

The Difficulty of Being Oneself: Identity Politics of “Old-Settler” Communities in Northeastern Siberia¹

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Beginnings

During the second third of the 17th century, strangers began to appear along the major rivers of northeastern Siberia, such as the Indigirka, Kolyma, and Anadyr rivers.² These strangers were part of Russia's eastward expansion across the Ural mountains, which had commenced in the late 16th century. These people, who came from different parts of Muscovy – and whom we will call Russians for simplicity's sake – had one obvious goal: furs, furs, furs. Some of those strangers were there by governmental decree; they were either service people who had been conscripted or convicts who had been exiled. In addition, however, there was a parallel, private movement of people from Muscovy toward the Pacific Ocean, peasants running away from their landlords, young men escaping recruitment, city dwellers escaping taxes, criminals on the run, etc. While governmental colonization proceeded more or less along predictable lines, the “grassroots” colonization movement was uncontrolled and pushed in small currents farther north and east. They opened up new areas that, if they proved to be rich in sable, were quickly stampeded by other fur hunters and trappers, as well as by government representatives. Fur resources were fairly quickly depleted by such massive onslaughts, though. Thus, almost as quickly as they had appeared, the majority of strangers moved on to new hunting grounds.³ Some of them, however, remained and settled down.

The settlers were generally apt hunters and fishermen, but they were all men. Thus, their most immediate problem was not to feed themselves but to find wives. Despite various restrictions on marrying Native women, wives were obtained in a variety of ways: by legal marriage (which was discouraged by the state, since it required Christening, which freed the woman's children from paying the fur tribute); by living illegally with a non-Christian woman, or by purchasing a Native woman and pretending that she was a captive. In any case, the emerging enclaves – the settlers were not permitted to live among the Natives or to take lands already occupied by Natives – were quite naturally of a mixed character, not only biologically, but also in terms of subsistence strategies, food habits, etc.

Nobody seems to have cared too much about who these mixed groups really were. In subsequent centuries, the Russian state almost forgot about

its distant outposts. It was not until the second part of the 19th century that state emissaries began to show up in northeastern Siberia. In the process of taking inventories of the Empire's people and wealth, they began the troublesome task of placing individuals and groups within the existing grids of social categorization. The emerging official discourse about how best to classify those groups covered not only last 50 years of Tsarist rule, but extended also throughout Soviet times. Although some of the conceptual parameters changed, the young Soviet state became even more obsessed with classification, as it aspired to gain full control over all its subjects and to integrate northeastern Siberia into its massive project of economic development. While we will discuss in greater detail below the various labels that are (and were) in use to designate these groups, we will use the terms "Old-Settlers" (which is the common Russian term in this context) and "mixed groups" (as a purely descriptive device) as general (neutral) labels interchangeably.

The authors explored the historical and contemporary dimensions of three concrete Old-Settler communities within a multi-year project entitled "Creole Communities in Northeastern Siberia: An Ethnographic Study of Ethnic Identity, Social Status, and Political Power." These three case studies will be briefly introduced in the next section, together with the wider context of "mixed communities" in the Russian and circumpolar North. While the overall project focused on issues of power, status, and ethnicity, we will limit ourselves to the latter subject in the present article. Following Barth (1969) and Jenkins (1994), we maintain that ethnicity (or ethnic identity) is not alone determined by internal processes, but as well through categorization by others. Thus, in section 3, we will present the various external definitions that have been put forward over time and contrast them with what our interlocutors told us during our field trips. The goal is neither to deconstruct the official discourse about the groups in question – it would not be difficult to demonstrate the ethnocentric and self-referencing quality of that discourse – nor to determine who these groups really are. Instead, external and internal definitions (with ethnic labels fulfilling particularly powerful functions) will be viewed in the context of the strategies with which individuals and groups situate themselves vis-a-vis others. Thus, we will direct our attention to the similarities and differences among the three study groups in the field of identity politics.

