

Alexander Nikulin

Misunderstanding and confusion in zemstvo and post-kolkhoz budget studies: comparing field experiences

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ALEXANDER NIKULIN

The Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences

MISUNDERSTANDING AND CONFUSION IN ZEMSTVO AND POST-KOLKHOZ BUDGET STUDIES: COMPARING FIELD EXPERIENCES

1. Family budget in the epicenter of centennial confusion

Sociological studies of the family budget are based on drawing up a balance of expenses and revenues of the family in the course of one year. One of the major difficulties in applying the budget method is connected with getting accurate and authentic information about a household. The distortion and confusion which intentionally or unintentionally may appear in the families' answers will destroy and decrease the value of the most thorough budget-based research concept.

Participating in the budget studies of rural households in the late 1990's in Russia, I became interested in the opportunity to compare the contemporary methods and results of field work with the famous *zemstvo* (*land council*) tradition in budget studies. I discovered that *zemstvo* colleagues had left for us several manual books on how to do budget studies. Even among those there was one legendary weighty tome with a lengthy old-fashioned and boring title – „A consolidated collection of reports on 12 uyezds /districts/ of the Voronezh province. Voronezh. 1897”. It was written by F. A. Scherbina, the founder of *zemstvo* statistics. One half of the book was taken up by statistical calculations of budget research, the other – by detailed recommendations on how to conduct the interviews with peasants in order to collect detailed information. It was just the thing.

The deeper I plunged into Scherbina's volume, the more amazed I was. If today's rural sociologist acted upon these recommendations in the contemporary village, he... would make a mess of the whole research. The *zemstvo* statistician would have certainly failed, if he had followed our recommendations. In both cases, the village families in the times of the tsar and in the post-soviet times, undoubtedly, would have had no wish to communicate with researchers because of their mistrust and lack of understanding.

For instance, how should one begin collecting information: visit each household separately or collect information getting together with all the peasants?

Scherbina advises to start work at the village meeting (*skhod*). There, in front of the whole community, each family will in turn answer the questions of the budget form. Here are some excerpts from the description of this process in Scherbina's book:

Alongside with those present at the census, here there was also a crowd of women, young people, teenagers and children – all of them paying attention, craning their necks, pricking up their ears. Often one could hear heated arguments and quick-tempered wrangles... here, too, they asked questions of each other, gave advice. A peasant stands listening closely to what his neighbor or fellow-villager will say – when they will tell the truth and when they will palter. Even without this it is interesting to hear how many cattle his neighbor or godfather of his child, father of his daughter-in-law or friend has at the moment, how much grain he bought or sold, how big his debt is, how much he earned himself and how much the other family members contributed into the household. Sometimes, this hearing out alternated with questions about what had happened to the grey cow or how come the respondent had not reached agreement on renting the land plot [...].¹

Scherbina definitely believes that by bunching all the peasants the researcher will get more reliable information rather than by going for information from farm to farm, where each individual family will get something wrong in the answers.

Personally, I recommend, relying on my own experience, going from household to household; and I cannot even imagine how it could be possible, in today's community, to get together and discuss household aspects, which in Scherbina's times may have been transparent and well-known to all, but are today secret and private. Let me quote some notes from my research diaries:

Yesterday I was at the kolkhoz meeting. As before, it is customary here not to say what you think, – to think differently from what you say. One driver's words stick in my memory. He was crying out the figure of his scanty pay and questioning how one could live on this paltry money. In response, those present sighed heavily and sadly shook their heads. Right then, I asked in whisper the zoo-technician sitting nearby: „Why doesn't anyone raise an objection against the driver: you don't live only on your farm wages, do you? What about the gasoline you pour off from the tank of the kolkhoz car into your gasoline can? And what about the kolkhoz fodder and milk you bring for yourself in that very car?...” The zoo-technician, laughing softly, replied with an affected fright: „What are you saying?! Can you really ask about this?! If I ask him that, he will shout to me in response:

¹ Ф. А. Щербина, *Сводный сборник по 12 уездам Воронежской губернии*, Воронеж 1897, р. 148.

you pinch fodder yourself!” Everybody steals here, everybody! But you cannot speak about it at a meeting.²

Further, comparing the experience of the researchers’ communication with peasants a hundred years ago and today, I found an interesting regularity and evolution in the confusion of memory loss and frights of rural inhabitants.

