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## 1

# Becoming “Progressive”: Structural Settings and Mental Mapping of Reformism

## Agrojournalism and a new turn toward the countryside

How unusual was the decision of the 20-year-old Ekaterina Sakharova to drop her literature and philosophy studies and dedicate herself to agriculture? She was certainly not alone in this evolution. Ivan Emel’ianov was born in 1880 in Siberia to the family of a poor priest. At the age of 20, after graduation from the Tobol’sk Seminary in 1900, he rejected the career of clergyman and enrolled in the History Department of the Iuriev (Tartu) University—a step rather typical for a *popovich*-turned-*intelligent* of the post-emancipation era.<sup>1</sup> In 1903, however, he changed his mind for the second time and became a student in the Agronomy Department of Kiev Polytechnic, from which he graduated in 1907 with the Diploma of Agronomist of the First Degree. Thereafter, he played an important role in the Russian community of agricultural specialists-modernizers during the next two decades. While we cannot count all those who dropped humanities for agronomy, we can still statistically assess the scale and dynamics of the society’s turn to agriculture.

The intensity of public engagement with the needs of rural Russia can be seen in the spread of agricultural societies as a form bridging organized public debate and institutionalized socioeconomic activism. Voluntary associations of people interested in various aspects of land cultivation, the agricultural societies, became the first institutions in Europe to form public discourse on agriculture and seek measures that could improve its ways in the second third of the eighteenth century.<sup>2</sup> While agricultural societies, comprised mostly of wealthy landowners, played a positive role in the spread of modern technologies of land cultivation, their primary significance was in shaping public opinion concerning the countryside.<sup>3</sup> In Russia the first institution of this type was the Imperial Free Economic Society established in 1765.<sup>4</sup> But it was not until 1820 when the first agricultural society in the strict sense was founded in Moscow. By 1861, about 30 agricultural societies

had surfaced on the Russian public horizon. It is quite understandable that under the social conditions of pre-reform Russia their practical influence was minimal. After the emancipation, the nature of Russian agricultural societies gradually changed, and after the adoption of the Normal Regulations of 1897 they became cooperative enterprises that constantly increased in number. Thousands of new societies emerged after the Revolution of 1905 and the introduction of Temporary Rules for Associations and Unions facilitated the registration procedure.<sup>5</sup> Their proliferation reflected the growth of public (and state) concern with agriculture, expressed in subsidies of millions of rubles a year rather than any real effectiveness of the agricultural societies, which spent an average 20 percent of their budgets for staff expenses.<sup>6</sup>

Until the late nineteenth century public engagement in the “agrarian question” was extremely limited. The only legal vehicle for such interest, the agricultural societies were mostly the domain of local gentry philanthropy. Illegal forms, such as the famous intelligentsia movement of “going to the people” of the mid-seventies, were even more limited in scope. Numerous attempts by the intelligentsia to found peasant cooperative organizations in the nineteenth century failed without clear evidence of what to blame for the failure: the intelligentsia’s preoccupation with socialist ideology or the peasants’ weak economic motivation.<sup>7</sup> These dynamics also suggest a possible explanation for the postemancipation intelligentsia’s disillusionment with the peasantry in the 1880s, as described by Cathy Frierson:<sup>8</sup> the initial fascination with peasants was generally limited to discursive projections, and only occasionally led to actual engagement (hence the insignificant number of agricultural societies). That is why a generation later, a new and much more practically oriented upsurge of interest in peasants and agriculture became possible.

A more precise device to measure Russian society’s general interest in agriculture can be found in the statistics of special periodicals and even individual articles, dedicated to agriculture in any year from the reign of Catherine II to the present. Their dynamics suggest the scale of public interest in agrarian topics, the social composition of readers, and even the political forces standing behind the spurt of “agrojournalism” at the beginning of the twentieth century, for very few of the agricultural periodicals were profitable, indicating that ideological concerns rather than revenues stimulated publishers. It was the mass printed word that contributed enormously to changing the social climate, elaborating the new tropes to be used in subsequent literary debates, and preparing the stage for a new type of social activism.

As one may expect, the first periodicals dealing with agriculture were the *Transactions* (Trudy) of the Free Economic Society, the first issue of which was published on December 7, 1765. It was 56 years before a second periodical appeared, this time dedicated exclusively to agriculture. This was the *Journal of Farming* (Zemledel’cheskii zhurnal), founded in 1821 by the

Moscow Agricultural Society. In 1830 the *Leaflets of the Agricultural Society of Southern Russia* appeared. By the end of the first century of existence of the Russian agricultural press, some 20 periodicals across the Russian Empire were dedicated to various aspects of land tilling: farming, stock-breeding, and forestry.<sup>9</sup> So far, the dynamics of the periodicals repeated those of agricultural societies. Characteristically enough, until the 1890s the majority of these periodicals targeted a very narrow circle of readers interested in the theoretical aspects of agriculture. Few titles were published by the government, while most of the others were published by imperial societies specializing in separate branches of rural economy (sheep-breeding, forestry, etc.)<sup>10</sup> and during the last third of the nineteenth century, by *zemstvos*.

It was probably the impact of the 1891 famine and the united relief efforts by the intelligentsia that changed the face of agrojournalism (as it changed the pattern of public activity of the entire "educated society").<sup>11</sup> In the 1890s, a number of new, mainly weekly, periodicals appeared that targeted a new type of reader—still highly educated and well-to-do, but now having a practical interest in agriculture (hence the spread of weekly editions in contrast to the monthly and even yearly publications of previous epochs).<sup>12</sup> At this stage, local *zemstvos* and provincial agricultural societies were the leading investors in the agricultural periodical press, demonstrating the decentralization of the emerging public discourse on the agrarian question. The real boom in agrojournalism took place in the interval between the 1905 Revolution in Russia and the World War I, as Table 1.1 suggests.

The actual figures may vary depending on the selection criteria adopted by different statisticians, but other sources confirm the basic trend. By 1917 almost half of all agricultural periodicals were less than 5 years old, and 75 percent of all publications were founded after 1905.<sup>14</sup>

If we equate the number of specialized periodicals to the popularity of their topic, we can reconstruct a popularity chart of the Russian press. In 1911 agrojournalism accounted for 5.5 percent of the periodicals published in the Russian Empire, which gave it an honorable third place among 28 other topics.<sup>15</sup> By 1912 its share had grown to 6.8 percent at the expense of its immediate rivals.

