

Pike Perch, Alcohol and Cursing

– Social Space of a Latvian Village Community –

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ABSTRACT: The paper firstly attempts a typology of relationships existing in one Latvian village and shows that the relationships between villagers fall into four categories, all of which remain from the Soviet times. Using the example of a relatively new company which functions in the village, it then shows that the four can not answer the needs of the new economy, and that this problem is remedied in two ways. One is by shifts between the categories, which bring a certain ambiguity in the relationship and allow the actors to avoid the rules, imposed by classification. And another is by *mat* – a linguistic layer within the language (both Russian and Latvian), the layer of obscenities. The author shows that *mat* constitutes a distinct conversational space, though not labeled in the village but, nevertheless, functionally comparable with the four categories described above, discusses its place within the framework of relationships and argues that in addition to patterns of exchange and folk-terms describing them – the traditional spheres of analysis – attention to linguistic peculiarities can help us draw a more complete picture of sociality.

KEYWORDS: [Post Soviet Studies, *svoi*, *blat*, *mat*]

和文要約：

本稿ではまず、ラトビアの一農村における交換関係の類型化を試み、交換関係が旧ソビエト時代の名残である四つのカテゴリーに分けられることを示す。次に、近年の経済的・社会的変容の結果として現れた「会社」という新たな組織において、この四つがうまく機能しないことを指摘する。この問題を村人は二つの方法で解決している。一つは、関係間の移動であり、移動することで一定のあいまいさを関係に持ち込むことによって、関係が押し付ける規則を逃れることである。そしてもう一つは、ロシア語の悪態、「マツト」である。

マツトとはロシア語の非検閲言語層といわれる特殊な語彙であり、莫大な単語数からなる一つの体系をなしている。マツトはこれまで何世紀にも渡り厳しく検閲され、マスメディアはもちろんのこと、研究論文や辞書にも全く登場してこなかった。このマツトが旧ソ連諸地域に広く伝わり、現地語と混ざり使われている。本論では、ラトビア農村部においてこのマツトが上述の四つの関係が機能しない部分を補う役割を果たしていることを述べるとともに、人類学者が調査対象の人々の言語学的特性に注意を向けることの重要性を指摘する。

キーワード：（ポスト・ソビエト研究、スヴォイ、ブラット、マツト）

The recent collapse of the Soviet Union brought with it numerous economical, cultural and social changes, providing anthropology, especially economic anthropology, with a new and booming field – Post Soviet Studies. The research within this field has been mainly concerned with two questions. The first is what modes of exchange existed before the transition. And the second is how they are employed now, within the new economic order. Methodologically speaking, researchers mainly focused on informal networks (cf. Ledeneva, 1998) or the mediums that are used in various modes of exchange. Papers such as “Vodka: The “Spirit” of Exchange” (Hivon, 1994), “Chocolate and Cognac” (Patico, 2002) or “Moonshine, money, and the politics of liquidity in rural Russia” (Rogers, 2005) all establish the differences between money and other mediums of exchange and thus try to envisage the exchange networks and, consequently, the social framework the mediums are embedded in. This line of research proved to be fruitful.

Hivon established the point that, until recent times, money has had only a limited significance in rural areas in Russia, especially when compared with the paramount role that vodka – the major medium of exchange – plays in Russian daily life. Ledeneva analyzed the discourse surrounding blat – the informal network founded on the exchange of available goods - and stressed the importance of these networks as the former fabric of society, now gradually being pushed aside by the growing importance of money. This last tendency was described and analyzed by Rogers, who coined the economic term “liquidity” to describe various degrees of “exchangeability” of rubles, U.S. dollars, moonshine and livestock in a small farming town, also assessing the “mutual aid” networks and their gradual decline in the new stratified society. Patico addressed the exchange between service givers – teachers, doctors, etc. – and service takers, and argued for the existence of “signs of attention” exchange space, not exactly personal but not formal either, where givers and takers are not as “fully individuated” as intimate friends but still more “human” than the “indifferent bureaucrats who bear only a public face”.

This research, though detailed and grass-root in the best anthropological style, is definitely informative. Still, it has one major flaw: it is lacking a theoretical scheme that would encompass all types of exchanges and thus give us a more generalized (though perhaps not as detailed) account of the social world of the former socialist states. For example, when Ledeneva describes the functions of krug (a circle of intimate friends), is she in fact talking of the same phenomenon which Rogers calls “mutual aid networks”? Or does vodka in Hivon’s account amount to the same function which is fulfilled by cognac and chocolates in Patico’s paper? And what is the connection between blat and “signs of attention” space? The questions are numerous and we can not answer them unless we have a common vocabulary to address and envisage the sociality of former Soviet states as a whole. The main aim of this paper is to do just that. I will attempt a typology of relationships existing in one Latvian village, and draw a scheme that would encompass the social frameworks referred to, but never fully explicated in the preceding research.

The material for this paper was collected during a several fieldwork trips I conducted from 2004 until 2006 in Burtnieki village, located in the north-west of Latvia in Vidzeme district. I will firstly present several folk-terms which are crucial for the understanding of village social space and then address the relationship between villagers and the outside world, especially

with the authorities. I will thus draw a rough scheme of the social space and argue that the four types of relationships that constitute it do not and can not answer the needs of the new economy, which presents an impasse for the companies that inherited the property of the Soviet-era sovkhos. As one of the ways this problem is being remedied I will then introduce mat – a layer of obscene words, originally Russian but now widely used in the former member countries of Soviet Union, and contend that it constitutes a distinct conversational space functionally comparable with the four types. I will finally discuss its place within the framework of relationships and maintain that in addition to patterns of exchange and folk-terms describing them – the traditional spheres of analysis – linguistic peculiarities can help us draw a more complete picture of sociality.