2. Confusion in family backgrounds

A century ago peasants confused and forgot, it would seem today, the most elementary data about the age of family members, their number, and who had died! And who was disabled.

According to Scherbina:

The peasants quite often do not know how old not only this or that family member is, but even what their own age is [...] The peasants sometimes forget to name the exact number of family members; as a rule, they tend to forget to name the elderly and the children... In the peasants’ eyes, the disabled are mostly one group – the so-called ‘miserable’, that is the people deprived of either the intellectual or physical ability to work... While the hunchbacked, the lame, the deaf, even the deaf-and-dumb, the weak-sighted and others are reckoned by them among the workers. Finally, they recalled with more accuracy in years other various facts in the family life and events of public nature, rather than somebody’s death [...].³

All this could be accounted for by mass illiteracy among the Russian peasants at the end of the XIX century; however, in other matters, fairly complex, requiring the skills of not only counting, but of generalizing and analyzing, the peasants were confident and precise.

The peasants remembered well the data concerning their households. They forgot much of what was unrelated to the households.

The formal dates of birth in the family were not related to the family economy, the more so since families used to celebrate not birthdays, but name days (the peasant calendar was consistently aligned with the hierarchy of Orthodox holidays). And at that time the Russian state did not yet provide the people with various certificates of birth for the sake of permanent police prevention. Because of this, their own dates of birth and the number of years they had lived blurred in the peasants’ memory into a vague blot of recollections.

² Author’s archive of the sociological project „Informal Economy of Urban and Rural Households: Restructuring of Family Economic Networks” INTAS 1999–2000.

³ Ф. А. Щербина, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

In the peasant household, the determining factor was not the formal degree of kinship, but the degree of participation in labor and consumption. Those who toiled in full with the others and „supped cabbage soup from the same bowl” with the others – those were not forgotten. And those who were yet unable (children) or already unable (old people) to work – those could be „inadvertently” omitted from the list of family members. The district council statisticians sometimes would get annoyed: how could the head of a family with many children fail to mention a little child, but at the same time, he knew exactly how many calves and piglets he had!

But then, if a twelve-year child, with his common sense and strength could already work like an adult, or a seventy-year old man kept plowing on a par with the rest of them, such family members were always remembered exactly.

A working cripple, in the peasant’s understanding, was not at all disabled. While an invalid who could not work – suffered from God’s punishment for his sins, a punishment, first of all, of religious and moral nature, burdening not only the cripple, but his relatives too. They chose to forget about this. „Masters in whose families these accidents occurred, always gave information about the type of disability and its causes with reluctance, with a sullen, depressed air”.⁴

Underlining the tact required in such cases, Scherbina advised the district clerks to question tentatively, as follows: „Did God spare you from cripples?” or „Who doesn’t work? Is everybody in the family fit to work?”⁵.

And the total oblivion of morbid events (especially of infant mortality – A.N.) is quite strange.

It is difficult to say what gave rise to this phenomenon. Maybe the economic background can account for this. The loss of a worker is a big fact in the life of a family chiefly in the economic sense, and this fact must have been better retained in the memory than the death of an infant, whose funeral cost just one ruble. Meanwhile, a fire devouring 300 or 500 rubles’ worth of buildings, a loss of several cows at one time dying from cattle plague, a bad harvest ruining the household etc – all these were such circumstances that were hard to forget in the peasant community. That was why deaths were associated with these circumstances. The peasants would say: „Peter’s boy died before the fire, so it was less than ten years ago”, or „three children died in the family of so-and-so when the buckwheat crop was beaten by hail, and that was 8 years ago etc.”⁶

To get more accurate information about deaths, Scherbina recommended specifically turning to women because „Men, in general, were less reliable and careful than women in taking account of the death rate in the family [...]”⁷.