Still, "politics, publicist writing, and literature" traditionally occupied first place in the minds of Russians, accounting for almost a third of the entire market. "Official publications" and "theological, religious-moral, and church issues" shared second place, each represented by approximately 8 percent of

Table 1.1 The number of agricultural periodicals in Russia, 1907–1914.<sup>13</sup>

Year:	1907	1908	1909	1910	1911	1912	1913	1914
Number of titles:	96	101	120	129	150	177	186	352

all titles. Agricultural periodicals held a firm third place, creating a niche of their own. This was a significant success: advertising and humor magazines could not master even 1.5 percent of the market, occupying seventeenth and twentieth places, respectively. And “philosophy and psychology” were at the very bottom of the list, along with “publications for the troops” and “insurance and fire fighting.”<sup>16</sup> Library statistics of readers’ requests corroborate this evidence.<sup>17</sup> Agriculture-related social interactions were becoming a matter of broad public concern in the early twentieth-century Russia. Agrojournalism spread to a significant segment of the broader public sphere, as different interest groups supported the discussion of agriculture-related topics in public.

While Russian was the predominant language of that segment of the public sphere, at least a dozen other languages were represented in the world of agrojournalism. In 1912, about three-quarters (73.14 percent) of all of the empire’s periodicals were published in Russian, and we find exactly the same proportion of Russian-language publications (73.12 percent) among the agricultural periodical press. This means that the Russians were responsible for the growth of both the general and the special agricultural press in equal proportion. On the contrary, some nationalities (Jews, and to some extent Poles) showed much less interest in agriculture than in other topics, while others (Estonians, Lithuanians, and Ukrainians) were much more enthusiastic about agrojournalism than the average.<sup>18</sup> By 1917 the share of non-Russian periodicals had decreased dramatically (about threefold),<sup>19</sup> largely due to the German occupation of Poland and the closing of the German-language press. However, prewar trends suggested a gradual increase in the number of non-Russian publications.

An important dimension of the “agrarian” side of the Russian public sphere was its spatial organization. The dominant tendency to regionalization of the agricultural press was evident to contemporaries as early as 1913.<sup>20</sup> This represented a dramatic departure from the legacy of the classical intelligentsia grouped around the “thick journals,” published either in Petersburg or in Moscow. The most popular agricultural periodicals of the 1910s were published elsewhere: in Kharkov (*Agronomicheskii zhurnal*, *Iuzhno-russkaia sel'skokoziastvennaia gazeta*), Samara (*Zhurnal obshchestvennoi agronomii*, *Samarskii zemledelets*), and Perm (*Permskaia zemskaia nedelia*). In general, by 1917 Moscow and Petrograd together controlled just over a third of the market (35 percent), while the leading role in publishing agricultural periodicals belonged to the “provincial capitals,” or central cities of provinces (46 percent). Major district towns (*uezdnye goroda*) and important villages could boast only one-fifth of the entire industry.<sup>21</sup> This meant an ongoing lack of resources and social infrastructure that might make chances in the provincial backwaters more equal to those of the more cultured centers. For provincial activists, this imbalance between the center and the periphery was a painful issue.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, these figures testify

to the hitherto unthinkable decentralization of professional (in this case, agricultural) periodicals.<sup>23</sup>

The next feature of the Russian prerevolutionary agrarian side of the public sphere was its pluralism in terms of the social actors involved in its formation. Looking through the prism of agricultural periodicals we can estimate the "weight" of those actors by the number of periodical titles published by each of them. By 1916, the structure of ownership was very diverse: government agencies, *zemstvos*, and private publishers each accounted for around 15 percent of the agricultural periodicals (i.e., 45 percent altogether). The remaining 55 percent belonged to a loose conglomerate of various associations: cooperatives, agricultural and professional societies, and so on.<sup>24</sup> This means that no political or institutional lobby was able to control the periodicals market simply by virtue of ownership.

That had not always been the case in previous decades. Looking through a somewhat distorting prism of statistics that fixes the publisher and time of foundation of existing periodicals (but excluding those that had disappeared by 1916), we observe the following dynamics: the last decade of the nineteenth century and the years immediately preceding the First Russian Revolution were marked by a steady withdrawal of the state from the business of establishing new agricultural periodicals. Out of the all government periodical publications existing in 1916, only 7.7 percent had been founded during the decade of 1897–1906. Precisely during this period, the *zemstvo* agrojournalism market took off, establishing 17 percent of all of the *zemstvo* titles that survived to 1916. During the years of active implementation of the Stolypin agrarian reform, private publishers and agricultural societies (not government agencies) were most active in the dissemination of new ideas and knowledge. Almost a third of all private periodicals active in 1916 had been founded between 1907 and 1911.

It is only natural that the majority of the surviving periodicals were quite young in 1916. Still, *zemstvos* had proportionately more newly established titles than any other group: 57.5 percent of all the *zemstvo* agricultural periodicals had been founded after 1911 (in contrast to some 42.2 percent of private editions). Keeping in mind that these statistics discarded all titles that had vanished by September 1916, they still accurately detect periods when the efforts of a certain group were persistent enough to make the then established periodicals survive in higher proportions (compared with any other period or any other group).<sup>25</sup>

It is difficult to estimate the total number of copies of newspapers, magazines, and journals pouring daily into the stream of agrojournalism. Such information usually was not published, and police records preserved in archives are the main source of such data. Another obstacle to even approximate calculations involves frequent shifts in the size of runs. For instance, print runs in 1910 included 2,400 copies of issues 8–10 of the magazine *Nuzhdy derevni* (Village Needs), 2,500 copies of issues 6 and 7, and only

2,200 copies of issue 23.<sup>26</sup> Ranging from 800 to 3,000 copies per issue (10,000 copies of *Derevenskaia gazeta* and 8,000 of *Khutorianin* were rare exceptions), the average run for an agricultural periodical was somewhere between 2,000 and 2,500 copies per issue.

