

The materiality of the corporation:

Oil, gas, and corporate social technologies in the remaking of a Russian region

ABSTRACT

In the Perm Region of Russia, recent social and cultural projects sponsored by energy companies prominently reference certain material qualities of oil and gas. The depth associated with the region's oil deposits is evoked in cultural heritage celebrations funded by Lukoil-Perm, and the connectivity associated with natural gas pipelines figures in PermRegionGaz's efforts to foster new patterns of sociability. Attending to the larger material and semiotic shifts in which these projects are embedded points to a significant dimension of contemporary hydrocarbon politics and to specific ways in which corporations attempt to transform critiques of their operations. [*oil, natural gas, corporations, materiality, infrastructure, corporate social responsibility, postsocialisms*]

The last millennium in the history of the [Perm Region] has been a period of expansion and continuous territorial development—by the Novgorod Ushkuiniks and the missionary bishop Stephen of Perm; by the Stroganov and Demidov dynasties; by Timofei Ermak and Vasiliï Tatishchev; by the colleagues of the OGPU and the victims of the GULAG; by Communist Party members and nonmembers; by Lukoil and Gazprom.

—“The New Perm Period,” *New Companion*, December 26, 1999

Cast an eye back at the turn of the millennium, one of the leading newspapers of the Perm Region, in the Russian Urals, characterized the region's present age as defined by two massive corporations, both of them in the energy sector. Indeed, for all that observers have trained their gaze on a resurgent Russian state in recent years, corporations have also been central to the development and implementation of a powerful set of new technologies aimed at shaping human lives. In the Perm Region of the early 2000s, Lukoil and Gazprom, in the shape of regional subsidiaries, were often understood to be out in front of both state agencies and NGOs in their efforts to respond to critiques of the status quo and mold new kinds of citizens and communities after a decade of “transition.” They had become as central to life in the Perm Region as the Communist Party and the Stroganovs were in earlier eras.

The dynamics by which oil and gas invite—and constrain—certain politics are most heavily theorized at the level of the nation-state, where political factions struggle to capture resource rents and those rents, in turn, fund projects of national development or integration (e.g., Apter 2005; Coronil 1997). An increasingly evident dimension of hydrocarbon politics in recent years, however, is the participation of oil and gas companies in small- and medium-scale development projects in their areas of operation. Attending to these projects in a single region permits an examination of some of the more direct—and less state-mediated—mechanisms by which oil and gas participate in the reshaping of political, social, and cultural orders. At this level of analysis, the kinds of material and semiotic processes that help constitute hydrocarbon politics come into particularly sharp focus. Consider two opening snapshots from the Perm Region.

Snapshot 1 is of the town of Il'inskii, which has been quite successful in grant competitions in recent years. Lukoil-Perm, a subsidiary of Russia's largest private oil company that operates a number of wells in the surrounding district, has provided funds to remodel the library, start a folk-crafts center, and support annual festivals celebrating local culture. Perhaps the most significant grant-funded addition to Il'inskii has been a newly renovated and expanded 1,600-square-meter regional studies museum dedicated to the famous Stroganovs, whose large family estates in tsarist-era Perm Province were administered from offices in Il'inskii. Il'inskii's projects are most notable for their frequent emphasis on celebrating cultural identity and local history. Taking part in the town's many cultural festivals or visiting the professionally designed exhibits about the Stroganovs in Il'inskii's new museum, one can hardly bemoan the Soviet-era destruction of local cultural heritage, as one might have in the 1990s. So, at least, say those doling out Lukoil-Perm's grants.

Snapshot 2 is of the town of Babka, some one hundred sixty kilometers to the southwest of Il'inskii, which has also distinguished itself in grant competitions. Reconstruction of the central square, for instance, began in 2004 with financing from PermRegionGaz, a subsidiary of Gazprom responsible for pipelines in the district. The new square features a garden, a fountain, new benches for sitting and talking, paved paths designed with stroller-pushing mothers in mind, and even a small monument to the town's namesake—a grandma (*babka*). "We call it 'Babka Arbat,'" one of the out-of-town specialists who helped secure grant funding for the square told me with a smile and some pride, referring to the old Moscow district known for its strolling pedestrians, resident intellectuals, and air of sociability. Projects like those in Babka, it was thought by their gas-company funders, might provide people with new ways to make connections, to get to know their fellow townspeople. Indeed, with its benches and paths, Babka's new square was explicitly designed and promoted to provide a new place for the sociability that many Russians longed for after the tumultuous and alienating 1990s.

In this article, I focus on a curious and, I argue, very significant element shared by these two examples. In both cases, aspects of crude oil and natural gas as material substances, along with the infrastructures built to extract and transport these substances, feature prominently in their reincarnations as sponsored social and cultural projects intended, in part, to tamp down anticorporate critique. In the first case, Lukoil-Perm's grants for cultural heritage projects often liken the geological depth of oil deposits to the historical depth attributed to local culture—even as they seek to reassure local communities that "their" oil has not been stolen by faraway oligarchs. In the second case, PermRegionGaz's grants for projects fostering social connectivity often evoke the material connectivity and net-

works of pipeline natural gas—even as they seek to counter widespread opinion that the gas industry makes its money by speculating on a transient product. Depth and connectivity, then, as material qualities associated respectively with oil and gas, play an important role in corporate social and cultural projects in the region. Indeed, I show in the following discussion that links between oil and culture, on the one hand, and pipeline gas and sociability, on the other hand, have become central to the political landscape of the Perm Region. These links are contingent but not arbitrary. In fact, one can trace their origins fairly precisely within Lukoil-Perm and PermRegionGaz as emergent corporations of regional scope. My exploration of this dimension of hydrocarbon politics thus proceeds within a broader argument about how capitalist corporations engage with the material world.

The corporation: Materiality beyond production, exchange, and consumption

By *materiality*, I mean the sensuous and phenomenal qualities of things and their implication in human social and cultural life. I am particularly interested in the ways in which the material qualities of objects—such as depth or connectivity—enter into and shift within broader regimes of signification at particular times and places.¹ Materiality in this and other senses has long been at the center of anthropological studies of production, exchange, and consumption, but it appears only in limited ways in anthropologists' more recent turn to the study of aspects of the corporation.

