On November 17, the lecture “What is the Social? People, objects and ideas” was presented by a remarkable sociologist, the head of RANEPA’s department of theoretical sociology and epistemology of, Professor Victor Vakhshtayn.

The lecture discussed finding a new “substance” of the Social in modern sociology. The lecturer’s main task was to make it clear where the frontiers of the Social are.

Victor Vakhshtayn underlined that economic sociology is on the frontier of sociological expansion. During the second part of the 20th century, world sociologists successfully imposed into the minds of economists the idea that, in fact, all that used to be called economics were just different forms of sociology.

Social psychologists have also been under attack for changing the notion of the Social. For decades, they have been arguing that social relations penetrate into all mental processes: everything that previously seemed to be mental and cognitive, is in fact the Social.

Professor Vakhshtayn noted that the sociology of science and technology was the sphere where the revolution associated with the problematization of social categories began. The sociologists of this school showed that everything that you considered to be the monopoly of the truth, in fact was just a reflection of the social community where people lived.

You can find signs of the Social everywhere: it is hiding in normal, everyday things, such as the design of the benches in Central Park or the construction of bridges in New York.

Victor Vakhshtayn underlined three stages in the relationship of sociology and the object of research:
1) A subcritical stage which constitutes the object of study of sociology as something distanced.

2) A critical stage in which sociologists begin to wonder “if I am a society being, how can I study it and can I be objective enough to study this society?”

3) A cascade decategorisation stage, which appears in such a direction as N. Luman's systematic theory, the basic meaning being that there is only social relation, and such objects as Society and the Social are only the illusion of glasses that allow us to see the world around us. N. Luman was one of the first to begin analyzing the structure of thinking about Society. On the one hand, Society is perceived as a territorial entity, while on the other hand, it is understood as a collection of individuals. However, in the realities of the modern world, such assertions are incorrect.

Professor Vakhshhtayn cited an example from a book by J. Urry, The Social on the Other Side of Society, in which he argues that if we want to save the category of the Social, we should abandon the concept of society. We can see here the so-called “domino effect,” when a change of one concept leads to a restructuring in the understanding of the whole science.

In conclusion, Professor Vakhshhtayn noted that at the present time there is a great number of various questions for sociology as a science, with one of the most important questions being: Should we, while adhering to the category of society, turn our backs to the concept of the Social? If so, then what can substitute for it? The study of this problem is the most important task of the near future.