Ethnography in Unstable Places

Everyday Lives in Contexts of Dramatic Political Change

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DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS DURHAM & LONDON 2002

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"Honest Bandits" and "Warped People": Russian Narratives about Money, Corruption, and Moral Decay

In the 1980s, we started with pluralism, and ended with banditism.
—Vitalii Tsepliaev, "Onward, to the Triumph of Capitalism?"

Perestroika (1986–1991) was an era of fervent unveiling: the manifold problems of Soviet society were exposed in all the media; official ideology was delegitimized as the depths of Communist Party corruption and hypocrisy were exposed; shocking histories of revolutionary and Stalinist terror were told and retold. These were the years of glasnost—the policy of transparency decreed by Gorbachev in early 1987 as part of his remedy for bureaucratic, technological, and social stultification. Glasnost quickly overtook the narrow boundaries Gorbachev had set for it, however. For a few years, there was a euphoric sense that all the dark corners of society would be exposed to public scrutiny, and that this exposure might serve as the basis for creating a democratic and just social order.

One of the bitter paradoxes of post-Soviet Russia is how quickly all sense or pretense of transparency evaporated (and with it much of the popular faith in democratization). The veiled complexities of communist prevarication have given way to manipulations of public information that are more open but all the more mystifying for their visibility, and all the more troubling for their ubiquity. Many of the conversations I had with people in Moscow and Yaroslavl during ethnographic fieldwork touched upon the idea of the profound cynicism (*tsinizm*), which many claim characterizes post-Soviet Russia from top to bottom. People talk about cynicism to describe a general context of moral corruption and dishonesty, where it seems that everyone is engaged, to some degree, in cheating, lying, swindling, and stealing—whatever it takes to capture one's share of the available economic resources. Those higher up on the socioeconomic or political ladder are cast as the most cynical, because, while pretending to care about the general welfare, they take advantage of myriad opportunities to enrich themselves at public expense.

As an interlocutor, I take these discourses about cynicism at face value—as embittered expressions of lost faith and political grounding. At the same time, I regard them as a dynamic and powerful field of sociocultural production. Through talk about cynicism (and through cynical talk), people actively deconstruct whatever legitimizing discourses or practices are presented on behalf of the reformulated political-economic order, and thus regularly inoculate themselves against any naive belief in state or market ideology; at the same time, the notion of ubiquitous cynicism explains and justifies their own less-than-honest actions—actions such as misrepresenting their income on tax declarations or as criminal as hijacking trucks or perpetrating scams. Finally, but perhaps most importantly, cynicism in its many guises is metaphoric shorthand—a way of encapsulating, depicting, and circulating a view of the present world.

The phenomenon of all-delegitimizing cynicism is not, of course, only a post-Soviet one. Under different guises (kitchen table humor, absurdist art forms and talk, participation in the black market) it was quite common in Soviet times.[1] However, in the late years of communist rule in Russia, many still heralded the innocence of the people (*narod*) in contrast to the corruption of those with power. This claim of popular innocence is one of the things that began to disappear in the early 1990s with the demise of Soviet rule. Thus, the particular cultural contours of post-Soviet cynicism, the metaphors employed to explain the spread of cynicism in Russia, and popular ideas about possible paths of redemption from the traps of cynicism are the central issues explored in this essay.

Cynicism emerged for me as an ethnographic issue in Yaroslavl,[2] Russia, during the summer of 1995, not in the form of abstract discussion, but through vivid narratives centered on two dominant and interconnected themes: money and the mafia. Not surprisingly, in this new market economy people spoke constantly about money: getting it, keeping it, spending it, hiding it; losing it to thieves, swindlers, relatives, or tax authorities; making do without it. As my close friend Olga declared: "This is all anybody talks about anymore: money, money, money. All you hear, even as you pass people on the street, is *limony* [literally "lemons"—then slang for "millions"] as people discuss their crazy ideas, their schemes, their dreams.[3] This is so even among children." I heard a great deal of speculation about other people's money: who had it and by

what mysterious means they got it, how they spent it or lost it. Although much of this talk centered on the pragmatics of money, there was a significant moral dimension to these narratives, as well.

People also spoke constantly and colorfully about the mafia, describing personal encounters and engagements with so-called "bandits" [*bandity*], the thievery, extortion, bombings, shootings, and poisonings attributed to the mafia. As with conversations about money, these stories seemed to invoke simultaneously "the real mafia" and what Katherine Verdery (1996:219) calls "the conceptual mafia" or "the-mafia-as-symbol."[4] One of the ironies of the new capitalism in Russia is the multivalent conceptions of the mafia as both the *destroyer* of any hopes for justice and social order and also the most likely potential *source* of justice and order. To this point I will return later in the essay.

In narratives about money and the mafia, people used a semimythical vernacular to express in a simple, linear fashion the enormously complicated, multidimensional realities of their changing society. To some extent, these condensed narratives seemed keyed to my presence as an interested outsider. I was interviewing people to try to understand something of their reality, but that reality had so many new complications, and there were so many new secrets, that it was hard to convey it except by way of these parables.[5] Through their symbolically charged metacommentaries, people conveyed a general image of the political, economic, social, cultural, and moral complexities, contradictions, and conflicts of their world. These were complexities and conflicts that they faced and were aware of every day, not as abstract issues, but as real dimensions of every social transaction and encounter.[6]

An "Honest Bandit"

I was initiated into the worlds of mafia and money (both real and conceptual) on my first day of fieldwork in Yaroslavl; for this initiation I remain grateful to Pasha, an acquaintance who played a clever ruse on me, probably as an act of sly pedagogy designed to upturn my scholarly pretensions. Although not his main intention, his ploy immersed me all at once in local orientations and practices which would otherwise have become clear only slowly.

Pasha was virtually the only businessperson I knew when I arrived in Yaroslavl to study changing conceptions of work. I called him on my first day in town and asked him if he would set up interviews for me with other people in business in the city. Perhaps irritated because I didn't first invite him for tea (or something stronger), Pasha said he was too busy to help me, although he would think about my request. Within an hour, however, the phone rang, and Alesha, a friend of Pasha's, offered his services as informant.

At noon the next day, Alesha picked me up in a battered, black Mercedes, and we drove to a cafe. The hostess greeted Alesha warmly and seated us in a curtained alcove. After Alesha ordered our meal, he said, "Okay, so what do you want to know?" I politely inquired as to the nature of his business. After a long pause and a piercing but amused look, he said "I . . . am a bandit."

I raised an eyebrow and smirked, trying not to show that I was taken aback. Here I was, on my first full day in Yaroslavl, sitting across the table from a gangster. And the gangster was grinning at me, tracing my reaction, pleased at his ability to disarm a foreign ethnographer.

"Aaah," I said, somewhat at a loss for words. "I had assumed from what Pasha said that you were a businessman."

"Well, yes, I am a businessman. I am in the business of building roofs." Fortunately, I had learned in a conversation with a young student the night before that "roofs" (*kryshi*) was bandit slang for the various forms of protection the mafia offered. During the rest of my summer in Yaroslavl, and later in Petersburg, Moscow, and Tver, I heard this term invoked constantly—in a short span of time it had become a key cultural referent throughout Russia. I asked Alesha to explain what it meant to provide roofs for people.

> Well, the traders and speculators are always cheating each other. They borrow money and disappear with it. They take goods on consignment and don't pay for them. They are always out to cheat each other, to make money however they can. Goods get stolen out of warehouses and stores. We protect the businessmen from each other. We ensure the collection of debts and recover stolen goods. Our clients' partners know who is protecting them, whether our clients have good *kryshi* or not. A good *krysha* means good business.

"Does every business have a *krysha*? Even the *babushki* selling potatoes and mushrooms from their rucksacks on the sidewalk? Do schools and hospitals have *kryshi*?" I asked. He smiled patiently, and it was clear he

recognized in my questions the international image of Russian mafia bandits as scoundrels who terrorize the urban population with their "racket":

> We don't make a point of "covering" the *babushki*. But they are constantly hassled by street criminals and alcoholics. So they ask our guys to protect them. So every month they pay maybe twenty, thirty bucks [Alesha spoke of money only in dollars], and we watch over them. The hoodlums know they better not mess with the old ladies because our guys are watching out for them. And schools don't have *kryshi* because there's no money involved. It's only when there is some kind of money that people need protection. Understand, Nancy, we don't go out and seek our clients: *they come to us*, our clients approach us to provide them a service which they need.

"You seem like a nice guy," I said, "Do you mind being a bandit? How do you feel about what you do?"

> Bandits are known for their honesty, we protect our clients from being cheated, we enforce their contracts, collect their debts for them, ensure some kind of normal business relations. They know they can count on us. Eventually, this will become, I would like to have it become a legitimate business, a regular kind of collection agency like you have in America.[7]

I asked him how he got into this "business," how it was structured, and how it operated. He explained that he had been an engineer, with an advanced degree, and had worked as a unit director in a local factory. But he was also an athlete, a weight lifter and a boxer with many trophies.

> When all this began, the master under whom I apprenticed proposed starting a gang. Within four years, we built up our gang to the point where we now have an echelon of "middle managers" [*brigadiry*] and thirty "soldiers" [*boitsi*] working under us.

"This is a delicate question, and you don't have to answer if you don't want, but . . . do you ever have to . . . kill anyone?" I inquired. Alesha paused before answering.

> No, there are few killings, it isn't necessary. Although sometimes there are fights among the different gangs [*brigady*] in town. We try to get our men to keep out of trouble, for instance, only to go to "our" restaurants and bars [I thus realized we were in one of Alesha's protected cafes]. When different gangs mingle, there can be trouble. We try to enforce a policy of discipline. Our boitsi shouldn't drink too much, or smoke even. They should be family men, decent, orderly people.

"And what about the police?" I inquired.

