

FROM SKILLS TO SELVES

RECYCLING “SOVIET DIY”

IN POST-SOVIET RUSSIA

Thèse en vue d’obtention du titre de
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Neuchâtel, le 22 mai 2019



Le doyen
Pierre Alain Mariaux

To my parents

To my brother Mitia

Моим родителям

Моему брату Мите

SUMMARY IN ENGLISH

This thesis explores a particular phenomenon of everyday material culture, namely “do-it-yourself”, which is routinely referred to in contemporary Russian (post-Soviet) society as a “Soviet” phenomenon. The tension between DIY as a combination of social practices and material facts on the one hand, and public discourses that (re)interpret it on the other, constitutes the central axis of the research. The starting point of this investigation is an observation made while doing fieldwork in 2011-2013: while practices of making, remaking and repairing material objects remain widespread in contemporary Russian society, many of the interlocutors around these practices display a complex mixture of enthusiasm, pride, bewilderment and even shame regarding DIY objects and the skills required to produce them. To understand this ambivalence, the author follows DIY-discourses, objects and their makers to different venues: individuals’ homes, archives of Soviet-period popular technical journals, amateur associations, museums and art galleries. Combining historical investigation with ethnographic research and pursuing the analysis of different sources (interviews, archival documents, literary texts, films, exhibitions and contemporary art works), the author demonstrates the ways in which meanings and values attributed to DIY practices and skills under the Soviet order have been challenged due to the enormous shifts that Soviet citizens experienced after the fall of the Soviet empire. “DIY” is approached, therefore, as both a social and material phenomenon in its own right, and as an analytical tool: a prism through which to analyze Soviet modernity and post-Soviet transformations. The author argues that while manual knowledge and skills and “low” and “slow” technologies were smoothly incorporated into the ideology, institutions and economic thinking of the Soviet modern project and, moreover, promoted by the state as a means to self-realization, the rapid and drastic social and economic transformations of the late 1980s-1990s resulted in a reinterpretation of popular technical culture in terms of “poverty” and “technological backwardness”.

Keywords: do-it-yourself, DIY, Russia, Soviet Union, post-Soviet transformations, modernity, national stereotype, popular technical knowledge, amateurism, crafts, making, memory, cultural recycling, cultural intimacy, self-activity, subjectivity

RÉSUMÉ EN FRANÇAIS

Cette thèse explore un phénomène particulier de la culture matérielle quotidienne, à savoir le bricolage / « do-it-yourself » (DIY), qui est souvent référé dans le contexte contemporain russe comme un phénomène « soviétique ». La tension entre les DIY comme pratiques sociales et faits matériels et les discours qui les interprètent constitue l'axe principale de la recherche.

Le point de départ de ce travail est une observation faite pendant la recherche de terrain menée en 2010-2013 : bien que les pratiques de bricolage, de récupération et de rénovation des objets restent courant dans la société contemporaine russe (post-soviétique), beaucoup de participants de l'enquête montraient un mélange complexe d'émotions composé d'enthousiasme, de fierté, de perplexité mais aussi de honte quant aux objets bricolés et aux savoir-faire liés à leur production. Pour comprendre cette attitude ambivalente, l'auteur suit les discours, les objets et les pratiquants de DIY et mène sa recherche sur différents terrains : dans les appartements personnels, dans les archives des revues techniques populaires soviétiques, dans les associations d'amateurs, dans les musées et dans les galeries d'art. Tout en combinant l'approche historique avec une enquête ethnographique, l'auteur fonde son analyse sur une variété de sources : entretiens, archives, textes littéraires, films de fiction, expositions et œuvres d'art contemporain, et montre comment les significations et les valeurs attribuées aux pratiques et savoir-faire relevant du DIY dans le contexte soviétique ont été perturbées suite aux changements sociaux et économiques extraordinaires vécus par les citoyens après la chute de l'empire soviétique. Ainsi, le concept de « DIY » fonctionne dans le présent travail dans deux sens : pour décrire un phénomène social et le matériel de bricolage tel qu'il est, et comme un instrument analytique : un prisme pour analyser la modernité soviétique et les transformations post-soviétiques. L'auteur avance que tandis que les compétences et savoir-faire manuels et les technologies « low » et « slow » faisaient partie intégrante de l'imaginaire, des institutions et de la pensée économique dans le contexte du projet moderne soviétique et, plus, étaient promus par l'État comme moyen de valorisation de soi, les transformations rapides de la fin des années 1980-1990 ont entraîné une réinterprétation de la culture technique populaire en termes de la « pauvreté » et de « retard technologique ».

Mot-clés: bricolage, do-it-yourself, DIY, Russie, Union Soviétique, transformations post-soviétiques, modernité, stéréotype national, connaissance technique populaire, amateurisme, savoir-faire, mémoire, recyclage culturel, cultural intimacy, actualisation de soi, subjectivation.

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NOTE ON STYLE AND TRANSLITERATION

I have followed the Chicago Manual of Style, 16th edition, as recommended by American Anthropological Association, for the in-text references and bibliography. Singular quotation marks are exceptionally used as linguistic marks to denote literal meaning (for instance, Rus. *byt* – Eng. ‘everyday life’).

For the transliteration of Russian concepts and names I followed the U.S. Library of Congress system, except in cases where spellings for certain names have become familiar in different forms (for instance, Yeltsin instead of Ieltsin or Trotsky instead of Trotskii).

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AVANT-PROPOS

POSITIONALITY AND GENEALOGY OF THE PROJECT

When I tell someone that I am writing a dissertation about DIY objects in the Soviet era, it usually makes them smile. This happens both in Russia and in Europe (by “Europe” I mainly mean Switzerland, Germany and France – the countries I visited regularly during my PhD studies). Often, this smile is followed by a couple of anecdotes about something my interlocutors have heard or read about Soviet shortages; after that, however, my interlocutors remember something they made themselves, or they recount the project of a friend or an acquaintance. These stories too can be told everywhere. When told in Russia, however, they are usually longer and have more details. Subjects may remember their parents or teachers, for example, who transmitted to them a particular skill; they might specifically name the popular magazines on science and technologies that they read or subscribed to; they sometimes mention the amateur clubs they attended, where they learned to do something themselves. Notably, these stories evoke a considerably wide range of emotions. When in Europe, the conversation is more likely to be limited to fun and smiles, and sometimes an expressed enthusiasm regarding contemporary hand-made and DIY culture. Among Russians the emotional spectrum appears to be more complex and controversial. Typically, in the course of the same interview some sequences are filled with love, gratitude and sympathy towards their teachers or guides in the realm of practical skills, whereas, at a different moment of the interview, the same person can express sorrow or even anger about the poverty they experienced, and sometimes even feelings of shame and guilt. Russian narratives about DIY are at once about joy and pleasure and, simultaneously, about the everyday struggle with uncomfortable living filled with pain, vexation and a certain kind of embarrassment. To give just one example, which I will analyze in more detail in Chapter 5, one of my interlocutors said: “all this [the realm of DIY] turned out to be very tragic to me, though I loved it.”

This emotional palette, ranging from very positive feelings of pride and respect to conflicting feelings of confusion, shame and guilt, as well as the very resistance to acknowledging the presence of self-made objects in the mundane life of my subjects became important clues that directed my thinking about DIY in the Soviet and post-Soviet life. I wanted to understand how

it came to pass that such a widespread but also beautiful (in my eyes) practice, which connoted (for me) creativity, self-development and an ecological way of life, had become so problematic for my interlocutors. Thus, these emotions were my first guideline to follow in fumbling to articulate the contours of the phenomenon I wanted to write about.

Another guideline emerged from my reflection on my own socialization as a scholar, and as a citizen, who grew up in Russia in the 1990s. To put it differently, this guiding thread emerged from the process of identifying epistemic difficulties, internal cultural codes and taboos that for some years prevented me from writing. In what follows, I will write a kind of autoethnography, which should clarify this epistemic context.

ALMA MATER: EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY AT ST. PETERSBURG

Before telling the (pre)history of my project, I have to make an important ethical claim. In what follows, I engage critically with the school of ethnology at the European University at St. Petersburg where I received my first training in anthropology after having graduated from the Department of History at St. Petersburg State University. In so doing, I tread on sensitive ground. Yet, I do it intentionally. Through my critical reflections, I wish to make an ethical and epistemic effort. First, I would like to celebrate the important work done at the European University at St. Petersburg, the only place in Russia where anthropological theory was taught in the late 1990s-early 2000s when I was an undergraduate and then a graduate student. I would also like to acknowledge that my intellectual development had been significantly influenced by the faculty members of that department, particularly by Ilia Utekhin, my former academic adviser, Albert Baiburin, the founder of the Department of Anthropology, and Georgii Levinton, professor of Folklore Studies, who has always been critical though very supportive of my every endeavor. Secondly, I must admit that my current work is very much written through and against the intellectual agenda of my former teachers. I recognize that today my understanding of Soviet and post-Soviet Russian society would be impossible without this radical epistemic, emotional and existential rupture, which occurred as a result of my move abroad and my further integration into Western academia and familiarity with European and North American realities on the one hand, and my regular travels back to Russia and continuous collaborations with colleagues from “post-socialist” spaces on the other hand. To an important extent, my intellectual growth is due both to the access to global mobility that I was able to gain thanks to my ever-temporal and ever-precarious student residence permit in Switzerland, and to the disenchantment with “western capitalist modernity” that I observed and experienced through my travels across the

“global North” and post-socialist “global East” (Müller 2018), which does not currently fit into the new geopolitical binary.

Thus, my writing is both very critical of and nevertheless in polemical dialogue with my former teachers. By writing in English, I make an effort to produce knowledge that can be read and understood by international academia, including my Russian colleagues, whom I would like to consider as members of the former category.

The development of this project took a long time. I started to think about the “Self-made, remade and repaired objects in late Soviet everyday life” in 2004 when I formally defended my PhD proposal under this title at the European University at St. Petersburg. However, for banal practical reasons it remained, at the time, only a proposal: the combination of full-time teaching in a College, a few additional small jobs, and a notable lack of recent academic literature in Russian libraries rendered my project technically unfeasible. The focus upon the Soviet past, meaning a very recent and therefore still painful trauma – though back then I didn’t consider it in these terms – did not help either. But at that particular moment I was twenty-one years old and I was trying to make sense of the changes that had happened and were happening within the country where I was born, with my family and with my own life. This is why I wanted to approach the Soviet everyday experience: the times into which I was born, during which my parents were young and felt safe about their tomorrow, and in which “everything was forever” (Yurchak 2005); and yet, also the times that were so easily and enthusiastically rejected by so many people whom I loved and respected; and – last but not least – the times that, in the decades that were to follow, became the main reference for conversations about “today” – from the beginning of the 1990s to the present moment any changes would be judged through comparison with the “Soviet.”

Although the proposal I defended in 2004 never became a real project, it might be useful to reflect for a moment on these beginnings in order to shed light on the origins of my intellectual journey.

Intellectually, my interest in inventiveness was very much nourished by the structuralist drive that I imbibed at the European University at St. Petersburg, and the Lévi-Straussian conceptual portrait of *bricoleur* (Lévi-Strauss 1962) in particular, which I read literally rather than metaphorically. This structuralist drive came from the academic faculty members of the EUSP,

former participants of the Moscow-Tartu semiotic school inspired and organized around Yurii Lotman, professor at Tartu University¹ and a great philologist, historian and semiotician whose significant contribution to the analysis of Russian literature and culture of the 19th century as well as his role as a public intellectual in the late Soviet period cannot be underestimated (recently his work and intellectual school has received more and more attention outside of Russian-language mediated academia (Sériot 2012; Waldstein 2008).

In the late Soviet intellectual milieu, the expression of interest in structuralism was both a methodological alternative to the ideological imperative of historical materialism, and a political claim against the dominance of the Soviet way of managing academic knowledge in the humanities. Although the majority (if not all) of these intellectuals and researchers were legal employees of Soviet state institutions – universities, research centers and institutes of the Soviet Academy of Science – and enjoyed all of the benefits these state-sponsored institutions could provide them with (for instance, they organized their seminars, conferences and summer schools within the framework of these respective institutions), they remained dissidents in spirit and often subjectively perceived their intellectual engagements as a form of political resistance. Their anthropological approach was grounded in structuralism and discursive analysis of culture understood as a complex and heterogeneous “text.” Structuralism as a theoretical paradigm allowing for the analysis of “culture” as a “text” – a symbolical representation (as opposed to the material characteristics of culture) – was a particularly good fit here. It allowed for the focus on the change of material and technological forms, traditional to Soviet ethnography, to be challenged – turning, therefore, the Marxist predominance of structure over superstructure upside down. The book *The Dwelling House in East Slavonic Culture*, by Albert Baiburin (1983),² is a good example of this approach: Baiburn takes an object of study typical to Soviet ethnography, the dwelling, and analyzes it as a particular semiotic system, thus “dematerializing” it, turning it into a pure symbolic construction, a “text” (Baiburin 1983).

This is also a good example of how Soviet structuralists played around with the ideological requirements of historical materialism: by taking a subject conventional for Soviet materialist ethnography, for instance housing, they protected themselves from any additional attention

¹ Today, Tartu is the second largest city of contemporary Estonia. Tartu University was found in 1632 by the King of Sweden and has since then enjoyed the glory of its old traditions. In the medieval era, the territory of the city belonged at different times to Polish-Lithuanian, Russian, Swedish and German kingdoms and then was incorporated into the Russian Empire. Under the USSR, Tartu was part of the Estonian Soviet Republic. In the late Soviet period, Tartu University was seen as a privileged place because of its geographical and cultural closeness to the “West” and its relatively strong political autonomy.

² I use the translation of the title as it is published on <http://albertbaiburin.ru/cntnt/biografiya.html>

from those who might impose censorship. Nevertheless, even while submitting to the “hegemonic form” (Yurchak 2003), they pursued their own intellectual agenda in content and, in a way, subverted the requirements.

Indeed, the intellectual tendency to “dematerialize” culture was not unique to Soviet intellectuals. Moreover, on both sides of the Iron Curtain, this trend, just like its antithesis, was clearly associated with sympathies or antipathies toward Marxism as a social theory and/or ideology. Thus, Victor Buchli explains in the Introduction to *The Material Culture Reader*, that

the demise of [Marxian-Morgan’s] unilinealism with the beginning of British social anthropology in the early twentieth century saw the demise of these objects [which had served their purpose as appropriate semiophores] as ‘fossils’. Material culture as cultural work was rendered increasingly useless in light of the developments of British social anthropology. [The renewed form of material culture studies in the UK] was to achieve in the second half of the twentieth century with the pioneering work of the archaeologist Gordon Childe, that which reasserted the social within the archaeological studies along with later Marxist-inspired critics of consumption in sociology. Childe was a keen observer of Soviet archaeology with its emphasis on the socially diagnostic aspect of material culture studies. Childe’s subtle Marxism, his rejection of antiquarianism and assertion of the significance of social processes in the study of archaeology paved the way along with others for the eventual formation of the ‘New Archaeology’ in Britain and America [...] with a renewed emphasis on the study of social processes as materialized in the material culture of the past. (Buchli 2002, 9-10)

The inclination toward structural analysis and an “immaterial” reading of culture, however, didn’t help in my case. For my teachers at the European University in St. Petersburg – former Soviet dissidents, mostly philologists and linguists by training – Marxism was not a theory, so much as an annoying corpus of texts and rituals that prevented them from working “freely.” Very specific and attentive to detail when it came to the literature of 18th, 19th and beginning of the 20th century, they were deliberately much less interested in critical analysis of the late 1980s. For them, everything was clear there: there was a minority made up of dissidents, people who they saw as correct and politically reflexive, and a majority that consisted of the rest, the conformists. Their vision of Soviet history included a (personal) struggle with the oppressive state, heroes and traitors. To debate the subject was particularly difficult, as their knowledge and experience possessed the additional value attributed to the accounts of witnesses and, to some extent, victims of the time. Not surprisingly, the protagonists of my research, often loyal Soviet citizens, did not look worthy of attention and intellectual effort. As one of my professors, who always appreciated my work but could not understand my interest in the Soviet DIYers, once told me: “well, only if you enjoy digging in this...” (*tol’ko esli Vam nravitsia v etom*

kopat'sia). This was neither a question nor a statement; instead, it was rather an expression of disappointment paired with surprise. He used the Russian verb *kopat'sia*, 'to dig into', which strongly connotes a sense of touching: one digs with his/her hands and, therefore, inevitably ends up with *it* on his or her hands and body. It also has a slight negative sense: for example, there is an expression "to dig in somebody's dirty underwear," meaning to be interested in personal stories; children can be asked "not to dig in the dirt." At the same time, digging is common and acceptable when it comes to favorable practices: gardeners love "digging into the ground," they get tired and get their hands dirty, but they enjoy it. Clearly, my professor could not imagine enjoying himself while touching "the Soviet ordinary" that he was so happy to leave behind in 1991. And he certainly did not wish it upon me either.

This kind of comment was, however, important in realizing that there was a "political problem" within my field. Although I did not find a way to deal with it at the time, I knew I had to think hard about *why* my best professors harbored such a strong sense of disgust towards my material. I was convinced that I ought to listen attentively to those who they were not interested in. For me this was, probably, easier: I was not coming from the dissident milieu but from an "average Soviet family" of those who might be known as "conformists."

A NATIVE ANTHROPOLOGIST FROM AN ORDINARY SOVIET FAMILY IN THE 1990S

I was born in 1982, a few years before the beginning of *Perestroika* (literally – 'reconstruction'), the period of reforms in the Soviet Union initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev. I entered school during the Soviet era, so for three years I, like all Soviet kids, wore a school uniform and a pin in the shape of a star, with the portrait of a young Vladimir Lenin in the middle of it. This pin was a sign of membership to *Oktiabriata*, the children's division of the Communist Party. Most importantly, it was a sign of growing up and, at the same time, the only decoration on the brown school dress.³ In the fall of 1991, I was ready to enter secondary school and, as it was time, to become a *pioneer*, the next step in a child's membership leading to the Communist party. This passage also implied a different kind of pin and – most importantly – a red tie, which I found to be a mark of adulthood and a beautiful accessory to my brown school dress.⁴ My father worked as a driver in one of the close research institutes and my mother was as a translator in the marine

³ The regular track implied the admission in *Oktiabriata* after 8 years old, basically in the second year of school.

⁴ Since the 1930s, the Soviet school uniform replicated models used in the Russian Empire. These were natural brown wool dresses for girls and blue suits for boys.

research institute: she translated international maritime documents on safety from English into Russian. According to the Soviet bureaucratic taxonomy, they covered two of the three basic social and professional categories: my dad was a “worker” (*rabochii*), and my mom was a “public servant” (*sluzhashchii*). Typical for the urban socio-economic structure of the USSR, they earned more or less equal wages with a small difference favoring my farther.

However, 1991 was the year of the big changes. The small-scale events of my school life paralleled with the path of the Big History. The political reforms of Perestroika resulted in the disbandment of the Communist Party; the consequent self-proclamation of independence by Russian, Ukrainian and Belarussian Soviet Republics meant the factual disintegration of the Soviet Union and dismissal of Gorbachev (the president of the Soviet Union) from power. From that point forward, I lived in a different country, called the Russian Federation, with Boris Yeltsin as its legal leader. Although my parents were rather enthusiastic about Gorbachev’s reforms, they grew confused after 1991. For instance, the dissolution of the Soviet Union meant that my grandmother, who hitherto had regularly visited us from Kazakhstan in summertime, was now separated by an international border. Moreover, more and more often, grandma reported on the phone about “anxious and strange things” going on around her. Apparently, life in Kazakhstan was getting less and less safe for Russians, and those of my grandmother's neighbors who were defined as ethnically Russian were relocating to the Russian Federation. Soon, my mother too decided to move my grandmother into our apartment.

For me the political change meant that the Pioneer organization did not exist anymore, and, unlike my elder brother, I would never wear the red tie – which would instead remain stored in my wardrobe. My disappointment was brief, however, as it was quickly swept up by further changes. One result of the reforms was a general relaxation of all state regulations; taking advantage of this adjustment, my mother managed to put me in a French school, which always enjoyed the reputation of being “a good school” but which had previously been inaccessible to me, as my family’s home belonged to a different city micro-district. My arrival at the French school coincided with the cancellation of any uniform whatsoever and I was met instead with a wide range of teenage subcultures. Within a short time a pin displaying the Peace sign, hand-woven bead bracelets, tapes with home-recorded rock-music and a myriad of other teenage discoveries made me forget about my red tie.

At the same time, my parents entered a radical professional crises: their employers – both state funded research institutes – stopped receiving money from the state budget and, consequently, stopped paying their employees’ salaries. Instead they distributed “food packages” whenever

they were able to exchange them for other services. As if following Gorbachev's famous invitation to "bite the bullets" (*zatianut' poiasa*), my father lost almost 10 kilos within several months and my grandmother started to comment on the family dinners she cooked, referencing her memories from the Siege of Leningrad during the Second World War. Although my mother was very much satisfied with the "improvement" of my father's physical shape, general anxiety about the family budget grew; soon my grandfather decided to mobilize his old networks in the countryside where he had grown up and ask for a lot of land in order to supplement our family "food basket" with home-grown vegetables. I should note that this decision was not easy for my grandfather, a Soviet military engineer who made remarkable social advancement from a village schoolboy to the position of an international expert in fortification with consulting experience in China and Egypt. Upon returning home to his family after many years of military service across the Soviet Union and abroad, he renewed contacts with the village school and made continuous contributions to the school museum. Because of this activity my grandfather gained respect and a solid reputation among the village authorities. He was approached on numerous occasions with the offer to be allocated (*poluchit'* – literally 'to receive') a lot. My grandfather always refused this offer, because his social mobility from the village to the city was an indicator of his social success; by the same token, his wife, my grandmother, a native of the same village, would have preferred to spend her holidays on the seaside in Ukraine or in the state-sponsored health resorts, rather than growing vegetables and "digging into the land." Thus, rather than carrying the joy of becoming a landlord, the decision to accept the land was, for my grandfather, a symptom signaling that the days of enjoying both social prestige and economic stability were coming to an end; and the results of his career, along with the ideas that had motivated him to pursue this career in the first place, were being put to the test. When he finally came to the chairman of the village with the request, the latter shook his head: new regulations restricted land allocations. The chairman called back shortly, however, to explain that he had found a solution: "you are boarding the last wagon of the train," he added. Despite the harsh climate of the Russian Northwest and its official status as a "zone of risky agriculture," this lot of land proved to be important in the following years, as it provided our family with potatoes, cabbages, cucumbers, salad, currants and, when the season was particularly good, tomatoes and strawberries. Moreover, fifteen years later it also proved to be a rather good property acquisition, as the proximity to St. Petersburg rendered it an attractive area for those who could not afford apartments in the city or decided in favor of the new trend of living in the suburbs. However, at the time of acquisition, the lot held very different connotations: henceforth, we spent most weekends of the fall, spring and summer carrying manure, pulling up weeds and

watering garden-beds. This physical work, previously unknown to us, was not a great pleasure for my brother and me; much to my surprise, our mother on the other hand, who had never had any notion of agriculture, engaged herself with unprecedented enthusiasm and proceeded to do everything “scientifically” (*po-nauke*). Within very little time, she enlarged our family library with books and journals filled with hints and good technological solutions for gardeners, and challenged the “traditional” knowledges and competences of my grandparents, who finally had to admit that “science has advanced greatly” since the time when they lived in the village and practiced agriculture themselves as children.

