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The Failed Consolidation of Academic Authority in Post-Soviet Scholarship: The Case of Sociology

Imagine that the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation were headed by an official who saw the chief aim of his earthly existence as being to secure a leading role for national scholarship across the world. When he compared ambition with reality he would inevitably conclude that thoroughgoing reforms were needed. Russian scholarship today is not only failing to gain in stature, it is in the process of losing the stature it once had.¹ If our official's thoughts were to run along the same lines as those of most of his counterparts around the world, he would come to the conclusion that the essential problem lay in the inefficiency of the system by which resources are allocated among scholars. He would probably tell himself that the greatest result could be achieved if maximum opportunities were concentrated in the hands of the most gifted, and conversely, if talent and achievement (and only talent and achievement) were always to receive a timely reward. The job that would be left to be done seems to be a purely technical one: how can the most gifted be distinguished, and the most important achievements identified?

It is precisely here that the essential problems arise. The hero of our story would probably suppose -- like most representatives of Western societies, excepting the few admirers of Feyerabend and Latour -- that it is only scholars themselves who can give a just assessment of what their colleagues have achieved. It is they who must indicate who amounts to what in the world of academia. Our official grasps with relief at the well-known fact that scholars are continually distributing all kinds of status symbols among themselves, which must -- isn't that so? -- serve as such indicators for the uninitiated. But were he to take a more careful look at these symbols, and discover what academics really thought of them, he would certainly be disappointed.

There are academic degrees that divide the world of scholarship into Doctors of Sciences, Candidates of Sciences, and the rest. Sadly, a study of what has been termed the 'market for dissertation services' [Kalimullin, 2006] or a single visit to a

¹ This fact has been raised more than once in reports by the real, not fictional, Ministry of Education and Science, with reference, for instance, to the continuing decline in the quantity of publications by Russian authors in the leading scholarly journals (according to ISI): from 2.9% in 2000 to 2.1% in 2005 (Ministerstvo..., 2007: 44).

site offering ‘ready-to-go dissertations’ can permanently undermine one’s faith that the possession of a higher degree necessarily stands for any scholarly merit at all. And such doubts can only be strengthened by conversations with scholars. From the very mouths of those who possess these degrees our official might hear things like this: *‘I feel a bit uncomfortable about the fact I did [a doctoral dissertation]. These days people reckon you need to get a Cand.Sc., but the only ones who do doctorates are administrators who have cosy relationships with academic councils, not real scholars.’* The same is true of all the other symbols of academic rank, from undergraduate degrees (although the official is unlikely to start with any illusions as to those) to membership of the Academy of Sciences (concerning which he will inevitably be told, for instance, that *‘most of those who’ve been elected to it in sociology aren’t sociologists at all, they’re... God knows who, really’*).²

The official might try approaching the problem from the other side -- by looking for recognised scholars among the boards and presidia of professional associations. Members of these bodies are elected, and large numbers of academics take part in the voting; so one might assume that those to be elected would be those who enjoyed a general reputation. But there are reasons for doubt here too. It turns out that in many disciplines there are several professional associations, sometimes openly fighting among themselves, and that even so none of them succeeds in including the majority of scholars. Thus, there are numerous associations of sociologists, with various political and intellectual loyalties: the Russian Society of Sociologists, the Russian Sociological Association, the Community of Professional Sociologists, the Union of Sociologists of Russia, M. M. Kovalevsky’s Russian Sociological Society, and others.³ Depending on which association the official picked, he would receive a different selection of leading scholars.

² Quotations from interviews are given in italics. Readers who are familiar with Russian sociology will themselves be able to check how far the list of full and corresponding members of the Russian Academy of Sciences correlates with their own conception of academic achievement by first compiling their own list of 12 names that deserve the highest symbol of honour and then comparing it with the following: Iu. V. Arutyunyan, V. I. Boiko, M. K. Gorshkov, A. V. Dmitriev, V. I. Zhukov, T. I. Zaslavskaya, V. I. Ivanov, V. N. Kuznetsov, N. I. Lapin, G. V. Osipov, M. N. Rutkevich, Zh. T. Toshchenko (academicians and corresponding members as of May 2008 in the Philosophy, Sociology, Psychology and Law section and the Economics section (Zaslavskaya), listing sociology as one of their areas of specialisation). Ill-wishers could also tell our official a number of anecdotes tending to harm the Academy’s reputation, for instance, the story of how easily major politicians have become academicians in recent decades -- sometimes only five years after receiving an extra-mural degree.

³ Probably the highest-profile clash between Russian scholarly associations was provoked by the continuing conflict around the dean of the Sociology Faculty at Moscow State University, Dobrenkov, who is known for his extremely conservative political views. He was accused of plagiarism and of

Or the official might turn to Western experience and try relying on citation counts, which are supposed to give the most precise assessment of real intellectual influence. But the same problem arises here as with the professional bodies: the result will be entirely predetermined by the initial choice of journals to study citation in. To return to the example of sociology: articles by people who call themselves sociologists appear in several hundred periodicals, most of which are published by specific institutions and have their own circles of writers, to a great extent drawn from people working at the institution concerned. Their staff offer articles to the editors of 'their' journals, read only these same journals, and, as a result, refer to other scholars who fall within the same 'attention space' (to borrow Randall Collins's term). To choose the *Learned Papers of the University of X* as a publication in which a citation will 'count' would automatically guarantee academics at that university a favourable index, while its exclusion would, equally automatically, reduce their ratings -- sometimes to zero.⁴ It would be possible to include all the sociological titles, but this would immediately raise two troublesome problems:

(a) it is difficult to distinguish sociological journals from non-sociological, and even entirely non-academic (should citations in *Neprikosnovennyi zapas* or *Ekspert* be included?), and

(b) an obvious counter-strategy on scholars' part would be the formation of 'citation cartels', whose members would refer to one another; and the victors in such a competition would be the largest and most cohesive groups -- which by no means necessarily means those with the greatest creative potential.

excluding students for political reasons. The Russian Society of Sociologists adopted a statement expressing concern at the situation and calling on the university's rector, Sadovnichy, to take measures to 'normalise' it; and members of the Society's board publicly called for Dobrenkov to be dismissed. At the same time the Russian Sociological Association, of which Dobrenkov was president, spoke up even more decidedly in his defence. Each association accused the other of serving the political interests of its leadership.

