



AFTERWORD TO AN UNPUBLISHED FORUM

Ekaterina Melnikova

European University at St Petersburg
6/1A Gagarinskaya Str., St Petersburg, Russia
melek@eu.spb.ru

Zinaida Vasilyeva

Museum für Naturkunde Berlin
43 Invalidenstrasse, Berlin, Germany
zvasilyeva@gmail.com

Abstract: The questions in the fifty-sixth issue of *Antropologicheskij forum* addressed the changes that have taken place in our lives and work over the past year. By focusing on the concept of “boundaries”, the editors invited the authors to reflect on the changes that are occurring today in our professional practices, in the field, and in our understanding of the profession. The Forum was meant to be a platform for dialogue between people not only divided, but still united by boundaries — disciplinary, epistemic, value-based, etc. The variety of responses and reactions received, and the sharpness and emotionality of many remarks faced the editors with a difficult choice. Finally, we made the decision not to publish the materials of the ‘Social Sciences and Boundaries’ Forum in the journal. In our ‘Afterword to an Unpublished Forum’ we discuss topics that have become key today: silence, public dumbness, attempts to overcome them, and the search for new ways to talk about modernity in the social sciences in Russia and about Russia today.

Keywords: professional language, silence, public dumbness, transformation of professional communities.

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Ekaterina Melnikova

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Afterword to an Unpublished Forum

The questions in the fifty-sixth issue of *Antropologicheskij forum* addressed the changes that have taken place in our lives and work over the past year. By focusing on the concept of “boundaries”, the editors invited the authors to reflect on the changes that are occurring today in our professional practices, in the field, and in our understanding of the profession. The Forum was meant to be a platform for dialogue between people not only divided, but still united by boundaries — disciplinary, epistemic, value-based, etc. The variety of responses and reactions received, and the sharpness and emotionality of many remarks faced the editors with a difficult choice. Finally, we made the decision not to publish the materials of the ‘Social Sciences and Boundaries’ Forum in the journal. In our ‘Afterword to an Unpublished Forum’ we discuss topics that have become key today: silence, public dumbness, attempts to overcome them, and the search for new ways to talk about modernity in the social sciences in Russia and about Russia today.

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The journal *Anthropologicheskij forum* began in 2004 as a place for “the exchange of ideas between representatives of different academic disciplines: anthropology, folklore, linguistics, cultural history and museum studies” [Ot redkollegii 2004: 4]. The important thing here is perhaps not the list of disciplines, but the aim of serving as “a place for the exchange of ideas” itself, a space for dialogue and discussion that would form a language for public debates, the lack of which has been written about by the authors of the collection of articles *The Language of Public Debate in Russia* [Vakhtin, Firsov 2017].¹ Every second issue of *Anthropologicheskij forum* publishes questions from the editors and the responses to them from the authors and readers of the journal. These questions address problems that are relevant to anthropology and related disciplines, but for one reason or another are ignored in analytical articles and monographs.

Essentially, a journal which made “the forum” its constitutional genre was an attempt to overcome “public silence”, admittedly on the familiar ground of the academic humanities and social sciences. Questions discussed on the pages of *AF* concerned the overall development

Ekaterina Melnikova

European University
at St Petersburg
6/1A Gagarinskaya Str.,
St Petersburg, Russia
melek@eu.spb.ru

Zinaida Vasilyeva

Museum für Naturkunde Berlin
Invalidenstrasse 43,
Berlin, Germany
zvasilyeva@gmail.com

¹ In the original Russian edition, the collection’s title was *Sindrom publichnoi nemoty* (The Syndrome of Public Muteness). [Eds.]

of anthropological knowledge, its “kitchen”, or institutional and professional workings, its structure and sore points, a proper analysis of which requires significant time and effort. The peculiarity of the “Forum” genre is that it is not individual authorial statements that acquire value, but the polyphony itself, the chorus of different voices, which allows one to grasp the diverse and complex space of the academic community and the ideas voiced therein. The publication of short responses by people directly involved in the process of scholarship allows a cross-section of different opinions to be taken and displayed, a specific point of the here and now to be fixed, by concentrating different views of existing problems and thereby revealing those problems that do not have a single solution or common interpretation.