The effects of the reformation of school life were also of a double nature. On one hand, the spirit of freedom and change allowed our best teachers to experiment with the curriculum and to develop, to the best of their abilities, “creative and multifaceted personalities” (*tvorcheskie i raznostoronnie lichnosti*) in their students — the ever socialist pedagogical ideal.⁵ On the other hand, competition on the school market – a new reality of the time – brought back some disciplinary practices. Within only two years, my school was officially renamed a “gymnasium” (*gimnaziia*), a title which signaled “the big return” to the pre-Revolutionary Russian educational tradition and, at the same time, marked the privileged status of our school in the post-Soviet environment. Following the model of the Russian Empire, the school uniform was restored, reconceptualized this time as a sign of distinction rather than of unification: were we thought of as *gimnazisty*, an elite group of particularly selected youth. From then on, admission to our school was no longer open to all of the children who lived in the micro-district, but was based instead on competition. Public education remained free, yet, under conditions of drastic financial state abandonment, the school administration had to seek “help” from reliable parents. To do so, school directors did their best to create and maintain a reputation of elite and highly competitive schools and keep the balance between the high quality of education and the attraction of a particular socio-economic population. The gossip was that purchasing PCs and/or renovating classrooms could facilitate admission to the school. Although this change did not concern previously admitted students, the difference in the socio-economic background of newly accepted children was noticeable. Moreover, a new segregation touched upon internal school class hierarchies: we were all made suddenly aware of the occupations of our parents, something that had previously been rarely discussed. I realized that “driver” was not a

⁵ Contrary to the widespread belief that Soviet school served as the first of many disciplining and oppressive institutions, Soviet pedagogical thought promoted the ideal Soviet subject as being creative. For more on the “recycling” of the Soviet pedagogical tradition in post-Soviet schools see: (Lemon 2009; Luehrmann 2005, 45-46). On some genealogies of this thinking not being linear, see: (Kukulin, Maiofis and Safronov 2015).

prestigious profession and “worker” was a kind of shameful category, not to mention the new development of my parents’ status in terms of salary. Although I knew my father to be an extraordinary erudite and the biggest reader in our family – both elements of the Soviet code of “culturedness” (*kul’turnost’*) connoting the social strata of intelligentsia – I avoided talking about him with my peers for some time.

From time to time, the restoration of “old good tradition” heralded administrative battles against teenage attributes such as bracelets, hairstyles and resistance to the school uniform. However, the era of total liberalization was taking its course, and these punctual acts of disciplining could stop neither our teachers from promoting intellectual openness and critical thinking, nor our teenage community from believing that knowledge and freedom were the unique means by which to achieve human happiness.

Thus, a particular configuration of my growing up was equally inspired by the American counter-culture of the 1960s, French language and literature — with a particular love for Nouvelle Vague cinema — late-Soviet and contemporary Russian rock-music and an interest in pre-Revolutionary Russian history and Orthodox religion. These “immaterial interests” were supplemented by our material everyday: we dressed ourselves from second-hand stores, exchanged self-recorded music and drank self-made wine in the kitchens of friends. Amongst other things, my teenage community preached both aestheticism and simplicity, intellectualism and denial of attachment to material goods, partly supported by the factual absence of the latter. All of this was in total harmony with the state of poverty that many of us faced in the 1990s and in sharp contrast to the actual socio-economic change which was underway.

This autoethographic *Avant-propos* is a way to introduce my field and, at the same time, to situate myself as a scholar in the midst of it: self-made culture in Russia is about experiences of poverty and everyday burden and, at the same time, about pleasure, self-expression and ethics of moderation. It is also about imaginaries that date back to the 19th century and, at the same time, about the Soviet state educational system. Moreover, it is about modernity and “expectations of modernity” (Ferguson 1999) that in many cases have not been fulfilled. Finally, it’s about very recent Russian experience, which rendered DIY objects and skills for making-do once again useful and, at the same time, placed them in a problematic relation with the new meanings of consumption, value of labor and morality of economic order, thus, fostering “nostalgia for the modern” (Özyürek 2006, as cited in Hann 2012, 1124).

INTRODUCTION

1. PROBLEMATIZATION

In 2004, I happened to witness the repair of an old Lada car, which for years had served my mother's uncle in the city of Ufa, located in the Ural region of Russia. At some point, the mechanic came to me with a small piece of metal and asked: "Do you know what it is?" "Looks like a rusty razor tip," I said. "Yes," he acknowledged with a smile and a sense of admiration in his voice, "a disc brake rotor wore off, and he needed to build it up, but only a bit, one millimeter or so. And he put a razor tip and drove with it for years! *That* is mastery!"

I start my work with this vignette because it demonstrates certain elements that attracted my attention in the early stages of my research. The use of a razor tip to repair a brake rotor nicely shows how practices of making, remaking and repairing things – practices that I will hereafter call "do-it-yourself" or DIY – are closely intertwined. Moreover, this anecdote convincingly denotes a particular material culture, with an emphasis on the value of one's having a "feeling for" a given object's affordances, of manual skills, and, finally, of a particular technological imagination, all of which help to solve complex technical problems in a cheap and autonomous way. Furthermore, this instance of the razor tip suggests a relation between the material culture and the subjective construction of the self, a construction that in this case implies "smart thinking" (*smekalka*) and skillful realization. The mechanic who discovered the razor tip clearly admired the solution; his emotional appreciation of the finding was thus a manifestation of his belonging to a particular technical culture – one in which such solutions are highly valued and recognized as evidence of excellence. His smile and the intonation of his voice communicated a recognition of mastery and craftsmanship. Those emotions demonstrated a pride which he would feel for himself, should he one day find such a simultaneously simple, efficient, and original way of fixing or making something. Finally, it is an example of what I term a "low technology" performed within a modern society, that is, a society that imagines itself as being driven by science and technology, and aspiring for good technological solutions.

This is to say that in the beginning, my research was mainly driven by the following general questions: What social and cultural meanings do simple engineering solutions have in modern society? How are these kinds of technical knowledge and skills acquired, transmitted and popularized? What is the status of tactile knowledge in a given society? And how does such material knowledge participate in the construction of the self?

Moreover, I found that the anecdote exemplified a particular approach to dealing with the material world – an approach characteristic of Soviet society, in which ordinary citizens constructed not only traditional arts and crafts, but also television sets, radios, refrigerators, and a number of smaller appliances used in everyday life. Although interest in and knowledge of technology, industry and engineering as well as development of particular local technical cultures is characteristic for many, if not all, industrial societies, one particular feature of the Soviet case is that these criteria were widespread across all social strata and not limited to the working class. Indeed, the very concept of “class” is rather problematic when it comes to the analysis of Soviet society, as this term was incorporated into the official vocabulary and legal and sociological taxonomy; “class,” therefore, was “ascribed” according to one’s professional occupation, rather than negotiated through mundane interactions (Fitzpatrick 1988; 1990; 1993). In other words, in Russia, the solution with the razor tip and the repair culture it represents are not limited to a particular professional culture – as is the case, for example, with the specificity of the highly documented car repairer cultures of Great Britain (Dant 2010) and the USA (Borg 2007; Harper 1987) – but rather informs the popular understanding of what it means to be a “creative” and “smart” individual. In other words, it is “creative” and “smart” to use a razor tip to repair a disc brake rotor.

Moreover, the range of solutions that can be called “smart” (*zdorovo pridumano* – Eng. ‘good thought’) can vary from complex technological objects, such as the one made with a razor tip, or a TV antenna made out of aluminum forks, to simple creations – a set of curtains made out of old postcards, for example, or a decorative model house built from matchsticks.

Thus, the best way to describe the material world I discuss with my counterparts would be a definition along the lines of the following: all of the self-made, remade and repaired objects, both functional and decorative, that one can have in a household. Regardless of how varied they can be, ranging from a carved kitchen plank to a self-made photo-camera, these objects can all be mentioned by the same people within the same conversation, brought up in similar contexts and described with help of the same discourses. All of these kinds of objects – objects created through the practices that I will, as I have said, refer to as DIY – were omnipresent in everyday Soviet culture and, as often happens with background phenomena, were dissolved and disappeared from view in quotidian life. Constituting a habitual element of the domestic world, these phenomena usually remained invisible and unproblematic for the beholders, often ignored and/or unappreciated or appreciated within the intimate circle of relatives but kept away from the eyes of visitors.



*Figure 1. Model house built from matchsticks. St. Petersburg, 2010
Photo: Irina Nazarova. Courtesy of the author*

My interest in specifically Russian configurations of material and technical culture prompted me to develop further questions. What discursive and institutional forms support this kind of technical culture in a specific societal context? What moral meanings are attached to it? How do these meanings inform broader contexts of social solidarities in a given society? Finally, how does this technical culture inform the relationship between the individual and the state, and what is the role of that relationship in the production of forms of citizenship?

The focus on material and technical culture, which originally animated my research agenda, was soon challenged by my first field findings. Although the mechanic who I met in Ufa and who was so happy to share with me his discovery of the razor tip, indeed represented a particular group of my interlocutors, many other subjects I met during my fieldwork were reluctant to recognize themselves within the realm of “DIY culture.” To my surprise, my interviews with random subjects in Moscow in St. Petersburg, mainly educated men and women twice as old as me and representing a social group which arguably (with some limitations) can be termed a “former Soviet middle class,”⁶ tended to deny any relation to DIY knowledge and skills. Typically, in the beginning of the conversation they would recollect other people having done something themselves and then conclude with a comment like, “Unfortunately, in our family

⁶ I define “middle class” as an individual or household position on scale marking social status, income, occupation and education and self-identification.

there were no handymen” or “Contrary to my brother/neighbor, I have never been able to do something like that myself.” Yet, when I spotted in their apartment an object that I suspected to be home-made and asked a direct question about it, they would suddenly remember, “Oh yes, it was my father/grandfather/... who made this” or “You are right, I actually forgot about that, I did this when....”

Although apparently there is nothing special about the invisibility of the DIY material culture in and of itself, as many components of everyday life remain unnoticed and unreflected upon for subjects around the world, there is something specific and culturally rooted in the ambivalent attitudes that emerge in public and private narratives about everyday material DIY culture in contemporary Russia. The reluctance on the part of my field partners to acknowledge that they have a certain connection to the “DIY world,” and the ambiguity of their emotions regarding that world, required explanation. An intuitive suggestion, that the different reactions to the DIY culture can be explained with the logic of social class (working class versus educated “middle class”) did not satisfy me. The Soviet social and economic structure tended to downplay eventual economic inequalities deriving from social origins and education. Moreover, I knew of several cases in which highly educated physicists repaired their cars themselves without considering it cause for shame. To give an example, I can cite Galina (b. 1943), one of my interlocutors, who said,

My brother had a car, and he could mount, dismount and reassemble it all alone, without addressing himself to the autoservice. He is an engineer, graduated from MIFI [one of the prestigious Moscow universities in Physics], yes. But I just want to say that Russian *umelets* [Eng. ‘handyman’], in order to facilitate one’s own life, invent just fantastic things.

Though I will never know whether the razor tip solution was found and realized in practice by my relative himself, a scientist of the oil industry, or by an anonymous repairman, I would suggest that both answers are highly plausible. My ethnographic data provided me with multiple examples of individuals, educated men and women, including a number holding top-ranking positions, repairing their cars or built gadgets of their own accord.

These first observations and contradictions helped me to formulate the controversy of my research: although DIY objects and DIY practices are obviously omnipresent on the surface of Russian everyday life, my interlocutors remain reluctant to recognize themselves within the culture of the “self-made.”

This incongruity, much like the ambiguous emotional palette surrounding the world of do-it-yourself, allowed me to formulate my further research questions in such a way that they would address the local specificity of Russian DIY culture: How do contradictory emotions inform the field of Russian DIY? What are some of the different competing discourses surrounding DIY culture in Russia? What are some of the “cultural obstacles” that cause a number of my subjects to deny their experiences of doing something by themselves? And what alternative discourses motivate others of my subjects to praise self-made culture? What are the sources of these sometimes contradictory imaginations?

Another specific aspect of this antinomy that emerged from my first field experiences concerns a particular gender dynamic in the interpretation of self-made practices: Some female subjects tended to explain their DIY skills and practices as a means of dealing with the difficulties of everyday life; moreover, they explained it historically, thus aligning their rather contemporary experiences with memories of their parents and grandparents who survived World War II and the revolution. These stories were full of contradictory emotions, ranging from sadness and sorrow to pride and self-content about their ability to find solutions under difficult circumstances. This contradictory narrative was less characteristic of my male interlocutors, who rather tended to demonstrate their satisfaction with the world of DIY.

Though acknowledging this gender difference, I don’t intend to say that it always works this way. I would like, rather, to point out that such observations led me to consider the gender element and to develop yet another set of questions: How does the category of “gender” inform the way narratives are constructed? How are DIY skills gendered and how are they embedded in the production of everyday economy? Is there any correlation between the professional status of a subject and his or her “DIY narrative”? How do family histories inform the narratives of DIY and how do they mediate the relation between the individual and the state?

Finally, my field experiences made me realize that nearly all of my subjects constructed their narratives through comparison with the present, thus prompting me to consider the issue of memory as a major interpretational framework for mediating the data I acquired from my interviews. The constant switching between “then” and “now” was, perhaps, the primary means employed by my interlocutors to ground interpretations and evaluations of both past and present. Our conversations about DIY objects and practices that is elements immersed in material everyday life, provoked subjects to revisit their experiences and rethink the meanings of work, utility, beauty, comfort, etc. and values attached to them. I find it important that, while

the stories they recount usually deal with the past, my interlocutors speak of things that are important to their present.

Thus, given the complexity and ambivalence of the opinions and meanings attributed to DIY culture that I encountered in my fieldwork, I approach narratives about DIY in the post-Soviet context as endeavors to convey emotions and opinions about the past and as “commentary on the present, and even as a form of resistance to the prevailing order, with implications for future alternatives” (Hann 2012, 1127). In analyzing these narratives, I attempt to answer the following research questions: How do post-Soviet experiences shape memories about the Soviet material life? What meanings do these DIY objects convey in the post-Soviet context? What messages do they mediate? What are images and ideas they evoke today and the discourses they are thought and described within? What social contexts do they refer to? To whom are these actors trying to make these statements? Why does the aesthetic of DIY appear to be an appropriate means of conveying these statements?

Thus, the object of my study crosscuts a number of intellectual fields, different in scale and in complexity. On the one hand, I mainly rely on Russian material, its Soviet and pre-Soviet genealogies and post-Soviet cultural memory, as expressed in individual commentaries and in art. On the other hand, my theoretical questioning goes far beyond the Russian field and is inspired by comparative studies of modern societies and contemporary socio-economic analysis of global processes. Thus, while thinking through Russian and Soviet empirical material, my intellectual strategy is aimed not so much at providing a detailed ethnography of practices that are now transforming or cease to exist, but rather to identify sometimes unexpected questions that allow for the rethinking of seemingly familiar social and economic phenomena.

2. RESEARCH QUESTION

The ambition of this work, therefore, is of a double nature. On the one hand, I inquire into how the Soviet modern project made DIY material culture its inherent characteristic and what kind of subject emerged as a result of this project. On the other hand, I investigate how the context of rapid and radical transformations influenced the way individuals remember and speak about DIY objects and practices and how these selective memories and interpretations inform their attitudes and opinions about the contemporary situation in Russia. Put differently: how did it come to be that the razor tip solution was smart and normal for my mother’s uncle in the 1980s, but was perceived as rare, unique and marginal in the late 2000s?

3. CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE AND WRITING STRATEGY

My critical perspective is closely connected to my writing strategy. While writing in English about Russian material culture, I would like to contribute to the scholarship on the post-Cold War knowledge striving to overcome simple binaries in the description of the Soviet/Russian experiences. As scholars interested in intellectual history have demonstrated, the Anglo-Saxon imagination of Russia, including some academic scholarship, has been profoundly influenced by journalistic and popular culture accounts constructed on simple binaries and decontextualized comparisons (Engerman 2004; Krylova 2000; Reid 2015; Yurchak 2005).

Material goods, technologies and tangible signs of wealth occupied an important place in the Cold War context, and the very political and ideological competition of the period was often articulated in terms of material symbols, above all relating to technological advancements, ranging from arms and spaceships to kitchen appliances and bluejeans (Mehilli 2014; Oldenziel and Zachmann 2009; Reid 2008). Both sides of the confrontation promised their followers prosperity and went to great lengths to demonstrate their achievements to their own citizens and their opponents alike (Belmonte 2008; Schwartz 2009; Cull and Mazumdar 2014).

The prosperity was, however, to be achieved thanks to different socio-economic mechanisms and imaginaries. While capitalist societies (with all the differences between the European and the North American versions) were building an economy of abundance by reinforcing consumption and educating the consumer-citizen (Cohen 2003), the member-states of the Socialist Bloc emphasized processes of production and distribution, believing that the rational allocation of a limited number of goods would lead to a more equal and fair society. Importantly, the second rationality implied that a socialist system would form politically conscious individuals able to resist the temptations of commodity-fetishism (Bogdanova 2015; Degot 2005; Kiaer 2005) and equilibrate the desire for material goods with that for a socialist way of life.

Although the description drawing “westerners” as perfect consumers and “easterners” as withheld from consuming is rather a caricature inspired by Cold War propaganda, this binary has shaped not only popular imagination but also relevant scholarship (Pence and Betts 2008, 5-7). Many agreed that the Soviet regime collapsed because it was unable to fulfill its promises and aspirations, and that the desire to consume was central and even decisive in the process of the delegitimatization of the socialist order (Chernyshova 2013; Golubev and Smolyak 2013; Verdery 1996). This interpretation of the collapse of the Soviet order is also implicit in studies

focusing on the so-called “Kitchen debate” which is often represented as a turning point in the Cold War (Oldenziel and Zachmann 2009; Reid 2008). In 1959, within the framework of U.S.-Soviet cultural exchange, Nixon presented a “typical” American home fitted with modern kitchen appliances in Moscow, thus allowing Soviet citizens to compare the quality of life in the Soviet Union with that of the United States. This exhibit radically rescaled the arena of the controversy from outer space to the individual kitchen, and rendered notions of “progress” and “prosperity” tangible and recognizable for every citizen, with a particular focus on the female audience (Reid 2002; 2005). One of the consequences of this debate was that Soviet rulers had to take the consumption expectations of their citizens seriously and to integrate consumption into the official discourse (Golubev 2016). Another consequence of this politics of competition was the integration of the “Western gaze” into the Soviet and Russian imagination (Golubev 2018), which, perhaps, was never free of it, but from now on evaluated its own materiality even more in comparison with the imagined perfect western technological object.

What I would like to emphasize here is that the Cold War rhetoric has its own history of mobilizing material objects in the capacity of political and ideological arguments. In this rhetoric, material objects and technologies are equated with the socio-economic order, and the political controversy around the nature of modernity, democracy and social justice is increasingly substituted by economic argumentation. It is not insignificant that this rhetorical strategy was perpetuated in the post-1989 period. As Pence and Betts pointed out,

One of the problems in post-cold war conceptualizations of modernity is a common tendency to equate modernity with triumphant liberal capitalism. (Pence and Betts 2008, 7)

Soon after the collapse of the USSR, western commentators created a powerful image of the post-communist landscape as destroyed and polluted, something that was particularly easy to achieve after the Chernobyl catastrophe in 1986. Zsuzsa Gille opens her book by citing descriptions from the press to show how socialist Hungary was represented as dirty and wasteful (Gille 2007). Similarly, Krisztina Fehérváry demonstrates how the color gray was discursively attached to negativity in descriptions of socialist and post-socialist worlds (Fehérváry 2009; 2013). By the same token, while talking about Germany, Ina Merkel points out that mass media portrayed Eastern Germany as black and white, or gray (Merkel 2006, 268-269), and Chris Hann argues, that “*Ost* was equated with a mentality of shabby complaining and state dependence, as well as the material culture of two-stroke engines and Plattenbau apartments” (Hann 2012, 1126). Along the same lines, Paul Betts writes that in the post-1989 era, German

museums continued to present and interpret German-German difference “in terms of material output and commodity cultures” (Betts 2000, 739). Finally, Alaina Lemon writes, that “it is customary, even patriotic, for ordinary Americans to assume that all in Russia is grim” (Lemon 2017, 243) and that, “Americans thought the Soviet material world was all grey or all red” (Lemon 2017, 244).⁷

As Francisco Martinez summarizes,

Abandoned industries, rusting machinery, obsolete power plants, decaying buildings, chemically polluted zones, environmental catastrophes and debris have for decades symbolized the ‘collapse’ of the USSR, displaying the break-up of the regime in its more literary and material sense. [...] Soon after its breakdown, state socialism was described as wasteful, symbolically polluted and economically out of order, *not separating the consequences of the ‘collapse’ with the socio-material effects of the Soviet regime* [emphasis is mine]. As waste, the Soviet past was automatically associated with inefficient practices, hazardous products, empty spaces and a sense of ending, activating an imaginary elimination, becoming a subject to practices of disposal, recuperation and revalorisation. (Martinez 2017, 348)

The equation of modernity with capitalism rendered Soviet and Socialist experience profoundly “anti-modern.” And the language of waste and pollution allowed for the onset of a rapid amnesia concerning the positive material symbols of Soviet modernity, such as state-sponsored block housing, a developed network of public transport, urban infrastructure for childcare and public activities, and relatively equal distribution of wealth. What replaced these important objects was a stigma of the “failed economy” and “backwardness.”

This language of waste, pollution, inefficiency and failure influenced not only the everyday imaginaries of lay citizens on the both sides of the Iron Curtain, but also penetrated academic discourses. Even those working within the so-called “revisionist” program (as opposed to the totalitarian school) and attempting to rehumanize Soviet and socialist subjects often perpetuated the underlying binaries by arguing that “socialist subjects were consumers too” (a recent example representing this discourse is the book by Chernyshova (2013). While affirming the “normality” of the Soviets by discovering and describing their behaviors as consumers, these authors, in fact, normalized capitalism and consumerism, rather than explored differences in the

⁷ Indeed, this picture proved to be efficient. In his recent paper, Martin Müller mentions that his Western European students are surprised at his interest in researching “the East”, because the assumption is that “the East is boring.” Moreover, Müller cites other scholars who have had similar experiences while teaching on “the East” (Müller 2018, 4).

“systems of provisions” (Fine and Leopold 1993; Warnier 1999) within capitalist and non-capitalist modern societies.

Susan Reid, who in her earlier works also employs the argument of socialist consumers (Reid 2008), recognizes the following in her recent article:

The meaning and effects of socialist consumption have sometimes been understood teleologically, in terms of the decline and collapse we know came later, thereby reinforcing the equation of modernity with triumphant liberal capitalism and perpetuating rather than challenging the Cold War binary image of advanced consumerist West v. backward anti-consumerist East. (Reid 2015)

In my work, I try to avoid binary language, although this sometimes surfaces through the language of my sources as well as the scholarship I cite. To overcome this language, I take inspiration from the recent critical literature on waste, calling for a decrease in the speed of production and consumption in the context of global capitalism. Although this literature rarely considers the post-Soviet space (Gille 2007 and Martinez 2017 are exceptions here), I find their analytical perspective productive for a better understanding of Soviet modernity.

Thus, my reading of the late Soviet culture of materiality as valorizing slow technology, repair and sustainable use clearly opposes these powerful stereotypes. I argue, therefore, that the Soviet experience of life with shortage may serve as a productive example of thinking about care and sustainability within modern society.

Socialist modernity explicitly valorized tradition and manual crafts, while carefully localizing them within specific contexts – in the frame of labor education or museified contexts, for instance, where they would serve as a reminder about the popular peasant origins and, at the same time, cultivate respect for craftsmanship and human labor as understood broadly. In this sense, “traditional” skills have never lost their moral value in Soviet society, even less so given the practical economic value that these skills can offer. Paradoxically, with all level of ideological control, a certain practical autonomy and reliability was an inherent part of the positive portrait of the Soviet citizen. Moreover, this very practical autonomy was a condition to fulfill expectations formulated by the authorities.

