Without a "Concept"? Race as Discursive Practice

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Eric Weitz urges scholars of Soviet society to consider claims made in other fields that boundaries are fluid between national and racial categories.[1] For, if contemporaneous "modern" states built national institutions by disciplining bodies and defining populations, by means of what Michel Foucault calls biopower, could a modernizing Soviet state uniquely refuse such strategies? If this holds, and "if one can see the oscillation in the United States between liberal political . . . and racial conceptions of the nation, which reserve citizenship for the members of the purported white race, why should one be surprised that the Soviets had their own oscillations." Weitz infers a particular *Soviet* version of racial politics at the intersection between biopower and federalism, where resistance from nationally defined "groups" might threaten the malleability of the New Man.

Weitz's argument is compelling, and it charges us to take up important questions. One could, along with Weitz, deduce a "Soviet slide from nationality to race" by analogy, observing in England, for instance, a slide from "class" to "race." Analogies showing that social categories such as "race" and "nation" are potentially fluid form a strong beginning point—but *where* does one look for the particular ways Soviets configured and deployed "race"? This methodological and epistemological concern frames my response.

Weitz suggests seeking race in "practice." As "practice" he includes "policies exercised by states" that structure or ascribe identity—here namely Soviet ethnic and national purges. He subdivides policy into actions on bodies and on identities, the latter representing "effort [that] *marked* the practice of racial politics despite the absence of an articulated racial ideology"(emphasis added). Weitz later writes that the "absence of [an explicit racial] ideology acted as a brake on the Soviet regime's population politics," that is, as a brake on practice.

Searching for racial "concepts" in "practice," defined this way, separates language from social action. Instead, I prefer to treat race *as* discursive practice. The term *discursive practice* includes specific articulations of ideology as actions and avoids reducing discourse to schema while acknowledging the structural constraints of language. To ascribe identity is not only a "mark" *of* practice, nor just a brake *on* practice, but *is* a practice among others. To point to resettlements and purges as macroevents does not elucidate the discursive practices that constituted them. To sketch the broad outlines of an event in which policy targeted every member of a group does not itself *prove* racial logics were at work (race is not the only social category that can be delimited in seemingly absolute ways), though it signals that we should look more closely for racial logics. *How* did troops identify who was to be rounded up? By passport? By accent? By external

1. See especially Étienne Balibar, "Le Racisme encore un universalisme," *Mots* 18 (March 1989): 7–19.

appearance? By hearsay? Did soldiers also resettle people who could be identified as "Russian" but who "looked Korean" or whose grandparents were known to be Korean? How were they instructed to discriminate? How did they actually do so? If the state ascribed *natsional'nost'* to newborns based on parents' identity only at the end of the 1930s, *how* were those parents, then the main objects of purges, identified?

Ethnographic research moves me to ask these questions. In 1990s Russia, many Roma (then "choosing" nationality at maturity) inscribed "Russian" in their internal passports, but authorities (police, bureaucrats handling residence permits, and others) nevertheless often dealt with them and spoke of them as "Gypsy"—but not always. Discursive practices of identification, sometimes racially grounded, sometimes otherwise, constituted those interactions. By contrast, some elderly Roma report being resettled during World War II, not because soldiers marked them visually or bodily as "Gypsies," but because "Hungarian" was written in their documents ("They thought we were Hungarian spies"); soldiers thus considered them "foreign" rather than "our" Gypsies (who were not all resettled).[2] Such discursive practices of recognition—and misrecognition—offer locations for scholars to seek processes of racializing or nationalizing.[3]

Finding such processes in textual accounts of the past is, however, a greater challenge than Weitz indicates. Weitz accuses recent authors of equivocating on whether race was a relevant category in Stalinist USSR and of treating racial politics as "an aberration or accident" that departed from Leninist ideals. I am not convinced that this is always so: Yuri Slezkine, for instance, details shifts in Soviet racial ideologies, not dismissing them but anchoring them to shifts in politics whereby, for instance in the early 1940s, "Nazi race science was no longer a demon to be exorcized—it was a rival to be defeated 'on its own territory.'"[4] And in a work Weitz does not cite, Slezkine argues that even when official Stalin-era discourse minimized "race," literary genres played freely with racializing criteria: "Now the fatherly 'teasing twinkle' [in the eyes of a novel's Slavic hero] had given way to the pristine color of the sky or the sea, which suggested the purity of the Russians' intentions and perhaps hinted at their racial superiority [over the northerners]."[5]

