

## **A few methodological notes based on the field observations of rural human capital in the Russia's Non-Black Earth Region<sup>1</sup>**

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*Abstract.* The article presents some methodological considerations on the possibilities and limitations of the qualitative approach (repeated case studies in the specific Russian region) for the sociological assessment of human capital. In the first part of the article, the author considers the Russian tradition of rural studies as combining two analytical 'optics' — sociological/ethnographic observations of local realities based on various combinations of qualitative techniques and a strong anthropological/ peasant-studies emphasis with large-scale social surveys aimed at macro-descriptions of agrarian reforms, rural social/human capital and agro-industrial complex under the persistent trends of social-spatial differentiation. In the second part, the author mentions the key possibilities and limitations of case studies for assessing the state and prospects of rural human capital in the most depressed rural region of Russia, focusing on the role of entrepreneurs in formal and informal support of the local rural economy and communities in cooperation with municipal and regional authorities. In the final part, the author emphasizes typologies as the analytical result of rural case studies (especially the repeated ones) and provides examples — 'types' of the local agricultural producer relationships with the rural settlement's authorities and community (as the basis for preserving rural human capital) and 'types' of the rural entrepreneurs' biographical trajectories (as the basis for the generational continuity of this differentiated rural stratum).

*Key words:* (repeated) case study, field research, typology, analytical generalizations, rural entrepreneur, rural human capital, positive and negative trends, local authorities, rural community, formal and informal interaction

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### **Two analytical 'optics'**

The Russian tradition of peasant/rural studies can be divided into two conditional parts. On the one hand, there are sociological/ethnographic observations of local rural realities based (see, e.g.: Ban-

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field, 2019; Vinogradsky, 2009; Yastrebinskaya, 2005; Vorbrugg, 2018; 2020). On the other hand, there are large-scale social surveys combining statistical and sociological data to provide macro-descriptions (see, e.g.: Kalugina, Fadeeva, 2009; Kuznetsova, 2009; Shagaida et al, 2019; 2023). Certainly, the latter is more widespread due to management tasks, including the critical systematization of the prerequisites and results of the post-Soviet agrarian reform for the further restructuring of Russian agriculture (Uzun, Shagaida, 2015: 12).

Other things being equal, rural sociologists prefer qualitative techniques to reveal rural realities that determine or are hidden behind the bravura macro-descriptions based on big data and inclined to imitation — of the local authorities for the regional ones, of the regional authorities to the federal ones, and of local entrepreneurs to everyone they consider necessary — so that not to be punished for shortcomings and to get additional funds (see, e.g.: Maksimov, 2018; Saraikin, Yanbykh, 2018). The qualitative approach allows to identify imitations and its reasons, for instance the desire of the local authorities to maintain the status quo and to keep higher authorities as far as possible in order to develop informal network mechanisms for everyday survival in the contemporary unpredictable and changeable social-economic realities. Depending on the success of such imitation games and selected social-economic practices, some researchers divide rural Russia into three spatial parts: “territories of growth”, “territories of stagnation” and “territories of compression” (or “desolation zones”) (see, e.g.: Nefedova, 2003; 2021).

Both quantitative and qualitative approaches are fundamentally important for rural sociology (see, e.g.: Toshchenko, 2018; Trotsuk, 2019a; 2019b; 2020): the former shows general trends, the latter — how they manifest themselves in the life of typical (according to various criteria) rural territories and settlements. For instance, when assessing the results of the post-Soviet agrarian reforms, long-term ethnographic observations within case studies reveal those social-economic forms that determine statistical generalizations about a multi-structural agrarian economy; why huge agrohholdings keep displacing peasant farms and personal subsidiary plots; why Russian agriculture lost its collective nature and did not manage to become cooperative; why there so many regional differences in the Russian agrarian structure; what determined “changes in the composition of the largest producers, redistribution of regions’ positions and increased concentration of production in the largest regions”, and consequences of “the complete and unconditional triumph of large and very large farms... an unprecedented round of agrarian gigantomania... and the disappearance of two villages every day” (Toshchenko, 2016: 14).

