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Comment on David G. Anderson and Dmitry V. Arzyutov (2019), "The *Etnos* Archipelago: Sergei M. Shirokogoroff and the Life History of a Controversial Anthropological Concept," *Current Anthropology* 60(6): 741-73 (pp. 760-1).

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In a 1935 book, written while he was head of the bacteriological laboratory at the L'viv General Hospital, Ludwik Fleck argued that the scientific concept of syphilis was, in the 15th century, 'an undifferentiated and confused mass of information.' Yet it was subsequently 'developed over epochs, becoming more and more substantial and precise' (Fleck 1979: 1, 23). Essential to this process was the strict discipline of a rigorously controlled laboratory. Making the concept more precise meant materially disciplining those bits of nature that were picked out by that concept.

More recently, Bruno Latour has argued that the power of science is best understood through its goal of 'transforming society into a vast laboratory' (Latour 1986: 167). The question thus arises, what happens when the disciplining rigours of laboratory practice are brought to bear on such concepts as ethnic and national identity?

In 1936, in Dvirtsi, a village north of L'viv, militant Ukrainian nationalists stormed the house of the Ukrainian peasant Mikhailo Bilets'kyi, first shooting him, then stabbing him to death. According to one report, Bilets'kyi's head was removed from his body, a cross cut into it (Dovgan' 1990). Three members of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) – Ivan Lushchyk, Zenon Buchma, and Andriy Mys' – were tried for the murder. The first two received prison sentences of 4 years and 18 months, respectively, the third was set free. According to one OUN memoirist, Bilets'kyi was killed for being a 'communist agitator' (Mirchuk 1968: 452).

Sergei Alymov argues that the concept of *etnos* has historical roots in the Ukrainian national movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Alymov 2019). This movement was not monolithic, however. In the 1930s, it included not just OUN members, but also the embattled advocates for a Ukrainian 'national communism' (see Mace 1983). These left-wing advocates threatened, not just Soviet universalism, but also the controlled precision of the OUN's right-wing national concept. Perhaps Bilets'kyi was a national communist, and so needed to be 'disciplined' – in order to keep the OUN's concept precise.

As Anderson and Arzyutov note, the term *etnos* was coined by Nikolai Mogilyanskiy, who passed it on to Sergei Shirokogoroff. Although Mogilyanskiy grew up speaking, and was

subsequently educated and socially immersed in, Russian, he considered himself Ukrainian. Politically, he inhabited an ‘ambivalent position as both a Ukrainian “patriot” and a supporter of the Russian-Ukrainian federation’ (Alymov 2019: 127). Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, Mogilyanskiy’s *ethnos* concept, despite some of his own rhetoric to the contrary, was remarkably ambiguous, hardly a precise term. This ambiguity, too, he passed on to Shirokogoroff.

By weaving together a truly impressive array of archival materials, Anderson and Arzyutov convincingly show that Shirokogoroff and his wife, Elizaveta (née Robinson), were outstanding ethnographers. Yet, quite on the other hand, as an engineer of precise theoretical concepts – *ethnos*, above all – Shirokogoroff seems to have fallen short. One sometimes senses a note of apology resonating through Anderson and Arzyutov’s prose. But I think they should rather celebrate, not apologise for, Shirokogoroff’s imprecision. For any committed field empiricist, ambiguity can be a strength rather than a weakness. Just because society is not, and will never become, a vast laboratory, we must learn to live comfortably with the inevitable ambiguities of the abstract scientific terms we use to describe it. In my view, Shirokogoroff used what I have called a ‘field style’ – as opposed to a ‘laboratory style’ – for thinking and doing science (Kochan 2015). This is not just academic hairsplitting – lives may sometimes be at stake.

Anderson and Arzyutov also seem to apologise for Shirokogoroff’s manifest conservatism. Indeed, Shirokogoroff kept, and is today now claimed by, some pretty nasty company. But not all conservatives are the same. So, what sort was Shirokogoroff?

In 1925, Karl Mannheim distinguished two kinds of conservatism: ‘Romantic’ and ‘feudal’ (Mannheim 1953). Feudal conservatism is older, predating the rise of capitalism. Romantic conservatism, in contrast, was a 19th-century reaction to the Enlightenment. In their reaction, Romantics drew heavily on feudal conservatism. But they also transformed it. As Mannheim argues, Romantics furthermore adopted the abstracting, totalising impulses of the Enlightenment. Consequently, the concrete particularism and rational sobriety of feudal thought became infiltrated with the metaphysical holism of modernity. It is probably no coincidence that, during this same period, the ambiguously bounded and particularistic notion of a ‘people’ became increasingly displaced by the abstract and totalising concept of a ‘nation.’

Shirokogoroff was clearly positioned on this shifting ground. Where exactly he stood is probably impossible to determine. But perhaps we can usefully treat him as the uneven agent of a faltering feudal conservatism. This may help us to explain why his *ethnos* concept has been so easily seized on by the mystifying rhetoricians of the right, and also why rationalistic Soviet scholars could not entirely dismiss it as bourgeois Romanticism. Furthermore, treating Shirokogoroff as a feudal thinker may throw light on why his successor, Yulian Bromlei, could

develop *ethnos* in way that Anderson and Arzyutov describe as ‘baroque’ and ‘Byzantine.’ These aesthetic styles are genetically tied to the concrete, pre-capitalist particularism of the feudal period. Elsewhere, I have discussed the unhappy fate of feudal thought in the context of early-modern experimental science (Kochan 2017).

If *ethnos* is rooted in feudal thought, then what chance has it in the present age? Let us return to the example of Ukrainian nationalism. This movement often traces its roots back to the 10th century, when Galicia fell under the sphere of Kievan Rus’. As Paul Robert Magocsi argues, Kievan Rus’ was then a loosely knit federation of principalities, nominally subordinate to Kiev, but more often than not operating with autonomy (Magocsi 2002: 5). As Anderson and Arzyutov suggest, such an ambiguous feudal model of ‘plural oneness’ may offer a hopeful answer to current Eurasian puzzles of multiculturalism. Yet, with the totalising tendencies of the centre now aided by powerful technologies, it becomes difficult to see how peoples on the periphery could successfully assert their local autonomy without also rejecting their ‘oneness’ with the centre.

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