The continuous proliferation of publications makes scientific communication extremely difficult: “The contemporaries read each other much less than we usually suppose; most of what they learn about each other is gathered ex auditu from what they have heard from colleagues, students and reviews” (Bourdieu 1996, 17). In his autobiographical novel The Gift, Vladimir Nabokov gave an accurate account of the feelings of an author who progressively loses hope of being read: “500 copies of the book were published at his own expense, 429 of them are still stocked gathering dust in a flat pile at the distributor’s depot. He gave away 19 copies and kept one for himself. Sometimes he was puzzled by the question as to who are these mysterious 50 and 1 persons who bought his book” (1990, 139). The counterargument written by Vincent Barnett indicates that, fortunately, this pessimistic picture is exaggerated. Ongoing intellectual exchange helps bring to light new ideas and clear up misunderstandings that are unavoidable in the initial stages of communication.

Communication is always a difficult undertaking, especially in the social sciences, where paradigms as commonly accepted analytical frameworks play only a minor role (Kuhn 1963, 86). Alternative approaches to the same subject coexist, and the progress of knowledge results from a complex and difficult process of mutual criticism and the interplay of arguments and counterarguments. Hence, the mere willingness to communicate requires efforts focused on the translation of messages from one language into another. As some adjectives and expressive forms used by Barnett suggest, he prefers a rhetorical manner of communication as opposed to a stylistic one. In a rhetorical text, the value and skill of an author “is manifest in the ‘expressiveness’ of the text, i.e. in the switch from one system of norms to another” (Lotman 1990, 51). Soviet/Russian studies as a separate discipline have developed a particular code adapted to the task of describing the phenomena specific to this country. Institutional theory has its own code, which allows for the introduction of more universal—less country-specific—categories. Barnett’s attempt to reformulate the initial arguments in institutional terms seems promising. In what follows, I will try to take further steps toward translating the message of Soviet/Russian studies into that of institutional theory and vice versa.

The search for the most fundamental building block of economic activity gives us an excellent opportunity for doing so. Several analytical strategies are available for accomplishing this task. Semiotics offers one of them. The program of “deconstruction” can be interpreted as an attempt to reach the “ground zero” of the cultural edifice composed of different symbols. Not all signs and symbols are equally important; they repose on different layers of the edifice. The lower the location of a sign, the more autonomous and encompassing its role. The signs at the “ground zero” transform into “signs of signs” (Derrida 1967), or “plot-genes” (Lotman 1990), and they initiate the path on which all other signs relevant to a culture lie. If we perceive economic activity in a similar man-
ner—as a stratified set of symbols—then the task consists in analyzing economic “lot-genes” (as in the case of money for George Simmel [1990]).

So far, we have not made any significant progress in the analysis of networks, which form the centerpiece of our discussion. However, this semiotic exercise in finding relevant metaphors will be helpful while revisiting Marxism and reconsidering the dialectics of the abstract and the concrete applied to the case of networks in my reply to Barnett’s first note. Karl Marx’s version of the economic edifice consists of several layers. According to Marx, property rights are too remote from “ground zero” to be considered as the most abstract element of economic activity, namely, its “plot-gene.” The original wording of one of the core Marxian “theorems” highlights the marginal position of property rights: “[T]he material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or—this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms—with property relations” (Marx 1970, preface). Property rights for him are nothing more than a translation of the concept of the relations of production into legal language. However, a successful translation—in full accordance with the prediction of semiotics—might generate new ideas and hypotheses. An interest in the new meanings that emerged during the process of translation was manifested by certain Marxists (Tronev 1978) as well as the “old” institutionalists (Commons 1939) and—more recently—the advocates of law and economics, one of the “extended” versions of the neoclassical theory. In their analytical coordinates, property rights move much closer to “ground zero.”

For the “late” Marx, the commodity played the role of the most abstract category. Any other element of the capitalist economic edifice can be derived from it: the commodity transforms into money, money buys the labor force which produces a surplus-value and becomes the capital, the capital further changes the nature of labor relationships, and so on. Keeping in mind that a large variety of networks exists, can we “deconstruct” them and find the abstract that initiates the path of their evolution? This author believes so: “Ground zero” exists in the historical and logical evolution of empirically observed and quite diverse networks. The model of a “small” society embodies the abstract, the “plot-gene” of these networks. Taking into consideration that this point was probably not clearly formulated and/or semiotically translated, which led to a number of misunderstandings and confusions, I will make another attempt to show how empirically dissimilar networks can be constructed on the basis of the “small” society or, inversely, how the process of the deconstruction of dissimilar networks can produce the “small” society.

The model of the “small” society was initially developed to inquire into the “social machinery” of organized crime that is deeply rooted in the Russian prison subculture (Oleinik 2003). It describes a system of relationships that are localized in social time and space, hostile to the outside world and yet characterized by strong in-group solidarity. The constitution of the “small” society implies the lack of differentiation of spheres (between public and private life; economics, politics, and society), the personalization of relations, the imperfect mastery of violence, the duality of norms (with regard to insiders
and outsiders), and imposed power. Furthermore, it will be argued that this is a “plot-gene” of a series of more concrete institutions, namely, institutions that are more embedded in particular historical circumstances, which have existed throughout Russian/Soviet/post-Soviet history. As in the Weber-inspired analysis based on ideal types, a straightforward projection of the “small” society onto any of these more concrete forms—the obshchina, the kolkhoz, or the (post)Soviet work collective—would be erroneous. Any of these concrete forms of networks results from a series of logical and historical transformations of the “small” society. The “small” society as a “plot-gene” cannot be observed empirically except in the rare cases of an institutional environment that has been artificially “purified” from the interference of the other “plot-genes,” almost a “laboratory” environment, as in prison, for instance.

