The dialectics of the complicated relationships between the languages of self-description by historical actors and the analytical models of latter-day researchers can be most vividly seen in the Russian public modernization campaign of the interrevolutionary decade of 1906–1916. A truly mass-scale social movement involving tens of thousands of educated Russians (professionals, cooperative activists, educators, etc.) and millions of their clients now becoming their partners (first of all, peasants) did not produce a coherent metanarrative of self-description until very late.¹ As a result, it was virtually ignored by historians preoccupied with readily available powerful narratives of revolutionary movement, government (“Stolypin”) reformism and counterreformism, and wartime mobilization and triumphant statism. Thus a discursively underreflected sphere of social politics and practices of modernization beyond administrative measures has found itself in the blind zone of historiography. The notion of “public agronomy” that was broadly used in the early twentieth century as a catchword for a particular type of social activism sounds too obscure for contemporary historians, and indeed had become somewhat outdated by 1913. The “agronomist crisis” of 1913, resulting from the extension of social activism and far exceeding the resources of professionally trained agricultural specialists, stimulated discussions of the nature and methods of this activism among educated Russians. Before long, the new concept of “social engineer” was introduced in the Russian public debates in November 1915 in the pages of Cooperative Life magazine, a mouthpiece of the booming Russian cooperative movement:

The state organization, as any other, may embark on the path of new social construction [sotsial’nogo stroitel’stva]. Only one has to note that so far this construction goes on beyond the state.

One should be aware that whole cadres of social engineers by vocation are available. It is sufficient to look in the midst of our modern village life. (I am not even talking about the city.) How many male and female teachers, agronomists, physicians, priests, and young peasants have rushed into the cooperative business?²

The author of the article “Social Engineers” (signed by A. Ufimskii, possibly a pen-name) claimed that he had synthesized the term himself after reading writings by Herbert Wells and Lester Frank Ward, and applied it to the realities of the Russian cooperative movement. The term “social engineering” sounds so familiar to the ear of modern social scientists that many would not even question its meaning, once more appropriating a historical concept as a category of analysis, with its particular methodological and ideological connotations.³ While the article by Ufimskii raises questions for a historian, it provides few answers: the term apparently did not become popular in Russia, and it had no evident prehistory of development in the Russian context. Where then did it come from, and why? Ufimskii referred to the texts that inspired him, all published in Russian translation before 1905, but what happened in 1915, more than a decade later, to make them so relevant? Last, but certainly not least, who actually coined the term “social engineering” and what did this term mean in the 1910s outside Russia? By answering these questions, we will be able to reconstruct, how social practices were acquiring and changing different modes of their articulation and description, and how latter-day scholars struggle to critically incorporate the narratives of self-description into their analytical metanarratives.

In order to avoid the epistemological trap of mixing up categories of practice with categories of analysis, let us clarify the historical and modern-day semantics of “social engineering.” The history of the

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