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**On the documentary production of the
'undocumented' migrant in urban Russia**

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On the documentary production of the ‘undocumented’ migrant in urban Russia

The road west out of Batken, the dusty provincial town of 11,000 that in 1999 became Kyrgyzstan’s newest regional [*oblast’*] centre, provides a vivid visual reminder of the complex new dependencies that connect livelihoods in the margins of Central Asia’s newly-independent states with the erstwhile Soviet centre. Second-hand *Audis* that have been “chased back” from car markets in Moscow compete with spluttering yellow buses that have plied this pot-holed road since the 1970s. Adobe huts with corrugated roofs squat alongside three-storey brick homes with elaborate facades and satellite dishes jutting out over high walls. In the sprawling market at Samarkandek that straddles the Kyrgyz-Tajik border, Russian roubles are used alongside Kyrgyz som and Tajik somoni – the currency of choice for returned labour migrants and their families, though technically illegal here. *Western Union* logos painted onto shops speak of formal flows of money; crowds of relatives counting out money beside an unmarked private home speak of the informal “banks” that have materialised in their wake. Kiosks and tea-houses carry advertisements for buses departing for Omsk, Tomsk and Ulianovsk. And repainted mosques celebrate the names of villagers whose labour in Russia has helped finance their reconstruction. Seasonal migration has become inscribed on the landscape of southern Kyrgyzstan in recent years, just as it has come, in more subtle ways, to reframe biographies, remake bodies and transform apprehensions of wealth.

In Ak-Tatyr, one of several border villages where I spent several months during fieldwork in 2004-5 and again earlier this year, the impact of remittances is as pronounced and complex as it is sudden. Elderly women would compare the absence

of young men to the war-time departure of working-age males to the front. The generic expression, “gone to town” [*shaarga ketken*] would be used to refer to departures for Moscow rather than Batken or Kyrgyzstan’s own capital city, Bishkek. The presence of “green money” in the village today is contrasted with the “hungry” 1990s when expenditure on life-cycle ceremonies virtually ceased. Several homes have been rebuilt and the cost of bride-price (*kalym*) has risen significantly. But if these changes have, as one elderly woman put it, meant that “people now say prayers to Putin *podsha* (~ Tsar Putin) for creating conditions to live”.¹ it has also exposed just how conditional such labour is, and at what personal and social cost. Decisions to send sons (and, less frequently, daughters-in-law) to Russia are fraught with economic and moral uncertainty: will he be able to find work? Will he be able to get a “legal” [*zakonnyi*] residence registration and work permit? Will children who remain behind in the village become reserved [*uyalchak*] from lack of social contact? Will he earn enough for it to be considered a “successful” trip, but not so much that it might arouse envy and the spreading of harmful words? And will he be able to avoid the ultimate risk of work that is exploitative, unregulated and technically illegal: a five-year deportation and the indignity of a night in the city’s isolation unit [*SIZO*]? It is the ambiguity of labour that is at once pervasive and precarious; intensely risky, but with the potential to generate significant fortune; in a city, Moscow, that is at once intimately familiar and intimidatingly alien; and which is poised ambiguously between the “legal” and the “illegal” that makes contemporary labour migration within the post-Soviet space at once analytically challenging and theoretically generative.

¹ Lit. for creating conditions to find bread [*nan tapshiga shart kылды*]

Beyond flows and forces: an ethnography of regulation

I start from this ambiguity deliberately. Contemporary post-socialist labour migrations tend to be explored in terms of dramatic movements, aggregate numbers and binary categories: a language, typically, of “flows” and “waves”, premised often upon a tidy distinction between “legal” and “illegal” migration. Such languages obscure the complex decisions that lie behind any decision to migrate and the moral assessments in which they are embedded. More significantly, they tend to exclude from analysis the dense network of administrative regulations that can make the boundary between legality and illegality a fragile and contested one. As De Genova has argued in a recent analysis of migrant “deportability” in everyday life, “‘illegality’ (much like citizenship) is a juridical status that entails a social relation to the state and is thus a pre-eminently political identity.” Conducting research on undocumented noncitizens from the unexamined standpoint of its citizens thus represents, in De Genova’s terms, “the kind of uncritical ethnocentrism that is, by definition, a perversion of anthropology’s putative aims as a distinctive mode of enquiry” (De Genova, 2002: 422).