⁴ A few figures, characterising sociology once again. The proportion of authors who represent the institution that publishes the journal exceeds 90% for the majority of these 'Papers' (a category to which 25 of the 58 journals entered in the VAK [Higher Academic Commission] listing for sociology belong), comes to 35% or 40% for some major publications (the *Sotsiologicheskii zhurnal*, the *Zhurnal sotsiologii i sotsial'noi antropologii*), and falls to 10% or 15% only in the veteran *SOTSIS* -- and even in *SOTSIS* a full 47% of authors are from Moscow (the figure is also 47% for the *Sotsiologicheskii zhurnal*, while 61% of *ZhSSA* authors are from Petersburg, where the periodical is published). Meanwhile, 65% of all references to journal articles appearing in *SOTSIS* over recent years are references to articles in *SOTSIS*, and no more than 4% represent references to any other single publication. A similar picture is visible with other journals. These figures have been kindly made available to the author by Katerina Guba (European University in St Petersburg), who is researching the journal system in Russian sociology.

In total despair our official might look to Western scholarship, which has presumably proved its ability to cope with all these problems. Why not take recognition in Europe and the USA as the basic indicator of achievement -- a simple extension of the field within which their status system operates? A certain proportional of sociology scholars in Russia, including the majority of likely readers of this article, would undoubtedly welcome such a decision. But in itself this approach is pregnant with a number of problems. Firstly, 'international recognition' is a much more diffuse category than might appear at first sight. The systems of status symbols employed in Anglo-American, French, and German scholarship (to take only the three most important instances) are not at all equivalent, and it is unclear how a decision should be reached to focus on one or another of them. It is unclear, further, exactly which symbols of recognition should be preferred: citation indexes? The total budget of joint projects in research and teaching? Regular participation in international conferences and long service on the boards of international associations? Unexpectedly for many, these criteria -- at least in the case of sociology -- yield different lists of 'recognised scholars'.⁵

Secondly, the general level of recognition of Russian scholars in the social sciences is too low for it to be possible to extract any guidance from it that would be useful within the framework of existing institutions. You couldn't put together a single dissertation council, which in Russia is supposed to consist of at least twenty members, from people who can be more or less described as 'internationally recognised', whatever criterion to justify the term might be chosen. Thirdly, even scholars who are very far from being nationalistic might see certain theoretical defects in such a decision. If we recognise that social theories owe their emergence to a social context, and that the aim of their creation is to enlighten those who are embedded in that context -- as the majority of modern sociologists would probably accept -- then

⁵ The various types of international cooperation pose different minimal requirements for participants, and utterly different people are correspondingly drawn into them. Teams carrying out comparative studies need a smooth-running machine for conducting surveys, and hence here directors of research centres with a good network of interviewers are placed *en valeur*; in teaching institutions, it is the deans of big and stable faculties who appear to advantage; editors of journals and at publishing houses prefer authors who write on topics that interest potential readers; and the boards of professional associations are the domain of energetic individuals with great communication skills who are also tireless correspondents. Individual scholars and organisations combining all these skills and qualities are, however, practically non-existent; and all the symbols of recognition are never conjoined in the same hands.

the idea of lending the character of a decisive verdict to assessments arising from a completely different context becomes less convincing.⁶

Having failed to find any ready-made indicators from which it would be possible to compute scholars' level of achievement, the official might have a go at creating new ones. In fact, the Ministry of Education and the Russian Academy of Sciences have carried out masses of work in this line, publishing all manner of ratings of universities and institutes based on indexes that government experts think might compensate for the weak points in the most familiar means of assessing academic achievement.⁷ But the feverish intensity of these searches itself betrays the perplexity that the bureaucrats of scholarship feel in the presence of the problem that has arisen.

What follows is an attempt to present our official's problem formally, which will make it possible to consider it in a broader comparative context and may even allow certain practical conclusions to be drawn.

2. Crystallised symbols and curator groups

Any form of social activity, from the viewpoint of the observer, can be described in terms of certain characteristics. Firstly, it can be more or less *open*, when openness means the absence of obstacles to observing it. Secondly, it can be more or less *transparent*, where transparency means an understanding of the principles of organisation that allows what is taking place to be interpreted without difficulty. A viewer who does not know the rules of football, but who happens to be at a match, will be faced with an activity that is open but that to him is not at all transparent; a coach, trying to work out what strategy his rival is developing for his team, is trying to penetrate an activity that is entirely transparent for him, but almost completely closed. Thirdly and lastly, the activity can be more or less *relevant* -- engaging some or other interests of the observer.

The history of scholarship is the history of how its world has become ever less transparent to external observers, but, at the same time, ever more relevant. The more

⁶ The extensive literature on 'academic dependence' and 'cultural imperialism' provides a significant number of arguments in support of this thesis (e.g. Alatas, 2003).

⁷ Three well-known examples are the university rating compiled by RosObrNadzor, the system of 'indicators of the results of scholarly activity' (IRSA), introduced by the Academy of Sciences, and work on the Russian Index of Scholarly Citation (RISC). The two first are based on adding up points awarded for a long list of varied indicators, which are meant to even out the imperfections of each indicator in isolation; a little more will be said below about the third.

important scholarship has become, the less comprehensible it has been to non-scholars. This process has been accompanied by a transformation in the interaction between the academic world and its social surroundings. One side of this transformation has been the erection of barriers that sharply divide ‘scholarship’ from ‘everything else’.⁸ The other side, which logically completes the first, has been the development of a signalling system that allows scholars to inform non-scholars of such things as they have thought it necessary for them to know. Academic status -- colleagues’ recognition of a concrete individual’s achievements -- has been something needing particularly effective translation. Scholars’ demand that non-scholars allocate rewards and resources coming from without in accordance with the hierarchy of academic merit can only be realised if non-scholars are given comprehensible and unequivocal indications of what this hierarchy is. Academic autonomy presupposes a monopoly on the part of scholars in presenting information as to the relative ranking of representatives of their discipline.