The qualitative approach reveals the subjective dimension of the macroeconomic situation, focusing on radical changes in the rural lifeworld under the ongoing transformations of the traditional rural

community (de-peasantization): “the peasant world has disintegrated, there is nothing in common that unites people, disunity and isolation are everywhere” (Toshchenko, 2016: 45). However, it is the qualitative approach that shows ‘behind’ the well-known negative trends (caused by inefficient formal social-economic institutions and identified with quantitative indicators) some positive trends, such as the revival of rural communities based on the mechanisms of informal economy (networks of mutual support, various forms of grassroots mobilization) which is forced to compensate for low living standards. Moreover, different combinations of qualitative and quantitative approaches have proven that both positive and negative trends in the agrarian development are largely the result of the unjustified romanticization of the countryside by post-Soviet reformers with their utopian “fantastic ideas about some collective farmer who, having received land, would instantly turn into a farmer to independently ensure the entire production cycle” (Toshchenko, 2016: 52).

In recent years, many economic and sociological works have considered the systemic transformations of Russia’s rural areas, focusing on development scenarios, institutional traps and transaction costs of numerous attempts to solve the land question, to resolve objective contradictions of post-Soviet reforms, to revive rural periphery and relationships between formal and informal social-economic and rural-urban practices, thus, trying to balance the interrelated trends of de- and re-peasantization, centralization and privatization, globalization and glocalization, etc. (see, e.g.: Allina-Pisano, 2008; Hann et al, 2003; Lindner, Moser, 2011; Nefedova, 2013; Pilyasov, 2009; Shagaida, 2010). On the one hand, the refrain of such works (even the most optimistic ones) is the shrinking rural space primarily due to the outflow to cities, the declining number of traditional types of agricultural employment, the ongoing depletion of rural human/social capital, the persisting objective and subcultural poverty and other negative trends that do not allow rural settlements to overcome the gap in the standard of living with cities. This persisting social-economic differentiation is a distinctive feature of the Russian society, especially when comparing life opportunities of urban and rural residents.

Another typical feature of rural studies is the refusal to talk about some mythical “peasant class” in the 21st century, since this concept turned from literal to metaphorical. The boundaries of Russian rural ‘classes’ seem unclear due to the remoteness of villages from urban centers as places of power, but the main reason is rather the inapplicability of the class stratification model today as representatives of powerless groups in rural areas often have some power resource (pensioners work as heads of municipalities, local entrepreneurs pay for public works and celebrations). Quite often rural residents hold a principal non-class position or do not identifying themselves with any class, emphasizing their ‘autonomy’ from the state; therefore, we can use the metaphor of “second Russia” (see, e.g.: Ni-

kulin, 2012; Trotsuk, 2014) or “weapons of the weak” (see, e.g.: Scott, 1985; Vinogradsky, 2009; Wegren, 2016) (the costs and negative consequences of social-economic reforms are compensated by traditional norms of the rural community life). It is unlikely that “the demonstrative indifference and bravado of freedom that remoteness from city life gives rural residents is a self-deception or a game” (Clement, 2021: 61), and that today we observe “the destruction of the peasant community (of the *Gemeinschaft* type) which began almost a hundred years ago” (Clement, 2021: 59).

### **Possibilities and limitations of case studies for assessing rural human capital**

Qualitative studies in Russia’s northern non-black-earth region with its difficult conditions for farming are particularly indicative, since in general its state of agriculture is deplorable and its human capital is depleted (compared to much more successful and rich agricultural regions like Kuban). Thereby, its ‘critical’ rural cases of vitality are valuable, especially if the most depressed rural localities somehow managed to survive. On the one hand, there are depressive settlements with the last weak attempts to survive with the help of the former collective/state farm’s resources preserved under the market economy and spontaneous privatization, with a general feeling of complete abandonment by the state and a migration outflow or sentiments. On the other hand, there are less pessimistic settlements with sustainable entrepreneurial activity based on both former Soviet agricultural enterprises and new projects with the state support (former city residents can become rural entrepreneurs, see, e.g.: Bozhkov, Trotsuk, 2018; Denisenko et al, 2016; Ovchintseva, 2021; Vinogradskaya, 2019; Vinogradsky, Vinogradskaya, 2022).

