia could you find this gargantuan productive labor done by old people and poor people, producing something out of nothing, and feeding the whole country?”

Families invest a massive amount of labor in potato growing, and this intensity of focus is discussed with both praise and scorn in media accounts and everyday conversation.¹² Yet although millions of postsocialist citizens do struggle for survival in conditions of “medieval subsistence” as the Yabloko Party leader Grigory Yavlinsky called it in 2002,¹³ and although the potato is a productive crop and nutritional marvel, most economic studies show that potato growing and household agriculture contribute insignificantly to individual household income, and are actually a drain on the fiscal and human resources of many families. Except for post-*kolkhoz* (post-collective farm) rural families who utilize their larger land allotments to produce potatoes for barter and small cash income, home-grown potato is a relatively unimportant component of household consumption.

A certain economic irony is hard to ignore: while as a national system, household agriculture is a major part of the potato and vegetable supply, for many who engage in it themselves it is only marginally profitable in cash terms and likely *unprofitable* in terms of total outputs of labor and anxiety. Analyzing multiple data sets and their own household surveys, Clarke et al. conclude that the costs of domestic food production far outweigh the benefits in terms of “the value of useful product” which they characterize as “very meagre” (2000: 491), only enough “to buy a box of chocolates or a few bottles of vodka and a bit of sausage for the weekend” (494). Economists Gaddy and Ickes echo this: “Self-production of food on the scale seen in today’s Russia is an example of extreme primitivization. It reflects both shrinkage and loss of human capital. If the labor of the scientist is more valuable on the potato field than in the research laboratory, then there is a serious problem in the economy” (2002: 168).

This irony is hardly lost on the public and is widely discussed in many contexts. Yet convictions about potato sustenance wane only slightly. Why do so many people insist that the survival of families, communities, and indeed of the Russian nation rests on potato? Why the widespread claim that potato saves the day? And why the mass investment in subsistence practices which seem to provide marginal, if any, returns?

As narrative, potato reifies the historically profound and complex process of social devolution: from a state in which most persons participated in and benefited from the commodity-service-welfare nexus, to one where a significant proportion of persons are marginalized from societal participation and benefit. That, however, is a mouthful; that is why people need to be able to say "*kartoshka*." Potato represents this historical shift—and the common experiences this larger history entails—in a word, while mass scale potato practices rehearse this reality in bodies, families and communities.

By merit of both its botanical qualities and social genealogies, potato spans a broad continuum of exchange and production, from the most technocratic global markets to the most isolated rural outposts. On one end of that continuum, Russian potato is quite observably commodified, mass-produced, and even modernized—as in Monsanto's genetic trials with Russian varieties or, more vividly, through the widespread *Kroshka Kartoshka* wagons, where young women in polyester peasant costumes serve out steaming baked potatoes, stuffed with any of dozens of fillings. Other points along this continuum are marked by the elderly women in white aprons and scarves selling *Udacha* (Success) variety by kilo buckets on upturned crates; such women are ubiquitous at urban intersections and in farmers' markets. At the extreme non-market end of this continuum, subsistence farmers reproduce their crops through what they save from year to year with few cash inputs, and it is these who sustaining the social imaginary about circular self-sufficiency. In this valence, potato dramatically marks the line between market and non-market.

In their essay "The Potato in Materialist Imagination," Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt traced the British potato debates of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, which posited the prolific tuber as "an icon of the autochthonous body" and "a peculiarly primitive food, a thing representing mere subsistence and (in some minds) the virtual end of culture" (2000: 111-112). As juxtaposed to bread, deemed a representative of society and civilization through cooperation and division of labor, in the complex cycle from planting to baking and distribution—potato was cast as the master signifier of primitive social reproduction, as a thing which "comes right out of the earth, haphazardly shaped, like a clot of dirt, but virtually ready to eat." For British political writers looking towards Ireland, potato "represented a presocial state of isolation in which the poor were cut off from civilization and undifferentiated both from each other and from nature" (2000: 114).

It is useful to reflect on conflicting images of potato in contemporary Russia in light of Gallagher and Greenblatt's study of these two hundred-year old British debates. In current Russian iconography, potato survival conveys the pathos of rural forgottenness, on one hand, and the heroic contributions of small growers to the survival of the nation, on the other. Importantly, and in contrast to the British debates, potato is called "the second bread" in Russia—thus ideologically redeeming it, drawing it into the realm of social production rather than contrasting it to "civilized" food.

