# The "Ontological Turn" in Russian Anthropology

## Turning towards Materiality, Nonhuman Agency, and Hybridity

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**Abstract:** The authors in this thematic issue reflect on the current "ontological turn" in Russian social sciences and humanities, and especially on the influence the turn exerts on various anthropological sub-disciplines and research domains. This introduction reviews publications in Russian academic journals, article collections, theses, books, and book chapters that best illustrate current ontological preoccupations in Russian anthropology. The ontological turn encompasses diverse interests and topics and is often labelled as "material," "object-oriented," "speculative-realist," or "praxiographic." In fact, we are dealing with multiple interdisciplinary "turns" that intersect and overlap, while interlinking many domains of the biological sciences, geographical sciences, social sciences, and humanities. In Russia, the ontological turn (actor-network theory, material semiotics, symmetrical anthropology, sociology of translation, object-oriented ontology, speculative realism) unfolds in different domains of research that can be grouped into four main fields: 1) medical anthropology, body studies, and death studies; 2) urban anthropology; 3) anthropology of science and techno-anthropology; 4) museum anthropology and material culture studies. The contributions to this issue illustrate current research in medical anthropology, body and death studies, urban anthropology, techno-anthropology, museum studies, as well as Siberian ethnography using the perspectivist model.

**Keywords:** actor-network theory; perspectivist turn; material semiotics; urban anthropology; medical anthropology; museum anthropology; techno-anthropology; Russia

The recent turn to ontological issues in social sciences, most often associated with the influential and much discussed methodologies of actor-network theory (ANT) and perspectivism, has substantially altered sociology by introducing a new concept of the social as the association of human and nonhuman actors (Latour 2005). It has also transformed anthropology, where the focus on alternative Indigenous cosmologies with multiple natures and cultures has further relativized the nature/culture and human/animal divides (Descola 2012; Kohn 2018; Viveiros de Castro 2017). Anthropology has been mainly affected by the perspectivist (multinaturalist) version of the "ontological turn" (*cf.* Venkatensan 2010; Kelly 2014) and, but for the important exclusion of medical anthropology, has generally downplayed its so-called speculative-relativist or material semiotic version. The version of the turn associated with the ANT advocated by Bruno Latour, Michel Callon, and John Law has generated much innovative work in science and technology studies (STS), cultural geography, urban studies, market studies, organization studies, and international relations studies, but has not much affected the mainstream concerns and domains of sociocultural anthropology. The few exceptions, including the excellent ethnographies of the international Matsutake mushroom trade (Tsing 2015) and Corsican fires (Candea 2010), only underscore the accuracy of this observation.

In Russian anthropology, the situation turned out to be very different: perspectivism has had an insignificant impact on the research agenda, whereas material semiotics has drawn the attention of a number of Russian anthropologists well beyond STS and medical anthropology, including specialists in urban, body, death, material culture, and museum studies. Why is it that the "flat ontology" of ANT has been discarded by most Euro-American anthropologists as "the baby out of the Bath school," to use the ironic phrase of Michel Callon and Bruno Latour (1992, 343–368), while Russian anthropologists found its tools useful for various types of research? The authors featured in this thematic section, although not answering this question directly, try to find practical value and theoretical significance in the various concepts and tools made available to researchers via the ontological turn in their own research fields.

This introduction explores some recent work on multiple trajectories of the ontological turn in Russian social sciences, with a particular emphasis on anthropology. It provides the context for the cases included in this thematic section, which are representative of the domains of anthropological research