We have information on 302 out of 310 periodicals published in 1916. One-third (101 titles) were monthly publications, usually targeting specialists and well-educated landowners. Another third was split more or less equally between weekly and fortnightly editions (55 and 67 titles, respectively) of a rather popular nature. A few dailies and a number of journals with one to ten issues a year comprised the last third. Predominantly magazines and journals, these 302 periodicals together published about 6,872 issues. Multiplying this figure by the minimum estimated run of 2,000 copies per issue yields the considerable quantity of 13,744,000 copies per year. During the war, in a situation of paper shortage, hundreds of thousands of people still may have read those 14 million copies of periodicals (not counting hundreds of popular brochures and dozens of special monographs that appeared every year). The intensity of public discourse on agriculture in Late Imperial Russia was obviously very high, as at least 90 percent of the published copies were read.<sup>27</sup>

Finishing our brief overview of Russian agrojournalism, which shaped the worldview of agricultural specialists and activists, and at the same time was itself shaped by their collective efforts, we shall note that it did not exist in a vacuum. If professional periodicals were read predominantly by specialists, there was an intermediate sphere bridging the world of professionals and that of a broad public. A considerable number of articles discussing agriculture-related themes were published in general periodicals, affecting even those readers who were not professionally engaged in agriculture. For over 35 years, until his death in 1925, Alexander Pedashenko composed lists of all pieces published on agriculture, regardless of the source of publication.<sup>28</sup> He also made lists of periodicals that published articles on the topic during a given year. Some of those periodicals appeared only occasionally on his list, for their interest in the topic was only temporary. Still, their presence is very important as an indication of public involvement in the discourse on agriculture. The grandiose taxonomical project of Pedashenko documented the trends in the involvement of Russian periodicals in the discussion of agricultural issues, and the fluctuation in the numbers of publications (books and, predominantly, articles) on those issues.

According to the data collected by A. D. Pedashenko, the number of articles and essays on different aspects of the agrarian question published in various periodicals had doubled between 1905 and 1912 and showed a peak of public interest in agriculture in 1913, when more than 23,500 agriculture-related articles were published, that is, a new piece on agriculture appeared every 22 minutes.<sup>29</sup> The seemingly permanent growth of public interest in agriculture was brought to a halt by the outbreak of the war, but by 1916, a

steady decline in the number of publications turned into a virtual collapse. A new and rather short era of mass interest in agriculture was coming, and it would differ very much from the prerevolutionary decade.

Pre-1917 agrojournalism did not have a purely academic character and did not exist in a political vacuum. The Russian press was affected by both governmental control and the influence of the radical opposition. However, my study of the periodicals (both their contents and occasional incidents with the authorities) shows that "direct" politics played a minimal role in the functioning of the agropress. New titles were usually registered without problems, within the timeframe determined by law.<sup>30</sup> Censorship interfered rarely, and in the majority of instances that I have encountered, publications were acquitted of all charges by higher authorities.<sup>31</sup> Criticism of government policies, especially the fierce attacks on Stolypin land reforms, were common in agricultural periodicals but rarely got them into trouble. Equally rare were explicitly revolutionary publications, and in a single case of which I am aware, the authorities exercised rather remarkable restraint.<sup>32</sup>

Thus we can tentatively reconstruct the intellectual climate that influenced the decisions of Ekaterina Sakharova, Ivan Emel'ianov, and Alexander Chaianov at the beginning of the twentieth century. They entered adulthood during a new stage of Russia's engagement with the "agrarian question": this time, interest was much more practical (almost "technological"), widespread throughout the country (i.e., not limited to the elite in the capitals), and intensive (as evidenced by the stable increase in the number of special periodicals and individual articles on the topic). Characteristically, even populist-minded Sakharova chose to study agriculture professionally in order to "get closer to the people," rather than to pursue the traditional and much easier strategy of "going to the people" by becoming a village teacher. Thus, the very understanding of the intelligentsia's mission vis-à-vis the people had changed: the former plan of modernization through political emancipation gave way to a new formula of emancipation through modernization. This was a crucial paradigm shift in the dominant "culture of modernization," to borrow the concept of Esther Kingston-Mann.<sup>33</sup>

### **A new culture of modernization and the "apolitical politics" of *obshchestvennost'***

*Modernity* is one of the most contested concepts in the social sciences, and to avoid the trap of choosing one normative model of "true" modernity over rival models we turn to its original meaning at the beginning of the twentieth century. "Modernity," as many other keywords of the twentieth century, was introduced in Russia by Peter Struve, the former founding father of Russian Marxism, turned dean of Russian liberals.<sup>34</sup> In January

1907, he literally inaugurated the interrevolutionary decade of a new type of modernization in Russia:

The Russian Revolution, as I have noted elsewhere, represents a phenomenon very peculiar by virtue of the two conditions that were combined in it: (1) one that can be called “contemporaneity,” and (2) one that can be called “elementarity.” I use the word “contemporaneity” for the lack in the Russian language of an expression equivalent to the west-European “modern.” The Russian Revolution is very “modern.”<sup>35</sup>

The new word correlated with a new understanding of modernization shaped by the then prevailing context of Progressivism, both an ideology and a mindset. For the purpose of our study it is important to note that historians characterize turn-of-the-twentieth-century Progressivism as a transatlantic phenomenon, when “university debates and chancery discussions in Paris, Washington, London, and Berlin formed a world of common referents.”<sup>36</sup> As Daniel Rodgers aptly points out, “Atlantic-era social politics had its origins not in its nation-state containers, not in a hypothesized ‘Europe’ nor an equally imagined ‘America,’ but in the world between them.”<sup>37</sup> The second key feature of Progressivism was its proverbial technocratic approach to solving the global problems of society. It was related to, and partially resulted from, the Progressives’ indifference, even hostility, toward politics. The general mood was that “[p]olitics as a governing device had become outdated, falling prey to the mass appeals and backroom deals frequently thought to characterize it. . . . Antitheoretical theory begat apolitical politics.”<sup>38</sup> Frustrated with the limitations of the nineteenth-century type of democracy of restricted enfranchisement, Progressivism advanced a more efficient scheme of “network mobilization” as a system of multiple campaigns for individual causes.<sup>39</sup> This “apolitical politics” implied a de facto different concept of citizenship, based not on guaranteed formal belonging to the enfranchised political community, but on optional and active participation in a public self-mobilization campaign. This version of citizenship was institutionalized in the form of grassroots associations and clubs.