In the post-Soviet context, a rhetoric of elemental forces in regard to migration is heightened by the scale and relative novelty of seasonal movement in search of work – a process, driven by an oil-fuelled building boom, which has turned Russia into the world’s second net migrant-receiving country after the US (IOM, 2005: 397) and made the economies of Central Asia among the most remittance-

dependent in the world.² In scholarly accounts of Central Asian labour migration the focus has primarily been upon establishing aggregate facts and predicting future dynamics: how many people are on the move? How much money are they remitting? Is the scale of migration fundamentally stabilizing (by “propping up” struggling economies and countering Russia’s demographic decline) or destabilizing (by changing Russia’s “ethnic profile”)?

Given the scale of this post-Soviet movement and the paradigmatically global trends into which it inserts, it is striking the lack of ethnographic enquiry into contemporary undocumented migrations and the administrative technologies through which migrant illegality is produced. A language of forces and flows: of Russia “absorbing the surplus labour from the Caucasus and Central Asian states” as one analyst recently put it (Hill, 2004) tends to naturalise processes that are intensely social and political, to portray “legality” as inhering in persons rather than policies, and to obscure the complex ways in which subjects are navigating these shifts, practically, legally and ethically. In Russian, indeed, “illegal” [*nelegal*] has become so thoroughly naturalised as a category of social analysis and political practice that it functions as a noun as well as an adjective. No longer requiring the qualifier “immigrant”, the person (the *nelegal*) fuses with the status - the contingent attribute (in violation of an administrative regime) comes to define the person’s very being. This linguistic slippage is consequential. Once one has become, discursively,

² According to research by *Inter-American Dialogue*, cited in the New York Times, Tajikistan derives 37% of its GDP from remittances, making it the third most remittance-dependent country in the world after Guinea-Bissau and Eritrea. Kyrgyzstan is the 7th most remittance-dependent economy, with 28% of its GDP from remittances (DeParle, 2007). According to Russia’s Central Bank (which records only official money transfers through banks and the post office), in 2005, \$3.2 billion was formally remitted to the countries of the CIS. The director of the Central bank estimated the volume of informal money transfers to be higher than \$10 billion, “undermining the system of state control” (*Kommersant*, 3rd October 2006).

not just (contingently) illegal but *an* illegal, a person always-already beyond law, it is not difficult for other aspects of one's humanity to be denied. As Agamben (2005: 20) has argued, continuing a rich line of critical legal theorising, "the conception of human rights based on the supposed existence of human beings as such [...] proves to be untenable as soon as those who profess it find themselves for the first time with people who have really lost every quality and every specific relation except for the pure fact of being human."

My aim in this paper is to foreground such legal/illegal productions, and to explore how this blurred boundary is navigated in practice by labour migrants from several remittance-dependent villages in southern Kyrgyzstan. I draw upon survey and interview materials from returned labour migrants in order to establish what we might call the political economy of migrant illegality – that is, the existent economic relations, housing opportunities and registration strategies that together determine any given migrant's "legibility" to the state. As I argue below, these materials demonstrate the paradox of excessive regulation upon internal mobility. A technology intended to render temporary residents visible to stately accounting *de facto* fosters a host of strategies that ensure migrants' "invisibility" – strategies in which urban law enforcement are intimately involved.

This is, at one level, a peculiarly "post-Soviet" story. The system of internal residence upon which I focus has historical continuities; the *ways* in which the contemporary Russian state seeks to "see" its population (cf. Scott, 1998) conditioned by past practice. It is also paradigmatically *post-socialist*. Undocumented Central Asian labour in contemporary Moscow represents perhaps a "limit case" of post-collective labour. Uncontracted and expendable, untaxed and

exploitative, the informal labour on commercial and individual building sites that constitute the primary source of income in Ak-Tatyr is at the sharp edge of contemporary Russian capitalism.

Yet, whilst my paper seeks to recognise what is particular about *this* instance of post-collective labour regulation, it also suggests lines of comparison that extend beyond the post-Soviet sphere. I argue that the dynamics of legal/illegal productions should be considered less as an instance of Russian “exceptionalism” than as part of broader global processes, in which economic accumulation thrives upon the creation of legal exceptions. This move demands bringing post-socialist labour migrations into theoretical conversation with debates about transnationalism and neoliberalism – debates, as Leyla Keough has argued in the case of Gagauz “mobile mothers” who travel to Turkey in search of work, from which they have been largely absent (Keough, 2006: 434). It also demands putting the administrative regime itself (and not just the migrant *community*) within the ethnographic lens. Sociological and anthropological studies focused on migrant livelihoods in the post-Soviet space have tended to frame their enquiry in terms of particular “ethnic communities” as self-evident units of study. As such, it is the putative “cultural stuff” (cf. Barth, 1969) of communities and their capacity for adaptation and “integration” that has garnered most attention. The *politics* of producing difference; the everyday techniques of racialization, or the process aptly identified by Dauvergne as the “securitization of migration law” has garnered significantly less attention.