4. CENTRAL ANALYTICAL CONCEPTS

4.1. DO-IT-YOURSELF

As delineated in the first section, my use of the English concept “DIY,” do-it-yourself, is a compromise that helps me enable a reader to more easily grasp the idea and quickly get a sense of the kind of things in question. While modern European languages usually contain normative expressions to refer to similar phenomena (‘do-it-yourself’ and ‘making do’ – Eng., ‘bricolage’ – Fr., ‘Heimwerk’ – Ger.), there is no obvious analogue in the Russian language covering the whole realm of objects that people can think of as “hand-made objects” or “objects made by themselves.” Instead, there is a pallet of different verbs and expressions describing particular types of skills, crafts, and/or household practices, such as *masterit*’ – to tinker; *rukodelnichat*’ – a general verb to describe all kinds of domestic handwork; *chinit*’ – to repair, to fix; *peredelyvat*’ – to remake, refashion; or idioms like *zolotyie ruki* – ‘golden hands’ or *master na vse ruki* – ‘handyman’.

The term DIY has its advantages and limitations, and I decided to stay with it for a number of intellectual and methodological reasons. First, “do-it-yourself” (in Russian literally *sdelai sam*), is a grammatical imperative, an invitation, a call to make something by yourself. Throughout my work, I will demonstrate how specific discourses and institutions in the Soviet Union functioned in a way to motivate individuals to produce a certain material and social reality, ranging from everyday small gadgets made by themselves, to for themselves. In my work, I suggest that “do-it-yourself” can be seen a kind of motto which mediated the relationship between the individual and the state in the field of production of material reality.

Second, contemporary intellectuals use the concept of “do-it-yourself” to describe social phenomena of very different varieties and scales, ranging from amateur crafting (Hackney 2013) and practices of knowledge sharing (Hemphill and Leskowitz 2012), including DIY biology – that is, amateur practices with natural substances (Seyfried, Pei and Schmidt 2014) – to spontaneous place-appropriation (Enigbokan 2016) and urban planning co-participation (Talen 2014), known as “DIY urbanism.” In this scholarship, the abbreviation of DIY functions as a sign referring to different practices of the transformation of material reality and as an analytical metaphor to describe bottom-up social and political initiatives (Ratto and Boler 2014) and self-organized institutions (Baker and Huber 2013; Baker and Cantillon 2018). In my work, I also use the concept of DIY to describe and theorize phenomena of different scales. On the

one hand, I am interested in manual practices of making as such, on the other hand, I use “DIY” as an analytical lens to explore initiatives, institutions and social spaces organized from below, characteristic of late Soviet society.

Third, the concept of “do-it-yourself” has informed an American anti-consumerist counterculture (Barrett 2013; Dale 2008; Moran 2010; Suri 2009; Triggs 2006; Turner 2006), and as such acquired a symbolical and political value in the English-speaking world. Although many have argued that this counterculture was also commodified later on, it nevertheless has held its value, as we can see by the remobilization of the language of DIY by groups looking for alternative social and economic solutions. While describing the Soviet and Russian material world with the help of this particular concept in English, I would like to render it a recognizable phenomenon of modernity around the world. In other words, I invite the reader to challenge the language commonly used to speak of Russian materialities and offer an alternative and politically informed analytical perspective. The application of this expression for the Soviet context provides, therefore, a new critical optic informed by a particular political vision, and suggests a comparative perspective where similarities are as important as differences.

Moreover, by drawing this comparative line I make an effort to avoid strong contrasts and binaries, typical for the field of Soviet Studies, and attempt rather “to perceive connections where before we were encouraged to divide, to taxonomize,” as suggested by Alaina Lemon (Lemon 2017, 242). In her essay, Lemon rightly emphasizes that Western (American, in her particular case) writing about Russia has long been built upon implicit and explicit contrasts, yet contrasts of different scales: loss was contrasted with (seemingly omnipresent) abundance, and the material wealth of “the ordinary Soviet family” with the wealth of an American upper middle-class family. This approach made it hard to appreciate those aspects of the Soviet life that would put the Soviet materiality in a positive light and, at the same time, rendered Western “ruins and material failures” invisible (Lemon 2017).

4.2. DIY OBJECTS, BRICOLAGE AND LOGICS OF MODERNITY

Taken a-historically, DIY objects represent a great interest as things “in between,” keeping traces of their former use and offering a transition to something new without a radical break. They are therefore examples of that kind of soft transformation which places the premium on non-radical, incremental change. As anthropologist of technologies Lucy Suchman points out, in the contemporary understanding of technology and design, such processes of incremental

change generally have negative value, and yet they bring transformations “without the associated costs in time and human effort” (Suchman 2011, 15).

Thus, DIY objects and the subjects producing them are in a problematic relation vis-à-vis the ideology of economic growth and that type of modernity which valorizes this growth. In his essay *On Bricolage*, anthropologist Victor Buchli goes as far as to name bricolage “inherently antimodern”:

The bricoleur accepts the world as it is and reconfigures it, rather than anticipating a new world and inventing it. In this respect the bricoleur has a different concept of time compared to the modernist: one that is retrospective, based on the continuous reworking of the received elements of the world, as opposed to prospective and filled with imagined new conditions and possibilities. (Buchli 2011, 113)

Although I do not join Buchli in his characterization of bricolage as “inherently anti-modern” – as I believe that bricolage emerges specifically in contrast to industrial ready-mades and is, therefore, epistemologically preconditioned by modernity – it is worth explaining why DIY connotes “anti-modernity.”

Buchli’s skepticism comes from the uncertain place that self-made culture occupies in modern societies. In the industrialized world, bricolage is not taken seriously. It is rather seen as a marginal practice performed out of necessity, a sign of poverty and limited opportunities to purchase ready-made goods, or as a conscious aesthetic choice: an expression of nostalgia for the preindustrial era, or of a criticism of consumerism and the promotion of ecological thinking. Both interpretations refer to the extremes of the modern imagination, scarcity and abundance, which also signify the temporal dynamic of modern thinking: the move from scarcity to abundance (Betts and Eghigian 2003).

Fundamentally relying on manual skills and values of parsimony and thrift, *bricolage* emphasizes the scarcity and inaccessibility of ready-made goods, and looks “non-modern.” In everyday language, words like “bricolage” refer to something that is not well done. Although over the last decade we can observe a renewed interest in crafts, home-making and low-tech solutions, the mainstream economic logic of modernity has pushed these practices to the periphery and stigmatized them with the negative meanings of rurality, poverty and backwardness.

In this work, I propose that one look at DIY material culture as a phenomenon which reveals the sensibilities of modernity, as it questions its most basic binaries, such as scarcity and

abundance, tradition and innovation, backwardness and progress. I propose that modernity be conceived as an ideology, based on a particular economic logic, which is represented and promoted as an objective “law.”

Contrary to the logic of modernity and its addiction to the future, DIY objects stick to the present: they are enabled by a particular momentum and the constellation of material elements and skills at hands. This is, perhaps, what allowed Levi-Strauss (1962) to neglect the temporal aspect of bricolage in his famous contribution and analyze it synchronically, as if a spontaneous constellation of signs would emerge immediately and have no history. The temporal aspect was, of course, of minute interest to him, as he meditated upon cognition, a process we can hardly observe historically.

Yet, material bricolage is historically contingent. Although the phenomenon itself is arguably a human universal, stories and narratives that interweave them into the social fabric and individual lives remain local and grounded. When placed in a historical setting and localized, in my case in Russia, this field opens a new set of questions related to specific regimes of value and knowledge production and the symbolisms involved. Not only can we observe that the planned economy context of the USSR pre-programmed thrift and resourcefulness as a widespread social practice (Anstett 2015; Caldwell 2004; Gerasimova and Chuikina 2004) and shared value, but it did so along with fostering the ideas and values that we conventionally associate with modernity. Thus, in the Soviet context, the creation of a secular national system of mass education, the belief in progress and science and technology, and the value of individual creativity, all coexisted with a public encouragement of “slow consumption,” thrift and practical autonomy and self-reliance.

Today, DIY objects can be read as statements against the singularity and discretion of the dominant regime of value obsessed with the production of new (Campbell 1992). They “do not respect” the borders established by this regime – between functions, objects, conventions and legal rights – that contemporary capitalist modernity tends to impose as “natural.” From this point of view, the research presented here is a contribution to the investigation of local histories of societies that favor the making of open and “unfinished” things as opposed to “black box” type objects and technologies. To use an imaginative formulation by Tim Ingold, things “are alive because they leak” (Ingold 2010). It is in this respect that this project partakes in political and ethical considerations.

4.3. DIY SKILLS

Objects are knowledge. They allow for an “archaeology of practice,” that is, an understanding of the knowledge and skills embedded in their shapes (Poitou 2007). Thus, while studying objects in the first place, I am also interested in the knowledge involved in the production of DIY things and the social and cultural contexts that shape and co-construct this knowledge. From the anthropological perspective, the central element of this knowledge is perhaps a particular skill comprised of an attentive engagement with the material environment (Ingold 2001, 22), the “feeling” of the affordances embedded in things and raw materials, and a particular “material consciousness” enabling everything to be transformed into everything (Sennett 2008). Following the analytical framework of Jean-Pierre Warnier, I understand these skills as deriving from knowledge of materials and their physical properties, from social forms that shape particular contexts of “mise en objets,” and from a particular imagination (Warnier 1999). A specific feature of this type of imagination is the absence of borders between art and technology (Gell 1992), raw material and ready-made object, natural forces and mechanisms.

I approach skills as practical and often embodied knowledge situated in a given activity (Ingold 2001; Suchman 1987) and within a broader historical, social and political context (Haraway 1988; Kopytoff 1986). Yet, unlike to those appearing in the bulk of literature on skills and crafts, my actors do not employ skills or engage in any crafts that can be named “traditional.” On the contrary, they articulate the “modern” character of their hobbies, which they acquired from scratch in specialized clubs and schools or invented on their own. Crafting model airplanes, making bicycles, constructing clothing fashions, “improving” technologies or simply repairing home appliances, all of this requires actual engagement with modern urban everyday life and mobilization of the objects and tools available within this urban setting. (I will come back to this issue in the Chapter 5 “Cultural biographies of skills”).

4.4. AGENCY AND MATERIAL CULTURE

Thinkers working on different aspects of material culture have suggested a number of concepts that inform our understanding of human productive agency and knowledge that mediate this agency, such as “techniques du corps” (Mauss 1950 [1934]), “savoir de familiarité” (Merleau-Ponty 1945), “geste” (Leroi-Gourhan 1964-1965), “tacit knowledge” (Polanyi 1966), “distributed cognition” (Hutchins 1995), “anthropotechnology” (Geslin 2002; 2017), “objectification” (Miller 2005), “mises en objet” (Warnier 1999), “material consciousness”

(Sennett 2008), “sensual knowledge” (Dant 2010), and many others. With all the differences that these authors demonstrate in their focuses of attention, all of them prove to be committed to the investigation of relationships between subjects and objects and of the ways humans internalize their relations to and interactions with material artifacts. This intellectual field allows one to approach a particular material culture – Russian, in my case – on a different anthropological scale, in which engagement with matter is theorized as both local cultural phenomenon and a human universal.

The contribution by Jean-Pierre Warnier is of particular importance to me, as it explicitly combines an interest in embodied knowledge with a theorization of the relationships between local material cultures and the self, on the one hand, and broader regimes of consumption in industrialized societies, on the other hand (Warnier 1999).

Soviet society was, obviously, industrialized, and yet it was not capitalist, which makes it hard to grasp it using analytical tools developed based on materials from capitalist societies. Referring to consumption, Warnier, building on Fine and Leopold (1993), often uses an alternative term, “système d’approvisionnement” (Eng. ‘system of provision’), which helps him to differentiate between various regimes of consumption, depending on the branches producing material goods and the social classes producing their respective consumers. By choosing the term “system of provision,” Warnier aims to avoid the stereotypical image of a consumption system as always structured in the same way, namely through the logic of obsolescence, and to include in his analysis those social groups who are excluded or limited in their consumption behavior, such as migrants, clochards and homeless people.

Dans les sociétés gagnées par l’économie marchande, qu’elles soient industrialisées comme la nôtre ou qu’elles le soient moins, la mise en objets comme médiation de la subjectivation et des gouvernementalités passe par le marché, par l’argent et, tout récemment, par l’approvisionnement de masse. Il y a là un motif de différence d’avec les sociétés non marchandes, qui affecte les modalités de la mise en objets et son retentissement sur le sujet et son action. (Warnier 1999, 87-88)

Such an approach allows for the perception of any productive human activity implying actions upon material as a performance of “consumption.” The use of a razor tip to build up a brake rotor appears, in Warnier’s terms, to be both a “consumption practice” and an act of “material provisioning,” that is providing oneself with certain material things. Following such a conceptualization, the interpretation of “consumption” as necessarily mediated by financial

transactions that is so frequently taken for granted can be overcome, and a critical lens for thinking about consumption practices taken on instead.

Cessons donc de raisonner en termes de « consommation de masse » comme s'il s'agissait là d'une réalité identifiable et cohérente. On est en présence d'une multitude de pratiques qui sont globalement structurées par des systèmes d'approvisionnement dont les profits varient considérablement de branche à branche... L'uniformisation des personnes et des pratiques par l'approvisionnement de masse n'est qu'une apparence non démontrée et sans doute illusoire. (Warnier 1999, 129-130)

4.5. CREATIVITY: DIY AND SUBJECTIVITY

The technological aesthetics of DIY raise questions of creativity and the human capacity to rethink the material world and recreate and/or reinterpret anything that was intended for a different purpose. Thinking in this direction, I take inspiration from Ingold's (2010) perception of creativity as something,

that assigns primacy to processes of formation as against their final products, and to flows and transformations of materials as against states of matter [...] this is to read creativity 'forwards', as an improvisatory joining in with formative processes, rather than 'backwards', as an abduction from a finished object to an intention in the mind of an agent. (Ingold 2010, 2-3)

Since Classical times, philosophers have suggested that there is a connection between the process of manual work and the subjectivity of the maker (among contemporary theorists: Miller 2005; Sennett 2008; Warnier 1999). Building on Hegel, Daniel Miller draws a clear temporal parallelism and a relation of interdependence between the process of objectification and the process of subjective "becoming" of the maker. He writes,

In objectification all we have is a process in time by which the very act of creating form creates consciousness or capacity such as skill and thereby transforms both form and the self-consciousness of that which has consciousness, or the capacity of that which now has skill. (Miller 2005, 9)

Yet, in the Soviet context the term "creativity" (*tvorchestvo*) receives an additional connotation, as this term was widely exploited by the official Soviet discourse. On the one hand, it was mobilized during the early Soviet period to describe and signify the spontaneous social drive of the "creative masses" which actually performed revolution as a major political change in a particular historical moment. On the other hand, it successfully penetrated Soviet pedagogical

discourse and remained one of the “key words” of the Soviet project especially in the after-war late Soviet period (I will develop this in detail in Chapters 3 and 4).

4.6. DIY IN TIME AND SPACE

Self-making often requires space. Even when it concerns relatively simple technologies, the practice requires raw materials, which should be available when the moment comes. Therefore, some such spaces are often considered stocks. These can be suitcases filled with scraps of different materials (Interview with Elena), shelving just below the level of the ceiling, table-desks, garages (Interviews with Alena, Nadezhda, Yurii), etc.

DIY practices take place in semi-private settings: in the home, in a country-house, in a garage, in a workshop after, and sometimes during, working hours. Since those practices are usually hobbies or eventual occupations, there is no particular timeframe during which they are performed. It happens: “when I have time,” “when I want to do something,” “when I want to make a gift,” “when I see something interesting and then get an idea,” as formulated by my interlocutors.

Moreover, DIY practices rarely constitute a matter of public pride: it is done “when it is needed” or “just for fun”; it is “nothing special.” The result, therefore, is not particularly exhibited (the only exception here is perhaps quasi-traditional crafts that might, according to convention, be put on display in the household). DIY objects are often pre-planned projects, but they can also be the result of a person’s skills enabling and even “pushing” them to do something (*ruki cheshutsia* – Eng. ‘hands itch’). DIY as a hobby is a realm of intimate pleasure (Widdis 2009) that is sometimes also a kind of therapy: it is performed in order to recover, to feel good, to take pleasure. Those pleasures are sometimes shared: in some cases deliberately – with other DIYers and, often unavoidably, with family members and/or neighbors who do not necessarily appreciate such occupations, for example when they point out the noise of the instruments and the dirt or mess that such projects might imply. In fact, it is very often an extremely intimate pleasure and practice, representing a kind of auto-communication mediated by material elements.

4.7. CULTURAL INTIMACY

To approach contradictory emotions and opinions of my interlocutors, I use the concept of “cultural intimacy” proposed by Michael Herzfeld:

[...] cultural intimacy – the recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality, the familiarity with the basis of power that may one moment assure the disenfranchised a degree of creative irreverence and at the next moment reinforce the effectiveness of intimidation. (Herzfeld 1996, 3)

Herzfeld’s method and analytical optics are particularly adjusted for the critical analysis of nationalism. For him, stereotypes and acts of stereotyping are, first of all, “discursive weapons” that “do serve the interests of power,” even though “they carry the possibility of subversion and sometimes are used to achieve it” (Herzfeld 1996, 202). I do not engage deeply the issue of nationalism, which would, in my case, likely correspond to imperialism rather than nationalism. Nevertheless, I would like to apply Herzfeld’s method of the “social poetic” to analyze how DIY as a self-stereotype and as a locus of cultural intimacy mediates social meanings of the state and relations to the state.

It is this intersection between everyday experience and the structures of power that impinge upon it that constitutes the ground of social poetics. (Herzfeld 1996, 203)

4.8. CULTURAL RECYCLING

The Russian case offers an example of an alternative modernity, as the Soviet ideology maintained work as the basic social value and promoted all kinds of manual skills along with the more conventional values of modernity such as progress, industrialism, innovation, etc. And yet the historical change, which occurred in the late 1980s and early 1990s, radically transformed the politico-economic and symbolical order and, consequently, the meanings of work, commodity, value and self. This radical change created a dramatic uncertainty about the most basic of notions and rendered previously “normal” and unproblematic things visible and symbolically marked. The material world inherited by post-Soviet Russia became “Soviet,” a characteristic that henceforth indicated the past, historical failure and doubtful morality. And the “Soviet thing” became an objective material evidence of the system’s inability to provide its citizens with industrially made commodities.

Studying “Soviet DIY” from a post-Soviet perspective meant conducting research on the past, on the material remains of Socialism. However, the more apartments I visited and the more interviews I conducted, the more I realized that the apparently “past” life has never lost its contemporaneity. This quality of taking place in the present often remained, both materially and symbolically; but in many cases the disappearance of tangible traces only reinforced intangible symbolical connections with the past. Thus, in the process of my research, the focus of my attention moved away from material objects *per se*, and toward the symbolical (cultural, historical and personal) contexts that I found them to be entangled with.

Defining DIY is as difficult as defining everyday life. The world of DIY marks an intersection of domesticity, economy, human agency and social relations that create unique configurations of meanings and practices; this intersection is, in turn, historically situated. The unique configuration that I witnessed during my fieldwork in 2010-2013 was heavily influenced by the momentum of transformations after the collapse of the Soviet order and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. This collapse marked not only a considerable political and economic change, but in particular the disintegration of previous epistemologies. While the public discourse of the Soviet Union offered a particular vision of modernity, based on supranational political solidarity and equal economic distribution of goods, the new Russia proved its adherence to capitalism but still hesitated between an ahistorical vision of democracy guaranteed by the free market and an abstract technocratic state (especially under the governments of Yeltsin and of Medvedev) on the one hand, and various versions of nationalisms (under Putin)⁸ (Kalinin 2011; Kukulin 2010) on the other. Yet, when the period of “romantic capitalism,” as one of my interlocutors termed it, was over, the project of democracy guaranteed by the free market no longer inspired trust. By the late 1990s,

Russians tended to remember the Brezhnev era as a ‘Golden Age’. A third of opinion poll respondents in 1995 and 1997, and half in 2002, named that period as the best time to have lived in Russia. (Chernyshova 2013, 2)

At the same time, the nationalist project also proved to be problematic: contrary to other former Soviet Republics, Russia did not inherit any nationalist project from the Soviet period, except for an “imperial” one. Regardless politics of Russification that started in the middle of the 1930s

⁸ This periodization is, of course, a schematic simplification that refers to mainstream logic but ignores important parallel projects. For instance, the project of religious renaissance clearly connoting Russian nationalism (as opposed to the Soviet imperial inclusive logic) emerged under Yeltsin. Another counterexample is Medvedev’s attempt to mobilize “patriotism as a feeling that allows resolution of the conflict between a ‘critical perspective on the past and on our far-from-ideal present’” (Kalinin 2011, 160) for the sake of technocratic modernization.

in contradiction with the early Soviet politics of support for minority cultures and languages, the Soviet imperial map has always remained plural and multinational. Moreover, for many years Russians imagined themselves to be responsible for promoting supranational Soviet identity and disseminating (supranational Soviet) “civilization” and enlightenment to the other peoples of the Soviet Union (Slezkine 1994).

In this context, by 2010, when I started my fieldwork, my subjects were in the midst of their subjective work of “recycling” the past. This was a time when new realities penetrated everyday life so deeply that everyone, whatever their political preferences, knew that turning time back was impossible. At the same time, this was a period of disappointment for many, as reforms brought not so much freedom and democracy, but rather hardship and drastic economic inequality. Even those of my interlocutors who apparently benefitted from these shifts, such as Marina, the dentist, and Elena, the chef accountant, asked themselves how much they had gained or lost because of the changes. In other words, this was a period during which people who grew up in the Soviet Union (the generation of subjects I have studied) and stayed in post-Soviet Russia (as opposed to a significant number of professionals of their age who emigrated) had to make sense of their new identities and situate themselves not only spatially – in the immediacy of everyday life – but also historically. Moreover, this work of “recycling” happened very much in the decoration of material objects inherited from the past – from ever functioning old Soviet refrigerators ZIL⁹ to stamp collections that contained, side by side, stamps with images of art and stamps with Lenin’s portrait on them, for example. In each case, one had to decide – to keep them or to throw them away. And if one were to let them stay, then the “why” would always emerge – as the inner censor, or a curious guest, may always ask, “Why do you keep this junk, it’s so easy to buy a new one now.”

In my analysis, I argue that in the post-Soviet context DIY operates as a medium for expressing and carrying individual, and, to a lesser extent, collective, attempts to make sense of the uncertainty and confusion related to memories of the Soviet and to “recycle” the Russian past.

Thus, DIY as an aesthetic (quasi-artistic) practice serves as a kind of “material language,” a language consisting of material signs that connote the past. The statements produced with the help of this material language are something like “material vernaculars” (thus alluding to the

9 ZIL refrigerators produced by the Likhachev Moscow Plant in Moscow in the second part of the 1950s are known for their sustainability: one can still find them in urban apartments in perfect working condition. Today, ZIL refrigerators are referenced as symbols of the Soviet industry, which produced technology “forever” rather than for a short commercially motivated lifecycle.

folkloric “oral” nature of their production and circulation). Materially and epistemologically rooted in the past, DIY appears to be a productive sign of ethical and political confusions associated with the socio-economic changes that occurred in Russia in the 1990s.

5. RELEVANT SCHOLARSHIP

This research is situated at the intersection of several fields of study: the anthropology of post-socialist transformations, anthropology of materiality, critical anthropology of modernity and an interdisciplinary corpus of literature on “socialist modernities.”