> The police know us. They know all the *bandiugi* [an affectionate diminutive of bandity] in town, who works for whom, whom we protect. They know everything. And they rely on us to provide order which they themselves can't; they don't have the resources. There would just be chaos if not for us, because the businessmen are incapable of running their affairs in an orderly way. Most of them are uncivilized! You know, the Russian people. It's not the decent businessmen who are driving around in Mercedes cars. They live in a more modest way, they have family values and don't need the showoff of fancy homes and cars; it's only those from the working-class backgrounds who need to show off their new wealth.

He went on to explain that he had been arrested in the spring of 1995 and spent an entire month in prison, without charges being filed.

> I was lucky to get out after a month, it could have been a lot longer. But I wasn't telling them anything they wanted to know. I just smiled and held my tongue. In general I was well taken care of there. The other prisoners took care of me, because they knew who I was, they brought me so much food I gained five kilos while there. I would sit in my bunk, and the others would bring me food, I didn't even have to leave my cell. Though I had to spend the days without any clothes on, to keep the bedbugs away! It was okay there, however; the cops even gave me mattresses and blankets, you often have just a metal plank to sleep on. I was well treated. And then they just let me go, because they didn't have any charges against me, and I didn't talk. In general the police just have a quota to fulfill, they have to arrest a certain number of us every month, to show they are doing their job.

"What about your wife? Wasn't she upset that you were in jail? Didn't she cry?" I asked.

> My wife didn't cry, she was very strong, she understands. My wife is a "good kid" [*molodets*]. My mother cried.

The rest of that day and the next, I spent driving around Yaroslavl with Alesha as he made his rounds. First we met some men in a parking lot outside of a notary public; Alesha sold his old Mercedes, took temporary possession of a decrepit Soviet-era Lada (he explained that he was getting ready to buy a jeep, the only kind of vehicle appropriate for driving the terrible local roads), and then drove to a furniture store (belonging to one of his clients) where he checked the forty hundred-dollar bills he had received for his Mercedes on their counterfeit-currency detection machine. Then we visited other clients together. What was remarkable to me was the ease with which he (and I with him) moved through the ranks of the city: we dropped in on the director of a newly founded private university, walking right in on (and asked to join) some kind of power-lunch; we visited bankers and store-owners, walking freely and unannounced into their offices. Nearly everyone was polite and many were even friendly with Alesha, and he was always polite and soft-spoken, although I sat in a vestibule while a verbal altercation, which I could just barely hear behind closed doors, took place between him and a bank director. At the end of our first day together, we dropped in on his partner, who didn't seem particularly glad to meet me, in part, perhaps, because he was busy taking care of his dying mother, who rested on the couch while Alesha and his partner talked "business."

Everywhere we went, Alesha greeted people he knew on the streets; some, he explained, were also bandits from his or other gangs; others were businesspeople whom he "protected." He was clearly an energetic participant in the flow of activity in the city. At one point we drove up to a set of kiosks to buy some snacks. A policeman jumped out of a jeep parked nearby and greeted Alesha warmly. There ensued a discussion about the policeman buying some ammunition for his "hunting rifle" through Alesha. We stopped in at Alesha's apartment (an average Soviet apartment but with brand new Scandinavian furniture) to pick up some documents he needed; there Alesha unlocked a gigantic safe and proudly displayed to me his collection of firearms and a block of hundred-dollar bills about the size of a breadbox.

During the two days we spent making rounds, Alesha seemed eager to let me observe his business, and he patiently, though elusively and without many details, answered my questions about the structures and practices of the local mafia and its role in the current social and economic system. To this day, I don't know why he agreed to meet with me, or why he was as open with me as he was; when I asked him at one

point, he just said, "Why not?" and laughed. My best guess is that it was a form of entertainment for him. He seemed to enjoy performing his identity as a bandit for an awed and interested foreign woman.[8] It is also possible that to some extent he was parading my presence as a sign of his legitimacy and importance, although in general I felt I had very little social capital compared to the obvious wealth and status of him and his clients. In any case, through Alesha, I made contacts with a wide range of people with whom it would have been difficult to meet otherwise, and several of these contacts proved valuable in the development of my networks in the city. To travel the streets with a bandit was to observe the patterns of interconnection and power that structure a postcommunist Russian town; it was also to experience a mysterious, charmed kind of passage across hierarchical boundaries and between a variety of social realms.

Later, in conversations and experiences with other informants, I had many opportunities to gauge the veracity of Alesha's representations of self, city, and society, and to understand the hidden factors in the various transactions I observed with him.[9] While it was difficult for me to discern the degree to which he believed his own claims to legitimacy and service of the common good, I decided that this was not really the main issue: what was important was the enthusiasm with which he employed these legitimizing discourses, which were his personal refractions of a much wider sphere of talk about trust and deception, alliance and conflict, civility and chaos, work and scheming, morality and socio-spiritual corruption.

In his narrative about the role of mafia gangs, Alesha depicts the landscape in postsocialist (or newly capitalist) Russia as a place of weak governance, where the state has insufficient resources and incentives to protect people's interests or those of business. The mafia, on the contrary, has the wherewithal and the will to provide order at ground level where it is needed—and it is needed wherever money is at stake. Alesha depicts the mafia as honest, decent, and disciplined in contrast to low-level businesspeople, whom he casts as unscrupulous, ostentatious, and immoderate; in this he is invoking the popular image of "New Russians" (*Novye Russkie*)—the Russian nouveaux riches who are represented in jokes, media stories, and everyday talk as uncultured, uneducated, and thoroughly corrupted by the thirst for money. During the rest of my fieldwork in Yaroslavl, what was striking to me was the degree to which Alesha's basic construction of the social terrain of contemporary

Russia and the mafia's function in this landscape was echoed in conversations I had with many other people. How was I to explain the fact that elderly, impoverished pensioners described their world in more-or-less the same terms as those used by a successful member of the contemporary Russian mafia? Was Alesha cynically echoing the popular construction because it conveniently legitimized (some of) his business activity? Or were these discourses, dialogically reinforcing and building upon each other, capturing—in the symbolic codes of narrative—some crucial dimensions of the restructuring social world?

Privatization: Views from Within

Although the success of enterprise privatization in Russia has been acclaimed by some outside observers (see, for instance, Aslund 1995 and Blasi, Kroumova, and Kruse 1997), the perspective of Russian citizens who have not been leading participants in the process is not nearly as sanguine. Until the fiscal crises of the late 1990s, the voices of neoliberal politicians, businesspeople, writers, and scholars could be heard around the globe, hailing the birth of capitalism in Russia, conceiving it as the cradle of eventual democracy and prosperity for all. In conversations with international harbingers of optimism during fieldwork in Russia, I was often struck by the passion with which they espouse their worldview, not noticing that their triumphalist declamations do not always echo on the ground.[10] There, local discourses about privatization and marketization are contextualized within a cluster of intertwining phenomena: overnight fortunes and unpaid workers, pyramid schemes and vouchers, "swindles" [*obman*] and violence. These form basic points of local conceptions of society, economy, and polity.

The spectacle of (seemingly) overnight fortunes has been quite vivid throughout Russia; I say seemingly since in fact many of these fortunes were far from instant; instead they represented, on the one hand, the lifelong maneuvering of Soviet-era elites whose positions allowed them to turn power or status into capital during the late Soviet and early post-Soviet years, and, on the other hand, they represented the proceeds from Soviet-era black market activities, which served as excellent start-up capital in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Gorbachev's 1988 decree permitting the formation of cooperatives provided a significant opportunity for those poised to privatize. Only a small percentage of the actual economic strategizing that took place during those years was publicly evident, in the form of small retail shops and services that began to appear. Less visible but more meaningful were the enrichment strategies of communist bosses, factory and shop directors, upper- and mid-level KGB functionaries, ministry bureaucrats, and other socialist-era elites, who created cooperatives as devices through which to siphon capital, equipment, labor, and other resources into privately held enterprises. When privatization went into full effect in late 1991, this process escalated dramatically in scope.[11]

Overall, the financial machinations of the elites entailed little investment in productive industry; on the contrary, since they often involved industrial directors, managers, and party bureaucrats conspiring to dismantle and sell off equipment and raw materials which lie within their domains, many productive enterprises devolved into trading organizations or holding companies, and the managerial elites transferred the capital thus acquired into offshore bank accounts or into their privately held cooperatives. Thousands of new banks were registered, and while some were legitimate, many others were merely covers for quasi-legal investment or money-laundering.

Having far more capital than most people, Soviet-era, black-market traders similarly found themselves in a prime position to start cooperatives that would allow them to invest, launder, and build on their existing wealth by entering the sphere of trade on a serious scale. One wealthy Moscow woman explained that her husband made his first fortune in the 1980s by illegally duplicating music and video cassettes for sale on the black market. When he became free to use that capital openly, he started buying and selling real estate in central Moscow. When I interviewed this woman in 1994, the couple was building their first house—a fifteen-room mansion, complete with gazebo, statuary, and fountains, on a lavishly landscaped, four-acre parcel near Moscow.

Nearly everyone I have interviewed has a tale to tell of a friend, relative, colleague, or acquaintance who amassed a considerable fortune after 1991. Such stories were often tinged with awe and aversion, since so many fortunes had their base in the semicriminal shadow economy. In 1994 in Obninsk, a town several hours south of Moscow, a nursery-school teacher told me of a locally infamous, former *fartsovshchik* [Soviet-era slang for foreign currency speculator, a word that connotes a general sleaziness]. Her description vividly summarized the popular image of New Russians who are seen as uncultured, uneducated, and unscrupulous persons who have accrued unthinkable wealth through criminal or

quasi-criminal means, and who live in vulgar splendor, tinged with an aura of violence:

> Ten years ago he was kicked out of his apartment and fired from his job for "speculating." He just barely avoided going to prison for his activities. Everybody knew him from childhood, he was always getting in and out of trouble. Now he is the town's richest businessman, with a dacha, a house, several cars, and his own bodyguards. He drives around town in an entourage, his own armored Mercedes surrounded by the cars of his bodyguards with their submachine guns.