Nevertheless, the surge of subsistence growing does mark the disintegration of social contract, of socialist contract between classes, ages, and social groups. Food indexes modern persons—the caviar eaters, the veal eaters, now the sushi eaters—and distinguishes them from peoples outside the nexus of cosmopolitanism: potato-eaters. Even more deprived, or anxious, and symbolically cut from the modern metropole are potato-growers, fastened by the demands of potato to their provincial towns and fields.¹⁴ These are ontological rather than merely phenomenological or epistemological distinctions, anchoring both individual and collective subjectivity.

While many Russian cooks declare their love for the dear and malleable potato, the flipside of its centrality in the diet is its monotony there, the poverty of choices and choices of the poor it conveys. Among the fields of labor, potato work is grubby, backbreaking, and tedious, all about beetles, nematodes, and fungal blights. Potato growing is as ignominious as it is beloved; no matter whether one values or disdains it, potato work nevertheless shouts “peasant,” marking persons and their communities as backward, primitive, pre-modern, and impoverished.

A haughty young banker made a spitting sound as she told me she will never again eat a potato, as if to say, “I am no longer a potato person,” as if she were purging the very potato-ness out of her body, and splitting her own social community off from the larger potato class and its history.

Potato Habitus: Cooking and Eating

For a great number of people in Russia, an everyday supper is three or four boiled potatoes, with a bit of oil, a scoop of salted cabbage, a chunk of bread with butter or margarine, tea, a piece of sausage or cheese. This is a staple diet for the majority of Russian families, whether they grow their own potatoes or not. Annual per capita potato consumption in Russia averages around 125 kilograms, just less than a pound of potatoes per person per day (Caskie 2000: 202).¹⁵ Obviously, many people are consuming far more per day than this average, with rural and provincial residents being highly dependent on potato (Pickup and White 2003).

For everyone who consumes it, the ontology of potato is anchored in the immediacy of preparation and consumption, encompassing a range social motions from acquisition (whether growing or purchasing) to eating. Any of these social motions may be fraught with meaning and history. In her essay “The Nourishing Arts,” Luce Giard noted that “*doing-cooking* is the medium for a basic, humble, and persistent practice that is repeated in time and space, rooted in the fabric of relationships to others and to one’s self, marked by the ‘family saga’ and the history of each, bound to childhood memory just like rhythms and seasons” (1998: 156-157). One potato process reveals these thinkable and unthinkable—articulated and unarticulated—aspects of potato consumption most clearly: peeling.

To peel potatoes you need a stool, an old newspaper or bucket, a paring knife, and preferably a man if there is one around. He sits on stool’s edge, legs apart, leaning forward, and peels off the skin with slow curving motions, wasting almost none of the white, but removing all traces of brown. The peels fall onto newspaper or into a bucket. A pile of white potatoes grows on the table beside him. In many families, potato peeling is one of the only interior culinary activities done regularly by men. Potato is also used to mark love. “The

Happiness of Peeling Potatoes,” an article in the magazine *Rossiia*, instructs husbands: “Try to help her with work in the kitchen, and show that you like peeling potatoes in her company. That will fill your woman’s heart with joy” (Uralov 2006).

Whatever the joy involved, the moral and physical challenge of peeling is in the removal of only the thinnest layer of brown skin. You *must* remove the brown layer, because, according to competing local interpretations, it contains a small amount of toxin, or is tainted by direct contact with the soil. Nevertheless, while removing the brown you should not waste even a small scraping of the white.

A story anthropologist Bruce Grant told me in 1997 first inspired me to pay attention to the skill exhibited in potato peeling. On a visit to old friends on Sakhalin Island, among other gifts he had brought was a brand new ergonomically sublime OXO peeler, to make preparing the daily pot of boiled potatoes easier for his arthritic host “grandmother.” When he returned a year later, he found the peeler unused. “It IS easy to use but it takes off too much of the peel” the family told him. Indeed, it is impossible to peel potato correctly with an OXO. Proper Russian potato peeling requires sharp focus and a sharp paring knife, in order to take off only the outermost micro-layer of skin. On the surface, this is a banal observation, pointing only to the instrumentally frugal actions of historically poor people. But like Tanya’s unwasted apples, such a practice embodies, to borrow a list from sociologist Pierre Bourdieu: “a whole cosmology, an ethic, a metaphysic, a political philosophy” (1977: 94).

