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Julie Hemment. *Empowering Women in Russia: Activism, Aid, and NGOs.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007. xv + 188 pp. $22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-21891-9; $60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-34839-5.

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Who is Taming Whom? On Foxes, Little Princes and Women's Organizations

Julie Hemment's *Empowering Women in Russia* is an evocative and engaging study of the inner workings of Russia's "Third Sector" in the first decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Using the method of participatory action research (PAR), Hemment expertly weaves a compelling tale of the trials and tribulations of a small group of women struggling to survive in Tver', a provincial city roughly 170 kilometers outside of Moscow. The book follows the lives of local women in the organization Zhenskii Svet and examines how a loose alliance of women trying to help each other through the tumultuous period of transition formalize themselves into an official nongovernmental organization, part of Russia's burgeoning post-1991 civil society. By exploring the gradual "NGOization" of Zhenskii Svet (Women's Light), Hemment challenges many existing arguments about the cynical and self-interested motives of Russia's civil society actors while also demonstrating their relative lack of power over setting their own agendas and their heavy dependence on foreign funding.

Hemment's interventions are most important in the growing scholarly literature on NGOs and the supposedly false promises of the third sector in an era of the ascendant hegemony of neoliberalism. After 1989 and what Francis Fukuyama so daringly called the "End of History" (in "The End of History" [1989]), there was a new global fascination with the endless possibilities of civil society, a civic space carved out for political action that was distinct from the state and the market. It was theorized that this new civil society would empower individuals to advocate for and/or provide for their own needs in countries emerging from decades of centralized communist authority and command economy. Hemment writes: "Universal strategies and one-size-fits-all solutions were enthusiastically exported all over the globe. Some of these were concepts that originated in progressive struggles for social justice–human rights, participation, women's rights, and gender. It looked like the victory of 'the people' (or 'civil society' as it came to be known) over states; indeed, the '90s was the decade of the nonstate actor, the NGO … However, these global interventions of the supposedly post-ideological age were deeply ideological" (p. 139).

Some of the most brilliant insights offered by the book regard how some civil society actors replicated old communist power systems or pandered shamelessly to the programs developed by those in the West who came to Russia ostensibly to "help." What is truly remarkable about the book, however, is how Hemment humanizes this process and shows the reader how Western discourses of civil society were appropriated and subverted by Russian women. Even though their successes are far more limited than many proponents of the third sector would like to claim, there is real agency and solidarity formed among those who have navigated the perilous waters of Russia's transition from communism through their work in NGOs. With regard to the women employed in the Russian NGO sector, Hemment provocatively asks us: "Can we dismiss their successes and perceptions of empowerment as false consciousness, as yet more evidence of the disciplining technologies and the 'production of neoliberal citizens'? … Unlike scholars of NGOs and civil society who see no possibility of agency in this terrain, I have elected instead to write with hope" (p. 145).

Another excellent aspect of the book is its explicit rumination on the role of the ethnographer and the politics of doing fieldwork. Hemment's is a testimony to the empirical richness and self-reflexive depth that participatory action research can produce. She is present throughout the book, and the first person narrative is an intentional choice that does not allow the author to obfuscate her own importance to the internal workings of Zhenskii Svet. Rather than adopting the mantle of the objective observer, the struggle to set up a crisis center in Tver' is as much Hemment's struggle as it is that of her informants, and this perspective enriches the reader's

understanding not only of Russian civil society, but also the production of ethnographic knowledge. Throughout the book, the exploration of power and knowledge in the field is described by poignant metaphorical references to Saint-Exupery's delightful book, *The Little Prince* through which Hemment challenges to the reader to determine who has tamed who in the ethnographer-informant relationship.

Although the book is rich with detail about the local social, political and economic contexts of Tver', it would have been nice to have a little more information about the Russians who benefited from the efforts of Zhenskii Svet and/or the women's crisis center. As written, we understand very well the internal struggles and dilemmas of the women involved in the NGO, but Hemment could have given the reader a slightly more comprehensive picture of how the efforts of the Zhenskii Svet women were received by having some interviews with beneficiaries or even local newspaper reports describing the impact of Zhenskii Svet on the local community. But this is a small complaint about what is otherwise a very original and readable book. Its short and accessible style make it ideal for use in upper-level undergraduate and graduate course across a variety of disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, political science, international studies, and women's studies. Overall, Hemment's book is a real jewel and makes an important and timely contribution to the growing field of postsocialist cultural studies.

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