While seeing such New Russians aggressively and visibly cruising the streets of the cities, towns, and villages, and while watching their directors building new dachas, purchasing foreign vehicles, and refurnishing their private offices in grand style, most workers are themselves earning salaries below the official subsistence level, are being laid off, or are working for months on end without being paid. Families use a variety of strategies for coping with this. Many of these strategies are similar to those employed in the Soviet period. People depend on relatives, friends, and colleagues for mutual assistance; they employ the science of frugality developed over a lifetime; they rely on the domestic production of foodstuffs (especially via dacha gardening); they do part-time, nighttime, or weekend work, and they engage in many forms of trade to make extra money. Hoarding food, utilizing public benefits and discounts, and pilfering from the workplace remain as common as they were in Soviet times, although the specific contours of these practices have changed somewhat, with new opportunities and constraints.[12]

There were a few moments in the mid-1990s when some people believed that they, too, might partake of the bounties of privatization and make their own overnight fortunes. As part of the official privatization program, in 1992 the Yeltsin administration announced that a voucher worth 10,000 rubles (around $24 at the time) would be distributed to each Russian citizen for investment in the newly privatized enterprise of their choice. Many people believed that their vouchers gave them an opportunity to participate in the future of Russian economic development, although many others realized right off that this was an absurdly insignificant amount of investment capital and regarded the entire campaign as a reflection of the cynical stance of administration reformers toward the population.[13]

In the same years that vouchers were being distributed (roughly 1992 to 1994) a range of investment schemes arose. Billboards, subway cars, and newspapers were plastered with advertisements promising enormous returns on investments; it was common to see ads offering several hundred percent yields on deposits (measured in dollars instead of constantly inflating rubles). The MMM company was the most active promoter of such investment opportunities, and their witty television ads were a topic of widespread public attention and amusement. These depicted Russian folkloric characters, the affable urban simpletons Lenia Golubkov and his family, who used their MMM profits to buy, first, new kitchen appliances, and then fur coats, purebred dogs, a vacation abroad, and a fancy new dacha. These humorous ads worked their magic, and people lined up at investment points all over Russia to hand over their vouchers—and often their entire savings. Being, in fact, nothing more than a countrywide pyramid scheme, MMM collapsed in 1994 when investors began to complain about not receiving their interest and not being able to withdraw their capital. Its director, Sergei Mavrodi, was charged with tax evasion and other financial crimes, but he later ran for and won a seat in the Russian parliament by promising depositors to return their capital if he was elected.[14]

MMM was only the most visible (and most brazen) of hundreds of similar financial pyramids, in which tens of millions of hopeful Russian citizens invested what little capital they possessed.[15] The media in 1995 were full of accounts of angry investors lined up outside the locked doors of these bankrupt firms in hopes of gaining some of their money back. While most of these schemes were ultimately simple, others were more complex marketing pyramids, less prone to sudden collapse but equally unrewarding for most investor-entrepreneurs.

For many the experience of investing in these schemes provided an introduction, in one form or another, to the new world of *obman* (deception and swindling) and to the weird cosmologies of capitalism as well. People by the millions fell for the promise that their investments would "deliver almost preternatural profits . . . yield wealth *sans* perceptible production, value *sans* visible effort" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999: 281). As one of my Moscow friends put it, "This is our necessary education in economic reality. We invested our money, believing the promises of advertisement, and now we know better, but it is a painful lesson." (She had invested and lost two hundred dollars, the equivalent for her family of two month's salary, and, more importantly, a large chunk of their savings). Quite a few of my informants described their own or their friends'

experiences losing money through such schemes, international, national, or local. They spoke with bitter irony about their own naïveté in the seductive new marketplace of trickery and con. There were many ways to be swindled on a large or small scale. Regular day-to-day shopping often entailed hidden risks, and although these might seem relatively insignificant, they created an atmosphere of mistrust and furthered the sense that everyone had become cynical and corrupt. Although the development of markets and the ubiquity of kiosks selling everything from beer to footwear has made shopping much easier than it was in Soviet times, people regularly remark on the problem of discerning fake or counterfeit products from genuine name brands: traders sell cheap imitations of designer clothes, and imported liquor bottles are filled with illegally-brewed grain alcohol that is tinted with food color.[16] Savvy consumers have developed numerous ways of discerning the real from the fake,[17] and the sharing of shopping experiences and advice is a regular topic of conversation. Writing about consumption habits in contemporary Russia, Caroline Humphrey comments that people buy from kiosks with the "certain knowledge that they are being 'cheated' " and, she argues, with a full understanding of the various mechanisms through which that cheating is perpetrated (1993:51). "Public markets," she writes, "have become huge fairs of disingenuousness" (63).

Property transfers also present a significant risk of swindle. With privatization, buying and selling property became legal, and property transfers occur at a furious pace. The market, however, is full of shady real estate agents and crooked developers, who have worked out myriad ways of cheating people out of their money or their property. They sell properties that don't belong to them, abscond with deposits and down payments, snare customers in high-interest loans that they can't repay, or get people to sign away their property by taking advantage of the complex bureaucracy involved. This last method has been especially effective in swindling elderly people who don't understand the intricacies of contracts. Explaining why she dare not sell or trade her apartment, whose mortgage payments she could no longer afford, one small-scale businesswoman declared that "if they want to swindle you, they will find a way. The agents know the ins and outs of the paperwork. No matter how savvy and careful we are, they are many steps ahead of us with their little tricks." My friend Olga, a schoolteacher, and her husband Yuri, a bookkeeper (one of the "prestigious" new professions, in which a person could earn a decent salary, at least until the banks

collapsed in 1998), told me their story of a property swindle which took place in 1995:

> We tried to buy another apartment. We found some agents, and they showed us a place, and we put a deposit down on it. Then they refused to give us the apartment or our money back, the whole thing was just a huge swindle. We tried to get some guys to help us get the money back, we had our own *krysha*, but the agents' krysha was stronger, and our krysha couldn't break through theirs.

People engaged in business or trade face the challenge of avoiding swindles and dealing with unreliable partners, clients, and suppliers on a daily basis; the risks involved correspond, of course, to the scale of the business being transacted. Hence the ubiquity of *kryshi* in business. It is no exaggeration to say that everyone doing business has some kind of "roof"—whether supplied by bandits, the police, or some other form of official connections (or all of the above).[18] "Where money flows," as one businessman said, "there is always a risk of swindle, because money attracts swindlers like flies; swindlers have a nose for money or property changing hands." The bandit Alesha summed up only a small part of the situation when he said "the traders and speculators . . . borrow money and disappear with it. They take goods on consignment and don't pay for them . . . goods get stolen out of warehouses and stores."

These are only the most direct forms of swindle in business. The general atmosphere is one of fierce competition for capital, resources, properties, supplies, control of specific markets, industries, or geographical regions, official support and favors, and so on. To engage in business in Russia is to engage in an elaborate, multileveled, and constant struggle to maintain even a slight advantage in these various arenas. While this description (and these bellicose metaphors) apply to capitalism everywhere, Russia entirely lacks a framework of state regulation and oversight within which business "battles" may take place; there are no final arbiters for the conflicts that constantly arise, and there are few developed moral or ideological constraints on bad behavior. Such conditions make the field of enterprise a frightfully slippery one in which rights, rules, alliances, and obligations constantly change. One of the key colloquialisms in contemporary Russian is "*krutit'sia*," meaning simultaneously "to turn, spin, revolve, whirl, squirm, circulate, twist, contort."[19] It is a common piece of local knowledge that

only by knowing how to *krutit'sia* can one keep one's head above water in any kind of enterprise. The Russian mafia are, in a sense, the masters of this dance. Their occupation entails a kind of "meta-spinning" among different realms of enterprise, within and between different social fields and different levels of hierarchy.

In the absence of reliable, coherent, and accessible state arbitration in business matters, the mafia are also, of course, the primary suppliers of mediation, compensation, and conflict resolution services. For many businesspeople, they provide the only controlling or coercive apparatus readily available. Their range of services includes the common *razborka*—meetings between two opposed parties that are mediated by the bandits representing each side. The outcomes of *razborki* may depend on communicative shrewdness or on some logic of justice, authority, alliance, or brute force (or a combination of these). If razborki fail to resolve a conflict, the mafia may be engaged to utilize more drastic means—everything from "unpleasant encounters" to assassination.

For those who haven't spent much time in Russia, the specter of the mafia may appear terrifying, astonishing, and exotic. From a local perspective, however, kryshi, razborki, murders, bombings, and assassinations have become surprisingly normal features of the daily landscape, of conversation, of humor, and of popular culture. It is not uncommon to see groups of five or six "flatheads"[20] aggressively marching, almost in formation, through a metro station or along a street; "there they go, off to a razborka!" my Russian companions say with droll humor. Several businesspeople have described their experience with razborki in interviews. Half-joking references to kryshi and protection money are a standard feature of much conversation.