Both types of rural entrepreneurs not only officially support the local rural economy (create jobs, replenish local budgets, prevent the youth from migration, attract families from neighboring areas), thus, preserving rural communities, but also informally perform the former functions of Soviet agricultural enterprises in cooperation with local administrations (construction, holidays, cleaning, applications for grants and state subsidies), thus, preserving rural human capital. Such entrepreneurial concern is not selfless or charitable but rather rational ‘capitalist’ — investment in rural workforce (living conditions and social activities), but rural entrepreneurs have no guarantees of success (natural disasters, financial crises, crop failures); thereby, their motives and actions can be explained by the theory of small deeds (see, e.g.: Ely, 2022; Gordeeva, 2003; Nikulin, Trotsuk, 2022a; 2022b) — a set of altruistic communitarian ideas for improving rural life through everyday transformations (educational, cultural-historical, recreational-ecological, etc.).

Such broad generalizations based on the case study data are traditional for rural sociology: for instance, the well-known Teodor Shanin's field projects summarizes the results of the post-Soviet market-economy reforms and rural transformations in a model of patrimonial management (a symbiotic type of appropriation and redistribution of collective-farm resources, see, e.g.: Nikulin, 2010; Uzun et al, 2022). Another example is a dynamic typology of rural areas, based on the extensive social-economic and social-geographic data, which shows an increasing differentiation and polarization of space between urban centers and rural periphery (preservation of agricultural production as a collective/cooperative farm, development of small-scale private agricultural farming, an entrepreneurial use of natural resources preservation of rural settlements as cultural-historical objects, see, e.g.: Nefedova, 2013). Among the peripheral rural areas, researchers identify autarkic (eco-settlements) and symbiotic (combinations of formal and informal practices) rural communities (see, e.g.: Averkieva, 2017); among economically developed, densely populated and market-oriented rural areas — multi-structural and mono-structural (see, e.g.: Fadeeva, 2015; Kuznetsova, 2009). Thus, case studies continue the tradition of typologizing rural areas based on the repeated field observations (see, e.g.: Trotsuk, 2007; Nikulin, Trotsuk, 2014; Ovchintseva, 2020; Savoskul, Alekseev, 2021). However, this does not eliminate the shortcomings of case studies, which are described, for instance, by E. C. Banfield in *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (2019): implicit and explicit comparisons, reliance on 'unverified guides', dubious simplifications of complex phenomena that are convenient to interpret as 'simple'/backward, etc. Banfield's book shows that even half a century ago 'rural status' did not guarantee sustainable *Gemeinschaft* relations and communalism, since, as today, the main problems of rural communities were unemployment, poverty, low social trust, perception of the state as both the cause of bad life and the paternalistic source of financial assistance (although it is always better to stay away from the state).

Our case studies in rural areas of the non-black-earth region (see, e.g.: Bozhkov et al, 2020; 2022; Bozhkov, Trotsuk, 2018; 2020) showed through the fate of villagers and settlements both clear depopulation trends and some reasons for optimism, since even in the traditionally depressed areas there are rural entrepreneurs supporting the rural economy and local communities, 'restoring' their social-demographic structure, cooperating with local administrations, combining formal and informal ways to solve problems, and turning into the real power in the countryside. As in Soviet times, agricultural and other enterprises are forced to act as social guarantors, maintaining the livelihoods of their workers and other villagers; and it is much easier for such 'guarantors' to fulfill these obligations in an informal way, i.e., their funding is irregular and depends on the financial condition of the enterprise and the good will of its owner. Local agricultural en-

terprises solve minor infrastructure problems and provide villagers with some necessary services, because their heads are more accessible than the municipal or regional authorities, which makes such enterprises a key supporter of the rural structure.