1 The village.

The village of Burtnieki is located in the north part of Latvia, in the Vidzeme district – the second richest region in the country after Zemgale. The village population is estimated to be 1560 people. The so-called “center” of the village, constituting the ruins of the old Baron’s castle, the village office and a well-known stud farm, is located on the shore of Burtnieku Lake. Still, much of the population lives in the farmsteads, each inhabited by one nuclear/extended family, scattered around in a radius of 10 to 20 kilometers. The sovkhos (state farm) of Burtnieki was a “sovkhos-millionaire” – its annual income was more than one million rubles – and since the 70s, when the government granted various privileges to attract guest workers from other Republics of Soviet Union, there had been a substantial flow of people from Ukraine, Belarus and other neighboring regions. The sovkhos consisted of five sections: live farming, hothouse farming, dairying, stud-raising and grain farming.

After independence, the sovkhos was remoulded into a closed joint stock company so that much of its structure could remain the same as in the Soviet era. Still, it could not last long. One of the factors which brought about its premature end was the law ruling that all of the real estate that was owned before the Second World War – including much of Burtnieki sovkhos land – had to be returned to the descendants of its former owners. At roughly the same time humanitarian aid from the West flooded the markets, causing a sharp decline in milk, meat and grain prices. Taxes for large-scale farmsteads were raised, making large-scale agriculture enterprises unprofitable. Soon after that several sustainable sections of the Sovkhos (including land, machinery and cattle) were privatized, and what was left – broken agricultural machinery, barren land, and dilapidated cowsheds – was sold at auction as the remaining property of the bankrupt sovkhos-millionaire. Naturally not all of the newly privatized sections could retain its old grandeur and as of now (2005) the only sections that survived on more or less the same scale are the stud raising farm and the grain farm. For the following discussion it is necessary to add that both of them were privatized by families – the grain farm by one family and the stud raising farm by two.

Burtnieki has an ethnically mixed population. Latvians are dominant but there are also many Ukrainians, Russians and Byelorussians, most of whom came to the village to work in the sovkhos in the 70s and 80s, during its “millionaire” period. Men usually came first and, having settled, invited their families. After privatization many of the families returned to their home

villages but some stayed. Most of those who remained live in the “center” where several apartment houses were built to accommodate the guest workers. Some have retained the same jobs in the remaining sections of the sovkhos, the village office or the school. Others, especially those who were in their middle age at the time of independence live off tiny plots of land they rent from the agriculturalist association.

The village provides few opportunities for employment. In addition to the village office, the school and the remaining sections of the kolkhoz, there are two more booming fields for manual labor. One is the timber industry, which has expanded dramatically after the privatization of land. When an owner of the forest plot decides (or is persuaded) to cut the trees for timber, a contractor usually comes to the village to assemble able but unemployed men into a lumberjack brigade. Contracts are rarely drawn up, and, as one of lumberjacks told me, the situation amounts to “survival of the fittest” – there are more people than jobs, so if you press for legal contracts, decent pay and security, the contractor will simply take a less demanding applicant neighbor instead. Another occupation, also largely undocumented, is poachingⁱ for pike perch and zander in the Burtnieku Lake. The fish can be sold, smoked or fresh, within the village or in the regional center, providing the poacher with maybe not substantial but still respectable income. Both occupations are not formally documented and are usually filled by those with limited mobility.

Working abroad became easy after Latvia joined the European Union. More and more young people seek employment in England, Ireland or Germany, working in forestry, construction and other industries as manual laborers. The jobs are usually found through family members and friends; interaction with the population of the host country is limited and on coming back, workers do not bring much information concerning the country they visited. What is discussed the most is how the fellow workers behaved while abroad, whether they proved themselves trustworthy *svoi* or not, whether they would be useful in *haltura* or not, and whether or not they should be employed in the new type of collective emerging within the village – the company. But before taking this (or in fact any) discussion further, it is necessary to lay the groundwork and describe the types of relationships which constitute the village social space.

2. The categories.

The three folk-terms that I would like to address first are *svoi*, *haltura* and *blat*.

Svoi is a Russian word that literally means “ours”. It is normally used to indicate “our people” – a small intimate group of two or three families or, especially in the case of males, a group of members of similar age. *Haltura* is a Russian word meaning a job – either a job badly done or a part-time job. And lastly *blat* is a Soviet-era informal redistribution network, where the general shortage of goods was remedied by extensive circles of people exchanging the goods they had access to.

It would not be true to say that any actual relationship between actual individuals can fall completely into any one of the categories. Rather, each of the categories is a vaguely defined behavioral space, where some behavior is laudable, some mandatory and some impossible. A relationship may fall between the categories, encompass two or more, and even within one interaction it is sometimes possible to discern shifts (3.1) from one behavioral space to another.

I will try to describe these spaces and show how these categories function in practice.