The literature on corporate social technologies²—the strand of the anthropology of the corporation with which I engage here—is illustrative in this regard. Ethnography-based accounts of corporate social technologies (hereafter, CSTs) have contributed enormously to understandings of the ways in which corporate participation in development, environmental, and other projects is reshaping communities and persons around the world (e.g., Kirsch 2007; Rajak 2011; Welker 2009; Welker and Wood 2011; see also Barry 2004).³ Synthesizing much of this literature and their own pathbreaking ethnographies of corporations, Peter Benson and Stuart Kirsch (2010) have set out an instructive model of the stages—denial, acknowledgment, and engagement—through which corporations often move in their efforts to respond to criticism. In this model, the material qualities of objects appear chiefly in the role of causing deleterious human health consequences and environmental destruction in the first place. Specific material qualities of tobacco smoke or mine tailings, for instance, are revealed to be harmful; this revelation prompts the stages of corporate response culminating in what, in recent times, has come to be termed "corporate social responsibility."⁴

My aim is to show some ways in which materiality also matters far beyond this initial prompting; if, that is, a “defining feature of contemporary capitalism is the corporate response to critique” (Benson and Kirsch 2010:462), then our ethnographies of that response should not lose sight of the material things in which particular corporations specialize and the ways in which they shape new political fields. Indeed, we might posit that the continued presence of the material qualities of a corporation’s primary objects of interest at the point of its social and cultural technologies is, although not without historical precedent, an especially prominent facet of this age of corporate ascendancy and state retreat or reformulation.⁵

The depths of postsocialism

In 2009, the small city of Lys’va, southeast of Perm, staged a yearlong celebration of local history and culture under the slogan “Lys’va—A Deposit of Culture.” *Mestorozhdenie* (deposit, lit. birthplace) is a term used for underground oil and gas reservoirs; it sounds odd, yet certainly intelligible, when applied to culture. Lys’va’s somewhat awkward slogan suggests that the association of deep oil and deep culture should be seen as the product of a particular historical circumstance, as one outcome of a broad range of corporate initiatives that worked to link oil deposits pumped by Lukoil-Perm—a corporation registered in 1996—to all of the historical depth and authenticity that “culture” in the context of a folklore-heavy festival can impart.

The association of oil deposits and local culture through the shared quality of depth was perhaps most succinctly on display in Lys’va’s celebratory slogan in 2009, but by that point it was hardly unfamiliar to residents of the Perm Region. Since the early 2000s, Lukoil-Perm had been on a concerted campaign—in the media, in its grants for social and cultural programs, and in all of its promotional material—to associate itself with the traditional culture of the Perm Region’s oil-producing districts. Beginning in 2002, for instance, it sponsored a major festival called “Historical Cities of the Kama River Region.” The festival moved among oil-producing districts of the Perm Region each year, fostering cultural awareness and gathering specialists in the interest of reviving local handicraft production and sale. Exhibits about local oil production—always emphasizing geological depth and the infrastructural technologies used to access it—began to crop up in regional history museums. Even historical exhibits not related to oil, such as those featuring the Stroganovs in Il’inskii’s new museum, bore Lukoil-Perm’s name, logo, and generous sponsorship.⁶

Indeed, the Stroganov era was recent by comparison to some of the historical depths with which Lukoil-Perm associated itself. In 2009, the company issued an official corporate history entitled *Permskii period: Vagit Alekperov*

i ego komanda (*The Permian period: Vagit Alekperov and his team*; Neroslov 2009). The title plays on the Permian geological period (the last period of the Paleozoic era) that, as every local schoolchild knows, shares its name with the Perm Region. By linking the Paleozoic to the postsocialist, the book’s title nicely encapsulates its overall goal: inserting Lukoil-Perm as inextricably into the historical, economic, political, and cultural fabric of the Perm Region as possible. Indeed, it projected the company’s Permian qualities back to a geological time when the earth’s oil deposits were still forming: oil and culture, depth and depth (see Figure 1).

Things from the depths and the quality of depth more generally were, to be sure, central to aspects of the postsocialist experience before Lukoil-Perm arrived on the scene, in times when yearlong celebrations of culture were far from most people’s minds. Former collective farmworkers I knew often joked about digging up and putting to use the items their great-grandparents had buried rather than allowing them to be collectivized in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Not long after the end of socialist regimes, phalanxes of dead bodies emerged from the ground to figure in struggles over history, land, and political power at all levels (Verdery 1999). At the same time, as they were confronted with new uses for money and new kinds of commodities, many Russians agonized over the surfaces and deeper essences of things, finding in this distinction a rich language with which to apprehend and navigate a variety of social and cultural transformations (Lemon 1998). Depth also featured prominently in the proliferating talk about the Russian soul so evocatively traced by Dale Pesmen (2000). In such talk, invocations of soul’s depth were closely linked to widely circulating stereotypes of Russian national character and distinctiveness: the deeper the soul, the more authentic, the more authoritative, the more Russian.⁷

That “culture” can be treated as an object with qualities like depth is a common enough phenomenon in conditions of modernity (e.g., Handler 1988), and this process took on particular shapes in the socialist project and its aftermath. As Bruce Grant put it in his study of the Nivkhi of Sakhalin Island, culture in the Soviet Union was “something to be produced, invented, constructed, and reconstructed” (1995:xi). After a century of such projects that whipsawed between framing Nivkhi culture as socialism’s Other and as socialism’s exemplar, between painting “their” culture as deep past and bright future, the Nivkhi Grant knew saw themselves as living among ruins—crumbled, discredited, meaningless bits of objectified and discarded culture. Much the same could be said of the 1990s state of cultural construction in the Perm Region.

The association of deep oil and deep culture in the Perm Region was made in the 2000s out of building blocks—or ruins—present in the first postsocialist decade. But, as the next two sections show, it took a capitalist corporation to create the conditions under which an acquaintance of



Figure 1. A billboard outside Lukoil-Perm's main offices in Perm juxtaposes the depths of oil—an oil rig—with the depths of cultural heritage—a child in traditional dress and a church. The text reads, “Protecting Traditions—Lukoil-Perm.” Photo by author.

mine could respond to my news that I had just come from a folk-handicrafts exhibition sponsored by Lukoil-Perm with the comment, “Of course—where there are folk handicrafts, there is Lukoil.” Her smile, like the minor awkwardness of the slogan “Lys’va—A Deposit of Culture,” points to the recently cobbled-together nature of this relationship.⁸

The qualities of oil

Oil as a material substance has a great many attributes. It is flammable. For engineers and other specialists, it can be “light” or “heavy” depending on viscosity and “sweet” or “sour” depending on sulfur content. Which of the “bundled” (Keane 2003) material qualities of oil becomes significant in broader social and cultural life at a given time and place is a matter of contingency rather than necessity, but it is not entirely arbitrary either. Material qualities may invite certain associations and possibilities but do not determine them in a strong sense. Several examples illustrate the range of possibilities. In Andrew Apter’s (2005) study of Nigeria in the late 1970s, for instance, the blackness of oil (“black gold”) undergirds another sense of blackness: state sponsorship of pan-African and diasporic black culture.⁹ Michael Watts (2001) catalogs several ways in which properties of oil in the modern world shape its transformability into the realm of the mystical—into massive wealth, state spectacle, and violence. At a still larger scale, Timothy Mitchell argues that the “fluid and transportable properties” (2011:44) of oil as compared with those of coal played a crucial role in the making of 20th-century democratic politics and, indeed, in the construction of the networks and kinds of knowledge that continue to organize the global political economy.