Family narratives powerfully transmit potato peeling morality. When I told her I was writing about potatoes, Marina, an erudite older friend, a Doctor of Social Sciences, plunged into a war story. She and her mother were evacuated to Kazakhstan, while her aunts remained in Moscow. When she returned after the war, the aunts told her their food stories. Always on the verge of starvation, her aunts did not waste even those dirty, unappetizing peels but saved and mashed them into pancakes. One day, Aunt Shura dropped the hot frying pan and the pancakes slid into a bucket of dirty washing water. “Here comes the most important part of the story,” Marina says. “Aunt Shura took them out of the filthy wash water, rinsed them off, re-cooked them, and they ate them. I will never forget that, never” Marina says.¹⁶

Most families have such stories. Children may resent what Bourdieu calls the “implicit pedagogy” (Bourdieu 1977: 94) of such narratives but still they have sticking power. They can make the smallest waste not just an occasion for guilt—although it is also that—but nearly a physical-moral impossibility. Such stories become ineluctably embedded in culinary motion and emotion, and persist as familial and collective “recipes” for survival: the newspaper story “How we survive without money” (Sivkova 1997) relays instructions from the family of a young physicist: “carefully wash and clean the potato. Cook the white for the child. Mash the peel scrapings, add milk, make pancakes.”

In the constellation of these particular stories it is instructive to observe the degree to which wartime survival strategies are available for resurrection in memory and practice. In conversations about potato, people talk about the war. When elderly people talk about the war, they tell stories about food, which invariably means they talk about potato. In 1992, a retired scientist, Aleskandr, told me how he had been evacuated by train from Leningrad with his mother and brother in 1941, to spend the war years in the Urals. This man declared that they would never have survived, were it not for his mother’s pig-headed stubbornness

when it came to potatoes: although she had never farmed or even gardened before, being an urbane intellectual, she single-handedly saved the three of them by claiming a small plot, obtaining and planting seed potatoes, and watching the garden round the clock as harvest time neared. “Potato is all we ate,” he said, “but it saved us.” Although full of personal portent as all individual iterations are, there is nothing in this story that is not also utterly commonplace.

In response to the three-pronged Nazi invasion in June of 1941, the Kremlin mobilized state resources for the army and for military production. Food provisioning was a gargantuan challenge, given that the *chernozem*, the USSR’s most fertile zone of agricultural production, was front line for the earth-scorching practices of Nazi occupation, an explicit tactic of Operation Barbarossa. Soviet populations were left to fend for themselves, with the slimmest of rations for bread, oils, and meat. Rural people were assigned no rations whatsoever, not even bread, as the state expected them to feed themselves along with supplying the war effort (Moskoff 1990: 135-151). Throughout the Soviet Union, government offices and enterprises assigned small plots often in the middle of industrial yards and in the vacant spaces between apartment blocks, for their workers’ self-provisioning efforts. These plots were used to grow cabbages, beets, carrots, and most importantly, of course, potatoes. Where the state withdrew, in other words, potato grew. In the postsocialist political landscape, the “individual” household coping mechanisms of self-provisioning are a similarly critical backbone of the state’s policies of economic liberalization and withdrawal (Wegren 2000: 49-50).

Aleksandr and his wife, also a retired scientist, had always enjoyed planting flowers and tending their berry bushes and pear trees at their dacha outside of Moscow; busy with cultural pursuits and their grandchildren, they never wanted to spend time on vegetable production. By the mid-1990s, however, like many fellow citizens, they dedicated most of their garden space to potatoes.

Potato Labor

Potatoes are grown on small bits of land throughout postsocialist Eurasia, many located within the boundaries of provincial cities. In the Russian countryside, stripes and squares of potato are tucked everywhere, with large fields broken into dozens of small plots, demarcated, fenced, and protected in myriad ways. The average family allotment is smaller than a *sotka*—100 square meters or one-tenth of a hectare—roughly one quarter acre (Caskie 2000: 196)¹⁷

Preparing the ground for planting requires immense body-taxing labor. Potato’s ability to grow in an extraordinary range of soils and climates accounts for its position as the world’s leading vegetable food crop; but it produces its best yields in well-cleared, tilled, and fertile ground. While most rural growers have access to tractors and horses—the latter of course also providing soil enrichment—most quasi-urban and dacha farmers have to prepare their rows with shovel and muscle. Compost and manure improve the soil, though growers concoct other additives, some mystical in nature. All sorts of shrewd discoveries are disseminated in newspapers, mimeographed gardening newsletters, and via the internet.