The boundary that separates the senders from the receivers of such signals does not, of course, run only between those who have chosen an academic career and those who have not. Even within particular disciplines we encounter a chaos of research fields and specialisations, whose representatives tend to be thoroughly ignorant concerning the character of one another’s work and therefore need hints to help them assess whom it makes sense to listen to, to read, to cite, to invite to lecture, or to lure towards a vacancy on the faculty.

To be effective academic status needs symbols that can easily be transported into another social or institutional context, symbols whose vocabulary can be understood even by those who will never find out what merits led to their possession. The standard academic CV is a catalogue of such symbols. The degree and the institution that awarded it, the professional positions that the individual has occupied and occupies now, publications in certain journals and publishing houses, membership of associations and posts on their boards or on the editorial teams of journals, research grants received (sometimes including their size in dollars), conferences and seminars in which the individual has taken part -- these make it possible to grasp how an individual has been assessed by those who have had the chance to observe him/her at close quarters. These symbols have various levels of transparency for different

⁸ On boundary work see (Gieryn, 1983).

audiences -- greatest of all for representatives of adjacent specialisations, and progressively less for a progressively broader public. As a minimum, some of them are meaningful to the majority of adult members of the given society (for instance, a Ph.D from Harvard). An academic career represents a story of the acquisition of similar symbols,⁹ of which the successful accumulation guarantees a significant financial and symbolic yield in the future.¹⁰

Symbols, however, do not arise all by themselves. To turn the spontaneous recognition of the value of another person's intellectual contributions into unequivocal and portable symbols, significant work of crystallisation of the former from the latter is necessary. Following Goffman, we can dub the individuals who undertake this work as the *curator groups* of the given symbol [Goffman, 1951a]. A curator group can consist of a single person (each of us curates the citations we make in our own articles), of several people who cooperate on a regular basis for a fixed or for an unlimited period (an example of the first would be the board of a professional association, of the second would be the editorial group of a journal), of several people selected *ad hoc* from a certain pool (dissertation committees in the USA), or it can be made up of multiple groups that are independent of one another and are not connected (dissertation councils in Russia). And the processes by which someone becomes the possessor of a status symbol are just as varied. Here there are two poles, one of which being *organic* procedures that sometimes merge completely with other interactions and are not even perceived as independent events (an invitation to participate in a research project) and the other being *autonomous* procedures that tend to be provided with special ceremonies (defending a dissertation or being elected to the Academy).¹¹

Despite these variations, a general logic can be discerned in the processes by which individuals become legitimate possessors of academic status symbols.

⁹ One of the first pieces of advice I received in my own academic life was '*Before doing something, think how it will look on your CV*'. The life of the scholar is arranged to be as profitably accountable as possible in this literary form. This part of my text is obviously much indebted to the work of Goffman, Garfinkel, and Latour.

¹⁰ Numerous studies of the economics of scholarship have been devoted to the question, of desperate importance to scholars, of just how significant this yield is (see the survey in [Diamond 1993]). In the 1970s a publication in a leading economics journal raised likely earnings by an average of \$100 per annum (while the first such publication meant a rise of the order of \$700) at a time when the average salary of an economics lecturer was somewhat less than \$16,000 ([Katz 1973]; [Tuckman, Leahey 1975]). Studies of the 'Matthew effect' [Merton, 1968] have demonstrated the equally blatant operation of the symbolic yield: assessment of what has been said depends significantly, in the academic world, on the status of the person who has said it.

¹¹ Citation indexes occupy a peculiar position: exceptionally for the academic world, they hand the central operations and techniques of their preparation to non-specialists in the field they describe, and thereby create an extra-disciplinary curator group.

Individuals invest their efforts and resources to acquire symbols that will be able to serve them with the greatest success in the future, by ensuring profitable offers on the labour market and colleagues' attention toward their work. In their turn, curator groups select those individuals who are most likely to help raise the value of the symbols they confer.

The career of the symbols demands special commentary. In Goffman's terms, symbols of academic status are poor tests of it [Goffman 1951].¹² The value of a degree from N. university is determined solely by what is known from all other sources as to the other achievements of individuals who have received that degree. Continual migration of academic personnel between universities X, Y, and Z, or the appearance of articles by the same authors in journals A, B, and C lead to the supposition that the universities and publications in question are on roughly the same level, so if we know the status of any part of this equation we can always determine the significance of the others. It is such correlations that allow us to find out what each concrete symbol is worth.

Conferring a symbol always represents an exchange in which the individual and the symbol are acknowledged to be of comparable merit. Symbols, through the groups that curate them, place a stake on individuals just as individuals place a stake on symbols.¹³ An unhappy choice of bearers of a particular symbol can discredit the symbol; an unhappy choice of symbols can discredit their possessor. Curator groups here face a decision that is analogous to the one faced by those who aspire to possess their symbols. At the same time, membership of a curator group is itself a symbol of academic status. The higher the status of the symbol, the higher the status of group members (it is incomparably more prestigious to be a member of the editorial team of the chief journal in a discipline than to hold the same position on a journal that is

¹² Goffman introduces the distinction between 'symbols' and 'tests' in his first published article in order to indicate the distinction, which he frequently drew afterwards, between the 'categorical' and 'expressive' meaning of symbols – between what symbols convey, and what they express, or between what they communicate, and what they exude ([Goffman 1959]; [Goffman 1969]). A mobile phone costing \$2,000 and a diamond ring costing \$800,000 are symbols of belonging to the upper class, but, although they are equally symbols of it, they are not of equal quality as tests of it. The telephone is a poor test, because almost anyone could have bought it on credit, and it only shows that the individual wants to demonstrate that he belongs to a certain group. As a symbol, it is not immune to unscrupulous use in order to mislead. The ring not only conveys an intention, it also offers obvious proof of its owner's class adherence.

¹³ Such exchanges are not, of course, confined to academia. The procedure by which a man exchanges the right to call a particular woman his wife for an analogous right on her part to call him her husband does not differ in any respect from the procedure by which one co-author exchanges the right to use someone else's surname in a list of publications for the right to use his/her name in someone else's.

rarely cited, and it is incomparably better to work at a faculty that has turned out a whole *pléiade* of young geniuses in recent years than to work at a faculty that cannot boast of any such thing).¹⁴ The permanence of the value of academic status symbols depends on the system of balances that this symmetry creates.