Since the relations between the authorities and agricultural enterprises are not officially regulated, personal connections come into force: if the head of the rural settlement and the head of the enterprise establish informal relationships, they start to work together in the interests of the village. Under the constant shortage of funds this is not easy but possible through the redistribution of funding and services. Thus, modest budgets of rural settlements provide opportunities not for their social-economic development but for the formation of social networks at the grassroots level, i.e., of the ‘patrimonial’ principle of management, which emerged in the 1990s, still works and determines the emergence of ‘exemplary’ municipalities — with decent schools, medical centers, good roads and public transport — not necessarily near the district/urban center.

The position of the local authorities is quite dual: on the one hand, they should express the rural population’s opinions and work in close contact with villagers; on the other hand, they depend on the regional authorities’ decisions (including in financial terms). As a result, the so-called ‘national consolidation’ often leads to rural destruction, although traditional rural groups and social institutions can successfully adapt to changing conditions, ensuring a necessary human-capital basis for the national model of modernization (see, e.g.: Gusfield, 1967), but only provided a reasonable balance between tradition and modernization. However, the ‘traditional’ model of Russian modernization in both Soviet and post-Soviet periods seems to be ‘catch-up’ and ‘from above’ (see, e.g.: Fedotova, 1997; Krasilshchikov, 1993; Naumova, 1999; Pain, Volkogonova, 2008), i.e., it combines traditional and modern (often borrowed) norms, values and institutions, making an emphasis on political-ideological (transformation of political system, changes in public life, increasing influence of power structures at all levels) rather than social-economic tasks.

Certainly, there has been a gradual transition to a new economic management regime, which can be traced through statistical data and biographical narratives of villagers, but officials often follow old patterns to expand the boundaries of their “administrative resource”. This term is negative in its narrow political definition: when parties or candidates use their status or connections with government agencies to influence the results of elections (see, e.g.: Nureev, Shulgin, 2006; Olshansky, 2001). This term’s broader interpretation has a greater research potential, indicating informal social connections and knowledge of the mechanism and structure of management, based on the traditional rural way of life (and the role of administrative resource in its regulation) and the rural communities’ attempts to maintain viability (human capital) under the social-economic transformation

‘from above’ with destructive outcomes instead of the increased efficiency of agricultural production.

In the Soviet period, collective and state farms had funds to maintain the rural social infrastructure (educational institutions, housing and communal services, transport), while the municipal authorities did not have resources to carry out their direct functions and were forced to turn for help to the heads of agricultural enterprises. This situation determined a significant redistribution of these enterprises’ resources in favor of their workers in both legal (purchase of agricultural products at lower prices, getting feed, grain and other products free of charge, use of agricultural machinery) and illegal (widespread theft with the connivance of enterprise managers) ways, i.e., the state transferred many its functions (and functions of municipalities) to agricultural enterprises.

In the post-Soviet period, under the inefficient agricultural management, low returns of huge investments in agriculture, and constant outflow of rural residents to cities due to the low quality of life in the countryside, the state chose the modernization model based on the radical disruption of management and an emphasis on self-organization (see, e.g.: Efimov, 2009; Kalugina, 2001; Nefedova, 2003; Patsiorkovsky, 2003; Veliky, Morekhina, 2004). The general idea of agrarian reforms (see, e.g.: Krylatykh et al, 2018; Petrick, 2022; Shagaida, 2019; Vinogradskaya, 2022) was that inefficient forms of production would be replaced by highly efficient ones as soon as the peasant started to work independently on the allocated land, created new forms of cooperation and established more effective collective or individual farms. However, the high technological level of the contemporary agricultural production, the lack of sufficient economic and social resources, the unpreparedness for such radical social-institutional transformations intensified the systemic crisis in agriculture, which explains that the preserved enterprises relied on power structures as the only available resource.

Some enterprises realized the importance of maintaining agricultural production for their regions or municipalities and established specific interaction with certain government institutions and other enterprises, i.e., personal connections and non-institutionalized relationships had a decisive influence on agricultural production, rural development and human capital (see, e.g.: Lester, 1998). The financial and social-economic well-being of the rural territory has been largely determined by the interaction between the authorities and the business (see, e.g.: Fadeeva, 2003; Fadeeva, Nefedkin, 2018; Nikula, Kopoteva, 2020; Popov, 2022; Vinogradsky, Vinogradskaya, 2022). Many long-term and repeated case studies prove the importance of such interactions for stabilizing the social-economic situation in rural areas and preserving their human capital by determining the most diverse local practices and the most justified local strategies for compensating the shortcomings of the state macro-policies and the regional unified management.