The media regularly report the murders of businesspeople, politicians, and journalists; people joke about the ignominy of low-price, thousand-dollar hits, and there are plenty of anecdotes about hired killings gone wrong.[21] This realm of murders and assassinations is not far removed from the experience of most people; on the contrary, many have stories to tell of their close encounters with bandits, of murders or bombings they have witnessed, and so on. One acquaintance, a woman engaged in very small-scale egg distribution in Moscow, described how she was dragged into a car and driven to a forest, where some bandits to whom she owed money threatened to strip her naked and drive away if she could not explain how she planned to pay up. A music teacher reported that her cousin, a security guard, had noticed a grenade taped

to his neighbor's door as he was leaving for work; he called the police who removed the grenade, but they could not figure out why the neighbor, a businesswoman, had been targeted. In Moscow during the summer of 1994, I was twice in the vicinity of bombings, close enough to hear the explosion and witness the ensuing commotion. The interesting aspect of these experiences for me was to observe, in myself as well as in those who tell me their own stories, a sense that these events were entirely explicable, as horrifying but as common a part of contemporary life as automobile accidents. Thus does an aura of violence become an almost banal part of existence.[22]

The Metaphysic of Money

Thus far, I have presented only a general outline of some of the contours of socioeconomic life in the developing markets of Russia; there is, obviously, much more to it. But the phenomena described above form the basis for widespread declarations about the "cynicism" that seems to have infiltrated the social fabric. However, most people—even the mafia bandit Alesha—are not so cynical that they do not seek to explain and justify the social changes they have experienced. As people watch others and, indeed, find *themselves* energetically participating in the scramble for resources—learning to *krutit'sia* on whatever level—ideas about the power of money serve as symbols of the compelling force behind all this activity and its resultant changes in social relations.

Contemporary Russian narratives often describe an expanding sphere of uncontrollable corruption, greed, duplicity, and savagery, a dystopic realm where the values of charity, compassion, love, art, and labor have all dissolved under the inescapable hypnosis of what many refer to as "the cult of money." There are multiple positions from which this social image is cast and a wide range of inflections that vary according to age, education, ethnicity, social status, degree of involvement in the marketplace, and economic experience. Nonetheless, certain central images are remarkably consistent, part of the general, "commonsense" view of the changed social world.

The symbolic construction of money as an almost animate, destructive agent serves in Russia, as elsewhere,[23] to summarize the immensely complicated dynamics of systemic transformation. As Jonathan Parry and Maurice Bloch (1989) have theorized in *Money and the Morality of Exchange*, at issue in these fetishistic discourses about money is the

question of how two overlapping, interdependent, but separate spheres of social life—the long-term sphere of collective values and the short-term sphere of private striving—are to be reconciled or articulated. In any society, they argue, both of these spheres are necessary to social and biological reproduction, yet each must be insulated from the other in reliable, stable, and socially legitimized ways. The fetishizing of money may occur when the natures of the exchanges between these two spheres is under contest, and this is surely the case in Russia as it has been throughout the postsocialist world. Conversations about money mark a general effort to define profound structural changes in moral terms; money is, in a sense, a symbol of the force which has dissolved the socialist institutions, practices, ideologies, and commitments that seemed (for better and for worse) so sturdy and unmalleable.

Katherine Verdery writes that "as a once-socialist economy increases the play of market forces, it opens up spaces for radically new conceptions of the economy and the place of money in people's lives" (1996:181). In socialist economies, of course, most people had few ways to amass capital or multiply their money without direct investment of labor. In moving away from the logics of socialism, people must come to grips with the seemingly magical quality of money in a market system, where money begets money, goods accrue value through trade, familiar work practices have given way to mysterious forms of economic activity, and income discrepancies create utterly disparate, incommensurate worlds.

Where traditional boundaries of moral and group identification have been effaced, the flow of money can be cast as the primary agent of that effacement. Where it seems that personal integrity, moral limits, concern for the welfare of the larger community, and a desire to perform "honest work" have disappeared, the thirst for money can be invoked to make sense of that disappearance. One irony here is that money has been reinvested with the fetishistic power it had in communist propaganda as an agent of spiritual and social corruption.

A retired schoolteacher, Viktoria, whose family was managing quite well through a variety of means (including renting their apartment to me for the summer), lamented that:

> We are morally damaged. Look at how men these days are glued to their televisions, and what are they watching? All the American films so long denied them but especially the martial arts films. Our old Soviet films all had some moral base, which wasn't bad. In fact the philosophy of communism corresponded to Christian philosophy. The only problem then was at the top with the officials. They gave us those moral messages but we didn't mean anything to them, we "little people," and they lived their comfortable lives behind a curtain, that was the *real* iron curtain, hiding their happy lives from us. Now it is all out in the open, and nobody is ashamed. Now we all know what it is about, and everybody wants to get rich and live like our leaders always lived, even the children are already totally damaged, totally warped.

Viktoria's commentary sheds light on many aspects of the discussion at hand. In a few verbal strokes, she constructs a history of class relations, posits certain alignments of cosmology and ideology, and conveys the emotional effects of moral confusion and decay. In particular, Viktoria suggests that there was always a social realm wherein money circulated and corrupted—the sphere of the communist elites—but that the "little people" were excluded from, in a sense *protected* from, that corrupting force by the fixed barriers of power and privilege. When she says "even the children are already damaged," she implies that there no longer seems to be any reliable separation between the spheres of innocence and corruption (childhood and adulthood, people and elites).

In this vein, another teacher described her disdain for the changes she witnessed in her ten-year-old nephew: "He's really charming, but he smokes and trades already. Kids today only think about money. When I asked him what he thought of a pretty girl in his class as a possible future wife, he said, 'No, she's too poor.' "

The thirst for money is said to motivate extreme breaches of social relations—even those of kinship. Kolia deplored the collapse of family values, saying: "It is sickening what is happening nowadays to children. People just toss their kids out on the streets, to fend for themselves, so they can save money. It was never like this before. Now there are thousands of abandoned kids."

The media has reported a few cases of people who murdered their own parents or grandparents so as to inherit and sell their apartments, and such stories are picked up and spread to vivify the claim that money drives people to the most abominable behaviors. Tales of friends, relatives, and associates cheating or abandoning each other for the sake of money are not uncommon.

Despite claims that now everybody is corrupt, there is a logic of degree: most people concurred that the moral waters are murkier the higher one looks. The more money a person has (or the more money that circulates around a person), the more corrupt he or she must be. Government officials and the new business class are seen as being the most corrupt of all, as being utterly disinterested in what happens to "the people" as long as their pockets are full and their dachas protected by high walls. Discourse is somewhat slippery and contradictory on this point, however. The thirst for money creates moral corruption, while, at the same time, existing moral corruption may allow the thirst for money to take hold. (This must be so if the speaker perceives himself or herself as being relatively immune to money's power).

Many people invoke the notion that the willingness to work for money has disappeared. Presumably, nowadays many people want to get it magically, instantly, and without labor; this idea seems to reflect most vividly the lack of fit between socialist ideologies about the honor of work and the evil of speculation. Talk constructs a standard opposition between real work, which does not bring a person money, and those dishonest or unproductive activities that do make money. In contrast to the transparency of "real labor," moneymaking activities are murky and mysterious. My friend Olga talked about an acquaintance who works as a cleaning woman in a fancy shop where they sell nothing but some kind of German skin balm—so expensive that few can afford it. "The cleaning woman says all she does in the mornings is gather up vodka and wine bottles, and she wonders what her employers actually do during the day." Olga also passed on the story of an engineer who works in a joint venture. "He signs a few pieces of paper every month and gets a huge salary. I have no idea where the money comes from to pay people like that for nothing."

Trading, the predominant (and most visible) economic activity of the day, feeds into the image of moneymaking as an activity by which money is made without work. Russian streets are now crammed with private shops, kiosks, and small stands, and it is imagined that the owners of these enterprises make "piles of money" without working. This, of course, reflects Soviet-era and even pre-Soviet Russian constructions of trade as immoral speculation. As Mikhail, a retired scientist, put it, "nowadays anybody will kill anybody else for any little thing." His son heartily disagreed, however, saying: "If that's true, then why would all these people sit all day in kiosks, selling vodka, when they could just as

easily kill someone?" His father retorted, "What kind of work is that, sitting in a kiosk? That isn't work. Those people just can't figure out whom to kill."

Sometimes deserving people do make money, but there is often some kind of "miracle" by which this occurs. A young seamstress, Anna, who dreams of being a fashion designer, cast things in an eminently folkloric vein in the following story:

> Russians don't really want to work, you know. It is too hard. One of my friends went to Florida and stayed with a Russian émigré there. He said it was beautiful and everybody was rich, but he couldn't stand it. Life there was too crazy, the phone was always ringing, there were always dozens of messages on the answering machine, business calls to answer, too much bustle, exhausting. Russians don't need that kind of insanity. Though we are living in poverty now, we wait for miracles, like always. All poor Russians wait for miracles, like Ivan the Fool from Russian fairy tales, who always did everything wrong but married the princess in the end anyway. But miracles do happen nowadays. One artist I know brought some paintings to Moscow to sell in a park. An Italian wandered by, fell in love with his work, brought him to Italy, toured him around, lavished millions on him. He came back loaded with money and bought himself an apartment in Moscow!

Such winsome accounts are overshadowed in conversation by those which highlight a logic alien to fairy tales, however. In older Russian tales, the honest (though perhaps lazy or foolhardy) hero usually prevails, and the villain gets his or her punishment; however, contemporary stories more often emphasize the inversion of this moral logic. Kolia put it starkly: "Look at who gets rich nowadays. Not people doing honest work or anything productive. Just those people who know how to steal, are willing to steal and kill and swindle to get what they want. People kill their own parents to get their apartments to sell. We are warped."

The image of two intimately connected but utterly unequal social groups, the "honest" people who have played by the rules and only gotten poorer and the former communists, businesspeople, traders, and bandits who have stolen everything they possibly could, was constantly voiced by other working people and pensioners with whom I spoke. At a birthday dinner for Pasha's father—a meal featuring homegrown potatoes and mushrooms gathered at the dacha—Pasha's mother lamented

bitterly about the impossibility of living on their pensions and the fatal insult that was being delivered to the people who had worked so hard their entire lives. Having sat desultorily silent during most of the meal, the father finally said:

> There's no future for Russia, it's twenty or thirty years away. The government does not serve the people, it just wrings them dry and steals from them. Our mayor, our governor, what do they do? They just travel to exotic lands supposedly to make "deals"—they go to Portugal, Japan, Europe, on money from our taxes and stay in fine hotels, eat fancy meals, buy presents for their mistresses. They live like tsars already, but they want more. Our own factory director, having piles of money of his own already, demanded that a shipment of wood for the factory be put aside, so he could use it in his own dacha. They have everything, but they want more. And we, who have worked all our lives, have nothing.