In seeking to draw attention to oil’s depth in the post-socialist period, Lukoil-Perm sought to deemphasize some other qualities of oil that were, in the early 2000s, far more present in the imaginations of residents of the region—and far more troublesome to the corporation. The first of these predates Lukoil’s arrival in the Perm Region but occupies an enormous place in the regional imagination. In 1987, in the early days of glasnost, a remarkable article appeared in *Evening Perm*, one of several party newspapers. Called “Clouds Overhead,” the article was a public indictment—the first of its kind—of Perm’s oil refinery, Permneftorgsintez, for systematically failing to prevent oil spills and harmful emissions that posed a major health risk to a significant part of the city (*Evening Perm* 1987:2). This was not news to residents—whose eyes had long been watering—but the public airing of the matter in a long series of replies and correspondence published by *Evening Perm* was a signal event that placed the potentially harmful qualities of oil at the very center of regional imaginations. Decades later, long after Lukoil acquired the refinery in the early 1990s, “Clouds Overhead,” with its emphasis on the toxic qualities of oil, was still recalled as the opening wedge of the end of socialism in the Perm Region.¹⁰

A second widely recognized quality of oil when Lukoil began operations in the Perm Region was its convertibility into money. That oil as substance is transformable not only into other substances at refineries but also into massive wealth seems commonsense, but it was not so in the Soviet period. Despite the overall heavy reliance of the Soviet economy on oil exports, the workings of the socialist mode of production and central planning meant oil towns and districts in the Perm Region never saw capitalist oil booms or their associated inequalities. In the post-Soviet period, both oil as substance and its associated infrastructure were old and familiar, but oil’s convertibility into massive wealth was new. It was linked to still another important aspect of oil: its ownership.

At the national level, Lukoil’s main corporate structures and early leadership emerged from the Soviet Ministry of Oil and Gas and the insiders’ networks commanded by Vagit Alekperov, former deputy minister of oil and gas and president of Lukoil since 1991. The Perm Region, with its old Soviet oil fields and a major refinery, was not originally part of Lukoil’s holdings. Alekperov and his team in Moscow only began to take an interest in Perm’s oil in the mid-1990s, as part of a concerted effort to build a vertically integrated oil company. Lukoil’s efforts to gain control over the Perm Region’s oil industry, however, quickly became tied up with notions of regional belonging and identity. In the concluding section of a long article summing up the competition among Moscow- and Perm-based oligarchs for control over Permneft’, the central Perm newspaper *Capital Weekly* lamented, “and now who will determine where Permian oil will flow?” (1995:2).

It is worth pausing over “Permian oil,” a phrase that still resonated when I mentioned it to friends over a decade later. The invocation of, and worry over, oil’s Permian characteristics in the context of an impending corporate takeover by Moscow oligarchs indicates some of the ways in which oil began to be associated with local identity in the Perm Region after socialism. At this point, oil’s Permian qualities constituted an element of a simmering critique of a corporation, a version of the widespread and highly visible critiques of oligarchs, “new Russians,” and social stratification in general as threats to existing communities of various shapes and sizes (see, e.g., Humphrey 2002). Like the ecological problems associated with the local refinery in the perestroika period, this articulation of the Permian qualities of oil was impossible for those making deals at the commanding heights of the economy to ignore. Local politicians, for instance, had made it clear that access to additional land for drilling would depend on brokered relationships with the local coalitions and communities they headed. Indeed, when Lukoil did acquire Permneft’ in 1996, it was eminently clear that one of Lukoil-Perm’s early challenges would be countering the widespread impression that both Permian resources and aspects of regional particularity had just been expropriated to Moscow. Although not by prearranged plan, depth featured centrally in this effort.

Fixing signs: Corporate response as new material politics

One of Lukoil-Perm’s responses to this situation—an aspect of Benson and Kirsch’s engagement stage—was to create a Connections with Society Division tasked with public relations, government relations, and the development of what, with one eye on Western oil companies, it would soon begin calling “corporate social responsibility.” To run the Connections with Society Division, Lukoil-Perm executives hired well-connected players from the region’s Soviet-era networks, including former high-level party members from the region’s respected arms factories. The skilled networkers of the region’s old factory elite were, that is, morphing into the skilled networkers of the region’s new oil elite. They, in turn, looked to experts in cultural construction.

I first met Oleg Leonidovich Kut’ev when he worked as a specialist in the Perm Region’s Department of Culture in the early 2000s. I quickly learned that, in addition to being an accomplished ethnographer, local historian, and museum specialist, he was a quintessential networker and fixer, and his jovial stories of how impossible Soviet and post-Soviet shortage could be transformed into bounty—cultural and otherwise—served as important background for an article I wrote on the topic (Rogers 2006). In 2003, Oleg Leonidovich left the Department of Culture to take up a new position in the Connections with Society Division at Lukoil-Perm, where he helped to oversee the corpora-

tion’s rapidly expanding grant competitions for social and cultural projects.¹¹

Scholars of socialist and postsocialist societies have paid ample attention to fixers and operators like Oleg Leonidovich and his superiors in Lukoil-Perm’s Connections with Society Division (e.g., Ledeneva 2006). We have not yet, however, appreciated the extent to which, when transplanted into the world of corporate capitalism, these figures have devoted their skills to resignifying the meanings of material objects as much as to facilitating business deals. For this is what Oleg Leonidovich did, now in oil-boom conditions of almost unimaginable plenty rather than the socialist and postsocialist shortage to which he was accustomed. For the four years he worked at Lukoil-Perm, the new association between the depth of oil and the depth of culture was, in significant part, forged by Oleg Leonidovich and the networks he facilitated: in the grants for local culture he helped write and award, in the museums he helped build, in the festivals he helped organize, and in the ways all of this reshaped the politics of the Perm Region’s oil-producing districts. The move was, in fact, a double one: emphasizing the geological depth of oil beneath the region as against toxicity and convertibility into wealth and, through omnipresent sponsorship, seeking to borrow the authority and legitimacy that might be associated with the depth of another object: culture.