Anthropological research on socialist societies began in the 1990s with a focus on social and economic transformations that took place throughout ex-socialist spaces after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Ashwin 1999; Burawoy 2001; Burawoy and Verdery 1999; Hann 2002; Humphrey 2002; Mandel and Humphrey 2002; Pine and Bridger 1997; for a good overview see Buyandelgeriyev 2008). These studies, based on ethnographic research in different post-socialist regions, challenged the neoliberal transition theories that assumed that the liberalization of capital and dismantling of socialist institutions would “naturally” lead toward “normal capitalism” and democracy. Moreover, these studies seriously questioned social and moral values of such theories that legitimated the so-called “shock therapy” and related human costs for the sake of transition and market economy. The failure of transition models was specifically articulated in the collection of articles *Uncertain Transition: Ethnographies of Change in the Postsocialist World* (Burawoy and Verdery 1999). This series of contributions demonstrated that economy is not a “natural law” but rather set of practices embedded in social relations and mediated by memories, relationships, and historically grounded cultural values. An important focus of attention of this early scholarship was directed toward the investigation of newly established markets and social responses to the processes of privatization and marketization (Hann 2002; Humphrey and Verdery 2004; Mandel and Humphrey 2002). Throughout the socialist period, trade and business were considered immoral activities, a way of making profit without labor. The arrival of capitalism and the rapid development of private businesses and consumption challenged long-established system of values and socially accepted forms of exchange and prompted multiple social and moral dilemmas (Humphrey 1995; 2002; Lemon 1998; Patino 2005; Pesmen 1995; 1996; Ries 2002). Ethnographers documented conflicting feelings and opinions regarding money, trade, property rights, entrepreneurial practices and their impact on social fabric.

These works demonstrate how the moral values established under socialism (and commonly shared by people until recently or even contemporaneously) influence attitudes toward capitalist concepts and realities such as money, private property or consumption, and structure behavior and identities of individuals who live in post-socialist countries. Interviews about DIY objects and practices as integrated into both the Soviet and post-Soviet domestic economy also provoke controversial moral and cultural judgments and demonstrate how past concepts and experiences penetrate the present.

The second block of literature relevant to my research consists of scholarship on the anthropology of materiality, namely two subfields of it: materiality and memory, and the anthropology of recycling.

The anthropology of materiality and memory has emerged in Europe very much as an effect of the critical attention paid to the effects of urbanization, industrialization and modernity as broadly understood. Ingrained in this literature are reminiscent feelings and nostalgia about the loss of what some would call “traditional culture.” A later revision of this theme was provoked by deindustrialization in Europe, which resulted in further transformations of material life and loss of habitual patterns of everyday life and the meanings and values embedded in them. Industrial ruins, left behind along with the communities established around once animated and vivid fabrics, made for a new consideration of the signs and meanings incorporated into the vanishing material landscape and their role in human experiences.

For post-socialist societies, a similar set of questions was raised after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 (Fehérváry 2013). This radical political shift rendered the transition from socialist industrial modernity to global neoliberal postmodernity even more dramatic, as it involved an overall devalorization of the past (Humphrey 1995). In this context, the closure of factories and mines in Eastern Europe and in the new countries that succeeded the Soviet republics signified not just a shift to a new type of economy, but also the meaninglessness of human efforts invested in the project of socialist modernity.

At the same time, the arrival of capitalism together with neoliberal ideology brought a new set of ideas and patterns of behavior having to do with new types of relationships involved in production and consumption, social and economic exchange (Makovicky 2011; Henig and Makovicky 2018) and with new types of subjectivity produced through these relationships (Makovicky 2014). While socialist economies were characterized by chronic shortages of everyday goods and, therefore, pushed individuals to develop strategies and skills to deal with

the lack and saving of commodities (Gerasimova and Chuikina 2004; Humphrey 1995), the new economic context required different skill-sets, ranging from choosing articles and taking pleasure in spending time and money on shopping to making sense of drastic social and economic inequalities (Ries 2000). Before the 1990s, the anthropological research on non-western consumption practices was mainly nourished by insights coming from postcolonial regions; its intellectual and moral agenda was therefore framed as a critical analysis of the interplay of local (“traditional”) and imported from the West (“modern”) practices, where the past or, more specifically, “tradition” is used as a positive “resource in confronting modernity” (Miller 1995, 7). The material from a post-socialist terrain challenged this frame as, in this case, both the past and the present appeared to be morally problematic. Commenting on Humphrey’s account of consumerism in Russia in 1993, Daniel Miller concludes:

The past is certainly not irrelevant to the formation of current skepticism but this new anthropology and these new consumers require a different sense of historical consciousness than has hitherto been the norm for the discipline. (Miller 1995, 8)

In the years that followed, a number of works focusing on nostalgia-like practices of consumption and dealing with materialities in a much broader sense have demonstrated the specific role of objects in mediating the process of appropriation of both the past and the present. These authors have shown how a new social and economic reality transformed the meanings of objects, practices and spaces and how these new meanings were, nevertheless, informed (though perhaps in a conflicting way) by patterns and ideas inherited from the past (Betts 2003; Berdhal 2005; 2006; Hann 2012; Luehrmann 2005; 2011; Makovicky 2011; Nadkarni and Shevchenko 2014; Todorova and Gille 2010).

The anthropology of waste and recycling has emerged as subfield at the crossroads of the anthropology of modernity (Appadurai 1996) and the anthropology of materiality (Appadurai 1986; Buchli 2002; Miller 2005). It emerged as a critical response to the neoliberal practice of relocating waste produced in the “Global North” to the “Global South” (Alexander and Reno 2012; Anstett and Ortar 2015; Gille 2007; Norris 2010). These economic practices mobilized bottom-up protests and, therefore, enabled debates and negotiations. The authors engaged in this field deal with the analysis of the social entanglements surrounding human efforts invested in the conceptualization and revaluation of “waste” as a legal, economic and everyday category, the management and recycling of waste, and finally, the human, ecological and economic “price” of these efforts. This literature provided me with analytical insights as to how to think about “waste” – the category often applied to the “Soviet DIY” objects – and how to address

critically the mainstream economic discourse. Yet, with a few exceptions (Alexander 2012; Gille 2007; Martinez 2017) this literature rarely deals with post-Socialist regions.

The important exception is Zsuzsa Gille's work on waste management in Socialist Hungary. Engaging with material from a post-communist country, Gille offered a rich historical panorama of state-sponsored waste management. In Hungary, just as in the Soviet Union, the official Marxist ideology was helpful in encouraging a reconsideration of "waste" as a "useful resource" rather than an unwanted residue. Rather than hiding and relocating waste out of sight, communist societies collected and recycled waste on-site, thus imbuing it with economic and moral value.

Another corpus which guided my thinking was the emerging literature on "socialist modernities" (Bockmann 2011; 2015; David-Fox 2015; Fehérváry 2013; Pence and Betts 2007; Reid and Crowley 2000), an intellectual paradigm inspired by Eisenstadt's concept of "multiple modernities" (Eisenstadt 2000). This very interdisciplinary academic field (for a partial overview see (Fidelis 2017)), consisting of anthropologists, geographers, historians, sociologists, STS scholars, etc., is rapidly developing with the increasing presence of young scholars with origins in post-socialist countries, and is very much politically motivated (Jelaka 2016; Kalinovsky 2016; Khalid 2007; Martinez 2014; Owczarzak 2009; Tulbure 2009; Vujanovic 2017). Their intellectual efforts are informed by the post-colonial attempt to recover what was formerly defined as a "Second World" from exclusion by the mainstream intellectual conversation about the present. The stabilization of new geopolitical categories, such as "Global North" and "Global South," pushed the entire scope of post-socialism out of geopolitical and moral considerations (Gille 2010; Müller 2018; Tlostanova 2012; Tlostanova 2015; Yurchak 2017). To a great extent, scholars working in this direction attempt to counterbalance the master narrative on the deficient and utopic communist "experiment" and to instead make a claim about the communist or, rather, socialist experience within a set of categories developed within the socialist world. By so doing, they work not just to better inform histories of post-socialist societies but also argue for the possibility of alternative modernities and therefore contribute to the conversation about modern futures.

6. SOURCES AND FIELDWORK

My fieldwork has been conducted over a number of separate periods. In 2010 I briefly conducted fieldwork in St. Petersburg, using this time to prepare my PhD research project

application for the Swiss National Foundation (SNF). Over a period of three months, split between St. Petersburg and Moscow, I conducted interviews with randomly selected people from the Soviet generation – which I defined broadly as being made up of “individuals born between 1930 and the 1970s” – and subjects known for their engagement in the field of DIY (those who were said to be “good at making” something). My first interlocutors were often parents of my friends and friends of my friends who agreed to invite me to their apartments “to talk about the Soviet times,” which is how I presented the purpose of the conversation. This preparatory pilot fieldwork allowed me to make a “map” of the field of “Soviet DIY,” a map which I largely used while preparing the SNF application. For instance, magazines and clubs devoted to “technical creativity” (*tekhnicheskoe tvorchestvo*) were identified as “places of knowledge” important to understanding processes of acquisition and transmission of technical knowledge in the Soviet Union.

The next 9-month-long period of fieldwork took place in 2011-2012 as part of my SNF scholarship. During this period, I conducted interviews with professionals who were (sometimes) engaged in amateur clubs of technical creativity and non-professional associations or who served as journalists or editors in popular technical magazines. In addition, I conducted interviews with DIY practitioners, who I imagined to be potential readers of those journals and members of those clubs. Moreover, I read extensively from popular technical journals, searched for archival documents and conducted interviews. This allowed me to learn the language of the official Soviet discourse on technical creativity, imagine the community of professionals of Soviet popular science and technology and draw a general picture of the institutional history of non-professional technical knowledge in the USSR.

More importantly, it allowed me to recognize how badly this history was in fact documented. While very precise when it comes to non-professional art-production, Soviet statistics and officials appeared to be quite disinterested in technical amateurism. The annual State statistics books do not reveal any specific numbers, and the archives on Soviet science and education do not contain any separate rubric on popular technical knowledge. Interestingly, regardless of common sense knowledge about the diffusion and popularity of these amateur clubs and the frequent reference to popular technical culture on nostalgic internet forums, they remain almost invisible in terms of official Soviet documentation. Both their budgets and their ideological importance were small, and leaders of the amateurs’ clubs relied on resources available through personal networks. It is likely that technical knowledge was thought of as ideologically positive and/or neutral and was not therefore subject to control and calculation.

Nevertheless, multiple popular science journals, published under the auspices of the Komsomol organization, are, of course, still available in the libraries and report on multiple competitions and events organized for the sake of technical creativity. These journals, with an annual circulation of millions of issues, were extremely popular and distributed through private and institutional subscription (by libraries, clubs and schools) across the country. Still, documents tracing their institutional history are poorly archived and barely accessible. Moreover, during my research I found that many of the operational documents associated with the journals and clubs were literally gone: in interviews with professionals and in informal conversations with archive employees I was frequently told about how, in the early 1990s, the large spaces that were sometimes occupied by state-sponsored agencies of popular knowledge (journals, clubs and associations) were quickly emptied and replaced by new private offices whose proprietors paid rent in cash. Piles of journals, books, letters from readers and other documents witness to the associational life under state socialism were literally thrown in the garbage bin. In a time when thousands of people spent days and months documenting the crimes of Stalinism in the finally-opened archives of the Party, the late Soviet culture of amateurism was not really considered to be History.

In anticipation of being misunderstood, I would like to emphasize that by making this comparison I, of course, do not mean to underestimate or devalue existing research on the period of Stalinism and the crimes of Stalinist politics, nor do I want to propose its moral reevaluation. Instead, I wish to emphasize how historically contingent the research conducted in the 1990s and 2000s was and how politically engaged the choice of topics under consideration. This research was in line with the logic of the “reconstitution of a normal history” (Oushakine 2009), within which 70 years of Soviet history were to be condemned, forgotten and erased from the surface of knowledge and memory. The emptiness of the actual body of sources, as well as narratives concerning how documents and letters were actually disposed of, became an important critical lens through which to understand post-Soviet narratives about the past.

In 2012-2013, I was lucky to be invited to join a collaborative project focused on the study of the technical community of Obninsk, a nuclear science city.¹⁰ Although in this work, I cite only

¹⁰ This particular piece of fieldwork was conducted in collaboration with two collective projects: “Scientific and Technical Intelligentsia in Historical and Cultural Perspective: Shaping Environment, World View, and Work Ethics” (2012) and “Ideology and Practice of Technological Breakthrough: People and Institutions” (2013). The Obninsk project was implemented under the general supervision of Professor Andrei Zorin on the basis of the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration (Moscow). The main material used consists of detailed biographical interviews with former and actual employees of the Obninsk research institutions.

one interview, which I conducted in Obninsk, my research experience there was outstanding. Most importantly, it enabled me to access a dense community with a strong ethos of Soviet technical and scientific professionals, and to appreciate how amateur activities penetrated their lives. I can very well say that the palette of narratives I witnessed in Obninsk provided me with a better articulated and sharper version of opinions, interpretations and moods regarding the Soviet modern project that I had documented elsewhere but with less precision. Regardless of the degree of political criticism (which is otherwise typical of its population) I encountered there, it nevertheless coexists with patriotism (in affiliation with the USSR rather than the Russian Federation) and a bitter sense of loss that combines the loss of their ability to participate in science professionally, a loss of recognition for their research achievements and the loss of their social statuses and individual well-being. These post-imperial frustrations are central to understand the temporal displacement, which I address in my work, and are part of that social content which emerges in the interviews today as a meaningful, though missing element of life in contemporary Russia.

Finally, from 2013 to 2015, when I was back in St. Petersburg as the Executive Director of a large international research project at the European University, I was able to observe the different ways in which DIY-like practices evolve in different contexts in contemporary Russia. Although my primary duties left little time for my own research, this period of time proved to be important in terms of reflection and continuous observation of social change. I observed, for instance, how self-made objects were increasingly commodified within the framework of ethno-design and, sometimes, were associated with different forms of nationalism. At the same time, I followed how the Soviet culture of “technical creativity” was reinvented within the imported discourse of “makers” and accommodated within the walls of new institutional settings, such as “hackerspaces” and “FabLabs.”

6.1. INTERVIEWS AND CONTEXTS OF OBSERVATION

My final corpus of interviews consists of 50 registered interviews and can be described as consisting of four different groups: 1) interviews with practitioners, 2) interviews with professionals of the field of “technical creativity” (typically, journalists and editors of popular magazines, teachers of clubs and representatives of the official All-Soviet Association of Inventors (VOIR)), 3) interviews with members of the community organized around TRIZ (the theory of inventive problem solving), 4) interviews with artists who use recycled materials to interpret “the Soviet.” In addition to that, in 2014-2015 I conducted short express conversations

with contemporary craftsmen and designers presenting their production for fairs organized around contemporary hand-made and ethnic aesthetics, and a few observation sessions in a hackerspace in St.Petersburg.

To identify and contact actual DIY practitioners I relied heavily on help of my personal network. Thus, at the beginning of my investigation I asked my relatives and friends to put me in contact with any individuals who did something with their hands. At the same time, I was often able to contact people about whom I had read in local newspapers or who I had seen in a TV reportage.¹¹

In contrast to private persons who were not always eager to talk about their “unimportant” hobbies, as many would say, professionals of “technical creativity” were easy to identify and contact via the official telephone numbers of those magazines that still exist. A couple of times, I was provided with contacts by the employees of the archives, who felt helpless in providing me with documents but eager to remember relevant people and put me in touch with them. Subjects from this category of professionals were usually happy to meet with me and deliver long and detailed narratives about how “serious” the Soviet state-sponsored system of popularization of knowledge was then and how weak it is now. The discovery of the TRIZ community was a chance: I found it online and attended their public conference. This community proved to be quite relevant, as it provided me with material on a grass-roots initiative of technical creativity that came from below (I come back to this in Chapter 4).

Unfortunately, I was less successful in directly observing DIY practices. Firstly, the level of transparency of life in the urban context where I conducted my research is rather low. Contrary to my field experience in Russian and Belorussian rural areas, where one can observe such practices simply by walking through villages and looking around, the urban setting implies more formalities involved in getting access. On several occasions, for example, my field partners preferred to be interviewed in their work places, outside of the contexts where their DIY activities would eventually take place. Secondly, contrary to professional occupations, which take place within particular settings limited in space and time, DIY practices occur in a rather spontaneous manner. Thus, even when I was invited to visit homes, the conversation usually took place around the table, which was set with food and drinks. Although my field partner could eventually show me artifacts, instruments, photo albums and the storage spaces where scraps were kept, my visits were still structured around conversation rather than the observation

¹¹ This was the case, for instance, with Yuri, who I discuss in the Chapter 5.

of practices. Opportunities to attend technical creativity classes, that is to access established institutionalized contexts, proved to be the exception.

My decision to address artists working with recycled materials was motivated by an observation that, in the 2000s, DIY aesthetics was increasingly mobilized by the artists who engaged with the Soviet past in their work. As one of my interlocutors, an artist and curator, said,

There is an unspoken desire to liberate ourselves in there [in this art]. We have said everything we wanted about the Soviet ideology and by and large we've liberated ourselves. Now the moment has come to liberate ourselves from the heritage of Soviet everyday life.

Although such liberation expresses itself in often contradictory articulations of political irony and nostalgia, they reveal, nevertheless, the strength of materiality in mobilizing relevant cultural narratives and, in some cases, provoking discussions. Moreover, artistic work is itself a material incarnation of the subjective rethinking of past and present (Chapter 6 and Chapter 7).

Finally, my engagement with the contemporary crafts economy and makers' culture is a rather recent dynamic (my short fieldwork in 2014-2015) which remains mainly outside of the current framework of the dissertation.

6.2. COLLECTIONS

At the beginning of my fieldwork, I came across a book by the Muscovite artist Vladimir Arkhipov, *Born out of necessity* (2003). This book was, in fact, a catalogue of self-made objects he had collected across Russia since 1994. The book contained 105 photos of self-made artifacts accompanied by small interviews with the people who had made them or who owned them when they met Arkhipov. This collection of pictures and narratives provided me with a significant corpus of material that served as evidence of the diversity of DIY as a realm of Russian material culture. Obviously, this realm could only be partially covered by the Soviet term "technical creativity." Instead, it revealed continuities within many Russian stories – sometimes obvious but often unexpected – concerning the poverty of peasant life, the WWII years, the modernization of households in the 1960s, dreams and gifts, and "survival practices" in the 1990s. The latter was, in fact, unexpected and insightful to me. Although the theme of poverty was often a leitmotif of the interviews, it was striking to realize that the most recent experience of poverty in Russia belongs, in fact, to the very recent past. Although I knew it, of

course, from personal experience, I had never reflected upon it in these terms until they were repeated by many of my interlocutors.

Shortly after finding his book, I got in touch with Arkhipov, who also struggled with his complex material while trying to develop his own artistic project. With time it became clear that Arkhipov was to become one of the protagonists of my work. My thinking about DIY was shaped considerably by the critical observation of the development of Arkhipov's project: his career as an artist, his exhibitions and the commentaries on his collection by curators, art historians, philosophers and himself. My continuous exchanges with Arkhipov and our mutual observation also became a form of partnership in the field of DIY analysis (Chapter 1, 6). Notably, my interest in Arkhipov's project helped me to critically address the contemporary Russian public sphere and to consider how Soviet material culture became an object of public debate within historical exhibitions and artistic projects.

7. STRUCTURE OF THE WORK

CHAPTER 1. THE FACETS OF RUSSIAN "LOW-TECHNOLOGICAL" MODERNITY

In the first chapter I discuss the problem of perspective, which is available today to someone endeavoring to study Soviet material culture. This perspective consists of a combination of the physical presence of objects created in the past and the absence of contemporary discourses that would incorporate those material objects into the fabric of everyday life. Instead, a researcher faces multiple and heterochronical discourses that inform us about memory and the politics of memory rather than about objects themselves. Taking into account the scale and the speed of the changes that have taken place in Russia since the late 1980s, the disentanglement of retrospective narratives represents a major challenge.

In the chapter I address a number of examples demonstrating that routine Soviet practices of do-it-yourself, repair and recycling were reinterpreted over the course of the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s in such a way that they were made visible and reflected as problematic, namely as they came to connote poverty and backwardness.

CHAPTER 2. DIY NARRATIVES AND RUSSIAN “CULTURAL INTIMACY”

In the second chapter, I address Russian popular culture narratives – literary texts and popular movies – that represent practices of crafts, technological innovation and manual work and offer particular interpretational frameworks for these practices. These narratives illustrate the fact that these DIY-like practices can be simultaneously filled with contradictory emotions, ranging from embarrassment and shame to a sense of resourcefulness and national pride. I compare these narratives with fragments from my field interviews and suggest that my interlocutors mobilize similar patterns of encountering. I conclude, therefore, that Russian culture carries a particular tradition of explaining the relationships between the individual and the state through the lens of DIY-like work. The complexity and the ambiguity of these relationships is then projected onto work and DIY practices.

Taking inspiration from Michael Herzfeld’s concept of “cultural intimacy,” I propose an analysis of these narratives as cultural stereotypes that contribute to the production of images of the collective self and, therefore, participate in the political negotiations between the individual and the nation-state. I demonstrate that the contradictory emotions related to DIY-like practices produce discursive essentialisms and stabilize, in a contradictory way, the meanings of “poverty,” “economic backwardness” and “technological underdevelopment” as well as positive moral values such as the resourcefulness, artfulness and cleverness of the Russian handyman.

CHAPTER 3. GENEALOGIES OF THE SOCIALIST MODERNITY: INVENTORISM, CREATIVITY, AND THE SELF

Contrary to the previous chapter, where I focus on the national cultural narratives that still inform the Russian imagination of DIY, in this chapter I deal with those epistemologies that are, perhaps, no longer on the surface, but still underlay processes that shaped DIY practices and DIY imagination along particular theoretical and institutional lines. Building on Russian and Soviet material, I aim, however, to achieve a broader geographical and diachronical panorama and inscribe the Soviet socialist project within a common European history of modernity.

In this chapter, I focus on the uneven genealogies of the Russian concept *samodeiatel’nost’* (Eng. ‘self-activity’), which, I suggest, inform the Soviet modern project. Imported from German materialist philosophy and dressed with British protestant-like ethics, this concept

contributed to the Russian socialist imagination and, finally, to the revolutionary discourse. In combination with other important concepts of the early Soviet project, such as *byt* (Eng. ‘everyday life’) and *tvorchestvo* (Eng. ‘creativity’), *samodeiatel’nost’* penetrated both the socialist construction of the Self and the state-sponsored institutional development of Soviet culture. This construction combined the imperative to be a “creative producer” eager for the permanent inner work of self-development with the institutionalized infrastructure for practices of amateurism.

CHAPTER 4. “TECHNICAL CREATIVITY” AND DIY SPACES FOR SELF-REALIZATION

In this chapter, I explore the ways in which the discursive and institutional framework of *samodeiatel’nost’* helped to produce a particular institutionalized social reality consisting of popular magazines on science and technology, and technical amateur clubs and associations that, all together, formed what I call the “infrastructure” of technical creativity. Building on examples of the institutionalization of a popular technical magazine and of an association for inventorism, I show that the establishment of the infrastructure of technical creativity was not only a top-down program, but also a bottom-up mobilization of like-minded people. I show how the discourse of technical creativity coupled with the moral ideal of the socialist Self can be discovered in these bottom-up initiatives. I am particularly interested in how an apparently top-down technology of knowledge transmission was, in fact, the result of individual efforts to achieve what was understood as a personal project of self-realization.