Rather than foregrounding the “migrant community”, then, my focus is the administrative system through which temporary residence and work in Russia is registered and regulated. This provides a productive point of entry for thinking

about the intersection of neoliberal logics with political technologies, and thus for denaturalising migrant illegality “as a seemingly objective ‘thing in itself’” (De Genova 2005: 248). It also provides a point of entry for thinking about how a particular regime of governing mediates everyday life, from the way domestic space is organised to a migrant’s habitus in the metro. A *registratsiia*, for my informants, was not just a certification of status. It was also a very material object – a stamp in the passport the qualities of which (authentic or fake; blurred or clear; carefully or hastily filled in) made real differences to the experience of life in the city. The *registratsiia* was an object of emotion and affect, not just a formal designation (cf. Navaro-Yashin, 2007), its effects profoundly uncertain. A “clean” document always bore the possibility of exposure as a “fake” – being “written through” always bore with it the anxiety of violation. As Tobias Kelly has argued in the context of Palestinians’ “documented lives”, documents enter life not just as reifying abstractions but as “an unpredictable and unstable technique of governance”, in which the separation between the “legal” and the “physical” person on which they nominally depend collapses in practice (2006: 90). This fragility - and the myriad encounters with law enforcement that it served to generate – profoundly mediated my informants’ accounts of their experiences in Russia. Less the fact of “illegality” *per se*, it is the radical contingency of being “legal” in context where administrative regulations and rules were felt to be inherently unknowable that I seek to capture here. The “clean fake” [*taza fal’shivyi*] – an “illegal” registration document issued through “legal” channels that is simultaneously authorising and fake captures, perhaps more than any other trope, this ambiguous predicament. If we are to grasp

the particularities of contemporary migrant subject formation in Moscow it is to this complexity that we must attend.

How, though, to study those who are formally “undocumented” – or, more accurately, who survive with a host of “clean-fake” documents – juridically invalid, but functionally sufficient to find work or accommodation and, coupled with a successful performance, sufficient to convince a policemen of a right not to be deported? How to begin to figure out the mechanisms by which a person who enters the country legally, without a visa, comes to end up in a condition of administrative violation – becomes *nelegal* in official eyes? And how to begin to get at the way in which this documentary precariousness – the fact that a migrant often don’t know what the “real” status of the documents she possesses is –mediates experiences of the city, the boundaries of trust and belonging, the spaces that can be considered “safe”?

Since “undocumented” migrants typically tend to be less accessible to bureaucrats and social researchers alike, I started my research by getting immersed in daily life in a typical sending community in southern Kyrgyzstan, and, in anthropological fashion am now following the social networks from there to apartments, workplaces, basements and building sites in Moscow. With my co-researcher, Mirgul Karimova, I conducted 50 in-depth interviews in Kyrgyz with returned labour migrants and their family members, most of these 2-3 hours in length. In order to get a quantitative overview of the scale and scope of migrant labour at village level we also conducted a household survey in five kin-related villages, gathering data from 500 randomly chosen migrant and non-migrant households through structured interviews, each lasting about one and a half hours.

To situate this part of the research I want to take us briefly back to southern Kyrgyzstan, to the group of four Kyrgyz villages lying contiguous to one another on two sides of the Isfara River. This is a rural area to the south west of Batken where the river and the densely-planted rice fields along its length tack back and forth between the jurisdiction of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Once part of the same Sovkhoz, three of the four villages are now subordinate to the same village administration (*aiyl okmotu*), which takes its name from the largest of these villages, Ak-Tatyr. Connected through kinship and often spoken of as constituting a single moral unit, these villages today share a similar economic profile, with remittances the single largest source of domestic incomes. In the years “before Russia” [*Rossiyaga cheiin*] as the 1990s are now referred, apricots and rice constituted the main source of cash, and apricot blossom continues to coat this otherwise inhospitable “stony land” [*tash jer*] every March. The cultivation of rice and apricots within the Sovkhoz and on domestic plots meant that this densely irrigated area of southern Kyrgyzstan had been a site of considerable seasonal travel to Russia as the 1970s. Older men who had at one time financed elaborate lifecycle ceremonies through the money earned by transporting apricots to Nizhnii Novgorod (a city still referred to here by its Soviet name, Gorkii) would often lament that whilst their sons now travelled to Russia as “slaves”, it was *they* with their lorry-loads of fresh and dried fruit, who used to provision Russia.