The final part of this article will put our three case studies into a larger comparative framework. By looking at similar cases in Siberia and the Russian Far East, as well as by looking at Russian colonization in general (including its Russian American chapter), we will address the specific

constellations that enabled the emergence of mixed groups (while at the same time denying them their categorical independence). Although this paper cannot provide a full circumpolar perspective, it will make the case for comparative research into northern colonial policies. Finally, we will return to the general issue of identity, a discussion to which, we believe, our case studies can add a few valuable facets.

Old-Settlers and the colonial process

During the summers of 1998 and 1999, the authors conducted fieldwork in three settlements that are predominantly inhabited by people who claim to be descendants of Russian Old-Settlers. Pokhodsk and Russkoe Ust'e are small villages in the northeastern part of the Republic Sakha (Yakutia), located in a tundra environment close to the shores of the Arctic Ocean. Markovo is a slightly bigger regional center and is situated on the Anadyr River in the forest tundra zone of western Chukotka. Pokhodsk and Russkoe Ust'e had between 200 and 250 inhabitants each during the 1990s and were less prone to population losses after the dissolution of the Soviet Union than their respective regional centers, Cherskii and Chokurdakh. Markovo, on the other hand, decreased in population from 2,500 in the mid-1980s to 900 in the late 1990s. Thus, the two communities located in Sakha are similar in size, population dynamics, and ecological conditions, while Markovo differs in many respects from Pokhodsk and Russkoe Ust'e. However, all three settlements can, to varying degrees, trace their early histories back to the 1640s, when Russian settlement began in locations close to the contemporary villages.⁴

The settlements in our case studies are part of a chain of arctic and sub-arctic Old-Settler communities, most of which are located in the deltas of the large Siberian rivers that drain into the Arctic Ocean (from west to east, they are the Ob, Yenisei, Anabar, Olenek, Lena, Yana, Indigirka, and Kolyma), on the Taimyr Peninsula, and in a few areas along the Pacific Ocean (along the middle course of the Anadyr River, on the Kamchatka Peninsula, and in the deltas of the Gizhiga, Okhota, and Yana [near Magadan] rivers) (Kamenetskaia 1986). These northern communities differ greatly from the Old-Settler communities that are found in the southern parts of Siberia and the Russian Far East (along the tributaries of large rivers), which combine agriculture and cattle breeding with hunting, fishing, and, rarely, with reindeer herding (see, e.g., Aleksandrov 1964; Bunak and Zolotareva 1973; Lipinskaia 1996; Liutsidarskaia 1992; Maslova and Suborova 1969; Gemuev 1998). While the environmental conditions of southern Siberia permitted larger concentrations of Russians and the

reproduction of eastern European peasant life-styles, the taiga and tundra necessitated different forms of subsistence (sedentary fishing, trapping and hunting) and the adoption of material and spiritual culture elements from their indigenous neighbors. Northern Old-Settler communities have always been small enclaves set in a natural environment unsuited for agriculture and outnumbered by a variety of indigenous Siberian groups. It used to be customary to distinguish Old-Settlers from groups of "mixed population" (*smeshannoe naselenie*), i.e., groups of Old-Settlers who had switched to a non-Russian language or native groups who had become "Russianized." If there is a unifying trait of all Old-Settler groups in the Russian North, however, it is their "mixedness."