Researchers have more confidently written of "race" when describing Soviet literary or ethnographic texts; when focusing on official texts, per-

2. In the 1990s, some Roma recalled as hardship their *failure* to be evacuated to Tashkent along with the troupe of the Moscow Romani Theater during World War II. Before the war, according to oral accounts and published memoirs, mainly Roma in border areas and those perceived as "foreign Roma" were resettled. For memoirs, see Olga Demeter-Charskaia, *Sud'ba Tsyganki* (self-publication in Moscow, 1997); Ivan Rom-Lebedev, *Ot tsyganskogo khora do teatra "Romen"* (Moscow, 1990).

3. See also Caroline Humphrey, "Myth-Making, Narratives and the Dispossessed in Russia" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Washington, D.C., November 1993).

4. Yuri Slezkine, "N. Ia. Marr and the National Origins of Soviet Ethnogenetics," *Slavic Review* 55, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 853.

5. Yuri Slezkine, *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small Peoples of the North* (Ithaca, 1994), 324.

haps they are justly wary. Their caution, however, may also result from collapsing "ideology," "concepts," and "texts" together, and separating them from "practice." However, official text-making is a practice in itself, one subject to particular restrictions (analytically, we can isolate texts from social life because texts are *also* "things" that circulate).[6] Even if officials do not make a concept explicit when they write and speak *ex cathedra,* that may not indicate ignorance of more explicit discursive practices. If I may be allowed an analogy: United States public junior high school staff (in Nebraska) in the 1970s did not articulate ideology about homosexuality, but students (and perhaps staff) in some settings explicitly articulated ways to detect a "gay" person. An absence of explicit racial ideologies in official Soviet texts does not tell us whether or not policymakers had "no concept" of race in other settings or genres.

Weitz, dissatisfied with such terms as *primordial nationalism* and with scholars who brush against talk about race and then "retreat to the safer language," signals that tracking elusive racial ideologies is hindered by habits of language. I agree, except that the problem is not semantic, not about how words refer to things, but pragmatic. In seeking "race," it may be better to follow Muscovite linguist and literary critic Roman Jakobson and pay attention to the nonreferential functions of language, particularly the indexical functions. These are the functions by which signs indicate or point (with or without also referring).[7] An example familiar to readers of this journal are *ty* or *vy,* which not only represent the "concepts" of second-person singular and plural but also differently point to relations among concrete participants, or to their current social location in some context. Those relations may be painfully explicit to interlocutors, but they may not be verbalized in the semantic meanings of the pronominal terminology and can only be traced through observing how interlocutors shift their uses of the terms over time.[8] To overemphasize semantics and reference over ways speech indexes social relations is especially misleading when looking for race "concepts" because races are not things to be named. Races exist only insofar as people deploy racializing criteria of difference to organize social relations.

Those who came to dominate Soviet cultural policy (and there was never just one ideology about language in the USSR) similarly leaned upon semantic and referential understandings of how language relates to "concepts" and thus to "practice."[9] They hoped that introducing or eradicating vocabularies would create New Men(talities). Because this referential and performative view of language parallels those dominant in the

6. See essays in Michael Silverstein and Greg Urban, eds., *Natural Histories of Discourse* (Chicago, 1996).

7. Roman Jakobson, "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," in T. Sebeok, ed., *Style in Language* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), 398–429.

8. See Paul Friedrich, "Structural Implications of Russian Pronominal Usage," in W. Bright, ed., *Sociolinguistics* (The Hague, 1966), 214–59.