3. Equilibrium in symbolic systems

The simplest way to create a model of the exchanges between a curator group and candidates for its symbols is to begin from an elementary case and then to add various complicating factors. To begin with, let us imagine a disciplinary community in which:

(a) there is complete consensus as to what should be considered a scholarly achievement;

(b) agreement automatically arises among the audience for any scholar as to how great his or her achievements are (for simplicity of exposition we will also assume that these achievements can be measured on an interval scale, from, say, 1 being the least to 10 being the most significant);¹⁵

(c) there are many competing symbols of academic status, and there are several symbols that approximate more or less accurately to any level of achievement;

(d) these symbols are binary—that is, they distinguish those who possess the symbol from those who do not, with no gradations in the degree to which a symbol is possessed.¹⁶

Each symbol bisects the community into an upper portion—those who have received it or who might have done so -- and a lower portion: those whose attainments are not adequate (see Figure 1). Individuals' investments in this system will be orientated

¹⁴ It is characteristic that many curator groups include only those who themselves possess the corresponding symbol. Those who decide to co-opt a new member to the Academy or to a professional association usually need to be members themselves, just as those who decide to invite a lecturer onto a faculty must themselves be lecturers there. This configuration creates an obvious stimulus to select candidates who are capable of being an adornment to the symbol. On the whole, however, the relationship between individual members of a curator group and the symbol they confer varies widely, and a theory of the behaviour of curator groups would have to include an analysis of these variations.

¹⁵ Scholarship in the English-speaking world may approach fulfilment of these two conditions if the administrative use of citation indexes continues to grow at the rate it has over recent decades and if these indexes become the primary system by which status is calculated for any academic career.

¹⁶ The majority of academic status symbols are of just this kind: an article is published or is not published in a given journal, a degree is awarded or is not. There are, however, exceptions -- symbols that allow individuals to be ranked into several classes ('excellent' degrees; plain degrees; no degrees) or even on interval scales (citation indexes, GPAs). These distinctions, however, do not alter the basic logic of the model.

towards the acquisition of symbols that stand as high in the hierarchy as seems to be possible for them.¹⁷ Let us imagine a researcher, X, whose achievements are assessed by those who collaborate with him at 6.1 points. He has written an article that might be accepted by any of three journals, A, B, and C. Journal A is known not to accept articles submitted by authors of a level lower than 5.2, while the equivalent figure for B is 5.9 and for C is 4.5. Of course, his best choice is journal B -- because an article there guarantees that the author's rating is no lower than 5.9. A and C cover a significantly broader field: they do not make the desired distinction between X and those who stand several rungs lower on the academic hierarchy.

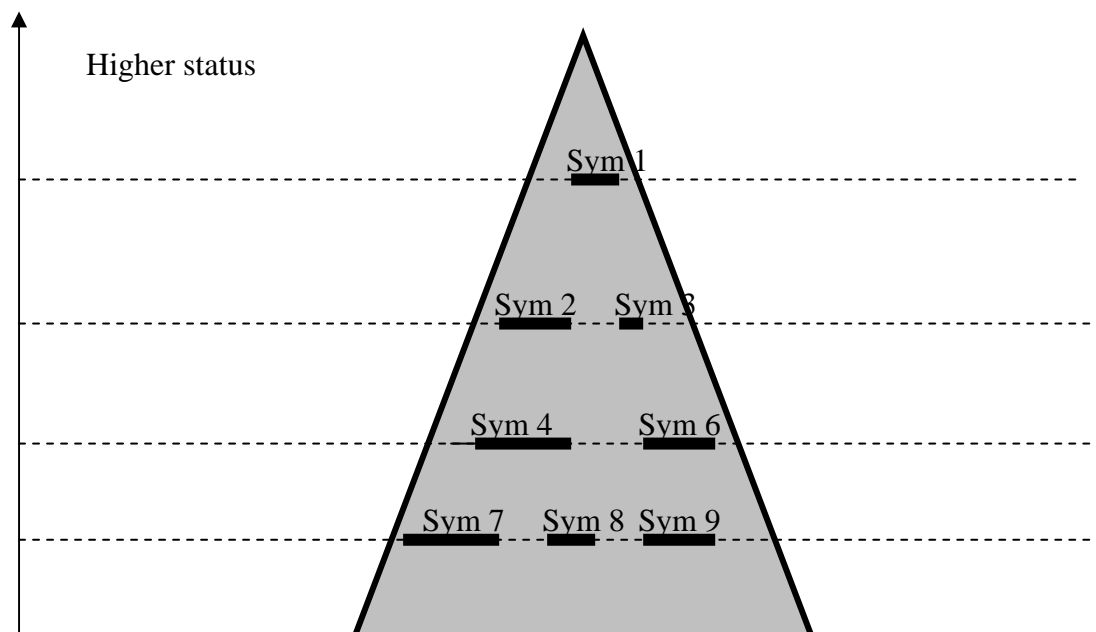


Figure 1. Elementary model of a discipline with ideal consolidation.

A disciplinary community where the above conditions are fulfilled will soon reach a state of *ideal consolidation*, which is characterised graphically by the fact that all the lines that bisect the community are parallel. Two symbols will always describe sets of which one is a subset of the other. If article X can be accepted by journal A but not by journal B, then journal B stands higher in the hierarchy of academic symbols, and the reverse situation -- where an article rejected by A would be accepted by B -- cannot

¹⁷ These considerations are based on the assumption that the expense of labour in acquiring each symbol of a given type (a degree, a publication) is roughly equal: someone who is capable of writing an article of level 7 will not save significantly in time by writing one of level 6.

arise. A state of ideal consolidation would be a point of balance in the given system. In fact, let us imagine that the editors of one of the journals, whose previous publications place it on level 6, were to accept a number of articles that weren't even worth level 4. As this fact became known to level-6 potential authors, they would probably prefer some other periodical that would more effectively mark them off from their inferiors. A journal that permitted such a failure of judgement would see a fatal decline in the quality of manuscripts submitted to it, since its mistake would be made immediate use of by competitors that had preserved their level. In sum, we can predict the emergence of a strictly stratified system of journals, in which the curator groups of the highest-level symbols receive articles from anyone they want, and all the others from those left over when the higher-ranked have taken their share. The symbols would *de facto* mark their possessors off not only from those below, but also from those above. In the example given above, the appearance of the article in journal A would be unequivocally interpreted as a sign that the author's 'ceiling' was somewhere between 5.9 (the 'value' of the journal in which he failed to publish) and 5.2 (the 'value' of the journal that did accept the article).¹⁸