Communities referred to as "Old-Settlers" in the Russian context have analogues throughout the circumpolar North and other parts of the world. However, there is no unified terminology to refer to such groups. In the circumpolar North, the majority of mixed groups are not referred to by any specific label. Apart from "Old-Settlers," the main designations in historical or present use are "Métis" (throughout large parts of Canada), "Settlers" (in Labrador), and "Creoles" (during the Russian American period of Alaska). In other parts of the world, "Creole," "Mestizo" and other labels have been employed to refer to mixed groups resulting from colonial encounters. Although we had used the term "Creole communities" in the initial English-language drafts of this project, we eventually decided to use the terms "Old-Settlers" and "mixed groups" (as neutral and descriptive labels) instead. First, our Russian-speaking informants certainly would not feel themselves adequately represented by the term "Creole." Second, although there have been recent arguments in favor of broadening the applicability of the label "Creole" (see, e.g., Hannerz 1987, 1996; Jackson 1989; Parkin 1993), it continues to be primarily understood as a historically and geographically restricted notion applicable first and foremost to mixed societies resulting from plantation slavery in the West Indies and in Louisiana (e.g., Abrahams 1983; Brathwaite 1971; Buisseret and Reinhardt 2000; Trouillot 2002). Still, although we dropped the broader label, we will continue to put the Old-Settler communities of northeastern Siberia into a broader geographical and historical perspective. We believe that there are predicaments that are shared by mixed communities in the circumpolar North and elsewhere. Our approach is both ethnographic, involving looking at specific case studies, and comparative, when we look for similarities and differences in other parts of the world.

As mentioned above, the processes that led to the establishment of Old-Settler communities in Siberia and elsewhere in Russia were closely related

to Muscovy's expansion east and south of the Ural mountains beginning in the 16th century. The Russian colonization of vast expanses of northern Asia became possible once the remnants of the Mongol Empire, which blocked Muscovy to the east and south, faltered or were defeated. Russia's incredibly rapid annexation of Siberia and the Far East, which was by and large completed during the 17th century, coincided with the first wave of western European colonialism in the Americas (Pagden 1995). Ever since "colonialism" entered the vocabulary of historians and social scientists, there have been fierce debates about whether the term applies to the processes that led to the formation of Russia's multiethnic empire (see, e.g., Osterhammel 1997). Obviously, in contrast to Spain, Portugal, England and other countries, Russia did not need to cross any oceans to expand its territorial possessions. However, as was mentioned above, the colonization of Siberia only became possible through the political vacuum left after the final demise of Genghis Khan's legacy in northern Asia. This event had effects similar to the nautical innovations that enabled the Spanish and Portuguese to cross the Atlantic Ocean. On the other hand, while the Spanish and subsequent conquerors encountered societies and cultures that did not fit their notions of humanity, the Russian conquest of Siberia did not lead to such unexpected encounters. As Kappeler (1982) has demonstrated convincingly, Russia's experience with the Finno-Ugric and Tataric peoples of the Middle Volga River had produced certain patterns of interaction with *inovertsy* and *inorodtsy* that could easily be reproduced in Siberia.

Our intention here is not to decide whether the Russian colonization of Siberia and the Russian Far East should be classified as similar to, or different from, the oversea expansions of western European countries from the 16th century onward. Rather, we are using non-Russian forms of colonialism as a background against which to better assess the specific characteristics of Old-Settler communities in Siberia.

Colonial ideologies and policies in the Americas and elsewhere can be distinguished analytically according to what the ultimate goal of colonization was. As Patricia Seed (2001) has recently argued, the main objective of English colonization was to acquire (native) land. The Spanish and Portuguese, on the other hand, considered control of people and their labor the relevant goal. French colonization of what is today southeastern Canada followed a third pattern, as neither the woodlands nor its inhabitants were the objectives of French presence. Instead, the appropriation of furs drove the system, and the emerging fur trade "enabled the natives to retain their dominion over hunting grounds and their nomadic way of life" (Seed 2001, 56).

Russian colonization of the northern parts of Siberia and the Russian Far East most closely resembled the French pattern. Outside of areas considered suitable for agricultural production, neither land nor (slave) labor were of particular concern to the Russian state or its colonists. The primary goal was to obtain furs, either by hunting or through trade. Russian expansion into Alaska was merely an extension of the colonization of Siberia. Still, a major difference was that in Russian America the control of Aleut and Alutiq labor was of prime importance, since the precious fur-bearing sea mammals were only hunted by the native population. Despite radically different ecological and historical conditions, the situation in Russian America somewhat resembled the Spanish and Portuguese pattern mentioned above.