⁴ Ф. А. Щербина, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 55.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 52.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 53.

A hundred years have gone by. Today, such things are not forgotten. Our village interlocutors simply adore telling about their children and grandchildren, telling about the efforts devoted to bringing up the young and helping grown up children.

Moreover, often the interlocutors made such candid sexual and moral revelations, which we do not even include in the questionnaire. Here is a characteristic example from the interview held by my colleague-sociologist with a housewife:

Sociologist: – In your budget you state a regular and considerable receipt of fodder for your household. And what for – in exchange or for some services – do you get fodder? Respondent (laughs in response): – For what services, for what services... What convent have you come from... for what services...”.⁸

A number of other stories about the details of personal life even brought us to an amusing conclusion that relations between lovers in the Russian province on average come to 200 rubles a month at the rate of 1999. It was this sum that was given by a Krasnodar respondent – a widow, mother of three children, who, as she said, had a lover only for material reasons. And it was exactly the same sum that was mentioned by one of our married interviewees in Saratov. He pointed out that his lover was better off than he, as she worked in a bank, and he himself was an intellectual with an artistic occupation. But as an admirer, he had to give his beloved sweets and wine costing him 200 rubles a month.

I do not believe that in Scherbina's times family relations were more moral and the spouses – more faithful, but it was absolutely impossible to discuss it.

There is only one kind of questions about the family that still arouses anxiety, confusion and reticence: about the subjects of repression and convicted family members. In the meantime, in the XX century, the number of people who were or are imprisoned per a thousand inhabitants has grown considerably, and for the families of the end of the XX century the criminal truism „do not swear off prison” remains to be as alarming as the lean year truism „do not swear off begging” of the end of the XIX century.

3. Confusion in the information on the household

The main economic mode of existence of the rural family at the end of the XIX century was a combination in their household of farming, cattle breeding and crafts. The family's production activities focused on arduous efforts to

⁸ Author's archive, op. cit.

reproduce itself („to make both ends meet”) – mostly to provide sustenance for the family and pay the taxes. Village families were united into a local community in the form of a commune.

The main economic mode of existence of the rural family at the end of the XX century includes, firstly, work at the agrarian-industrial enterprise (the former kolkhoz, sovkhoz transformed into a joint-stock company), secondly, work at the individual subsidiary farm, thirdly, secondary employment in the form of odd jobs on the side or craftsmanship inside the household. Families, as a rule, are involved in a dense network of corporate ties of the local agrarian-industrial enterprise.

The household economy at the end of the XIX century is naturally autonomous. The means of production and articles of consumption turn over inside the household, and only part of the family balance of receipts and expenditures is drawn into the outside world of commodity-money relations.

The household economy at the end of the XX century is by far more dependent on the „outside world” – on the wages and other resources of the kolkhoz/JSC, on the local functionaries and the involvement in market relations. The individual auxiliary farm (IAF) plays an important stabilizing natural-autonomous role, but auxiliary indeed. The scope of the family IAF (the nature and boundaries of its natural autonomy), as well as the secondary employment, are directly tied in to the relations with the kolkhoz/JSC, the local administrative and market structures.

With great pleasure Scherbina describes the carefulness and meticulousness with which the peasants tell about the live and dead cattle stock, the land, its cultivation and leasing, the buildings and other real estate, industrial and commercial institutions, the history and nature of money expenses, accounting of money receipts, accounting of crafts, credits and remainders.

Yes, sometimes there are distortions-hesitations in the answers, but they are mostly connected with somebody's slow-wittedness and lack of education. And this is exactly what the 'skhod' is for. There and then, the most observant and sharp-witted among the crowd will explain the essence of the asked question to the bewildered fellow-villager, the respondent.

However, the thorough Scherbina did notice one important type of systematic distortion in the information about the household: it was the questions potentially linked to the fiscal interests of the state. The questions concerning the fertility of the lands and crop capacity and the questions about crafts sometimes aroused confusion among the peasants, urging them to diminish some figures.

