



Does Impact Reinforce the Boundary Between the Academy and the World?

**SPECIAL COLLECTION:
SLAVIC STUDIES**

**ARTICLES – RUSSIAN &
EASTERN EUROPEAN
LANGUAGES**

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ABSTRACT

The ongoing pandemic has made everyone extremely conscious of space, both as a reality and a metaphor. In light of this, this article takes a critical approach to the construction of space in the discourse of “impact” and “public engagement,” using parallels with the study of Russian culture in the twentieth century to argue that attempts to overcome a perceived barrier between academics and non-academics can serve to essentialise and reinforce this division.

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It is probably a bad idea to pontificate during a crisis, especially one that has the world historical proportions of the Covid-19 pandemic. Even after more than a year, any reflection on this huge, unknowable situation risks being speculative, banal, or both; any attempt to relate it to something concrete and knowable, like your own job, seems as petty as writing an op-ed called “The Impending Asteroid Collision and the Future of Bitcoin.”

Nonetheless, this is also a peculiarly apt time to think about the relationship between the academy and the public, and especially where it takes place.

First, for better and for worse, over my lifetime the privileged position of academic expertise has been eroded both by the democratization of access to knowledge (good!) and by the machinations of self-interested populists (bad!). Not long ago, the UK was said to have had enough of experts; in the past year, though, the majority of the population has been eager for data-driven guidance and even the expert-phobic PR flacks in government are still happy, when it suits them, to defer demonstratively to “the best science” and to lionize academics—or at least academics of the lab-coat-wearing, vaccine-making kind; those engaged in the arts or social science, not so much. But even as hope increases for a technological solution to our woes, the dominant mood is one of uncertainty about the future and, especially, about the pandemic’s lasting damage to the most vulnerable parts of society, against which no inoculation is imminent. In this nervous atmosphere, and with the clamour of anti-science, anti-vaccination voices increasingly audible, it is far from certain that either people or politicians will keep placing their faith in expertise, at least not the sort of expertise that comes with PhDs and peer review. After all, decades of scientific consensus on the still more disastrous effects of the climate emergency have not changed much. All academics, therefore, even ones as clueless about epidemiology as me, have a part to play in protecting our colleagues’ claims to legitimacy.

Second, one of the most noticeable consequences of the virus is an intensification of our perception of place. On the one hand, it is more obvious than ever that the global economy is constituted by countless bodies moving through space and across borders; on the other, in the confinement of intermittent quarantines, highly mobile global northerners have been forced to confront spatial restrictions already familiar to the less privileged. But even this new awareness of our own four walls cannot be separated from the experience of globalization in its other, more nebulous form—the Internet. At least, we sigh, we have Zoom and WhatsApp and Netflix and all these other corporate conveniences that allow us to pretend we can transcend geography and find connection in the ether.

So what does this have to do with Slavic Studies going public? What is the asteroid’s impact on “impact”?

This current consciousness of two opposed models of space—connection and confinement—and two types of globalization—people in motion and people at monitors—might seem novel in its intensity but crises accelerate history not only by creating new conditions but also by laying bare existing contradictions. The coordination of virtual and physical globalization was already a key issue, it is just that now we cannot help but think about it. And nowhere is this question more relevant than in the study of languages and cultures—a field that should have been flourishing in an era of international interconnection but which instead has been floundering.

There are structural and political reasons for this that are beyond academics’ control, but we might help our predicament by talking more accurately about what we do. As a literary scholar, it is pretty on-brand of me to suggest that the solution is a better metaphor, but how we present what we do to ourselves and to others is important. In short, I think scholars of Modern Languages have become too invested in an image of ourselves as privileged points of contact and exchange between discrete spaces, as if we were intrepid merchants transporting precious cargoes from unknown lands (the colonialist connotations are no accident).

The metaphor of intellectual cross-border traffic is particularly prevalent in Russian studies: partly because of Russia’s long history of agonizing over its exceptionalism, but mostly because of the lingering influence of the Cold War, when there really were two political and cultural systems divided geographically by physical borders that were tricky to traverse. Tricky, but not impossible, and what border-crossers there were got extra attention for their exoticism: Beatlemania and blue jeans one way, ballet dancers and banned novels the other. The Iron

Curtain was only the entry-level spatial metaphor, though; the next was a multiple interiority of boxes within boxes, represented in images by the impenetrable walls of the Kremlin, in words by Churchill's riddle in an enigma in a mystery, and in trinkets by the matryoshka. Scholars, like spies, could claim a special role in unwrapping all this, smuggling Russian "content", be that Kremlinological bunkum or burn-proof manuscripts, through all these barriers.