Russian Empire, though hardly a part of the “North Atlantic world,” was actively engaged in this process of Progressive intellectual exchange and dialogue. Every major theme debated by the international reformist community found its prompt response in Russian progressive educated society (*obshchestvennost'*). Sometimes it is possible to measure the intensity of this rapport.<sup>40</sup> We find the same motif of “apolitical politics” in Russian publications, literally praising “socialism without politics.”<sup>41</sup> The international Progressivist “culture of modernization” became an integral part of the Russian public sphere and eventually became a dominant force in Russian politics in summer 1915, when the majority of the fourth-state Duma deputies managed to unite in a coalition called the “Progressive Bloc.” Both

the origins of this bloc and the fact that nobody questioned its name testify to the wide spread of Progressivist political discourse and imagery in Late Imperial Russia.<sup>42</sup>

The ethos of "apolitical politics" of the intellectuals from democratic countries resonated particularly well with the Russian intelligentsia living in the situation of political demobilization in the semi-parliamentary, semi-autocratic country. They could also rely on the domestic tradition of piecemeal social reformism, namely, the "small deeds" approach toward improvement of the people's (primarily peasants') conditions. Not directly challenging the existing regime, back in the 1880s the "small deeds" theory was mocked by the opposition leaders for opportunism, a lack of grand strategy and important goals, and was denied any political significance (except for the negative role of distracting the scarce human resources of the educated elite from radical opposition to the authorities).<sup>43</sup> "Small deeds" became the major synonym for an apolitical venue of social activism.<sup>44</sup> It took more than a decade for the "small deeds" modernization discourse to enhance its position among the intelligentsia, who until the defeat of the 1905 Revolution were very reluctant to give up their political radicalism in favor of economic reformism.<sup>45</sup> Political demobilization after 1905 and the spread of Progressivist ideology and ethos among all strata of Russian educated society, particularly stimulated by participation in the World Exhibition of 1900 in Paris and the takeoff of the city reform movement, gave new meaning to the seemingly compromised "small deeds" ideology. Progressivism in its Russian reading succeeded in uniting the hitherto conflicting social projects of radical populists, with their ideal of servicing "the people," social democrats, focused on economic efficiency, and liberals, mostly concerned with individual success (a development mirroring processes in the West<sup>46</sup>). The same Peter Struve insisted in November 1908:

Greater [economic] *productivity* is always based on a higher standard of personal *applicability* . . . . While the eternal idealistic moment of liberalism consists in the idea of freedom and individuality of the person, the eternal realistic moment of a liberal worldview embodies an idea of personal applicability . . . . The Russian intelligentsia need a crucial reconstruction of their entire economic worldview . . . . They must understand that the productive process is not a "predatory" one but a creation of the very basis of the culture . . . . The development of national productive forces should be understood and accepted as a national ideal and a national service.<sup>47</sup>

This was a concise formulation of the political agenda of Russian "apolitical politics:" the building of a new national compound through the development of human capital, to be measured by its economic performance. The vision of Progressivism in Russia as a coordinated movement for

society's self-modernization has been obstructed for a while by old-time historiographic clichés that conceptualized the social dynamics of Late Imperial Russia in terms of fixed sociopolitical and economic identities. In the 1970s and much of the 1980s, studies of Late Imperial Russia were greatly influenced by the structuralist formula of "dual polarization" (between the tsarist government and educated society, and between the latter and the working class).<sup>48</sup> The "polarization" scheme implied that imperial society was in a state of complex disintegration, with the Revolution of 1917 becoming a logical and all but inevitable outcome of that process. The revisionist approach of the 1990s instead concentrated on social structures and intermediate groups that "bridged" the alleged polarization of Russian pre-revolutionary society.<sup>49</sup> However, this new research agenda still took for granted the conventional divisions of Russian imperial society along the fixed lines of class, social estate, or party membership. It ignored the fundamental interconnectedness of Russian reformist forces and understood "bridging" as filling the gap between static social groups. Very few scholars would explore the new social structures and practices that began emerging after 1905 to accommodate the "apolitical" politics of social change. Thus, people like Ekaterina Vavilova or Alexander Chaianov could be analyzed in the context of studies of the radical intelligentsia or of economic theory, but there was no way to show their intellectual and practical interdependence with such distinct figures as Petr Stolypin or Peter Struve.

The underappreciation of late imperial society's potential for self-modernization rested, in part, on the influential concept of its "sedimentary" dislocated structure, and on the fatal inadequacy of its frustrated intellectual elite to properly emulate the "true" modernity of the West. The first concept belonged to Alfred Rieber, who replaced Haimson's clear-cut image of Russia as a society composed of (predominantly) capitalist classes with a subtle vision depicting a social fabric woven from a mosaic of social identities, archaic and modern, coexisting simultaneously and overlapping with each other.<sup>50</sup> Rieber's snapshot revealed a "sedimentary society," but could not provide insight into the direction of its *evolution* before 1917. However, this static picture was perceived by many as a diagnosis of social processes under way in early twentieth-century Russia. This is the origin of the popular thesis of the fatal "fragmentation" of Russian prerevolutionary society, which allegedly explains its collapse in 1917<sup>51</sup>—a thesis that became standard in the work of some social historians in the 1990s.<sup>52</sup> Laura Engelstein most powerfully advanced the skeptical vision of the Russian intelligentsia's modernizing efforts. Among the first to introduce the themes and concepts developed by Michel Foucault to the field of Russian history, she opened a new venue for studies of Russia as a partially modernized society of professionals and intellectuals that used modern "techniques" and produced modern "discourses." She also laid grounds for subsequent interpretations of the Soviet regime as "an alliance between the old tutelary state

and the new disciplinary mechanisms."<sup>53</sup> Despite her critical and balanced application of Foucault, she built into her model of emerging pockets of modernity in Imperial Russia a rather simplistic juxtaposition of advanced "Europe," where the disciplinary power of professionals (i.e., institutes of civil society) was guaranteed and regulated by law, and "Russia," where "both the reign of law and the ascendance of bourgeois discipline remained largely hypothetical."<sup>54</sup> Engelstein based her persuasive argument about the vulnerability of modern institutes in Russia on metahistorical speculations, using "Europe" as a self-explanatory trope, relying on a then nascent literature on Russian professions, and avoiding any reference to relevant European historiography. As a result, subsequent studies of modern ideologies and social practices in Late Imperial Russia were overshadowed by the sense of their inherited inadequacy and failure to emulate some normative "European" scenario.<sup>55</sup>

Thus, an attempt in the 1990s to revise a "polarization/disintegration" paradigm—which was structuralist in a Marxist or rather Braudelian sense, and was moved by the "trauma of 1917" and the necessity to explain its historical inevitability—was itself bound by the equally structuralist criteria of "normality" (class social structure, institutionalized civil society, party politics, etc.) and a *Sonderweg* vision of Russian development, largely caused by a lack of interest in a truly comparative perspective. Little wonder that, when multiple empirical lacunae were filled in by a new wave of research on professions, local social networks, and the interaction of different social groups at various levels, a conflict emerged between the general methodological scheme of the "postpolarization" tradition and the newly studied, rich body of sources suggesting a different vision of late imperial society—one that is much more dynamic and probably more self-conscious.