Publication in a periodical is one symbol that can only be offered within the confines of a pre-established framework: a journal can only print a certain number of articles. The picture does not change substantially, however, even when we turn to examine symbols that can be offered to an unlimited extent. Speaking purely technically, a faculty can award as many undergraduate or higher degrees as it likes. But the level of candidates it receives is nonetheless limited by an upper bar. The demand can only be expanded at any given moment by encroaching on inferior universities' territory -- but any movement in that direction will lead immediately to a loss of the better students and, therefore, to a drop in the lecturers' status. The only universities that can lower the bar without repercussions, in such a system, are those that already stand at the very bottom of the hierarchy and are known to be willing to hand out degrees to anyone who pays for them. In striving to maximise their status, which can be calculated from the crystallised symbols in their possession, candidates and curator groups reach equilibrium, at which point neither participant in the game

¹⁸ A more complete model would have to take account of the fact that symbols are used not only to assess the marginal level of individual achievements, but also their quantity -- otherwise there would be no incentive for someone who had once published in the best extant journal to write anything more at all. This important comment was made to the author by Mariya Yudkevich. Nonetheless, it can be left temporarily on one side for the purposes of the present article.

can deviate from the strategy ‘select the best available symbol’ / ‘select the best possible candidate’ without harming their own position.¹⁹

The elementary model shows only a very distant similarity with the reality we all know so well. The most obvious difference is the presence in the model of consensus as to what constitutes ‘good work’. Sociology, which provides the main source of examples for the present article, is often described as a conglomeration of warring ‘academic gangs’ [Scheff 1995] who feel nothing for each other’s work but contemptuous distaste. It would be naïve to hope that a positivist of the Lazarsfeld tendency, a devotee of critical theory, and an ethnomethodologist should easily agree on any general assessments.²⁰ A more accurate graphic representation of the system of academic status symbols should represent not a triangle bisected by horizontal straight lines, but a set of concentric lines on a surface divided by various rays issuing from a single centre. The division into sectors corresponds to sub-disciplinary fields, research specialities, and theoretical approaches -- those zones within the discipline where there are differing ideas as to how good research is distinguished from bad.

¹⁹ These considerations have parallels in the formal theory of social status proposed by Jasso (2001: 99-102), which distinguishes the following varieties: (1) the status of individuals based on quantitative parameters (quantity of money or, in our case, the assessment of an individual’s ‘professional level’ by his/her immediate audience); (2) the status of qualitative characteristics based on average indicators for members of one or another social group (for instance, gender or race, or the group of lecturers at a given university); (3) the status of individuals deduced from the status of categories to which an individual belongs. Since information about an individual’s racial identity is much more easily accessible than information about the state of his bank balance (or: information about the university where she works is more accessible than information about her impact factor), assessments of individual status are often made on the basis of what is known about ‘people like him/her’ in general. These assessments do not lose their significance even when the necessary data for determining status of type (1) become available.

²⁰ The fact that they do sometimes manage to do this *in situ* serves as perhaps the strongest argument for continuing to work in the social sciences. The fact that such an improbable event can take place proves there is some sense to what we do.

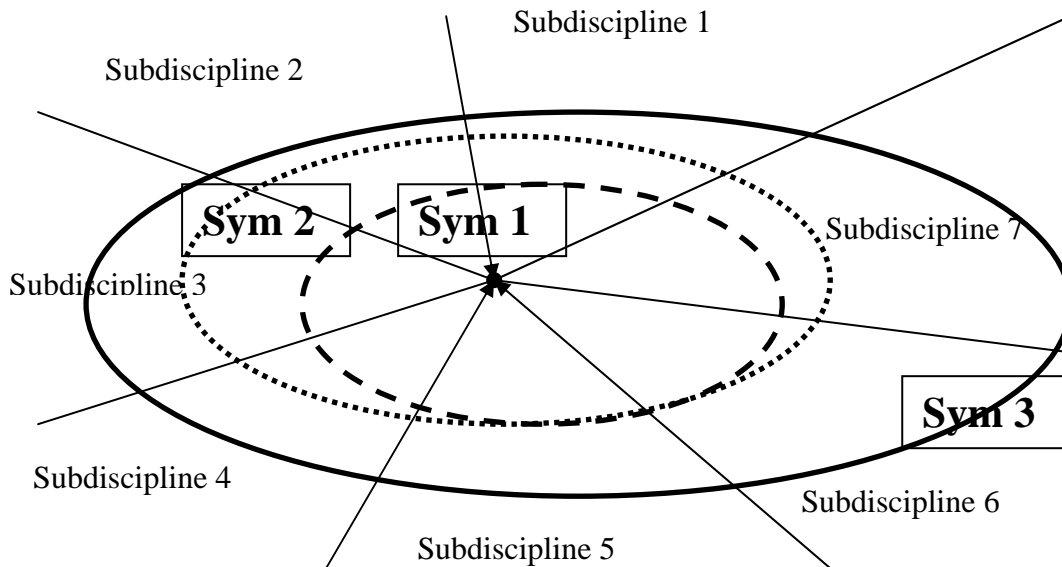


Figure 2. An ideally consolidated discipline of the federated type.

We come here to the possibility of drawing two completely different diagrams that will depict two different forms of organisation of a disciplinary community's status system. The first can be compared to a political confederation, and the second to anarchy.