A portion of each potato harvest is saved from year to year for replanting. Poor farmers may reuse seed for six, eight, or ten years, which continuously reduces yield.¹⁸ Rural

sociologists and potato scientists in Russia discuss the many ramifications of this reuse of seed with a combination of agronomic horror and national pride (Filippov 2000). Russian potato provides and keeps providing.

Everyone despises the ravenous Colorado beetle, which many believe to be an American entomological weapon from the Cold War. People spend hours picking these dreadful beetles off by hand, drowning them in beer or spirits, and cursing their neighbors who are not as devoted to this task (Williams 2007). As harvests mature, thievery becomes the more imminent threat. In a standard local anecdote, a journalist asks a dacha farmer why he is digging his potatoes early. "If I do not harvest my potatoes today my neighbor will harvest them tonight." When a family's field is not right next to their house, some member of the family may sleep in a lean-to in the field as the harvest matures. Every year brings newspaper and apocryphal reports of someone knifed or bludgeoned trying to steal potatoes (Slackman 1999; Humphrey 2000: 152). Vigorous physical defense of potatoes is a moral and even a legal right.

Relatives may come from cities to help with the hard labor of tilling, planting, weeding, guarding, or harvesting in return for a few sacks for themselves; potato is the most basic of a number of home-produced food items that circulate among and link extended families, friends, and colleagues in complex networks of mutual support and exchange.

Harvesting is exhausting work and must be done quickly and massively at the optimal moment in terms of potato maturity and weather. Labor for this is always in short supply, requiring a range of solutions. Families call on whomever they can for help in exchange for sacks of potato. School children are still being bussed out to the remaining collective farm fields for the peak harvest weekends, prompting both praise and complaints on the part of journalists, who disagree as to whether this is great training for the future or a debilitating waste of their time (Lindt 2007).

Potatoes migrate by the millions into the cities in early autumn. Urban farmers transport their harvests back to their city apartments, by car or on public transport, in suitcases, wheeled carts, and rucksacks. There, they have to be spread out to dry, before being tucked away in buckets, boxes, and sacks on the balcony, under the bed, in corners. As the anthropologist Catherine Wanner said about similar practices in Ukraine, "every house is a factory" (personal communication). Indeed, in vegetable producing urban families, use of space in the apartment is shaped by the need to process and store potatoes, fruits and vegetables. Families measure their need and many try to produce and/or buy what they will need for the whole winter and as much of the spring as possible—a hundred or two hundred kilos per family is not unusual. The calendar arches across potato time: potato practice structures the life-year from seed to harvest to storage through potato depletion in the spring (Galtz 2000: 25).

Potato production is both scientific and ritualistic, patterned by transmitted knowledge but also ripe for invention. It is laborious, tedious, and exhausting; only vigilance will thwart thieves and beetles and other pathogens. It is also existentially demanding and socially divisive. Caroline Humphrey asks "Who is to go and do the backbreaking work? Who will stay for months in a tiny, comfortless hut? Who will go to the market to sell the produce?" Observation leads her to the answer: "it is the elderly retired people who bear these burdens"—a situation which, she notes, gives rise to intra-familial conflict and inter-generational estrangement (2000: 152).

Local pundits and global economists all seem to grouse that the cost of transport alone makes potato uneconomical; this is clearly the case given that a kilo can be purchased for eight to twelve rubles—twenty to thirty cents—on roadsides or farmers’ markets in any city or town in the early autumn. Economist Vadim Radaev found that forty percent of urban residents he surveyed had vegetable plots, usually including potatoes, and that seventy-five percent of those with plots said their harvests were an important part of their families’ material survival. Ironically, though, he also discovered that it was the employed, relatively better-off families who kept gardens. “To become involved in the informal economy on a land plot,” he notes “one has to be mobile, capable, have additional material resources and above all, have support from the family” (Radaev 2001: 351).¹⁹

The Russian anthropologist Serguei Oushakine has regaled me over the years with stories of his efforts to convince his parents in Altai to stop growing potatoes, offering to buy them potatoes for the winter. He showed them his calculations, proving that they were losing money on transport and other monetary costs by growing their own, not to mention their momentous labor. Only in the past couple of summers, and only gradually, have they shifted from growing to purchasing. The tentativeness of this process of letting go suggests something about the grip of potato.