The economic collapse of the early 1990s, combined with increasing obstacles to local cross-border movement and trade, have rendered the business of harvesting and selling apricots increasingly difficult. Apricots are a notoriously unpredictable crop: a sudden frost in early spring when the tree is in blossom can

make the difference between an abundant season and none at all. And whilst it used to be sufficiently profitable to trade apricots in Russia one lorry-load at a time, customs dues and a road police in Kazakhstan with a voracious appetite for “fines” mean that now only the wealthiest of farmers have the capital to be able to sell their crop anywhere beyond Batken or Samarkandek. As a rule, it is Tajik traders, with access to the rail network just across the border and sufficient capital to send a train-load of the fruit at a time, who are able to profit from today’s competitive trade in dried fruit. Tajikistan’s devastating civil war, together with acute land shortage in the villages immediately bordering Ak-Tatyr, meant that long distance labour migration, both to regional capitals and to Russia, was a much earlier livelihood strategy here. It is this fact, according to many Ak-Tatyr elders, that accounts for the speed with which migration has come to be routinised in the Kyrgyz villages at the border.

By the mid-2000s, the economic differentials opened up by work in Russia were too stark not to be impacting upon domestic calculations, even by those who were determined that they would “never leave Batken”. In the summer of 2005, a mathematics teacher from Ak-Tatyr school in the “highest category”, with 25 years’ teaching experience and a double teaching load would still be earning 6-7 times less than he would as an unskilled labourer [*kara jumushchi/ chernorabochii*] on a Moscow building site. This disparity was having devastating consequences for local schools, as it was widely acknowledged to be the educated, Russian-speaking, confident young men who were above all eager to earn a better living “in town”. It was also felt to be reversing the “proper”, normative relationship between study and earning potential. As we took the bus together from Batken back to his home in Ak-

Tatyr, Jengish, a student in his third year of university in Batken, joked about his predicament as one of only a handful of school-mates who had decided to persevere with studies instead of leaving for Moscow:

“What does the student who used to get “twos” [*dvoishchnik* – i.e. failing grades] now have? A car and an apartment. What does the student who used to get “threes” [*troishchnik* – i.e. poor grades] now have? A car, an apartment and a *dacha*! And what does the student who used to get “fives” [*otlichnik* – i.e. excellent grades] now have? Debts, fines, fears, illness and hopelessness”.

Jengish recounted this in jest, of course, and with more than a hint of pride that he was, despite his precarious financial predicament, still the student who got excellent grades. A year later, however, the differential with his school friends who had returned with money to build homes and hold weddings had become, as he put it, a source of “shame” [*uiat*] and Jengish, too, left for Moscow, abandoning his studies. In the summer of 2006, when I travelled from Bishkek to Moscow by train, I experienced this bittersweet of life “in town” first hand: it was Jengish who met me at the Kazan station, on his way to a 12-hour shift cleaning supermarket trolleys. As we rode the Moscow metro together, trading news about friends in Batken, Jengish’s comments swung between the exhilaration and despair that he felt by turns in Moscow. He was managing to save money, and was navigating his way in Russian – a language that he had previously understood but not spoken. But walking the streets near his home he always felt like a “rabbit in a car’s headlights” running to

stay unchecked by the Moscow militia, unsure which way to leap. “Even if you don’t get physically exhausted in Moscow, you will be morally exhausted [*moral’no charchasyng*]. Guaranteed”.

To try to grasp something of the experiences, the household survey’s 105 questions covered a variety of aspects of migrant experiences, including motivations for sending (or not sending) family members to Russia; decisions about place and kind of work abroad; decisions about the control and investment of remittances; and assessment of changes in family dynamics and gender roles and relations as a result of extended family absence. Whilst I am still in the throws of exploring this data, a preliminary analysis of results provides a vivid picture of the scale of labour migration from this region, and the extent to which remittances have come to sustain rural livelihoods. At time of interview earlier this year (which was before the major migration season, which occurs in the spring), 35.6% of all of the surveyed families had at least one member currently working in Russia, and 85.8% of all families had had a least one member working in Russia at some point during the preceding five years. Moreover, the villages had seen a dramatic increase in the scope of out-migration over the preceding half decade, with a classic “snowball effect” characteristic of migrant communities elsewhere, as those who had recently left invited brothers, friends, wives, school-mates and fellow-villagers to come and join them abroad.