An attempt to override this deadlock can be seen in studies of the Russian public sphere and civil society that gained momentum sometime around 2000. Influenced by the seminal work of Jürgen Habermas,<sup>56</sup> the structuralist approach to the problem of social dynamics in Imperial Russia found what seemed to be an ideal vehicle for its description and analysis. The "public sphere" was seen now as a quintessence of "modernity," and "civil society" replaced the industrialization and parliamentary politics of older structuralist theories of modernization as a universal indicator of a country's development. Russian prerevolutionary society did not demonstrate a developed modern class structure or stable parliamentary regime—the two old criteria of modernization quite indifferent to the evidences of burgeoning social activism in the fatally "fragmented" and "porous" Russian social order. However, it now seemed possible to integrate that sedimentary ("imperial") society into a single model of the public sphere, and to interpret the instances of rapid professionalization and political activism as the signs of a nascent civil society. Given the social composition of the empire, the debate about the perspectives of civil society embracing the emerging

public sphere in Late Imperial Russia was often referred to as the problem of turning “peasants into citizens.”

Most noticeably, this became the theme of Scott Seregny’s articles.<sup>57</sup> Following David Moon,<sup>58</sup> Seregny applied Eugen Weber’s famous formula “peasants into Frenchmen”<sup>59</sup> to the Russian case in its political reading—“peasants into Russian citizens”—studying the growing involvement of Russian peasants with a nascent rural civil society in the 1910s.<sup>60</sup> He thus joined the ranks of American and European historians who over the past two decades have reassessed the role of local self-government administrations (*zemstvos*) and rural professionals in the service of *zemstvos* and government in mobilizing and integrating the peasantry into a broader society, and emphasized the amazing success of those attempts in dismantling the traditional peasant isolationism and passivity.<sup>61</sup> Still bound by the powerful legacy of the partial revision of the “dual polarization” historiographic canon, Seregny stopped short of acknowledging the building of a universal civil society in pre-1917 Russia as a success.<sup>62</sup>

The growing literature on Russian civil society became an arena of fierce ideological confrontation: the “optimists” pointed to empirical data suggesting a dramatic growth of public activism and awareness during the last decade of the old regime in Russia,<sup>63</sup> while “pessimists,” not questioning the facts, appealed to methodological considerations, first of all the lack of institutional guarantees for a civil society in Imperial Russia and the insurmountable gap between Russian realities and the state of “true” civil society in the “West.”<sup>64</sup> Both parties share a common essentialist approach toward civil society as an actual “thing,” a formal institution that can be measured against some normative ideal. Joshua Sanborn was one of the first historians of Russia to abandon the archaic structuralist approach toward defining “the norm.” He studied social practices in their “eventuality” dynamics rather than distilling “ideal types” from an unavoidably limited pool of processed data.<sup>65</sup> Joseph Bradley has demonstrated the illusiveness of belief in the existence of some ideal “Western” civil society,<sup>66</sup> while Harold Mah has deconstructed methodological essentialization of the public sphere:

The transformation of social groups into persons who fuse into unity is, of course, a phantasy, and one that is always at odds with an empirical reality of conflicting social identities and interests . . . .

It seems to me that Habermas and historians are misled if they treat the idea of the public sphere as if it were or could ever be a real institution. Analysis of the public sphere should begin, I would suggest, with a recognition that its location is strictly in the political imaginary . . . . Construing the public sphere as a powerful political fiction would lead historians not to measure institutions and intentions against the criteria of an ideal public sphere . . . . Rather, the historical problem would be to figure out

why and how certain groups are able to render their social particularity invisible and therefore make viable claims to universality.<sup>67</sup>

The dynamics of agrojournalism in Late Imperial Russia suggest that a very considerable number of educated Russians behaved *as if* they were part of an invisible sphere of public debates of the most important issues of the day, which acquired a certain political influence, or even authority. While we can conceptualize this phenomenon in terms of the modern analytical category of the "public sphere," there was a developed category of self-description at that time: "*obshchestvennost'*." The concept of *obshchestvennost'* was firmly built in the language of self-description of educated Russians of the early twentieth century, only the related notion of *intelligentsia* could be compared to it in terms of its universal acceptance in all quarters of imperial society. Reconstructing an intertextual context of its application is equivalent to reproducing texts by Duma deputies, revolutionary leaflets, minutes of professional congresses, and resolutions of public associations.<sup>68</sup> This preponderance of the notion left many scholars quite indifferent to its content, at best equating *obshchestvennost'* with public associations and formal institutions of civil society.<sup>69</sup> Yet there are grounds to believe that the trope of *obshchestvennost'* embodied a certain social and political agenda. Genealogically, it accommodated the semi-rational sociopolitical imagery of social self-organization, previously characteristic of anarchists-Bakuninists and populists of the 1870s with their idea of the ideal society composed of autonomous public associations. Russian leading legal experts in the fields of administrative and civil law during the post-1905 decade acknowledged the fundamental nature of the rivalry between the state and *obshchestvennost'*, which "in fact limits the sovereignty of the state" and steals from it "part of its influence and loyalty."<sup>70</sup> In this respect, Russian lawyers followed their European peers, including luminaries such as Georg Jellinek, who regarded the state and self-organized society as two parallel and even alternative institutions.<sup>71</sup>