The undercurrent of mockery and disdain towards the potato enterprise is substantial. A translator told me, “It is our punishment for living with Communism all those years, for our passivity, now we have to labor like horses to survive!” Ethnographer Jane Zavisca tells of a writer who disdains his in-laws’ dacha dedication, saying “I don’t believe that one should work a dacha. It should be for leisure. But my wife’s parents grow potatoes and everything else. The bus, the walking, the heavy sacks of supplies. They are exhausted all the time. It’s not a dacha, it’s a form of slavery” (Zavisca 2003: 804). The bad-boy Russian writer Eduard Limonov writes, more scornfully: “The dacha turns a Russian into an idiot, it takes away his strength, makes him impotent. Any connection with property tends to make people submissive, cowardly, dense, and greedy. And when millions of Russian people are attached to dacha plots and spend their time planting carrots, potatoes, onions, and so on we can’t expect any changes in society” (cited in Lovell 2003: 231).

So why *are* scientists, teachers, office managers, engineers out in the potato fields? What does potato labor provide? People talk about this quite a lot. Here are some of the reasons they give for growing potatoes:

- Land should not go to waste.
- Gardening makes you breathe fresh air all summer.
- The hard work keeps people (men) out of trouble (away from drinking).
- Your own potatoes are “ecologically clean.” They taste better and are healthier.
- Growing potatoes frees limited cash income for needed purchases.
- Potato provides a medium of barter or reciprocal exchange.
- It is a national and familial habit.
- “We love potato.”
- Potato establishes you as a moral person, concerned with simple virtues rather than wealth.
- We know we can survive if we can grow potato.

Anyone who grows food at their dacha or on their allotment will tell you any of these things, at various moments. But I would argue that this last element trumps the others in

importance. A Moscow friend articulated this in 2003, saying: "You can trust that if everything *really* falls apart, you have the skills and habits to survive. And, you can look at your potatoes in the apartment hallway in dark November, and *see* your food for the winter. You can *see* your own ability to labor like a horse, right there before your eyes."

Potato may not actually be the life preserver it is touted as being, but the potatoes in the hallway and under the bed in November are a lived and living monument to family labor, to a family's experience of key episodes of Russian and Soviet history, and to the knowledge, disposition, and bodily skills that these confer. In this vein, in Novgorod Oblast' in 2004, pensioner Nikolai Zaryadov erected a monument in his village—a pipe topped by a potato-like rock, and an inscription thanking Christopher Columbus and Peter the Great for bringing "this beloved vegetable" to Russia (Moroz 2004).

Potato Politics

A woman in the Siberian city of Omsk told a journalist she would vote Communist in the 1999 election, saying, "When I think about economics... I think about how many potatoes I can afford to eat a day. Governor Polezhaev doesn't understand that. The Communists do" (Coker 1999). A man from Volgograd wrote to the newspaper *Argumenty i fakty* that "our authorities [*vlast'*] thought up an original solution: give everyone their own plot, so the little people can spend their weekends [official days off], plowing and tilling to feed their families" (Sivkova 1997: 5). Such declarations of potato reliance are bitter commentaries on the political economy. They are lamentations about the nation's abandonment of its people. As the Soviet state did during the Great Patriotic war, instead of paying wages, post-Soviet governors, enterprises, schools, and collective farms have made land available to workers. A strong vein of potato discourse scoffs at the indifferent state apparatus, as in, "we will show them we can get by even when they do not pay our wages or pensions."

Some influential cultural figures and political leaders spin this subsistence quite differently. An article published in the national newspaper *Rossii'skaia Gazeta* captures this remarkably (Shmeleva 2007). It is an interview with Andrei Tumanov, editor of the leading gardening magazine, *Vashi 6 sotok* [*Your 6/100ths of a hectare*] who is introduced as the country's number one "dachnik" (dacha-grower). The article is entitled "Na dachnika nuzhno molit'sia!" which roughly translates "We should offer prayers to the dacha grower!"

Tumanov rehearses normative potato talk with passion:

When someone tries to tell me that the dacha is for resting, I go at him with my fists, replying that the dacha is for work, for work! My main argument is that as far as agriculture is concerned, this country relies on nobody more than on the dachnik. On dacha plots as much as ninety percent of the potatoes and eighty percent of other fruits and vegetables are grown. I am referring not just to the domestic garden plots but also to other small plots... people have to work, to help create surplus product for the country, to help themselves and those close to them."