I suggest that the infrastructure of technical creativity reified through institutions, periodicals and amateur associations formed a particular environment of knowledge in the late Soviet period, which one of my subjects termed as “cross-fertilization” – that is, a space of intensive contact and exchanges between individuals. The disappearance of this environment, along with the collapse of the state-sponsored infrastructure of amateurs activities, caused, therefore, the decomposition of one of the important channels of social solidarity.

CHAPTER 5. THE CULTURAL BIOGRAPHIES OF SKILLS

In the fifth chapter I address DIY-like manual skills as being part of the subjective worlds of individuals. Tracing the biographies of two of my interlocutors, I show how the manual skills they acquired during the Soviet period were or were not mobilized after the political and

economic reforms at the end of the 1980s-beginning of the 1990s and how the transformation of the economic logic reshaped the regimes of value that had previously framed their manual skills.

Drawing inspiration from Igor Kopytoff's famous contribution on the cultural biographies of things (Kopytoff 1986) and applying his analysis to skills, I inquire into the dynamics of regimes of value and the mechanisms of "moral economy" involved in processes of commodification and de-commodification of skills. I also use this chapter to discuss how the value of labor and gender politics characteristic of the Soviet period influenced the professional choices and trajectories of my interlocutors and how the values acquired during the Soviet period informed the late-Soviet and post-Soviet professional dynamics of these subjects.

CHAPTER 6. GLOBAL GEOGRAPHIES OF RUSSIAN DIY AESTHETICS

In Chapter 6 I discuss how DIY aesthetics, and the connotations of poverty and backwardness attached to it, informed artistic projects in the 1990-2000s. More specifically, I address two cases: a large international exhibition, *Russian Povera* (2008), and the ongoing work of one individual, Arkhipov, known as *Self-Made Russia*. Although these two projects have different genealogies, they both, I suggest, operated on the mobilization of a national stereotype, an effective choice in these cases both at home and abroad.

I contextualize these two cases through the prism of the process of transformation of the late Soviet "art worlds," and the establishment of a new post-Soviet art world integrated into global contemporary art networks. In this context, the institutionalization of Arkhipov's project can be read as an example of "artification," as analyzed by Nathalie Heinich and Roberta Shapiro.

CHAPTER 7. "CULTURAL RECYCLING" IN POST-SOVIET RUSSIA

In my final chapter I discuss a number of cases in which my interlocutors draw parallels between their DIY practices – artistic and quasi-artistic assemblages made out of recycled materials – and their experiences of social abandonment and/or social anxiety about the fragmentation of contemporary Russian society. Their biographical narratives, in describing experiences of struggle and hardship in the recent past, create a meaningful parallel to the development of their attention to recycled materials. I suggest that individual work of manual "assemblage" of secondary materials serves for some of my interlocutors not only as an artistic means for self-

valorization and self-expression, but also as a therapeutic medium in the work of cultural recycling. By choosing “poor materials,” these individuals, in a way, metonymically refer to themselves and their social environment and perform the work of fixing and restoring and, therefore, of “reassembling the social.”

CHAPTER 1

THE FACETS OF RUSSIAN “LOW-TECHNOLOGICAL” MODERNITY

The goal of this chapter is to discuss the perspective, which is available today to an anthropologist or a social historian, aiming to study the “Soviet DIY.” This perspective is unavoidably retrospective. This is a view from today to the past. While material objects remain available and durable and, in a way, provides with an illusion of continuity of meanings, the immediate social contexts and discourses that were relevant back in time are gone. Instead, what remains is today and material objects that may revive memories and stimulate questions and thoughts. Moreover, today that provokes comparisons and offers new interpretations informed by newly available discourses that are, nevertheless, routinely projected into the past. In this chapter a perspective of an ethnographer, which is also subjective and informed with different contemporary discourses; and yet, which is trained to identify discursive discrepancies and mismatches. In what follows, I don’t offer any clear interpretation; instead I would like to emphasize gaps, which exists between the “Soviet DIY” and their post-Soviet interpretations and demonstrate the diversity of meanings that DIY objects and practices reveal in contemporary Russian beholders.

In addition to that, I would like to show, how the interpretations of Russian material culture broadly understood, are shaped by the imagination of modernity, understood as a social order privileging science and technology and the improvement of the everyday life with help of the modern technology. I argue that the lack of consensus about the “Soviet DIY” is very much due to the anxieties that contemporary Russians demonstrate when it comes to the understanding of the national place in global geopolitical hierarchies.

1.1. OBSERVATION 2012: RED OCTOBER GALLERY

The year is 2012 and I am in Moscow, at the Red October Gallery, a newly opened fashionable place situated in the historical Zamoskvorechye district of the Russian capital, just a few minutes’ walk from the Kremlin. Following the global cultural trend of the last decades, this contemporary art gallery was opened within the walls of an old Soviet factory named in honor of the Great October Socialist Revolution of 1917. For many decades, this factory produced

chocolates and other confectionaries famous for being among the best in the Soviet Union. Even today, many of those who were born and grew up in the USSR associate the name “Red October” with the smell and taste of candies and sweets, rather than with national upheaval.

Yet, the history of the place goes back to the late Russian Empire when, in 1851, Theodor Ferdinand von Einem, a German entrepreneur, decided to open his first confectionary shop in Moscow. Later on, he extended his business and constructed the new factory buildings at the very heart of the Russian capital, on Bolotny Island, squeezed between the Moskva River and its old river-bed (*Vodootvodnyi Kanal*), where it existed until 1917 when it was nationalized by the new Bolshevik government. Today, this building, a brilliant sample of industrial architecture typical of the turn of the twentieth century, is a memorial to the industrial development of the Late Russian Empire.



Figure 2. The building of the Red October confectionary plant, where the Red October Galler is located
Photo: Zinaida Vasilyeva

In the 2000s, the plant, along with other industries, was removed from the center of the capital and building was transformed into a space for contemporary art and design. In today’s Moscow, this place attracts artists, tourists and young people who come here to discover novelties in the world of art, to purchase vintage clothes and accessories, to look through the upcoming art-albums and to feel “modern.”

Thus, the very space of the Red October Gallery reveals and manifests the complex and multifaceted process of Russian modernization that emerged under the Late Empire and

continued throughout the entire Soviet era. From the very beginning, this process was closely tied to the Russian choice to follow the direction of “civilization,” and the contradictory Russian attitude towards capitalism and its painful and non-linear appropriation (David-Fox 2015; Hoffmann 2011; Hoffman and Kotsonis 2000; Shanin 1983). Moreover, this process is inseparable from the process of national self-identification as carried out by the “West,” which has always been imagined as the leader and the model of “civilization” incarnated, first of all, in advanced craftsmanship and technologies and, at the same time, as a “foreign culture,” which cannot be or even should not be completely appropriated. Although it is not possible to develop this theme in detail here, I would like to point out that different projects and discussions concerning modernization and the development of Russian and Soviet technology, including the most recent ones, have always entailed an internal imagined “western gaze,” which served as an important measure for comparison and self-understanding. Indeed, a number of scholars have studied the same dynamic “from the other shore” (Baron and Frierson 2003; Engerman 2004; English 2000; Krylova 2000), as Russia has always been an important Other for the American and European public (Engerman 2009). As David Engerman explains in the introduction to his book on the reception of the Soviet modernization by the Americans during the 1930s, “The way Americans understood the process of social change [in Russia] shaped the way they envisioned their own nation” (Engerman 2004, 3).

In October and November 2012, the allure of visiting the Red October Gallery was, for me, an exhibition entitled *Self-Made Russia (Samodel'naia Rossiia)*, which displayed to the public a collection of fifty self-made functional objects, created by ordinary people in their everyday life for different purposes. All of the artifacts on exhibit came from the private collection of Vladimir Arkhipov, a Moscow artist who had been gathering self-made items from all over the country since the 1990s.

I would like to address some of the artefacts from Arkhipov’s collection – exhibited in the Red October Gallery and documented in photographs published in his books – as an entry point to that particular material world which I think through in my dissertation. At the same time, this collection is, obviously, a selection, a choice made by Arkhipov as an artist. Its analysis will also help me to identify those elements of this material world that I encountered in my field but that are left out by the collector. Finally, the development of Arkhipov’s project and observations about its reception at home and abroad provide food for thought concerning how the popularity of practices in dealing with “matter” inform more general meanings about

economy, technology, aesthetics, self-expression and human-nature relations and how these meanings interplay with popular geopolitics (Sharp 1993, 1996).



Figure 3. Open market thermos-stall made out of a baby carriage and an old fridge. An item from Arkhipov's collection exhibited in the Red October Gallery in 2012.

Photo: Zinaida Vasilyeva

I stroll around the gallery space. Many of the artifacts are familiar to me – I have known Vladimir Arkhipov roughly since 2009. I have been to his place several times, visiting his small one-room apartment on the outskirts of the Russian capital in a territory called “close under Moscow” (*blizkoe Podmoskov’e* – the surroundings of Moscow), which implies a two or three hour commute from central Moscow, despite the proximity of the city. Arkhipov keeps his favorites and the most fragile of the pieces at his place, though his apartment is too small for the whole collection. Most of it is stocked in his parents’ garage in Kolomna, a medieval Russian town in the Moscow region.

I stroll around the exhibition, recognizing many of the featured objects. They look different here in the Red October Gallery. The largeness of the gallery space and the perfect whiteness of its walls contrast with the very “local” and “domestic” character of the objects.

The space is poorly lit – quite possibly out of an attempt by the curators to create a cozy atmosphere. But my perception is different. I feel confused, as if I have peeped through a keyhole. These objects were not created to be exhibited, to be shown in public. Made for multiple and particular domestic tasks, they still bear an imprint of intimacy: they belong to intimate worlds, they were made because of intimate needs, they are intimate solutions.



Figure 4. Exhibition spaces of the Red October Gallery. Source: RIA Novosti, Maria Ganiianc, http://ria.ru/weekend_art/20120904/743036399.html. Accessed December 10, 2018



Figure 5 Exhibition spaces of the Red October Gallery. Source: RIA Novosti, Maria Ganiianc, http://ria.ru/weekend_art/20120904/743036399.html. Accessed December 10, 2018

An outdoor shower constructed out of city bus doors, its creator having probably worked in a bus garage and thus able to collect parts before the old buses were discarded; an open market stall made out of a baby carriage. An apron sewn out of milk cartons: the unfolded water-proof milk cartons were sewn together to make a solid apron for selling fish. Many of my interlocutors agreed that “nothing should be thrown away, you never know when it might turn out to be useful,” and that “everything can serve longer, one only need to find a good use for it.”

A plastic top of a Champaign bottle is furnished with needles to pierce berries to help making a home-made jams; a hair-curler is transformed into a “temporal house” for a queen bee, to preserve it during the period of adaptaion after putting into a new hive; an antenna made out of forks is designed in order to catch particular channels. All these objects are functional and very

specific, often designed for a particular punctual operation. These artefacts witness to the needs that had been fulfilled with their help, but even more – to the knowledge and skills involved, and the technological way of organizing practices and solving problems.



*Figure 6. Country-side shower made out of the bus doors
An item from Arkhipov's collection. Photo: Vladimir Arkhipov. Courtesy of the author*



*Figure 7. TV Antenna made out of aluminium forks. An item from Arkhipov's collection
Source: http://folkforms.ru/events/Praha_NG2011/picts/IMG_0056.big.jpg. Accessed January 3, 2019*



Figure 8. Berry-piercer for making jam, made out of a champagne plastic cork and needles. Author: Nikita Kuzmichyov. Moscow. 1987. Reproduced in: Arkhipov 2003, 66

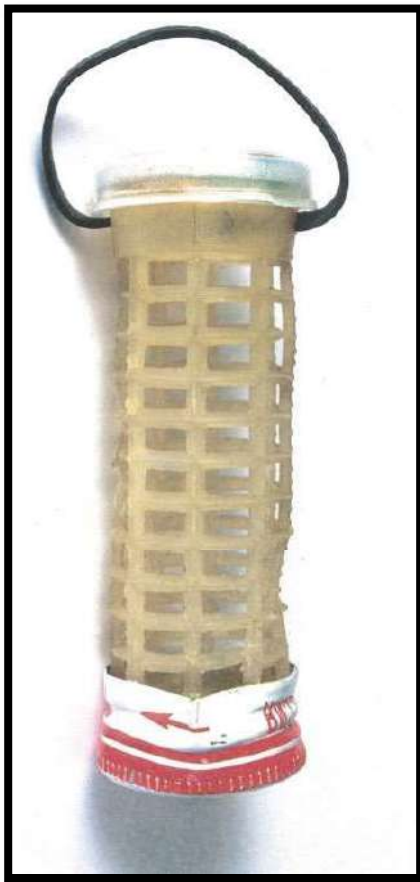


Figure 10. House of a queen bee made out of a hair curler, a bottle top and an elastic band. Author: Sergey Kharitonov. Voronezh. 1996. Reproduced in: Arkhipov 2003, 10

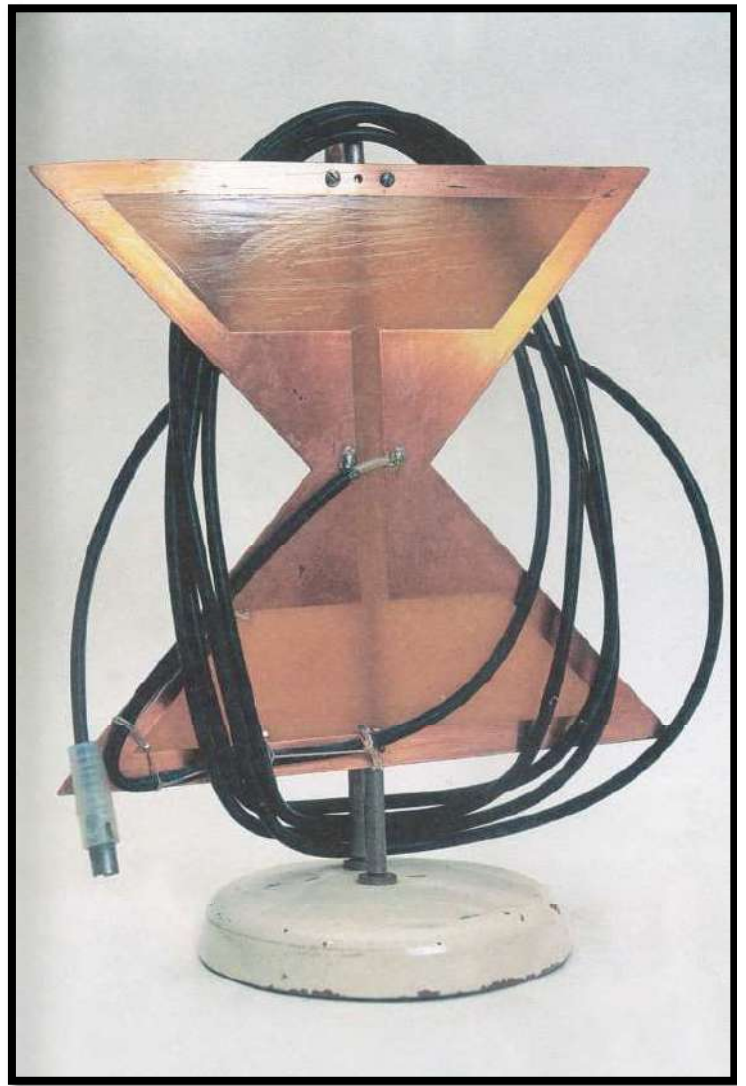


Figure 9. TV antenna made out of a base from a table lamp, a conductor, textolite, soldering and screws. Author: Aleksandr Tarasov. Moscow region. 1980. Reproduced in: Arkhipov 2003, 5

1.2. VISITORS' PERSPECTIVES

I keep strolling around the gallery. I hang out and observe the other visitors. I am curious how they see and understand these objects.

- “Cool!”

- “Look at this – I had one of these when I was a child...”

- “Oh, my God...” – an exclamation followed by an ambiguous and profound sigh.

I hear in their vocal reactions that many of them like it. At the same time, their non-verbal nods of head and para-linguistic exclamations demonstrate that this appreciation carries a variety of very different connotations. For some, it's just fun, an exhibition of original curious objects; for many, it's a recognizable part of their lives.

I read the book of commentaries:

Many thanks for this exhibition! It shows how inventive is our people (*nash narod*), which can improve its own life. The texts that accompany the exposed objects are amazing. I came back to the past. Garanina, 71 years old. (Arkhipov 2012, 13)

Original idea. Many of these things were around during all of my childhood. I never expected to see them at an exhibition. Thank you! It is worth being continued! (Arkhipov 2012, 17)

Many thanks for the exhibition! It's very sincere and everything is very successfully placed in the space – I go in the space of my memory too – almost every object brings with it a memory from my own life. (Arkhipov 2012, 43)

I liked the exhibition; [it] reflects everyday life in the village, the life of residents who love domestic coziness and different facilities (Arkhipov 2012, 77)

Amazing exhibition! I have been recollecting vacations at my grandma's place. I haven't seen this kind of rarity in a long time, and I have been remembering my childhood! (Arkhipov 2012, 49)

Very cool exhibition! Was interesting to see those artifacts that were invented in the deep of Russia (Arkhipov 2012, 83)

Most of the visitors feel positively about the exhibition. And yet, they construct a distance. Visitors see the technological and aesthetic hybridism of the exhibited artifacts and look for explanations. The material texture of the objects, their technological simplicity and aesthetic awkwardness contrast with the allure of contemporary Moscow's luxury lifestyle and challenge

gallery visitors' tastes while providing them with a kind of temporal, social and aesthetic displacement. To make sense of this displacement, some visitors attribute the exhibited material world to the realm of "rurality": they associate it with the village, grandma's place, a different "deep" Russia. Although they recognize these objects as familiar and often even as "cozy," "domestic" and "necessary," they locate them in spaces far from themselves, often in the past, the space we cannot bring back. They recognize the objects on display as part of their own lives but prefer to maintain a distance, to leave them outside of their worlds of today. They create historical and moral barriers to separate them from the objects, to keep themselves safe.

Although most of the commentaries convey positive associations and, at times, a sense of surprise, some choose to make historical and moral interpretations:

In fact, it has been forgotten. How grey and poor the shortages were. The shortage of beauty and practicality. (Arkhipov 2012, 5)

Nice to realize that the human [was] able to make by himself almost everything he needed. However, it's a pity that the creation of all these things was due to either poverty and misery, or shortages in the USSR. (Arkhipov 2012, 47)

A very sad exhibition. It's about poverty. These items could be done beautifully, with elements of proficiency, of a craft and popular traditions. And this is the everyday life of homeless street people, ugly and sad things... witness to a life of the people who could not buy good things, but lost their traditions and craftsmanship... God grant us not to live among these things. (Arkhipov 2012, 72)

In general the exhibition is interesting. [But] it revealed in me some kind of post-apocalyptic associations. [These are] objects of people who survived a nuclear war (Arkhipov 2012, 65)

The words that the commentators don't say directly but that emerge through these last comments are taboos in contemporary anthropology, but are still routinely used by lay people and even in some academic discourses, notably in economics (Zaostrovtssev 2011). These words are "primitivism" and "backwardness" – characteristics that until very recently have been applied to describe "primitive people," "aborigines," living in rural, non-industrialized and often non-literate societies. In the late 1980s and early 1990s these words were, however, broadly applied to describe the Soviet order, planned economy and Soviet industries.

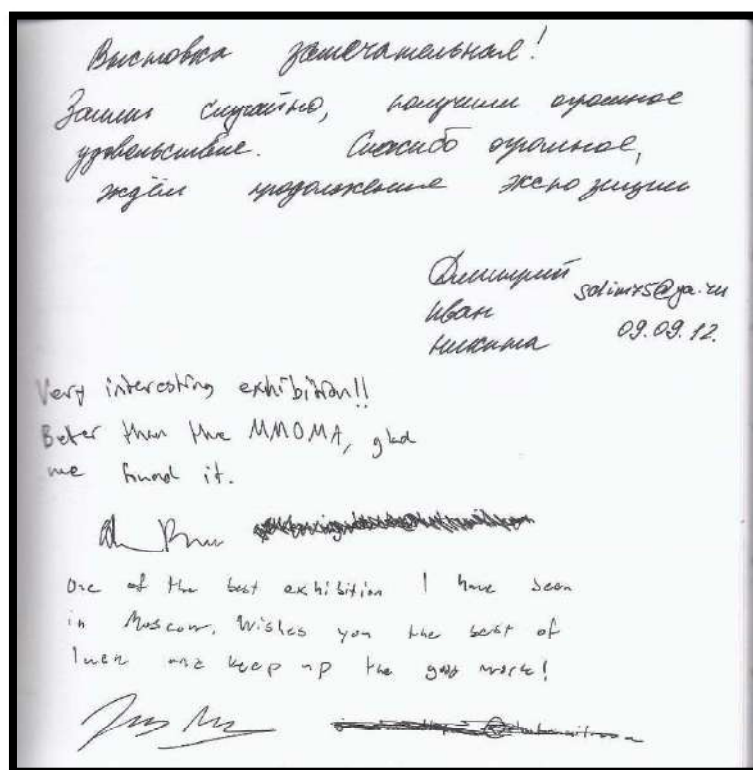


Figure 11. Page from the Book of Commentaries to Arkhipov's exhibition *Self-Made Russia*. Courtesy of the Red October Gallery

While looking through the book of commentaries and reading different opinions I recognize the same conflicting emotions that I encountered while conducting interviews: gratitude, nostalgia, frustration, irony, historical speculations over both present and past. One thing is consistent: the range of emotions that the comments expose. The exhibition has touched upon a sensitive strand of the visitors' memories and reopened a box that had seemed to be closed and well hidden, concealed in memory. As one journalist writes in his review, *Self-Made Russia* is an exhibition of “useful non-fossils” (*poleznyye neiskopaemye*) (Ledenev 2012).

Etymologically, the word “fossils” (as well as its Russian calque *iskopaemye*) comes from the Latin ‘fossilis’ - “dug up,” obtained by digging, emphasizing the hidden aspect of the artifacts that are to be dug up. At the same time it infers a hidden potential value and resourcefulness that draws people in, interests them in discovering these objects. In Russian, the expression “useful fossils” mainly refers to minerals such as coal, petrol or gas – the valuable underground resources that symbolize and literally constitute national capital and richness. It also alludes to the particular temporal dimension, the ancientness of these resources. The term “useful non-fossils” provides, on the other hand, a resonant juxtaposition: the exhibited artifacts are old but still on the surface – there is no need to dig them up; they are useful but nobody is interested in

either discovering or appreciating them. These are unwanted, undesirable resources. They belong simultaneously to the past and to the present, but to a part of the present that is to vanish. This metaphor of “useful non-fossils” is important, as it indicates a particular temporality, which is attributed to the Soviet DIY objects and practices of the 1990s to 2000s. The quick arrival of previously inaccessible and often unknown commodities, for instance domestic supplies, resembled a sort of materialized and, therefore, “objective” evidence that the kind of life that many Soviets had experienced for decades was, in fact, poor and deficient, something that needed to be urgently amended and adjusted to the “norm.” The apparent contrast between the design, color and technological advancement of these new commodities and the materiality that was previously available challenged a common sense understanding of what is “normal” and acceptable. Importantly, this contrast suddenly made visible the particularities of the former materiality. During this period of rapid marketization and normalization of capitalism in Russia, practices of making, remaking and repairing things were stigmatized as being obsolescent, inadequate and “Soviet.” The multiple fixes and gizmos that for years had remained invisible and constituted a kind of glue holding together the imperfect fragments of everyday Soviet material culture suddenly stood out as the remains of an undesired life, as “useful non-fossils.” This appearance was even more emphasized by a new way of speaking and thinking about the material world. The TV, newspapers and streets were suddenly overwhelmed with all kinds of commercial advertisement, conveying messages of a new genre that had been almost nonexistent in the Soviet mediascape.¹² It was through these messages that the post-Soviet people were to learn a new vocabulary appropriate for describing and evaluating things and material culture more broadly. Qualities such as “usefulness,” “practicality” and “durability,” which had been important, if not primary, in comparison to “fashion,” “style” and “brand,” became less pertinent. Although concepts of “fashion” and “style” existed, of course, in the Soviet culture and, indeed, were important for both official discourse and small communities (Yurchak 2005; Zakharova 2006; 2013; 2015) they were signifiers within a different semiotic system that was inextricable from the particular Soviet “system of provision” and the Soviet system of values. While many adult Russians, of course, still identified with these references, mass media and, indeed, some intellectuals continuously place blame upon the generalized and un-nuanced “Soviet,” while creating constant comparisons with a generalized and un-nuanced,

¹² As I explain later in this chapter, advertisement did exist in the Soviet Union and, indeed, was an important genre in the 1920s, when revolutionary artists invented a radically new visual language (Hilton 2017), but it functioned differently in the late Soviet period, in a way that was closer to what is meant in English by the terms “publicity” and “public relations.”

but certainly “developed,” “civilized” and “normal” West, which was to serve as the model for “transition” and “modernization” (Baysha 2014). This new discourse, building on well-known evidence from the recent past and unknown, but “certainly true,” information about the imagined *Amerika i Evropa*, created powerful barriers preventing people from taking positive experiences from the Soviet past seriously. Moreover, the legitimization of capitalism as the only way to become and to be “modern” arrested alternative political imaginations.