Let us consider the historical path started by the “small” society in Russia. The obshchina is the first concrete form found on this path. Geographical factors (remote and dispersed location) and economic autarchy—the context in which the “small” society was then embedded—might overshadow the particularities of the relationships between the members of an obshchina and the outside world. This can probably provide an explanation for Barnett’s continuous insistence on the positive sides of mutual aid and collective responsibility (krugovaja poruka). The clash with the outside world is necessary to bring to light the reverse side of “strong” in-group solidarity.

However, the relationships with state representatives—based on imposed power—played an important role even in this early stage of the ascension from the abstract to the concrete. The obshchina was dependent on the Tsarist state, yet mostly in negative terms: its members got very few benefits in exchange for paying taxes (compare with the old Russian term podat’—a contribution) and providing soldiers to be drafted into the army. The perception of the state as an imposed power explains why the references to property rights—the translation of social relationships into legal language—appear irrelevant in this context. The more power is imposed, the fewer incentives there are for ordinary people to learn this language. As a Colombian saying goes, “the law applies only to those who wear the ruana” (the judge’s mantle; see Thoumi 1995, 83). Hence, the emphasis on formal ownership can hardly contribute to differentiating the obshchina from the other forms of networks in Russian history: “[A]long with the formal system of land distribution on the basis of an official roster, there existed another system. . . . [T]he plots were attributed to households according to the real number of members they have in the labor force, this attribution was compulsory, imposed. This happened because the size of plots depended on the amount of the duties imposed on the peasantry” (Kluchevski 1957, 298). Even the state did not use legal language while intervening with respect to land distribution! (Does it do so now in Russia, during this time of the forced redistribution of property rights?)

In other words, power relationships are one of the intervening variables to be taken into account while analyzing the ascension from the abstract to the concrete. They should be considered an important element of the institutional environment influenc-
ing the evolutionary path initiated by a “plot-gene” (Oleinik 2005). The study of the
transformation of the obshchina into the kolkhoz highlights the role of power relation-
ships in the dialectics of the abstract and the concrete. There is no doubt that collectiv-
ization, that is, the spread in the 1930s of a particular organizational form functioning
on the basis of formal collective (not state—this was the case of sovkhozes) ownership, kol-
khoz, heavily relied on bloody violence and compulsion. This violence was different
from that outlined by Kluchevski quantitatively, not qualitatively. In both cases, Rus-

sian peasants faced imposed power; only the circumstances and concrete forms of this
encounter were different. The intensity of imposed power has varied throughout Rus-

sian history but not its nature, which means that it is still an underestimated explanatory
variable for the studies in continuity and change in this country.

The post-Soviet work collective is still embedded in relationships based on imposed
power, which explains the blatant refusal of post-Soviets to speak the legal language and
their drift into extralegality discussed in more details in my first reply (see also Oleinik
2003, chapter 3). Once again, power relationships changed their intensity and forms
without transforming their nature. Today, they can be better understood in terms of a
“deal”: “[I]n authority relations that must be backed by coercion, the exchange is a some-
what special one in that the superordinate agrees to withhold an action that would make
the subordinate worse off in return for the subordinate’s obeying the superordinate”
(Coleman 1990, 71). A new concrete form of imposed power emerges in the context of
post-Soviet transformations: it responds to the challenge of the market while keeping
the “genom” untouched.

Another historical and logical path—the progressive transformation of the “small”
society into such open and flexible networks as interlocking directorates, strategic alli-
ances of firms, or “projects”—necessitates the existence and enforcement of the law.
Here, semiotic translation into legal language not only becomes possible but also gener-
ates new ideas and leads us far away from the first path. The concrete networks lying on
the two divergent paths have only “empty formal similarities” in common, in other
words, those that lie on the same path form a long chain similar to one between an
acorn and the oak tree.

In the light of the previous discussion, we achieve some important insights with
respect to the use of empirical evidence to prove or refute hypotheses in the social sci-
ences. Without appropriate translation, such an enterprise ends in failure: no observa-
tion can be independent of the conceptual framework (Hodgson 1988, 37). The same is
true with respect to the claims of some social scientists that predictions should be con-
sidered proof of validity (for an example related to our discussion, see Collins 1995).
This author could claim that the predictions formulated in his doctoral dissertation,
which was defended in 2000, with respect to the strengthening of the elements of the
“small” society in post-Soviet Russia (Oleinik 2003), including the continuous increase
in violence and authoritarianism, have been “empirically” confirmed so far. Neverthe-
less, these pretensions remain fruitless as long as there is no adequate translation while
speaking about apparently the same reality. The discussion with Barnett can be considered a modest contribution to the solution of this difficult task—to speak and to be heard in science.

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