**Not just descriptions**

In addition to analytical descriptions, case studies serve as a source of typologies that can be rather broad (successful and unsuccessful paths of the local rural development; efficient and inefficient relationships of the local rural community with local/regional authorities/agricultural producers) or focused (types of local rural entrepreneurs). Due to the huge variety of practices and strategies for interaction between municipal authorities, local communities and heads of agricultural enterprises, any single model for the development of rural areas makes no sense and should be replaced by some common type-forming features. For instance, a typology of the local agricultural producer (entrepreneur) relationships with the rural settlement (its authorities and community) can consist of the following types:

- Large agroholding as an interested (temporarily but better constantly) and forcedly socially responsible economic actor that invests if not in the regional/local development then at least in preserving agricultural production, which implies caring for the local community as a source of human capital (workers). Sometimes the municipal authorities contribute to the concentration of the production base to ensure that several small (weak) enterprises would constitute one large (strong) enterprise (negotiations set the conditions for both sides).
- Individual successful entrepreneur (the backbone of the local economy — high production indicators, effective management, independently solves all problems without municipal or regional subsidies or funds) is forced to invest in the local human capital to save a dying enterprise, to preserve his rural homeland or to create a profitable agricultural production. Any of these motives is fortunate for the local authorities (to preserve and develop agricultural production and rural territory), but such an entrepreneur is inconvenient in the management perspective (the authorities have almost no leverage over such an investor).
- Successful medium-sized or small entrepreneur that depends on local authorities is offered to become the head of the local economy-forming agricultural enterprise to invest in it his income from diversified activities. Usually, he cannot refuse such an offer not to spoil relations with the local/regional authorities, which would threaten his main enterprise. Such a case is beneficial for the local authorities that can report about having found an investor for the dying enterprise, but there are no guarantees of his success.
- The ‘unique’ case of the successful commercial enterprise either established by the local institution that did not get support from the local authorities but managed to interest the regional authorities or to win a federal/commercial/regional grant or patronized by the local authorities as a kind of the “social-economic landmark”. Both cas-



es are beneficial for the municipal administration to demonstrate to any higher-ranking authorities when asking for (additional) funding. Certainly, this typology is far from being complete, and the boundaries between types are fluid as they can transform into others under the influence of external (regional or district policy) or internal (social and human capital) factors with both positive and negative consequences. However, all types form the basis for the rural survival strategies and perform the stabilizing function for the local economy.

In general, those agricultural enterprises whose managers/owners have a significant social resource are in a better position, since their informal connections with the municipal/regional authorities and accumulated social capital (formalized in legal, consulting, information, financial and other types of assistance) provide such resource-rich entrepreneurs with better chances for implementing their business development strategy (to get loans and equipment within regional or national programs, to re-register enterprise, to get financial and consulting assistance, etc.). In other words, agriculture as an industry of small and medium-sized commodity producers is often more efficient and sustainable when the authorities take responsibility for the work of agricultural enterprises with both economic and administrative levers, admitting the importance of such producers for preserving rural human capital.

Another important resource for analytical generalizations in rural case studies are biographies of owners/managers of agricultural enterprises, especially in repeated case studies, when we compare 'qualitative' changes in the stratum of rural entrepreneurs. For instance, such a typology can be based on the idea of the generational continuity: in recent decades, the stratum of rural entrepreneurs has become noticeably younger (compared to the previous generation of former state/collective farm managers and more diversified (a) in terms of entering this economic niche — some have consistently replaced their fathers/grandfathers, some at first denied this path but then accepted it (for different reasons), some were engaged in many urban or rural activities before making their final choice of agriculture (can be newcomers for the rural community), reinforced by the state's attitude (many forms of support — grants, expanded subsidies, changes in legislation) and (b) in motives and value orientations (wishes to organize a profitable business, to change one's life, to preserve family business, to have a more 'natural'/traditional way of life, to live in a small community of like-minded people, and so on).