Then he adds: "Besides that, you can never buy clean, good products in the market."

All of this is fairly standard, but what he says at the end is striking political commentary and pedagogy: “The average dacha-grower lives seven to ten years longer than city-dwellers without dachas. And, as well, he rarely needs to go to the doctor, and does not go to rallies at the White House [the Russian Federal Building]. The government does not waste a kopeck on dacha growers [here he means agricultural subsidies]. The dacha grower is an ideal citizen. Our government should just offer prayers to these people, who live longer and produce!” (Shmeleva 2007: 24). Though Soviet in its rhetoric of praise, Tumanov’s pointed message speaks to the moment, to the strange political and symbolic economy of postsocialist subsistence.

President Putin himself affirmed this detachment of the state and the remarkable survival of the abandoned people. In a Kremlin press conference in June 2003, the same journalist, Andrei Tumanov, asked Putin “do the authorities intend to pay more attention to the ordinary hardworking people with their spades and rakes, who form the backbone of this country?” Putin replied:

In the old days they used to allocate people six hundredths of a hectare, and then the size grew a little, and then a bit more. The strange thing is that ninety percent of the potatoes grown in the country are grown in these little private gardens. Ninety percent! And these gardens produce eighty percent of the vegetables and sixty percent of the fruit. These figures seem incredible, but these are the facts. So, I would first of all like to thank everyone out there who takes part in this work for such amazing results. And I hope that you will get satisfaction out the work you do this season and that it will bring you good results.”

Here, the president of Russia offered his awe, his hope and his good wishes. He even added that “my own parents in their time worked hard keeping up their garden, labored away from morning till night and made me do the same. So I know very well what it’s all about.” In this one brief sweep, Putin announced, legitimized, historicized and even romanticized the recurrent politics of abandonment by the state.²⁰

Like Putin, people rising above subsistence cut their connections to potato labor in practice and in narrative. The banker told me she no longer eats potatoes, since she can afford to eat sushi, French cuisine, fusion food. “We were poor as kids, and I ate so many potatoes my whole life, I told myself that was *it*, I will never eat another potato.” This kind of shift in diet marks class detachment as well as a deliberate dividing of past and present, socialism and capitalism. Potato as symbol and practice marks the political economy of contested meanings and subjectivities.

Potato Love

Whatever political bitterness and class rejection it may inspire, still many people talk of loving potato—not just in a gustatory sense but metaphysically. Potato talk is amusingly and anthropomorphically affectionate. Over a meal with fried potatoes in 2003, my slightly tipsy friend Anya declared “Potato is the most important, potato is the beginning, and it is sacred.” Then she added, “Good food is the product of the soul.” An article on “Potato—

Familiar but Surprising” waxes with similar tenderness: “If you try to exclude your familiar potato from your daily menu, after a certain time you will inevitably feel a pang of nostalgia for this vegetable so dear to your heart.” The article went on to relay a number of recipes for medicinal and cosmetic uses of potato, including my favorite. “If your lips are chapped by autumn winds and rains, make a paste out of mashed potato, cottage cheese, and sour cream, spread on your lips and leave for ten minutes” (“Kartoshka—znakomaia neznakomka” 2004).

One story unites many strands of potato narrative, and I end this paper with it, because it has consistently guided my thinking. It is a story that crosses ontological domains and levels, interweaves emotional valences, and fuses bodily, family, and national memory. My friend Vasya is an older man who often shares his life stories—and his soul—with me.²¹ One afternoon in 2003, he cooked lunch for me, while I perched on my stool in his tiny kitchen. I told him about my potato project and just like Marina, he dove into a series of epiphanies, literally outlining an entire book for me, in the air, with his wooden spoon.

While the main course cooked, he opened the Riabinka, we toasted distant friends, and ate carrot salad. He grew intense, leaned on his elbows, and told me this story.