Culture, that is, also had to be revived from its post-Soviet ruins and placed in a new position of authority; in the Perm Region in the early 2000s, Lukoil-Perm’s CST projects were the primary vehicles for this revival, at that point far outstripping the efforts of the regional state apparatus. Indeed, the opportunity to revive culture—rather than any corporate strategy or endorsement of Russia’s *nouveaux riches*—drew Oleg Leonidovich to his new job. As we walked through his hometown of Il’inskii with a mutual friend in 2008, Oleg Leonidovich was greeted solicitously at nearly every turn. He answered questions about when the library’s most recent batch of construction materials would be appearing and inquired how sales were going at the folk arts and crafts center (founded with support from Lukoil-Perm). The town priest eagerly showed us the most recent renovations to his church, also supported in part by a grant from Lukoil-Perm. Our tour of the new regional-studies museum—the place of Oleg Leonidovich’s first job as a young man—revealed expensive glass cases, spotlights, and video screens that, I was told by our tour guide, had begun to win federal awards.¹²

As a complement to the new regional studies museum, Oleg Leonidovich published a book to commemorate the town’s 425th anniversary in 2004. *Il’inskii: Stranitsy istorii* (*Il’inskii: Pages of history*; Kut’ev 2004) charts the town’s beginning in the prerevolutionary period and concludes with a chapter on “Il’inskii’s Big Oil,” an extensive account of the geology and labor history of oil production in the Il’inskii

district. This book sought to accomplish much the same work as the official Lukoil-Perm history *Permskii period*, mentioned above, but at a district rather than regional level. The “Permian” qualities of oil that had featured in the critique of Lukoil-Perm as a corporation in the 1990s were, a decade later, redeployed in a much different way through CSTs: Permian oil and Il’inskii’s oil became chapters in the recounting of the best and deepest of regional and local cultural traditions.

Il’inskii was perhaps especially fortunate under the patronage of Oleg Leonidovich, a native son, but it was not atypical of the districts of the Perm Region where Lukoil-Perm operated production and refining facilities. At a 2005 ceremony awarding grants, the director of Lukoil-Perm lauded a “virtual museum” about the Stroganovs for presenting the “deep traditions and unique culture of the Perm Region.” The citation for a project collecting wedding folklore in the Cherdyn’ district noted expert opinion that the district’s wedding songs pointed to “deep national Russian” traditions. In these and dozens of other instances, Oleg Leonidovich and his colleagues used CST projects to shift the visible and relevant qualities associated with oil as substance in the region. They built the rhetoric of corporate involvement in communities on these shifts. As one of Oleg Leonidovich’s former coworkers put it to me, things like cultural festivals and folk handicrafts “became the mechanisms by which we brought people to a place at which they weren’t offended that oil workers were living so well.”

My research has not turned up a conscious semiotic branding strategy at the heart of the Connections with Society Division’s efforts, at least in the early days that I focus on here. Indeed, the story, as recounted to me by many of its key players, was one of improvisation, of experienced Soviet-era networkers seizing opportunities in a new corporate context, with massive funds and a mandate to remake the corporation’s relationships with the region. Although a language of corporate social responsibility imported from Western corporations played a role, as did the technology of grant competitions (borrowed from Western foundations active across Russia in the mid-1990s), the central focus on shifting the relevant qualities of oil that I have described here emerged largely from an improvised repurposing of what was at hand: the ruins of Soviet cultural construction and a pervasive concern with the surfaces and deeper essences of things—from souls to dollar bills—in the 1990s.

These new associations had powerful and large-scale political effects. Lukoil-Perm’s use of CST, with its distinctive emphasis on building authentic culture, increased in scope and scale from 2000 to 2010 and gradually came to occupy the very center of the company’s relationships with oil-producing districts of the Perm Region. In good part because oil companies’ taxes did not accrue directly to oil-producing districts (filling federal and regional coffers, instead), district-level politicians came to see answers

to many of their problems precisely in Lukoil’s CST efforts. Complaints about joblessness were answered—however ineffectively—with Lukoil-Perm’s attempts to create and then make profitable a tourist industry through museums and folk-craft centers. Complaints that the Soviet period had left culture in ruins were answered with corporation-funded festivals, celebrations of local culture, and the reconstruction of churches and mosques. District head after district head relied on Lukoil-Perm’s social and cultural programs to blunt critiques of their own past work, speaking ever more clearly in the language of cultural depth and distinctiveness supported by the oil pumped from deep under their districts. By the late 2000s, the words of the head of the Orda district had become standard fare: “We are delighted that the oil industry organized [a festival celebrating 75 years of Permian oil] on our territory. It’s not a coincidence that the festival was held in our district. More than four hundred thousand tons of oil are pumped from our territory every year, and our traditional folk crafts are recognized not only in Russia, but in many foreign countries as well” (*Star* 2004).¹³ The side-by-side invocation of the depths of oil and the depths of culture in the context of Lukoil-Perm’s CSTs had become central to regional politics, at least in the approximately half of the region’s districts that produced oil.

Here, then, is one example of the ways in which certain material qualities of a natural resource remain central to the capitalist corporation specializing in it—not only beyond the domains of production, exchange, and consumption but also beyond the point at which recognition of the harm these materials do prompts public or professional political critique. Indeed, the material qualities of oil appear here as the very ground on which Lukoil-Perm has sought to remake cultural and political orders. In the Perm Region, some of the distinctiveness and implications of this arrangement in the oil industry become clearer in light of the quite different, but no less shifting, material qualities of natural gas.

Socializing with pipelines

Like crude oil, natural gas is pumped from the depths of the subsoil. There are, however, no significant deposits of natural gas beneath the Perm Region.¹⁴ Natural gas extracted in western Siberia flows through the region in pipelines, the largest of which run from the Siberian supergiant fields southwest through the Perm Region and into the Druzhba network, which transports gas as far as Europe. Branches from these trunk lines feed the Perm Region’s municipal gas networks, factories, and heat and power cogenerating plants. The material qualities of gas as it moved through this pipeline infrastructure—rather than the geology of subsoil deposits—took on special significance in the regional gas industry’s CST projects.

