

Moonshine, money, and the politics of liquidity in rural Russia

ABSTRACT

In many areas of rural Russia after socialism, moonshine serves as a local currency. In this article, I trace the intersecting circuits of moonshine, rubles, labor, and U.S. dollars in a Russian town to outline an approach to exchange that concentrates on the politics of liquidity—conflicts and inequalities rooted in the relative degrees of exchangeability associated with different transactables. I explore emerging axes of stratification after socialism at several junctures: between husbands and wives; among units of extended families; between moonlighters and their employers; and, through an analysis of ruble–dollar exchanges and Russia’s “August crisis” of 1998, between rural households and international currency speculators. [*exchange, currencies, liquidity, labor, rural economies, foreign exchange markets, postsocialism*]

It is a source of abiding disdain in cities and occasional embarrassment in rural areas that moonshine competes with rubles for the status of primary currency in the Russian countryside after socialism. Although hardly to the cataclysmic extent forecast by my urban Russian acquaintances, moonshine (*samogon*) did, indeed, lubricate my fieldwork in Sepych, a small farming town in the Urals. In the busy warmer months, moonshine was compensation to workers after (and often during) the labor of domestic agricultural production—herding, slaughtering livestock, or haying. In the winter, social life slowed and slipped below ground, into the furnace rooms heating Sepych’s public buildings. There men gathered for warmth and company, played cards, and discussed who among them would buy the next bottle of moonshine, and who would sell it to him. Husbands hid moonshine from their wives. When they found it, wives rehid it from their husbands. Milk truck drivers from the privatized state farm, fulfilling requests from family and friends, often returned from their routes to urban processing plants with 50-kilogram sacks of granulated sugar lashed to their trucks, a good portion of it for use in domestic bootlegging operations. Elderly women measured post-Soviet moral decline by the proliferation of households engaged in moonshine production, and nearly everyone in town expressed some disapproval of the unemployed young men who worked odd jobs, charging their temporary employers only a bottle or two of moonshine. As one friend in Sepych put it, summing up a long conversation about exchange, “But, really, you know, everything here is done for a bottle.” An urban acquaintance offered a less neutral opinion, declaring that moonshine had become the rural “system of reckoning” (*raschet*) and reiterating her disbelief that I had chosen to live in the Russian countryside.¹

As locally produced moonshine circulated among townspeople, it crossed paths with state-issued rubles at multiple points in the social and moral landscape. Uneasy equivalencies and outright inequalities at these nodes of exchange helped to create—and were often the idiom in which townspeople discussed—shifting axes of social stratification. In this article,

I explore the contrasting exchangeabilities of moonshine and rubles as they interacted with each other and with other transactables, such as labor and U.S. dollars, to illuminate the restructuring of inequalities after socialism. After developing an approach to exchange that focuses on the politics of liquidity, I present and discuss four examples of the ways in which attention to differential liquidities points to emerging lines of stratification in Sepych. These examples move gradually outward from the domestic economies that were, to an even greater extent than in the socialist period, the focus of townspeople's energies. I analyze exchange relationships between husbands and wives, among units of extended families, between unemployed moonlighters and those who hired them, and, through the ruble-dollar-ruble exchanges that often followed the sale of household livestock, between households in Sepych and international currency speculators.

Multiple currencies and the politics of liquidity

Sepych's highly charged exchanges and potential exchanges of rubles and moonshine resemble in some ways the interaction of state and nonstate currencies long studied by anthropologists in other parts of the world. Townspeople in Sepych, for instance, often played up the local origins of moonshine, noting that its provenance in the kitchens of their friends and neighbors bespoke a sense of communal trust that they did not always find present in monetary exchanges or even in the bottles of vodka—often alleged to be of dubious quality—for sale in Sepych's stores (compare LiPuma 1999; Thomas 1991). Yet moonshine as currency in Sepych was also somewhat different from the sorts of objects circulating in other dual-currency situations. Despite its range of exchangeability, moonshine was not particularly durable. Unlike other nonstate currencies, such as brass rods in Tivland (Bohannon 1955, 1959) or shells in parts of Melanesia (Akin and Robbins 1999), moonshine in Sepych demanded no further transformation or accumulation following exchange but, rather, consumption as an intrinsic element of (or very shortly after) exchange. As an object, any one bottle of moonshine was rarely long for this world.²

It is not only the material properties of moonshine as an object of exchange that concern me here, but also liquidity at a different analytic level, one that situates moonshine transactions in Sepych within the global-scale economic transformations I discuss in the final section of this article. Dual-currency contexts highlight with particular clarity the more general issue of what I am calling the "politics of liquidity": historically and culturally embedded struggles associated with relative degrees of exchangeability among multiple transactables. To inquire into the politics of liquidity is to ask how liquidity can be unevenly distributed along—and can help to create—lines of social

distinction. "Liquidity," in its contemporary *Wall Street Journal* usage, refers most often to assets held in cash or in other transactables that can be readily converted into cash. In the present-day United States, savings accounts are very liquid, the Brooklyn Bridge rather less so. This understanding of liquidity is, in fact, a particular instance of a more fundamental understanding of liquidity as the "grease" that creates the conditions for any sort of exchange: between the transactors of anything that might conceivably change hands there must be some liquidity to make the transaction possible. To provide the conditions enabling exchange is to provide liquidity.³ Illiquidity, by contrast, is the state of low or nonexchangeability and describes contexts in which potential transactables are simply not commensurable or, although commensurable, flow slowly or not at all for political or cultural reasons.⁴

Liquidity comes in degrees, and certain transactables can be more or less exchangeable for a variety of reasons related to the nature of the transactables themselves, to the parties engaged in their potential exchange, or to cultural, political, and historical factors. Barter is generally less liquid than cash-based transactions because of its oft-cited difficulties in achieving the "double coincidence of wants": On balance, bringing together two parties wanting to exchange two specific objects is harder than finding one party with an object and another with cash. Degrees of liquidity are always relative across time, space, and brand of transactable. Greater liquidity is not always "better" (having less cash liquidity in times of rapid inflation is often advantageous, as was the case with rubles in Sepych).⁵

The specific use of liquidity to refer to cash and near-cash assets is connected with the historically recent assumption that state-issued monetary currency is the provider of liquidity par excellence, the universal eraser of incommensurabilities.⁶ This understanding of money was shared by classical theorists of money as different as Karl Marx, for whom money was "a radical leveler [that] extinguishes all distinctions" (1976:229), and Georg Simmel, who argued that money was "interchangeability personified" (1990:124).⁷ It is this same understanding of money, of course, that is put to the test in multiple currency contexts, in which what is often at stake is a state's ability to extend sovereignty over exchange—trust in its currency as the ultimate measure of transactions on its territory (e.g., Helleiner 2003; Keane 2001). By this yardstick, the Russian state was a spectacular failure in the 1990s (Woodruff 1999a).

In what ways does liquidity figure in techniques of domination, in strategies of subversion, or, in general, as a site for politics? The transition from socialism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union provides an ideal context in which to explore the politics of liquidity, not least because it has been the site for what economists

Clifford Gaddy and Barry Ickes termed “some of the most curious nonmonetary payment schemes recently seen in the modern world” (2002:13). Anthropologists have played a key role in studying exchange in this environment, and their contributions fall into three overlapping camps. One line of investigation has paid particular attention to money, often tracing Russian variations on the discourse of alienation and moral decay available in many places where money circulates (Dinello 1998; Pesmen 2000:126–145 and *passim*; Ries 2002; cf. Parry and Bloch 1989). A second set of researchers has focused on the proliferation of barter arrangements in the Russian economy (e.g., Humphrey 2002:5–20; see also Cellarius 2000), in some cases engaging in productive discussions with economists also attempting to come to grips with post-Soviet demonetization (above all, Seabright 2000). A third cluster of scholars has concentrated on nonmonetary transactions in ethnographies of bribes, gifts, and informal connections accruing around access to goods and services (Caldwell 2004; Ledeneva 1998; Patico 2002; Rivkin-Fish *in press*). The arguments of this third group have generally been somewhat less oriented toward economic issues associated with barter and demonetization, illuminating, instead, the social construction of personhood and subjectivity through objects (Rethmann 2000; Ssorin-Chaikov 2000).

Of course, inasmuch as barter is often based on personal connections, the second two lines of inquiry overlap a great deal: Both are often situated within the still-expanding critique of theories that starkly oppose “gift economies” and “commodity economies.” After all, the much-criticized idea that societies can be sorted into and make transitions between gift and commodity orientations (as in Gregory 1982) bears a certain similarity to the dominant narratives of a transition from socialism to capitalism articulated by the engineers of postsocialist economic restructuring. In their collective effort to challenge the teleological assumptions of this “transitology” (see Burawoy and Verdery 1999; Verdery 1996), anthropologists of the postsocialist world have found an effective theoretical platform in the circulating objects that populate the recent anthropological literature arrayed against dichotomies between gift and commodity economies (Appadurai 1986; Miller 1987; Myers 2001; and see Patico and Caldwell 2002).