Striking incongruities were sometimes encountered in relation to such discourses, however. I spent quite a lot of time talking with Viktoria, my landlady for the summer. Many of our conversations hinged around her depictions of the poverty in which her family and her friends now live, and the "moral insult" that this represents to pensioners.

> I don't understand. People work for forty-three years and find themselves paupers. Is that fair? No, it is dishonest. The government has treated us very very badly, insults all of us who endured everything. And look at all the stuff in the bazaar, what an insult. None of it is Russian, traders just go to Poland or Turkey, buy stuff, bring it back here to sell. While our local factories sit empty. There used to be no shoes to buy, now the bazaar is full of piles of shoes to enjoy but they are all imported, and our shoe factory sits empty. Now, we honest people are still as poor as ever. It is no wonder that nobody wants to live honestly anymore. If you live honestly, you starve. Regular workers are just starving nowadays. The minimal sum required for living is now officially one and a half million rubles per month per person, and we get 150,000 each as pensioners, so we live *one hundred times worse* [sic] than the minimum standard. While the big guys and the criminals get rich, resting on our backs.

I made no comment on the flaw in her mathematical calculation, which was repeated a number of times during our acquaintance. I took

it to indicate her affective response to the degree of separation she sensed between herself and the newly rich. There were other puzzling moments in her discourses and practices, however. Viktoria and her husband had gone to live for the summer at their dacha, in order to rent their apartment to me for the sum of two hundred dollars per month. This money, she explained, they would use to pay part of their grandson's thousand-dollar tuition to the new private university. It was unclear to me, at first, how they raised the rest of his tuition; as the summer progressed, however, I realized that they must have had several ways of earning money on the side. One day someone called offering an apartment on the Volga River for sale. I passed this message along to Viktoria. Later I overheard her asking her husband "did you advertise that you wanted to buy an apartment on the Volga?" He said he had and took the caller's number. Clearly the family had some capital to invest. During the entire summer, she brought home vast quantities of berries, mushrooms, tomatoes, and other produce for preserving, saying, "this, and the potatoes we are growing at our dacha, is the only way we old people can survive anymore." And yet, on another day she described the forty-dollar electric teakettle she planned to buy. "Imagine, it boils water in two minutes and shuts itself off so that it won't boil dry!" The inconsistencies in our conversations—her descriptions of their extreme poverty and the evidence I saw to the contrary—may have been her attempts to assuage the moral repugnance she felt toward shadow income. As someone who had spent her entire working life in the Soviet system, where these realms were clearly marked and income on the side might be disguised, she could not easily see her family's extra income as legitimate. The director of the private university, who I met during my travels with Alesha, explained this, saying:

> Since, in Soviet times, people had no way to earn money legally aside from their official jobs, since so much economic activity was in the shadows, it is natural that now they hide and do not even in many cases appraise their own incomes. So while they complain of having no money, they are getting money on the side, which they do not even really count consciously as income.

My friend Tania offered an alternative explanation, however:

> She is ashamed at how she is cheating you, Nancy! Taking two hundred dollars for such a place, from an unsuspecting foreigner. She

has to make you think she is really poor, so you will feel good about giving her an insane amount of money for the apartment, an apartment that you can't even really work in, because she is always there herself![24]

I did not agree, however, that Viktoria was consciously manipulating my feelings. Rather, it seemed to me that she was working on her own self-construction, trying to perceive herself as a "good person," living the life of relative poverty which was for so long ideologically constructed as connoting honesty and morality among nonpowerful Soviet people. Current realities gave her family economic opportunities not directly related to their own labor, and it was necessary for her to frame these in terms of the predominant ideologies of the past.[25]

People in their forties and fifties, who came of age during the Khrushchev "thaw" (a period of relative liberalization in the early 1960s) more openly express their cynicism—the conflict they negotiate between moral values and pragmatic necessities. My friend Larissa joked bitterly that "there is no mafia, we are all mafia now," referring to her sense that there is no way to survive economically if one behaves ethically. Olga and her husband, Vasia, honest and hardworking people, were approaching the point of impoverishment when they found themselves considering a way of getting a kickback from suppliers at Vasia's workplace; it was clear that this was the way his colleagues were making money. I was taken aback as I heard myself encourage them to do this; "What am I saying?" I asked aloud, and Larissa replied, sardonically, "You see, it's inescapable, even you are getting as corrupted as we are!"

More striking than these generational divergences in discourse are the distinct ways that social status shapes people's representations of money and morality. While conversations with "working people" constantly revealed an ideological struggle to coordinate moral and pragmatic interest (or, to put this in Parry and Bloch's terms, to navigate the shifting, blurry lines between long-term collective interests and short-term personal needs), conversations with successful and powerful people reflected these concerns in abstract and detached language. It might be argued, and I think most of my Russian friends would agree, that the greater a person's corruption, the less he or she would be bothered by the problem of social cynicism. A couple of examples illustrate this point well.

When I visited Yaroslavl's new private university with the bandit

Alesha, the director showed me around the poshly renovated building and was especially proud to show me the computer center whose appointments and technology rival those of many well-endowed universities in the West. He explained that the university had received grant money from the German government for the retraining of Soviet military officers, that they had established a sophisticated computer laboratory and were training the officers (and some of their wives) in systems design, programming, and other high-tech applications.

A few days later, I returned to the university by myself for a formal interview with the director. I asked what the main problems in business in Russia today are, and he said:

> There is no culture of agreement here; that is the main problem. There is no mode, for example, of dividing property. So, two guys, longtime friends and colleagues, working together, start to disagree about the direction of their business, and they come to the point of splitting up. But it is impossible for them to figure out a way to divide their capital rationally, to appraise its value correctly. So they fight, and then they call in their respective "bandits" who assist them in working things out. Banditry [*banditizm*] is thus a normal phenomenon in times like these. It is necessary to get people to pay their debts in the absence of a developed legal system and a developed business culture. The Chechen mafia has been fulfilling this function for a long time in Poland. I cannot predict how long that will be the case, but it is slow to evolve. Also, there is always a margin of people who do not really have the talent or means—the capital—to start their own businesses, but who want to get ahead. Banditry is for them a way.

This explanation frames current reality in starkly functional, pragmatic terms with no hint of moral questioning and no expression of anxiety or uncertainty about the future. During our tour of Yaroslavl, I had asked Alesha who the director was and how he had founded this university. Alesha explained that the director had been a top city official, a highly-placed Communist Party member. During the transitional years, he was able to get the German grant and some other capital—Alesha's explanation here was vague—and acquired buildings for the university to renovate. It was clear that, like many former party leaders and managers, the director had been able to transform his power and connections into a new platform for the greater accrual of power, wealth, and prestige—his chauffeur drives him around in a new Volvo,

and he just returned from a grand tour of American universities where he was on a quest for partnership arrangements. I asked Alesha whether, in his view, it was mainly those with top party connections who were doing really well today. He said:

> Well, those people, who were even then very active and businesslike [*delovye*], and who were shrewd and had good connections, of course things have been much easier for them, and they are doing quite well today. But if a person is *very smart* . . . he can do anything, even without those connections.

Being "smart" means being active, energetic, and ambitious [*delovoi*]; it also means being shrewd, always on the lookout for opportunities to make money or gain power; and, especially in the current context, it seems to mean negotiating the margins of danger and taking risks, but only those for which you have adequate "cover."[26] Cover—the protection of "roofs"—is partly structural, dependent on the net of connections and the security of status, and partly charismatic, a function of one's ability to intimidate and charm. Alesha, too, seemed confident about the possibilities for making money, maintaining power, and living well; this sanguine optimism was the key feature of the speech and mode of self-presentation among the mafia, elite businesspeople, and government officials alike. In conversations and interviews with such people (including a group of mafia gangleaders with whom I sat through a dinner party charged with the drama of threats and brutality), I never heard a single expression of concern about the corrupting power of money.

Another encounter shows this nonchalance in stark relief. While visiting a bank with Alesha, I had a short conversation with its public relations director, a sophisticated man in his early thirties. Without any irony or hesitation, he told me the following:

> We try to "control the press" so the public does not get scared about their investments; they are very nervous right now after MMM and everything. This is easy, since there is no free press here, no fourth estate. We just pay journalists to write what we want them to, and the people believe anything in print. Although it is hard when you have investments from regular people. They have the strange habit of coming to collect their interest and then turning around and cursing the bankers, calling us "scoundrels" because they are sure we are getting very rich off their money. They are earning 300 percent a year from us and calling the bankers scoundrels.

This man seemed to have no sense of how cynically his words rang. This suggests how powerful the discourses of particular status groups can be in shaping social perceptions. The general surround of "businesslike" [*delovoi*] talk is like a powerful filter through which very few of the concerns of other social groups penetrate. This man clearly had no idea why bank customers cast bankers as "scoundrels," although his own brief rendition of how he uses money to control the press is a flagrant articulation of the general spirit of cynicism and public swindling which so many people decry.

The Dangerous "Cult of Money": Retribution and Redemption

Contemporary stories and laments about a population warped by the cynicism and moral debasement that circulate with money do not stand alone. Rather, they are almost always in implicit or explicit dialogue with transcendent images of a near or distant future in which some form of social redemption will occur. Espousing a logic of retribution—human, magical, or divine—many of the stories depict the dangers of the "money cult," and the circulation of these stories may act as a subtle form of interpersonal warning, a pedagogy of moral order couched in almost folkloric forms. At the same time, this circulation represents a collective discursive effort to imagine "ways out" of the morass of moral confusion, to resolve the urgent question of establishing boundaries of right and wrong, private and public: in short, to revise the contours of social order in relation to changed patterns of economic and political practice. In the absence of any common ritual forms for navigating these unfamiliar waters, public and private discourse is arguably the key sphere in which a moral order can be renegotiated and moral anxiety is expressed.