2.1 Svoi

The category of *svoi*ⁱⁱ usually involves the nuclear and extended family and very close friends. The category of *svoi* can be easily defined by its connection with the ultimate medium of all exchange in former Soviet Union – alcohol (cf. Hivon, 1994). Alcohol is the general starting point of the relationship, the proof of its authenticity and ultimately the major medium of exchange between the parties. To become *svoi* people drink together, get extremely drunk and disclose something private about themselves. If both are drunk enough and open enough to disclose equivalent quantities of sufficiently private information, they would call each other *svoi* and we might say that this is the starting point of the *svoi* relationship. I have already mentioned that, with the exception of the smoked pike perch that often goes together with it, alcohol is the only medium of exchange allowed between true *svoi*. If one of your *svoi* lent you his car, ploughed your field on his tractor or found you a job, the one and only way you can repay him is by so-called *pasidelochka* – sitting and drinking together. *Svoi* should always help and should always ask for help when help is needed. *Svoi* should help other *svoi* even if by helping they will inflict a loss on their families or their career. *Svoi* are crucial with regard to self-esteem, self-identity and self-evaluation. *Svoi* relationships are always simultaneously destructive and constructive. *Svoi lyudi* – "our people" – are those who drink together.

Betrayal is the worst and the most feared threat to *svoi* relationships. *Svoi* are often defined in the opposition to *chuzije* – the outsiders, with the ultimate outsider always being the authorities (cf. 2.4). Violence, selfishness and even lies can be forgiven, but betrayal of another *svoi* to the law or to another group of *svoi* generally means the end of relationship. I know of an occasion when a group of three fishermen – father, son and another *svoi* – found a thief from the regional center, who regularly checked their nets and appropriated the take. The son hit the thief several times, eventually throwing him into the lake. The thief scrambled out onto the shore and said:

"Mujiki (guys), don't hit me. You know Egils, right mujiki? Well, I'm Egils's pal."

The father informed me that for a second he had taken pity on this sorry sight; but these words hardened his heart again:

"Wait a second laddie. Egils? So what! I didn't see him and I do not want to hear anything about it. You did wrong laddie, well, you pay for it. But I will not have any treachery here, that much I can tell you. Smack him another one, sonny".

The thief was trying to use his relationship with Egils – a man from the regional center connected to the father through the *haltura* frame I will describe later – as a shield in this difficult situation. But the father deliberately ignored the connotation, showing the man that no such external power will work in the village, and that the thief is doing nothing but exposing one of his *svoi* to the enemy. And then he delivered his message: betrayal is a worse crime than theft.

The same strong attitude to betrayal I could observe in a dialogue about a *BOMZ*ⁱⁱⁱ (a man without means to survive, a bum) who was taken by a former policeman to live in a shed near the ex-policeman's house. The ex-policeman had the bum do odd jobs and generously provided

him with accommodation, food and alcohol in return. The quality of work was negligible when compared with the salary and the ex-policeman was generally praised for his “humane ways” (cf. 2.3). In the dialogue of two people not directly connected to the pair someone mentioned that the bum had previously robbed a store, was caught and convicted. “Poor guy”, said the other. “But could get out pretty quickly”, said the first. “Well, that’s a lucky bastard”, said the other. “Because he sold out his pals”, said the first. “And now that is interesting”, said the other in a very strong, dry tone, very unlike the mat (cf. 3.2) conversational space that usually dominated the dialogues of these two men.

Thus, a *svoi* relationship is an intimate space of gratuitous exchange, strictly protected from outsiders and demanding huge efforts from the participants. I will show later that this space also serves as the ultimate denominator for all other relationships except one – mat.

2.2 Haltura and blat.

The next two categories, *haltura*^{iv} (exchange of labor) and *blat*^v (exchange of goods, favors or information) are also easily understood through their connection with alcohol. If *svoi* are those who drink alcohol together, people who are connected by *haltura* or *blat* are those who exchange goods, exchange labor, profit from the exchange but drink apart.

For example, if you need an oven rebricked, a bathhouse built, potatoes gathered or a field ploughed and you can not or do not want (as sometimes is the case, though we will not get into this part of the problem here) to use your *svoi*, you can call a *halturshik* (a man whose labor is described as *haltura*), or *taltsienik* (a similar Latvian term) to work for you. You have to reciprocate him – mostly with labor or goods, rarely in money^{vi}, now or at some later time – and, moreover, you have to provide him here and now with alcohol. Usually the employer provides the worker with beer, but sometimes, especially if only one worker is involved in the *haltura*, the quality of work and general good will can be ensured by a “flat one”. A “flat one” is a bottle of vodka, small and flat, that can fit in a pocket. The size clearly shows that it is meant to be drunk by the worker alone and I have never seen a 500ml or bigger bottles – the size that is usually consumed in *svoi pasidelochnka* – to be handed to a *halturshik*, unless it is in fact the currency, payment for the job is done in. An equivalent function can be performed by a smoked pike perch – a fish that is poached (or, though quite rarely, fished in a legitimate way) in Burtnieki Lake. Here also the line between *svoi* and *haltura* is drawn very clearly – though smoked pike perch is also used by *svoi* in *pasidelochnka*, in *haltura* there is usually one fish and it is taken by the *halturshik* home – to consume with his *svoi*.

Patico, discussing gift-giving practices involving members of service professions – teachers, hairdressers, doctors and such – notices that by such gifts the givers and the takers recognize each other “not as fully individualized persons... but at least as more human... than the indifferent bureaucrat who bears only a public face” (Patico 2002:362). I would paraphrase this statement and argue that *haltura* /*blat* relationships fall exactly between the *svoi* space on the one hand and the relationships with authority that will be discussed later on the other. Patico also makes a very important point that the choice of gift – cognac and chocolate in her case – shows that the giver recognizes the taker as a “meaningfully social person” who will use the gift for socializing. She downplays this point, however, and concludes her paper arguing that

these gifts, by recognizing generally needed commodities that do not depend on tastes, constitute a “perceived social commonality” or “shared norms of sociability”, which encompass the whole society. She thus echoes Ledeneva, for whom blat networks are the very fabric of society of former socialist states. I would argue that there is and can be no all-encompassing “social commonality” in the former socialist states, and that “social commonality” can only be achieved in a particular encounter when the parties recognize each other as members of different *svoi* groups, and interact with each other as such. That is the definition of *haltura*/blat relationships which I espouse – they are relationships between members of different *svoi* groups, and because they are just that, the alcohol given (or cognac and chocolate in the case of Patico’s doctors and teachers) is always taken elsewhere – to be consumed with the receiver’s *svoi*^{vii}.