that have been influenced by this turn in Russia. There are several caveats in approaching the subject under the heading of "ontological turn in Russian anthropology." First, one should not envisage an all-encompassing movement, as the word "turn" might imply. Indeed, the turn involves quite a modest number of Russian anthropologists who have considered that ANT and, to a much lesser degree, perspectivism might be relevant for their research. Second, anthropologists who employ the relevant methods and approaches often engage in research as part of multidisciplinary teams involving sociologists and philosophers, specialists in media and cultural studies, or social and cultural geographers. Thus, the turn unfolds not so much in anthropology per se, but in a multidisciplinary research field characterized by a common set of topics and issues. Third, "ontological" or "cosmological" concerns do not always come to the forefront of the research agenda: other elements of the turn, such as nonhuman agency, hybridity, or the forms of integration of the human body into its artefactual milieu or techno-environment are frequent research foci. Hence, the ontological turn comprises a wide range of interests and topics and is often labelled as "nonhuman," "material," "object-oriented," "speculative-realist," or "praxiographic." In fact, we are dealing with multiple interdisciplinary "turns" that intersect and overlap, while interlinking many domains of the biological sciences, geographical sciences, social sciences, and humanities.

One should also bear in mind that the classification of academic disciplines and domains of research and specialization in the Russian academy are confusing for an external observer: social anthropology is considered as a sociological discipline and taught in sociology departments, while ethnology has traditionally been part of the curriculum of history departments. After Russian universities joined the Bologna process, things got even more complicated, as the European tradition of discipline classification and subdivision overlapped with, but did not entirely displace the local tradition. The result is that the borders between sociology (especially the branch that relies on qualitative methods) and anthropology cum ethnology are blurred, and "social anthropologists" with sociological training and "ethnologists" with training in history work side by side at various research institutions and often engage in joint research projects.

Furthermore, the expression "Russian anthropology" is ambiguous because it remains uncertain whether it refers to qualitative research in sociology and ethnology or to the "proper" domain of cultural and social anthropology. It is also unclear whether the expression refers to the current preoccupations

of Russian anthropologists or to anthropological research *in* Russia, that is, to trends in a particular national academic community or to anthropological research in a specific geographical area. The latter question is raised in the article by Virginie Vaté and John Eidson (this issue): "The Anthropology of Ontology in Siberia: A Critical Review." The distinction is important. If we follow the first interpretation, we will not find any publications associated with the ontological turn in its perspectivist version, irrespective of the interest in the Russian translations of the books by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2017), Philippe Descola (2012), and Eduardo Kohn (2018), whereas if we follow the second, we will find a number of important works on Siberian perspectivism written by anthropologists from other countries (Brightman, Grotti, and Ulturgasheva 2012; Brož 2007, 2015; Brož and Willerslev 2012; Descola 2013; Holbraad and Willerslev 2007; Pedersen 2007; Skvirskaja 2012; Willerslev 2004, 2007, 2013, 2016).

The field of studies in which the ontological turn of Russian social sciences and humanities is unfolding is not that of Indigenous cosmologies and ontologies as, I believe, is the predominant case in many other national variants of "world anthropology." In Russian academe, more specifically in a number of humanities and social sciences, the turn means mostly the usage of "object-oriented" methodology. The response to the ontological turn was conditioned by local circumstances: Russian anthropologists, unlike their Western colleagues, have worked predominantly in the genre of "anthropology at home," which means that "exotic Others" (like the Indigenous American societies studied by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Eduardo Kohn) have less appeal for the younger generation, especially in the current context of transformation of the former Soviet ethnology into the new Russian socio-cultural anthropology. The Russian variant of the ontological turn departs from traditional ethnological preoccupations while showing itself to be more radical than elsewhere, at least in the case of anthropology. In this view, multi-species anthropology and multi-naturalism is a restricted version of the general "nonhuman turn" that establishes the "democracy of living beings" and considers Indigenous ontologies on a par with Western scientism (as illustrated by the works of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Philippe Descola, and Eduardo Kohn), whereas the full spectrum post- or non-anthropocentric version, brought by the influence of STS and sociology, posits in a more radical and profound fashion what Levi Bryant (2011) has called the "democracy of objects"—a very promising avenue for several anthropological domains, museum and medical

anthropologies included. While both these versions of the non-human turn have been inspired by Whiteheadian and Deleuzian ontologies, it remains to be seen which will prove more productive for anthropological research in Russia.