Narratives describe three main forms that retribution may take against those engaging in the cult of money: wealthy people experience psychospiritual, financial, and physical dangers. Those who fall prey to the temptations of money must cope with their constant vulnerability to the general ennui that may result when money is one's highest value; they are also liable to being swindled, robbed, kidnapped, or killed. A Moscow feminist described a complicated chain of psychological despair in the lives of New Russians:

You know who's suffering the most now? The wives of the rich businessmen. They have everything, but life is totally boring. They are not involved in their husbands' intense business activities. The men think their wives should be happy, with their fancy kitchens and clothes, but these women have nothing to do or be involved in. All the patients in a new neurosis clinic are the rich husbands who are going nuts because their wives are so unhappy.

Anxiety is another primary psychological penalty paid by the wealthy. I heard a number of tales of how people turned in others to the police or the bandits in exchange for money, or tales of people who were killed when they made a wrong move or tried to cheat someone.[27] Families are also under threat. Several unrelated people in Yaroslavl told me the same story of a woman working in oil refining (still a partly state-controlled industry) who managed to divert huge sums into her own pocket by working hand-in-hand with the mafia. Presumably, she tried to hide some of her income from the mafia to avoid paying them their full share of the profits. As a result, the bandits kidnapped her two children and held them for a huge ransom (one person said $200,000, another twice that). In the end, she paid them and got her children back. "Why would anyone want to live like that, having to worry all the time that your children would be kidnapped?" asked a woman, hearing this story at a dinner party.

In Yaroslavl in early August 1995, the media reported the brutal slaying of a married couple who had made a fortune in the beverage distribution business. Discussing a newspaper report about the killing, the artist, Kolia, explained:

You see, there is no point in making big money. People are greedy. As soon as they see large sums flowing, they demand their percent. This couple probably got greedy, maybe they tried to hide some of their income, or maybe their competitors got annoyed with them for grabbing too much of the market here. It's all swindling and fraud; it isn't worth it to try to do anything; you work hard, figure something out, make some money and you think you've done it, and then somebody takes it all away from you. There's no point in trying to make money. People are greedy. As soon as they see it flowing, they want it. Or you get killed if you cross someone. This is normal business in Russia today: it's the cult of money . . . very simple. And money attracts trouble like a magnet. Because of this, there will never be a normal

business climate in Russia. Everyone just wants big bucks as fast as possible, and will do anything to get it. It is a very murky water.

As in many Russian cities, the edges of Yaroslavl have sprouted with beautiful and preposterously large private homes, always surrounded by tall brick walls that are topped with barbed wire and security cameras. These are the fortresses of the New Russians. Expressing both awe and disdain at their vulgar grandeur, my friends would show me around their dacha villages, pointing out these new structures and passing on rumors about who the owners were supposed to be and the shady ways they were said to have made their money. These houses stood as symbols of the miraculous new wealth in their midst, but they also conjured tales which reinforced the idea that the cult of money brings on the demise of its most fervent devotees.

A number of times I rode the bus past a particular red-brick palace, and each time my companions would point and explain that it was the house of a particularly ruthless politician, recently murdered in his own home despite his barbed wire, bodyguards, and electronic security system. I spent many evenings listening as people told strings of tales about such murders, all hinging on the inevitable connection between moneymaking and death. On one level, these were just stories people told with eagerness and thrill, like kids telling slasher stories around a campfire. But these were pregnant with a kind of occult significance as well: they signaled a belief in the inevitability of some manner of social redemption, some ultimate reconciliation of the contradictions of morality and money. As Pasha, my trader friend explained:

It is not at all worthwhile to make a lot of money, you just attract attention and get yourself killed. It is much better to stay very small, stay in your own small corner. Of course everybody has to pay for *kryshi*—there is no getting around that. But if you stay little, take care of your debts, pay your percent for protection, you have a chance to be okay, make a little money and survive. But you have to be very careful, not to step on anybody's toes, not to go over the limit.

In Moscow in 1994, I visited my old friend Andrei, a poet and artistic impresario. He had moved from his old communal flat, which he had proudly inhabited for decades, into a nice large apartment that a businessman, who valued everything Andrei had done in Soviet times to help underground artists, had bought for him. After hearing him describe

this generous gift, I asked Andrei to tell me what he thought about all the social changes around him, and he took off on a descriptive flight:

> Suddenly, into this life in which the Russian people have been conditioned to perceive poverty an accomplishment, a sign of cleanliness and morality, suddenly into this life flies a sixteen-year-old boy behind the wheel of a Lincoln, and the question arises: when did he succeed in earning enough for a Lincoln? Any fool understands what it means: He killed somebody, he robbed somebody, the racket, kidnapping, and so on. Everyone understands. Where did he manage to earn it? This sixteen-year-old kid with hardly anything on his face to shave? The people see this and go into wild shock. All understand: hard work, honest labor now means nothing. There's a guy, he's survived the war, and here he is earning a minimal salary, nowadays twenty thousand rubles—what is twenty thousand now? It means one breakfast. Per month. That is the minimum wage, what people earn who are washing floors, working their hands raw, and these people see the kid with the Mercedes. . . . Philosophers, scientists, make sixty thousand a month. That's three breakfasts. To express this in Russian language is impossible. Even artists can't describe this contrast of two Russias. Even our humor is dying. What can you say about this new world of ours? Nothing. But I'll tell you: When the big companies let out at night, the new rich pour into the street, and they are all drunk. They have been drinking all day. I have seen it with my own eyes, on the main streets, in front of the fancy new buildings. Our new wealthy class files out of their gleaming skyscrapers, wearing their Armani suits, and they are all falling down drunk, falling into puddles with their Armani suits. All they can do at work is drink. They know there's no future, for them or for us. They live in mortal fear, in mortal shame, and to forget about it they drink until they fall down. This is the world we live in now.

In Andrei's fantastic realism, Russia is a new Babylon, one in which the cult of money leads to "mortal shame and fear," the first signs of an impending, inevitable world-collapse. Money earned "magically"—that is, dishonestly, through the sorcery of corrupt practices—also destroys "magically" and the New Russians, as the avant-garde of corruption, are the first to sense this inevitable destruction. Stories of this sort form a broad discursive tapestry; they weave the seemingly senseless social phenomena of a radically changed world into a clear theodicy, whereby—

at least in narrative—everything makes sense: there may be no just future on earth for the poor workers or professor, but neither will the "wealthy class" enjoy the illegitimate fruits of their corruption.[28]

Redemption through the Mafia

> To see corruption as something which is morally bad needlessly burdens the task of analysis. It suggests that there are evildoers who can be punished. We must expect, however, that people who act in particularistic and corrupt ways in not making a clear distinction between public and private affairs have few other options. They are part of societies in which the distribution of power is far more uneven than in certain nation-State societies where people can, quite apart from personal merits, afford to be "honest."—Anton Blok, *The Mafia of a Sicilian Village, 1860–1960*

If money is the fetishized agent of social decay, the agent of redemption that appears in many stories is, strangely enough, the mafia. This is implicit in Andrei's tale, for everyone knows that the "mortal fear" the New Russians feel is fear of being killed, and the mafia are, of course, the professional agents of murder. But a representation of the mafia as a redemptive agent is much more broadly cast in Russian talk. That Alesha depicted himself as an "honest" bandit may not be surprising; what is striking, however, is how widespread and explicit are notions that the mafia may be the most reliable provider of social and moral order.

Until I encountered actual bandits and heard all kinds of bandit stories, it would have been hard for me to imagine the degree to which the mafia and its members have been constructed and experienced as a normal, necessary, and even comforting presence in day-to-day life. Conversations I had in 1990 and 1992 showed that the mafia was, for most people, the supreme symbol of evil and terror. Four or five years later, however, the shadow of evil was projected onto other social groups, and the terror the mafia provided was sometimes represented as the means by which avarice and corruption might be reined in. A few selections from local discourse suggest the contours of this conception.

A student in the private university who described himself as struggling to stay honest in a corrupted world, nineteen-year-old Lenia offered his image of possible futures:

> I see two forms of government for Russia in the future. The first will be the type proposed by Zhirinovsky [an eccentric nationalist politi-

cian], with a crackdown on crime; although what Zhirinovsky promises is impossible: a wealthy, comfortable life for all. He promises vodka for all the men, but sober husbands for all the women! This is of course a fairy tale. The other type of government will be made up by the mafia, and this is a more rational way to go. The bandits understood economic reality, they will set things up in a rational way. And you know, the majority of business people are not driving in Mercedes-Benzes, they live modestly, value family life. It's only the real working-class people who get suddenly rich and need everything fancy, to show off. By the way, the Russian mafia now has more methods of torture than there were during the Spanish Inquisition. They are really advanced.

In this construction, the mafia—because it is both rational and "advanced"—will ensure some kind of social normalization. Lenia's depiction echoes that of the director of his university, who said that the bandits fulfill a crucial function in the absence of a developed legal and business culture that is "slow to evolve." Kolia, the artist, told a story that reflected these themes:

> I made fourteen thousand bucks selling my old apartment. I gave my ex-wife half. The next thing I knew, some of her gangster friends came and stole the rest from me. That was all the money I ever had, and it was actually all mine, because that was my apartment before I even met my wife. I had just wanted to help her out, but she wanted everything. After that the gangsters stole the money from her! In the end, Alesha helped me, and he managed to get me three thousand back. That was all he could do. He's a decent guy, he gave me the whole three thousand, didn't take a cut. He said, "Kolia, I respect you, you're a good fellow, I just wanted to help you out and I don't need to make money off of you." He's a good guy.

Although I wondered whether Alesha really gave Kolia all the money he recovered, I decided that was not the most important point of this story. Here we have a traditional tale of good bandits and bad, fighting it out, with the good bandit achieving at least a partial victory.