In this work, I suggest that the discrepancies and conflictual meanings and emotions that I encountered during my fieldwork result from the constant and often unreflected switching between different systems of meanings that still coexist within contemporary Russian society. Moreover, because both of these systems were constructed within the context of the Cold War, they represent rigid binaries that resist critical rethinking and recontextualisation. The ambition of this work is to offer such a recontextualization.

In the following sections of this chapter I will present some examples from my fieldwork that demonstrate how the meanings of seemingly similar practices change when described within different conceptual framework and come, therefore, with conflicting social meanings and moral evaluations. Later on in my work, I will offer a number of contexts that explore the epistemologies of Russian and Soviet DIY culture, and challenge contemporary discourse about “Soviet DIY” as a monolithic phenomenon caused by the Soviet shortages.

1.3. CONCEPTUALIZING “SOVIET OBJECTS” IN POST-SOVIET TIMES

One of the most influential, but also one of the most problematic, interpretational frames that colonized the intellectual space of thinking and writing about the material world in Russian Studies in the late 1990s-beginning of 2000s was the discourse of consumption. Scholars from sociology, cultural studies, social history engaged with the analysis of “Soviet” and “socialist” consumption building upon classic sociological works such as Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, Michel de Certeau, Norbert Elias and Thorstein Veblen. Yet, they did so without reflecting upon the criticism of capitalism implicit in these works.

The interpretational framework of Consumption Studies was, however, originally developed to understand capitalist societies, in which normative practices of acquiring things are mediated by market and monetary exchange, while non-monetary exchanges exist but remain rather marginalized. As the editors of the recent *Handbook of Consumer Culture* summarize,

...[although by now] there is no one accepted definition of what the term ‘consumer culture’ means [... broadly speaking] consumer culture is used to refer to the intensification of consumerism along with increasing prominence of consumption as social, cultural and economic activity that has come about with free-market capitalism and that is characteristic of late modernity, or what many refer to as postmodernity. The term also refers to the significance of the market in governing social worlds, including through beliefs, values, and meanings created around commodities and acts of consumption in relation to life-style and identity. (Kravets, Maclaran, et al. 2018, 1)

As a result, the analytical concepts developed within the field of Consumption Studies were often uncritically transferred onto the Soviet material, where the context of free-market was rather problematic. Although this scholarship is interesting in terms of ethnographic evidence, it shares a number of methodological inaccuracies.

First, it tends to essentialize “the Soviet” and speak about “Soviet consumption” without considering serious historical differences. For instance, historical books exploring the period of 1930-1940, which included extreme periods of hunger under collectivization and World War II, (e.g. books by Osokina 2001 and Fitzpatrick 1999) are uncritically referred to in several articles focusing on the late Soviet period. By the same token, the material collected in the 1990s may be unproblematically transferred onto the late Soviet period, implying the continuity of practices and failing to take into account a significant change in social and economic realities and public discourses.

Secondly, this scholarship particularly emphasized those social and economic contexts of Soviet life that could be better compared with the free market economy – that is, illegal and semi-illegal economic practices – marginalizing, therefore, the ordinary normative practices of provisioning. An important side effect of such a focus was the normalization and moralization of those practices that, in fact, were not publicly accepted and criticized as “speculation” (*spekuliatsiia*), that is illegal trade at a profit. This moralization was facilitated by the creation of analytical parallels between “normal entrepreneurial activities” in capitalist countries and illegal traders (*spekulianty*) in the Soviet Union (Romanov and Suvorova 2003), or between political dissent and illegal traders referred to as “economic dissidents” (Romanov and Iarskaia-Smirnova 2005). In this framework, those who were negatively called *spekulianty* within Soviet society are made to look more like “victims of the regime” and, therefore, deserving of moral rehabilitation. Although it is quite possible that this point of view was and still is shared by a particular social group, mainly those who could benefit from those illegal practices and market reforms, it has always been far from being a social consensus.

Third, the misconstrued recognition of the critical assumptions of the theorists of Consumption Studies placed the sociological analysis of “Soviet consumption” in line with the intellectual tradition and moral agenda of the totalitarian school of Sovietology, rather than with contemporary social theory. In other words, the discursive construction of the “Soviet consumer” morally normalized him, and especially *her*, within the capitalist modern trajectory and, therefore, contributed to the legitimation of capitalism and neoliberalism in the post-Soviet space. This framework confirmed the late-Soviet orientation towards consumerism and downgraded, marginalized or ridiculed practices and experiences of “dealing with things” that today connote such concepts as “sustainability,” “recycling” and “ecological lifestyle.”

Although it may seem that I overestimate the significance of this academic discourse to the understanding of the discursive shift which occurred in the late 1990s-beginning of 2000s, as academic discourse rarely reaches broad audiences, the tendency in this particular case is rather the opposite. Here it was not the academic discourse that reshaped public opinions, but rather influential public discourses that penetrated academia (I will come back to this in Chapter 2).

Indeed, it would be wrong to think that “consumption” (*potreblenie*) as a term is foreign to the Soviet context. Soviet economists were busy calculating the plan of production in order to supply the population with the minimum necessary material goods. As a number of scholars have demonstrated, official Soviet discourse never denied *potreblenie*, but it conceptualized it as based on rational need rather than on desire, thus proving an adherence to the modern scientific approach (Bogdanova 2015; Oushakine 2014). By the same token, the post-war “Socialist fashion was characterized not by sensationalism and extravagance, but rather by comfort, practicality, functionality, and hygiene” (Zakharova 2013, 403). Although the emic term *potreblenie* never lost its significance for Soviet economists, for the purpose of my analysis I decided to stay with the concept “systems of provisions” proposed by Ben Fine and Ellen Leopold (1993) and reapplied by Jean-Pierre Warnier (1999), which offers a broad understanding of consumption without limiting it to a capitalist context.

1.4. DIY AND SOVIET “SYSTEM OF PROVISION”

One of the first artifacts in Arkhipov’s collection was a refrigerator made by his father. Arkhipov explains,

It’s a funny story [...] Well, most people think that a fridge should be made with metal, but in fact it can be done with everything, even with foam

plastic. You understand? This is only a question of strength, temperature isolation, and so on. And he [his father] said there was a waiting list for these refrigerators, one had to wait. And it costs quite a bit, about two or three salaries. Yes. And that's why he bought a cooling aggregate in Moscow, an engine, and made the corpus by himself. And then put the aggregate into the corpus. And he got a fridge! It is still in Kolomna [at Arkhipov's parents' place].

As in many other European countries, refrigerators in the Soviet Union remained a luxury technology until the late 1960s.¹³ The standard apartment in the Khrushchev era was equipped with a “refrigerating case” (*kholodil'nyi shkaf*), a special niche situated under the window in the kitchen containing an open round hole to the outside that allowed for food to be conserved during the cold seasons. Yet, refrigerators were part of that aspired comfort the official discourses of modernity promised to fulfill. Moreover, popular scientific journals published articles explaining the new technologies, thus whetting the appetites of their readers. Vasilii, Arkhipov's father, explained to me,

This was 1962... And the descriptions started appearing in the magazines [...]. I guess, in *Science and Life*, I don't remember, somewhere there. And I thought “why don't I make this refrigerator?” But how? The principal was described there, and I reckoned how to make it. We had been drawing it down on paper [with a friend] and guessing... so and so, and then I was selecting materials, yes... finally it turned out to be successful. Back then, these plastic things were on sale, how are they called... [he refers to the plastic panels that he used to build the fridge's corpus] I think they are not in production any more... The advantage of it is that it can be diluted with acetone. When you smear with it, [the plastic] relaxes itself, its getting soaked. And you can put them together and they stick themselves. And it holds quite well. And this was the basis [of the idea]. We made the corpus with this. But because it was thin, it would not work, because it would not maintain the right temperature. So, we needed to insulate it (*ogradit'*) somehow, so that it would keep the air cold effectively. And we stuffed it with mineral wool. So, yes. So, all the cold air goes down, that's why we decided to place the cooling aggregate on the top. And the aggregate itself we bought in Moscow, and brought home from Moscow.

The story with the refrigerator reveals a number of issues that inform my research. First, it illustrates the routinely mobilization of technical knowledge and skills in everyday life to construct complex technical devices. Second, it demonstrates the role of popular technical journals as mediators conveying ideas of modernity to private homes and transferring technologies not only as images and objects of desire (Reid 2005; Golubev and Smolyak 2013;

¹³ According to The Telegraph, in 1959 only 13 % of homes had a refrigerator in the UK (compared with 96 % in the US); this number increased to 58 % by the 1970s (Wilson 2011).

Golubev 2016), but also as pieces of knowledge that can be comprehended and, eventually, reproduced. Finally, it exemplifies the incorporation of self-made objects into the structure of Soviet system of provision, without replacing the consumption of ready-made goods.

Vasilii's narrative illustrates how a theoretical understanding of the cooling principle received from the journal was complemented by his tactile knowledge of affordances of available materials as well as by the use of the purchased ready-made elements. Vasilii's decision to build the corpus out of a particular plastic derived from his awareness about its particular characteristic, namely the ability to be diluted easily with acetone.



*Figure 12. Self-assembled refrigerator. An item from Arkhipov's collection exhibited in the Red October Gallery in 2012
Photo: Zinaida Vasilyeva*

Moreover, as we can see in this particular case, the knowledge of the material at hand would be decisive for the whole project, as the main challenge was to conceive of and construct the corpus, not the cooling aggregate, which was actually purchased. The journal, therefore, functioned as a promotor of the idea of having a refrigerator in the household in the first place,

in addition to disseminating the basic physical principle which made the technology possible. The practical realization, however, was up to the reader and his or her creativity and access to materials.

The literature dealing with socialist consumption is generally dominated by the “shortage paradigm,” as Fehérváry named it (2009). These studies tend to imagine a particular type of consumption, that is consumption limited to purchasing ready-made goods, as normative and to contrast it with the “abnormal” and deficient socialist form of consumption (see e.g. Gerasimova and Chuikina 2004; Anstett 2015). This approach, however, is deserving of criticism. Not only does it ignore non-western practices of consumption (Miller 1994), but it also overlooks and, therefore, neglects those practices of consumption in western societies that do not fit the “normative pattern,” such as, for example, practices of auto-consumption (Weber 1986; 1989; 1998), side-productions (Anteby 2008; Banville De 2001; Kosmann 2010; Trivière 1999), recycling (Guénin 2003) or the consumption practices of discriminated (Vlach 1992; Williams-Forson 2006) and disadvantaged groups (Gaboriau 1993; Réchard 2002). Finally, authors who follow this approach remain uncritical to the origins and political implications of this kind of conceptualization, and therefore limit the analytical value of the term “consumption” to its conventional interpretation of capitalist economics.

Vasilii’s refrigerator example, just like many others from my field, nicely demonstrates how practices of DIY can be smoothly incorporated into the structures of modern economies without forming a strong binary between two different economic systems. What becomes apparent here is that the idea of making something by oneself was not, in fact, in contradiction with practices of purchasing, but rather supplementary to it. Vasilii still purchased an industrially produced good – he bought a ready-made engine – but this ready-made good was not necessarily supposed to be a final technology, just an element of it.

Another element that emerges from Vasilii’s narrative, which, in fact, points to a substantial difference between western and socialist modernities, concerns the accessibility of complex technical descriptions in popular magazines. In other words, magazines did not advertise technology as a “black box,” always a final product, but instead provided readers with the essence of the technological principle, thus making it a “transparent box” from the start. Alaina Lemon, as an American anthropologist conducting PhD research in Russia in the early 1990s, noted such technological “openness” as an element that evoked in her great fascination:

My first material impression came minutes after stepping onto the train from Helsinki to Leningrad, travelling with a large group of American students of

Russian, in 1988. The shined wood panelling, the scent of steel wheels and engine. A huge electric kettle built in at the front of a train car – a samovar always ready to dispense hot water. Convenience! Genius! Next to the samovar was a chart that explained and labelled all the parts of the machines, indicating how it worked and how it might be repaired. There was an invitation in that chart, to know, to take charge – pointing to a world of things that do not only operate upon people, but that invite humans to adapt material objects. (Lemon 2017, 244)

The openness of technological know-how was a particular feature of socialist modernity, which makes it distinct from its capitalist counterpart. Free of the limitations imposed by the legal protection of intellectual property in capitalist societies, Soviet discourse adopted a Marxist conceptualization of technical inventions as products of “universal labor” and, hence, common goods:

Incidentally, a distinction should be made between universal labour and co-operative labour. Both kinds play their role in the process of production, both flow one into the other, but both are also differentiated. Universal labour is all scientific labour, all discovery and all invention. This labour depends partly on the co-operation of the living, and partly on the utilisation of the labours of those who have gone before. Co-operative labour, on the other hand, is the direct co-operation of individuals. (Marx 1959 [1894])

I suggest that the official Soviet ideology of labor offered a particular intellectual frame in which to accommodate practices of manual production of objects. While speculating on the heuristic potential of dialectic philosophy to understand materiality, Daniel Miller writes:

For Marx, the dialectical philosopher, the workers lost their humanity precisely because what was denied them was their material being as people who made themselves through their own labor, in their transformation of nature. [...] So in dialectical thought, proper materialism is one that recognizes the irreducible relation of culture, which through production creates persons in and through their materiality. Capitalism splits culture and person apart into commodities separated from their intrinsic person-making capacities, and the illusion of pure humanism outside materiality. (Miller 2005, 17)

The Soviet ideology of labor offered the “material being” as the prototype of a moral subject and good citizen. One consequence of such a “material being” was the lack of “black box” technology, inherently related to the lack of the idea of private property. The ability to “open” a technology is not merely a question of curiosity, but an act of empowerment in the process of becoming.

Indeed, as my ethnographic data suggests, some Soviet citizens maintained this approach to labor and becoming through labor even twenty years after the collapse of the Soviet order. Thus, Timofei (b. 1939), a professional worker who later became a teacher in one technical club explained,

I can tell you what I tell parents during a parents meeting at the beginning of the school year: I say, you can take my words as you wish, but I want to make a person happy. To my mind, the human is the labor. And one should work with pleasure. [...] I work with pleasure, and if I can show someone that one can work with pleasure, I will make him happy, because if one suffers when he is going to work, if one is sick and tired of what he is doing, then perhaps this is not his job. And if I can show that there is a work he can love, he can experience success. You understand? And for this, one should learn by working. One should try. That's why you need to propose the work he is able to do. Easy but lively, the human.

In contrast to the capitalist economy, based on consumption and, therefore, techniques of stimulating the desire to possess, the planned economy was focused on the rationalization of production and distribution, and, therefore, prompted ideas around the production of things. Building on this logic, Galina Orlova, in an analysis of “handy hints” published in the Soviet magazine *Science and Life* (*Nauka i Zhizn'*) in the 1960s – 1970s, concludes:

On closer inspection, a handy hint starts looking like a strange variety of advertisement: “Cut a child's punctured rubber ball into two unequal halves, place the smaller half into the larger . . . and there you have a flawless device for cleaning a dirty washbasin!”

The shameless plugging of the object's merits unquestionably aims to produce desire—except that here instead of a covert call to “Buy!” there is an overt impetus to action, “Make!” (Orlova 2009, 84)

Although I share with Orlova the idea that the Socialist project of modernity promoted production over consumption and even openly invited its citizens to make things by themselves and thus to practically participate in the production of socialist society, through DIY practices as well, I am less convinced about the appropriateness of “desire” as the main conceptual tool to understand this call.

For the contemporary reader, the rhetoric of desire clearly refers to the analytical vocabulary of psychoanalysis: Western culture was early to be informed by Freudian ideas, and consciously cultivated desire as a central concept for understanding and “programming” human behaviors (for example, through methods of advertisement) and for their self-understanding (through psychoanalytical therapy). The Soviet school of social psychology, meanwhile, rejected

Freudian theory, as it undermined the capacity of a human to *consciously* decide about his or her future and, therefore, questioned the very possibility of building an alternative society. Soviet psychology built on Marxism and emphasized the role of one's environment (the "base" in Marxist terms), both social and material, and argued that the change in environment would necessarily produce change in the imaginary (the "superstructure"). Following the same logic, Soviet techniques of advertising – were not aimed at reaching the "subconscious" of individuals (to use the psychoanalytical term), but rather their "consciousness," through information and propaganda, positively understood,¹⁴ which (ideally) would create awareness and the motivation to consume this or that good or service – and this, ironically, independent of its availability on the market. As sociologist Gricenko Wells, who studied the misunderstandings between former Soviet and Western professionals in advertising in 1990-1991 in Moscow, points out, advertising in the Soviet Union "provided information about goods and services, rather than brands" and was "closer to market information" (Gricenko Wells 1994, 87, 88).

Participants [of the survey] also identified advertising as other forms of communication – publicity, public relations, product promotion/trade films, and participation in trade shows, exhibitions, seminars, or symposia. Few specialized or narrowly defined terms were used in the advertising industry. Participants tended to use synonyms interchangeably to describe communication concepts. (Gricenko Wells 1994, 88)

In other words, Soviet advertising was meant to communicate information, rather than to create desires, and is perhaps better translatable into English with the terms "publicity" or "public relations." Taking this context into account, I rather interpret the dissemination of information about science and technology through popular journals as a way to diffuse information and images of the Socialist modern project and to invite citizens to participate in this project by acquiring knowledge about new devices and, eventually, enjoying the comfort they could bring about.

Thus, the motivation to have a refrigerator doesn't necessarily come through the desire to possess a gadget connoting social prestige and economic wealth, but rather through the awareness of a new technology and a personal motivation to participate in and experience modernity by trying it out by whatever means were available. For instance, Vasilii mentions that this adventure with the refrigerator occurred soon after he had finished his studies, and

¹⁴ In the Soviet vocabulary, the term "propaganda" was rather neutral and referred to "the dissemination of political, philosophical, scientific, artistic and other views and ideas with the goal of their implementation in the public consciousness and activation of practical mass activity." (The Big Soviet Encyclopedia 1969-1978).

perhaps presented an additional challenge for him to put his knowledge into practice as a young engineer.

1.5. DIY AND SOVIET PRACTICES OF RECYCLING

Some foreign visitors commented on Arkhipov's exhibition in ecological terms:

Let's learn again how to improvise - like in the USSR and GDR – now we need to recycle for other reasons – to save resources & our planet
GlobalChangeFactory.org (Arkhipov 2012, 48)

Great to see the unusual inventions. More people should recycle & create new out of old [in English] (Arkhipov 2012, 84)

The ecological discourse is almost lacking in the Russian commentaries. Although one may argue that this lack is a continuity of the “wasteful” Soviet economy and lack of ecological responsibility, I suggest that it rather reflects different histories of ecological discourses. While in western countries ecological worries have been articulated as arguments against capitalism, in the late Soviet Union they were incorporated into the rationale of the planned economy and, therefore, were not opposed to the mainstream economic logic. As such, they emerged very much as top-down expert and political discourses rather than bottom-up public movements.

For instance, one of my interlocutors, a professional engineer, explained that he developed new technologies and materials at his factory in the 1970s-1980s by recycling technological scraps and defective pieces (Interview with Voliuslav, b. 1928).¹⁵ This research and development was launched within the framework of “the struggle against the inefficient use of primary resources.” In other words, technologies of recycling were promoted by the official discourse of “efficient management” and careful use of primary resources, and therefore remained well in line with the logic of the planned economy. Producing from scraps was both “more efficient” and “more ecological.” Similarly, common “must” practices of collecting used metal and old papers, or bringing empty bottles back to the special collectors were not so much reflected as being “ecological,” but rather as being “economic” and inscribed in the state-run program of “careful attitude towards resources” (*berezhnoe otnoshenie k resursam*). Zsuzsa Gille similarly explains in her book how practices of waste management were inscribed in the official politics

¹⁵ Later on, he summarized some of his proposals in the book: Mitrofanov 1998.

of socialist Hungary and even argues for the presence of a “cult of waste” in the socialist context (Gille 2007).

Moreover, the official discourses of recycling openly articulated the direct link between the volume of recycled materials and the number of eventually produced commodities, maintaining therefore the Marxist understanding of the price value as reflecting the amount of labor and raw materials invested into the production of goods. Thus, kilograms of collected papers could be exchanged for books, the practice regularly appearing in my interviews. Similarly, in one 1957 poster piles of scrap metal are depicted as eventual new cars, motorcycles and bicycles.



Figure 13. Poster. Unknown Artists. 1957. “Pioneers and school youth, collect and deliver scrap metal to the collectors, collection points and procurement agencies of the consumer cooperative!”

“From every 20 tons of scrap metal one can produce either 14 “Pobeda” cars, or 160 motorcycles, or 1100 bicycles.”

Source: <https://ukrmetallolom.com.ua/interesno/plakatakh-i-lozungakh-po-metallolomu-vremen-sssr>

Although practices of collecting old materials for recycling concerned the whole population, the activity was particularly ascribed to the youth.

Indeed, the logic of collecting the old and recycling it into the new was adapted by some parts of the population. During the interviews, I was frequently told that the decision to throw something away was not an easy one. As one of the visitors of Arkhipov's exhibition put it,

This is how you start to sort out old things, want to throw something away. And finally throw nothing. They all have soul. They are alive. (Arkhipov 2012, 46)

Similarly, Alena (b. 1952) and Elena (b. 1956), both told me separately that they imagine things as living a “closed cycle,” both referring to the metaphor of the water cycle. Alena explained it in the following terms:

Before throwing something away, I suffer a lot [...] [This is like] the circulation of water in nature, when something transforms into something else. Well, something gets lost. The same here: something is born, and until it's finished getting reborn, some elements of it...like sand, stone... then a house is built with it, it is alive, then it falls to pieces, then again the sand sticks to the stone. The same here: you are trying to find a particular way for every thing. For some, it [the way] is long, for others it is short. Some [live long] if someone has done, got an idea... then, of course, these are individual things, they have a more interesting path from the beginning. Then, either they live eternally, like pieces of art, or they die in abandonment (*v zapustenii*). I mean if a thing is thrown away, it may end its life. But maybe somebody will give it a second life. For instance, we have a ceramic vessel from the south¹⁶ with vine, with [an image of] a tup. Such a nice tup, but very big. I liked it, I found it on the street. Yes, had somebody thrown it away. I noticed it, I liked it, and I didn't know what to do with it, and it stayed in my kitchen, yes. Well, I have a lot of things in my garage, and I look at them, use them (*primeniaiui*), and otherwise they just stay [there]. Well. And there was one woman in my village [at the dacha], and now the landscape design started developing, and I presented it to her, and she put it in her yard.