9. See Katerina Clark, *Petersburg: Crucible of Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), 45, 208. But cf. Françoise Thom, who claims that Soviet ideological language was deficient in referential function, instead suspiciously hyper-indexical, metalinguistic, and exhortative. Thom, *Newspeak: The Language of Soviet Communism* (London, 1989), 95–100.

western academic community, scholars in the United States and Europe may not go beyond pointing out where they think Soviet terms do not fit reality. This state of affairs constrains debate both within and across national borders. In the 1990s, various post-Soviet scholars argued with me that "race" was not a relevant category in either Soviet or post-Soviet social life because the relevant *terms* in official and academic use were not *race* but *natsional'nost'* or *narodnost'*. One Russian scholar objected that my use of the term *race* imposed a foreign category. His historical point is well taken. Weitz likewise insists on a distinction between the racializing practices of the USSR and the "racial regimes" of post-slave societies in the Americas. I too would not transpose specific histories of slavery and repression from the American continents to Eurasia: the argument that I have elaborated elsewhere has been simply that people in post-Soviet Russia, like people in the United States and elsewhere, *did* infer internal, biological, and inherited essences from external (if not always physical) "signs."[10] That meta-terms such as *race* were only just entering broad circulation to describe these discursive practices did not mean that those practices themselves were brand new.

Attending to particular 1990s uses of *nationality*, the dominance of which term my post-Soviet interlocutors insisted proved "race" to be an irrelevant category, suggests the opposite, supporting Étienne Balibar's and others' claim that race thinking and nationalism can slide into one another. In the post-Soviet 1990s, terms such as *nationality* were often deployed to do the work of racial categories, as in this excerpt from a 1995 statement by the Russian National Union: "There are even people who . . . rush to *mix with* the Jewish *nationality* and expect all kinds of beneficial results. [A] man and wife who are both Russian and happen to want healthy, *racially whole* children are automatically labeled fascists."[11] This slippage tracks so easily because the terms appear so closely together. Connections and slippages among such categories, of course, change over time, and to project current configurations of national and racial identities backwards would be unpersuasive. At the same time, their recent articulations also beg the question of continuity: what kinds of discursive practice did the authors of this statement encounter before enacting this one?

There is evidence that plenty of racializing terms did circulate decades earlier—even if we were to seek referential lexicons as our only data, we *would* find them: however firmly the Soviet state declared itself against racism, numerous racializing slurs circulated both outside official discourse and within state institutions (in prison and the army, for instance). Evidence of elaborate usage of racial terms can be found in collections made during Iosif Stalin's time: A. A. Roback's 1946 multilingual dictio-

10. Alaina Lemon, "'What Are They Writing about Us Blacks': Roma and 'Race' in Russia," *Anthropology of East Europe Review* 13, no. 2 (Autumn 1995): 34–40; Lemon, "Your Eyes Are Green Like Dollars: Counterfeit Cash, National Substance and Currency Apartheid in 1990s' Russia," *Cultural Anthropology* 13, no. 1 (Winter 1998): 22–55; Lemon, "Talking Transit and Spectating Transition: The Moscow Metro," in Daphne Berdahl, Matti Bunzl, Martha Lampland, eds., *Altering States: Ethnographies of Transition in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union* (Ann Arbor, 2000).

11. *Shturmovik*, 1995, no. 1; emphasis added.

nary of slurs, published just after World War II, gives numerous Russian colloquial pejoratives turning upon skin color and bodily features or linking genetics to geography.[12] So do dictionaries of prison slang collected in the 1960s.[13] From such collections one can only hypothesize the actual practices through which terms such as *chernozhepy* (black asses) circulated beyond state disciplinary contexts of prison and army into other realms of social life. Still, these collections of racial slurs, because they were recorded decades earlier, belie attempts to displace "race" to the west or the very distant past.

But finding lexical traces, lists of terms that refer to or that describe "race," cannot specify how, where, and for whom "race" operates. Racial logic lives not only in the terms that refer to things but in the various ways people use language to *index relations* in specific contexts. Weitz justly bring the purges into the discussion—but what do we need to discover about how the purges were conducted in order to know for certain who was being racialized, and how? The fact that each member of a group "bar none" is isolated may or may not indicate racial logic—other social categories *can* be delimited in exclusive ways. More needs to be understood about the microlevel means by which people are recognized—or *mis*recognized.

Race, as an organic metaphor, is not only about bodies (nationalism and gender rely on bodily imagery too) but about a particular connection *among* bodies, bodies whose substance is bound over time, unmixed with other bodies' substance. It is the means by which people index connections among bodies that is key: individual bodies may be visibly represented as raced, but connections among them cannot always be, not in the same way, they can only be mapped or pointed to.