I suggest that, by adopting a broader focus on liquidity, the object exchanges associated with barter and other informal connections appear as only one of several interrelated and contested strands of shifting exchangeability. I have already pointed to the potentially different liquidities of object and state currencies; indeed, money is often the explicit or implicit other to the objects moving through the postsocialist literature on gifts, barter, and connections. But both moonshine and money in Sepych took on their

greatest significance as townspeople struggled to bring them into equivalence with still another transactable: labor. In the decade of rural decollectivization following the end of socialism, domestic agricultural production soared across the former Soviet Union. In the negotiations over compensating the labor power that Sepych’s growing private sector demanded, what was often at stake was whether labor could—and, as importantly, should—be exchanged for rubles, moonshine, reciprocal labor, or some combination thereof.

The absence of labor from the studies of money, objects, and connections in the postsocialist world is, I would argue, symptomatic of its more general absence in recent studies of exchange and material culture; among the objects that flow through the proliferating studies of “commodity chains” and “regimes of value,” labor as object or potential object is rarely to be found.⁸ Arjun Appadurai’s (1986) reworking of the commodity concept—to take only a particularly clear and influential example—helped shift the weight of anthropological work on commodities from its 1970s focus on the realm of production to those of exchange and consumption (see also Ferguson 1988). One result has been that labor features in recent and more culturally informed analyses of production but rarely makes an appearance in the array of new approaches to objects—including currency objects—associated with studies of material culture and materiality. By incorporating labor into the analysis of differential liquidities, then, I also suggest one way in which production might be reintegrated into the study of exchange and value (see Eiss and Pedersen 2002 and Miller 1995 for others).

State Farm Sepych, decollectivization, and the post-Soviet household sector

During the period from the full-scale collectivization of Soviet agriculture in the late 1920s until 1991, Sepych was home to a range of socialist agricultural enterprises, from small collective farms in the 1930s to the massive State Farm Sepych after 1965.⁹ At its Soviet-era peak, State Farm Sepych employed around six hundred townspeople (about one-third of the population) in several divisions based in the largest villages of the Sepych rural soviet. Each division ran its own livestock operations, devoted to either milking cows or fattening calves, and operated mechanized brigades for sowing seed, harvesting grain, and midsummer haying. In the ideologies of Soviet agriculture, domestic agricultural production, of both household plot and livestock-raising varieties, took a back seat to production on state and collective farms. Throughout the later Soviet period, the size of Sepych’s domestic garden plots for growing potatoes and vegetables was limited to 0.35 hectares. Many townspeople, particularly the trained

specialists who worked in Sepych's grade school, hospital, and state administration, never owned or learned to care for their own livestock. For those few townspeople who required it, the central office of State Farm Sepych allocated land for haying in out-of-the-way nooks and crannies, only in the early fall, after haying for state farm livestock had already been completed. The socialist ideologies that created these policies aside, domestic agricultural production on household plots remained crucial to rural life, taking up a good portion of townspeople's energies and filling in the gaps left by the convulsive rhythms of planned economies.¹⁰

The Yeltsin administration's first decrees on rural decollectivization came in late 1991. Their many modifications and permutations gave rise to a range of organizational possibilities in the post-Soviet countryside (Humphrey 1998:444–481; Wegren 1998). The membership of State Farm Sepych, on the strong advice of its longtime director, voted for closed joint stock company (AOZT) status, which allowed the farm, renamed AOZT Sepych, to retain much of its Soviet-era brigade structure and permitted only current and former employees to hold shares, vote at meetings, and hope for yearly dividends.¹¹ Productivity levels and salaries at AOZT Sepych promptly plunged. There was never enough remaining at the end of the year for the initially much-discussed shareholders' dividends. Money virtually disappeared for months at a time. For much of the 1990s, AOZT Sepych was nearly bankrupt, although not unintentionally so. Like other firms across the Soviet Union, AOZT Sepych tried not to register cash profits so as to avoid paying regional and federal taxes.¹² The farm sought, that is, to remain less liquid, to reduce the degree of exchangeability of its transactables, circulating all manner of goods and services that, whatever else they could be exchanged for, did not register in cash in bank accounts, which could be immediately garnished to pay back taxes. AOZT Sepych, for instance, arranged to pay taxes by supplying the local school directly with milk and meat.

Individual households, however, did not have the luxury of avoiding cash entirely—they needed at least some money. With the largest private employer in town paying salaries irregularly, with state agencies making their payrolls only slightly more reliably, and with the more general disappearance of Soviet-era social safety nets, townspeople in Sepych turned increasingly to their own barns and household plots for both food and income. Doctors and teachers rapidly overcame their Soviet-era disdain for milking cows. In the 1990s, only a small handful of townspeople could rely on enough salary income to go without raising some combination of pigs, cattle, and fowl and growing potatoes on multiple scattered plots. Expanded garden fences and large new backyard sties were common sights in Sepych in 2001, testament

to the ways in which agricultural production continued to “involute” (Burawoy et al. 2000; see also Creed 1998: 246–262; Humphrey 1998, 2002:164–174).¹³ “We’re all livestock breeders now,” I was told on one occasion, despite AOZT Sepych's continued employment of several hundred townspeople across its divisions.

The gendering of moonshine and money within households

The intensification of domestic production characteristic of involution was reflected in everything from home-baked bread to home-thickened sour cream, and moonshine was further diagnostic of the withdrawal of much of the rural population from purchasing in stores (compare Creed 2002 on Bulgaria). The conflicts and complementarities of moonshine and money within a household, particularly in relationships between husbands and wives, form my first example of the ways in which attending to the politics of liquidity illuminates shifting axes of social stratification and inequality. I show that, although inputs from the circulation of both moonshine and money were important to domestic economies, the association of women with the higher liquidity of money contributed to the widely held, if often contested, view that men were subordinate to women in the management of the household.

In contrast to the preponderance of store-bought vodka during much of the Soviet period—at least until Gorbachev's antialcohol campaigns of the mid-1980s—rural moonshine production soared across Russia in the 1990s, reaching a level high enough to figure in the market forecasts of international sugar concerns.¹⁴ The moonshine favored in Sepych was between 40 and 60 percent alcohol. It required relatively little to produce: granulated sugar, yeast, water, a pressure cooker of one sort or another, and, often, secret ingredients. Nearly all households with which I was familiar produced moonshine on occasion, but not all had a perpetual supply. As one friend from a somewhat wealthier family told me, “We prefer vodka for ourselves, but in the summer we always have moonshine around, for our helpers.” Still fewer households actively sold moonshine to their fellow townspeople, a technically illegal activity that carried a heavy fine on the extremely rare occasions the law was enforced. Pegged to the market price of sugar, a half-liter bottle cost 20 rubles (\$0.65) in 2001, around one-third as much as store-bought vodka.

The occasions for consuming this moonshine were many but can be loosely classified into those marking hospitality for friends and family, those associated with sociability in the workplace (mostly, but not exclusively, male), and those accompanying hard labor in household economies.¹⁵ The production of moonshine was not exclusively the domain of either women or men—depending

on the household, husbands, wives, or both supervised the still. The exchanges enabled by these bottles, however, were often deeply gendered. In those households that regularly sold moonshine to other townspeople, for instance, it was usually wives who made the sales and kept charge of the cash proceeds. Husbands were less likely to sell moonshine for cash than to consume it with male friends, cementing relationships that ultimately led to nonmonetary inputs to the household.

Money, too, was a gendered item in Sepych's households. As others have noted, the involution and defensive strategies characteristic of much of the transition from socialism have transformed the roles of women and men in households (Burawoy et al. 2000; Pine 1996, 2002; Shreeves 2002). In Sepych, one element of this gendered transformation was that women most often controlled—or at the very least were engaged in ongoing struggles to control—the household's inflows and outflows of money. There were several reasons for this association between women and money. First, women were more likely to be employed in the school, kindergarten, hospital, and culture department, and, hence, to have access to comparatively reliable cash salaries from the federal budget throughout the year. Second, salaries from AOZT Sepych, the most likely source of cash income for men, varied seasonally and in kind. In 2001, they were lower on average than those of state-employed and usually female "budget" workers. At earlier points in the 1990s, AOZT Sepych workers were often paid not in cash, but in agricultural products, construction materials, or commercial farm services, such as plowing. Third, even at the worst of times, state pensions were the most reliable source of money, and the much greater percentage of women over retirement age further amplified the association of money with women.

Although money competed with moonshine in many contexts, it also had a somewhat higher degree of exchangeability than did moonshine. Women most often tended to those household expenditures that could be made only with rubles: large purchases of durable goods such as televisions or refrigerators, food purchased in stores, clothing and schoolbooks for children, electricity and telephone bills, and taxes. Women, that is, were more likely to both receive as salary and use in exchanges the currency with the greatest amount of liquidity and the highest degree of exchangeability: rubles. Most women tried to maintain for their households only a moderate, defensive level of cash liquidity because bouts of inflation and devaluation meant that it was usually safer to transform rubles, whether from salaries or sale of domestic agricultural products, into more durable goods (Humphrey 1998:459) or U.S. dollars (see the final section, below). Men, by contrast, were much more likely to be responsible for household inputs and outputs that involved moon-

shine, rather than money. It was most often men who were recruited by other households in the omnipresent arrangements of mutual aid and moonlighting that I discuss in more detail below.