You know how the Stalinist state gave no help to the country folk during the war. The population was mostly women, all the men were off at the front, or dead already, most would never come back. So the women toiled by day for the kolkhoz. They could be shot for stealing even a handful of grain but they all hid some barley in their hems and bras, how else would we survive? After they would come home from twelve or fourteen hours at the kolkhoz they had to plow their own fields of potatoes, kartoshka was life or death for us then. But they could not use horses from the kolkhoz. The horses were exhausted after their own day of labor, and they had to let the horses rest, or they would be useful to nobody. So the women would bring home the horse plow and strap themselves in, seven or eight women pulling the plow to make the rows. They would make the rows and the old babushki would come along behind to rake the soil into mounds and plant the potato seed and then we kids would cover the plants with soil. When I was thirteen or so, I was old enough, I got to walk behind and guide the plow as the women pulled it.²²

I recalled these very images from Vasya’s life when I later read the words of Soviet Marxist philosopher G. L. Shchedrovitskii: “It is not separate individuals... who create and bring about activity but ...*activity itself takes hold of them and compels them to behave in a certain way...* in order to become a *real human being*, the child must attach itself to the system of human activity” (Shchedrovitskii cited in Slobodchikov 2002: 35; emphasis mine).

How do we become who we are? The child attaches itself to the system of human activity: what is it like to be that boy, quite literally harnessed to the human activity of eight women pulling a plow? What does this teach a boy about human labor, about gender, about politics and justice and humility and hunger and mother love and the absence of men? What kind of lifelong orientation towards potatoes might this implant—what does one feel about the life-saving but grueling labor of *kartoshka*? And when a new era of intense impoverishment comes around—as it has for Vasya and most of the people he knows—what does that leave him feeling about time, modernity, the progress promised by his nation, and the life of labor his mother and he invested in it?

On the day of our lunch, however, before I could get too heavy imaging the Herculean labors of his mother, Vasya made a remarkable segue, one which shows how potato bridges time and predicament. He told about his institute days, when he and his fellow music students would be trucked out to a collective farm for the potato harvest.²³ The mechanical combine dug up the rows and the students walked behind to gather the potatoes resting on the upturned soil. But, Vasya said, starting to laugh, “there were these huge wild pigs that came out to steal potatoes behind us. We would leave the sacks in the field along the way and they would come and RIP open the bags with their huge snouts and you would hear KHRU KHRU! KHRU KHRU!” He nearly fell off his stool, miming the long-snouted pigs and the students running in all directions waving their arms, desperately trying to shoo these beasts away.

Then, coughing with laughter, Vasya stood up and opened the lid of the frying pan, full of perfectly cooked home-fried potatoes. Ironically and tenderly, with a double diminutive, he said: *vot tebye kartoshechka*, in a way that nobody would EVER say “potatoes.” In his word *kartoshechka* steamed forth both his avuncular tenderness towards me and his profound affection for—his kinship with—these heroic spuds.

ENDNOTES

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- 1 *Kormilitsa* means food-source or bread-winner, but in the feminine form as here, is also the word for “wet-nurse” (“Svoia kartoshka” 2006).
- 2 See <http://www.healthmanagement.ru/ruralworlds/eng/news/140303.html> for a brief report on some of these meetings at the Center for Peasant Studies and Agrarian Reforms in Moscow, March 2003.
- 3 Potato was likely first brought to Russia from the Netherlands by Emperor Petr I (Peter the Great) in 1698 at the end of his European tour. There were largely unsuccessful attempts in the 1700s under Empress Yekaterina II (Catherine the Great) and her son and successor Pavel I to spread potato cultivation. Under Tsar Nikolai I, potato cultivation was forced on state peasants, provoking wide-spread revolts in the early 1840s. Only in the second half of the nineteenth century did potato become an agricultural staple in the Russian empire, maintaining its importance in the national diet since that time (Ekshtut 2000; Langer 1975: 54; McNeill 1999).
- 4 Among many writers on state policy, poverty, and subsistence, see particularly Rose and Tikhomirov 1993; Shlapentokh 1996; Wegren 1998 and 2000; Radaev 2001; Shanin et al. 2002; O’Brien and Wegren 2002; Manning and Tikhonova 2004.
- 5 See Kostov and Lingard 2004 for an economic overview; Abele and Frohberg 2002 for broad critical inquiry; Rose and Tikhomirov 1993 on the comparative scale of and incentives for household food production in Russia and Eastern Europe in the early 1990s; chapters on Tajikistan, Armenia, Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova, and Latvia in Dudwick, et al. 2003; and the chapters on Russia and Hungary in Leonard and Kaneff 2000. Closer ethnographic examinations include Hervouet 2003 and 2006 on Belarus; Cellarius 2000 on Bulgaria; Nazpary 2002, especially chapter four, on Kazakhstan. The best ethnographic sources for Russia are Humphrey 2000 and Zavisca 2003.