Given the particular concerns that I was bringing to the research, a significant proportion of the questions, in survey and in-depth interview alike, focused on strategies for, and obstacles to, becoming and remaining “documented” in Russia; and in particular, on the possibility for obtaining a residence registration and work

permit (both of these legal requirements but notoriously difficult to obtain), as well as on work conditions, work contracts and opportunities to assert labour and other rights. Let me try to talk you through what this phase of the research revealed. A citizen of Kyrgyzstan can enter Russia without a visa, and is entitled to stay for up to 90 days in the country before being obliged to leave and enter again anew (unsurprisingly there is a rich local economy in fake border stamps and migration cards). He or she must register with the Federal Migration Service, however, within 3 days of arriving in order to avoid fines and potential deportation. This system for registering internal residence in the state is a hold-over from the Soviet *propiska* system through which internal movement within the Soviet state was regulated.³ It is nominally designed to keep track of the city's temporary population. Only certain kinds of accommodation, however, – notably those that are “permanent”, those that are deemed fit for human habitation, or those with a certain number of humans per metre square – “count” as legally visible homes. Here lies the first in a series of Catch 22 situations, for overwhelmingly, migrants tend to live in accommodation that is invisible to stately systems of accounting: that is, in a railway wagon on a construction site; in shipping containers on market-sites; in the basement of an apartment building, or sharing a 2 or 3 room apartment with typically between 15 and 25 other migrants.

There is an economic rationale here, just as there is in other cities, such as Dubai, with large migrant populations and soaring real estate costs. Wages in

³ In Russia the Soviet *propiska* was technically banned, in name at least, in the 1993 law on freedom of movement (Moiseenko, 1999: 46), which replaced the *propiska* with a system of residence registration. The continuation of the term *propiska* in everyday conversation is indicative of the fact that the new law represented a continuation of past restrictions upon movement and limitations upon permanent residence for new arrivals in all but name (ibid: 48; FIDH/Assistance Civique 2007).

Moscow for migrant workers are typically just half of what they are for those with Russian citizenship – at the current moment averaging around 15-20,000 roubles. This is under a half of the average rental cost of a simple, unfurnished 2 or 3 room flat in the outskirts of Moscow. As a result, most migrants live in property that is “invisible” to the seeing state, and hence rely on private firms and middle-men – themselves often migrants who have more years’ experience navigating the Russian bureaucracy – to obtain the registration documents needed to avoid fines and eventual deportation.

The survey data reveal that the majority of migrants interviewed *did* have some kind of residence registration for at least part of their stay in Russia. This is in itself a striking shift from five years ago, when it was much more common for migrants simply to purchase a fake registration from a market or railway station on arrival in the city, and to live in fear of being caught by the police. However, if we look at how this was obtained, what we see is that in the majority of cases this was bought through a private firm or individual who processes these documents for a fee. In response to the question, “did you have to give a bribe to obtain this registration”, over 60% of respondents replied that they did. Moreover, over half of those respondents who did have some kind of residence registration indicated that they never lived in the place where they were registered. As a result, this so called “clean” document - one that is visible to state systems of accounting and officially registered, can very quickly come to be identified as a “fake” if a policeman or migration official comes to tell that the migrant does not in fact live where he or she is registered. The document’s “cleanliness”, in other words, depends for it to work

upon a successful performance to the person doing the checking: depends upon being able to efficaciously assert a right to be here in the city.

A similar kind of scenario arises if we look at the organisation of work. A work permit can be obtained relatively straightforwardly, though at considerable cost, for the first three months' work in Russia. Thereafter, the migrant either needs to leave the country and enter it again, becoming a "new migrant" for the next three months and able to obtain another short-term work permit, or to obtain a longer-term permit that can allow them to work legally for up to a year. Here is the second site at which the migrant worker risks becoming "undocumented". For the number of legally issued work permits depends upon a quota, established each year in each city or administrative district. Since a permanent work permit demands a whole packet of documents – and in any cases most of the quotas are filled early in the year – migrant workers or, more rarely, their employers, resort to obtaining work permits through commercial firms, which typically charge several thousand roubles – that is the equivalent to a month's salary – for the document. As with the residence registration, however, there are few independent ways of telling whether the document that has been issued is "clean" or "fake". As this photograph suggests, the "fakes" are often difficult to distinguish from the "originals", and as many respondents pointed out to me in interview, they were rarely entirely sure whether their permit was "really" fake or not. Moreover, a document often starts out as one thing, but then "becomes" the other, since the companies issuing the documents are known to increase their quota by issuing what ought to be a unique identifying number to multiple permit holders. The unfortunate migrant worker only finds out that their document has been ascribed to a different person – if it carries a different

“identity” – if and when they are stopped by the police and find that their document no longer documents *them*.