It was also men who, with their friends, spent time conniving about how to steal from the commercial farm, collective activity that invariably involved drinking and payoffs in moonshine. These payoffs often had a generally agreed-on word-of-mouth price: A sack of grain stolen from the warehouse by a night watchman, for instance, cost two bottles of moonshine. In practice, distinguishing between drinking in this context, which brought inputs of various sorts into the household, and simply getting drunk at work with one's friends was often hard. Discerning the difference between these drinking contexts was of great importance to the wives who supervised household money. Although many women objected to their husbands being drunk, they cared how men got drunk. If a man returned home from work so drunk as to be unable to complete the household tasks waiting for him and having spent part of his salary on moonshine to boot, he might find a very unwelcome reception from his wife. But the same wife would be more than happy to place a bottle on the table after the immediate family had completed a difficult day of household labor and would consider it her obligation to place far more than a single bottle on the table if her husband and his male friends or extended family members had just completed a set of arduous household tasks, perhaps stealing grain or firewood. In short, drinking as an element of household labor or labor exchange was not an outlay of money with only a hangover to show for it. Wives tolerated, encouraged, and often joined in this sort of drinking. A man's simply getting drunk with other men at work, however, where bottles were often purchased on the spur of the moment, was useless and reprehensible in most women's eyes.

Many women's efforts, therefore, revolved around reducing the amount of money that men spent on moonshine with their friends so as to divert that money to household purchasing in stores or other contexts in which moonshine, despite the vast range of goods and services for which it could be exchanged, was of little use. Large and small battles about moonshine and money were common among the women and men I knew in Sepych and often came to a head over the amount of household monetary income men were permitted to spend purchasing and sharing bottles of moonshine with their coworkers. These battles ranged from the lighthearted—a husband I knew arrived home and informed his wife that the long summer work shifts would soon be over and she would be pleased to know that he would, therefore, be drunk less frequently—to the much more serious. I knew one couple whose relationship was strained to the brink of divorce in the 1990s precisely along the fault line between moonshine

and money. The wife insisted on a greater degree of control over her husband's salary to provide for their young children in an economy in which, she argued, money mattered far more than it used to. Her husband, by contrast, insisted that he could not refuse to drink at work and hope to maintain his friendships, which provided another important source of inputs into the household through gathered helpers for labor projects and accomplices on thieving expeditions. In the end, the wife won the larger battle and greater control of their salary income. Another common compromise was for husband and wife to keep their own salaries while the wife kept charge of the much larger sums of money obtained from periodically selling livestock.

These conflicts extended to men's and women's alliances outside the household, as well. When men gathered to drink in the workplace, out of sight of their wives, they often had to pool pocket change to come up with enough for a bottle of moonshine or small amount of vodka (sold in Sepych's stores by the 50- or 100-gram shot). But coming up with the money was not always enough—the next step was properly lining up a purchasing relationship of appropriate social distance. That is, the gathered men had to elect a purchaser from their number and match him to a woman seller of alcohol (either a moonshine trader at home or a vodka saleswoman in a shop) who was not closely related to or good friends with the elected purchaser's wife. If she was close to the purchaser's wife, she was likely to be under orders not to let her friend's husband spend money getting drunk during the day. Relationships between wives and husbands were, then, often the point of conversion and contest between the currencies of money and moonshine, each with different degrees of liquidity, both considered necessary for running a household.¹⁶ Many marriages struggled to find a balance point between women's money and men's moonshine, struggles that were not aided by the unpredictably shifting levels of liquidity and exchange rates in the larger economy, reflected in late salaries, in-kind payments, and inflation. Women's control of money enabled them to participate in a much wider array of exchanges than men—including many exchanges outside of Sepych. Men's moonshine networks, although locally potent, did not extend far beyond the borders of Sepych. Many husbands resented their wives' attempts to control money, feeling that the greater purchasing power associated with money cast men in an inferior position in the household.

Money and moonshine were, thus, differently gendered in the ways each currency featured in exchange for different sorts of household inputs. But moonshine, unlike money, could potentially feature in exchange for labor within the household itself. Most families strove to be selective about the amount and kinds of work for which they brought in outside help that would then have to be

compensated or reciprocated. Wives, husbands, and children, therefore, divvied up the everyday tasks of attending to gardens and livestock and planned household chores around work and school. Hard work over and above the usual fare, such as herding the neighborhood cows (which families undertook by turns during the grazing months) or unloading and storing several tons of grain, might warrant a bottle of moonshine around the kitchen table after the labor was completed. Either women or men might recognize the completion of the work by opening a bottle for the family, whether from the household's own stash or purchased from a neighbor or family member down the road. Depending on the household and the situation, these settings could slip back and forth between moonshine as contributing to commensality and moonshine as currency object exchanged for labor within households. A few glasses of moonshine and some food consumed together at table could, in some cases, mark satisfaction about work well done that might stand the household in good stead in the coming months. Grain stolen and stored could fatten a pig, which, when slaughtered and sold, would provide money to be rapidly transformed into a new refrigerator or television. In other cases, though, moonshine could serve as direct compensation for labor, and in households with particularly truculent men, a bottle at the end of the day could be used by wives as incentive to get a solid day's work out of their husbands. Moonshine as object, that is, could slip in and out of different regimes of value. This dynamic—between moonshine as fostering commensality and moonshine as compensation—underlies the uneasy equivalencies of money, moonshine, and labor in transactions among households to an even greater extent than within households.

The strains of mutual aid: Extended family and close friends

Given the burgeoning demands of domestic economies, very few households in Sepych could rely exclusively on their own capacity to labor, regardless of how much "self-exploitation" (Chaianov 1986) they engaged in (compare Creed 1998:247). Households recruited the majority of the assistance they required—and nearly all of the extra labor power—from other households in the private sector, either through mutual-aid arrangements with extended family and close friends or, as I discuss below, by hiring moonlighters.¹⁷ Moonshine and money, offered, haggled over, and ultimately exchanged in various proportions for this labor power, helped to create emerging lines of social stratification in Sepych. I argue that they did so, as was the case between husbands and wives in individual households, along the lines of differential liquidity.

When they needed assistance, households often turned first to grown sons and daughters who had married

and moved out, particularly if they lived in Sepych or nearby. Children living in cities timed at least some of their visits home to coincide with the weekends when the most hands were needed in the countryside, especially during haying and potato planting or harvesting. The visitors enjoyed a weekend of fresh country air and, as more than one young man noted, the moonshine that flowed more liberally than in the cities, where their employers usually viewed drunkenness much more harshly.¹⁸ Moonshine, sometimes homemade, sometimes purchased from others, was the *sine qua non* after (and usually during) hard household labor by friends or extended family members, whether two friends chopping firewood in December or over a dozen people haying in July.

This type of labor assistance, cemented by moonshine and commensality, was usually called *pomoch'*: "help" in any one instance but most accurately translated as "mutual aid" when referring to a general interhousehold practice.¹⁹ On the evening before they planned a large task, the husband or wife in a household might go around to extended family members or close friends to collect help (*sobirat' pomoch'*), to invite helpers to join them at a certain time and place. Households could gather help for work that was typically male (slaughtering livestock), typically female (spring cleaning), or an affair for everyone (haying). Whether men or women collected the helpers, it was usually women who supervised the distribution of moonshine and food after the work was completed, as they often did for labor that took place within the household itself.²⁰ The household collecting helpers would then be expected to reciprocate at a later date, its members making their labor available to those who helped them and sharing moonshine at their table. It was labor itself, in combination with moonshine and food consumed with family and friends, that was exchanged in mutual-aid relationships.

In conversation, townspeople often portrayed mutual aid as a centerpiece of interhousehold commensality and sociability, pointing out that difficult economic conditions necessitated helping each other as much as possible. Money never changed hands in mutual-aid relationships, and some suggested that mutual aid was a morally positive shelter from the harshness of unfamiliar kinds of labor markets and the money economy more closely associated with state employment or with hiring moonlighters. The moonshine-aided commensality and subsequent labor reciprocity associated with mutual aid blurred the lines between moonshine as hospitality for family and close friends and moonshine as direct, calculated payment for labor, a common means of compensating moonlighters (see below). The moonshine of mutual aid, consumed in the context of sitting together after hard work, could refuse to admit labor as an object to be calculated and precisely compensated. Moonshine's nondurable quality lent itself

to this possibility, for the alcohol was used up in the course of the evening, unavailable for further transactions (as money would be). In fact, the point at which enough moonshine was consumed during and after mutual aid was also likely to be the point at which no one knew or remembered exactly how much had been consumed. Similarly, the implied commitment to work off (*otrabatyvat'*) another's labor at some future time left room for varying claims on how much was to be repaid and when (although there was little doubt that moonshine would again figure in the deal).