Nevertheless, twentieth-century scholars' entanglement in the Cold War and its espionage-inflected epistemology of uncovering and decoding did not undermine the genuine importance of some of their disclosures. The fact, for instance, that western scholars continued to shine a light on experimental modernists marginalized (and/or murdered) in the Soviet Union was, in theory, congenial to an official discourse of Soviet brutality and cultural aridity, but it also helped to preserve and to publicize something of real value and transformative power. In practice, Curtain-crossing scholarly undertakings such as Camilla Gray's *The Russian Experiment in Art: 1863–1922* (1962) or Carl and Ellendea Proffer's work at Ardis Publishers not only militated against reductive understandings of Russia but did so in a way that appealed to a broad audience. In the jargon of contemporary UK academia, they were case studies of outstanding reach and significance.

The idea that academics might now play a similarly vital role in connecting countries seems far-fetched, as our current predicament—made inevitable by worldwide travel, mitigated by the worldwide web—shows. Of course, the movement of information, like the movement of people, is anything but free, fair, and multilateral and, not least because of language barriers, there is still some role for experts to play in curating the endless bounty of the Internet. But if my Russianist colleagues and I all retired tomorrow, the majority of Russian history and culture would still be out there, a couple of clicks away.

Even without the Internet, mass migration means that the cultures connected with "foreign languages" are thriving "here" as much as "there". It seems to me that, for all its pathological Cold War paranoia, the USA does a better job in this regard than the UK, probably because the USA has more successfully integrated (white) migration into its own mythology. In the UK, by contrast, the fact that hundreds of thousands of speakers of Slavic languages have been living here for two decades seems to have had little impact on the official teaching and research strategies of Modern Language departments. One is tempted to wonder whether, despite its well-meaning, multinational workforce, Modern Languages as a discipline is more comfortable with diversity beginning at Calais.

Of course, many individual researchers and some departments have made sure to work with these migrant communities and, indeed, many teachers are themselves migrants from Central, Eastern, or South-Eastern Europe—more often than not women and working in departments' less prestigious, more precarious, and worse paid language-teaching jobs. But it is only in the last five years that funding bodies and professional organizations have made explicit the connection between the travails of Modern Languages—and with it Slavic Studies—and its failure to engage, on a structural, institutional level, with the UK's own linguistic diversity. Slavic Studies is a case in point: Polish, despite being the second most-spoken language in the country for more than a decade, and despite fitting well within the traditional (and inadequate) Modern Languages paradigm of monoglot European nations, is offered as a degree at only three UK universities.

The ever-present pressure for internationalization means that universities and their language departments will eventually get to grips with the mobility and multilingualism of the modern world. More worrying is the fact that the same border-oriented thinking that has shaped Modern Languages' self-image has taken root in the jargon used for all research. Just as much-vaunted "interdisciplinarity" often serves to delimit disciplines, so vague terms like "public engagement" and "impact" draw a line between the university and the world. The former is defined by taking place "outside the institution", the latter "beyond academia", with scholars invited to traffic wares across this border (and bring back cash). Just as the Russian intelligentsia's fetishization of "the people" was as much about snobbish self-definition as it was regretful alienation, so the border-crossing imagery of public engagement can help to re-entrench the ivory tower, at once objectifying "ordinary people" and giving oxygen to the perilous myth that university lecturers are somehow less part of "the public" than plumbers.

This sense of worlds colliding is particularly unhelpful for those of us who work with culture. Much of the bureaucratic infrastructure of public engagement is predicated on bringing esoteric scientific knowledge out of the lab and presenting it to potentially bewildered laypeople. In contrast, books and movies—even incredibly long Russian ones—are already known and loved outside of academia. The challenge is not so much getting people excited about something arcane, it is making our ideas stand out in an already crowded cultural marketplace.

More importantly, if, as I fear, the act of public engagement is too often an exercise in distinguishing here from there and us from them, then the academy as a whole risks losing people's trust and sympathy—a dangerous prospect in a world desperately in need of experts.

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