A partial explanation for the outstanding status of *obshchestvennost'* in Russian politics and culture may be found in its universal pan-imperial character. While the administration, legal system, and economy of the empire just nominally covered its entire space, being in fact but a hodgepodge of "special regulations" and semi-isolated economic systems, *obshchestvennost'* was one and the same in Tiflis and Harbin, at the district zemstvo board and in the capital, using the Russian language as the universal medium of communication and regarding the boundaries of the Russian Empire as its natural boundaries. This universalism of *obshchestvennost'* made it the most modern social institution in the Russian Empire, and thus authoritative even for those who objected to the leftist political connotations of the broadly defined "Progressivism" of *obshchestvennost'*. The dominant and persistent pan-imperial discourse of *obshchestvennost'* reconfigured and

reconstructed the empire as a homogeneous space of equal citizenship in the Russian-language “republic of the letters” (which, however, did not include some borderland regions of the empire). Unlike the imperial schooling system, there were no *numerous clausus* to limit one’s access to this emerging national compound;<sup>72</sup> unlike the imperial army, there did not exist any prejudice against certain groups regarded as “unfit” or undesirable for the common civic service,<sup>73</sup> and certainly no privileges for the “well-born.” The universality of the *obshchestvennost’* sphere for a while supported the illusion of a similar universality of the Russian Empire itself. Substituting the formal unity of the multifaceted empire, secured by the figure of the autocrat who himself held almost 50 regional titles,<sup>74</sup> by the single community of civic-minded educated public implied that any initiative supported by *obshchestvennost’* had an empire-wide application and meaning. The project of radical populism embraced by the emerging *obshchestvennost’* in the last decades of the nineteenth century was a case in point: how else to explain the “ethnic blindness” of Jewish activists who would agitate for socialism among the Ukrainian peasants, posing as tsarist officials?<sup>75</sup> The dominant mental map of *obshchestvennost’* was some unqualified “Russia,” where the universal ideals of enlightenment and modernity were to be put into practice. This unconscious or at least underreflective imperialism of *obshchestvennost’* greatly facilitated its rise as a pan-Russian phenomenon, but made it ill-prepared for the challenge presented by brewing and (for a while) much less articulated and visible alternative nationalist projects.

### Russian peasants and the “third element”

When Russian *obshchestvennost’* embraced Progressivism atop its largely eroded populism and once again turned to the countryside, this time with the practical task of organizational and technological improvements, they envisioned their counterparts in the village as an equally homogeneous “Russian peasantry.” This can be explained by the powerful populist inertia only partially affected by Marxist schemes. The abolition of serfdom in 1861 launched the process of continuous social engineering and discursive construction of “peasants.” From then on, any ideological projection on the peasantry could be followed potentially by an actual change in the peasantry’s socioeconomic or legal conditions. Historians studying debates among the Reform’s architects—top bureaucrats, noble members of the provincial Editing Commissions (drafting legislation proposals for consideration in St. Petersburg), and general educated public in 1857–1861—may disagree in their interpretations of the nature of the reform and intentions of the actors involved. However, nobody questions its significance in the process of differentiating a legally and economically amalgamated complex of the gentry–serf estate into separate entities: the nobility and private land propriety vs. the peasantry and communal landholding of individual

households.<sup>76</sup> It was not before the emancipation of serfs in 1861 that the peasant emerged as a universal category, not defined solely by his legal bond to the owner and economic dependency on the landlord. In fact, as Mikhail Dolbilov, who studied the Reform of 1861 as a discursive event par excellence, noted, it was the legislation that eventually constructed a holistic vision of the "peasantry."<sup>77</sup>

Even nowadays the most careful and informed scholars believe in the fundamentality of this social category. In the book that has set a new benchmark for studies of rural Russia, David Moon discusses the "Russian peasantry" as a social entity with clear characteristics and boundaries, and even calculates their quantity as separate from other "Slavic peoples (Ukrainians, Belorussians and Poles), and Finnic, Turkic, and Baltic peoples."<sup>78</sup> Quite aware of the challenges he faces, Moon selected a number of criteria of "Russianness," yet he did not explain why Orthodox "Ukrainian peasants" differed from "Russians" more than "Russian" Old Believers; why individualistic peasants of the Russian North or Siberia were closer to commune-minded peasants of Central Russia and not to Ukrainian farmers; why life "inside the borders of what had been the realm of the Muscovite tsars"<sup>79</sup> did not make "Russians" of the numerous Turkic and Finnic peoples of the Volga region. The general problem is, of course, an attempt to ascribe a modern national identity to a social group that is premodern by definition. But the idea that all varieties of nonprivileged agricultural populations, from Poland to Sakhalin, from Arkhangelsk to Turkestan, could be lumped together under a single category of "peasants" seems to be equally problematic. Even if limited to "Russian" peasantry (which could be possible in some situations empirically, but never for a single methodological reason), the analysis of this category would encounter such different cultural, social, economic, and technological patterns that any generalizations would have been limited to a few meaningful regularities.

We may add that the emancipation reform also overshadowed the theme of non-Russian agricultural populations (i.e., the majority of non-Russian ethnoconfessional groups) in the public debates for decades to come and even in subsequent historiography. Only Orthodox Slav peasants had been enserfed, hence postemancipation discourse fixed predominantly on these groups of petty agriculturists. That is why from the very beginning the new holistic notion of "peasantry" meant "Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarussian peasantry" by default. Non-Slav agriculturists were also included in this notion when it was used in broader all-imperial contexts such as famine relief, education, economic productivity, and so on. The particular circumstances of emerging national movements in the empire in the last third of the nineteenth century also allowed for the ethnically unqualified usage of the term "peasants" (which in practice meant ascribing indigenous "Russianness" to it in the dominating discourse of the Russian-language bureaucrats and public): the largely illiterate rural population was excluded

from the public sphere of urban nationalists, and government pressure would not permit the active interaction of the latter with countryside residents. In the East European context, many ethnoconfessional groups lacked a complete social structure, while different social strata could be integrated into different sediments of the complex imperial society, thus hampering ethnic mobilization along traditional social hierarchies. For example, nationalist Polish gentry in the western provinces of the empire found it difficult to rely on a local peasantry that was predominantly Belarusian and Ukrainian by language and (less often) Orthodox by faith.<sup>80</sup> On the contrary, Ukrainian nobility long since been integrated into the privileged stratum of imperial society,<sup>81</sup> and in search of the glorious and unique past that would have differentiated them from the Muscovites, Ukrainian nationalists appealed to the legacy of Cossackdom and distinctive Ukrainian culture to be found among the town literati.<sup>82</sup> The nonintegrated part of the nobility of the Turkic peoples in the Caucasus and Middle Volga had much closer relations with the common villagers, but protonationalist mobilization in these societies was centered on their Muslim identities and their possible modernization, and thus had little interest in the most traditional and benighted segment of their brethren.<sup>83</sup> As a result, until the beginning of the twentieth century, the trope of “peasant” had pan-imperial legal or Russian (East Slav) ethnoconfessional connotations.