Denis, an employee of AOZT Sepych, was one of the more respected men in town in part because he owned his own minitractor, which he had taken out loans from extended family members to purchase in the early 1990s. With the loans long since paid off, the minitractor made Denis and his wife Katia independent in significant ways because they did not need to arrange for a tractor to plow their household plot, mow or rake their hay, or ferry potatoes back and forth from their far-flung supplementary plots. Most townspeople considered the minitractor to be a great boon not only to Denis and Katia but to their extended family, as well. When I asked about the mechanics of haying, for instance, townspeople often pointed to Denis's family as a model of successful mutual aid. Denis, I was told, would mow the hayfields belonging to each of the family's households, and all five households would take turns stacking and clearing each others' hay. After each day of work, everyone would sit at table drinking moonshine and eating, served by the wife or a daughter of the family whose meadow had been cleared that day. With so many households, and with sons and daughters visiting from the cities, Denis's family could put a large number of people on a hayfield at any given time. The means of transport were assured, and there was consequently little chance that haying would stretch out for weeks, allowing the hay to lose quality with the summer rains. In contrast to these public perceptions of Denis and his family, however, the actual practice of mutual aid in this case revealed a somewhat different dynamic, one of strained relations between households having newly unequal capacities to give and receive labor.²¹

As the haying season drew near, I asked Ol'ga, Denis's sister, how she and her husband Leonid were making arrangements to cut and transport their hay. Ol'ga surprised me by responding that she did not know how they were going to cope with haying. Leonid did not have access to a tractor at work, and hiring someone with a mowing attachment was getting more and more expensive, especially because everyone in Sepych was looking to hire the same tractors at the same time. Puzzled, and repeating what others in town had told me, I said that I thought Denis would cut the hay, in return for Ol'ga and Leonid's help on his hayfield. Ol'ga explained that the

previous year, Denis had, indeed, cut their hay and helped them to transport it, but she did not know if he would agree to do it this year. She was getting more and more embarrassed at always asking Denis and Katia to help, not only with haying but also by lending their minitractor for other sorts of work. Laboring for them in return, she implied, was not really adequate repayment anymore.

When the hot July haying days began, Denis mowed his own hayfield on the first day the weather permitted, and the news rapidly spread around town that haying had begun. Although I am not quite sure how and when the arrangement was finally made, Denis mowed Ol'ga and Leonid's meadow a day or two later. While the cut grass dried on the fields, both families began thinking about the arrangements for transporting it back to their haylofts. They needed to round up not only the helpers to physically heave the hay from the field to the cart and then from the cart to the hayloft but also, as importantly, the moonshine and food to sustain the haying team and provide for after-work commensality. On the evening of the third day after Denis had mowed their meadow, Denis and Katia set out to begin bringing back their hay. They told no one of their plans and did not ask Ol'ga and Leonid or any of the other households in their extended family for help. Denis had his minitractor to rake and pile the hay, and one of his good friends had brought a midsized truck to the field for use as a hay cart because the minitractor was not powerful enough to pull a cart by itself. Together with Katia and Denis's son, the group set to work, with the modest goal of bringing home one small load that evening.

Ol'ga, Leonid, and other extended family members found out that Katia and Denis were in the meadow only by accidental gossip. They dropped everything—including dinner—and headed straight for the hayfield, rakes and pitchforks in hand. With eight workers, rather than four, the truck was filled in short order. Even so, more and more of Denis and Katia's extended family kept streaming over the hill, all of them uninvited, to work off their debt to Denis for having mowed their meadows already or in hopes that he would repay their labor by doing so in the near future. While one team stayed to continue stacking hay in the field, Denis and several of the men left in the full truck. Some stayed at Denis's house to unload the hay, while Denis himself ran to one of AOZT Sepych's garages to commandeer a full-sized hay cart and a more powerful tractor. By the time he returned to the meadow, there were over a dozen people stacking hay. Shortly after midnight, and without explicitly asking for a single family member to help, Denis and Katia had nearly finished haying for the year. Katia served the helpers moonshine and what food she had around, and they all toasted the opening of the haying season until the morning hours. Despite not having asked for help, Katia found it hard to conceal her delight that the stresses of the haying season had disappeared so quickly.

Knowing that Denis and Katia were not shy about asking for help on other, more minor, occasions, I asked Ol'ga why they had not collected helpers for haying. Denis and Katia, Ol'ga conjectured, wanted to remind other family members on the occasion of the most stressful work of the year that they did not need as much help as they could provide others with their minitractor. Denis and Katia could cast their participation in mutual aid as generosity, rather than the necessity it was for Ol'ga and Leonid.

Two days later, it was Ol'ga and Leonid's turn to bring in their hay. They asked Denis to help in the morning, rounded up several other helpers during the day, and waited for Denis's work tractor to arrive and take them to the meadow in the late afternoon. Although dependable to a fault, Denis did not show. After an hour of waiting, the gathered helpers began to ask Ol'ga and Leonid what the couple had done to offend Denis and Katia. Ol'ga replied that she thought she had made the proper invitation in the morning and that Denis had promised he would be there to help. You should go over there to ask again if you want your hay, came the helpers' advice. Ol'ga and Leonid were deeply embarrassed at the reminder that they always had to ask for help and torn that their hay had already been rained on during the night. Instead of highlighting their dependence by asking for help again, they sidestepped the problem and set off for their meadow on foot to spread out the stacked hay so that it would dry faster. In the end, two other family members interceded, walking over to Denis and Katia's house to ask once again for help on behalf of Ol'ga and Leonid. The tractor and hay cart appeared shortly, with Denis and Katia in the cab. Denis and Katia drove the haying party to the meadow, left them the tractor, and walked off to weed their nearby potato plot, notably refusing to lend their labor to the haying itself. Hours later, when the cart was fully loaded, Denis drove everyone back to Sepych, the haying party exhausted atop the cart. Katia, who had not uttered a word to anyone all evening, was in the cab with Denis. The tractor stopped at the crossroads, and Katia jumped out and headed home, not going back to Ol'ga and Leonid's house to help unload or to sit eating and drinking at table with everyone else. Having withdrawn her labor, she withdrew from drinking and socializing, as well. Denis sat and drank quietly in acknowledgment of his aid in procuring the tractor and hay cart and then went home for the night. Ol'ga, Leonid, and their other helpers worked through the night and, exhausted, finished unloading as the sun rose, so that Denis could pick up the tractor on his way to work.

After the end of the haying season, I spoke at length to several of those involved in this episode. Both sides offered detailed explanations that rested on the difficulties of adjusting to reforms since perestroika, and their analyses lend shape to this example of the ways in which the exchange of moonshine and labor in mutual-aid relationships

helped to create lines of social stratification. Ol'ga interpreted Denis's failure to appear when asked in the same way that she interpreted Denis and Katia's refusal to ask family members for help in transporting their own hay: as a reminder of their greater degree of independence from circuits of exchange. By refusing to ask for help a second time when the tractor did not appear on schedule, Ol'ga and Leonid clung proudly to what independence they had, at the risk of diminishing the quality of their hay for the year. Every year, Ol'ga said, Katia wants to do her own hay by herself, just to show that she can—even though Denis would prefer to summon others and go to their aid, as well. Ol'ga and Leonid, on the other hand, had no choice but to ask for help and no strategy but to run to Denis and Katia's meadow without invitation in an attempt to erase their debt. Katia had a somewhat different story, but one just as related to emerging social strata and new economic conditions. She confirmed that it was she, and not Denis, who had decided not to invite helpers to their meadow and she again who had temporarily barred Denis from going to help Ol'ga and Leonid in theirs. She pointed out that Leonid should be doing more to help his own household and that Ol'ga should not be relying on Denis when Leonid was such an ineffective husband. Her Denis, she said, worked hard at his job, was dependable at home, and earned extra money in the evenings on his minitractor. He drank plenty, as well, but he was doing his best to make his way and provide for his household in difficult circumstances. Leonid, she said, was one of those men who had not adjusted to economic changes, and he had still not learned that he had to provide for his household now in ways that he did not during the Soviet period. She did not want him dragging her family down with him. Ol'ga might well have agreed with Katia about Leonid's failure to adjust, but, as she pointed out, she still needed her hay and she did not have much choice but to ask her brother and sister-in-law for help.

Despite the egalitarian "language of help" (Humphrey 1998:466; see also Caldwell 2004:83–86), the labor exchanges of mutual aid frequently strained relationships in ways that highlight axes of social stratification and inequality quite different from those that characterized the Soviet period. Before 1991, those who needed a tractor could frequently borrow one from State Farm Sepyeh through social networks or patronage ties. After privatization, the new possibility of owning a reliable minitractor can hardly be underestimated, for it allowed connections to be left for other uses and some households to cast themselves as givers, rather than as takers, of all-important tractor time. A tractor added considerably to the capacity for work that certain households could offer. When haying had to be done (often by hand) in the uneven leftover meadows of the Soviet-era state farm, it would not have been feasible for a household to cope alone, as Katia and Denis now could. Socialist-era problems gathered around

unequal access to decent hay in the first place, post-socialist problems around inequalities among households in their ability to deploy labor power and resources to cut their hay and bring it home. Exchanges of labor and moonshine—not always equal and not always voluntarily entered into—helped to create new lines of distinction in many extended families and among close friends. These distinctions become even more evident when mutual-aid arrangements are viewed in the context of moonlighting, which took on new dimensions as unemployment became an official category in the post-Soviet period.