In Russia, the interdisciplinary literature on the ontological turn remains predominantly sociological. While anthropological research represents but a small part of the broad spectrum of object-oriented methodologies, it covers several sub-disciplines and research domains, including techno-anthropology, the anthropology of organizations, digital anthropology, museum studies, medical anthropology, disability studies, evolutionary anthropology, body studies, and, very recently, death studies. These different research domains can be grouped into four main fields: 1) medical anthropology, body studies, and death studies; 2) urban anthropology; 3) anthropology of science and techno-anthropology; 4) museum anthropology and material culture studies. Thus, within the Russian anthropological community, the research associated with the ontological turn (ANT, material semiotics, symmetrical anthropology, sociology of translation, object-oriented ontology, and speculative realism) remains fragmented.

In this introduction, I will offer a short overview of these four fields of research and will comment on the scarcity of Russian publications on the other version of the turn: the cosmological-ontological or perspectivist approach developed by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Philippe Descola, and Roy Wagner, whose followers are mainly found in anthropological communities beyond Russia (*cf.* Henare et al. 2007). In so doing, I will provide the context for the contributions to this issue.

## A Brief Overview of the "Turn" Towards Materiality and Ontological Issues

Most of the major books by Bruno Latour (2006, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2018), John Law (2015), Philippe Descola (2012), Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2017), Annemarie Mol (2017), and Eduardo Kohn (2018) and some of the influential papers by Michel Callon (2017) have been available in Russian since the early 2000s. However, the concepts and methods associated with the ontological turn were only recently embraced by Russian anthropologists; and while the research inspired by this turn is developing rather dynamically, the results are still awaited. The impact on anthropology of such a diverse assortment of approaches—which range from perspectivism to material semiotics, object-oriented ontology, speculative realism, the sociology of translation, ANT,

the "democracy of things," hybridity, and the symmetry between animate and inanimate "actants"—is not only recent but concerns a small number of scholars. Many Russian anthropologists perceive the ontological turn as being mainly related to the domains of sociology or philosophy (as is the case of *Métaphysique cannibales* by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, which many Russian readers associate more with Deleuzian philosophy than with Indigenous American ethnology). This may be explained by the fact that most of the works mentioned above were not only translated by sociologists (*cf.* Erofeeva 2012, 2015, 2019; Konstantinova 2015; Napreenko 2015; Vakhshtayn 2006; Volkov and Kharkhordin 2008) or philosophers (for example, Sergei Astakhov, Stanislav Gavrilenko, Alexandr Pisarev, Mikhail Kurtov, Artiom Morozov)—who also commented on the various versions of "flat ontology"—but were discussed and analyzed in non-anthropological thematic article collections and special issues of academic journals. To mention just a few: the philosophical and literary journal *Logos* devoted many issues to translations of and commentaries on works by Bruno Latour, Michel Callon, John Law, and Annemarie Mol, as well as to the object-oriented ontologies and/or speculative realism elaborated by Quentin Meillassoux, Graham Harman, Levi Bryant, Ray Brassier, Manuel DeLanda, and Steven Shaviro; the new editorial team of the journal *Sociology of Power* included in its policy the elaboration of ANT and post-ANT theories and methodologies; the *New Literary Review* discussed Graham Harman's version of flat ontology, etcetera.

As will become clear from the examination of the four fields of research concerned by the ontological turn, Russian anthropologists have been mostly influenced by analyses, translations, and reviews produced in the neighboring discipline of sociology. Predictably, the most influential and productive teams that shape the turn in Russia work in research centres located in the capitals. In Moscow, they are found at the Higher School of Economics (HSE), the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration (RANEPA), the Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences (MSSES), and Moscow State University, the first three institutions specializing in the sociological application of the turn and the last contributing to discussions on its metaphysical aspects. In St.-Petersburg, they work in the STS research centre of the European University. However, a significant number of research projects are conducted outside of the capitals: at Saratov Technical University, Volgograd University, and the Policy Analysis and Studies of Technology (PAST) Centre of Tomsk Polytechnic University.