Regimes of classification in Northeastern Siberia

We now return to the Russian situation and to issues of ethnic classification. Russian administrative ethnographers of the late 19th century (most of them were primarily administrators who acquired through their job assignments in the Far North a certain ethnographic competence) were troubled by the assimilation processes they encountered among Old-Settlers. According to prevailing notions about the course of cultural evolution, contact between Russians and Natives should have led to the Russianization of the latter, i.e., the supposedly “higher culture” of the Russians was expected to “civilize” the Natives.⁵ However, what bureaucrats and travelers found in Markovo, Pokhodsk, Russkoe Ust’e and elsewhere did not please their eyes. The cultural repertoire of Old-Settler communities was a syncretistic mixture of Russian and non-Russian elements, a *mélange* that was neither clearly “Russian” nor “Native.”

Among the many works that have dealt with the issue of cultural assimilation in northeastern Siberia during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, three distinct positions can be distinguished. According to the first, each nation occupied a rung on the ladder of progress, and movement along that ladder was possible in only one direction. For those authors, the cultural realities they encountered were a slap in the face. As one of the most outspoken defenders of this position, M. A. Miropiev, put it: “they [the Russians] lost sight of a Russian project of state importance – the project of Russianizing the Natives” (Miropiev 1901, 296). The second approach took a similarly Eurocentric form of unilinear evolution as its starting point. However, in contrast to the first position, these authors (e.g., Golovachev 1902) tried to excuse the “sins” of the Russians in their reference to adaptation to local conditions. Yes, it was bad that Russians had shifted

to eating half-raw meat and had adopted other Native customs, but at least such customs were successful means of surviving in an inhospitable environment. The third position is encountered less often and is generally more characteristic of later works than the other two; it views processes of Russian assimilation to local conditions in neutral and, in certain rare cases, in positive terms (cf., e.g., Bogoraz 1899). After the 1930s, Soviet anthropology continued the evolutionistic discourse of pre-revolutionary times; now, scholastic energy was devoted to such questions as whether the Chuvans (of Markovo) were a “people” or an “ethnic group” (Tugolukov 1975, 189).

As the historian Sunderland (1996) has shown, the explanations for these “wrong” assimilation processes centered around demographic and environmentalist factors. Some of the authors, however, followed their own biases to their logical conclusion and argued that the Russian settlers must have had a lower level of culture than the Natives. In the end, however, the Russian and Soviet state was not primarily worried about “wrong assimilation.” The core task was to classify its inhabitants according to social and ethnic categories. We will now briefly review how the inhabitants of the three study sites were thus categorized over time.



Metal boats with outboard motors on the bank of the Indigirka river. Russkoe Ust'e, 1999.

photo: P. Schweitzer

Russkoe Ust'e never presented particular problems for the classifiers. Even in Tsarist times, when social rank often superseded ethnic categories in importance, the inhabitants of the village and its surroundings were

homogeneously classified as *meshchane*; during Soviet times the *Russko-ustintsy* became *kolkhozniki* and “Russians.” The situation in Pokhodsk was similar, but there was a greater variety of social ranks (*meshchane*, *krest'iane*, Cossacks) in pre-revolutionary times. The people of Markovo changed from “Chuvans” to “Kamchadals” and back to “Chuvans.”



photo:
P. Schweitzer

E. F. Berezhnev, one of the last fluent speakers of the Russian Old-Settler idiom and one of the last experts in dog-sled building. Pokhodsk 1999.

Having reviewed these external labels, we now turn to how the residents of the settlements in question designate themselves and others. On the basis of the interviews we conducted in 1998 and 1999, there emerges the following system of self-designations and labels for others. The column “we” above the dividing line in figures 1-3 denotes contemporary self-designations, while the labels below the dividing line refer to past self-designations. Similarly, the column “they” contains past (below the line) and present (above the line) labels for “others” with whom they are in contact.