There is a further twist to the story, however. Because, as we found during our research, whilst the majority of migrants had a work permit for their period of labour, relatively few were issued a work *contract*. Overwhelmingly, agreements are made orally, either with the employer him or herself or, as is often the case, with an intermediary who receives and distributes the salary that is paid on the employee’s behalf. Quite apart from the abuses to which this leaves employees open – the scale of which is considerable, and the topic of a different talk -- without a work contract, the work permit does not have force – does not count as proof that you really are employed.

There are mechanisms, of course, for getting round this, just as there are mechanisms for ensuring that a 3-room flat intended for a single family in fact comes to host 20 or 30 people. Usually these mechanisms involve informal payments to state officials – “cigarette money” as it is often called, to your local policeman – the lowest level of a huge pyramid of corruption that stretches very high indeed. The world of “clean fakes” is economically productive – one of the reasons, I am often told by my informants and privately by migration officials alike – why there is little political will to try to regularise migrants’ status in the city.

But it also profoundly mediates experiences of the city, and of the possibility of feeling “at home”. The most pervasive and widely noted feature of documentary ambiguity was the way that it infused routine with uncertainty. Jengish, for instance, was in possession of a “clean” *propiska*, but described how he nonetheless felt on edge if he was stopped by policemen near his home because the registration

indicated his place of residence to be in another part of town. Akram, whose brother had been deported in a raid following the tragic school shooting in Beslan on September 1st 2004, described how the uncertainty of “having the chance to work tomorrow” created a climate of intense competition on the commercial building site where he worked; competition that was often coded in ethnic terms. Riding the metro or just walking down the street in Moscow’s commercial districts could be a source of intense anxiety. Deportations, whilst not common, were frequent enough for everyone to know someone who had been unceremoniously deported from Russia. They thus represented a very real risk; particularly at times when terrorist threat gave “securitization” a distinctly racialised twist.

Uncertainty about the future also characterised the world of work. Non-contractual labour on building sites was particularly vulnerable to sudden terminations and underpayment. In Russian, the term used to convey the (unplanned) dismissal of an employee is *kidat’* – a verb that speaks at once of throwing or hurling, and of throwing *away*. This sense of labour as inherently disposable was a source of frequent commentary, and led several men from Ak-Tatyr to deliberately seek out smaller, “private” building sites, where the owner himself answered for security [*ozu joop beret*].

In his penetrating study of everyday illegality amongst Mexican migrants in Chicago, De Genova has characterised this predicament as one of “deportability” (2005: 427). Being deportable, he argues, is quite different from being *deported*. It is less a legal state than an existential one: an “enforced orientation to the present” in which the future is fundamentally revocable (De Genova, *ibid*: 427). This condition, as many migrants and their families reminded me, helped foster and reinforce forms

of categorical subordination: the fact, as one elderly Ak-Tatyr lady put it, referring to a grandson's work, that the Kyrgyz in Russia "are quieter than the lamb" [*al jakta kyrgyzdar koidon joosh*]. It is, at one level, a mechanism for keeping labour cheap. But it also generates a host of other strategies that stretch the boundary between the physical and the documented person. In Russia, whole industries have developed around the separation of these two persons to provide what we might call "fictive visibility" to the state: a documented persona that enables the real person to get on with life unhindered. Such practices range from the small-scale and weakly institutionalised (such as the *ad hoc* selling of fake [*fal'shivye*] registration documents by Uzbek traders in Moscow's Kazan station) to large-scale operations specialising in the arrangement of *propiska*-granting "fictive marriages" [*fiktivnye braky*].