- 6 In the mid-1990s, Richard Rose identified what he calls Nine Economies and schematized the demographics of the majority along various survival portfolios: Enterprising, Defensive, Vulnerable, and Marginal (Rose 1994). This schematic still applies to conditions more than a decade later.
- 7 Clarke 1999, Spryskov (2003: 9-41) and various authors in Manning and Tikhonova 2004 discuss methodological challenges in the measurement and characterization of poverty in Russia; Dudwick, et al. (2003: 3) present broad World Bank poverty indicators for the 1990s. World Bank reports of 2005 and 2006 outline more recent trends.
- 8 These estimates are based on State Statistical Service (Goskomstat) figures for the Russian Federation http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/2007/b07_12/07-09.htm ("Distribution of population by per capita average monthly income"; accessed January 8, 2008) which scholars of economic conditions in Russia take to be largely credible; see Clarke's discussion of Goskomstat household survey methodologies (1999: 8). See also the World Bank's Russian Economic Report (2006: 29).
- 9 The relevant Goskomstat table is "Main socio-economic indicators of living standards of population" at http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/2007/b07_12/07-01.htm; accessed January 5, 2008.
- 10 Pallot and Nefedova discuss the expansion of production in personal or household plots—what is termed "personal subsidiary farming" (*lichnoye podsobnoye khozyaystvo*), noting that every year since 1992 this personal sector has produced more than in 1990, some years by nearly twenty percent (2003: 41).
- 11 http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/2007/b07_12/15-08.htm; last accessed January 7, 2008. See also O'Brien and Patsiorkovsky 2006: xvii.
- 12 For typical newspaper stories representing different views, see Lindt 2007 and "Nuzhno li samim sazhat' kartofel'?" 2002.
- 13 Comparisons of contemporary life with feudalism and medieval existence are a standard part of the discursive landscape in Russia, in conversation, in the media, and among academics. Shlapentokh 1996 is a good example of scholarly use of this trope.
- 14 Images of temporal devolution are common throughout the former Soviet Union. Julia Holdsworth writes about her fieldwork in Ukraine that "many people in Donetsk do indeed feel that their experiences of being 'modern' are in the past... Symbols of this decline are scattered across the domestic, industrial and imagined landscape" (2004: 6-7).
- 15 Wegren's (2005: 13) estimates of per capita consumption are lower, while some sources point to much higher potato consumption; the International Year of the Potato website, using UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) data, estimates consumption in Russia to be 140 kg.

- 16 Moskoff quotes a Soviet Red Army soldier on kitchen duty during the war: “You were lucky if you got to peel potatoes. You could keep the skins. To go to the kitchen was like a holiday” (1990: 131; on potato skins see also p. 40).
- 17 Humphrey describes such allotments in Ulan-Ude, Buryatiya (2000:150-152); Pallot and Nefedova 2003 provide an overview of diverse scales of subsistence agriculture.
- 18 Elmer Ewing, a potato scientist from Cornell, was stunned to learn this when we visited a group of rural sociologists at the Center for Peasant Studies and Agrarian Reforms in Moscow in March 2003. Since potato degrades so much from generation to generation, Ewing did not think this form of reproduction could continue for more than five years, though Russian rural sociologists had consistently found it going for longer in rural areas around St. Petersburg. As the gross potato stock depletes, households have to save a larger portion of each harvest for the next year’s seed, thus requiring additional labor and other inputs. See the papers in Shanin et al. 2002 for some of the work of this group.
- 19 Clarke, Varshavskaya et al. 2000 bring a range of data analyses to bear on the questions of who grows, how much subsistence agriculture provides and at what cost to families, and why growing is so widespread. Lovell 2003, Zavisca 2003, and Hervouet 2003 and 2006 each capture the complex cultural logic supporting these practices.
- 20 Kremlin Press Conference, June 20, 2003
http://www.kremlin.ru/appears/2003/06/20/1237_type63380type63381_47449.shtml,
 accessed February 2, 2008. The translation cited here can be found at
<http://www.cdi.org/russia/johnson/7233.cfm>
- 21 Soul is an ontological category in its own right. To say he shares his soul with me refers to a very specific set of practices, well codified in Russian ways of being and talking. Dale Pesmen 2000 evokes and analyses this brilliantly.
- 22 See Paxson 2005: 272-273 on horses, plowing, and potato planting.
- 23 Sending students, academics, and others out to help with the harvest was a standard, annual feature of Soviet life, and even if you were taken to pick cabbage it was still called going out “on potato”—*na kartoshku*.

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