The confederated diagram assumes -- impossibly, at first glance -- that the various sectors of the discipline continue to use the same symbols of academic status. Each of these zones carries out selection among those who are vying for places that come free in the 'centre' of the discipline, in accordance with the zone's own principles (editors pass articles on gender studies to reviewers known for their work in that field; and in Western universities dissertations in gender studies are discussed by dissertation committees made up of specialists in gender studies). The absence of general criteria for perfection does not destabilise the authority of the discipline, because the symbols of academic status awarded to successful candidates themselves remain the same: a sociology degree from an Ivy League university or a publication in the *ASR* is taken seriously whatever the sub-disciplinary field within which it was received.²¹ In this system, 'scientific revolutions' (in Thomas Kuhn's sense of the

²¹ In fact observation of this system sometimes gives rise to the suspicion that the authority of the 'centre' is not necessarily destabilised by the absence of any criteria for perfection at all. The usefulness of any symbol as a test of academic achievement can be determined solely from its 'construct validity' -- the convergence of the results it gives with the results of other similar tests. As the example of modern psychology demonstrates, a testing industry can exist and develop for a very

term) remain palace coups. They are staged by the brilliant pupils and younger colleagues of those against whose scholarly authority they are directed. In fact, the development of a successful 'theory group' ([Mullins 1977]; [Wiley 1979]) requires control over the institutional infrastructure, which is associated with the highest academic class -- access to degrees from the best universities, publication in the best journals, etc. Only those who have all this as their start-up capital can enter the corresponding curator groups and ensure that their supporters are promoted through the academic system, thereby ensuring the success of their movement -- and they therefore have no interest at all in the complete annihilation of their own symbolic resources.

The diagram of disciplinary anarchy is much closer to the picture observed by the Russian official we left behind at the beginning of the article (Figure 3). Various sectors possess different status symbols, each of which is seen as having any value only by people who are closely connected with its own curator group. Others refuse to recognise that someone's possessing the symbol obliges them to show the possessor any respect at all. It might even mean complete disqualification in their eyes.²² The first diagram looks Utopian, but it gives a more or less accurate characterisation of the state of affairs in American sociology. The second is much closer to Russian reality. But the question that needs answering is the question of what determines the approximation of the discipline in a concrete country to one or the other ideal type.

long time in the absence of any clear idea at all as to what the tests are actually measuring. It is hard to set anything against these pessimistic doubts except the experience of unexpected mutual understanding with members of rival gangs, as recounted in the previous note.

²² *'Someone who defended their dissertation in front of N... well, maybe he's OK... but I'm scared he'll be a nutter as well -- it's mostly N's students who defend in front of him, and, to put it mildly [smile] that says a lot.'* *'Western degrees are all well and good, but you need to know Russian reality as well, you need to spend many years studying it, not just turn up back and straightaway start lecturing everyone. Knowing Western theory's important, but you've got to be able to adapt it, that's the thing. On its own Western theory doesn't make you a good sociologist, not in Russia at any rate.'*

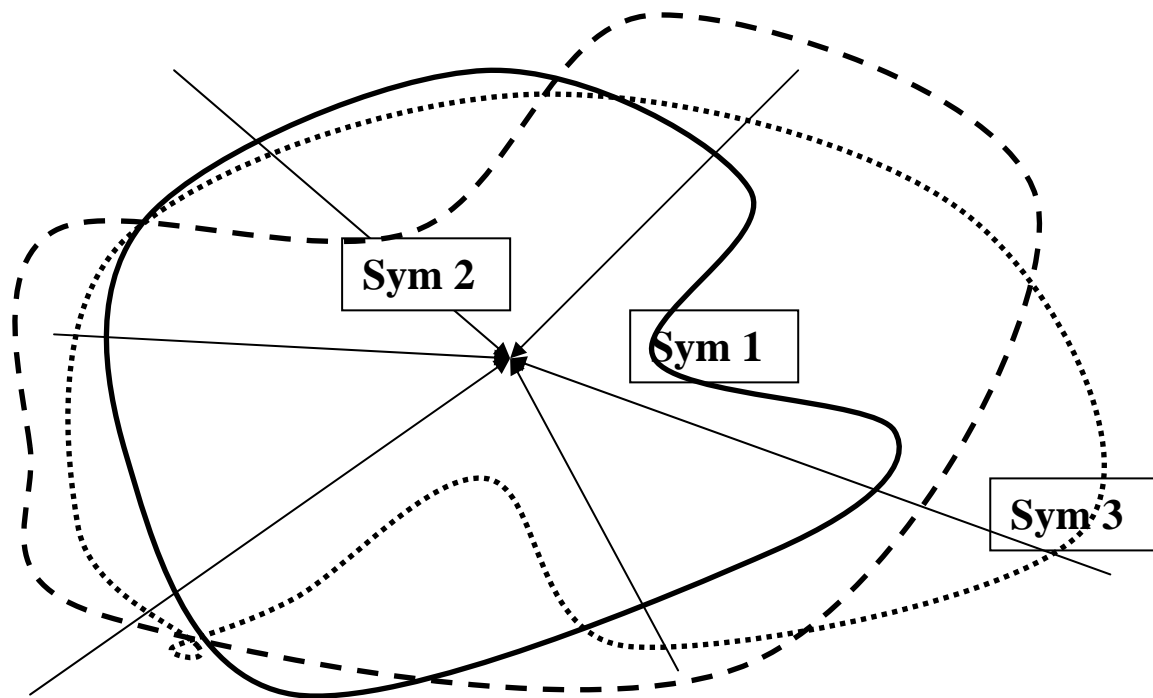


Figure 3. An 'anarchic' discipline with an unconsolidated status system.

We must find a partial answer in the history of the development of the discipline within the boundaries of the national academic system. American sociology developed from one centre, which for decades was the University of Chicago ([Wiley 1979]; [Abbot 1995]). Chicago saw the emergence not only of the first sociology faculty in the new world,²³ but also the first journal (the *American Journal of Sociology*) and the first professional association (the American Sociological Society, now the American Sociological Association). The leading positions were held for a long time by the same people, who worked at the University of Chicago, with other universities as junior partners. The first intellectual oppositions (supporters of ethnographic case studies versus researchers who were orientated more towards statistics) arose within this small group, whose members curated the same symbols. Chicago's comparative loss of influence in the 1930s, and the emergence in the front rank of Columbia University and Harvard, were accompanied more by a gradual transfer of control over these symbols to the latter than by the creation of new

²³ Unless one counts the faculty in Kansas, which disappeared almost immediately and whose existence was only remembered several decades later by historians of sociology [Becker 2001].

symbols: the oppositionists had already invested years of hard work in acquiring the old ones.