Thus by the turn of the twentieth century, neither top bureaucrats nor professional economists nor *obshchestvennost'* doubted the “Russianness” of themselves or the peasants, but were at pains to harmonize the ever-differentiating connotations of “people,” “agriculturists,” “peasant social estate,” and “villagers”—once captured in the single epistemological and (perhaps) social entity of the “peasantry.” No longer seen as icons of spiritual virtues and champions of land cultivation, peasants were still perceived as a whole, as a homogeneous stratum of “defective” economic producers. Different political factions within Russian educated society shared a common awareness that a “true” peasantry was yet to be cultivated through coordinated social politics—whether by endowing them with all of the arable land in the realm as a result of revolution and egalitarian agrarian reform, by rationalizing and intensifying agriculture, or by replacing communal landownership with private petty landownership. Hence, to fit Russian realities a 100 years ago, Eugen Weber’s formula would have been adapted to “from Russians into peasants”—such was the order of priorities in public discourse of the time. Of course, “Russianness” was problematized in the multiethnic Russian Empire, as Russian nationalism failed to separate itself from Russian imperialism and imperial loyalty and to evolve into some form of a modern nationalism, whether political, racial, cultural, or other.<sup>84</sup> Moreover, it seemed that the very “national” principle (often understood in ethnographic terms) contradicted the idea of rationalizing the peasant economy.<sup>85</sup> Adhering to traditions (and often literally inventing new ones)

hampered the reorganization of household production and reallocation of labor resources for purely "ideological" reasons.<sup>86</sup> Not unlike the old populist view of the peasantry, the new Progressivist approach of *obshchestvennost'* was universalist and largely insensitive to national specificity. In the words of Vasiliï Ferdinandov, who in 1905 was a young instructor of poultry farming in the province of Voronezh and an organizer of local agricultural societies,

We [the intelligentsia] . . . have joined in the universal progress; we have used much of others' labor and time to improve ourselves, while he, that prehistoric ploughman, the salt of the Russian earth, he was consciously left by us and our predecessors outside of culture, outside of life.<sup>87</sup>

By "culture" and "life," apparently, Ferdinandov implied the culture of professionals formed as a result of Westernization, and the enlightened life as structured by the standards of transnational modernity. While there is no doubt that agricultural specialists were imposing their standards on peasants as some universal norm,<sup>88</sup> it would be misleading to squeeze this group into the Foucauldian-type model of a corporation of bourgeois professionals producing hegemonic discourses in their striving for public authority. They were not quite "bourgeois," still being largely a part of the intelligentsia and effectively limited in their ideological outlook by the general worldview of *obshchestvennost'*. Contemporaries characterized this hybridity as "new 'bourgeois' forms of intelligentsia service."<sup>89</sup> The analytical model of professionalization as developed by modern social sciences is an important frame of reference that allows us to deconstruct general patterns of this group's formation and evolution. At the same time, to understand the motivation of the people who joined the ranks of agricultural specialists and the choices they had to make, we should turn to the tropes of their language of self-description, first of all, to the concept of the "third element."

The concept of the "three social elements" emerged at the turn of the twentieth century as an attempt to categorize new types of social identities in the modernized sector of rural society. The first element was represented by the appointed officers of the government agencies; the elected deputies of the relatively new *zemstvo* structures were called the second element; and the title of the third element was ascribed to the hired specialists in *zemstvo* service. This scheme obviously contained an allusion to the social hierarchy of the French *ancien régime*, with the interests of the landed gentry supposedly represented by the first two elements. Unlike the French model, however, the merchants and entrepreneurs were not regarded as a unity with any common agenda to represent (a point extensively elaborated by Alfred Rieber).<sup>90</sup> Hence, the third element was seen as a new social body of the faction of the intelligentsia that was compelled to earn a living by means of professional service, rather than to concentrate solely on literary or political activity.

The very term “third element” was introduced in 1900 in a speech delivered by the Samara vice-governor V. G. Kondoidi at the opening of the annual congress of provincial zemstvo deputies. He warned the representatives of the “second element” about the arrival of a new factor in Russian social life, a third element:

... it consists of specimen [sic!] with a large stock of scientific theoretical knowledge, who use it to raise and conquer authority for themselves in the local social milieu.... It happens that the [zemstvo] representatives hearken to the word of *intelligently* without sufficient justification, only because of a reference to science or the teachings of newspaper and journal writers, while these [*intelligently*] are no more than employees of the [zemstvo] board.<sup>91</sup>

This episode proves that before the Revolution of 1905–07, it was the *first element* that dominated the sociopolitical landscape and quite insightfully defined its configuration, both institutionally and symbolically. In fact, Vladimir Kondoidi, a well-read and shrewd administrator,<sup>92</sup> all but anticipated a classical sociological description of professionals as a group that derived its social status from special knowledge provided by science.<sup>93</sup> Probably because of the ingenious accuracy of Kondoidi’s definition, professional *intelligently* ignored the pejorative overtones in the speech of a high-ranking official and enthusiastically accepted a new denomination—“the third element.” Until the Revolution of 1905, the third element was totally subdued and controlled by the second element, not to mention the state agencies. Those who had started their professional careers before 1905 later retold numerous stories of the humiliation and assaults they experienced as young specialists in the zemstvo service.<sup>94</sup> They were treated as potential political delinquents who could not be trusted. In December 1903, Sergei Fridolin, a recent graduate of the Moscow Agricultural Institute, came to the St. Petersburg district zemstvo board (*uprava*) to be interviewed for the position of district agronomist. He was affronted from the very beginning by a zemstvo deputy who was also a senator (which was technically illegal):