Moonshine and the moonlighting of the unemployed

Giving and receiving labor and moonshine, rather than money, was one strategy that allowed households to maintain their desired low level of ruble liquidity. Labor is a curious "object." It exists as a material capacity that can be brought into equivalence with other materials, such as money or moonshine. Aside from labor migration (which did not catch on in Sepyeh), however, labor cannot travel or be transformed as easily as objects like moonshine or ruble notes. Nevertheless, as the discussion of mutual-aid relationships showed, it can be exchanged for other labor without intervening transformations. It is not entirely a "terminal commodity" (Kopytoff 1986:85), although it is relatively illiquid compared to money. Neither is the objectification of labor confined only to the political and economic organization of capitalism. Martha Lampland (1995), drawing attention to the calculation and self-interested bargaining that were by-products of socialist central planning, has convincingly demonstrated that labor could be objectified in socialist economies as much as—if also rather differently than—in capitalist economies. From this perspective, townspeople in post-Soviet Sepyeh faced an unfamiliar wrinkle in an already familiar process of objectification: For the first time since the collectivization of agriculture in the late 1920s, labor power could legally circulate in the private sector, among Sepyeh's households themselves, rather than exclusively in relationships with the state-run farm and the apparatus of central planning. Moonlighting was the chief manifestation of this new kind of circulation; it forms my third example of the inequalities that attended differential liquidities in post-Soviet Sepyeh.

One afternoon in the spring, I ran into Katia in the center of town and, among other things, inquired about Denis. "I'll barely see him for the next couple of weeks," she replied, "he'll be at work during the day and moonlighting [*na shabashke*] until late at night." She added that Denis was not drinking at all at the moment. For one thing, he was driving all the time, answering calls from all over Sepyeh to plow household plots on his minitractor. For

another thing, he was working outside of the moonshine economy: He was earning money, rather than moonshine, for his work, most of which Katia took and saved for household purchases. *Shabashka*, in post-Soviet Sepych, referred to the wide range of labor that fell between mutual aid among extended family or close friends and official employment in an organization that was legally recorded in a labor book (*trudovaia kniga*).²² *Shabas* is a variant of the Russian word for Sabbath, and *shabashka* originally meant time off from work for relaxation or simply quitting work at the end of the day. With the proliferation of the informal sector of the Soviet economy in the Brezhnev era, however, *shabashka* increasingly came to refer to all manner of work done outside of one's regular employment. Unauthorized moonlighting could be prosecuted in the Soviet era, particularly as moonlighters typically worked harder on their after-hours projects than on their regular jobs and even on occasion offered their moonlighting services at their regular jobs (at higher than normal pay rates) to make up for their own failure to meet centrally planned quotas during working hours.

Moonlighting in postsocialist Sepych never involved reciprocal labor in the manner that mutual aid did. It was, however, exchanged for various combinations of moonshine and money. Evaluated in strictly economic terms, and taking into account the usual size of moonshine payments, money payments, and the cost of ingredients for moonshine production, paying in moonshine was cheaper than paying in money. Cost was, however, hardly the only factor in hiring negotiations, and the relative liquidities of the transactables involved had important implications for how these negotiations proceeded. The various possibilities for exchange point, once again, to the increasingly vertical relationships among differently situated households.

Denis's plowing work for those outside of his extended family was highly regarded and seen as morally positive, in large part because it was considered proper moonlighting: evening or late-night work done to supplement a regular salary. Most in town also considered Denis's plowing technique to be excellent and, therefore, worthy of payouts in valuable money, particularly for such an important service as plowing a household plot. Denis could also charge money because the services he offered were relatively rare in Sepych. There were only a few private mini-tractors in Sepych, the larger tractors in AOZT Sepych were cumbersome to navigate on household plots, and the small hand-operated cultivators owned by many took too long to plow the average garden. The precise amount of money Denis charged for plowing a standard plot (70 rubles, or just over \$2.00) was always paid on the spot, with none of the imprecision of moonshine or reciprocal labor anticipated at a later date that attended mutual aid.

At least nominal full employment was a centerpiece of Soviet social policy. As unemployment became an official

category and possibility in the post-Soviet period, the term *shabashka* expanded from Denis's kind of moonlighting, loosely analogous to Soviet-era moonlighting, to cover odd jobs that newly unemployed workers did to support themselves. Moonlighting, in other words, could for the first time in the post-Soviet period be one's regular occupation, and this sort of moonlighting without a regular job—the moonlighting of the unemployed—was as morally suspicious as Denis's moonlighting was morally positive. It was doubly so when unemployed moonlighters exchanged their labor not for rubles but for bottles of moonshine that they took with them, rather than consumed with their employer. In 2001, unemployment in Sepych hovered unofficially at around 15 percent of the able-bodied population, and debates raged over whether unemployed men were unemployed because they were so often drunk or drunk so often because they were unemployed. Either way, the association between the moonlighting of the unemployed and bottles of moonshine was strong. Those young men, and a smaller number of women, who offered to work on private household plots for moonshine on a regular basis were often termed “bums.” The slipperiness of this term and the provisos that often accompanied it spoke volumes about the relatively new category of person it tried to comprehend: laborers who moonlighted without having regular jobs, taking their wages in some combination of moonshine and money. When they did not want to or could not turn to family members or close friends for mutual aid, those townspeople who could afford to considered the possibility of “hiring a bum” (*nanimat' BOMZh*) or “collecting the bums” (*sobirat' BOMZhei*) to work in their households.²³

When I asked about these phrases, townspeople explained that there were no real bums in Sepych—the acronym *BOMZh* was Soviet-speak for people who did not have registration stamps in their internal passports (*Bez Opredelennogo Mesta Zhitel'stva*). Everyone in Sepych had a place to live, I was told, so technically no one was a *BOMZh*. Nevertheless, there was a stratum of unemployed and underemployed workers who almost everyone thought of when the term *BOMZh* was mentioned. Many of these men also self-identified as bums, although only with self-mocking pride. If mutual aid could take place among friendly households of any social stratum or between households of different social strata (especially along the lines of extended family), then the moonlighting of the unemployed created lines of distinction between households of different status that bought and sold labor power. Furthermore, it created them along the lines of relative liquidity, which always figured in the calculations of both moonlighters and their employers.

The quality of work done by unemployed moonlighters was often suspect, depending in key part on whether the negotiated compensation settled primarily on money or moonshine. Several factors influenced the

kind of agreement struck by the parties. A few households in town had enough monetary income not to worry about having to save it for those transactions for which money alone could serve as a medium of exchange. These households, with few concerns about maintaining a degree of cash liquidity, could afford to hire moonlighters and pay them only in cash. In the mid-1990s, for instance, the owner of one of Sepych's new stores decided to build a new house for his family, and he employed a brigade of young men to do the work during the summer months. He paid them exclusively in rubles and, to cut off the commensality associated with mutual-aid relationships, explicitly ordered members of his family and neighbors not to feed the workers or give them anything to drink. They were being paid money to work, he said, and he expected both the process and the end product to reflect that he had hired quality workers to build a quality house, paying them exclusively in money. From the moonlighters' perspective, work on a construction brigade for one of Sepych's wealthier residents was a good way to make a moderate income, and members of this brigade respected their employer a good deal. Although the monetary relationships certainly bespoke a degree of social stratification and distance, many moonlighters also considered aligning themselves with a more powerful and wealthy employer beneficial, a way to earn promises of future jobs or favors.

Not many households in Sepych could afford—much less afford on a regular basis—to hire outside workers and pay them in money. One alternative was to hire bums and compensate them, on completion of their work, exclusively in bottles of moonshine to take with them, rather than for consumption at table. This kind of moonlighting arrangement was in many ways the polar opposite of collecting helpers for mutual aid. The fact that the verb *sobirat'* (to collect) accompanied both kinds of labor transaction—collecting helpers and collecting bums—accentuated the extent to which one was a moral opposite of the other. This opposition hinged directly on the ambivalence of moonshine as an object of exchange, its ability to slip between centerpiece of hospitality and currency object. Unemployed moonlighters taking payment in moonshine “to go” at the end of a day's labor created social distance and stratification precisely because this form of exchange inverted the practice of mutual-aid labor arrangements, which were cemented by moonshine first during work and then at table after work. If moonshine in a mutual-aid relationship downplayed, as much as possible, the extent to which the work to be done might be calculated and revealed to be taking place among unequal households, then moonshine “to go” as compensation for the moonlighting of the unemployed served only to highlight the divide between those who gave and those who received labor power. In these cases, moonshine was still a relatively nondurable exchange object, but

it was more socially transportable than that consumed in mutual aid. It outlasted the period of labor with which it was associated, to be consumed that night by the moonlighter with his friends, apart from the other party to the transaction—the employer.

In practice, the vast majority of cases of moonlighting by unemployed men involved some combination of money and moonshine, either in the same transaction or in the overall course of the exchange relationship, which usually included far more than a single episode of work. During recurrent interactions there was room for negotiation. At times, employers themselves preferred to compensate moonlighters in moonshine, diverting what cash liquidity they had for use in those market contexts in which it was necessary, passing on the lower costs and liquidities of moonshine to their workers. At other times, it was the unemployed moonlighters themselves who demanded bottles as payment, sometimes even on occasions when money was offered. Why would unemployed moonlighters accept moonshine rather than money in exchange for their labor? Consider the case of Fedor and his moonlighters.

