Neotraditionalism in the Contemporary Russian Office: Coworkers Birthdays¹

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to describe and analyze the case of birthdays of employees in the Russian office. Description and analysis of this case is made in the framework of the concept of neotraditionalism, by using the classical concepts of anthropology and comparative data, obtained in the study of traditional societies. The study shows a high explanatory potential of classical anthropology theories applied on the analysis of contemporary societies in the framework of neotraditionalism concept.

Keywords: gift exchange, neotraditionalism, modernity, organisational studies, celebrations.

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This article is devoted to the case observed by the author over the years in one of the divisions of the large Russian construction company in Saint-Petersburg; this case is about celebrating coworkers birthdays. Field research focused on organizing these celebrations, forming a set of participants, collecting gift money. The field (modern company office in St. Petersburg) involves the greatest applicability concepts and theoretical frameworks of organizational studies, as well as concepts of similar anthropological and sociological sub-disciplines, most often used for the study of modernity. Of course, the description and interpretation of this case in these theoretical frameworks would be efficiently and interesting, but authors background in the field of traditional anthropology allowed to draw attention to the possibility of applying concepts, that came from studies of traditional culture. While conceptual export from classical anthropology to studies of modernity is relatively frequent, however, requires an explanation.

Typologization and generalization have always been the most important methods of scientific knowledge, including humanities and social sciences. One of the most articulated and long-playing paradigms of cultural and social development are the theory of evolution in different ways. In Soviet science Marxist theory of sequential change of socio-economic formations has long been a dogma; in the West, almost all the classics of sociology agreed with the scheme, according to which modern society arose from the traditional; their local stadial scheme arose in power researchers, economy, and material culture. Although the authors of stadial schemes does not necessarily imply that features of each stage are characteristic only this stage, but at mass dissemination schemes turned out that unique features of current stage considered most important, and the rest were recorded in the category of "remnants", "periphery", that important only to identify regularities past epochs, but not this. It was reflected in the orientation of anthropological research on historicism, but reduced their explanatory value in relation to the present.

Although large-scale generalization and stadial schemes have been proud to modern science, its reductionism is realized a growing number of researchers, particularly anthropologists. Even Mauss believed that social phenomena has "total" (holistic) character in the primitive societies, these include features of economic, political, religious institutions, and can't be attributed to any one category (Mauss 2002: 3). Recently, more and more often expressed the view that such things still exist, and even widespread in modern society. B. Latour calls them hybrids (Latour 1993: 1-3), and D. Greber says plainly that the economy, considered without regard to the social sphere is abstraction, that is far-away from life (Graeber 2011: 32-33). T. Ingold focuses on the deconstruction of the opposition between nature and society, the individual and the body, he thinks that this framework is not relevant to the research (Ingold 2000: 3). Perhaps the movement towards a comprehensive study of the phenomena without distinction of disciplinary boundaries, will be the main trend of the near future, but for now, these approaches are only making their first steps.

What do the anthropologist, who sees in the studied community or culture is something that does not fit into conventional stadial scheme? He has a difficult choice between several approaches: try to put the facts in the old concepts; adapt holistic approaches, such as actor-network theory of B. Latour to new field; and, finally, create his own theoretical scheme, which can consistently describe the observed situation. The first approach evidently leads to a high probability of distortions and reductions, the second approach is possible, when the study does not include the analysis of large empirical database, structured in line with old approaches (otherwise a large number of resources to be spent on their translation into the language of new paradigm). The third option is the best, but only when the scope of the study is sufficient for the new global generalization, but this is not
always true. Use of concepts, that contains the usual terms, but have filled them with a new content is a good way in this situations; such concept, for example, is neotraditionalism. The benefits of their application are not only understandable to a broad range of researchers, but also an opportunity to use a large amount of materials, which have been accumulated in the framework of classical paradigms.

In view of the above, referring to the archaic, the author will be understood not phenomena inherent "archaic" stage in any of the stadial schemes, but phenomena described in classical anthropology, in the theoretical framework of this kind schemes. That is, the terms "neotraditionalism" and "archaic" will have an appeal mainly to the disciplinary boundaries.

Thus, the study of celebrations in the Russian office using the traditional concepts of anthropology, is possible to put into the framework of "neotraditionalism", because social structures and actions, that have been described and conceptualized on the data of traditional societies, are found in modern organization. The discovery of structures that do not fit into the traditional economic and social concept, often happened, in spite of the applied research orientation. For example, the concept of "social system", entered in the study of organizations by means of anthropologists (M. Mead, AR Radcliffe-Brown) in the famous Hawthorne experiment, revealed that the workers do not increase the production of a response to material stimulation, and by means of a system of social norms retain a certain constant level of productivity (Romanov, 1999, 96). This conclusion is strikingly coincides with the so-called “Chayanov's rule” first formulated by A. Chayanov on the data of the Russian peasant economy, and then tested by M. Sahlins on the data of the primitive agricultural communities. The rule reads as follows: «Intensity of labor in a system of domestic production for use varies inversely with the relative working capacity of the producing unit» (Sahlins 1974: 91). This correlation shows, that pre-industrial community and industrial company have similar social and cultural patterns. Also it shows, that the use of classical anthropological concepts in modern society, can bring interesting results, not devoid of practical importance.

Returning to our case, note that in study used participant observation, informal occasional interview and some elements of autoethnography. Birthdays celebrations in the studied division is standard for the Russian organizations: in Birthday (or in the next business day, if the birthday falls on a weekend) "newborn" ordered or brought from home some treats (cakes, pizza, pies and etc.) and set it on the free table in the division room. After it, he invited employees to treat ourselves. By this time, the employees collected cash gift for him (each adding to the overall envelope a certain amount), which is awarded during treats by senior officer. In most episodes circle of those presents at the feasts was limited to staff of the division and employees with a workplace in the main room of division (not being his employees). Thus, they formed a closed network “Those who congratulate”, each of the participants of this network annually treated his colleagues and received a cash gift, were treated on the Birthdays of other participants and made a contribution to the cash gifts.