Other stories about mafia gangsters emphasized their less pragmatic functions. One woman told me about having met one of Yaroslavl's top mafia leaders at a spa, and she enthusiastically described how he generously treated her and her companions to fancy meals and drinks and

entertained them with his stories of life in the racket; she expressed regret that this man had recently been poisoned while he lay in a hospital bed getting treatment for alcoholism. Marina, an ethnographer who had recently moved to Yaroslavl from Yekaterinburg, the proclaimed mafia capital of Russia, told me that:

> the funerals of bandits have become the most important public ritual, much more interesting than other holidays. People turn out in droves to watch the long parades of fancy black cars going in entourage to the funerals. They watch the newspapers to know when the funerals will be. It is a regular event in town, people are thrilled by it, fascinated to see these parades of the rich and powerful.

What are these stories about the mafia saying, and why are they so prevalent? Katherine Verdery suggests that mafia talk circulates so actively in postsocialist societies "because it symbolically expresses many of people's difficulties in the transition." Among the general meanings that mafia-talk may encapsulate, Verdery suggests that since they flexibly mediate a variety of social fields, the mafia may stand for the "invisible horizontal linkages" integral to market economies, and as such they may symbolize people's suspicions that those linkages are morally questionable. Mafia, she proposes, "is a symbol for what happens when the visible hand of the state is being replaced by the invisible hand of the market. . . . [I] in this sense, the image of mafia perhaps gives voice to an anxiety about statelessness, alongside other forms of insecurity" (1996:219).

While Verdery is quite right about what the mafia can symbolize, I think she has conveyed only half of the picture. The "conceptual mafia" that she describes does not fit the one depicted in the Russian stories above; these stories do describe "real bandits" but gloss them with a symbolic varnish of generosity, helpfulness, and judiciousness, and relay a sense of the awe (not altogether disapproving) with which the populace regards mafia rituals.

Ethnographic encounters suggest that there are a number of "conceptual mafias" circulating at once in postsocialist contexts—just as there are any number of real and competing mafia gangs. Local talk, in fact, makes this quite clear. Interviewing five young workers at a Yaroslavl bread factory in 1995, I asked them whether they would vote in the upcoming elections. They all said no. One man said: "Why should we vote when it is all rigged and political offices are just bought and traded?

It is nothing but a giant mafia up there. We must simply try to live on our own down here and get by without politics."

As so many others do in casual conversation and media discussions, this man applied the metaphor of mafia not to the "real" mafia but to the "government" mafia—to those who are seen as invisibly, conspiratorially, and effectively mastering social resources and power to the detriment of the people "down here." My trader friend Pasha made these categories of mafia even clearer for me. One day, after hearing one of his long complaints about how hard it is to do business and still stay honest in Russia, I asked him whether he ever fantasizes about living and working elsewhere:

> No! I totally love my country, my motherland. I don't want to live anywhere else. This place nourishes my soul, with all its craziness, mysteriousness, and unpredictability. I would die anywhere else, couldn't live. But I can't stand the corruption. Everyone who has power or money is corrupt. The politicians—that is our true mafia, each and every one of them: the *real* mafia. The street bandits, who you have met, they are basically honest, hardworking guys. The real corruption is at the top, and it is the politicians, from top to bottom, who are the real criminals. I think they should all be taken out and shot. That is the only way for Russia to become a clean and civilized place: like Stalin did, we should just round our leaders up and destroy them. We pay our taxes to them and it just goes in their pockets. I am not against supporting the poor, the elderly, but I think the best way is for us to do this independently: give me three *babushki* to support and I will happily, joyously support them! Directly! Without the intervention of the fucking mafia government which takes the largest percent just for themselves. This is the way our country should be arranged. I am an honest businessman, and I pay my taxes diligently, but I resent it, because I see the poor old women on the street and I know I could do a better job of taking care of them, just assign me three *babushki* and I will take care of them until they die. Another thing that is really pathetic: the way the old people believe in and give their last kopecks to the church. They are totally happy to give their last kopecks for the reconstruction of the local churches. But then you see the priests driving around in Mercedes, really! And living it up on the money the poor, believing *babushki* give them. The priests today are also the real mafia. Getting rich from two directions, from the contributions of the people who want to believe in something again and from the huge investments of the government, which is trying to prove its spirituality by rebuilding the church. Wherever you have such money pouring in, there is corruption and evil. I'm not, but if I were a terrorist, I would be a revolutionary. I think it is necessary, on a regular basis, to take certain groups of people out and shoot them, to restore the purity of our society.

However frightening Pasha's passionate diatribe may seem, I think it vividly presents the sociocultural paradoxes of postsocialism and capitalism in Russia and the tangles of hypocrisy and cynicism in which people feel themselves caught. State power disintegrates and reintegrates, but though it pretends to move toward democracy and justice, it in fact seems as inaccessible, inconsistent, and involuted as before. It seems unwilling to distribute resources as needed—whether to feed the old *babushki* or guarantee a general rule of law in which market mechanisms might function. In such a context, it is no wonder that the bandits are sometimes cast as social redeemers. As depicted in public mythology, the "real mafia" seems to offer what the weak (or unwilling and self-interested) state cannot. Street bandits are accessible and flexible. They are sympathetic and fair—if the price is right. They are "protective." They offer arbitration services, and they mete out legalistic decisions in somewhat predictable ways. They are controlled by fixed internal regulations (the well-known mafia hierarchy and code of conduct) and thus *seem* to operate within a frame of social morality. They are relatively transparent; their mode of operation seems straightforwardly visible and thus negotiable. They fulfill functions of discipline and punishment—often, significantly, capital punishment. In short, they seem to embody the very qualities that characterize strong states. And, as a final touch, they render a range of ritualistic spectacles (such as momentous funeral processions) through which legitimate states normally glorify collective agency and undying commitment.[29]

In a sense then, however paradoxical it may seem, one of the conceptual mafias in contemporary Russia functions as a discursive projection of people's yearnings for a rational, distinct, and strong state apparatus. We, western ethnographers and others privileged by life experience in more stable societies, might be inclined to judge this as a highly mystified projection. After all, it is the mafia that has facilitated the liquefaction of legal parameters and the less-than-legitimate privatization of

public resources by former Communist Party bosses and powerful others; it is the mafia that has made grotesque murder a predictable outcome of competition in business and politics. Yes, the spiritual integrity that some discourse attaches to the Russian street mafia is of questionable veracity. Nonetheless, despite all of the mystification I may detect in their talk, I often find myself thinking that because of the stark forms their economic "re-education" has taken, my Russian interlocutors perceive the structural realities of class, power, and transaction in the capitalist marketplace more clearly than I ever will.

Notes

For thoughtful and critical assessments of this essay and its ideas in various incarnations, I am grateful to Bruce Grant, Svetlana Golybina, Carol Greenhouse, Julie Hemment, Natalia Kulakova, Michael Peletz, and Kay Warren. Generous funding for fieldwork in 1994, 1995, and 1997 was provided by the Joint Committee on the Soviet Union and its Successor States of the Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies with funds provided by the State Department under the Russian, Eurasian, and East European Training Program (Title 8). Research in 1997 was funded in part by a Fellowship Grant from the National Council for Soviet and East European Research, under authority of a Title 8 Grant from the U.S. Department of State; neither the council nor the U.S. Government is responsible for my findings or this essay. I am also grateful to Colgate University for research leave and for support in 1997 from the Colgate Research Council. Selected portions of this essay are reprinted from Nancy Ries, *Russian Talk: Culture and Conversation during Perestroika*. Copyright © 1997 Cornell University. Used by permission of the publisher, Cornell University Press.

1. For phenomenological discussions of Soviet cynicism, see Yurchak 1997, Kon 1996, and Humphrey 1993.

2. Yaroslavl is an ancient Russian city about two hundred kilometers to the northeast of Moscow. In the Soviet period it was transformed into a center of heavy industry, primarily dedicated to the manufacture of automobile engines and parts. With the collapse of heavy industry in the postsocialist economy, many of Yaroslavl's plants sit inactive, and vast numbers of workers inhabit the limbo of semiemployment, with all of the complex and shadowy survival strategies that this necessitates.

3. In 1995, a million rubles equaled about two hundred dollars and a million was a standard monetary referent, both concrete and symbolic. In some circles, however, people used *limony* to refer to millions of dollars, not rubles. *Arbuz* (watermelon) was a slang way of indicating a billion (dollars or rubles), a metonym, I assume, from the smaller fruit but also an allusion to the heaps of watermelons sold on city streets every summer by traders, who are presumed to earn "piles of money" this way.

4. Verdery notes the prevalence of talk about the mafia (or various mafias) in all postsocialist societies and suggests that exploration of the ways the conceptual mafia is used in postsocialist discourse can reveal much about local perceptions of social and political upheaval.

5. In my work on Russian discourses during the time of perestroika, I have argued that the key narratives (particularly laments) I was hearing in 1989 and 1990 were widespread, not tied to my presence as an outsider (Ries 1997:83–84). In contrast, many narratives I heard in Yaroslavl in 1995 seemed keyed to my foreignness. While in the last years of the Soviet regime people were collectively and ritualistically mourning the past and bemoaning the uncertain future, by 1995 that future had arrived, and local conversations were focused on the close-at-hand specifics of survival. These specifics were probably viewed as being both beyond my comprehension and inappropriate to discuss with a relative stranger. Only a handful of close friends openly described their economic strategies, and indeed it was only among old friends that I had enough background knowledge to make sense of the complex trajectories of survival activity.

6. This is another crucial way that post-Soviet narratives were different from those of perestroika. With the evaporation of the ideological construct of Soviet Communism and the hegemony of the Soviet state, abstract and totalizing discourses and local practices that had been keyed to state power were now decentered. This entailed a personalization and fragmentation on both ideological-discursive and practical levels.