To begin with, the kinds of critique to which the regional gas industry responded were pegged quite closely to the transient qualities of pipeline gas. The fact that the gas companies in the Perm Region specialized in buying and selling something produced elsewhere made them vulnerable to a genre of criticism quite common in the postsocialist period: that the industry engaged in speculation, making money purely by means of moving a product around, marking up the price, and trying to eliminate any competition to make that price still higher. One relatively high-ranking regional state employee drew the following distinction for me between Lukoil-Perm and PermRegionGaz: “Look at what hard work it takes to pump oil out of the subsoil, how much money and labor. But the gas industry (*gazoviki*) . . . they’re just sitting on the pipes, turning the spigot on and off.” A newspaper reporter opened an interview with a gas company executive rather bluntly: “Who loves *gazoviki*? Everyone loves gas. But *gazoviki*? No one. *Gazoviki* sit on the valve and threaten to shut off anyone who doesn’t pay” (*Bright Path* 2001:4). Although the consumption-driven boom of the mid-2000s substantially dampened the efficacy of “speculation” as epithet, as compared to the mid-1990s, the transient quality of gas remained available as a source of critique of the regional corporations that specialized in it.

Gas’s transient qualities in the region also meant that it could not easily be said to have Permian qualities. The potent set of place-based associations so central to early critiques of Lukoil-Perm and, later, to the company’s CST projects aimed at diluting those critiques did not characterize the gas industry. Whereas Lukoil-Perm worked hard to associate itself with the production of Permian oil, the fact that PermRegionGaz largely managed transient pipelines meant that it was far more often associated with laborless circulation and speculation. This association had real political consequences, at least at the level of rhetoric and deal making. In the late 1990s, for instance, the governor of the Perm Region, Gennady Igumenov, reported that he sat down with executives at the region’s main gas-processing plant to inform them that simply processing transit gas—and therefore paying only federal taxes—did not excuse them from contributing to the Perm Region. If the company did not recognize that it “was located in our territory,” he had the means to ensure that it would soon encounter “a certain discomfort in its activities” (Kurbanova 2006:547).

Such were the qualities associated with natural gas—transience, non-Permianness, and, of course, convertibility into massive wealth¹⁵—that PermRegionGaz sought to shift as it followed Lukoil-Perm into the practice of giving grants for social and cultural projects in the early 2000s. Its sponsored projects, administered through a Perm-based noncommercial organization named Cooperation, picked up on another quality of pipeline gas in the region—connectivity—and linked it to widespread postsocialist longings for sociability. Like talk about depth, dollars, and

souls, discussions of sociability (*obshchenie*) circulated everywhere in the first postsocialist decade, articulating worries about both the number and the intensity of fulfilling personal interactions as compared with those of the Soviet period. Whatever goods, consumer and otherwise, the postsocialist era had brought, the lack of sociability often hovered in the background as a casualty of the speeded-up paces, pervasive disorientations, and rapid social stratification of the new age. Cooperation’s projects, with funding from PermRegionGaz, took aim at this lack.¹⁶

Well before I met her in 2010, the director of Cooperation, Nina Nikolaevna Samarina, had begun to hold up Babka’s central square as a model of collaboration between a corporation—in this case, PermRegionGaz—and a local community. She expanded on her choice of exemplar in several interviews with me. The new spaces of Babka, she said, meant that everyone had a place to go and socialize now, that far more people were “included in the life of the town” than had been previously. Indeed, one of the main points of “Babka Arbat” was to address the alienation and declining sociability that so many experienced in the proliferation of markets and inequalities after socialism. This was no backward-looking socialist project, for Cooperation’s efforts were wrapped tightly in the language of capitalist entrepreneurship, not least in competitive grant writing. But they held out the possibility of regaining and reassembling a sociable world through this self-actualization.

The fruits of engagement in one’s community, of actively engaged citizenship (another word appearing throughout Cooperation’s work), would be new kinds of valued connections. A photograph of inviting benches arrayed around Babka’s modest fountain was featured, for instance, in Cooperation’s 2009 annual report and in any number of PowerPoint presentations showcasing the foundation’s activities. The little desk calendars that Nina Nikolaevna handed me after each of our interviews tended to feature examples of “society work” (*obshchestvennaia rabota*): children repairing a fence, teenagers building a soccer field near a ramshackle school, or volunteers building Babka’s new central square. (Lukoil-Perm’s annual reports and desk calendars, by contrast, featured month after month of children and elderly women in assertively traditional outfits, or perhaps small handicrafts—all items that evoked the depths of culture.) One particularly striking image in a Cooperation calendar featured schoolchildren stacking firewood for elderly townspeople, a classic Soviet-era activity of the Komsomol (the Communist Youth League) in this cold region. Nina Nikolaevna’s socialist-era networks were, in fact, largely in the Komsomol—a point to which I return below.

Like Oleg Leonidovich, Nina Nikolaevna was an accomplished networker and skilled operator, newly recruited, in her case, into a contractual relationship with an energy company (rather than direct employment). She had seized on an opportunity to continue the “work with people” to

which she had long dedicated herself, in the process rethinking it for a new era. Cooperation's sociability-focused CST projects did not originate as part of a conscious gas industry branding strategy any more than did those run out of Lukoil-Perm. They were made in a corporate context that facilitated the improvised combination of widely circulating postsocialist discourses about sociability and its lack, resurgent social-political networks, and massive new wealth. The material qualities of pipeline gas played no small role.

Gas wars: From “social sphere” to sociability

I have been focusing on the ways in which shifts in the significant material qualities associated with certain substances can originate in corporate contexts and shape political processes. Thus far, the shifts I have been tracing have proceeded largely at the level of resemblances. Through the work of well-funded and skilled operators, that is, oil and culture in the Perm Region have come to resemble each other through a shared quality of depth, gas and society through a shared quality of connectivity. In each case, the shared material quality is the bridge by which corporations seek to respond to critiques and local needs. At the same time, these new resemblances divert attention from other qualities—more physically harmful or morally suspect—that had been associated with the substances in which each corporation specialized.

In the case of pipeline natural gas, a set of actual physical connections is in play in addition to these resemblances: pipeline grids, especially the extension of physical gas lines to communities who had long demanded them.¹⁷ Indeed, these aspects of pipeline gas were crucial to the gas sector long before PermRegionGaz began funding sociability. A brief excursion into the 1990s history of the Perm Region's “gas wars” demonstrates how pipeline grids became crucial to regional notions of society in the post-Soviet period and, at the same time, helped assemble the coalitions that later came to administer PermRegionGaz's CST projects.

The story revolves around a contentious split between federally and regionally managed pipeline networks. In the Soviet period, gas production and the management of region-crossing trunk pipelines fell under control of the Ministry of Oil and Gas, whereas the Ministry of Housing and Utilities controlled the municipal pipelines feeding urban housing blocks. In the Yeltsin era, the federal monopoly Gazprom emerged out of the former structure. It initially owned and controlled only the trunk lines passing through the Perm Region from its west Siberian fields. The Perm Region's municipal gas distribution networks were privatized in 1991 into a corporation named UralGazServis, which was controlled by regional businessmen and politicians.