This separation has two striking consequences. Firstly, it can create sites of surprising intimacy and informality between those nominally regulating movement of people within the city (in particular the local, *uchastkovye* police responsible for a particular block) and the migrant to whom protection is being afforded. In the winter and spring of 2005, a period of particularly vigorous urban "clean-ups" following the tragic shootings in Beslan the previous autumn, many migrants from Ak-Tatyr began simply to leave their passport at home and to carry only a minimum amount of money on their person. Whilst technically illegal (and an invitation for fines and/or detention in a police cell) it was nonetheless considered less risky than being caught with a fake *propiska* and issued a deportation stamp. As one seasoned brigade-leader reasoned, "I would rather spend three hours in the monkey-cage [*obez'iannik* – ie. police detention cell] than have to pay 5,000 roubles to get my

passport back from them!” In an interesting illustration of the ironic concealments generated by this kind of situation, several men who had returned from working in Moscow the previous year described how, for a fee, local police officers responsible for a given block of houses would issue a document [*spravka*] “certifying” that the migrant’s passport had *already* been taken by them to register their presence or to record some minor administrative offence. A fictive offence, in other words, was used to enable the migrant to keep his real passport at home: policeman and migrant collaborating here in a double layer of documentary obfuscation to keep the “real” person illegible.

Secondly, the intimate involvement of law “enforcement” in this economy of invisibility meant a profound blurring of the boundary between “law” and its outside in practice. Indeed, in the extended interviews I conducted with returned migrants, it was this discursive blurring between the domains of the “official” and the “unofficial” that was particularly striking. Jyldyz, an articulate journalist who, in her Bishkek life, is professionally invested in policing the domain of “law”, struggled to define the boundary when it came to her life in Russia. She described in the following way the regular checks that occurred in the market where she sold clothes and household goods [*shmotki*] in Omsk:

The rate [*stavka*] used to be between ten and fifty roubles. As soon as [the police] catch you. You haven’t got a *propiska*.

MR: And was that a fine, or a bribe?

Well... it was kind of both a fine and a bribe, you know? It's the same thing [*odno i to zhe*]. You haven't got a *propiska*. I had a ticket [which allowed me to live unregistered] for three days and a month had gone past. So you've got to give fifty roubles if you want to deal with it there and then [*razvesti na meste*]. If they take you to the *GOM* [city police department] ... you'll have to pay the state one hundred roubles.

Despite her acute legal sense, Jyldyz had difficulty calling the fee that she had to pay either a fine or bribe; in her rendering, it was just the *stavka*, the rate for being able to get on with her job. Its technical status made little difference to her, since it did not, at the level of experience, correlate with a right or a respond to a violation. As such she would rather pay the policeman (who is someone here discursively separate from the state) than risk a larger fine and temporary detention with the "drunks and maniacs" who frequented the police detention cell.

Becoming black

Perhaps the most striking effect of this gulf between "physical" and "documented" person, however, was the way in which skin colour came to index and code "illegality". During research in Ak-Tatyr, I was often struck by the extent to which colour came to figure in recollections of life in Russia, and of the particular way in which it entered narrative accounts. I felt surprise at this use in part because "race" is not an everyday category of practice in Kyrgyzstan. Distinctions are often made between "Kyrgyz" and "Russians", and sometimes between "Asians" and

“Europeans”; but “black” and “white” rarely enter public discourse as a way of categorising people. I was also struck because several of the discursive tropes through which “blackness” entered the conversation signalled just how problematic a category it was felt to be. The expression often used to talk of this racialization was *biz chernyi bolup kaldyk* - literally, “we became black” – with the Russian word for black [*chernyi*] used even when the description was occurring in Kyrgyz. Moreover, the expressions in which such phrases were typically couched – *al jakta* [“over there”], or “*sen chernyi*” *deit* [they’ll call you black] suggested that *chernyi* here signalled a particular kind of relation that was time and space specific: an ascriptive category rather than a term of self-identification.

The complex dynamics of this racialization in urban Russia are beyond the scope of this paper. The causes, I suspect are complex, and we should be wary of deterministic models, just as we should of reading western genealogies of “race” into the Russian context. What I wish to emphasise is one particular *effect* of the pervasive separation between “physical” and “documented” persons that the documentary regime helped foster. The registration and work permit, as we have seen, exist declaratively as a mechanism for registering, and thus regulating, movement of non-locals in major cities and migration-prone areas of the Russian Federation. In practice, however, the realities of the migrant economy coupled with the registration requirements mean that most migrants are always-already in a state of administrative offense.