It is tempting to explain the development of a confederated organisation of the discipline in terms of the relative smoothness of this path. Some other cases, however, force us to reject an approach that would see the historical trajectory as the only significant factor. The institutionalisation of American sociology took place at much the same time as the great transformation of American medicine described by Paul Starr [Starr 1982]. The condition of the latter in the middle of the nineteenth century might bring tears of glad recognition to the eyes of the Russian sociologist. In Starr's book he will find 'diploma mills' competing to award Doctor of Medicine degrees in the shortest possible time (with the record at six months, extra-mural), and a multitude of competing schools, each with its own theory, explaining every illness on the basis of a single cause and prescribing a single universal medicine for them all (one of these panaceas was mercury), and national associations incapable of persuading even a minority of colleagues to pay membership dues -- let alone to accept the need of following any kind of professional code of ethics. In the four decades from 1880 to 1920, however, this chaos gave way to a stable professional corporation with a single, universally accepted status system, one that turned out to be capable of defending its autonomy against the government and the largest corporations. Starr identifies several reasons behind this change: (1) the high-profile success enjoyed by vaccination experiments and other achievements in that field that gradually became medical science; (2) powerful grant support for the leading research universities, connected both with these achievements and with changes in legislation, from magnates like Rockefeller; (3) economic growth and the increase in effective demand for the services of professional medics—demand that was orientated towards degrees from the research medical schools as a standard of quality. Together these factors allowed a group of medics working at the research universities to establish their dominance in the profession and to force others to accept their standards.²⁴

An example of the opposite is represented by Soviet sociology, which, from the standpoint of status organisation, stood at the end of the twentieth century roughly where American medicine had been in the second quarter of the nineteenth.

²⁴ For instance, they managed firstly to make membership of the American Medical Association, which they controlled, into the main certificate of quality for medical services in the eyes of the mass of consumers -- and then to set six years' medical education at an Association-approved university programme as a condition of membership.

Paradoxically, its development until the end of the 1980s resembles the above-described experience of sociology more than that of medicine. Soon after its creation, sociology in the USSR acquired an uncontested organisational centre (the Institute of Concrete Social Research of the Academy of Sciences, 1968 to 1972) where the large majority of its leaders worked—leaders who also occupied the key posts in the Soviet Sociological Association and wrote a significant proportion of articles published in the only sociological journal, *SOTsIS* (from 1974). Within the discipline there were generally recognised authorities, whose leading position no-one challenged.²⁵ The only fault that showed up in the working of the status system concerned how degrees were conferred: many undoubtedly recognised researchers still did not acquire them, while many of the sociologists' Party curators did. In general, however, there was nothing to foreshadow what was to happen later. The starting point does not itself determine the whole trajectory.

Another answer to the question of why one or other type of status organisation emerges refers us to the second fundamental simplification made in the ideal model. It implicitly assumes that the award of a symbol is motivated only by the desire of the candidate and the curator group respectively to add to their crystallised status. It is obvious, however, that in any real act of this kind the transfer of the symbol is only one dimension of the exchange. A university does not simply confer a degree, it also sells it to people who have paid for their education, and supervisors generally bother with students not because they want to assist the latter's professional growth, but because they'll simply be dismissed if they refuse to do it. Exchange can be, and usually is, asymmetrical: the different parties exchange different resources. Take the example of co-authorship. One person grants another the right to use his/her own name in the other's list of publications. When these names are of unequal value, we presume that the *mésalliance* has been compensated for by investments of another kind: the junior author has done a lot of work collecting data to support the senior author's hypothesis, or a graduate student has put forward an excellent idea and the

²⁵ In fact these people still constitute the majority of those who enjoy nationwide fame. It is interesting that their vision of the past of Soviet sociology and the part each of them played in the development of scholarship has remained the same, despite the ideological conflicts that have subsequently divided them (cf, e.g., the interviews with Osipov, Yadov, and others in Batygin, 1999).

supervisor has lent his name to ensure publication in a much-cited journal, or the boss has found the money for the project within which the results have been achieved.²⁶

4. Back to the Russian case

The chief Russian difficulty to which this article is devoted has its sources precisely in the excessive dominance of asymmetrical exchanges, in which academic status symbols are either simply sold by members of the curator group or are handed out to as many candidates as possible, because the act of handing them out is either accompanied by payments from some third party²⁷ or else becomes an object of barter without any attention being paid to the quality of the work (*'our department has always written positive reports on X's students, so now he kind of owes me... a positive report on my dissertation.'*) The question of how status symbols are organised thus leads us to an investigation of the checks and balances that are intended to make such things irrational. What, in fact, are the conditions that force curator groups to refrain from the tactic of turning the symbols of which they dispose into a source of quick enrichment, albeit at the cost of rapid inflation?

Several such criteria can be identified on the basis of the model proposed above.

A. For crystallised symbols to have a substantial meaning, there must be a reasonably large and, preferably, geographically extended labour market within which the labour force can migrate freely. In a network where everyone knows everyone, there is little need for formal certificates of achievement: everyone has some idea of

²⁶ Merton (1968) showed that the glory also accrues disproportionately to the possessor of the more familiar name (*'the book by Latour and... what's his name?'*). The junior partner, however, also gains substantially precisely from the background knowledge of how such exchanges are effected. If we can show a work written jointly with Robert Merton in our list of publications, we force people to suspect that we have been in a position to put in sufficient additional investments to make Merton, who had many potential co-authors to choose from, to prefer us. Whatever these investments might have been-- we might be hardworking, or original, or erudite, or (if the observer sinks to the level of cynical academic folklore) sexually attractive, -- we've clearly got something going for us.

²⁷ The budgetary funding of a faculty in a state university is predominantly determined by the number of its students. The main argument during negotiations with the ministry about expanding admissions concerns competition to secure a place. For reasons that lie beyond the framework of the present article (see [Sokolov 2007]), in Russian conditions lowering what is required of students is the most reliable way of increasing competition in social science faculties. This position makes the 'diploma mill' strategy the only realistic one for them. Finally it should be added that the expulsion of students who have once been accepted leads inevitably to a reduction in income -- firstly because it reduces the number of students and therefore the funding, and secondly because the ministry regards a significant dropout rate as a sufficient reason to cut the number of places budgeted for.

what everyone else is worth even without them. Our credentials become important when we encounter people who will rely on them to decide how they should behave towards us.