This is why race is "not essentially about skin color," though it often is: most of my consultants in 1990s central Russia spoke a great deal about how skin color and facial features mark difference. This was so even though many people from the Caucasus or parts of Central Asia are not physically distinct from some people who identify themselves as Russian.[14] But skin color was never the sum of race—most linked "black" complexions to naturalized proclivities: cleverness in the market, a lusty nature, quick to fight ("hot blood"), a nature inseparable from "traditional" practices ("patriarchy"), and networks of family ("clans"). These things could signal race on their own; *anything* isolated as a difference can be made to signal some ostensibly essential nature connecting generations. Race can

12. A. A. Roback, *A Dictionary of International Slurs (Ethnophaulisms)* (1946; reprint, Waukesha, Wisc., 1979).

13. For example, Jacques Rossi, *Spravochnik po gulagu: Istoricheskii slovar' sovetskikh penitentsiarnykh institutsiii i terminov,* 2d ed. (Moscow, 1992).

14. Such "taxonomic dissolution" vexed nineteenth-century physical anthropologists in Russia, who found "some Finns to be Balts, some Balts to be Slavs, and some Slavs to be Turks." Slezkine, "N. Ia. Marr," 828. Recall also that *chernii* cuts in a different place than does "black" in the United States: in Russia *chernii* describes people with "olive" skin, dark eyes and hair (also *temnii* [dark] or *smuglii* [swarthy]). "Black" may also refer to social categories, that is, "black marketers," but this does not negate its usage to describe bodies.

thus be marked by accent or grammar, by forms of kinship, by spatial relations, or by cultural practice. As I have discussed at greater length elsewhere,[15] my consultants in 1990s Russia often described these traits as being carried unseen "in the blood." For instance, among Gypsies many noted that "talent" in music or dancing lay "in the blood," passed along through "dynasties" of performers. This Russian phrase *v krovi* was not a metaphor for ingrained, learned habit but for innate, "national" practices not immediately visible to the eye. A retired judge, in a 1992 interview with me, transposed the metaphor into a scientific register this way: "It's in their genes . . . God found [Gypsies] useful, so they have a right to live. But their life is difficult, and their genes make them unable to work."[16]

Since at least the 1960s, Soviet films and television have fleshed out a motif of detecting hidden identity "in the blood," and they played this trope of connections under the skin without naming those connections as "racial." A widely circulated example (which still reruns on television) is the 1970s series based on the 1961 novel and film titled simply *Tsygan*. The original begins about fifteen years after the end of World War II. The Gypsy hero, Budulaj, is seeking his family. He stays on at a collective farm where he meets a boy who turns out to be his son. The boy's adoptive mother conceals his "true" identity by claiming a different hybrid, that a Tatar grandfather gave him his "swarthy face" (note that the swarthiness needs to be explained). Yet the boy betrays his blood when he learns "Gypsy dance"—he picks up the steps instantly, instinctively, and by this sign, his father recognizes his own substance just as instantly. Similar tropes multiplied in the 1990s, in films like *Luna Park* (1992), *To See Paris and Die* (1993), and *Shirly-Myrly* (1995). The 1995 slapstick farce *Shirly-Myrly* takes the motif to absurdity: the hero (a thief) doubles into long-lost twins when he discovers that he is part-Jewish, then he becomes triplets when he finds that he is also part Gypsy, and so on ad infinitum (part-African, part-Chinese, . . .). Earlier, discovering a hidden hybrid identity was potentially joyful, but in the 1990s, the problem of distinguishing racial and national identities intersected with anxiety about authentic motives under a new regime. Like the surfaces of labels or currencies that pass as one thing and turn out to be another, the human face could deceive. What we call "race" came to mean something different than before.

Such representations of discursive practices of recognition support Weitz's sustained comparison to Nazi Germany. In Nazi Germany, the state "discovered" Jewishness or Gypsiness through genealogical research (sometimes carried out by state anthropologists). Some Roma and Sinte and Jews, perhaps only those who "looked" Aryan, evaded discovery by converting to Christianity, changing surnames, or abandoning old social networks. Race surveillance and what some call "passing" are not peculiar to either Nazi Germany or Soviet Russia. During the same period in the

15. Lemon, "'What Are They Writing about Us Blacks,'" and Lemon, "Your Eyes Are Green Like Dollars."

16. Personal communication, Moscow, 22 March 1992.

United States, some black professionals "passing" as white who enlisted as officers were discovered to be genealogical "negros" (the "one drop" rule) and were ejected from military service.