In a review of the reception of ANT in Russian social sciences, one of the leading contributors to the ontological turn in Russian sociology, Viktor Vakhshtayn (2015), affiliated with HSE and RANEPA, suggested a useful typology (published in a discussion about "tacit scientific revolutions" that I initiated in the journal *Antropologicheskij Forum*). According to this typology, "Turn-0" refers to the first and rather large groups of scholars who styled their rhetoric according to those of materiality and ANT without really "turning" to them. "Turn-1," on the other hand, is "related to [the] epistemic emancipation … of material objects" (Vakhshtayn 2015, 25–28) or things *sui generis*, not reducible to representations of the traits of a particular society or culture. "Turn-2," the most radical, is directly related to Latour's project of "re-assembling the social" and re-conceptualizing sociology's theoretical core (ibid.: 31). Thus, "turn-0" reflects current literary fashion and does not imply any substantial change in theory or methodology; "turn-1" involves fractional infra-changes of both the discipline's domain and its theoretical core; whereas "turn-2" might be viewed as a revolutionary change of paradigm insofar as it brings about the complete reconfiguration of basic assumptions and core concepts.

Chronologically, the first mentions of ANT, the ontological turn, or works by Bruno Latour, Michel Callon, and John Law in Russian anthropological journals appeared, albeit sporadically, during the second half of the 1990s: we find a few book reviews and an interview with Michael Fisher in which he briefly mentions Bruno Latour's book *Science in Action* (Elfimov 1996, 13). In 2010, the translation of an article by Barbara Czarniawska on the anthropology of organizations (Bogatyr' 2010; Czarniawska 2010) was published in an issue of the oldest Russian anthropological journal (founded in 1889) *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie* (hereinafter referred to as *EO*). However, these various publications did not noticeably draw the attention of anthropologists to either STS or ANT. Very recently, Russian anthropologists joined sociological discussions on the "material turn," which has led to thematic issues of anthropological journals and article collections presenting original research and reviews. The first thematic section specifically devoted to new approaches in material culture studies featured original "STS cum anthropology" research (Bogatyr' 2011a, b), as well as translations of influential articles by David Hess (2011) and Phillip Vannini (2011). In 2013, *EO* published a thematic issue, "On the Boundaries of the Human and Humanity: Bioethics, Posthumanism, and New Technologies" (Kozhevnikova and Yudin 2013; Sokolovskiy 2013), which used some concepts from so-called "symmetrical anthropology." Three years later another thematic

section, "Thing Theory, Material Culture, and New Materiality," documented the influence of the ontological turn on Russian anthropology and its various sub-disciplines (Sokolovskiy 2016). However, the peak of interest in the turn was reached in 2018, with special sections published on the subject in three anthropological journals: *"The Living and the Dead: Hybrid Realities"* in *EO* (Sokolovskiy 2018a); "New Technologies and the Body" in *Antropologicheskij Forum* (Sokolovskiy 2018b); and "Cyberhumanity and Post-Anthropology" in *Siberian Historical Research* (Sokolovskiy 2018c) (for more details, see the sections below on techno-anthropology and material culture studies). Yet, the introduction of ANT methodology, symmetrical anthropology, and material semiotics into several sub-disciplines of Russian anthropology cannot be explained only by the influence of relevant developments in sociology or philosophy. I will argue that the challenges and promises that these approaches contained for each of the anthropological sub-disciplines concerned were more important stimuli for experimentation with the conceptual toolkits of the ontological turn.