UralGazServis bought natural gas from Gazprom's west-east-running trunk pipelines and sold it to industrial

and residential customers in the Perm Region. In conditions of 1990s demonetization and barter, however, most of those customers were paying in kind or simply not paying. UralGazServis thus accumulated astronomical debts to federal Gazprom: It was collecting almost no cash payments but was legally prohibited from turning off the gas supply to 90 percent of its customers, including electricity companies, heating facilities, factories of national significance, and, crucially, “the social sphere”—residential apartment buildings. As Gazprom repeatedly tried to collect on these debts, regional coalitions in Perm did everything they could to avoid paying. They had powerful leverage against the center: Federal Gazprom could not shut off the supply to UralGazServis either, especially during the winter months, without prompting a public outcry and, in all likelihood, a national crisis of political legitimacy. So the gas continued to flow and UralGazServis continued not to pay, instead circulating all manner of noncash payments, favors, and influence that were at the heart of Perm regional politics.¹⁸

Recall that, in the 1990s, the assertion that regional oil had important Permian characteristics was central to critiques of Moscow-based Lukoil's attempt to take over the regional oil industry. In the gas industry at around the same time, politics—and semiotics—were configured quite differently. Here, the hardwired material connectivity of gas pipelines supplying the post-Soviet “social sphere” was an important basis for regional coalitions to accumulate power and influence at the expense of the federal center.¹⁹

Later episodes from the gas wars show how the material connectivity of the “social sphere” in the 1990s morphed into sociability-focused CSTs funded by a gas company a decade later. In the Putin era, Gazprom again sought to collect on debts and consolidate control over regional pipeline networks, this time with more success. As part of this effort in the Perm Region, a new company, PermRegionGaz, was created to replace UralGazServis. A power-sharing compromise between center and region allocated the majority of shares in PermRegionGaz to Gazprom but allowed Iurii Trutnev, governor of the Perm Region, to appoint the director of the new company. Trutnev chose Igor Shubin, the Perm Region's vice-governor for energy affairs from 1994 to 2001 and a veteran of the gas wars.

Shortly after his appointment as head of PermRegionGaz in 2001, and in a move common among influential businesspeople, Shubin ran for—and handily won—a seat in the Legislative Assembly (*Zakonodatel'noe Sobranie*), the Perm Region's chief lawmaking body. No residency laws governed the eligibility of candidates, and Shubin selected an open seat in the 34th electoral region, encompassing the Bol'shesosnovskii, Okhanskii, Ocherskii, and Chastinskii districts. Although some of Gazprom's trunk pipelines passed through them, these districts had no other special connection to the regional gas industry; indeed, many of their constituent towns and villages were not on the

gas grid at all. Not surprisingly, then, Shubin campaigned on a promise to bring municipal gas pipelines to the districts—to include them in the hardwired “social sphere.” By 2004, he had fulfilled at least part of his promise, and a newly constructed set of pipelines brought gas to the Bol’shesosnovskii district, one of those Shubin represented, for the first time ever.

It is worth noting that the materialities of the region’s oil industry did not permit this particular kind of response to a local community. Oil, oil pipelines, and refined oil products can, in principle, also work through connection; their signifying capacities are not limited to the domain of resemblance. However, several factors pushed against this possibility at the regional level of analysis on which I focus here. Most notably, gasoline refined from crude oil was highly mobile, easily trucked around the entire region by tanker, and widely available at Lukoil and non-Lukoil service stations. By contrast, the hardwired nature of municipal gas supply placed a premium on connectivity that gas companies could provide only through the much more expensive and time-consuming extension of pipelines; towns, villages, and districts were either linked into this network or, like many residents of Shubin’s districts, desperately wanted to be.

Gas lines were not all that Shubin’s constituents wanted, however. Requests and complaints about social and economic problems poured into his office from these largely agricultural and impoverished districts, and critiques revolving around gas’s transience did not disappear. Indeed, they had started during Shubin’s electoral campaign, and one of his responses was to invoke his connections as head of PermRegionGaz and promise to imitate Lukoil-Perm’s already-running social and cultural project competitions to provide the most up-to-date kinds of support for the population. He told a local newspaper, “We have, for instance, Lukoil, an influential, popular, and respected organization. [PermRegionGaz’s] goal is to become just as influential, popular, and useful to the people of the region” (*Bright Path* 2001:4–5). In 2003 and 2004, then, PermRegionGaz entered this new field of CST, not in all of the districts of the Perm Region where gas flowed but, rather, only in those represented by Shubin in the Legislative Assembly.

Initially, the effort was run internally at PermRegionGaz, with Shubin himself as chair of the commission selecting projects to fund. Nina Nikolaevna of Collaboration served an advisory role at first, taking over the full administration of the grant program in 2005 and steering it further in the direction of fostering sociability. Her relationship with Shubin was not at all coincidental. In fact, it ran through their joint membership in the large and powerful regional coalition headed by Governor Iurii Trutnev, who had both appointed Shubin to his position at PermRegionGaz and installed a number of former Komsomol

members in the upper echelons of his government to administer services and projects for the population. Indeed, these former Komsomol members were some of the earliest regional adopters of the strategy of running grant competitions to fund local initiatives. They continued to think of their work as “society work” (*obshchestvennaia rabota*) and “work with people” (*rabota s liud’mi*), now recast as helping the population of the Perm Region adapt to new capitalist circumstances.²⁰

I am arguing, then, that the focus on sociability epitomized by the CST projects in Babka’s central square emerged directly from two linked networks: first, a material infrastructure of pipelines connecting the all-important post-Soviet “social sphere” and, second, a political-economic coalition that, under Governor Iurii Trutnev, included both the powerful regional manager of the pipeline infrastructure (Shubin) and former Komsomol members (like Nina Nikolaevna) doing “society work” in a state administration context.²¹ Here, as in the oil industry, the ongoing significance of a material quality of pipeline gas—connectedness—into PermRegionGaz’s CST projects was neither mere coincidence nor careful, prehatched plan. It emerged from the active recombination of a whole range of postsocialist processes in the crucible of a corporation.