In issue No. 56 of the journal we were planning to publish a “Forum” devoted to scholarship and borders. The editors of *AF* wanted to discuss the changes in the practice and theory of anthropology that have resulted from the events of the past year. We supposed that the concept of “borders” would allow us to reveal and trace the complex dynamic processes within academia, the points of contact and tension between new and old fields of knowledge and life, placing the interrelationships between people and institutions at the centre and at the same time retaining the general idea of “a border”, which is not only a prohibitive restriction, but also a place of passage open for communication. However, as we worked with the material in the responses that we had received, we discovered a noticeable resistance to such a focus. In many cases the questions were understood as an invitation to an “open mike” allowing people to get things off their chest, share their thoughts, and give voice to immediate testimony. For some people the “Forum” questions were a trigger for a demonstration of their personal political and social positions. Others read them as euphemistic, an allegorical formula making it possible and safe to discuss delicate subjects. Others still used the invitation as an opportunity for autoethnography, for reflection on the recent changes, according to which each person feels him- or herself to be at the same time the subject of history and (not infrequently) its hostage. Practically all the responses, no matter where their authors were living, were written emotionally, where disorientation, pain, wrath, and mourning for the former life, comprehensible even if not always well ordered, confronted the borders of language, (self-)censorship and the indeterminacy of the present and the future.

That “Forum” will not be published. We received almost thirty responses in Russian and English, but we cannot publish them without risk to the authors and to the editors of the journal. In the current circumstances we find ourselves in an extremely complicated and, in a way, curious situation. While we fully realise that the refusal

to publish the “Forum” is already a symbolically significant act, a performative statement, a loud silence, we prefer not to ignore the void that has been created: on the contrary, we find it essential to make it visible and audible. The topic of silence is foregrounded both in our decision not to publish the “Forum” and in the responses received by the journal themselves. “I have found myself in a situation when there is no language to speak of these things, that my voice has no right to express anything, and all that remains is to be silent,”¹ wrote one researcher, who did not manage to write a reply. The muteness that the journal aimed to overcome from the very beginning of its existence, and which has once again become an explicatory model for the contemporary public sphere in Russia [Vayzer, Antashev, Velizhev 2021] has returned to the pages of *Anthropologicheskij forum* as well.

In our short sketch, which stands in for, but does not replace the “Forum”, we would like to clarify the reasons for such a decision, thinking about this muteness and the attempts to overcome it through our own experience of working on this publication.

Muteness was a theme that ran through many of the responses that the journal received. At the same time, judging by the volume of texts published over the past year (even measured simply by the number of characters) that are devoted to attempts to understand and formulate one’s attitude to what is happening, this time can by no means be called a period of silence. On the contrary, talking seems to have become one of its key characteristics. A chorus of voices, a cacophony of opinions and interpretations, a polyphony, a diversity of genres and platforms — these are what we encounter every day in the media and to a certain extent in everyday life [Yusupova 2023]. It is the tension between the muteness, the silence, the impossibility or unreadiness to find a language, on the one hand, and the cacophony, the unambiguous declaration and a sort of compulsion to speak out, that is at the centre of our considerations.

An extreme form of muteness is the deliberate refusal to speak out, a performative communicative act when silence is evidence not of an incapacity for speech, but of an unwillingness to take part in dialogue as a form of interaction and co-participation. The context of a statement — the platform, the affiliation, the language of the publication — are weighed down today with a whole spectrum of additional meanings, which in some cases make the statement itself impossible. And although the question of where and in what language to speak out (or as a variant, where to

¹ Here and below we quote anonymously, with the authors’ permission, fragments from their personal correspondence with members of the editorial committee.

publish) was significant before too, now the price of the reputational risks has increased, and the price of the choice of the territory and the language of the conversation has increased correspondingly.

Another kind of muteness that our authors wrote about is characterised by a person's inner state that resists the normalisation of her or his experience. "The topic is very important, and worries me, but I have set about writing several times and understood that I cannot formulate anything coherently." An effort, and at the same time an inability, to find a language "in which one could describe the indescribable, the unprecedented" [Barskova 2022: 32], the distressing failure of attempts to write, the struggle with the language, the "deaf-blindness", as Irina Sandomirskaya calls this rhetorical property [Sandomirskaya 2013] indicate an experience of the inadequacy of the available language for the events that we are living through. Such an experience is a recognisable feature of traumatic testimonies, a constituent property of which is the dissimilation of the ordinary and the dreadful, to describe which one requires another language, which does not exist. The refusal to acknowledge one's own experience as normal, usual, capable of being described by means of accustomed language, does not mean an identification of one's own experiences with the tragic experience of victims of humanitarian disasters, but rather indicates a whole range of other communicative and social challenges.