Yet, it is true that the mainstream discourse of recycling particularly emphasized the symbolical connection with the state and national industry, rather than with universal nature. The color green as a sign of ecological thinking, like mottos of the kind “Collect old papers, save the forest” (*Sobirai makulaturu – beregi les!*), belong rather to the late Soviet period, that is the late 1970s-1980s.

For instance, starting in 1974, the Soviet publisher VTORMA, an abbreviation deriving from *vtorichnye materialy* (secondary materials), started printing popular works by Russian and foreign authors on recycled paper. The front matter of some VTORMA books opens with a page explaining the agenda of the publishing house as follows:

¹⁶ In Russian, the expression “from the south” (*s iuga*) refers to the seaside and traditional summer holiday destinations, such as Crimea and the Krasnodar region.

The use of scrap-paper (*makulatura*) in the production of the paper in our books creates an opportunity to save wood, a raw material that is in short supply (*ostrodefitsitnyi*), and to significantly decrease the costs of production.

The use of one tonne of scrap-paper yields 0,7 tonnes of paper or carton, substituting 0,85 tonnes of cellulose or 4,4 cubic meters of wood. In addition, this saves the forests of our Motherland and the cleanness of its rivers, lakes, and air space.

The collection and delivery of scrap-paper is an important state affaire.

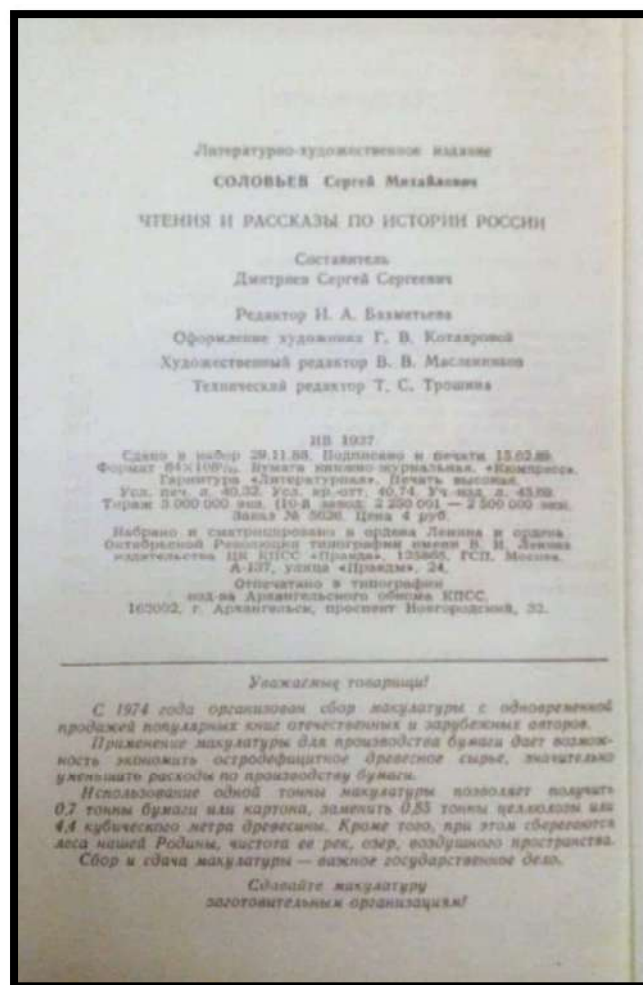


Figure 14. An example of the VTORMA Edition
Photo Zinaida Vasilyeva

Yet, there are also personal narratives that demonstrate an ecological awareness rooted in the late Soviet period. Thus, Elena, who makes rugs out of scraps of textile, including nylon tights, explained:

In the 1970s synthetic clothes just became widespread. I say: in my heart I am green. So I worried about some things [being] thrown away, these things worried me, especially those things that don't decay very well, nylon in particular. So, tights were the first thing I used to knit my rugs. It is the

classics of the genre. I'd like to mention, it is twofold [my reasoning] – it is economic and it is out of a sense of responsibility for the environment. I can't say that I keep a plastic bag just for myself. I can't do it in any other way. I look around [and I ask myself]: what is this bag doing here? I put some rubbish in it and then I throw it away, and then the bag is gone. But I can't just throw it away. If a thing can be used, it can't be thrown away.



Figure 15. Thread-spooler made out of a plastic bottle and cocktail straws. Author: Nikolai Egorov. Moscow Around 1994. Reproduced in: Arkhipov 2003, 42

The same logic of the permanent cycle of recycling can be applied to the everyday logic of the Soviet “handyman”: anything can become a primary product. Any material or item has its own potential and value because it incorporates some objective physical characteristics that can be (and should be) used. To neglect this potential may be considered a kind of non respect toward material resources and toward a user him/herself.

Finally, the discourse of recycling resonates with the relative economic isolation of the Soviet Union during the Cold War period. Although different kinds of trade and exchange existed within the countries of the Socialist block as well as in China, India, Cuba and other countries that sympathized the communist ideology, the ideal Soviet planned industrial cycle was imagined as a closed system, where all available raw materials would be converted into goods, and all the leftovers and defective products of this industrial cycle would be reintroduced back into the industry.

1.6. DIY AND RUSSIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY

Regardless of the wide range of meanings and interpretations apparent in Book of commentaries left by the visitors of Arkhipov's exhibition, what unites the absolute majority of them is a common recognition of the rootedness of the DIY style of thinking and making in Russian culture and even its particular role for Russian national sovereignty. I cite only a few of them:

It was interesting to look at the things from different areas of Russia. The Russian people are great and creative (Arkhipov 2012, 85)

I think that the question is not so much that each of these items is worth being an art object, as the author claims, but rather that all these things, gathered together, tell us more about our country. In fact, it is RUSSIA itself in front of us. (Arkhipov 2012, 22)

Very interesting. "Russia cannot be understood with a mind alone"¹⁷ and cannot be conquered with anything (=) Creativity [will help] everywhere and always. (Arkhipov 2012, 38)

Very instructive! Impossible to conquer this country! (Arkhipov 2012, 79)

The frequency of such commentaries, which can connote both national pride and a bitter recognition of the omnipresence of "low technology" in Russia, confirms the observation of anthropologist Melissa Caldwell that DIY is, indeed, a Russian self-stereotype. Caldwell points out that, for her Muscovite interlocutors in the late 1990s,

¹⁷ This sentence is a quote of the first line of the famous and often-cited poem written by Fedor Tyutchev in 1866. In English, the full translation by Anatoly Liberman reads as: "You will not grasp her with your mind / or cover with a common label, / for Russia is one of a kind - / believe in her, if you are able..." (Chandler, Dralyuk and Mashinski 2015).

the ability to improvise, to patch together a random assortment of goods and circumstances, is a distinctively Russian trait, an activity often referred to as doing something in the Russian style. (Caldwell 2004, 29)

Moreover, as the commentaries suggest, this ability is understood as both a strength and the weakness of the Russian people.

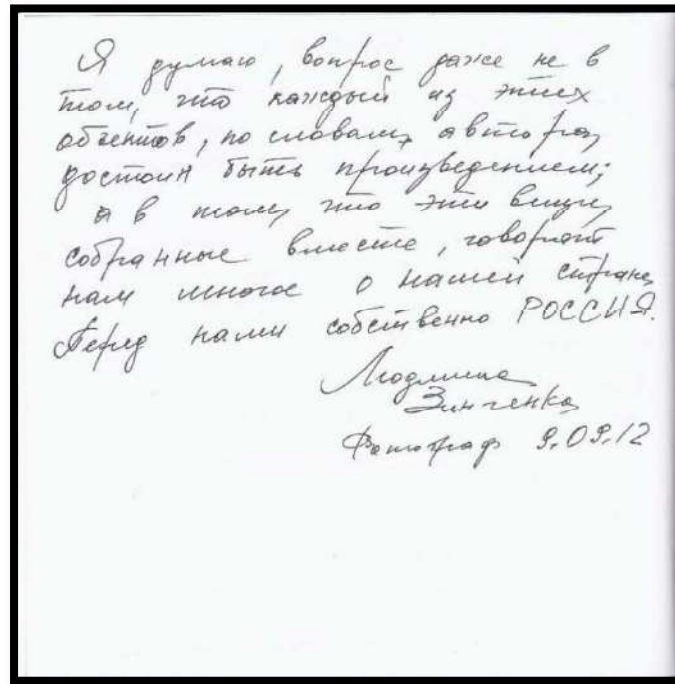
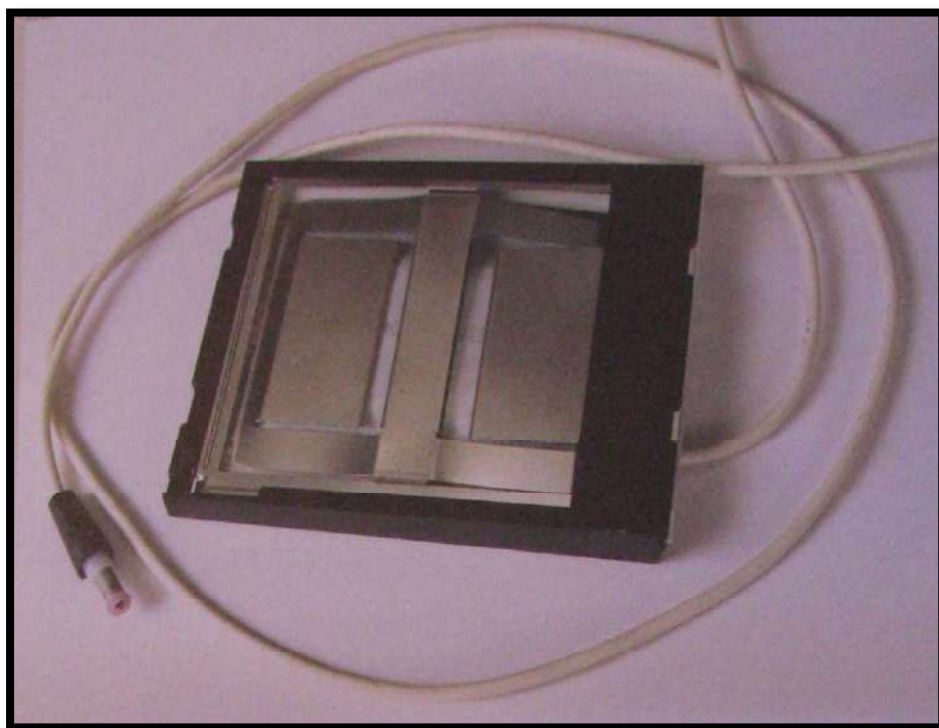


Figure 16. Page from the Book of Commentaries to Arkhipov's Exhibition Self-Made Russia. Courtesy of the Red October Gallery

To explain this ambiguity in more details, I cite one of the narratives collected by Arkhipov:

[...] I have a transistor radio and a “Polaroid” camera. After you’ve taken ten pictures with a “Polaroid” the cartridge, which contains a good source of power in the form of a dry element, has to be thrown away. On the cartridge it’s written, “do not open,” “do not break apart” because there are alkaline elements inside and “Greens” will get, naturally, worked up if you break it apart and throw it out with the rubbish. And yet, at the same time, it’s a pity to throw them out straight away. I decided that it’s better to use them before you throw them away. But how to use them? Better for my transistor radio to get 2-3 hours-a-day use from those batteries than me just going to the shop for new ones. I just took a piece of textolite, kind of, worked on it where the “Polaroid” contacts go in order to connect with the camera. Under these contacts I put in two metal contacts, cut off from the battery, soldered onto it some wires. Onto the ends of these wires, I soldered on a standard socket – and turned the radio on. The radio plays wonderfully but well, not for a month, more like a day or two. But I get used 100% and not 50%. It’s only lazy Americans who can bring themselves to chuck away stuff that’s only been 50% used up [...] (Arkhipov 2003, 6).



*Figure 17. Power charger made from a Polaroid cartridge. Author: Aleksandr Tarasov
Moscow region. 1990. Reproduced in: Arkhipov 2003, 7*

This narrative illustrates a number of aspects of Russian DIY that I have discussed above. First of all, a ready-made object is imagined as an “open box” technology, that is a technology that can be modified, regardless of the instruction “not to open.” Secondly, the logic of recycling is driven by economic concern: it is petty to throw away an object that still has a use-value: “better for my transistor radio to get 2-3 hours-a-day use from those batteries.” Third, the subject demonstrates a clear understanding of the technological principle of the Polaroid camera, and the technical skills necessary to transform it into an alternative source of power. Fourth, the ability to use up the power source 100% instead of 50% is related to the subjective self-respect and self-estimation of being “smart” and “not lazy.” Finally, the subjective understanding of smartness is constructed in contrast to the imagined American “laziness,” which derives from the imagined consumer behavior. As the subject believes, Americans would never open the body of a Polaroid when it says “do not open,” and would never put their labor and creativity into something which may still serve them for another couple of hours, but would rather go to the shop and buy new batteries.

The Soviet discourse of the Cold War described American society as fundamentally unequal and unjust, where the price of comfort for the few was the poverty and unemployment of the many. At the same time, the USA – *Amerika*, as Russians would call it – remained a symbol of abundance and technological advancement, two characteristics important for the Soviet modern

project. Even the political motto “to catch up with and surpass *Amerika*” implied the superiority of the USA in terms of material wealth. This recognition of the country’s economic superiority and, at the same time, the belief in the moral superiority of the Socialist world, created contradictory and ambiguous sentiments towards western objects, which were both desirable and morally suspicious (Humphrey 1995; Yurchak 2005, 158-206).

This final aspect is crucial to understanding why DIY culture is imagined as being a source of Russian sovereignty. Although the internal drive to “overuse” the technology may appear absurd, as the time put into the production of a new source of power can be little less than the time during which the radio runs off of it, the very ability to reimagine the old Polaroid and put it to an alternative good use is interpreted as proof of the self-sufficiency of the maker and their statement against dependence on the market. By the same token, Russia, imagined as a country full of such handymen, is self-reliable and able to reconstruct itself from scratch, even under conditions of scarcity. Indeed, since the early 1990s, Russians demonstrated suspicion towards imported goods and loyalty towards national production (Caldwell 2002; Humphrey 1995; Patino 2005). Although ethnographers who documented these responses provided rather different interpretations (Vann 2005), the fact remains that mass consumption of imported commodities tend to be interpreted as a threat to national sovereignty. For instance, this discourse received its new reactualisation in the recent past, after the USA and later the EU countries introduced sanctions against Russia in 2014.

1.7. VALUE OF WORK AND SOVIET “LOW-TECHNOLOGICAL” MODERNITY

As it is well known, Soviet ideology valorized manual labor. The symbolism of this valorization was multilayered: the revolutionary mythology praised manual labor as a strong contributor to the transformation of workers and peasants into a politically conscious proletariat class (more on this in Chapter 3); the Soviet techno-scientific narrative included the encouragement of *inventorism* and technical creativity (more on this in Chapter 4) as part of the program to popularize science and technology; finally the moral script of “culturedness” (*kul'turnost'*) included skills of self-organization at work and in everyday life and implied competences of self-reliance (more on this in Chapter 3 and 5).

All of these cultural narratives were elements of a symbolical assemblage, which constituted the imaginary of the Soviet modern project and allowed for the marriage of the emphasis on

techno-science and progressivism on the one hand, and the appreciation of manual work, “traditional” crafts and “slow” and “low” domestic technologies of making-do, on the other. In other words, contrary to the imaginary of Western modernity, manual skills and making-do, as broadly understood, were never expunged from the fantasy of the Soviet techno-scientific progressivism. Moreover, manual skills were discursively framed as a necessary “environment of knowledge,” which allowed the individual to pursue the quest of self-development and, on a different scale, dialectically enabled national industrial progress to emerge. Although one can dispute the extent to which the discursive egalitarianism of manual and intellectual labor was shared in the late Soviet society, the fact remains that it was legally, institutionally and discursively supported and insured by economic means: workers and engineers had similar salaries with a small advantage given to working professions at the beginning of their careers. Thus, Larisa, who combined her university studies with a working job on a textile plant in the late 1970s - beginning of the 1980s, had a salary of 160 Rubles per month which was 40 Rubles more than the starting salary of a teacher or an engineer. As I was told in interviews, the monthly salary of an experienced qualified worker could go up to 300 Rubles at the same historical period.

In addition to this, workers often had the opportunity to execute additional private orders using materials and instruments from the plant. Although this practice was informal and, at times, discussed in terms of theft (Anstett 2015, 19; Smolyak 2012; 2014), it was tolerated, especially for qualified workers. In this sense, working professions were given additional value, as demonstrated by their privileged access to materials and tools, that is the “means of production” in Marxist terms. I would rather agree with Ekaterina Degot, who interpreted the whole problem of *nesuny* (Eng. ‘smugglers’), documented for the Soviet planned economy, in contrast to the Western problem of shoplifting:

If the only consequence of capitalist commodity aesthetics is shoplifting (the thief gives into that temptation, the temptation to possess, on which is based the entire aesthetic principle of all goods), then in the USSR there was a similar typical phenomenon of “nesuny,” whereby the workers, carrying away from the factories fully functioning items or parts, supposed (in accordance with socialist ideology), that he who made an item therefore owned it. (Degot 2003, VIII)

As I was told in an interview with Natalia (b. 1940), engineers, unlike workers, had limited opportunities to make additional money on site. Officially, engineers could not hold more than one job, and the only way for them to make additional money was to give private courses for

students. Another way to increase income was to complete a PhD dissertation, which would result in an automatic 30 Rub increase in salary.

Though this egalitarian principle without a doubt insured social security and guaranteed confidence concerning the future, by the late 1980s many complained about the system and considered it to be demotivating. Vladimir told me about cases in which engineers decided to “downshift” and take working jobs in order to earn more. In private conversations, I have also heard about practices of “downshifting” as “being fashionable” during late socialism.

Yet, one should not analyze the relationship between manual and intellectual labor exclusively in economic terms. Scholars who came to Russia in the early 1990s to study workers and working class culture were surprised to realize to what extent the morality of the Soviet ideology of labor has indeed been deeply internalized by individuals.

Thus, Simon Clarke concluded the following in 1995:

The Soviet ideology of labor is as much a moral as an economic ideology. The physical act of the collective engagement with nature is seen not only as a means to produce goods to meet human needs, but more fundamentally as the means to achieve human dignity and self-realization, so that the act of production has value in itself, regardless of the material rewards that might flow from it, and in extremis even regardless of the usefulness of its results. This ideology could not be more foreign to western intellectuals, for whom the priority of mental labor over manual labor goes without saying, and for whom the measure of the value of labor is the monetary reward received by the laborer. However in Russia this ideology is not simply an abstract philosophy expressed in the rhetoric of the regime, but has been internalized by Soviet workers as result of seventy years of systematic propaganda, despite the workers’ skepticism and even contempt for the regime and its rituals. (Clarke 1995, 10)

1.8. REFLECTING ON “SOVIET DIY” – UNDERSTANDING POST-SOVIET TRANSFORMATIONS

In this section, I would like to come back to the issue of discrepancies, which I announced in the first part of this chapter. By discrepancies, I mean those moments in responses of my subjects where they perform confusion and an uneven navigation between contradictory discourses or where they consciously articulate their disagreements with some mainstream opinions. I suggest that the analysis of those discrepancies provide evidence of more recent

discursive hegemonies and uncovers lack of consensus about the historical and moral evaluation of the recent past and social transformations occurred after the reforms.

My first example concerns practices of saving and recycling that were common in the Soviet Union and were ridiculized in the early 1990s. Timofei, the leader of a technical club who I cited above, explains,

Of course, compared to today, this was poverty. [...] The old stuff was used back then very broadly. The anecdotes were that if one washes their toilet paper, one can use it again. Or, as one says “Ah, [we] washed plastic bags!,” and reused them. And I still cannot divest myself of the idea, that [if I have] a bag that is still usable, I need to wash it and put aside, until the time comes [to reuse it]. My wife is categorically against this. She throws away everything I accurately stock. If I wash or do not wash bags, what’s the difference? All this is alive in me, perhaps the age takes on. Recently, I read an article in the newspaper *24 hours*, and I didn’t like the emphasis, how they put it, like “the miserable people, how the Soviet power rendered it.” But I still think, why should I throw things away immediately? By the way, we all nuzzle into the waste, although, in my view, it’s a gold mine for people who understand where it comes from. And even now: one boy came to me and said, he saw an old black and white TV set in the garbage, wanted to pick it up, but had scruples to do so. So you see, even in this generation... This was a boy of the 4th grade [around 10 years old], can you imagine, so young, and he still wanted to take [the TV] with a hope of making something out of it.

Timofei contrasts his approach to the old (to clean and to stock until the moment for the reuse will come) with that of his wife and the interpretation of the newspaper. By so doing he confirms his belonging to the past, on the one hand, and questions the whole logic of throw-away contemporary principle on the other hand. The recent example of a child who has a spontaneous impulse “to save” the old TV provides him with an evidence of a certain continuity and suggests that, perhaps, he is right, and the old should be put in a good use even today.

Importantly, Timofei’s open dislike of the discourse of the newspaper *24 Hours* (“I didn’t like the emphasis, how they put it, like ‘the miserable people, how the Soviet power rendered it’.”) is an example of the resistance to the contemporary widespread interpretation of the Soviet past as being “poor” and rendering people “miserable.” This case is particularly interesting as it reflects critically on the discourse, which in many other cases merges with subjects’ old system of values and creates logical and emotional confusions. In other words, Timofei demonstrates his awareness that some of his values and habits originates from the Soviet system of values, and yet, he finds they keep having value and relevance in the present. Instead, he questions the contemporary tendency to describe Soviet experience as dehumanizing and having no value for today.

I take another series of examples from the Arkhipov's book of commentaries:

Absolutely remarkable exhibition. In a very friendly manner, I could immerse into the atmosphere of a different Russia, the one where people were able to make many necessary and interesting things for themselves, for their homes, and this with almost no possibilities. (Arkhipov 2012, 88)

This is very serious if so many people are ready to solve their problems but also those of other people. Good continuation to the exhibition and wish to all of us to transform from the "consumers" back to "inventors." (Arkhipov 2012, 108)

The exhibition has stirred up so many memories (I am 72 years old). And the most important is that all this is so typical of my young years. The necessity pushed to create, [it was] not like now, when everything is at hand, just consume and enjoy, but [there is] ~~few~~ [correction in the original] less creativity. And the most important – things made by yourself were respected by the others and were evaluated and loved in a special way, they contain different energy. And of course, the abundance is not a bad thing; however, the element of the poor spirit is present [now]. Zhanna Borisovna, a pensioner. (Arkhipov 2012, 73)

Contrary to Timofei, who explicitly points to the source of the contemporary discourse he disagrees with, the authors of these comments perform a rather "soft version of resistance," which, indeed, is sometimes interpreted as expression of nostalgia. However, I agree with those authors who argue that this form of nostalgia helps to understand, what are the elements of the past that these people miss in their present, and in this respect provides with a critical commentary to the contemporary condition (Betts 2003; Hann 2012; Todorova 2010). In other words, most probably, none of these visitors would like to come back; and Zhanna Borisovna herself admits, that "of course, the abundance is not a bad thing." Rather, while looking at the objects from the past, these individuals recognize some important differences in social relations that happened in parallel and, sometimes, due to the economic change. The remembered Soviet past appears to be the imagined time-space, when some were "ready to solve their problems but also those of other people," when creativity was a way to care about one's families and homes, and when self-made objects and mutual assistance in self-provisioning helped individuals to stay together. In other words, the reflection upon material things guide these visitors to the reflection about social relations among humans. My point here is not to take these statements at face value, but rather to interpret them as indicators of change in social relations that subjects identify as important but missing or significantly damaged in the present.