7. Alesha seemed to speak without irony here; clearly he was unaware of the popular image of collection agencies in the United States. Discursively striving toward legitimacy, he unwittingly underscored its opposite.

8. A month later, due to a connection I made through Alesha, I happened quite accidentally to be at a dacha outside Yaroslavl that, to my surprise, turned out to be the safe house that his gang used for meetings. Without warning a group of eight mafia leaders, including one who Alesha told me was the head of a big Belorussian gang, showed up for a *razborka*—bandit slang for a meeting to sort out differences. All afternoon these eight men energetically "performed" their bandit identity for me, even threatening to stick my feet in concrete and throw me in the nearby river if I turned out to be a CIA spy and not the innocent anthropologist I claimed. It was clearly amusing to them to enact an identity borrowed directly from American gangster films. Sensing this—and recognizing my own sense of the Hollywood thrill of it all—I was not as unnerved by the situation as I might have been.

9. For example, through discussions of mafia activity and culture with several informants, I learned that boxing clubs were a cradle of criminal enterprise even in Soviet times and that Alesha had probably been involved in underground activity even long ago; I realized that the vehicles being traded were quite probably stolen; and I was given hints that suggested that Alesha's gang had recently carried out at least one hired killing. I also began to understand that the street-level protection racket pro-

vided only a relatively small source of mafia income, but that this local base was crucial to the large-scale, intergang, and even transnational criminal activities in which gangs like Alesha's were engaged.

10. I have had many occasions to converse with western businesspeople and scholars during fieldwork and travel in the 1980s and 1990s; most vivid for me were the three days I spent working as a translator for top company executives during the gala grand opening of Moscow's first McDonald's. I regret that I have not had time to undertake an ethnographic study of the discourses of westerners engaged in business in Russia; if one wants to encounter the ideology of capitalist colonizers in a most naked form, Russia offers a prime research site. While some western agents of business and democracy have been made quite cynical by their experiences, many espouse the idea of the "natural" social progress that the "free market" will deliver. Discourses about "the survival of the fittest" resound abundantly.

11. "*Privatizatsia*" (privatization) is often bitterly referred to by the rhyming neologism "*prikhvatizatsia*" which plays on the verb "*prikhvatiwat*" (to grasp, grip, or clutch) and on the colloquial "*khvatkii*" (tenacious, shrewd, crafty). This pun reflects popular awareness that privatization has been a process whereby people in power grabbed resources in a shrewd and greedy manner. Quick privatization was energetically promoted by the IMF, the World Bank, and armies of neoliberal foreign advisers representing the interests of global markets. Instructive are Janine Wedel's (1999) study of the entanglement of international interests in Russia and Michael Burawoy's (1997) trenchant remarks on privatization theory and practice. For realistic assessments of the privatization process, see, for example, McFaul and Perlmutter (1995) and Nelson and Kuzes (1995).

12. Although focused on very different kinds of communities in Russia—collective farms in rural Buryatiya—Caroline Humphrey's (1998:444–505) discussion of survival strategies and the ideological and practical dilemmas they entail is very instructive here.

13. The Russian anthropologist, Alexei Istomin, has commented (in a personal communication) that each voucher invested represented a person's symbolic acquiescence to privatization policies; in this way, he argues, the administration cleverly "purchased" people's naive consent to "shock-therapy" programs that did not represent their best interests. Joseph Blasi, Maya Kroumova, and Douglas Kruse (1997:77–79) make high claims about the success of the voucher program in creating a "people's capitalism," but I have not encountered a single person who has earned anything, whether cash or influence in factory management, from the program. Blasi, Kroumova, and Kruse cite figures for voucher investment, but they fail to report that a significant portion of these investments vanished into pyramid schemes or fly-by-night banks.

14. Under a law of their own creation, elected members of the Russian Parliament cannot be prosecuted for crimes while in office; Sergei Mavrodi, MMM's founder, thus escaped criminal prosecution by gaining a seat in the parliament. People voted for him chiefly out of desperation, imagining his election to provide a chance for them to get their investments back. For a fascinating discussion of the narrative effectiveness of MMM advertising, see Borenstein 1999.

15. See Katharine Verdery's detailed discussion of similar pyramid schemes in Romania, where, as certainly was the case in Russia, many of the savvy first investors—those who made huge windfalls before the pyramid collapsed—were members of the political-economic managerial class. Verdery hypothesizes that among other results in the former socialist societies, such schemes "nourished segments of the rising bourgeoiscracy that feeds off the primitive accumulation realized under socialism in both public and private domains" and that they "helped to produce two opposing social groups; one whose new wealth enables them to make money and dominate politics, and one, increasingly impoverished and disenfranchised, who will see riches as immoral and risk as unrewarded" (1996:202–203). Because government regulation of investment firms is so weak, such pyramids have been widespread throughout Eastern Europe; Albania's experience, where angry investors took up arms and rioted throughout the country in 1997, has perhaps been the most vivid example of the vast scale and serious consequences of these scams. Comaroff and Comaroff describe a complex of such schemes in post-Apartheid South Africa, which, like Russia, experiences "a promiscuous mix of scarcity and deregulation" (1999:281).

16. One wholesale-market worker described a box of shirts she was given to sell in a kiosk; the neck labels read "Made in France," while inseam labels read "Made in Korea," and labels on the plastic wrap read "Made in Italy." Her boss instructed her to remove the inseam label and the plastic wrap so that buyers would think the shirts were made in France. In a similar case, a friend explained one of his friend's frozen-food business: he imports expired product from Europe and has his employees restamp the boxes with new expiration dates; this man pays off the state inspection agents at the border so he can import his inventory without problems.

17. Some of these strategies are almost mystical in nature. There is, for example, a folkloric inventory of ways to discern real vodka from cheap grain alcohol. This can be a deadly serious situation; there have been numerous instances of people being poisoned by drinking "vodka" that turned out to be derived from industrial alcohol.

18. On various forms of krysha, see particularly Shlapentokh (1996).

19. The anthropologist Dale Pesmen (2000) has written a brilliant semantic analysis of this key term and its many correlated forms. It must be noted that the ability to *krutit'sia* has always been adaptive in Russia. Practices implied by the traditional proverb, "*khochesh'zhit'? Umei vertet'sia*" (You want to live? Know how to spin/prevaricate) carried on through the Soviet years in the various forms of *blat*, the complex system of favors and "pull." Ledeneva (1998) provides a comprehensive ethno-

graphic treatment of blat, and includes a discussion of its transformations in post-Soviet years; see also Pesmen (1996) on the metaphysics of *blat* transformations in recent years.

20. This is the expatriate community's slang for bandit-types, whose uniform style is crew cuts and black leather jackets.

21. Several such jokes concerned the murder of Versace, who was the designer of choice for bandits: "A New Russian makes a phone call somewhere in America after the murder of Versace. He says 'I ordered Versace . . . but the guys took me literally!' " The verb *zakazat'* means to order goods, but can also mean to order a killing.

22. It is crucial, however, to note that I did not experience any sense of personal danger related to this kind of violence in Russia. In the ocean of money flowing freely (especially in Moscow) today, an American academic is a very small fish indeed.

23. See Taussig (1980) for an extended case study of the metaphysics of money in a transforming system; see also Comaroff and Comaroff (1993).

24. While living in Yaroslavl, I learned that I could have rented a better apartment for much less, and many people commented that it was a swindle to charge me so much rent for that space, especially given the fact that my landlords, their grandson, and two dogs were frequently home, though they had promised to come only once a week to do laundry. Late in the summer, having heard my complaints about having no privacy, Grisha, one of my acquaintances, wanting, I think, to demonstrate to me his connections and his toughness, phoned Viktoria and made a veiled threat to gather his bandit buddies and come "take the two hundred dollars back from them." It was a mystery to me why my hosts suddenly disappeared to their dacha, leaving a note saying they would return only in two weeks, until my acquaintance proudly told me about his phone call. I was horrified, I felt that there was "evil on my soul" (thus do local constructs become part of an ethnographer's own worldview), but in spite of this I did manage to enjoy my privacy; thus did I benefit directly from the threat of banditizm.

25. Elsewhere I have described popular discourses of "mystical poverty" (Ries 1997:126–60). See also Dale Pesmen's (1996; 2000) discussions of the ways in which monetary exchanges could be purged of immoral connotations through complex avoidance practices.

26. As Max Weber noted in "The Social Psychology of the World Religions" (1946: 276), "strata in possession of honor and power fashion their status-legend so as to claim a special and intrinsic quality of their own, usually a quality of blood." *Delovoi*—"businesslike"—seems to me just such a symbolic quality, perhaps not a quality of "blood" but certainly an essentializing mode of explaining why some people had status and others did not.

27. The fact that these are usually tales about "distant acquaintances" or "acquaintances of acquaintances" suggests the mythic quality of such stories; while they may be real occurrences, they are probably more rare than the constant talk makes them seem.

28. I am grateful to John Borneman for the observation that these kinds of narratives are a contemporary theodicy. See Weber's (1946) "Social Psychology of the World Religions."

29. This image of socially redeeming mafiosi is vividly reflected in popular literature. In the books of Alexandra Marinina, by far the most popular detective novelist in Russia today (as well as a professor of jurisprudence and state criminal investigator), one recurring character is Eduard Petrovich Denisov, the aging mafia boss of a small Russian city. In Marinina's 1997 *Playing on Foreign Turf*, Denisov is depicted as a highly principled man, who runs his city with an iron hand, guaranteeing freedom from crime, high employment rates, well-provisioned schools and hospitals, orderly, "swindle-free" commerce, and a satisfying urban ritual life. Though he is a bandit, on principle Denisov refuses to trade in weapons, drugs, or historical treasures. Marinina is, of course, invoking an international popular culture archetype here, but it is one with poignant resonance in Russia today.