Fedor was a middle-aged man in Sepych who was close to retirement and who often found himself in need of extra hands in his household. Both he and his wife were frequently ill, and although they managed their household well enough, they often could not complete strenuous household work by themselves. Fedor sometimes relied on extended family, but because he was unable to reciprocate properly by offering his labor to family members in return, he often hired other townspeople. “Almost time to collect the bums,” he would say when I passed him in the street and asked about his household plot. Fedor usually preferred to pay his workers in cash, from his wife's pension and the couple's disability pay. I asked on one occasion why he did not pay in moonshine, saving money for store purchases. He did sometimes pay in moonshine, Fedor said, usually when his workers demanded it instead of money. They would say to him, “We're not asking you for money this time, so sit down with us and drink this bottle.” Somewhat reluctantly, he would.

As Fedor was the first to point out, his workers could perfectly easily use whatever money he gave them to buy moonshine down the road, and they surely did so much of the time. Occasionally demanding moonshine at Fedor's table afforded the unemployed moonlighters a chance to temporarily erase the lower status associated with selling their labor to Fedor. Drawing attention to the differential liquidities of money and moonshine (“We're not asking you for money this time”) allowed them a justification that Fedor could not easily counter. To refuse to sit would have been to baldly affirm that he was so wealthy that the “moonshine discount” offered to him was insignificant. So, ambivalently, and unlike the store owner discussed above, he sat. Fedor was not always pleased with this

arrangement, wishing on many occasions that his workers would just take the money, rather than getting roaring drunk in his kitchen. He sometimes preferred, that is, the social distance and stratification of an exclusively monetary relationship, whereas the unemployed moonlighters sought to bring him down to their level by sitting and drinking with him, mutual-aid style, at his table. But sit he did. At other times, Fedor praised the “humanity” of sitting and drinking with his workers and cited it as evidence that “there isn’t really a market yet.”

There was a second reason why many of Fedor’s moonlighters—and moonlighters in general—accepted and demanded moonshine from those to whom they sold their labor power. Payment in moonshine, whether “to go” or demanded at table with the employer, aggravated moonlighters’ wives to no end. It led to men getting drunk and being away from household work with no return at all, either in the form of money or reciprocal labor at a later date (as in mutual aid). It was, thus, an ideal way for husbands to resist their wives’ attempts to control their inputs into the household. If moonlighters refused to bring home money, then their wives could not take it away from them; compensation for labor could be redirected into male drinking sociability, and men could avoid the double embarrassment of bringing home a pittance and having even that taken away. Indeed, when one of Fedor’s unemployed moonlighters whom I knew did accept cash for his work, he made sure that Fedor did not mention to anyone exactly how much the payment had come to. This way, word would not leak back to his wife, and she would not miss the amount he skimmed off his payment on the way home for a bottle of moonshine to share with his friends. Here the vectors of social stratification I have been describing overlap. For this moonlighter, choosing a currency with lower liquidity that demanded immediate consumption was calculated in relation not only to the money that Fedor or another employer might have paid but also to the household struggles over moonshine and money that were particularly acute in the homes of poorer, unemployed moonlighters.

The politics of liquidity and global convergences after socialism

Whether the transactions within and among households that I have been discussing took place in connection with haying, herding, or numerous other tasks, most were aimed toward a single goal: fattening and then selling livestock to supplement households’ meager and unpredictable income from their primary employment. One woman, for instance, estimated that she and her husband had to sell a pig or calf each quarter to make ends meet (a slaughtered pig or calf could typically bring in the equivalent of several months’ salary). From this calculation, the

couple could work backward to determine how much hay, how much other feed, and how much extra labor power they would require at different points in the course of the year. Thus far, I have been exploring the intersecting axes of stratification that emerged in Sepych as nearly all households struggled, with varying amounts of ability and success, to execute the plans these calculations demanded.

Before the rubles gained from livestock sales were spent, however, they often went through two further transformations: into and then out of U.S. dollars. These transactions permit a final example of the ways in which the analysis of differential liquidities illuminates the making and remaking of inequalities. Taking these ruble-dollar-ruble exchanges as a starting point, I conclude by situating Sepych’s small-scale circuits of rubles, moonshine, and labor within the global-scale growth of foreign exchange (FOREX) currency markets over the last 30 years and the proliferation of hedge funds in the late 1980s and 1990s.²⁴ Beginning to trace the links between these scales affords a fuller perspective on the levels of stratification in which townspeople have found themselves implicated after the end of socialism.

Dollars were not particularly liquid assets in Sepych, with the nearest exchange point at least an hour away and even small denominations of dollars equal to far more than the price of most items for sale in Sepych’s stores. Moreover, the purpose of dollars was the opposite of day-to-day exchange. Whether or not it had happened to them personally, everyone knew stories of accumulated rubles that had lost their value in unexpected bursts of inflation. Dollars, by contrast, indicated stability and risk avoidance. Townspeople saw them as a temporary shelter from inflation and ruble devaluation, to be held until such time as a large sum of rubles was required for durable goods, children’s tuition, or other big-ticket items. Dollars were so closely associated with stability and large purchases that they were often less liquid than calves, pigs, or sheep, which might be slaughtered and sold more immediately and with less effort than it took to exchange dollars into rubles. The sharp difference in liquidities between rubles and dollars, coupled with the common strategy of holding dollars, helped to ensure that it was, for the most part, townspeople’s small salaries alone that served as the basis for women to manage their households’ week-to-week level of ruble liquidity.²⁵

In these ruble-dollar-ruble transactions, townspeople’s immediate exchange partners were to be found not down the road in Sepych, but wherever rubles, dollars, and the bonds issued by the Russian Central Bank changed hands on world markets. In this age of massive currency speculation, in which the world’s central banks publicly defend state currencies against speculative attacks by (usually foreign) investors, with all parties waiting for the potential intervention of the IMF, the universe of

relationships involved in the “state of play between currencies” (Akin and Robbins 1999:2) has widened exponentially. The place of townspeople in Selych—and that of former socialist citizens more broadly—with respect to these global-scale patterns of exchange shifted drastically in the early 1990s. I suggest that much of this transformation can be conceptualized in terms of shifting degrees of liquidity and, furthermore, that a range of ensuing inequalities can be traced to the strategies, competencies, and risks involved in currency exchanges.

For the second half of the 20th century, the Soviet Union set ruble exchange rates more or less arbitrarily against other world currencies; only one Soviet bank (Vneshtorgbank) was legally permitted to execute currency trades. As a result, much of the economic exchange between socialist and capitalist blocs of the international system was conducted on the relatively illiquid terms of barter (Humphrey and Hugh-Jones 1992:5). This global-scale barter of decades past represents a quite different international organization of liquidity than that of the post-Soviet era, when currency exchange points sprouted on nearly every corner in even medium-sized Russian cities. Suddenly, everyone in Russia could legally buy and sell rubles and dollars, and traders around the world could wager on the rise or fall of the ruble and on the policies of the fledgling Russian Central Bank.

In other words, the postsocialist period in Russia brought into convergence the tentative currency-trading strategies of townspeople in Selych and the profit-making activities of some of the world’s most seasoned investors, currency speculators, and hedge fund managers.²⁶ All of these parties attempted to manage risk by correctly timing their purchases and sales of dollars and rubles. Although formally the same type of activity, in the case of wealthy currency speculators and their investors these exchanges were cast as a quest for profit, whereas in Selych, as I have shown, they were understood as attempts not to lose money in the face of rapid inflation and general instability.²⁷ These dynamics were especially evident in Russia’s “August crisis” of 1998, which focused worldwide attention on nonmonetary payments, currency markets, and state monetary policy in Russia. The August crisis offers a propitious conjuncture at which to examine more concretely the place of Selych in global-scale convergences: It demonstrates how the focus on liquidity I have adopted for understanding social stratification within Selych also points to some of the larger inequalities that attend townspeople’s new place in the global economy.

In the mid-1990s, one of the aspects of the so-called transition to capitalism in Russia that most worried Western reformers and officials at the World Bank and IMF was the continuing high level of nonmonetary transactions in Russia. The reformers were somewhat less worried about things like moonshine payments among households in

rural villages than they were about the extensive cashless networks enabling firms like AOZT Selych to minimize their ruble liquidity to avoid paying taxes. In 1998, these nonmonetary payments, coupled with domino effects from the Asian financial crises of 1997, helped provoke declining confidence in Russia’s already very high-interest, short-term debt (GKOs) and a wave of speculation on the future of the ruble. Despite doubt about the progress of tax reform in Russia and rising pressure against the ruble, a significant strand of conventional wisdom among foreign investors was that the United States and the IMF would never let Russia default and would, instead, put together a loan package sufficiently large to permit the Russian Central Bank to fend off speculators. When no sufficiently large rescue package was forthcoming, Russia both defaulted on its debt and devalued the ruble in mid-August 1998.

Many Russian banks folded overnight. In the short term, as money disappeared again, one effect was a further increase in nonmonetary payments throughout Russia. Although devaluation was more directly felt in cities, where a greater proportion of the Russian population held bank accounts that were wiped out (Anderson 2000), the August crisis led to shifting prices, salary delays, and lack of confidence in the ruble in Selych as much as anywhere else. M. Kozlov, for instance, notes the following principal effects of the financial crisis on agricultural commodity producers:

the deterioration of the social status of the rural population ... a decline in the level of material and technical support for agriculture; a reduction in the size of state subsidies for enterprises in this sector; a decline in the amounts of favorable financing for agricultural producers; and an increase in the gap between prices for material and technical resources and agricultural products. [2000:89–90]

To this one might add that, as of 2001, the August crisis remained one of the primary examples townspeople in Selych deployed when adducing evidence for the importance of maintaining minimum ruble liquidity and some portion of their assets in more-stable dollars. Their defensive posture and attempts to cling to the value brought in by their livestock sales stand in sharp contrast to the aggressive profit-making bets of currency speculators and hedge funds.

