INTERVIEWS

# The Small World of Russian Studies in Gender Relations: An Interview with Sarah Ashwin

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*Sarah Ashwin was interviewed by Tatiana Karabchuk, Associate Professor at the National Research University Higher School of Economics in Moscow. The conversation took place during the international conference "Embeddedness and Beyond: Do Sociological Theories Meet Economic Realities?" (Moscow, 25–28 October 2012), at which Prof. Ashwin co-chaired the mini-conference "Gender and Work Transformation" (with Prof. Roberto Fernandez of MIT). Prof. Ashwin described her background and professional trajectory, and explained how her research interest in Russia, specifically in Russian workers' movements, developed. Prof. Ashwin shared her early impressions of Russia during the 1990's and described her time working in Kemerovo, the administrative center of Kemerovo Oblast located in the major coal mining region of the Kuznetsk Basin in Russia. It was there she collected empirical data for her PhD dissertation on mineworkers and trade unions during the economic transition under Boris Yeltsin. Additionally, Prof. Ashwin devoted several comments to her current research interests which cover feminist movements and gender relations in Russia. Finally, Prof. Ashwin referred to several scholars working on gender relations, within and outside of the Russian context, and made some helpful reading recommendations for newcomers to this field of study.*

**Keywords:** trade unions; employment and gender relations; gender inequality; working class; workers' movement; workers' organization; feminist movement.

*— First of all, I would like to ask you about your career. How did you get into the field of Russian labour and gender studies? Could you explain how your research interests developed?*

— Well, there's no family connection or anything. When I was at school, for my A-level exams, which is the exams you prepare for between 16 and 18 in England, one of my courses was history, specifically 20th century Russian history. I had a really inspiring teacher, Mr. Nick Miles. I'd heard the names Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, but I didn't know that much about it. And so every lesson was like this unfolding drama: "Oh, my goodness, what's going to happen next? Oh no, Stalin's gonna win! Oh no, it's awful!" It was so exciting; it really hooked me in. When I was younger, I also read a lot of Russian novels, in English of course, because I didn't speak any Russian then; Sholokhov and other authors. Then, at university, my first degree was at Oxford in history. It wasn't focused on Russian history, although I did a little bit of Russian history. And then, I graduated in 1989, so obviously here (in Russia) that was a very exciting time. I decided to go to the London School of Economics (LSE). I was thinking of doing social policy, but when I was at LSE meeting people and talking about my Master's degree, I met Howard White, who, along with Dominic Lieven, was running a Master of Science (M.Sc) in Russian Government and Politics, which you could combine

with learning Russian at the same time. It was a kind of impulse, really. I just thought: "If I do that, my life will probably be interesting!" (*laughing*). That decision to do that M.Sc at LSE, where I now work, that had a huge influence on my life, essentially. And during that time — I was studying between 1989 and 1991 — was when the miners in Russia were one of the key elements of the democratization movement, as it then was. And being of the left-wing persuasion, I was always interested in workers and what they were going to do. I was interested in this idea of whether workers were going to be for democratization or they were going to be against democratization. In that sense, this question of what miners were going to do, whether they were going to support Yeltsin, or who there were going to support, if not him, that was for me at that time very interesting. I wrote my Master's dissertation about the 1991 miners' strike, focusing on the strike and its meaning.

Then I went to work for 2 years at the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), which is the main trade union federation in the world, and I was their Central and East European research officer. So I was doing research on the trade unions here, but also across Central and Eastern Europe. But, having done that for a couple of years, I realized I didn't want to work for an international organization, because the trouble with that kind of work is that essentially your conclusions are always written for you in advance by the strongest interests. Whatever I wrote in my report, my conclusion had to please the AFL-CIO, which is the American Trade Union Confederation and it also had to please the Nordic Trade Unions. So it just had to be something really bland. For me, I think I've always had an academic approach, so it just wasn't satisfying as a long-term career. And so I decided to do a PhD, and I went to Warwick to study with Simon Clarke as my supervisor, because Simon had done a really creative thing in gathering together these then very young sociologists into a team, which became the research institute ISITO (Institute for Comparative Labour Relations Research). He had people across the country and he had a team in Kuzbass as well. For me, that was just amazing, because I went there to work with him, and I immediately became part of this network. And it meant that when I was in Kuzbass, I had people, who could take me to a mine, introduce me to the Trade Union President for the first time, and that kind of thing.