Resistance to normalisation is expressed in a protest against "hasty" diagnoses and judgments, particularly noticeable amongst anthropologists, whose basic background assumes training in moral relativism and the acceptance of the most alien and incomprehensible positions. The habit of analysing complex life on many levels and the impossibility of "hacking out" what has been said and written is today a problem for many people who use the word as the tool of their trade to produce "long" meanings, the value of which presumes a long-term agenda and relevance. "Hasty" words à la Facebook¹ and Twitter, reflecting momentary feelings and reflections, are important, useful and acceptable in ordinary public dialogue, but seem to a number of authors to be dangerous and harmful, oversimplifying reality and giving a sense of definiteness to what is indefinite, unstable and incomprehensible.

In a recent podcast on NLO.media about Olga Freidenberg's diaries of the Leningrad blockade, Irina Paperno spoke about another contradiction of speaking-muteness: the risk of suppressing freedom of thought with ready-made linguistic clichés and concepts that lay reality on a Procrustean bed of categories which were formed in

¹ Belonging to Meta, which has been forbidden in Russia and declared to be extremist.

other historical, geographical and political contexts. Such intellectual transfers or borrowings are more a hindrance than a help to finding the words and models for an adequate description of the present day [Intellectual v izolyatsii 2023]. Our authors also spoke of risks of this kind, preferring to avoid large conceptual frameworks that treat the present day in any sort of unambiguous terms. Muteness is a means of distancing oneself from any forms of analytic and political consensus in a situation when external compulsion towards such a consensus becomes a reality on different sides of political and disciplinary borders.

At the same time as noticing muteness, many authors spoke of the importance and inner necessity of overcoming it. Combining a whole range of evidential roles, from the moral and historical witness [Assmann 2007] to the informant, researchers have tried to feel their way towards such a form of utterance and to find a genre that would not only allow the explanation and interpretation of the surrounding reality, but also provide it with sources for a future understanding. Hence the remarkable diversity of genres among the responses, distributed as widely as possible along the scale from “raw” to “cooked”, from “bare sources” to maximally distanced analysis and diagnosis of the present day.

Although this “Forum” was not envisaged as a therapeutic practice, it soon became clear that reflection on the events that were happening to researchers and inside them was ineluctably connected with therapeutic work of that sort. The place of conceptual interpretations is frequently occupied by reflection and lucubration on a person’s own, and as a rule profoundly personal experience — fieldwork, writing, observation. The conflict between a researcher’s academic role and her or his inner self is well documented and reflected on in anthropology ever since Malinowski’s famous diaries [Malinowski 2020] and it remains on the agenda [Faust, Pfeifer 2021]. The imperative to understand and to extend sympathetic attention and sensitivity in fieldwork frequently collides with inner protest and painful self-examination regarding the extent and degree to which it is appropriate, meaningful and possible to exercise empathy and compassion in a situation where “the field” breaks the researcher’s basic ethical principles and even physical boundaries. The frontier experience revealed in such responses echoes the topics of risks in the field in anthropology, to the discussion of which a previous issue of the journal was dedicated [Forum 2021]. The verbalisation of personal feelings and experiences serves both as a form of subjectivisation (the determination and expression of oneself as a human being here and now) and a means of flight from analysis: transferring attention to one’s affects as symptoms of the existing conflict allows researchers to distance themselves from global conclusions and generalisations.

Concern about the lack of a language is often accompanied by an explicit desire to feel one's way towards it. Although not all the authors responded positively to the invitation to answer the questions in the "Forum", a number of researchers thanked the editorial board for this initiative, recognising that the search for a common language transcending borders, be they national, academic, generational or political, is essential for the continuation of the dialogue. A common language is always the result of concessions and conventions, and a situation of extreme uncertainty leads, if not to the abolition, then to a maximal "suspension" of conventional language. The multiplicity of reactions, genres and means of (not) speaking that we have encountered and that cannot be reduced to one or even to several models, seems not only to be a sufficient imprint of the current language crisis, but also an honest means of articulating it.