Like exchanges of rubles and dollars in Selych, however, these bets were not risk free, as the crisis of August 1998 again shows. One of the many foreign players involved in Russian currency and bond markets in 1998 was Long-Term Capital Management (LTCM), at the time the crown jewel of hedge funds with nearly \$4 billion in capital. LTCM had bet massively and directionally (i.e., without a fully

hedged counterbet) against Russian default. The eventual default sent LTCM, already in trouble in the aftermath of the Asian crises, into a tailspin from which recovery proved impossible. At the time, its rapidly eroding capital base was leveraged to nearly \$100 billion in a murky labyrinth of loans (not counting thousands of derivatives contracts) knitting together the world's investment banks. By the end of September 1998, the Federal Reserve Bank of New York stepped in to muscle private banks into orchestrating an unprecedented \$3.5 billion bailout. Federal Reserve officers, the financial media, and the bankers themselves were beginning to wonder what would happen if the investment banks, in a global environment still reeling from the Asian and Russian crises, suddenly had to write off nearly \$100 billion in bad loans to LTCM. It was not, however, simply LTCM's lack of cash liquidity that caused worry. The worries were "systemic risk" and a worldwide "crisis of liquidity": On the horizon loomed global illiquidity in the sense of massive nonexchangeability, the never-before-encountered possibility that the world's financial markets might seize up.²⁸ What if the biggest banks underwriting the world's markets were all perceived (correctly or not) to be on the verge of bankruptcy at the same time? What if no one would sell the least risky assets (such as U.S. Treasury bonds) and no one would buy riskier assets, at any price? What if trading—exchange—simply stopped? The bailout negotiations in New York were successful.

Even in this abbreviated and liquidity-centered account of the August 1998 crisis, some of the global-scale inequalities in which townspeople in Sepych began to participate in the post-Soviet period begin to come into focus. First, the size differential between the capital base of international currency traders and that of households in Sepych was enormous and expanding; this meant that LTCM and other investment firms could move (and threaten) world markets, whereas households in Sepych could only attempt to react to them. Second, and following logically, the currency exchanges executed by professional investors and neophyte townspeople were of quite different sorts: offensive bets to increase shareholders' value as compared with defensive bets to keep value from disappearing into global streams. Third, although none of these bets was risk free, it was the fund managers and their investors who were bailed out when their exchange strategies misfired. By contrast, one of the lessons that townspeople in Sepych learned over the course of the 1990s was that neither the state nor private banks were likely to notice devaluation in their households or the Russian countryside more broadly, much less ride to the rescue.

Hashing out the terms of LTCM's bailout in the conference room of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, the CEOs of the world's biggest investment banks were

wondering about the differential and relative exchangeabilities of transactables. Townspeople in Sepych wrestled with their own versions of these dilemmas after the end of the Soviet Union. If using the lens of liquidity to bring these quandaries into the same analytic orbit and begin to trace their connections offers insight, it does so across a widening gulf of inequality.

Notes

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1. Although various sorts of alcohol changed hands all over Russia, likely only in rural settings did alcohol take on the status of currency (see also Hivon 1994 on vodka, and note Ssorin-Chaikov 2000:345). Victor Erofeev's recent *New Yorker* article is representative of Russian intelligentsia views on drinking. It concludes: "The provinces, though, lag behind, and in rural areas vodka is still a kind of second currency. The choice is not between vodka and wine but between cheap vodka and home brew" (Erofeev 2002: 63). Drinking during working hours and domestic labor fueled the urban stereotype of the drunken countryside, a stereotype that I challenge in this article. The common picture of rural Russians engaged in little but drinking moonshine day in and day out far overestimates the amount that was actually consumed in Sepych and far underestimates the amount of work that can be effectively completed with a bit of moonshine in one's system. Many men I knew were quite careful not to drink while driving tractors or combines, but moonshine did figure in several traffic accidents, other work-related injuries, and one drowning during my time in Sepych. I would argue that policy makers wishing to reduce the incidence of alcohol-related death in rural Russia should both shed the stereotype of the drunken countryside and pay more attention to the ways in which rural drinking is deeply embedded in the social and economic aspects of post-Soviet transformation.

2. Attention to the material properties of exchange items—both culturally imputed (Weiner 1992) and semiotic (Keane 1997, 2001)—has been an important development in recent studies of objects in circulation. Jennifer Patico has drawn attention to the more durable qualities of alcohol as a gift in urban St. Petersburg, counting it as one among a range of gifts that can be "saved for the right moment" by the receiver (2002:361). This was rarely the case with moonshine in the rural setting of Sepych.

3. “Liquidity,” in this sense, is often used in finance and economic theory, and I make no claim to use the concept in a way that would satisfy its more customary theorists. My thanks to Robert Greenfield of Fairleigh Dickinson University for pointing me in the direction of several instructive references on this topic. An anthropological consideration of liquidity offers one way of approaching the thorny issues of commensurability and incommensurability (Espeland and Stevens 1998; Povinelli 2001; Strathern 1995).

4. Cultural illiquidity would be the state of what anthropologists often call “inalienability” (Weiner 1992). Elizabeth Ferry (2002) cogently argues that inalienability and exchangeability are not necessarily opposed to each other; commodities can take on both characteristics simultaneously.

5. The assumption that more and more liquidity, close cousin to market efficiency, is an index of development and modernization, however, runs deep in some corners of economic theory. Situating or critiquing this position is beyond the scope of this article, but see Carruthers and Stinchcombe 1999 and Maurer 2002 for treatments of some assumptions underlying liquidity and derivatives trading, respectively.

6. The recent heritage of this idea is made particularly clear by removing analysis to the distance of Homeric Greece, where, as T. O. Beidelman (1989) and Terrence Turner (1989) have shown, conditions of exchangeability had to be established through “situational totalization, the terms of which had to be rhetorically negotiated on each occasion” (Turner 1989:264) without an external measure such as state-sponsored currency.

7. For Marx, of course, abstract labor incarnated in the money form, rather than money itself, served as the eraser of all incommensurabilities under the capitalist mode of production: “It is not money that renders commodities commensurable. . . . Money as the measure of value is the necessary form of appearance of the measure of value which is immanent in commodities, namely labour-time” (1976:189). See Espeland and Stevens 1998:320 for a particularly clear discussion of this point.

8. In postsocialist studies, the major exception is Elizabeth Dunn’s (2004) superb study of the privatization of a Polish baby-food factory. Dunn’s analyses of informal connections, gift economies, and Polish *znajomości* networks are firmly situated in her exploration of post-Fordist relations in production on the shop floor. Barbara Cellarius (2000) and Carole Nagengast (1991), also working in Eastern Europe, rather than the former Soviet Union, discuss a range of rural exchanges that include labor power. See Comaroff and Comaroff 1992 and Hutchinson 1996 for slightly different takes on commodities, money, and political economic transformation than the one I adopt here.

9. Rogers 2004 treats the configuration of exchanges and inequalities discussed in this article as one in a long series of transformations in moral practice in and around Sepych from 1861 to 2001.

10. On the importance of rural domestic production in the Soviet Union, see Humphrey 1998, 2002:164–174, and compare Creed 1998, Kideckel 1993, and Lampland 1995 on those Eastern European states that followed the path of rural collectivization.

11. Yulian Konstantinov (1997) terms this arrangement an “insiders’ collective.” It was one of the most popular choices for privatizing enterprises across Russia. In 2001, legal changes forced Sepych to change its name again, from AOZT Sepych to SPK (Agricultural Production Cooperative) Sepych. This change brought few, if any, immediate consequences for its organization or operation; for the sake of clarity, I stay with “AOZT Sepych” to refer to the farm in the post-Soviet era. In this article, I can only point provisionally to the significance of this path to privatization for the

configuration of exchanges in Sepych that are my primary concern. In short, AOZT Sepych acted in many ways to mitigate the strains and inequalities that I treat in this article. By paying even modest and irregular salaries, keeping socialist-era patronage networks more or less intact, and looking the other way about a certain amount of theft, AOZT Sepych provided extrahousehold sources of inputs for nearly everyone in Sepych. It thereby alleviated some of the pressures that arose in the increasingly stratified relations among households themselves. There are likely to be substantial differences—confirmed by a great deal of anecdotal evidence—between interhousehold relations in Sepych, which chose to privatize into an AOZT, and interhousehold relations in former state or collective farms that elected to disband entirely into constituent households, leaving no input sources outside the household sector of production. For the same reasons, the case I discuss here is substantially different than Nagengast’s (1991) analysis of labor exchanges and class in rural Poland, which was not collectivized.

12. See the partially contrasting treatments of this practice in Gaddy and Ickes 2002 and Woodruff 1999a, 1999b.

13. The issue of involution is related to debates about the return of the peasant after socialism (Creed 1995; Leonard and Kaneff 2002; Zbierski-Salameh 1999). To gain some sense of the issues at play in this literature, compare two studies of Romania: A. L. Cartwright’s “return of the peasant” (2001) and Katherine Verdery’s “death of a peasantry” (2003:190–229). Caroline Humphrey (1998:446–453) discusses the many meanings that the term *peasant* took on in post-Soviet Russia.