Fig. 1: Ethnic Labels in Russkoe Ust'e

WE	THEY
Local Russians (Locals) <i>Russkoustintsy (Poliarnenskie)</i>	
Descendants of Explorers Russians	Russians (Incoming Russians, Real Russians)
Indigenous Population	Indigenous Population (Evens, Yukagirs) Yakuts Russian Men (<i>russkie muzhiki</i>)
<hr/>	
Indigirshchiki (Indigirtsy, Indigirskie) Nizovskie	Kolymchane (Kolymskie) Verkhovskie (Ozhogintsy) <i>Meshchane</i> Exiles (<i>soslannye, vyslannye</i>)



O. V. Banshchikova (on the left) and her family.
Russkoe Ust'e, 1999.

photo: P. Schweitzer

Fig. 2: Ethnic Labels in Pokhodsk

WE	THEY
Local Russians	
Kolymchane	
Old-Settlers (Russian Old-Settlers)	
Descendants of Explorers	
Pokhodchane (Pokhodskie)	
Russians	Russians (Incoming Russians, Real Russians)
Nizhnekolymskie	Srednekolymskie
Native Population	Native Population (Yukagirs, Chukchis, Evens)
	Yakuts
	Russian Men
<hr/>	
Kolymchane (Kolymskie)	Indigirshchiki (Indigirtsy, Indigirskie)
	Cossacks
	<i>Meshchane</i>
	Exiles (<i>soslannyye, vyslannyye</i>)



V. L. Rebrova and E. P. Kolganov (with the accordion), a professional musician from St. Petersburg who supervises the folklore ensemble *Kolymskie Vechorki* in Cherskii and the folklore ensemble *Rossokha* in Pokhodsk. Cherskii, 1999.
photo: P. Schweitzer

Fig. 3: Ethnic Labels in Markovo

WE	THEY
Chuvans (River Chuvans) Indigenous Population	Chuvans (Reindeer Chuvans) Indigenous Population (Chukchis, Yukagirs, Lamuts, Evens)
Descendants of Cossacks <i>Markovtsy (Markovchane)</i>	
Kamchadals	Russians Kamchadals (<i>Penzhintsy</i>)
<hr/>	
Cossacks (<i>Dezhnevtsy</i>)	

Note that several labels appear on both sides of the charts. That is, the same label can be used as a self-designation and to signify others (e.g., Russians, indigenous population, Chuvans, etc.). Among other things, this testifies to the fact that the boundaries between the groups are flexible. Obviously, the charts for Pokhodsk and Russkoe Ust'e differ much more from the one for Markovo than they differ between themselves. The most important difference is that the chart for Markovo does not contain the label "Russian" in its left-hand column (as do the other two charts).

Generally, we see a direct connection between the various official designations used over time and the way each group situates itself today. The people from Russkoe Ust'e and Pokhodsk were never officially designated as non-Russians; thus, their bundle of options never included defining themselves as "Natives" (indigenous population). On the other hand, the Old-Settlers from Markovo were never called Russians. Rather, they were Chuvans or Kamchadals, and then Chuvans once again.

An interesting component is added by the way "real Russians" relate to the three groups in question. When speaking of the people from Pokhodsk and Russkoe Ust'e, other Russians generally try to emphasize that, although these Old-Settlers are called "Russians," they nevertheless differ from the "real Russians": thus, they are referred to as "local Russians," etc. On the other hand, toward the people from Markovo who call themselves Chuvans, incoming Russians demonstrate a different attitude; they emphasize that, after all, these Chuvans are "Russians." In both cases, the social and politically dominant group – the incoming Russians – establishes a hierarchy that has them at top, the Old-Settlers next, and the Native population at the bottom. Thus, the Incomers' practice of differentiating the people

from Markovo from Natives and of separating the people from Pokhodsk and Russkoe Ust'e from "real Russians" solidifies the regional interethnic hierarchy.