Bitter experience has taught the peasants that giving the authorities exact data about these subjects was not safe for the interests of the commune. The peasants understand only too well the dependence of fiscal considerations and calculations

on the quality of the land and the size of crops, and here lie the reasons for the unanimous rebuff of both the 'skhod' and its individual members when estimating the value and yield of the lands.⁹

Scherbina also mentioned some amusing incidents: the men would understate their expenses on alcohol, the women – on clothes and knick-knackery.

One special type of distortions includes those to which the richest and the poorest people in the village are inclined. Russian populist-socialist Scherbina, with particular enmity, warns about the kulaks, profiteers and usurers in talking with whom the zemstvo (district) clerk must manifest his professionalism in full:

The corn-merchant contractor, the huckster, the horse-dealer stood out prominently in their household décor and their needs. Their very appearance, decent clothes, galoshes, possession of watches, rings and so on let the clerk know what kind of expenses he should pay special attention to.

In such cases the talk about the budget turned into an exciting spectacle in front of the whole 'skhod'. Scherbina describes it as follows:

A fight and competition would start between the district clerk, making the kulak sweat and shiver under the cross fire of artfully devised questions, and the respondent, sullenly and apprehensively trying in one case to conceal the required information, in another – to distort it, and in still another – desperately to declare something which should not have been said in public under different circumstances. This half-forced necessity „to reveal” the concealed secrets of the kulak household always amused the peasants [...].

If the rich distorted the information out of greed, keeping the „commercial secret”, the poor did it because of „inborn muddle-headedness”. Scherbina pointed out:

Mental squalor always goes hand in hand with material squalor. That was why a poor man, entangled in his statements, could be helped out to give the proper answers by his neighbors and the fellow-villagers of the 'skhod'.¹⁰

But overall, any possible distortions made up just a small part of the economic information about the life of the family, given in detail, honestly and conscientiously.

⁹ Ф. А. Щербина, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 154–155.

One hundred years later, the level of the „alcohol-dress” distortions was nearly unchanged, if not lower. Muddle-headedness did diminish – the people are indeed educated.

However, it is just impossible to arrange for a budget interview with the obvious rich and the obvious poor. The obvious rich, living in red-brick cottages, driving impressive cars, from the very beginning refused to participate in the budget study. The obvious poor are, as a rule, hard drinking families, unable to keep coherent budget accounting.

Personal self-appraisal of village families between the obvious signs of affluence and poverty is of interest: well-to-do families (rich with regard to the local middle level) asserted that they were average; somewhat poor families (poor with regard to the local middle level) also asserted that they were average. Thus, even one hundred years later, the economy and ideology of the peasant of average means in the village remain in the lead.

The „anti-fiscal” type of distortions has changed sharply: from concealment of family information concerning crafts and land fertility a century ago it has broadened to global systematic misinformation concerning employment and the resources of family economies of the present day.

So, we find here illegally and half-legally used economic resources of the family as an enterprise. For the most part, such a supply of resources to the family enterprise is arranged from the workplaces of the big enterprises where family members work. The list of resources is extraordinarily diverse. The most valuable of them are those which can be immediately used in various areas of family production. These include: fodder for the livestock of the family farm; construction hardware for the family house, fuel, spare parts for the private car, various instruments and the like.

The most realistic and principled interviewees warned openly at the start of our talk: „Well, let us assume that I will include in the budget my official pay, but I won’t tell you how I pilfer from the kolkhoz, all right?”¹¹.

In such situations, the sociologist had to patiently reassure the representative of the family household that the received confidential data would not be disclosed to anyone but the sociologist. All the budget data are analyzed anonymously. This is actually true, so none of our respondents, thank God, ever suffered from their openness.

Anyway, the families were apprehensive and unhappy to answer the questions touching upon informal economic relations. Intentionally or unintentionally they sought to understate the scope of their informal actions. And the reason for this was not only the sense of fear, but also the sense of morality. Humanly, it is hard to speak about it. As one of the respondents asked in a fit of

¹¹ Author’s archive, op. cit.

temper, summing up the informal characteristics of his family household: „But why does our state create such conditions which force us to steal?! And for us not to steal – the state doesn’t create such conditions!”¹².