## Medical Anthropology, Body Studies, and Death Studies

Medical anthropology is one of the fields of anthropological research in which the application of the ontological turn's ideas has brought about significant changes. Prior to its institutionalization as a sub-discipline of anthropology at the end of 1990s, medical anthropology formed part of medical students' curriculum: It acquainted them with human morphological variations and ethnically-specific hygienic practices. Another predecessor of medical anthropology in Russia is the study of folk medicine in various ethnic groups, which formed a specific research domain of Russian ethnology from its beginnings (for an overview see Bromley and Voronov 1976). During the early 2000s, some universities and postgraduate centres included in their curricula new courses for sociologists and social anthropologists that were mostly modeled on American medical anthropology—for example, the course given by Dmitry Mikhel at Saratov Technical University and the (ongoing) seminar led by Valentina Kharitonova, head of the Department of Medical Anthropology at the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology in Moscow.

The research focus on the interface of human body and technology, which is most evident in the case of new reproductive technologies, led medical anthropology students to take an interest in STS and ANT methodologies. A case in point is the thematic issue of the journal *Sociology of Power* devoted to

ontologies of the human body in the context of medical practices (Kurlenkova 2017). Several of the research projects conducted in the PAST centre of Tomsk Polytechnic University, led by Evgeniya Popova, explicitly focus on the interface of medicine and technological innovations and employ ANT methodology. The project "The Ontological Assemblage of Disability in Practices of Socio-Medical Expertise in Russia" is a relevant example of disability research that emphasizes ontological issues. This project applies the methods of ontology-in-practice to the ethnography of the Russian regional Bureau of socio-medical expertise, while paying particular attention to the construction of disability as a hybrid object (Torlopova 2017). Other projects include research on blind people or smartphone applications for the blind (Kurlenkova 2017), as well as studies on the urban navigation infrastructure for people with reduced eyesight (Torlopova 2018). These projects have demonstrated among other things that disability is more an effect of particular infrastructural deficiencies than the consequence of an individual's "illness" or of an inherited disorder. Another application of ANT methodology in medical anthropology is Dmitry Mikhel's extensive study of organ transplantation research, which has shown how Russian transplantologists try to adapt their technology to the traditional values of Russian society (this issue; but see also: Mikhel 2017).

As part of ANT-inspired discussions of "illness," the nuanced differentiations between the phenomenological "living body" experiences of the patient and the realist "scientific" ontology of the therapist have become part of medical anthropology conventions, thus replacing the former authoritative and authoritarian models of therapist–patient relations.

Anthropologists engaged in body studies have used the toolkit of material semiotics to explore human bodies in virtual realities (*cf.* Sokolova, Shevchenko, and Shirokov 2018) or augmented reality games (Sokolova 2018). Material semiotics and ANT have also been largely applied to the bioethical issues raised by post-humanist concerns, making post-humans appear as one of the Latourian "nonhumans" (Kozhevnikova 2018).

Finally, in the context of death studies, a research area closely interrelated with medical anthropology, I have presented multiple examples of the integration of the living human body with its (technical) milieu (this issue; see also: Sokolovskiy 2017, 2019, 2020). I have also posed the problem of a definition of death that takes into account the primal hybridity of the human and that grounds the concept of heterochronicity of human death.

## Urban Anthropology

Urban anthropology in Russia was the primary locus of development of social anthropology of the Western kind. The institutionalization of this research domain occurred in stark opposition to Russian ethnologists' preoccupations with folklore, traditions, and rituals, on the one hand, and the study of ethnic politics and policies, on the other. Urban anthropology was also a site of active exchange and co-operation with sociologists. This collaboration resulted among other things in a multi-volume series on the anthropology of professions (Yarskaia-Smirnova 2005, 2007, 2011, 2012), which played a crucial role in the emergence of an interest in urban infrastructure and applied techno-anthropological research. However, the main impetus for the turn to ontological issues in urban anthropology comes from the praxiological interpretation of ANT (Volkov and Kharkhordin 2008) and the concept of urban infrastructure as a molding milieu, standing in constant interaction with city dwellers (Popova 2012; Torlopova 2018; Vakhshtayn 2014;). Through ANT, researchers have come to view infrastructure as a hybrid collective composed of humans and pipes, maps and organizations, soils and wires, but also to consider its stability as the result of a constant trial of forces, of interactions between intermediaries and mediators (Latour 2006).