B. There must be a high level of competition between curator groups offering their own symbols. The status of a symbol must not be fixed – hence, an unsuccessful use of the symbol can lead to a rapid and irreversible loss of its value.

C. The system of returns yielded by possession of a symbol must be reasonably stable, and the gains from it must be sufficient even at the lowest levels to permit investment in attainments that can pay off only in the indefinite future. Agents' temporal horizon must not be limited by the need to get by here and now (Sokolov, in press).

D. Non-symbolic selective benefits accruing to members of curator groups must be minimised by the institutional arrangements. This means, in the most obvious form, that the transfer of symbols to other people must not become the object of paid exchange.

We see that none of these conditions is fully met in Russia. Neither a national labour market nor a national market for symbols exists in more than an extremely weakened form. The feature that has marked the whole development of Russian scholarship is the exceptionally low geographical mobility of our scholars, by Western standards. The acute housing deficit of the Soviet period and the housing prices in post-Soviet Russia, extraordinarily high in comparison to scholars' average earnings, have combined with the inefficient institutions of the property market substantially to narrow the choice both of possible employers and of attainable symbols. Roughly half the university sociology courses in the country are the only ones on offer in the city concerned, and it is only in Moscow and Petersburg that there are several dissertation councils, research organisations, and periodicals.²⁸ In Russian conditions moving to another city is a very complex and expensive undertaking, and employers and curator groups located in the same place as the candidate for a status symbol therefore have enormous advantages. Their behaviour is significantly less

²⁸ In 2006 there were 98 universities offering undergraduate or bachelor's courses in sociology. Of those 98 fourteen were based in Moscow, seven in Petersburg, four in Novosibirsk, three each in Kazan and Perm, and two each in another ten cities.

exposed to the influence of competition than the model assumes. Instead of a single national market we have several local, monopolistic markets.²⁹

The consequence for individuals is a comparatively low rate of return on investments in crystallised symbols. Since they are locked into a local labour market, they can do much better by cultivating relationships with concrete deans than by accumulating symbols that might impress some other deans in other cities. The consequence for curator groups is that they can boost the market for their symbols by depressing the requisite level of achievement without fearing an outflow of the best-qualified candidates, because that would require enormous additional efforts on their part. Returning to our diagram, the bisecting line can be pushed as low as one likes without losing the upper segment of potential consumers. Symbols thus cease unequivocally to denote any level of academic achievement. The very best scholars, and the extremely mediocre, receive the same degrees and work at the same faculties.

Another reason why symbols have not been able to lose their value altogether is that a certain minimal level of return on them is guaranteed by the institutional arrangements, which guarantee bonuses and benefits for possession of higher degrees and make possession of one a necessary condition for occupying certain positions. This arrangement has created and continues to create a minimal effective demand, and readiness to meet it is further strengthened by the numerous rewards for each concrete operation of conferring a symbol. Thus, supervising a graduate student is counted as a teaching stint of 50 hours per academic year; a successful defence brings the supervisor closer to the title of professor or senior fellow; the institution gains points on the ministry's 'results indicator' ('number of graduate students who defend their dissertations within a year after finishing their studentships'); and the likelihood that

²⁹ An example of institutional arrangements tending to conserve such a situation is offered by the policy of many universities in not charging their own alumni for dissertation defence. Given the significance of the sums involved (up to \$3,000 at 2008 prices) this guarantees dissertation councils a certain quantity of defences which might otherwise take place at any other university. This practice is usually seen as a charitable measure; in fact it guarantees the faculty that a certain number of dissertations of acceptable quality will pass through it, so the value of the relevant qualification is not completely eroded by inflation.

An interesting consequence of all this is the territorial segmentation of the discipline, whereby the major lines of internal division pass not between substantive fields or theoretical approaches but between local groups. This pattern was obvious in the case of Soviet sociology, with its 'Leningrad', 'Novosibirsk', 'Perm', etc., schools between which there were no explicit intellectual disagreements but which nonetheless manifested strong loyalty towards local leaders (the best available description of the dynamic of such schools is in an interview with Tatyana Zaslavskaya — Batygin, 1999: 142–155). The sectors of the diagram, which in Figure 2 correspond to sub-disciplines, in Figure 3 largely indicate groups with a territorial and institutional attachment (Russian Academy of Sciences, various universities under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education, etc.).

the dissertation council will be dissolved is reduced. Nothing but vague moral doubts prevents members of curator groups from expanding the number of recipients of their symbol, and although these doubts do sometimes win out (more often than purely utilitarian theory would have us assume), they are insufficient to reverse the general tendency of the system.³⁰

5. Instead of a conclusion

If our official got this far in his consideration, he would have to ask himself some fresh questions.

Firstly, how far can the case he has studied – sociology -- be regarded as typical of post-Soviet scholarship? Perhaps there are other disciplines, in the natural and even in the social sciences, where the situation is better, whether because of peculiarities of the historical trajectory or because they innately possess more definite criteria of academic achievement?

Secondly, how far is this situation responsible for the way Russian scholarship lags behind internationally, and, even more importantly, what might happen if the state (in his own person) were to refrain absolutely from conducting any institutional reforms? If the evolution of the status system continues in the same direction as it has followed in recent years, where will Russian social science be in ten years' time?

Thirdly, if he does reach the conclusion that he needs to take decisive steps, are there any symbols of academic achievement he could take as reliable and inflation-proof -- even if only as a provisional measure?

Fourthly, if the only solution is to create new academic status symbols, is it possible to create a system that would (a) prevent purchase or exchange, (b) favour intellectual achievement as well as possible, and (c) be possible to introduce without being blocked by an opposition raised by those who controlled the symbols in circulation hitherto?

The author of the present article confesses that he is unable to answer any of these questions. It is up to readers to try.

³⁰ It should be added to the picture that dissertation councils award the same degree, whose equivalence is determined by legislation -- which creates a charming example of the 'tragedy of the commons'. An individual council cannot change the general situation by raising its own standards; it cannot even increase its members' reputations. It can only cut the number of successful defences, bringing its own dissolution closer.

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