The fact that several journals and academic media platforms invited their authors to discuss the current changes all at once [Vazyana et al. 2022; Discussion 2022; Schweitzer, Povoroznyuk 2022; Anketa 2023] testifies not only, and not even mainly, to attempts to feel one's way towards a new common language. Rather, this is an effort to preserve the existing transnational 'thought collectives' (Denkkollektive) [Fleck 1979] and epistemic communities [Haas 1991; Sánchez Criado, Estalella 2018], of which language is a principal foundation. The process of reordering social, epistemic and ethical networks is one of which researchers are acutely sensible, and the decision (not) to participate in the collective discussion becomes one of the forms in which the new borders of the academic community, and one's own positioning in respect of them, are manifested.

Like the search for a new language, the assertion, questioning, exploration and construction of new borders makes up a not insignificant part of our everyday life nowadays. Many researchers are not only changing their place of residence and work, their position and status, but are also reordering their relationships with their colleagues, institutions and field partners and regions. Some of the refusals that we received were motivated by relocation and the many practical difficulties that absorb all time and creative energy of a person. However, there were also some responses that constituted a means of living through and reflecting on these changes, practical but also political and ethical.

Against the background of the reordering of the community, old networks and affiliations acquire new meanings and connotations. Belonging to institutions, which only recently was a sign of a successful career and a stable position, now often places researchers in a vulnerable position. By contrast, translocality, which used to be

correlated not only with the resource of an international academic existence but also with its precarity, the lack of a permanent position and of a firm place in the community, seems in the current situation to possess an additional emancipatory potential, also because it removes the burden of old connexions and the necessity of positioning oneself in relation to traditional institutions.

A central theme of many responses was the maintenance of personal connexions and of the possibility of preserving intellectual life in a situation where the research community is closed and/or polarised. Within this, colleagues from abroad also express concern at the growing role of administrative directives in regulating academic life. Against this background, old contacts and networks acquire an even greater significance, not only helping to patch up the rents in the fabric of academic life, but also maintaining the experience of transnational research solidarity. Some authors noted the importance of technology in maintaining relationships, and also placed upon it their hopes that complete isolation will be impossible in the modern world.

The reordering of borders within the community, like the reordering of national borders, is inevitably accompanied by a re-evaluation of the discipline and of the professional practices of ethnographers. What field is (in)accessible? What means of presenting material are (im)possible and (un)acceptable? What can(not) be a topic for research? What objects can(not) be included nowadays in museum collections? How can one conduct fieldwork and maintain connexions with informants safely — for the field subjects and for oneself?

Much has been written since the middle of the twentieth century about how anthropology as a discipline has been rooted in colonialism as a means of understanding the world and governing it. The collections and exhibitions in ethnographical museums are clear evidence of how societies have lived through this experience. Being aware of that heritage, many generations of anthropologists have asked the question how their professional interest affects the life of the communities they study, and how they can work so as not to harm them (or, better, so as to help them), taking upon themselves the role of mediators in conflicts, guides, Kulturträger, or simply sympathetic and interested citizens. The tension between research interest and political responsibility regarding the communities being studied has led to a reinterpretation of fieldwork as collaboration, accompanied by a constant problematisation and critical reflection on one's own methods of work, and by a discussion of "the role and ethical position of the researcher in the field" [Vasilyeva, Kasatkina, Khandozhko 2021: 408]. Variants of this reflexive turn in the social sciences are also known as the

participatory, actionist or collaborative approaches [Yarskaya-Smirnova, Romanov 2004; Utekhin 2015]. There are not so many followers of these approaches in Russia,¹ and those who regard their social mission as an important dimension of their ethnographical practice are today confronted with new challenges. If the anthropologist's task includes the mission of a go-between in the organisation of social dialogue and cultural transfer in the very broadest sense, it is completely unclear from what language and into what language the observed reality can and should be translated, for whom and for what purpose the evidence of the present should be preserved, and with whom and in what language one's observations should be shared.

This general state of inarticulacy, silence and muteness nevertheless conceals active work in searching for meanings, new borders and points of contact with the field and with each other. The preparation of this "Forum" also made a contribution to this work: correspondence with authors and discussion within the editorial board were simultaneously performance, and therapy, and practice in maintaining the community, and a moment for expressing positions, when in another context we might have preferred to stay silent.

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¹ One outstanding example is the work of Anna Klepikova [Klepikova 2019].

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