In addition, ANT methodology has been actively employed in the study of mobilities in several large cities (*cf.* Kuznetso and Shaitanova 2012; Vozyanov, Kuznetsov, and Laktyukhina 2017), notably Volgograd (Kuznetsov 2016), St.-Petersburg (Shchepanskaia 2016), and others (Vozyanov 2011). In his research on city ontologies, Andrei Vozyanov combines the study of mobilities and infrastructure with the anthropology of catastrophes. He uses the concepts of assemblage and "linear, heterogeneous, and re-collectable mobility rhizome" in his search for the answer to the question of how particular socio-technical assembling processes led to the survival or closure of electric transport networks in several post-socialist countries (Vozyanov 2018).

## Anthropology of Science and Techno-Anthropology

Some of the interests of urban anthropology overlap with those of techno-anthropology—or anthropology of techno-science—while also contributing to the latter's development. Prior to becoming acquainted with STS and ANT, Russian anthropological studies on science and knowledge production were limited to a version of collective autoethnography, an "anthropology of anthropology" that combined the study of the anthropological community's

professional folklore (Komarova 2008, 2010, 2013; Smirnova 2010) with elements of scholars' biographical accounts, memoirs, and the history of Russian anthropology. The rituals and practices of community members were the primary focus of attention. Modern technology, its development, and its impact were beyond the scope of the discipline, which considered that only traditional manual labour and its instruments belonged to the material culture of particular ethnic groups.

The first dissertation in techno-anthropology in Russia was based on a one-year fieldwork on data recovery technologies in a small private firm (Bogatyr' 2011c). The main centres for the development of applied techno-anthropological research became the STS Centre of the European University in St.-Petersburg, initially headed by one of Latour's colleagues, Vincent Antonin Lepinay, and the PAST Centre of Tomsk Polytechnic University, with Evgenia Popova as its head (see Evgenia Popova's observations on STS and the ethnography of complex technical networks in this issue). A number of research projects within the newly emerging field of techno-anthropology in Russia have targeted digital technologies. Besides data recovery technologies (Bogatyr' 2010, 2011a, 2011b) and smartphone use in augmented reality games (Sokolova 2018), self-tracking technologies have become the focus of research (Nim 2018). However, the number of anthropologists involved in such research has remained too small to effect a major change, and the gap between sociologists and anthropologists interested in ANT has yet to be filled.

## Museum Anthropology and Material Culture Studies

Most regional museums in Russia exhibit collections of natural and/or human history, and their staff includes historians, archeologists, and ethnologists trained either at universities or at teachers' colleges. Insofar as historians are far more numerous in the country than archeologists and ethnologists combined (with archeology and ethnology still being considered as branches of historical research), museum collections are analyzed mostly within the framework of local historical narratives. The most widespread model in Russia's regional museums is a repository of natural objects, artifacts, and copies of historical documents (texts and photos) from local archives that document regional history in the broadest sense of the term. Unsurprisingly, material culture comes to the forefront of the research agenda of museum staff.

In Russia, historians have shown little interest in issues related to the ontological turn, irrespective of the latter's value for material culture research.

History, including its methodology and philosophy, is the discipline that has been least affected by either ANT methodology or perspectivism. Other approaches of material culture studies and those of "thing theory," including the biography of things (as illustrated by the works of Arjun Appadurai and Daniel Miller) and the theory of affordances (Gell 1998), seem to be little known in Russia, despite the fact that they are more appealing to anthropologists. It was partly with the aim of changing this situation that I initiated discussions in several Russian anthropological fora and edited article collections and thematic issues in several anthropological journals (Sokolovskiy 2016a, 2016b, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2018d, 2018e).