This point became clear to me during the following episode. The car driven by one of my informants was stopped by a policeman for exceeding the speed limit. The dialogue went on in the official manner until my informant, as an excuse for going too fast, said in a troubled voice that he was in fact “in a hurry”. The next thing the policeman said was “Polovinochku?” (A halfer?) The policeman meant that he would not report the offence to the authorities and in return receive just the half of the standard fine and pocket it. As my informant later explained, both parties did their duty and, at the same time, benefited from each other. The offender was punished for the offence, but paid just half of the extremely high fine. The policeman punished the offender, and got a nice addition to his meager salary. But the most important point as concerns our discussion is the following. If, as my informant explained to me, both parties were equal and both profited from each other then, by definition, this encounter falls into the *haltura* frame. And the trigger for the shift from an official relationship to a *haltura* frame was the sincerely uttered phrase “in a hurry”, which, as was again explained to me by my informant, denoted the existence of someone close – a *svoi* – needing immediate assistance. Thus the basis for a *haltura* relationship is nothing other than the recognition of a *svoi* group.

Often the service is not reciprocated immediately, giving the impression that blat and *haltura* relationships are just as altruistic as those between members of a *svoi* group. In “Blat – the Russian Economy of Favors”, Ledeneva, while recognizing the reciprocal nature of blat in the long run, still stresses the “human spirit” or “mutual help” rhetoric (Ledeneva, 1998. pp.205-206) used by blatmeisters (those who “obtained things and arranged problems just to feel useful” (ibid. 170)) to explain their behavior. She believes that the altruism of blat networks was the fabric that really connected people and mourns the fact that their former “social’ charge is being gradually overtaken by a functional one” (ibid. 200). Judging from the data of my fieldwork, to draw a connection between blat and “human spirit”, at least in the case of Latvian villagers, would be misleading. Let me explain why.

Blat and *haltura* relationships are (and also were, judging from the information I could gather) very calculative, and I have heard many times that such and such work has to be done because the person who asked for it is *nuznij* (convenient) or that the relationship with him is *poleznij* (useful). It is true that “mutual help” rhetoric is sometimes used to explain the *haltura* relationships, but these explanations are mostly intended for outsiders and describe what should be rather than what is. And the reality is that ties of *haltura* are neither as intimate nor as strong as those of *svoi* – the truest (and most valued) “mutual help” relationship. When one

of the parties in a haltura/blat relationship can no longer provide the other with work (or, in the case of blat, information or goods), the connection simply fades away. I have heard a very subtle but at the same time extremely telling dialogue, that proves this point. A fifty-five year old carpenter whose services were widely used in halturas throughout the village had just invited me to help him pick potatoes as his taltsienik. Another man, who happened to be present, was already over seventy and used to be in a haltura relationship with the carpenter in the past. Now, due to his age, he was completely out of the haltura market. The dialogue went like this:

Carpenter (looking at me): See this man here? Well, this man can't do nothing no more. He could before but look at him now...

Old man: Yeah guys, I'm no better than a dead man now.

Carpenter: Now, you know... we can't... you know... from each other... well, that's the way it is.

He suddenly gave us both an embarrassed look and changed the topic but what he probably started to say was, "we can not profit from each other anymore". These words were an apology to the old man, who from former interactions could expect an invitation or at least an excuse for not inviting him. At the same time (at least to my ears) it was a lament for the frail ties of haltura/blat relationships, which, regrettably, can not be maintained on a "humanistic" basis. The calculative nature of haltura/blat relationship provides the first counter-argument against Ledeneva's "humanistic ethic". The second is that the phrase *po-chelovecheski* that means "human-like", and which was probably the starting-point for Ledeneva's "humanistic ethic" theory, is used to describe a distinct and quite different relationship.

2.3 Po-chelovecheski

When an alcoholic who can work two hours a day at the most is hired (and thus given money to drink) for 2 lats (the new Latvian currency) per day instead of an able man who can work for 8 hours (and will ask 10 lats for the same work), it is done for "po-chelovecheski" sake. When a BOMZ is given a shed near your house to sleep in and food to eat and is expected to work for you, follow you and obey you, it is done for "po-chelovecheski" sake. When a woman clerk, working in a branch office of a bank did not follow the rules and did not close the till when she went to the door to close the office, was assaulted and robbed of the bank money, but, against the bank's own regulations, was not given the sack by the authorities but left on her old post, without pay – the salary is taken by the bank to compensate it for the loss – it is also said to have been done for "po-chelovecheski" sake. Thus, when you deal with someone "po-chelovecheski", or "as humans should", it usually means an extremely unequal relationship, where one side always gives and another always takes, where the former exercises almost unlimited power against the latter. To use our old simile, in a "po-chelovecheski" relationship alcohol goes one way and never comes back.