Contrary to the social classification maintained by the Incomers (which, by the way, is strongly reminiscent of the evolutionistic discourse mentioned above), there was a reversed hierarchy of economic advantages during Soviet times: "Natives" could claim certain *l'goty* (a kind of affirmative action benefits), which included higher fishing and hunting quotas. In post-Soviet times, another aspect was added: "indigenoussness" increased the social capital of groups, especially on an international level. Thus, the people from Markovo are able to negotiate advantages within both hierarchies. They are Natives and, at least to some degree, Russians as well. The Russkoustintsy and Pokhochane were never were able to capitalize on their Nativeness (although there have been attempts in recent years to include them in the list of "Native peoples of the North").

What we see, therefore, is, on the one hand, the pervasive influence of the state and its power of definition. On the other hand, individuals and groups are not just passively molded by the state. The state may invent a particular label, but its effectiveness still requires the active acceptance (or rejection) of the people in question. Thus, it is the concrete negotiations by individuals and groups that translate state blueprints into social reality.

Colonial ideologies and strategies of being oneself

Now, let us briefly revisit the comparison among different colonial ideologies and policies that was mentioned above. By this point, it is evident that the British approach to classifying the descendants of natives and non-natives – "half-natives" are natives because mixture leads to loss of Anglo-American status – is rather unique within the circumpolar North. Even the Danish colonization of Greenland, with its paternalistic official attempts to prevent unions between Greenlanders and Danes, enabled the rise of "mixed" communities. It looks as though the British approach dealing with the fact of mixing may well be the result of its orientation toward the appropriation of land. The inclusion of "half-breeds" in the ranks of the colonizers, or their recognition as a separate group with special rights, would have enlarged the number of potential contenders for land. In such a situation, it is clearly advantageous to limit the number of potential landowners by excluding offspring from mixed marriages.

Russian practices in Siberia and the Russian Far East, as well as the French experience in Canada, were markedly different. The emergence of mixed groups was nowhere prevented, even if they were only seldom recognized

as separate groups. (After all, the Canadian Métis formed as a self-conscious group long after the end of French rule in the territory of the Hudson's Bay Company.) The Russian and French interest in obtaining furs required a population that knew how to acquire them and was willing to enter into (trade) relations with the representatives of the colonial state. Descendants of mixed marriages were ideally suited to performing the job; they considered the woods their homeland and were able to "live in both worlds."

The case of Alaska under Russian rule seems to fit the general picture of Russia's colonization of Siberia. However, there were some marked differences. Not only did the Russian American Company (RAC) introduce the social and legal category of "Creoles," which was used nowhere else in the Russian possessions (Black 1990). It is also important to remember that the sea otter hunt, which constituted the economic underpinnings of Russian America, was only conducted by natives (Aleuts and Alutiiqs) and not by Russians. Russian dependence on an indigenous labor force, which sometimes led to slavery-like conditions, was much more pronounced in Alaska than it was in Siberia or in French Canada. Without suggesting a straightforward causal relationship, it is useful to hypothesize that there was a correlation between the introduction of the "Creole" status and the constraints on the labor force in Russian America. This unique case within the Russian Empire, where there was instituted a special social category ("Creoles") distinct from Russians and Natives, did not have a prolonged history. Although the Creoles of Copper Island were responsible for the development of their own "mixed language," the category "Creole" was unable to sustain the development of a lasting ethnic community (distinct from "Aleuts").

Much has been written about the specifics of the Russian colonization of Siberia. Explanations have ranged from the fact that Siberia is a physical extension of European Russia, to the supposedly low "cultural level" of Russian colonists, to the specific role played by the Russian Orthodox Church. Viewed in a circumpolar or global perspective, however, the Old-Settler communities of northeastern Siberia that resulted from Russian colonization do not seem to be so special at all. If they are seen as emerging due to a combination of local and regional historical developments and of broader colonial policies sketched and implemented on the national level, nothing particularly mysterious remains.

The Old-Settlers portrayed and discussed in this article can best be understood as "mixed groups" along a continuum ranging from "native" to "Russian." The end points of the continuum, however, are merely ideal-types today, and probably have never been anything else. The contem-

porary ethnic and cultural reality in the Russian and circumpolar North is certainly one of “mixedness.” The still-prevailing binary classification schemes (either native or non-native) are discriminatory and racist. On the other hand, alternative tripartite classification models (as in Canada) do not really offer a solution, because they are still based on racist assumptions and, in the end, tend to fall back into binary oppositions (e.g., the Métis of Canada are considered a “native” group today).