*— What was your first project about?*

— The global question of my PhD was how are Russian workers responding to economic reform and whether there was going to be any collective resistance. Because the miners had been the most organized element of the Russian working class, I decided to focus on them because, in a sense, that's the negative case: If the miners are doing it then that signifies something. But if even the miners aren't organizing collective protest it suggests that, in fact, there is not much basis for collective protest. My first book, *Russian Workers: The Anatomy of Patience* [Ashwin 1999], which was based on my ethnography of a Kuzbass mine, argued that the social organization of the traditional Soviet enterprise systematically inhibited independent workers' organization.

*— What was your first impression of Russia, when you came? It was not Moscow, it was the remote regional city…*

— The thing is that I'd already been here before because when I was learning Russian at LSE, I spent a summer in Moscow and travelled quite a lot. That was amazing… It was the summer of 1990. Prices for me were really cheap, so we travelled a lot. We obviously went down to Sochi for a while, and that was very nice. We also went to Georgia — without anyone checking our passports! We went to Tajikistan, Dushanbe. It was an amazing two months, that summer..

Actually, talking about when I was starting my PhD research in 1994, I can remember that we took the train from Moscow to Kemerovo, so that's about three days. As we drew into Kemerovo I just saw these huge chimneys, you know, and all this orange, revolting-looking toxic smoke. I thought "Oh my God, куда я по-

пала?" (*Where have I landed?*). I actually started to cry at that moment, when I saw what Kemerovo looked like from the train. Obviously, then, I was a bit frightened, but, actually, the little mining village where I did my case study of the mine, I just got to know some people there, and they were so protective of me and so kind to me. And the Trade Union President of that mine, to be honest, I think had a bit of a soft spot for me … (*laughing*). He was very, very kind to me, and so in that sense I felt quite at home there, quite protected there. Although, I made several visits there and every time I went back, after I hadn't been there for a while, it was always really scary going back, because you know, nobody had telephones at that time. You had to just turn up and say "Hi, it's me again!" and that was a weird thing.

— *Do you feel any difference from that time?*

— In Russia? Huge difference, yeah.

— *If you feel that difference, what is the most interesting thing for you to study now?*

— Well, at the moment I don't think there's that much going on in trade unions and worker movements. I feel like the things I've said about that, they still stand and not that much has changed. There are some changes in the most advanced enterprises, like at Ford outside of St. Petersburg. In that kind of place you have seen a shift towards a different kind of workers' consciousness, so that's interesting. But I think it's probably not going be my focus at the moment, although I do keep monitoring it.

In terms of gender relations, I think there are lots of interesting things. First, it is very interesting that a key element of the opposition to Putin at the moment is a feminist punk band! (*laughing*) That's quite surprising! When I first heard about Pussy Riot, I was amazed, because, well, the feminist movement in Russia is pretty weak. So the idea that this feminist group, suddenly burst onto the international stage is intriguing. Just in terms of where it came from, the intellectual and social background, that to me is interesting. I'm not sure it's a research topic, but just out of curiosity it's very interesting.

And then, in terms of change in general, I think that, all the way through until the early 2000s or mid-2000s it seemed to me like the old Soviet model of gender relations was just reproducing itself. It seems to me that perhaps now you're beginning to see some change. I'm not sure the extent to which you've got a new middle class, housewives and stuff. I mean obviously I've read the research of Elena Zdravomyslova and Anna Temkina, but I don't know how widespread the kind of phenomenon that they're talking about is, but nonetheless I do think that there are some shifts taking place in gender relations that are interesting.