It should be noted, that network was built more as a local than on formal structural basis. That is, employees with a workplace in the main division room formed network, even if structurally belonged to another division; at the same time, division employees, were located in other areas, could not participate in the network. Moreover, there was great resistance of this network, than the local organizational structures, that is, employees who previously had a working place in the common room, but later moved to other room, continued to participate in the network. Obviously,
the network was built primarily on the basis of personal acquaintance, as well as other types of face-to-face communities. It is also important to note that the network is an informal structure and evolved spontaneously, without orders from the management. This fact suggested that the principles of its creation and functioning, can be found among other types of informal social structures known anthropology.

These principles were found in the well-studied conception of gift exchange, founded by M. Moss on the data of the primitive and ancient societies. Although Moss considered, that the gift is a "total" social fact, as we mentioned above, but its consideration is produced mainly in economic terms, and compared primarily with trade relations. In the future, other researchers have argued in this manner, they considered, that a gift is early commodity or anti-commodity, and it shifted the focus from the gift as a social but not only economical phenomenon\(^2\). These economic determinations will obviously need to be revised in line with the mentioned holistic interdisciplinary concepts, but even in the unchanged economic definitions centered on the movement of wealth between agents, in this case have sufficient explanatory value. The material aspect of the turnover of congratulations and gifts can be described using two complementary definitions: M. Moss and M. Sahlins. Moss has formulated the essence of the gift of the three obligations: the obligation to give, the obligation to receive and the obligation to return a gift. M. Sahlins, describing all types of economic exchange using the concept of reciprocity (reciprocity), the gift or generalized reciprocity defined as the exchange, in which the first gift is counting on roughly equivalent gift response, and the response time and the content will not stipulated in advance (Sahlins 1974: 193-194).

Thus, repeating the cycle of feasts and birthday celebrations formed, when one of the coworkers invited all his colleagues to the celebration, and colleagues feel the need to give a gift in the form of equivalent treats on his birthday. Giving cash gifts during Birthday treats is separate, partly independent circle of gift exchange. This circle was formed later, than treats tradition, and it was formed at the suggestion of one of the socially active employees. "Newborn" employee, having once cash gift, felt obliged to take part in the subsequent cash gifts to colleagues. In the case of food, the size of the response gift, in fact, will have only a relative equivalence, because each employee selects products for the feast table according to own taste. Money gift size also depends on the number of participants, which may depend on the number of division staff and other factors, therefore, in this case the gifts have only an approximate equivalence too. Only time of treats and gifts in this case is known in advance, because the dates of birthdays of employees will be repeated every year.

In general, the historical data show that holiday feast, often become part of the gift exchanges relations. In societies, where exchange of gifts acquired competitive nature, feasts became a place of such events, or their part. Competition could lead to a form of feast, in that values could even be destroyed, for the elevation of the status of the organizer of the feast. However, when there were no preconditions for one of participants victory, egalitarian gift exchange network was formed. This network is considering, for example, Y. Semenov. He wrote about village feasts of the late XIX century in Russia. Each village of certain districts arranged them in turn (often, in the feast day of

\(^2\) A brief overview of the concepts of "gift like other commodity" see in [Verhovcev 2015: 8-12].
the church or the chapel, located in the settlement) and the invited were the inhabitants of all the villages that were part of "festive" network (Semjonov 1996: 79). This case is in many respects similar to studied office network: the role of the host in turn perform all participants in the network, also the date of the general holidays are distributed relatively evenly over the days of the year. Also in both cases the holidays had "hidden" function to establish informal communication between participants.

In both cases is preserved function of competition in an implicit form. The hosts in the village wanted to treat ourselves guests better, and the “newborns” tried to treat their colleagues is not worse than previously treated. Moreover, employees who claimed to form (heads) or informal leadership in the team, trying to surpass the normal scope of such treats, buy for the celebration of any unusual, sometimes quite expensive foods. Of course, this cannot be compared in scale to the extravagance of the peasants, who bring themselves to impoverishment after such feasts (Semjonov 1996: 81), but feast day were the main holidays in their life, while celebrating a birthday at work is only one among several events, such as Birthday celebrations with family and friends.

It should be pointed out, that the common for the holidays in the Russian village of the late XIX century, and for celebrations in the Contemporary Russian office of the beginning of the XXI century is also a function of the deposit, which, apparently, often accompanying by the gift exchanges transactions. Its essence lies in the fact, that the scarce good that is accessible for a short time, but in large amount, gifted to another, that he returned the gift later. So, what would benefit only a short time, gift exchanges embedded in the "bank" and after a certain time return back for free, and thus the access time to the good extended. A single village could not afford more than one crowded holiday a year, but joining the informal alliance of villages, arrange holidays at a time, inhabitants of the village visited all neighboring feasts. The same thing happens in the office: the employee invited his colleagues in birthday cakes or pizza, and he was invited to the subsequent similar events, when he could distract from the work routine, and communicated with colleagues in an informal atmosphere.

So, the case of the circle of mutual treats in the Russian office used to test the concept “neotraditionalism” in the study of modern societies. The function and the structure of the circle could be explained using the theory of gift exchange, set up on the archaic societies data, that shows the overall prospects of such approaches. Of course, it would be interesting to consider other manifestations of the existing informal network, its interaction with other informal communities of company division and the organization as a whole. Finally, these results may be included in the disciplinary scope of application areas of anthropology, for example, for identification the role of informal institutions in workflow efficiency. But we will leave implementation of these tasks to future research.
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