This has fairly obvious repercussions for the logics of policing. With “illegals” potentially everywhere, violations of the registration regime are some of the easiest “crimes” for under-funded police officers to catch: there is little risk involved, good

returns, and a very large pool of potential offenders.⁴ Yet there is also a more pernicious effect. The action of identifying registration violators both endorses, and gives further credence to, official discourses of “security” that portray “threat” as emanating overwhelmingly from Russia’s southern neighbours. Like the penitentiary regime identified by Foucault (1977), and the interventions of the development industry analysed by Ferguson (1994), the very extent of failure (“look how many people are slipping through the net!”) is used to justify the system’s continued existence. For this reason there exists, I suggest, not just a registration system, but a registration *regime*, in which colour, as the bluntest shorthand for “foreign” and hence “unregistered,” becomes the proxy for illegality, and thus easily identified as its apparent cause. Precisely because the “documented person” is shot through with uncertainty (is this passport a fake? Does the person really live at this address? Is this *spravka* telling the truth or not?), the physical person, ironically, becomes scrutinized all the more intensely as the locus of truth. Just as the proliferation of fakes [*poddelki*] within society more generally invites an intensification of practices aimed at determining authenticity, with “everyday moral judgments depend[ant] on the ability to quickly re-discern substantive value from illusory surfaces” (Lemon, 1998: 24), so, too, with people. In a world of suspicious documents, the surface of the human body becomes the site for indexing truth.

Conclusion

⁴ A quantitative survey of police document checking on the Moscow metro, in which the proportion of “non-Slavs” whose documents were checked was analysed against the “benchmark” metro-riding population for several Moscow metro stops claimed to reveal “the most extreme and egregious ethnic profiling ever documented through a statistical survey of the practice” (Jurix, 2006: 51-52).

Such dynamics should make us wary of monochrome accounts of post-socialist subject formation. “Post-socialism” may today be of limited analytic use for explaining processes, such as migrant movement between Central Asia and Russia, which are determined less by aftermaths of socialism than by political technologies, commodity flows and logics of accumulation that are, at least aspirationally, global. But if post-socialism provides too restrictive an interpretative lens, we should wary of replacing this with an encompassing, undifferentiated account of “neoliberalism” in which a disembedded economy hangs “above” society, directing it and institutions and subjects all in its image.

The case of the documentary regime in Russia that I have explored in this paper is doubly instructive in this regard. On the one hand, it demonstrates how political technologies (themselves historically and culturally mediated) intersect with economic rationalities to produce “regimes of living” that are multiple and distinct. It is by attending to the complex ways in which particular rationalities take root (or fail to take root) at the level of everyday life that we can grasp the diversity of contemporary neoliberalisms and their complex ethical stakes (cf Hoffman et al 2006: 10). On the other hand, the Russian case reminds us just how complex – and counterintuitive – the outcomes of such intersections can be. In the former Soviet space, the combination of a radically neoliberal logic of capitalist accumulation with a draconian system for regulating internal movement has led, ironically, to a *reification* of national and other boundaries. Rather than a space of mobile, unmarked consumers freely buying and selling their labour, what emerges is an intensely marked system of subordination, something analogous to what Hartman

(2007) calls in the context of the new EU economy of “freely-moving” goods and services, a “platonic” system of categorical roles.

It also demands that we think about how we talk about and theorise “undocumented” migration. What my research reveals is that, as in other global cities, the boundary between formally legalised and illegalised presence in the nation state is narrow, ambiguous and constantly shifting: you can move in and out of the status in the duration of period of residence or work in the country; even during the course of a single day. Our categories of academic and political analysis, however, have yet to catch up with the complexities of this reality, and – I would suggest – the shift in academic analysis towards a language of “undocumented migrants” does not necessarily render the reality more accurately. For the people that I work with, the problem is not being “undocumented” but being surrounded by an excess of documents, a series of simulacra, of clean fakes, the status of which is never entirely clear, and the efficacy of which comes to depend on successfully performing the “migrant worker”. This fact profoundly mediates experiences of the city – it determines the adrenalin rush migrant workers often feel at the moment that they enter the Moscow metro – “will I be checked? Will I be picked out?” It conditions feelings of suspicion and trust. Perhaps most importantly it allows a host of other practices to thrive in the gap between life and law – most visibly and egregiously, perhaps, the exploitation of migrant workers and the cheapening of their labour: but also and no less consequentially, the proliferation of simulacrae – “if you pay me, I’ll pretend not to notice that your document is fake” and the pervasive racialisation of everyday life.

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