The other thing I'm interested in doing in my work at the moment, is to use my work on Russia as a basis for wider theorization. . In the past, the way I was looking at Russia was very much about answering questions that were internal to Russia: What's going to happen in Russia? What's going on with gender relations or unions or workers in Russia? Now, what I'm interested in doing is taking a Russian case and using it to develop theory, contribute to wider sociological theory, which I didn't really do so much in my previous work. You can see this in my two most recent articles that are coming out on *Gendering Reciprocity* [Ashwin et. al 2013] and the male marriage wage premium [Ashwin, Isupova 2014] which use Russian data to make more general arguments.

— *You've mentioned how you got into research on trade unions. So, why did you decide to work with gender relations? What was the motivation?*

— Actually, I was always interested in those two aspects. When I was doing my Master's degree, the two things I focused on were workers' organization and the position of women and the development of feminism.

I always had those two strands — feminism and socialism! For example, I had an internship, at what was then Radio Liberty in 1991. During that time I wrote two articles for them: one was on the 1991 miners' strike and the other on the first feminist conference in Dubna. Do you remember? It was a long time ago… Those two strands have always been there in my work. The gender aspect I think is very interesting, because the Soviet gender order was unique, has very specific features — this idea that you've got very high female employment combined with very traditional, in the sense of conservative, gender roles. It's very interesting because you've got this systematic attempt by the Soviet state to transform gender relations. Trying to trace the impact of official ideology and then how that impacts on individual consciousness and identity, that is also very interesting to me.

*— You have many contacts with researchers from different countries, including Eastern Europe and the US, could you name some, who are doing interesting work on gender relations, especially within the Russian context?*

— Actually I have to say that the field is quite small. It's really not that big. In fact, one of the things I lack, I think, is Western collaborators to do this kind of work with. There aren't that many people doing it… It's strange, but there aren't. For example, the whole of LSE, quite a big university, I think, has only about five people focusing on Russia. Not on gender in Russia, but just on Russia as a whole. Actually there are not that many people working on Russia, so among the Western researchers that I collaborate with, or have contact, with, regarding Russia, not that many of them do work on gender. One of them does, her name is Jennifer Utrata. She's just had a nice article in *Gender and Society*, which actually won the Best Gender Paper prize at the American Sociological Association. It was on grandmothers and so called "youth privilege" [Utrata 2011]. It's a good paper.. Then people not doing gender, there's obviously Valery Yakubovich, and Ted Gerber of Wisconsin. I'm very, very proud right now, because one of my PhD students, Sam Greene, who used to be at Carnegie in Moscow, has just been made head of the Russia Institute at King's College London. This for me is like, wow, I was his PhD supervisor! I don't think it's much to do with me that he got this job, but it's great. I think he's going to try to push things about Russian themes forward in London. Hopefully, he'll develop some cooperation between King's and LSE, just seminars and stuff. That's a new development.

I'm just trying to think of other people that I've worked with… In the UK obviously there's is Rebecca Kay. I have to say, though, that we know each other but we haven't ever worked together. There's Suvi Salmenniemi. She was at University of Helsinki, now she's at Turku in Finland. Her work is really good. Her thesis was actually in an area similar to mine. It was on the development of civil society, but with a gender aspect. I really like her work.

*– What is the most valuable book about gender relations?*

– About gender relations in Russia?

*– Not only in Russia.*

– Ah, generally. Well, the book that I'm really enjoying at the moment is a book by Cecilia Ridgeway *Framed by Gender* [Ridgeway 2011]. She's at Stanford University. It's an account of why gender relations reproduce themselves, even though women's employment has increased so much. *Framed by Gender* is a good summary of her main arguments. That's a really useful book. The other theorist that I like, not specifically about gender, but I enjoy the work of Pierre Bourdieu, because in my work there's a lot about historical continuities, and I think his theory of dispositions is helpful. His overall theoretical standpoint I find very useful as a starting point. And obviously that whole "doing gender" type approach, but that's been around for a long time now.

– *Thank you very much. It was very interesting!*

– Thank you (*laughing*).

Tatiana Karabchuk
October 2012, Moscow

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