Tim Ingold (2000) has recently suggested a “relational” understanding of indigenesness. Unlike the conventional “genealogical method” of defining indigenesness (which is entirely based on descent and is, in Ingold’s view, a colonial model), indigenesness understood as being relational is inseparable from inhabiting the land. Our aim here is not to define indigenesness but to better understand the existing modes of cultural life in Siberia and elsewhere. Rephrasing Ingold’s terminology, it is possible to view our three case studies along another continuum, a continuum of cultural forms ranging from the ideal-type “culture as lived” to “culture as declared.” The inhabitants of Pokhodsk would occupy a spot closer to the “culture as lived” end, the Chuvans of Markovo would be closer to the “culture as declared” end, and the people of Russkoe Ust’e could be classified as falling somewhere in-between. The case of Markovo differs from the two other case studies by dint of the existence of distinctive cultural traits that are permanently declared and reaffirmed. (This is true even where practice seems to contradict these assertions, as was shown in the case of language use.) The inhabitants of Pokhodsk, on the other hand, live lifestyles that are much more “indigenous” – they are literally *tundroviki*, or “tundra dwellers” – than those practiced by the “declared natives” of Markovo, the Chuvans. The people of Russkoe Ust’e, who have been exposed to lots of media coverage portraying them as “original Russians,” manage to make use of both venues; declaration is taken care of by outsiders, while the lived practices define a particular Old-Settler tradition.

It is neither our task nor our intention to pass value judgments on how people in Markovo, Pokhodsk, and Russkoe Ust’e organize and represent their cultural lives. The above-mentioned slots on a continuum are thus best understood as different strategies enabling cultural reproduction. What Pokhodsk and Russkoe Ust’e achieve through spatial and social isolation, Markovo is able to do through declaration and active self-definition. Only the future can tell which strategy will yield better long-term results.

In the end, our case studies demonstrate that self-definitions are never independent from how a group (or individual) is perceived by others. This does not make what people think of themselves untrue or irrelevant. On

the contrary, people think and act according to these notions. However, we believe that an awareness of the dialectics between self and other can be used to re-define the role of the social sciences in the realm of identity politics. We have long since been forced to understand that the enterprise of defining who other people are is a remnant of the colonial mind-set. The counter-position that the task of social scientists is to report what other people think of themselves is an important part of our job, but it cannot be an end in itself. By taking into account the multiplicity of determining factors, we want to combine an actor-centered approach with an acknowledgment of the pervasive influence of the state. However, this is not intended to mean that social scientists distill the “truth” from the difference between outside classification and self-definition. What we might be able to do is to sketch a processual space that is the result of the historical relationships between groups and individuals. Being oneself thus appears as a series of complex negotiations within social and linguistic fields marked and defined by others.

Notes

- 1 We wish to acknowledge the generous support of the U.S. National Science Foundation (NSF Award #OPP-9727102), which enabled the realization of the project.
- 2 The following brief summary of Russian colonial expansion into northeastern Siberia is based on Berg 1927, Butsinikii 1889, Dolgikh 1960, Gurvich 1966, Miller 1999 (1937), Ogorodnikov 1922, Shunkov 1968, Slezkine 1994. See also chapter 1 of Vakhtin et al. 2004.
- 3 For example, in northeastern Yakutia there were ca. 1,300 people around the 1630 and 1640s, but only 200 to 250 people were left by the 1670s.
- 4 This observation should not distract from the fact that “Russian” settlement in the region was somewhat discontinuous over the centuries (e.g., contemporary Markovo was founded in the late 1840s).
- 5 “Mixing was fine, but the outcome was expected to be culturally Russian and not something else” (Sunderland 1996, 810).

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