For their part, local communities are interested in new rural entrepreneurs — with good knowledge of agricultural production (can be supplemented by the higher or secondary specialized education), management experience (in leadership positions), professional skills, authority among municipal and regional authorities (mainly informal connections). Many successful rural entrepreneurs become members of municipal or regional government bodies — due to their ability to restructure thinking in changing economic conditions, to find solu-

tions in the most unfavorable conditions, to set goals and work for results that are associated with both personal and collective success.

Thus, repeated rural case studies show two trends in the development of rural areas and their human capital: on the one hand, since the mid-2000s, many local authorities have lost their ability to dictate conditions to agricultural enterprises and a number of powers (due to the radical reduction in funding), which accelerated the collapse of agriculture, aggravated the already deplorable situation in some rural areas, especially in the non-black-earth region, and gave rise to depressive and pessimistic moods among rural population (a feeling of the complete abandonment by the state led to the increasing outflow to the city). On the other hand, Russia's rural areas have become a differentiated space with 'oases' of development, mainly due to the new human capital (a cohort of rural entrepreneurs that establish or preserve agricultural enterprises, including with the help of federal and regional support).

Certainly, the latter trend is reinforced by the contemporary production technologies that reduced the number of employees needed. This trend cannot be considered sustainable positive, since it did not completely break/reverse the negative trend of the compression of the old-developed rural territories due to the still unsolved agricultural and rural problems. Nevertheless, the local entrepreneurial stratum makes a huge contribution to the development of rural human capital and economic functions of the village, thus, preserving rural settlements even in the traditionally most depressed areas. The positive influence of small and medium-sized rural entrepreneurs on the social and human rural capital is the main reason why local administrations are so much interested in them rather than in large enterprises (not to mention huge agroholdings) that, as a rule, do not contribute to the financial base of the village/region and do not implement social responsibility to the local community. On the contrary, small and medium-sized agricultural and other enterprises invest part of their working capital and profits in maintaining social infrastructure of rural settlements, fulfilling most of such obligations informally, which strengthens their relationships and cooperation with the heads of rural municipalities in the interests of local communities (a micro-public-private partnership).

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### **Несколько методических заметок по результатам полевых наблюдений за сельским человеческим капиталом в российском Нечерноземье<sup>2</sup>**

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*Аннотация.* В статье представлены некоторые методологические выводы о возможностях и ограничениях качественного подхода (повторных кейс-стади в особом сельском регионе России) в рамках социологической оценки состояния сельского человеческого капитала. В первой части статьи российская традиция сельских/крестьяноведческих исследований представлена как сложное сочетание двух аналитических «оптик» — социологических/этнографических наблюдений за локальными реалиями сельской жизни на основе разных сочетаний мягких методик и с сильным антропологическим акцентом с крупномасштабными социальными обследованиями, призванными обеспечить макро-описания хода и результатов сохраняющихся тенденций социально-пространственной дифференциации. Во второй части обозначены ключевые возможности и ограничения кейс-стади в оценке состояния и перспектив сельского человеческого капитала в самом депрессивном аграрном регионе России: акцент сделан на роли сельских предпринимателей в формальной и неформальной поддержке местной экономики и локальных сообществ в сотрудничестве с муниципальными и региональными властями. В заключительной части подчеркивается, что типологии — важнейший результат кейс-стади (особенно повторных), и представлены примеры — «типы» взаимоотношений местного аграрного производителя с представителями власти и локального сообщества (как основа сохранения сельского человеческого капитала) и «типы» биографических траекторий сельских предпринимателей (как основа поколенческой преемственности данной дифференцированной социальной страты).

*Ключевые слова:* (повторное) кейс-стади, полевое исследование, типология, аналитическое обобщение, сельский предприниматель, сельский человеческий капитал, позитивные и негативные тенденции, местные власти, сельское сообщество, формальное и неформальное взаимодействие