One anecdotic episode shows the *po-chelovecheski* relationship in its true light – as one of inequality. To make it intelligible I will first have to introduce one more folk-term, *po-sovesti*. *Po-sovesti* literally means "as much as your conscience tells you to". This phrase is often used in the same context or together with *po-chelovecheski*. So, a successful businessman from a

village near Burtnieki was detained in Russia by a policeman for a minor traffic offence. The policeman clearly expected a bribe and the businessman, who could easily afford even a substantial sum, was calmly waiting for the quote. The policeman was procrastinating, hoping that this “foreign” businessman would offer him a higher sum than he would ask a compatriot for. The businessman finally lost his temper and asked:

“How much then?”

“Well, po-sovesti,” said the policeman.

“Whose conscience?” quickly returned the businessman.

It is a little hard to understand without an explanation what, in fact, happened here. In general, the short interactions between the fine takers and fine givers fall within one of two types of relationships: either the haltura frame or the formal people/authority frame that I will describe later. If the policeman chooses to behave like a nachal’nik (boss, cf. 2.4), the interaction is limited to the official minimum and the fine is paid in the form and quantity prescribed by the regulations. If, on the other hand, the policeman chooses to relinquish his status and pocket the money himself, the relationship falls into haltura frame where both sides profit equally, as in the incident described in the previous section: the infringer gets away having paid just a fraction of the fine and the policeman gets a much-needed addition to his salary. Each party is content with the other and the interaction often ends with a mutual “thanks”. The case described above was still different: the policeman forced the fine giving/taking interaction into the po-chelovecheski frame. It is completely inadequate, because slaves, as a rule, do not pay money to their masters and even if they do they are never allowed to decide the amount. And this is the very reason why the businessman’s punch-line works so well. His question, “Whose?” can be interpreted within our discussion as “Who then is the master here? Me?”

Thus we have now seen three distinct types of relationships: (1) “drinking together” ties of svoi, mutually-destructive and mutually-constructive at the same time; (2) the calculative “drinking apart, benefiting together” haltura and blat domains; and (3) an unequal “human ethic” type, with its alcohol givers and alcohol takers. Now it is time to move one more step further from the individual and look into the relationship with the nachal’sstvo (authority), imagined and real, within the village and without.

2.4 Nachal’sstvo

Throughout Latvian history, authority, be it Russian, Swedish, Polish or German, came from without. It was also so during the Soviet period, when the prominent leaders of the Communist party were either Russian or Latvian townfolk but rarely the villagers themselves. Now, when the remnants of the sovkhos were privatized by several Latvian families of the village and are run with more or less success as one- or two-family businesses, it is slightly different. Still, though now the authority figures come from within, the relationship toward them is basically the same. It is characterized by the following:

1. You can steal from the nachal’sstvo.
2. You can lie to the nachal’sstvo.
3. You should never ask anything from the nachal’sstvo.

The reason for this ethical code is that the real nachal'stvo (that is, the nachal'stvo whose actions are not governed by personal profit like everybody else's) is never fully human. It has no other purpose than to give orders. This theme of authority being not human is prominent in various anecdotes about Communist Party leaders and the nachal'stvo at large. The anecdotes are numerous in every one of the republics of the Soviet Union and here I will present just one that I heard in Burtneki.

A policeman is walking down the street when someone throws a brick at him from the window of an apartment house nearby. The brick hits the policeman square on the head, breaks and falls onto the pavement completely disintegrated. The policeman slowly turns his head up and looks at the offender, saying: "What if someone (chelovek=human) was walking here?"

The nachal'stvo is not human in the everyday life of Burtneki village either, though this is evident more from actual behavior than from the talk about it. Still, I heard one picturesque story that draws on the same point. A woman – a good svoi for one of my informants – took up a post of power within the stable and was instantly lost as a svoi for everyone in the stable. She changed so completely that three of her best friends quit working under her, some refused to talk to her and only accepted orders on paper. But one day, just a few weeks before her death, she suddenly returned to her previous self, as if she knew that her end was near. And died, as my informant said, as a human being. I need to add here that normally the change is not so striking, and the inhumanity of the nachal'nik (boss) is in most cases limited to working hours or to work-related interactions. In theory, however, the nachal'stvo is not human and when work turns from *haltura* into formal employment (it can be so when a legal contract is drawn up, or when it is somehow convenient for one of the parties to regard the labor as such), the employee starts to look at the employer differently. The employee stops asking the employer for favors and it is automatically possible to lie and steal.

Interestingly, this stratification and antagonism that come with it are avoided as much as possible outside the company or village office buildings. The "people", when they need something from the nachal'nik, avoid going into his office and try to catch him in the street, where he would be at least to some extent stripped of his inhuman garment, and where "you could talk to the man, not the chin (rank)". Most of my informants said that they did not talk to any of the villagers (including those of a certain standing) in polite speech and avoided those who demanded it from them. All of the nachal'niks I met during the fieldwork did their best to avoid work-related topics with the employees when off-work. When I directly asked them about their position they made a clear distinction between their own opinion and the rank's, and even went a long way in order to convince me that the post of power which they took up is not something they sought and worked hard to attain but a heavy burden that they were forced to bear by "the people". We might say that the avoidance and antagonism which characterise relationships with authority, are not therefore limited to the people/nachal'stvo dyad, but are also inherent in the way the nachal'stvo envisions itself.