14. See, for instance, Czarnikow Russian Market Weekly Report 2000. In 2001, the year on which this article is based, moonshine was the drink of choice in Sepych, in contrast to many towns and villages closer to urban centers, where people were more likely to drink cheap, mass-produced grain alcohol (*spirit*). At that point, the costly commute from Sepych to the urban markets where spirit was sold made it unprofitable for townspeople to buy at market, dilute, and resell spirit to their neighbors. When I visited Sepych in the summer of 2004, however, market conditions had shifted: Spirit had become somewhat cheaper than, and as readily available as, moonshine. The least well-off townspeople in Sepych had correspondingly switched their allegiance, adding a new wrinkle to the lines of inequality I discuss here.

15. Although there was a stronger association between men and alcohol, women’s drinking was certainly on the rise in the post-Soviet era, as well. Most women’s drinking took place in the context of household hospitality and occasional workplace sociability, during which some women drank nearly as much as men. Most women I knew—although certainly not all—preferred vodka, cognac, wine, or champagne to moonshine on occasions such as birthdays or holidays; these women did, however, often drink moonshine in the contexts of household labor exchange. Whatever the occasion, no one ever objected to two or more different kinds of alcohol sitting on the table at the same time. Women did not moonlight as much as men did and, thus, did not figure as often in the relationship between moonshine and moonlighting I discuss below.

Post-Soviet drinking “at table” (*za stolom*) has featured in several very instructive anthropological analyses (Koester 2003; Pesmen 2000:170–188 and passim; Ries 1997). In these studies of Russian “drinking rituals,” drinking often serves as a context for reflection on or creation of one or another kind of community, from the suffering Russian nation as a whole on down to small-scale drinking circles or one-on-one trading relationships. One goal of the present argument is to add to these studies a fuller consideration of the inequalities, exclusions, and emergent social fault lines also evident in shifting drinking practices.

16. Access to the inputs that accrued to the circulation of money and moonshine was one of the chief reasons widows, widowers, and divorced townspeople gave for remarrying swiftly (whether or not they, in fact, did remarry). Women said they found it much harder to negotiate with nonhousehold men for items to be stolen or for help with household work. Similarly, many men felt uncomfortable dealing with teachers and school administrators, tax officials, and other official contacts, especially those extending further from town.

17. Some minimal help with household work came from state agencies, for example, that provided free firewood vouchers for pensioners. The commercial farm was another source of official and unofficial inputs, in the form of patronage from those in leadership positions, “borrowed” equipment, or outright stolen goods. Aside from the increasing scale of nearly all household economies, multiple factors affected the proportions of labor for which households appealed to others for help. Some tasks, such as slaughtering a pig, haying, or building a new bathhouse, by their nature required more hands than most households could consistently muster. Moreover, there were also a great many households that did not match the local ideal type of married couple with coresident or nearby children. Sepych’s large collection of middle-aged and elderly widows, for instance, found themselves relying a great deal on extended kin and neighbors. Even households that did match the local model family were, on occasion, largely beholden to others because of illness or other circumstances.

18. Visiting family members from the city also served as a handy conduit for selling pig or calf meat at better prices than were available locally, and many a car left Sepych after a long weekend laden with meat to be sold to urban friends or coworkers. On rural–urban kinship connections of this sort, see Eleanor Smollett’s (1989) discussion of the Bulgarian “economy of jars.”

19. I follow local speech in using the term *pomoch’*, rather than the more standard Russian *pomoshch’*. Mutual aid, I was often reminded by scholars and, occasionally, by certain state officials outside of Sepych, was a pre-Revolutionary Russian peasant custom. This is no doubt true, although its character has been consistently debated (e.g., Herlihy 1991; Mironov 1985:454). Sufficiently locating present-day configurations in the context of pre-Revolutionary history is beyond the scope of this article. It would, however, be a mistake to identify present-day mutual-aid relations as simple reincarnations of the pre-Revolutionary institution. In the first place, the large-scale generalized reciprocity sometimes reported for the pre-1917 period was simply not a feature of post-Soviet Sepych. More importantly, my argument here is that present-day mutual-aid relations are caught up in—and cannot be understood apart from—several other sets of relations specific to the post-Soviet rural landscape: the money–moonshine dynamic within households, moonlighting, the role of nonmonetary exchange in the post-Soviet Russian economy more broadly, and ruble–dollar exchanges on the global currency market. Note, as well, that, in this rural setting, *pomoch’* and *blat* (the famous Russian “pull”) do not line up as they do in some other contexts (e.g., Pesmen 2000:134).

20. Various sorts of food were always served with moonshine, whether full meals or simply slices of vegetable to chase down the alcohol, but it was the moonshine that received more comment. Food sometimes had to be pushed on men who might otherwise drink endlessly on an empty stomach. When full meals were required—multiple full meals if a day of haying was the labor at hand—they were usually prepared by women. Households sometimes made special arrangements for kitchen help from friends or family on these days because all of the women in the household would be in the meadow.

21. The description below is based on a substantial number of conversations I had before, during, and after the haying season as well as one day and one night during which I worked in the meadow with the households involved. During the July haying season, I worked with many of the families I knew to gain a varied perspective on haying organization and strategies. As conversations in town during that month were about little else, I also accumulated a good deal of information on other families’ successes and difficulties in procuring hay for their livestock over the winter. Judged in relation to the rest of the town, the tensions in Denis’s family were relatively minor and evaporated shortly after the haying season.

22. The barrier between *pomoch’* and *shabashka* was actually somewhat porous, although only in one direction. In practice, many of the mutual-aid relations discussed in the previous section could easily slip into the category of “*shabashka*,” but the moonlighting relationships of greater social distance were not normally referred to as *pomoch’*. I deal here only with moonlighting that took place in the private sector, that is, cases in which households hired moonlighting labor. The local state administration and other organizations also frequently employed moonlighters for tasks that ranged from repainting the town hall to snowplowing to renovating the school. In other parts of Russia, the term *kalym* is synonymous with *shabashka*, although the linguistic genealogy is quite different. Katherine Metzko (2001) traces *kalym* to the Kazakh term for bridewealth.

23. The homology between the English *bum* and the Russian *BOMZh* is coincidental.

24. With the unraveling of the Bretton Woods system in 1971, world currencies were allowed to move freely against each other for the first time since the interwar period. The resulting foreign exchange markets enabled currency speculation, the practice of attempting to profit from bets on state currencies rising or falling in relation to one other. Currency speculation grew steadily through the late 1970s and 1980s and in the 1990s became a favorite activity of newly popular hedge funds. Hedge funds pool contributions—originally from wealthy individuals but increasingly from upper-middle-class investors and institutions—and leverage their capital with loans to make bets on the movement of all manner of financial markets, including currency markets. For other anthropological studies that include analysis of foreign exchange markets, see Gregory 1997, Guyer 1995, and Hart 1986; see Miyazaki 2003 for an insightful ethnography of arbitrage, a favored practice of hedge funds. Alaina Lemon (1998) has shown how the entrance of the Russian ruble into the international foreign exchange system in the early 1990s led to new kinds of enchantment with the U.S. dollar and featured in the aesthetics and performances of post-Soviet social transformation.

25. In all of the cases of ruble–dollar and dollar–ruble exchange that I knew of, it was women who made the decisions, arranged the trips to the exchange point, and took charge of the subsequent purchases, often made on the same trip to the city. Women sometimes noted that their implication in circuits of exchange that included both rubles and dollars only further contributed to their husbands’ feelings of provinciality and inadequacy that I discussed above.

26. Indeed, one might think of the postsocialist “transition” more broadly as a period of steadily increasing liquidity in Russia, one that participates in a time of increasing liquidity on a global scale. The last three decades have seen a staggering growth in global liquidity: in the scale of monetary transactions, in the relative proportion of monetary (as opposed to nonmonetary) commodity exchanges, and in the scope of transactable that have become exchangeable (Eurodollar markets, interest rate swaps,

options trading, etc.). Many scholars have drawn attention to this “financialization of capital” as a part of global economic transformations that began in the early 1970s (Arrighi 1994; Harvey 1989). Verdery (1996) has argued that among the effects of these global transformations was the destabilization and eventual collapse of Soviet and East European socialisms.

27. On the significance of risk in other aspects of postsocialist transformation, see, especially, Dunn 2004 and Verdery 2003. Guyer et al. 2002 analyzes the effects of large-scale instability in currency markets from various local perspectives in urban areas of southern Nigeria.

28. The lack of state-enforced reporting requirements for hedge funds contributed to the problem. Because LTCM was not required to disclose its exposure and actively hid its positions to shield its trading secrets, no one knew just how big the problem might turn out to be. For accounts of the global crisis of liquidity associated with the collapse of LTCM, see Lowenstein 2000 and Dunbar 2000. Juliet Johnson (2000:201–224) provides an analysis of the August 1998 crisis that situates the proximate role of international currency and bond trading within the institutional legacy of Soviet banking and the course of reform from 1987 to 1998.

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