In sharp contrast to the increasingly entrenched district-level politics swirling around Lukoil-Perm’s culture-focused CST projects, the relationship between PermRegionGaz and Nina Nikolaevna’s Cooperation was, in the end, short-lived. Igor Shubin was appointed acting head of the city of Perm in November 2005 and relinquished his dual positions at PermRegionGaz and in the Perm Legislative Assembly. The district’s new representative to the Legislative Assembly did not have anywhere near Shubin’s networks and the resources of PermRegionGaz at his disposal. Andrei Agishev, the new director of PermRegionGaz, ran for election to the Perm Legislative Assembly but from a different electoral region than Shubin. His own interests in social, cultural, and charitable work also lay in other districts, and the resources that had flowed from PermRegionGaz, through Collaboration, and into Babka and other towns and villages in the districts of Shubin’s electoral region promptly dried up. Nina Nikolaevna continued to skillfully wrangle other connections, especially in regional government and in local businesses, but they were never as good and the funding never as substantial as during the alliance with PermRegionGaz under Igor Shubin.

Corporate social technologies as a political and material field

As corporate social technologies unfolded in the Perm Region, one of their most intriguing aspects was a dramatic spatial differentiation: Cultural projects focused on depth came to predominate in the region’s oil-producing

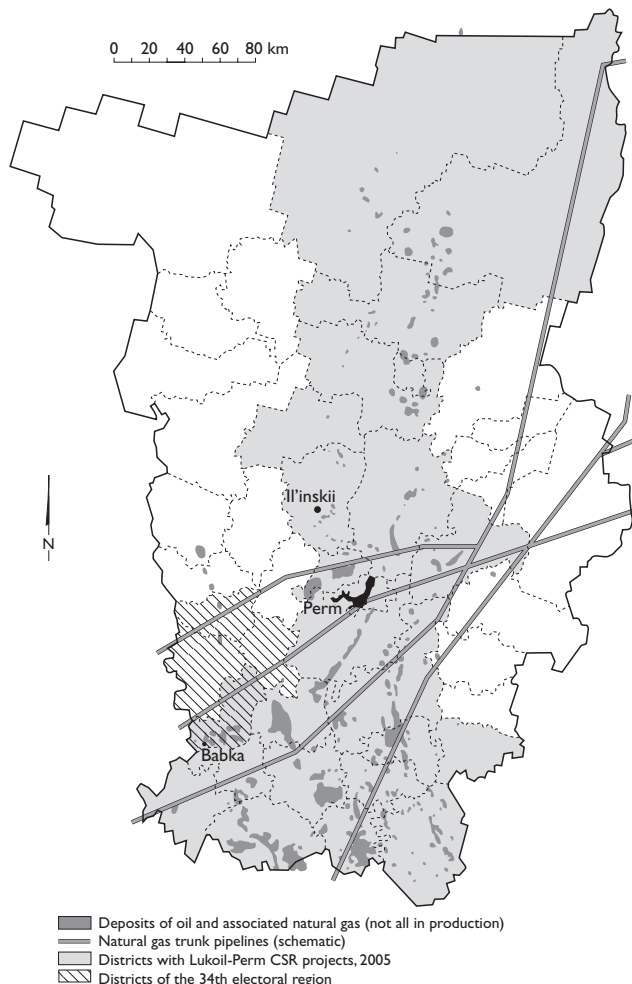


Figure 2. The spatial distribution of hydrocarbon materialities and corporate social technologies in the Perm Region, 2004. Map by Bill Nelson Maps, 2011.

districts, whereas projects focused on creating sociability and connectivity predominated in the much narrower set of districts Igor Shubin represented, at least until he moved on from PermRegionGaz (compare Ferguson 2005 on “enclaves”). In new ways and to a new degree, the conditions of political, social, and cultural life in the Perm Region were differentially influenced by the material qualities of oil and gas as they reappeared in Lukoil-Perm’s and PermRegionGaz’s CST projects—and, correspondingly, could not easily appear elsewhere (see Figure 2).

Speaking with the elected head of one of the Perm Region’s non-oil-producing districts one day, I asked why his district did not follow others in declaring itself a “Cultural Capital of the Kama River Basin” to bring in tourist money. “We can’t be a cultural capital,” he replied, “We don’t have any oil!” This arrangement is quite different from both the Soviet period, when unified party-state organs sought to apply a somewhat more evenly distributed set of social and cultural technologies to the population,²² and the early

post-Soviet period, when neither major corporations nor state agencies were in much of a position to embark on such explicit projects. These two earlier periods, however, provided the crucial ingredients—from objectified senses of culture to political networks, from widely circulating talk about depth to pipeline infrastructures—out of which experienced operators like Oleg Leonidovich and Nina Nikolaevna could, in new corporate contexts, help usher in a new age of social and cultural projects.

I have argued, in sum, that certain qualities of oil and gas as material substances, along with their associated geologies and built infrastructures, have, via corporate social technologies, played a key role in shaping political, social, and cultural possibilities in the Perm Region’s second post-Soviet decade. The specific configurations I have described are highly contingent. Although I believe they provide a useful starting point for examination of the broader Russian case, they would not obtain in precisely this way even at a smaller scale of analysis, such as a single town or village in the Perm Region, let alone in, say, a gas-producing region of Russia or other segments of what Watts (2005) so usefully calls the global “oil complex.”²³ The material depth of oil deposits and the material connectivity of natural gas pipelines, that is, may invite certain associations, but these qualities are always wrapped up in a shifting range of other qualities. Which of these, if any, emerge to become salient within broader “representational economies” (Keane 2007:18–21) varies both with scale of analysis and with a host of other circumstances at any particular scale. Nevertheless, the approach to hydrocarbon politics and corporations I pursue here may be instructive in the analysis of other times and places.

In certain academic and policy circles, oil is widely believed to be a prime factor inhibiting democracy and “normal” economic development—the so-called resource curse (see, e.g., Ross 2001; Sachs and Warner 1995). A range of recent studies has directly and effectively challenged this thesis on multiple fronts, demonstrating that hydrocarbon politics are, in fact, diverse, global, and highly contingent (see, e.g., Barry 2010; Mitchell 2011; Reyna and Behrends 2008; Watts 2004). My analysis of hydrocarbon-sector CST in the Perm Region of Russia adds another dimension to the range of ways in which we might move beyond the “resource curse” in our theorization of hydrocarbon politics: by attending ethnographically to the ways in which particular qualities of these materials enter broader, and heavily politicized, fields of signification. This analysis resonates with other recent accounts, among them Andrew Barry’s exploration of the ways in which failures of the coating on a stretch of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline became “signs of the state of relations between government and the oil business” (2010:105) in the European Union and Mitchell’s (2011:109–145) captivating account of how the mid-20th-century belief in the essentially unlimited supply of oil—in contrast to depleted coal reserves—influenced the

emergent Keynesian notion that “the economy” could expand indefinitely.