Both in the space of people/nachal'stvo and in that of the "po-chelovecheski" frame there is a dominating party and a subordinate one, and at first glance it might seem that the two are similar. In fact, they are very different, because a relationship within the people/nachal'stvo space always presupposes a group of svoi, a group of our people, opposed to one inhuman

nachal'nik (boss). In the case of "human ethics" the relationship is inverted – there usually is a svoi group of masters, commanding one "less than human" slave. The first are the ultimate possessors of the ethic (which provides the ideological basis for the unequal relationship) and of the power (which makes it an inevitable one), and the second are meek (or, very rarely, rebellious) slaves. But the most important difference between these two relationships is in yet another logical class.

People/nachal'stvo relationships constitute a recursion that reaches to the highest ranks of society and, eventually, out of it. Starting from a tight and human svoi group of (for example) workers in a stable, which treats its nachal'nik as inhuman, it goes on to a group of human nachal'niks of the stable who treat the nachal'nik of the district veterinary institution as inhuman. The district veterinary inspectors are again all very close friends, many from the same university, who would do anything for each other and hate their inhuman boss from the Ministry. Assuredly the top of the country in fact constitutes yet another tight svoi group, opposed and subordinate to inhuman E.U. officials. The line, thus, is endless, and I would argue that there is not one person in it, who would embrace his identity as nachal'nik proper and proudly state: "Yes, I am inhuman". Naturally, there is no such generality in a "human ethics" relationship.

Thus, it is possible to argue that the space of relationships can be classified into the following categories:

1. Constructive and destructive svoi – the base.
2. Blat and haltura – the calculative relationships between equal members of different svoi groups.
3. Po-chelovecheski space of inequality, consisting of one master or, sometimes, a svoi group of masters, commanding one slave.
4. Svoi /nachal'stvo space of avoidance and antagonism

The next task will be to look into how these Soviet-era categories work now, within the new regime.

3. The change.

And here we have the post-soviet economic change. In the free post-soviet, post-sovkhoz Latvia emerges a new form of collective – the company. Its existence presents two difficulties for those involved. Firstly, there is the problem of how to conceptualize the subject of benefit. Any company needs a certain amount of sacrifice to survive. Sometimes the benefit is not immediate; sometimes the effort of the workers is not rewarded at all. There has to be a certain conceptual or rhetorical base to explain and to uphold this sacrifice. Secondly, there is the relationship problem: which of the four types of relationship should be employed by the staff and the management? In this section I will look into these two problems.

In the Soviet era, the subject of benefit was always the individual, or, at best, the svoi group the individual belongs to. Stealing from the State was an ordinary social task, and often a laudable activity to boot (cf. Rogers: 67). The relationship with the nachal'nik described above was the model for all interactions with the State. The State took from the individual the fruits of his labor and returned the rotten, half-eaten leftovers. If you did not provide for yourself, no

one would. So you did. You dropped home on the way back from the field and you took enough potatoes to last you for a year. You sold half the meat delivered to your shop to those who could provide you with some other necessary commodity. And when they found you out you knew and they knew and everyone in the village knew that there was nothing morally wrong with you – you were just not as lucky as the others and so were caught.

But the company is not the State; if everyone were to apply the Soviet time wisdom “what is the people’s is mine, what is mine is mine” to the company and steal from it, lie to it and despise it, the company would simply collapse. It is necessary to shift the subject of benefit from individual to company, and to be able to appeal to “profit-to-the-company-will-someday-become-profit-for-you” rhetoric. This is, at present, impossible. Companies do not yet function as subjects of benefit. Although the old Soviet-type slogans like “we are headed towards becoming the first stable in Latvia” were sometimes presented to me as an outsider and researcher, they do not and can not function within the collective. In fact it is very difficult to say at this point for the sake of what and whom work in an enterprise involving people from more than one family is done, but the old Soviet feeling that everyone is stealing is still dominant.

Next is the problem of relationship. Svoi space, where things can be asked for and received easily, even if there is no immediate return, works best in small one-family businesses. It does not function well within companies where two or more families are at the helm because the staff automatically divides into two or more factions, and it is extremely difficult to reach an integrated structure. The haltura relationship is not the answer because it does not allow any inequalities between the parties and is therefore very problematic for the officially and functionally hierarchical structure of the company. The “po-chelovecheski” relationship implies complete obedience and dependence and so does not function when any sort of autonomous decision-making is necessary. This presents a problem for the company because it needs at least one rhetoric space where authority can be exercised, where orders can be given and taken. The more we analyse the situation by presupposing that traditional context-establishing categories produce behavior, the more it seems to be a complete dead end. Still several possibilities remain.

3.1 Shifts

One way this problem is mended (though by no means completely resolved) is by shifts from one category to another. If the nachal’stvo resigns itself to its inhuman status, it can, of course, give orders, but they are followed only as long as the employee is under surveillance. Proper nachal’stvo is never human, so there are no moral codes to prescribe obedience when no whip is raised. Thus, the nachal’stvo tries to regain its human status without giving up its rights.

There are two ways for the nachal’nik (boss) to mend his inhuman status. One is to describe the labor, contract or no contract, as being somewhere halfway between the proper employment and haltura. This does make the nachal’nik to some extent human but is good neither for productivity and nor for the image he has amongst other nachal’niks. The problem is that when the relationship is structured along the haltura lines, there in fact is no authority, the employee can choose how to work, when to work and when not to work. I have heard of how a

halturshik, deciding that in fact he was the boss and that he therefore had the ultimate right to make decisions, started to behave on this assumption, and was fired as a result. So, when the nachal'nik chooses to play the game somewhere between the haltura and the people/authority frames, it has to be done very carefully. Another way to mend the inhuman status is to rely on the "po-chelovecheski" rhetoric – that is, to act as tyrant, turn the worker into a slave until he concedes to become a "human" and, thus, treat nachal'nik as a "human" also. For reasons described above this shift can only be temporary.