Perhaps more comparison and contrast to race in the United States, especially to the ways racial politics intersect cultural production, might lead us to better understand how practices of racial discernment circulate among the *various* institutions and settings. For not only may "cultural" texts make explicit what official ones may not, but policymakers do not live in a vacuum, apart from other arenas of discursive production and circulation. In addition, censorship notwithstanding, we cannot assume that discursive practices flow in one direction, that "order—execution" is the only direction in which to trace agency.

To know that entire groups were purged, that group identities were mobilized in other exclusionary practices (such as the "100-kilometer rule") may imply "race" was salient but does not reveal actual practices of racial or other kinds of discernment. Questions to answer include not only what semantic terms describe or delimit racial categories but *who* points *to whom?* Where and when? How, and in relation to what? For instance, in February 1996, Moscow police raided a plant manufacturing counterfeit vodka: suspects were lined up against a wall as the camera slowly lingered on each face, the voiceover simultaneously labeling them "Armenians." The naming could be pegged as "nationalizing," but the sequential panning of faces, connecting them, may index another sort of relation—perhaps a racial one. Reading this broadcast in combination with other interactions in Moscow at the time (for example, a Moscow-born woman whose "ne ochen' slavianskoe litso" contributed to her having her papers checked daily by the special police forces of the Ministry of the Interior), one might inquire whether the broadcast, especially by anchoring faces to a background of shady market practice, engaged a frame in which post-Soviets could hear a "national" label but see a "racial" difference.

If boundaries between race and nation are slippery, it makes sense to look for articulations of racial logic where people perceive a danger of slipping, where they struggle over anchoring identities, and to look not only in the execution of orders concerning major events but also in everyday acts of discernment. Attention to this microlevel will turn up surprises—for instance, perhaps it is not only Russians who found "praise and power" in racial traits. In the 1990s, many Roma embraced certain "national" and "dynastic" traits as signs of authenticity, as capital; many had profoundly internalized that musical talent was "in the blood," for example, and that "blackness" distinguished a "true Gypsy." At the same time, applause for inherited talent could not compensate for the social barriers that resulted from being perceived as having a "black" face. "We are *negry*," one Romani man told me, describing how Russians looked at him, "we are treated like second class here, like your blacks in America."[17]

17. Many Russians use the phrase "white person" without regard to color, to mean "person with civil rights or civilized status" (playing off Soviet reports about racism in the United States) as in phrases like, "When I drive along this new circle road highway I feel like a white person [*chuvstvuiu sebia belym chelovekom*]". Yet this Romani man was not play-

Here *was* a foreign category—race in another nation—being used to make a point about local relations. In other cases, by indexing foreign "blackness," Roma could attempt to *shift* their place within local racial hierarchies. Younger Roma also claimed affinity with American blacks—not as "second class" but in terms of an "attitude" they detected in the movements of musicians on MTV that rendered them "like us." They equated *this* kind of "blackness" with "America" (that is, "The Statue of Liberty—isn't that where Michael Jackson dances in the video?"). Since many former Soviets positioned "America" as materially better off or even "more civilized" than Russia, Romani youth could try to reverse the local valence of blackness: if Roma were like American black musicians, and thus like Americans, they could be "better" than Russians—all the more for being "black." Here, at least in a limited social space, the directions of slippage between race and nation were two-way, and non-Russians deployed *both* as capital.

I write about these shifts after a combination of ethnographic and archival research that allowed attention both to real-time interactions and to ways they are institutionally shaped over time. Could I have detailed slippages between past social categories by juxtaposing cultural texts and policy documents from the archives, laws about residency permits, or even oral histories about racial categories? I am not sure I could have, though others more experienced with such sources may be able to. It may be possible, but not easy, to treat historical sources as both text and discursive practice at the same time.

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ing ironically off reports of racism elsewhere but making a straightforward analogy to situations of color discrimination abroad.