I remember, how the first question addressed to me by that senator was: “Aren’t you a socialist?” And before I replied, the other Privy Councilor [*tainyi sovetnik*], also a deputy, answered for me laughing: “Well, what agronomist is not a socialist?”<sup>95</sup>

The situation of specialists in state service was no easier, for instead of personal assaults they were confronted by the system of official political screening. In 1906, the 48-year-old agronomist Mikhail Shaternikov was fired from the State Administration of Land Settlement and Agriculture (GUZiZ) for refusing to sign an affidavit of nonmembership in leftist political

parties. In Shaternikov's police dossier there is no evidence that he was actually a member of any party at this time. Apparently, he just protested against the interference of political concerns in purely professional matters.<sup>96</sup>

Yet, time was on the side of the third element. The number of professionals in zemstvo service had increased to 65,000–70,000 by 1908,<sup>97</sup> thus making the third element de facto a significant social force with enormous political potential. It did not take them long to turn the tables, fighting for recognition by, and independence from, the first and second elements. Sharing a very general democratic ethos and a program of practical measures basically confined to professional activity and "small deeds," members of the third element characterized themselves as an "active part of the servicemen in public institutions who . . . influenced the democratization of the zemstvo organs."<sup>98</sup> The second element, the elected zemstvo deputies, played a dubious role in the elevation of the third element. On the one hand, a result of their efforts—a rapid expansion of the zemstvo budget and activities after the First Russian Revolution—contributed to the rise of the third element.<sup>99</sup> On the other hand, the history of professionals in zemstvo service is a history of constant conflicts between the zemstvo authorities and the third element. By the 1910s, the third element went from the defensive to the offensive, demanding the right for initiative and professional expertise of the zemstvo programs.<sup>100</sup> Previously, speakers for the third element questioned the moral authority of the second element and insisted that the existing oligarchic zemstvos should be replaced with democratically elected zemstvos.<sup>101</sup> In the 1910s, the third element already claimed that it was they who represented the "true" essence of zemstvo institutions (even though institutionally they were salaried employees, and not elected deputies), and demanded that the second element yield part of their control over zemstvo politics.<sup>102</sup> The constant pressure for the introduction of county-level (*volost'*) zemstvos could be viewed as an attempt to shift the balance of power in favor of the third element that would have totally controlled the most numerous lowest level of the zemstvo hierarchy.<sup>103</sup>

Judging from the sources, by 1913, specialists in the zemstvo service felt themselves in a position to challenge even the authority of the landed gentry who only a decade earlier had treated agronomists or veterinarians as their personal employees.<sup>104</sup> It was sometimes said that gentry deputies to zemstvo boards no longer represented the true interests of the class of landowners, for they lacked the necessary knowledge and training to identify those interests.<sup>105</sup> Now the second element could not survive without the expertise of the third element, and the latter was ready to apply all available leverage in a bargain for influence.<sup>106</sup>

From what we know about the climate in zemstvos on the eve of the World War I, the third element and the zemstvo patricians had reached a compromise. Here is a description of a quite typical celebration by the Birk district zemstvo board (Ufa province) of the fiftieth anniversary of the zemstvo

institution in the Russian Empire. Even a brief glimpse at the proceedings reveals much about the distribution of authority in this zemstvo. The grand meeting of the zemstvo board began on February 19, 1914, with religious ceremonies: separate services for Orthodox and for Muslims took place about noon. Then followed a brief presentation on the history of zemstvo institutions in Russia in general, and in the Birk district in particular. After a break came the time for official addresses. The first speaker, who could be expected to be the most important figure in the audience, was not a board chairman or deputy, but a zemstvo physician, A. A. Smorodintsev, who said,

Allow me to address this jubilee meeting with brief greetings on behalf of the zemstvo employees, the so-called third element, upon their authorization. We are happy that life as personalized by all of you [*zhizn' v vashem litse*] has recognized, apparently, our modest work for the benefit of the population of the Birk district.<sup>107</sup>

When the representatives of the third element succeeded in securing their rights and status, a bitter rivalry between the elements gave way to partnership. At least in the sphere of economic assistance to the rural population, the role of specialists was recognized by both the state and the zemstvo.<sup>108</sup> By 1914, the third element had become indispensable in sustaining agricultural productivity and successful procurement campaigns. In their turn, rural professionals greeted the rapprochement between the first and the second elements. This situation gave them a freedom of maneuver between those major employers resulting in a higher degree of independence from both of them. Rural professionals even criticized those who

are living by the principles of the past, pre-liberation [i.e., pre-1905] opposition of "zemstvo and bureaucracy," who cannot see that during the postliberation epoch both of these elements... have been brought together to such an extent that it is difficult to say where one ends and the other begins.... The most democratic organs of self-government will be unable to cope with the present abundance of their functions without help from the state budget. And the most convincing example of this is America, where individual states... use the aid of the federal budget, and precisely in the sphere of agronomic measures.

That is why we believe that financing and support [of the zemstvo] by the state... suggests the rise of new, more correct relationships between the state and the zemstvo.<sup>109</sup>

As the gap between the major sediments of Russian society was being gradually bridged during the 1910s, a new social force appeared to challenge the seemingly certain harmony. Without much exaggeration, the rapidly

growing cooperative movement can be recognized as the "fourth element" in the modernized sector of Russian society.<sup>110</sup> It was a genuinely mass phenomenon that challenged the authority of the first two elements on different grounds than the third element had a decade earlier. While agricultural specialists could not survive without the favorable attitude of the state agencies and the solid budget of the zemstvos as their employers, cooperatives were much more independent of the government and the zemstvos. Cooperative ideologists claimed that only the voluntary economic associations really met the needs and aspirations of the population, while the zemstvo was a compulsory institution built upon a highly restrictive franchise system. Hence, leadership in representing the interests of the rural population must belong to cooperatives.<sup>111</sup>

Thus, the Progressivist-minded cohort of intelligentsia-turning-professionals can be presented in the language of the epoch as occupying a social niche between the "establishment" of the first and the second elements, and the rising "fourth element," while partially overlapping with the "third element." The post-1905 "turn to agriculture" in the public discourse imparted a prominent role to the hitherto neglected third element, while the dominant trend in the schooling system promised further expansion of the cadres of rural modernizers.

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