One case that illustrates this rhetoric shift happened in the stalls, where the managing director is the thirty-year-old son of the last chairman of the sovkhoz – the man who presided over the privatization process and eventually managed to make the stalls his and another family's own property. His son was driving home one night and decided to drop by and check the horses at the stable. Right in the middle of the stall yard he found the workers in the midst of a drunken party, with lights and music. As soon as the revelers saw him they ran away, leaving him with no evidence as to who participated. On the next day he lined up the staff, trying to get confessions from the guilty. Because the nachal'nik is always an outsider, because to sell a pal to the nachal'nik is the worst crime, not one of them confessed. He made everyone do unnecessary dirty work, then changed his attitude from a commodore's to a deeply hurt "human" – not their old pal from the stables, but not a boss either, lamenting that "if you are not honest with me, how can I possibly be honest with you?". He said that they were not acting "po-chelovecheski" and that they were losing their "human virtue" by not telling the truth. Eventually each of the workers privately went to him, confessed, without telling the names of the others, and was forgiven. This way, firstly, the integrity of the staff – a tight svoi group – was not threatened, secondly, the authority was left intact and, thirdly, the dialogue, if we might call it that, took place in the neutral waters of "human ethics".

It is interesting to note that during that night (and therefore during his inhuman state), the nachal'nik collected all the alcohol that the revelers left in their flight and hid it, thus supplying this paper with a definition of nachal'stvo relationship in the alcohol frame – the nachal'stvo is the ultimate confiscator of alcohol. It makes sense, because if alcohol is the first and foremost medium of exchange it is accordingly the very core of relationships between humans, and so inhuman authority would want to annihilate it.

There is one more way to mend the situation. It is not a distinct category of relationship but it is nevertheless more than functional. It is mat.

3.2 Mat

Mat is the so-called "unquotable layer of vocabulary" – the layer of Russian obscenities. I have written extensively on this subject elsewhere and here will only give a very general description of mat, and will try to show how it functions and fills the gap that is left from modes of relationships described above. Mat is a distinct and large layer of obscenities outside generally permitted language, a layer that has penetrated the languages of all the members of the old Soviet State, including Latvia^{viii}. I was initially interested in mat precisely because of its exportation to languages of other language families and also because I myself heard Latvians using mat during the rebellion of 1991, when the national sentiment was so strong that nobody

except the most ardent reactionaries used Russian – the language of the oppressor^{ix}.

Mat was strongly persecuted during the Soviet period as well as before it: in Russian mass-media it was completely nonexistent; scientific papers on mat were not allowed to be published and even now scientific work concerning it is still in its rudimentary stages (Mokijenko, 1994). Mat is thought to have been used as a ritual language in pre-Christian cults (Uspenskij, 1994), so its use in daily life was tabooed. Following the advent of Christianity, it was condemned as a remnant of pagan beliefs. Today it is generally thought to be a repressed rhetoric, used to express repressed feelings, or simply to be a group of extremely strong (and so largely untranslatable) swear-words. This common belief is also widely accepted in scientific papers (cf. Levin, 1988), where mat is characterized by its “cursing illocutionary force”.

In my previous work (Okamoto, 2006), I analyzed an interview with a Russian politician and several fragments of the conversation of an ethnically mixed group of villagers from the same village, Burtnieki, and argued that the illocutionary force of mat should be completely reformulated. I have shown that mat constructs a unique rhetorical space where participants in the conversation are completely equal as to their connection to the topic, where societal norms are excluded and where individuals, evidently stripped of their societal garments and rights, engage in a game of complete unison or a battle of similarly complete mutual negation.

What does the existence of such a space mean for the categories of *svoi*, *haltura/blat*, *po-chelovecheski* and *nachal'stvo*? It means that though in the long term relationships are organized around the four categories, in the short term there is one more rhetorical space, where decisions can be made, orders given and taken and opinions expressed in such a way that the limitations imposed by the long term categories do not interfere.

In the mat rhetorical space actors can not use any arguments, except their own personal, physical (literally and metaphorically) and immediate needs. There can be no calculation and utterances must be made up on the spot. When you speak using mat you have no societal status – you are not an employer or an employee, not a *halturshik* or a *BOMZ* – the one and only status that you have is the status of an equal, equal to whoever you are speaking to. If you want something done it is not because it is needed, or has to be done due to some order, external to the here-and-now, face-to-face and want-to-want interaction. It is because you want it, physically and immediately, and, if the other concedes to enter the same mat space, your request will be granted or not granted on the same basis of immediacy.

I would have liked to be able to present here a clear example which would demonstrate this function of mat within the company, but in all of the conversations I happened to listen to, mat was so subtly interwoven into the fabric of the dialogue that I would need another paper at the very least to prove my point. Instead I will tell of a picturesque conversation not less foreign to the participants as the relationships within the company. The parties are a 65 year old Russian *BOMZ* and a twenty-year-old son of a relatively wealthy veterinarian. The former is asking the latter for a job. This stratification is new – in the Soviet times hobos were almost nonexistent and local veterinarians were just as poor (or just as rich) as everybody else. Thus, the situation demanded a new solution just as the new relationships within the company do. The following is the speech of the *BOMZ*. It was long and repetitious and consisted almost completely of mat. Minus the non-translatable mat, it can be translated like this:

Man, you got any work? 'Cause I'm sitting here doing jack shit all day, no work at all, I

mean, I can do you the hay, or the hot-house, or chop you some wood. Your pops does have some work right? You know, me sitting all day with old lady staring at each other, like. Just think, you and me, we could finish any work in no time man, what do you say huh?