And so the families sought to understate the size of their real economic potential. It is in this informal dimension that the main difference between budget information about the family household of the end of the XX century and that of a century ago was rooted.

In such cases, we have methods of neutralization and clarification. First of all, of course, there must be friendly relations of trust with the interviewees. At the same time, his right to put a stop to the discussion of any unpleasant topics was recognized and respected. Some facts can be reconstructed from indirect data: for example, how much fodder and from what source the master gets for his cattle can be deduced from the number of that very cattle and the volume of fodder in fodder-units. And the respondent may hold back on where he gets this amount of fodder, it is clear as it is – from the local big agrarian enterprise.

Nevertheless, it does not seem possible to fully overcome this type of distortion. The results (proven) of our budget studies are higher and more exact than the official statistics, but still admittedly lower than the real (not proved) data on informal family economies.

Possibly, it is because of these unintentional shady activities of family households that the families today prefer to speak about the nicer aspects of their lives. They find a meaning and justification for their household economy in their well-groomed children and a decent physical and cultural subsistence of their family. It may be for this reason that at the turn of the XX^I century the respondents seek to transform the information about the family, as an economic unit, into information about the family as a family.

4. Fears

Among other things, intentional and unintentional distortions of information are instigated in the people’s answers by various sorts of anxieties and fears. These are the anxieties of intimate intra-family secrets: unaccounted money of the husband and wife – on alcohol, knick-knacks; expenses on conjugal infidelity.

These are the anxieties of local secrets: the families conceal from one another and from the researcher how the local community resources are used. In Scherbina’s times, they concealed the turnovers of usurious kulak households; nowadays they hush up the control of the clans and local elite families over

¹² Ibidem.

various resources. For example, the family clan of the chief farm engineer controls the machinery and spare parts, the clan of chief livestock-technician controls fodder, etcetera.

Finally, the fear of the outside, big, alien world, represented in the minds of the families, first of all, by the Russian state itself. The Russian state acts here as the great demiurge of fear, permanently destroying the old fears and creating new ones, the demiurge whose casuistry of law and lawlessness penetrates the local and even the intra-family levels. The notable slip of the tongue of Russian prime-minister Putin could become the best epigraph to this kind of fear: „You must have forgotten that in our society there exist wonderful opportunities not only for criminals, but for the state, too!?” These fears are elaborately intertwined, creating a thick atmosphere of anxiety, oppressing family households. They did exist earlier, but they were different. This is why the structure of distortions in family statistics has changed: a century ago distortions in the answers about the family prevailed over distortions in the answers about its economy. Today, the answers about the family household economy are more distorted than the answers about the family.

Недоразумения и путаница в земских и пост-колхозных бюджетных исследованиях: сопоставляя опыт полевой работы

В статье проведено историко-социологический анализ особенностей изучения бюджетов сельских домохозяйств на основе материалов руководителя российской земской статистики конца XIX века Ф. А. Щербины и материалов социологического проекта конца XX века ИНТАС: «Неформальная экономика городских и семейных домохозяйств: реструктуризация сетей междусемейного обмена». В результате сформулирован ряд парадоксов в столетней трансформации типичных бюджетных ошибок и искажений, возникавших среди земских статистиков и постсоветских социологов в процессе общения с различными стратами сельского населения. Главный аналитический вывод данного исследования: за прошедшие сто лет изменились базовые структуры искажений сведений в бюджетной статистике российских домохозяйств. Сто лет назад в царской России искажения в ответах о семье преобладали над искажениями в ответах о ее хозяйстве. В постсоветской России искажения в ответах о хозяйстве преобладают над искажениями в ответах о семье. Неизменным в бюджетных ответах сельских респондентов и царской и постсоветской России остается психологическое напряжение, связанное с вопросами формального и неформального взаимодействия экономики домохозяйств с государственной властью.