The main interest of the ontological turn literature for Russian anthropologists lies in ANT's purported capacity as a new methodology to transform the traditional reductionist approach of material culture studies. Prior to the introduction of ANT, this specific sub-discipline of Russian anthropology suffered from low status and relative neglect: the number of relevant publications on the topic in leading anthropological journals decreased dramatically over the years. At the same time, theoretical innovation was always highly valued by researchers engaged in these studies. During the 1980s, the Tartu-Moscow semiotic school introduced new interpretive and explanatory models for the analysis of material culture, and the field experienced a surge in interest (Baiburin 1983). However, the anti-representationalist stance that subsequently developed in anthropology rendered suspect all material culture studies employing textual metaphors, which contributed to their decline in popularity. The year 2006 saw the publication of an influential collection of translations edited by Viktor Vakhshtayn, which comprised papers by Bruno Latour, John Law, and Michel Callon (Vakhshtayn 2006). This article collection, along with the thematic issues of anthropological and philosophical journals mentioned above, drew the attention of museum anthropologists to the innovative potential of ANT. The influence of sociologists in the new turn of material culture studies in Russian anthropology has been properly documented (Baranov 2016, 39).

The idea that material objects (museum artifacts included) have an enabling and constraining activity, as well as the view of things as active mediators or intermediaries of human action, technologies, and media, have the potential to transform museum anthropology. The contribution by Dmitry Baranov (this issue) assesses this potential and traces the change of paradigm in material

culture studies in the context of Russian museum anthropology. He shows that these studies went from the "display of things" to the "display of ideas" during the 1930s, then from "ethnogenetic evidences" to the comparative ethnography of "ethnographic objects" from the 1950s to the 1970s, and finally from the positivist treatment of things to their semiotic treatment in the 1980s. Lastly, he considers the reluctance of most Russian museum anthropologists to adopt the new agenda brought about by the turn and comments on the reasons for such a conservative reaction.

## The "Perspectivist Turn" and its Virtual Absence in Russian Anthropology

There is some paradox in the fact that despite the (admittedly recent) translation into Russian of major works by Philippe Descola (2012), Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2017), and Eduardo Kohn (2018), the influence of the "perspectivist turn" on anthropological research remains minimal. To my knowledge, perspectivist concepts have been explored in only two publications (Tyukhteneva 2011, 2012) and in one PhD research in progress (by Sviatoslav Koval'skiy, student at Moscow State University) whose results have yet to be published. This is especially surprising since our foreign colleagues have conducted fieldwork in Siberia (Dmitry Arzyutov, Ksenia Pimenova, Olga Ulturgasheva, Ludek Brož, Ishtvan Shanta, Rane Willerslev, and others—for more details, see the article by Virginie Vaté and John Eidson in this issue) and have found in local cosmologies many analogies with Indigenous American multi-naturalism. Besides the already mentioned fact that the major perspectivist works were translated only recently and that some of them were misinterpreted as "purely philosophical" (including the book by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro), other reasons might explain such neglect among Russian anthropologists. My hypothesis is that the reluctance to engage with perspectivist models, or at least to evaluate their application to Siberian fieldwork materials, lies in the perception that perspectivism constitutes a new version of the theory of animism, which has been associated for over a century with the early evolutionist theory of Edward Tylor and the concomitant theological debates—an association that incidentally explains why the study of animism and even the use of the concept gradually lost popularity among anthropologists. Moreover, the mere length of the translation chain, both conceptual and from language to language—from Achuar to Portuguese, and then from Portuguese to British "Anthropologese," and finally from English

to Russian, all this complicated by the translation of Deleuzian conceptual vocabulary from French to Portuguese and English—has probably contributed to the difficult accessibility of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's book in Russia.