I need to explain here that mat consists of five word-stems: huj, pizda, jebat', mudak and blyad', respectively meaning male sexual organ, female sexual organ, intercourse, male sexual organ and prostitute. By adding multiple suffixes and prefixes to the five stems, and by placing the words in the right context, mat words can be made to signify practically anything, from a certain technique of jazz-drumming to a part of an atomic reactor. Some mat words have a more or less fixed meaning, as for example the verb "ob'yebat'" – "to deceive". Others are more flexible. And there is always room for creativity – a new combination of less obvious suffixes and prefixes, inserted with sufficient skill into a certain context, will undoubtedly be understood. Thus it was in the passage above.

The point here is that although the above request was made from a man with a certain social status – he is elderly, the father of three children, from a low-income, self-sustaining family and so on – to another man with a certain social status – he is young, the son of village elite, he has a stable job as a truck driver and so on – social standing did not enter the conversation at all. The conversation was constructed around a triangle – the old man, the young man and the work to be done. The message was: "I want to do it. Do you want me?" Later, there can be talk about money, about mutual benefit, about how to do the work in question. The relationship between the two will be stratified, entering either *haltura*, *svoi/nachal'stvo* or even *po-chelovecheski* space. But here it was *asocial*. The answer too was in mat – that the young man wants him and will talk to his father about the job. Such momentary shifts into mat space occur often, within each of the four categories mentioned above. And it is reassuring to know that Latvians, when they are not satisfied with social boundaries, always know a way to curse them away.

4. Conclusion

In the discussion above I have described four categories which constitute the village social space. The first two, *svoi* and *haltura/blat*, are based on equality and are perhaps easily understood in terms of Sahlins (Sahlins, 1972). The first is a general reciprocity space, where anything asked for should be done without expectations of return. The second is a balanced reciprocity space, where parties calculate the profit and the loss, the given and the taken, and regulate their effort depending on the balance. The next two, the *po-chelovecheski* and *svoi/nachal'stvo* spaces, are not so easily defined in Sahlins's terms (both being perhaps variations of "negative reciprocity"), and thus constitute a Soviet Union-specific phenomenon. All four appeared under various guises in preceding research on post-Soviet change but were never fully explicated or brought together into a unified picture. Coining the terms for them, envisaging a scheme that would incorporate them all, and establishing the connections between them, was the first purpose of this paper.

The second purpose was to introduce another mode of inquiry into the more or less methodologically established field of economic anthropology. The papers cited above either picked a folk-term which corresponded to a certain mode of relationship and analyzed the

discourse surrounding it, or concentrated on collecting modes and mediums of exchange that compose the networks. This paper, on the other hand, incorporated findings of a conversational-analytic sort into the traditional scheme, and tried to show that one more medium is exchanged along with alcohol, pike perch and the rest – the medium of words. I have argued that mat – a language which is now found throughout the old member-republics of the Soviet Union – also constructs a distinct relational space which transcends the others, and that any model of sociality of Post-Soviet world will not be complete without it.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to express his debt to COE Transnationality Research Graduate Students Fieldwork Subsidy Program for financing the two fieldwork trips this study is based on. I also wish to express my gratitude to my thesis supervisor Satoshi Nakagawa and Osamu Nakagawa for commenting on earlier versions of this paper.

NOTES

ⁱ There are also four licensed fishing brigades but the number of vacancies is strictly limited.

ⁱⁱ Functionally identical relationship is often described by the word *krug* (circle); this word also appears in Ledeneva's analysis. Patino and Rogers respectively use phrases "intimate circle of friends" and "extended family and close friends". It is a distinct category of relationship in former Soviet Union and needs a unified label. As usage of *krug* is probably limited to urban areas and especially to intelligentsia I propose the more common *svoi*.

ⁱⁱⁱ It seems that the category of BOMZ is widespread. It is an acronym and stands for people "bez opredilyonnogo mesta zitel'stva" (without a specific place of dwelling). Rogers (Rogers, 2005) in his work on *Sepych*, a small farming town in the Urals, defines them as "stratum of unemployed or underemployed workers", not necessarily homeless.

^{iv} Rogers describes similar relationship as existing in town of *Sepych* in Urals by name *shabashka* (from Sabbath).

^v *Blat* is a re-redistribution network remaining from Soviet time, when goods, favors and information were supposed to be distributed evenly but, due to general shortage, were in fact leaking through every point of distribution network. Rarely the same amount of potatoes that was loaded in the truck was unloaded at the warehouse. Rarely the whole produce of a factory reached the stores. And even when they did, it did not mean that they will be put on the shelves.

^{vi} As perhaps everywhere in the rural areas of former Soviet Union (cf. Rogers, 2005), money in *Burtneki* is scarce. Thus, when it is possible to reciprocate in labor it is nearly always done so.

^{vii} This point was also observed by Hivon (Hivon, 1994), who described the numerous social, medical, ritual and economic uses of vodka within a village community.

^{viii} I have also heard that *mat* is used by Chinese workers in America, probably because they often work together with Russian immigrants of the third wave, and I have personally heard *mat* in Mongolia.

^{ix} The power relations between the republics of former Soviet Union are well expressed in

the following joke of that time: "All republics in the Soviet Union are equal, but Russia is more equal than the others." For a detailed discussion of language policies and ethnic relations in the former Soviet Union see Karklins (Karklins, 1986).

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