Readers familiar with science and technology studies (a field that features prominently in Barry’s and Mitchell’s accounts) will note that I base my analysis on some fairly obvious material qualities of oil and gas: depth of oil deposits and connectivity of gas pipeline networks. I do not deny that more technical and engineering matters may be of crucial social, cultural, and political import. I would suggest, however, that it is precisely the more obvious material qualities of oil and gas that are the most likely to reappear in CST projects, given these projects’ aims to resonate with wide audiences. Moreover, the kinds of material effects I trace here are not somehow secondary to or derivative of a class of primary or more direct technological determinants. Even very technical matters are deeply embedded in the kinds of signifying practices I discuss here, as demonstrated, for instance, in Gabrielle Hecht’s (1998) study of the mutual implications of national imaginaries and technical aspects of nuclear reactor design in France.²⁴

CST projects in the Perm Region also point beyond hydrocarbon politics to reveal something about how corporations respond to the anxieties, harms, and critiques that their products and other material objects so often engender. Through CSTs, corporations often emphasize other qualities of those same products and objects—qualities, like depth, that are not necessarily directly related to use value. Part of this process involves working to shift entire semiotic fields of resemblances and connections with the intended result that the newly emphasized material qualities of a corporation’s favored objects appear to address precisely the problems that other material qualities were understood to create in the first place. Corporate strategies such as these, especially prominent in the current era of privatization, play out on some of the most basic fields of human social and cultural life, from the historical consciousness prompted by museums and festivals to the promise of sociability held out by a new town square.

Notes

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1. This approach to materiality derives from anthropologists’ use of Peircian semiotics. See Keane 2003 for an especially instructive exposition that has influenced my approach and Munn 1986 and Meneley 2008 for analyses of the general sort that I pursue here.

2. Welker et al. 2011 and Benson and Kirsch 2010:464–465 provide reviews of classic and more recent anthropological work on the corporation. Manning 2010 makes a similar point about the absence of materiality in studies of the corporation in a review of literature on branding.

3. I use the term *corporate social technologies* to capture the full range of corporations’ direct and planned efforts to shape social and cultural life. This phrasing includes, but is not limited to, self-identified participation in the global “corporate social responsibility” movement. I am grateful to Pauline Jones Luong for questioning my terminology on this point. The lines between CST and branding strategies or labor relations are, to be sure, shifting and blurry in ways that demand attention (for the postsocialist world, see Dunn 2004 and Manning and Uplisashvili 2007; for the oil industry, see Shever 2008, 2010); they are not my focus here.

4. In the global oil industry, the precipitating issues are often violence and corruption (Watts 2005).

5. See Sawyer 2004 on the ways the Ecuadorian state did not so much retreat as refashion itself in the age of oil industry CSTs.

6. Lukoil was a moving force behind the revival of interest in the Stroganovs, who were derided as feudal landlords in the Soviet period. Indeed, Lukoil sometimes cast its philanthropic activities precisely in the Stroganov model, claiming that the company was picking up a regional tradition of private sponsorship of arts, culture, and religion that had been interrupted in the Soviet period. Recipients of Lukoil funding drew this comparison on occasion as well. A group of icon painters who had received a Lukoil grant, for instance, thanked the company by way of analogy to the Stroganovs’ patronage of what became known as the “Stroganov School” of icon painting in the 16th and 17th centuries.

7. For an incisive treatment of the semiotics and politics of depth in another context, see Collins 2011.

8. Such links between geological formations and imaginations of community have long been noted in the literature on mining (e.g., Ferry 2005), in which they often serve as ways to counter or divert corporate strategies. In the cases I explore, corporations themselves are forging these links at substantial remove from local experience at the point of extraction and then placing them at the center of CST programs.

9. Apter argues that the strand of semiotic theory most applicable to the Nigerian oil boom and its aftermath is Jean Baudrillard’s (1981), making his approach differ somewhat from the one I take here.

10. On the ways in which the toxic qualities of oil refining are apprehended in different contexts, see Auyero and Swistun 2009 and Cepek in press.

11. The excerpted portions of my conversations with O. L. Kut’ev and N. N. Samarina were conducted “on the record,” and both individuals were fully aware that I expected to quote them in a study of corporate involvement in social and cultural projects. Lukoil also made significant contributions to other sorts of projects, including the construction of schools and hospitals, but the Connections with Society Division was most often concerned with promoting and projecting the company’s cultural work.

12. With a focus on academic expertise and based on work on Kodiak Island, Alaska, Arthur Mason (2008) tells another story in which museums, local heritage, and oil money combine to produce important local transformations.

13. See Comaroff and Comaroff 2009 for an argument that situates the kinds of juxtaposition discussed here at the intersections

of the anthropology of the corporation and global-scale shifts in the making of ethnicities.

14. Several oil deposits managed by Lukoil-Perm included natural gas—so-called associated gas—which was simply flared into the atmosphere in the Soviet period. Lukoil-Perm had gradually increased the amount of this gas that it processed and sold and was on track to become a midsized player on the production side of the Perm Region's gas market.

15. On the possibilities for rent capture afforded by transit gas in post-Soviet space, see Balmaceda 2008.

16. On postsocialist longings for sociability, see Paxson 2005, Pesmen 2000, Ries 1997, and Yurchak 2005. For another postsocialist case in which the difference between local notions of culture and sociability became a political and ethical fault line, see Rogers 2009:246–268.

17. In the terminology of Peircian semiotics, natural gas pipelines, like wires and other aspects of built infrastructure, are indexical icons, working through both resemblance and actual connection. On the importance of pipeline infrastructure in the gas industry, see Kandiyoti 2008 and Bouzarovski 2010.

18. This discussion compresses a large literature on the intersection of Russia's 1990s "parcellization of sovereignty" (Verdery 1996) and the energy sector; see, above all, Woodruff 1999.

19. As Stephen J. Collier (2011) brilliantly shows in the service of a different argument, the routing and technical specifications of pipes and wires were crucial elements of the brand of social modernity that characterized the Soviet Union; the "intransigent materiality" of this infrastructure in the post-Soviet period powerfully shaped the ways in which neoliberal reforms could and could not be realized.

20. On "society work" and "work with people," see Rogers 2009:248.

21. On Trutnev's "team," see Borisova 2002.

22. Buchli 1999 and Humphrey 2005 treat some of the material aspects of this process.

23. Indeed, as Hannah Appel (2011) shows in an argument about offshore drilling, oil companies often employ social and material practices that are designed to extricate them from the local contexts in which they operate.

24. I am thankful to Paul Richards for prompting me to clarify these points.

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