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As I have shown in this introduction, the research associated with the ontological turn (ANT, material semiotics, symmetrical anthropology, sociology of translation, object-oriented ontology, and speculative realism) remains fragmented in Russian anthropology. The overview of the four main fields of research (medical anthropology, urban anthropology, techno-anthropology, and museum anthropology) indicates that, although influential, the various versions of the turn have not so far substantially altered the research agenda of Russian anthropologists in general. Indeed, the potential of the turn is being explored only by small interdisciplinary research teams, and its perspectivist version has been applied exclusively by our foreign colleagues, mostly Siberianists.

The contributions to this issue cover these four fields of research, and one of them examines the application of the cosmological-ontological or perspectivist version of the turn—which as we have seen is more representative of anthropology *in* Russia than of Russian anthropology *per se.* Most of these contributions are authored by anthropologists who were among the first to experiment with the various concepts and approaches of the turn's toolkit in their respective anthropological subdisciplines. As I noted earlier, not only were the domains of urban anthropology and techno-anthropology the first to be affected by the turn, but they also played a predominant role in its reception. This might be explained by the relative proximity of these domains to sociology, knowing that the two institutions that spearheaded these developments— the Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences and the STS Centre of the European University in St.-Petersburg—have multidisciplinary teams composed of sociologists and anthropologists. It should be noted, however, that the country's two largest anthropological research centres—the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology in Moscow and the Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (formerly Kunstkamera) in St.-Petersburg, with over 150 research anthropologists in each institution—have mostly ignored ANT and perspectivism, even though many of their researchers specialize in urban anthropology and in traditional technologies studies.

Evgenia Popova and Liliia Zemnukhova, both graduates of the European University post-graduate program, were among the first to introduce the

methodologies of ANT and material semiotics into urban anthropology and techno-anthropology, respectively. Liliia Zemnukhova, along with her team members from the WrongTech Telegram channel, creatively applies Latour's concept of mediation, which she interprets as a complex set of sociotechnical barriers that entangle and merge social, technical, and discursive actants into a network.

One of the intriguing problems related to the new ontologies uncovered by the ontological turn concerns the role played by various infrastructures as technical objects and the position they occupy vis-à-vis humans. Evgenia Popova and Olga Bychkova were among the first researchers in Russian social sciences to conduct prolonged fieldwork on urban infrastructures. They have documented the very first attempt to integrate ANT in the ethnographic observation of the operation of large technical systems in the city of Cherepovets (Bychkova and Popova 2012).

Due to their close association with "thing theory," material culture studies eventually developed an interest in the concepts of material semiotics propagated by the works of Bruno Latour, Michel Callon, John Law, Isabelle Stengers, and their colleagues. In Russia, material culture studies have long focused on tradition and its reproduction and have largely disregarded the processes of transformation and innovation, with the corollary of viewing modern technology research as deviating from the legitimate interests of the discipline. The ontological turn is now changing this unfortunate situation, thus opening new avenues for Russian anthropological research. One such avenue is social memory and death studies, in which the notions of embodiment and embedded and entangled bodies have given rise to the concept of the body multiple. In my paper on multiple death (this issue), I extend this concept to the hitherto unexplored area of personal commemoration of the dead and of its covert geography. Finally, Virginie Vaté and John Eidson provide a stimulating critical review of the anthropology of Siberian Indigenous ontologies (this issue). They review the criticisms of the anthropology of ontology and indicate how these might apply to research in Siberia. They also pose the important question of the inconsistency of popular beliefs, which undermines schematic, or to use their term, "overly systematic" classifications of Indigenous ontologies.

As mentioned above, the ontological turn in its various applications began to unfold in Russian anthropology under the influence of both discussions in sociology and translations of its proponents' most influential books. Sonja Luehrmann, former editor-in-chief of *Anthropologica*, conceived this thematic

section after reading some publications on the subject that I authored or edited. She contacted me in December 2018 with a suggestion to guest-edit this section, while also specifying that a number of Canadian anthropologists were interested in issues related to the perspectivist and material semiotic versions of the turn. It is with great respect that the authors in this section dedicate their contributions to her memory.

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