Indeed, many examples from Arkhipov's collection as well as from my own findings suggest that practices of do-it-yourself bring people together and are involved in the production of solidarities. The berry purser was made by a grandfather for a grandmother; the electric garland was made by a father for his daughter; the bass-guitar was made together with a friend; finally, the bee-house was made to protect the bee. In many cases, self-made objects are materialized examples of care about the beloved ones, examples of efforts to make their life easier, nicer, better. By giving these examples I, of course, don't mean that mutual help and care disappeared in Russia together with the arrival of capitalism. Instead, I intend to emphasise that DIY practices, that is practices of doing things by themselves, repairing them and helping others to improve their everyday life, constituted meaningful forms and networks of sociality that ceased to exist and left behind a kind of emptiness, which needs to be explained and reflected upon.

A similar kind of nostalgia and criticism comes up in the interviews, when individuals speak of how gifts, including self-made gifts, lost their value in the present. For instance, Tatiana and a few other subjects told me separately that it became hard to make gifts today,

Before, it was so easy to make gifts: whatever you offer, people were happy. This is not the case anymore. Even kids don't offer self-made things to each other, it is considered like you saved on the gift. People would think I skimp on the gift to save money.

In the post-Soviet consumption society self-made objects became marginalized. Their exchange value has been reduced to the price, and they look "cheap." The main problem is, however, not the change in the economic value as such, but rather in the transformation of moral meanings attached to particular material objects. As Zhanna Borisovna wrote, "things made by yourself were respected by the others and were evaluated and loved in a special way." One who presented a self-made gift, offered more than an object: he or she offered a part of her personality incorporated in the labor invested in the production of the thing. This human dimension of the material thing prevailed and, in a way, "compensated" for the commodity-dimension of the material good. The devalorization of human labor was one of the most obvious consequences of the drastic inequality characteristic for the post-Soviet period (Humphrey 1995; Lemon 1998).

1.9. RUSSIAN IDENTITY AND THE CRISIS OF TEMPORALITY: BETWEEN MODERNITY AND BACKWARDNESS

Finally, I would like to come back to temporality, something I outline in my Introduction as an element crucial to grasping the contradictory nature of the Soviet modern project and transforming the DIY phenomenon into a critical lens for the study of the very logic of capitalist modernity that dominates the contemporary world.

The Russian-Swedish postcolonial feminist thinker Madina Tlostanova starts her recent book *Postcolonialism and Postsocialism in Fiction and Art: Resistance and Re-existence* (2017) with the discussion of two works of works:

[...] one of them – French artist Yves Klein’s famous 1960 photomontage *Le saut dans le vide* which celebrated a sense of the emancipation of the artistic impulse, transcendence, negating gravity but also rhymed with Klein’s interest in the Zen-Buddhist interpretation of the void; and the other – contemporary Romanian artist Ciprian Muresan’s 2004 ironic work *Leap into the Void, after three seconds*, concentrating on the painful and degrading fall coming three seconds after the leap.

The spatiality of both works is almost the same – the old cobbled streets of some unrecognized European city, but the accent on the fall rather than the leap makes a lot of difference, symbolizing the gist of the postsocialist initial hope, bitter disappointment, and the subsequent emergence of a critical reflection on our condition and our prospects for the future. (Tlostanova 2017, 1)

I cite these two paragraphs from Tlostanova’s book because they offer a short and eloquent metaphor that summarizes the long and controversial interviews I have conducted. Although significant individual differences are obviously lost in such an abbreviation, it still conveys the main point I would like to make: what underlies the post-Soviet emotional and logical discrepancies that I encountered during my fieldwork and, indeed, constitutes an important drama of post-socialism is the radical shift in understanding-of-the-self on the temporal scale of modernity.

As several ethnographers have pointed out, many citizens of the Soviet Union and other former socialist countries imagined the political and economic reforms of the late 1980s as a process

of “normalization” (Adams 2005; Eglitis 2002; Fehérváry 2010; Gille 2007).¹⁸ One example from my field interviews is Vladimir’s explanation:

Nobody perceived this as a collapse. We thought, we would now elect normal people and would live normally.

Like Vladimir, many ordinary people believed that the reforms would be a step toward modernization, civilization and “progress.” This “normalization” implied achieving better living standards and obtaining quality goods; all of this, naturally, without losing those privileges of socialism that they enjoyed but, most often, took for granted. Well-established childcare systems, job security, the availability of cheap housing and public transportation, access to high-quality cultural programs and sport facilities – all of these common elements of urban Soviet life became visible only when they began to decline rapidly at the beginning of the 1990s.

Indeed, expectations about the improvement of the consumption sphere were among the few topics most citizens agreed upon. The political imagination of how “normal life” would look, on the other hand, varied considerably between social groups and regions. Thus, in reference to the Soviet Republics, Laura Adams points out that “the desire to become normal” was often imagined as a return to pre-communist times. Thus,

Latvians changed street names back to what they were before the Soviet era, Ukrainians implemented curricular reforms that de-emphasized Russian language and history, and Tajik and Azeri women celebrated their retreat from the labor market, all in the pursuit of becoming “normal” again. (Adams 2005, 336)

It is important to understand that even the projects to restore the “traditional way of life” were, paradoxically, imagined as a step forward, an “improvement” and a kind of “progress.” Thus, with all the differences in political aspirations and imaginations, Soviets from different regions of the Union celebrated the Perestroika era, because it promised positive transformations for the better. I suggest that these optimistic visions and aspirations were very much due to a particular characteristic of temporality of the Soviet project and, perhaps, even to its particular aesthetics.

The Soviet project was, first of all, a civilizational project imagined by its designers as a version of Western Enlightenment; the better version, free of commodity fetishism and the negative aspects of capitalism. It was to bring Russia and other peoples of the USSR to the civilized

¹⁸ On the perpetuation of this discourse in the postsocialist time see: Manolova 2018.

future, which was imagined as industrialized, urbanized and happy. Soviet temporality was, therefore, a progressive line; many individuals who lived within it internalized this temporality as the only possible one. Regardless of different kinds of tensions and disagreements, Soviets from different republics saw themselves as being “modern” (Kalinovsky 2016) and on the way to permanent progress.

The promises of Perestroika, enthusiastically met by so many Soviets, were imagined as a logical transition to the “next stage,” located on the same temporal scale of development. Bitter was the frustration, therefore, when for so many (though clearly not for all) these promises turned out to be a deception that in fact lead them “back in time” and approached the “beginning of the end.” As Tlostanova put it, when the project of communist modernity failed,

[...] we were all forced to come back to the usual established course, speed and most importantly direction of history and to the camouflaged but recognizable mild progressivism as opposed to a radical Socialist one. And this was interpreted by many as a way backwards, whereas for a number of social theorists this trajectory reminded of the postcolonial situation albeit with some important differences which did not allow the easy translation of the lighter side of modernity into the darker one – in this case, socialism into colonialism.¹⁹ (Tlostanova 2017, 5)

After a short period of enjoying the spirit of transformation and the freedom of identity and nation building, many Russians – the most “modern” and “civilized” within the symbolical hierarchy of the Soviet Union²⁰ – faced a “lack of place” on the new temporal scale. Contrary to other ethnic groups and regions, who built their new identities on the pre-communist past, Russians preserved little memory of and nostalgia for those times. Monarchy and religion, the two probable candidates to fill the symbolical gap left by “tradition,” never gained popularity beyond a few limited publics. In contrast, many shared beliefs in science, technology, culture and social justice, all significant values of late Soviet society. But the realm of Soviet science and technology was soon discredited by the cliché of Soviet economic inefficiency, and Soviet culture was made out to be the product of a corrupt ideology. Finally, the idea of social justice was challenged by economic inequality, which rapidly segregated the society and divided the closest of colleagues and friends.

As the main designers of the Soviet and Socialist project, Russians were now the most “backward” and, in addition, were responsible for keeping others “backward.” The epistemic failure of communism and a voluntary renunciation from that very same epistemic ground

¹⁹ While the citation employs somewhat poor language, it is not clear whether this is because of the quality of the translation or because the colloquialisms that Tlostanova uses are indeed difficult to translate into English.

²⁰ The Baltic republics always enjoyed a reputation as the “most civilized”, if not the most politically reliable.

rendered the whole period of 70 years – the timeframe of the Soviet state – a “historical mistake,” thus symbolically bringing the whole society “back in time.”

This temporal displacement, which became apparent in the post-Soviet period, is revealing of a certain historical irony. The bipolar structure of Cold War geopolitics allowed the Soviets (and their followers in other parts of the world) to understand themselves as being as modern as, and on equal footing with, their opponents on the other side of the Iron Curtain. Similarly, the Cold War rhetoric of competition (including in the category of military technology) contributed to the symbolic “equality” and “comparability” of their competitors. As I have explained in the Introduction, rather than enjoying integration into the global world, Russia, just like many other followers of the Socialist project, found itself outside of global history and geography. The conceptual replacement of the tripartite description of the world with a new binary of Global North and Global South technically excluded Russia and the “East” from contemporary geopolitical considerations.

At the same time, the failure of the Socialist project and, therefore, the dissolution of an imagined “competitor,” reactivated a longstanding Western tradition of describing the “East” as being “backward” and “secondary” in comparison with the progressive West (Hann 2015; Müller 2018; Todorova 2005).

As Martin Müller summarizes in his recent article,

Countries in the East may be on the way northward, but at the same time seem stuck in eternal transition towards an elusive modernity. Object of the North American and European *mission civilisatrice*, the East is defined through its backwardness, a persistent marker of Eastern Europe for centuries. It has served as the Other against which Western Europe has long narrated its own civilisation and progress. (Müller 2018, 3)

In the same vein, historian Yanni Kotsonis summarises his experiences of working with western literature on Russia:

In the historiography of Russia in particular, backwardness is ubiquitous, used to lend meaning to information which in turn illustrates backwardness. In this sense, backwardness as a framework of explanation is circular. In economic history, backwardness explains and is explained, for example, by scarcity of tractors until the 1930s, low levels of monetization and capital formation in, say, 1913, and more generally the failure of Russia to industrialize and urbanize sooner or at a constant pace. But few commentaries on the economy will limit themselves to economics narrowly conceived. As one writer put it recently, ‘Modern Russia’s backwardness was not just economic; it was all-encompassing, involving the economic, the social, the

political, and the cultural all at once.’ Cultural backwardness explains and is explained by high levels of illiteracy in, say 1914, unusually high levels of consumption of alcohol in any period of modern Russian history, and high levels of disease and mortality until the 1950s. Political backwardness explains and is explained by the repressiveness of the autocratic state in the nineteenth century and its apparent re-emergence in the Soviet Union, as well as by the apparent absence or weakness of ‘civil society’ in modern Russian history. Social backwardness explains and is explained by the unenviable position of ethnic minorities and women in Imperial Russia, not to mention post-Soviet Russia. Since any one of these types of backwardness is bolstered by reference to the others, backwardness is also self-contained and self-referential. (Kotsonis 1999, 5)

Kotsonnis concludes that in Russian Studies, backwardness functions as “part of an ideology in its own right, a framework of belief and explanation, and a basis to prescribe and evaluate action and historical phenomena” (Kotsonis 1999, 5).

The major consequence of the dissolution of the Soviet Union is, therefore, the dissolution of a political alternative to capitalist modernity and the discreditation of the system of knowledge produced under this alternative epistemic order. The disappearance of this alternative from the political and imaginary landscape made capitalism look like the only possible “normal” way of life.

1.10. CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have demonstrated some examples of discursive discrepancies and conflicting emotions that I encountered in my field and have suggested that they are very much due to the new economic discourse that appeared in the late 1980s, which was legitimized during the 1990s and 2000s. This discourse celebrated economic reforms and the arrival of capitalism and, at the same time, condemned the Socialist utopia along with the material world it produced. Moreover, this discourse created a new vocabulary, including a category of the “Soviet thing,” connoting obsolescence, poor quality, lack of design and economic backwardness. The new economic logic celebrating ready-made consumer goods and condemning “Soviet things” did not leave much space for the positive description of DIY objects. While the Soviet practices of recycling and local ecological discourse were devaluated alongside the Soviet economy, the Western ecological narrative, which arrived in the 2000s, came in the form of eco-design and

hand-made commodities and, therefore, merged into the logic of consumerism.²¹ In this context, while “Soviet DIY” persisted on the surface of everyday life in useful ways, it was no longer welcomed and symbolically belonged to the Soviet past – its language, its experience and its historical failure.

²¹ This latest trend was partly appropriated by Russian fairs and festivals claiming “traditionality” and “authenticity” and was, therefore, integrated into the contemporary national(ist) narrative, drawing on “old” pre-revolutionary Russia and Orthodox religion. For instance, Elena’s rugs, which I mentioned above, can be seen as a part of this trend.

CHAPTER 2

DIY NARRATIVES AND RUSSIAN “CULTURAL INTIMACY”

As I have mentioned in the Introduction, during my fieldwork, I regularly observed that subjects display a rather contradictory palette of emotions while telling about practices of the self-made. Moreover, in Chapter 1, I demonstrated how these contradictory emotions and opinions might be integrated into a generic image of the collective national self, “the Russia” represented by low-tech DIY material objects. In this chapter, I would like to show how this collective imaginary of Russian “DIY-modernity” circulates across different cultural narratives – literary texts, popular movies, and fragments of interviews – and operates as a national stereotype shared by both internal and external audiences. Taking inspiration from Michael Herzfeld’s analysis of signs producing a social space of “cultural intimacy” (Herzfeld 1996), I understand stereotypes as iconic signs and essentialisms that co-constitute collective national identities and solidarities.

2.1. DIY AS A LOCUS OF “CULTURAL INTIMACY”

When I met with Natalia, a professional engineer and journalist who published extensively in the genre of recipes for making-do in both Soviet magazines and specialized books, and who is herself an enthusiastic DIY practitioner, she opened our biographical interview with an extensive narrative on her father’s experience of building aviation plants in Komsomolsk-on-Amour in Siberia at the beginning of the 1930s:

When they arrived on the Amour riverside in 1932, they always lacked this and that. They landed during summer. Once they landed, they were provided with only the bare necessities. And that was all, Amour froze. And there was no connection with the external world. They all but died because of the scurvy. And the next spring they eagerly awaited some equipment at least. And the first ship which arrived brought only a huge amount of cart wheels. Later, [other things] came finally. Well, this was an anecdote, an anecdote about our planned economy. And then they started to finally bring the equipment for the aviation plants.

My father was building an aviation plant there which now resounds throughout the whole country, the whole world, because of their quite successful airplane models. For instance, this Jet 100 [plane]²², it was built on my father’s plant. And I am proud of it, I am glad it was built there. Yes.

²² Sukhoi Superjet 100.

And it is produced there. This is a world sensation. It was considered to be a very good model. But they started just with a few workshops. Some little shed, a barrack. They brought tanks, but forgot to bring bearings. And here is the first finding of our Russian handyman (*rossiiskogo umel'tsa*). Papa got the idea to cut round timbers out of birch tree, when one cut a birch tree, drench in the machine oil for a few days and then use them instead of bearings. This is how they had to work until the next passage arrived and brought them bearings. Yes, and there was a lot of findings like this, that they had to make-do, these handymen. [...] and when at home, my father was always inventing something. Later on, with time, life turned out so that he became a diplomat and was graduated from the [Diplomatic Academy] and worked in Montreal, in Canada. Yes. And regardless of a more or less wealthy life and the possibility to buy all these things abroad, he preferred to make them at home.

This long excerpt from the interview is a good example of that complex, multilayered and heterochronic cultural content that Michael Herzfeld has termed “cultural intimacy.” Its most characteristic feature is a contradictory mixture of pride and embarrassment in relation to some social reality which is understood as collectively shared and specific to collective self-identification. In this case, the shared social reality is an experience of severe everyday material conditions and of solving complex and, sometimes, life-threatening problems with a minimum of means at hand. Natalia’s narrative is a narrative about survival and, at the same time, about building high-end technologies using “peasant’s knowledge” solutions, such as putting a birch tree in machine oil. As Herzfeld explains,

[...] cultural intimacy – the recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality, the familiarity with the basis of power that may one moment assure the disenfranchised a degree of creative irreverence and at the next moment reinforce the effectiveness of intimidation. (Herzfeld 1996, 3)

What emerges from Natalia’s account is a mixture of feelings and histories: anger concerning the badly organized supply, bitter irony about the economic system, compassion toward her father and his colleagues, pride for their achievements, and admiration of their ingenuity. Altogether, these contradictory emotions allow her to celebrate the Russian handyman who is able to make great, original and complicated things (for instance, to build successful aviation plants) from the most basic elements of the available material environment and using his practical knowledge and imagination. The simultaneous location of very heterochronic events – the industrialization effort of the 1930s, criticism of the planned economy of the late 1970s-80s, and pride for the Super Jet 100 constructed in 2008 – within the same passage produces a

seemingly coherent atemporal cultural narrative, explaining the place of DIY practices in Russian everyday life and national history.

Natalia's emotional narrative in the very beginning of the interview was her spontaneous answer to my disclosure of the topic of my research, which I usually formulate in Russian as "practices of repair, secondary use and home-production of things in Soviet everyday life"; the announcement of the topic was then followed by my standard opening question: "Please tell me about your life, whatever you find important." That is to say, with the help of the story about her father's experience of construction on the Amour riverside, Natalia was temporally and spatially grounding her biography across different contexts of everyday life, professional self-realization, and family and national history. The ingenuity of her father provided her own autobiographical story, therefore, not only with a kind of discursive explanatory power informing her life, but, more importantly, it mediated the relation between her personal trajectory and national history. Moreover, this relation between individual and collective was contradictorily furnished with feelings of shame for the irresponsible state, compassion for and solidarity with the hardship of her father, and pride for his successful achievement. The simultaneous social abandonment in a moment of crisis and a constructive momentum of participation through ingenuity and practical skillfulness, paradoxically, function here as the two sides of the same coin and produce an emotionally contradictory sense of social and national belonging. At the end of the day, the worldwide celebrated SuperJet 100 appears to be an important result which, at least to some extent, compensates for the effort and even instills it with meanings of glory and pride. Moreover, the famous airplane model happens to be both an important achievement for the family and a medium between Natalia's personal history and the state, which provides her with a strong subjective "anchor" within the national narrative and constitutes a cultural basis for her personal understanding of citizenship.

Herzfeld analyzes stereotypes as essentialisms, images that nourish the collective social imagination, and recognizable patterns of behavior that correspond to the common sense knowledge that require no explanation for insiders. In this perspective, everyday hardship and the everyday burden of making life more comfortable is normalized as a shared common sense knowledge and experience which can be expressed by such phrases as "business as usual," "same old same old" or "it is what it is" (in Russian, *u nas kak vseгда*). Moreover, the local ingenuity of an anonymous Russian handyman is made a cornerstone to the success of making ends meet in everyday life and, on a different level, to the success of the state and state-run economy. The Russian handyman, – which, as one might suggest, resembles the character of

Michel de Certeau's *L'invention du quotidien* (1984) – appears, in fact, to be a collaborator of the state. Rather than “resisting” the top-down imposed totalizing system of management and control, Natalia's father, a Russian handyman, helps the state to patch holes in the porous structure of the national economic fabric. While blaming and scolding this very state for its failures, he remains nevertheless faithful to the project of socialist modernity and continues to build complex technologies by improvising with whatever means and materials he can get his hands on.

The paradox of this narrative is that a seemingly negative picture of the state (“they,” “our anecdotic planned economy”) unable to provide experts with tools and correct working conditions is, in fact, a sad prerequisite for the very possibility of a Russian handyman to perform the miracle of inventiveness. To put it differently, should the state be able to perform better, there would be no need to celebrate ingenuity. The two essentialisms – that of ingenuity and of survival – co-constitute, therefore, each other and, in turn, stabilize the essentialism of the state, even though it is understood (by insiders) as deficient.

Answering Herzfeld's question of how an “actor adopts the stereotypes of a dominant discourse and deploys them in the pursuit of personal interests” in social practice (Herzfeld 1996, 207), I would suggest that Natalia's narrative demonstrates how DIY as a self-stereotype confirms individual belonging to the collective national body and fulfills this relationship with the experience of suffering for the sake of both personal survival and the state which, in turn, mediates individual self-fulfillment and the collective good. According to this logic, criticism of the national social and economic system and bitter irony towards it produce nothing but a paradoxical support for this very system and even provide this support with a moral value.

Natalia's narrative is unique in the sense that it brings together within a single monologue a number of otherwise heterogeneous and heterochronic cultural narratives, which in other cases can be mobilized separately at different moments of the conversation about DIY in Russia, and yet, which all have their relevance to the contemporary discourse.

In the next sections, I will address some of these stereotypical cultural narratives, essentialisms, that will inform other specific issues presented in the following chapters. Building on field data and analysis of literary texts and popular movies regularly mentioned by the subjects, I will demonstrate various cultural contexts that entangle individuals, technologies and the state into emotionally-colored cultural narratives and constitute, therefore, the culturally specific background of my field. First, I will address literary texts and popular movies that produce national characters typically associated with the DIY-like practices. Second, I will show how

these cultural contexts (stereotypes) penetrate academic literature and interplay with the common sense understanding of modernity. I suggest that uncritical references to the common sense modernity, imagined as ultimately high-tech and “ready-made,” stabilize the symbolical connection of DIY-like low technologies to meanings of “backwardness” and to the imaginative scape of Russian cultural intimacy.

2.2. THE RUSSIAN *UMELETS*: LEVSHA AND KULIBIN

If I were to list those cultural images that I regularly faced at different moments of my fieldwork, I would have to name, first of all, Levsha (Eng. ‘lefty’, ‘left-hander’), the protagonist of the story *Lefty* (1881) by Nikolai Leskov, the author famously presented by Walter Benjamin as “the storyteller” (1936). Levsha is a left-handed and cross-eyed craftsman who manages, nevertheless, to shoe a minuscule steel flea offered to the Russian emperor Alexander I by the Englishmen in order to demonstrate the superiority of Russian craftsmanship and art in comparison with that of the English (I will come back to this in a few passages).

Another important cultural character that repeatedly came up during my fieldwork is Ivan Kulibin (1735-1818), an autodidact mechanic and inventor from early modern Russian history, famous for the development of many original mechanisms and machines and the discovery of several physical effects, particularly in the field of optics. Before explaining in detail their place in the collective Russian imagination, I would like to demonstrate a few contexts in which Levsha and Kulibin circulate as generic cultural characters, both together and separately.

One of my subjects, for example, Nikolai (b. 1925), is the leader of the Youth club of technical creativity *Young Inventor*, named after Ivan Kulibin. During the interview, Nikolai, an extremely concise interlocutor, suddenly asked me,

N: Do you know Levsha, the character?

Z: Yes, what does Levsha mean for you?

N: It’s a symbol.

Z: A symbol of what?

N: Of skill.

Nikolai’s question to me was an attempt to reduce a potentially long conversation to a clear picture, a sign, which would answer all of my questions at once. A terse speaker who is otherwise incredibly eloquent through his activities as an enthusiastic teacher, did not want to

spend time explaining “obvious things.” For him, my questions about DIY material culture in Russia could be sufficiently resumed with a reference to Leskov’s character.

During another interview, Yurii (b. 1951) concluded ironically that he sometimes “has to be Kulibin a little bit” (*prikhoditsia nemnogo byt’ Kulibinym*), when he explained how he painted a car using a self-made tool, assembled from a hairspray or perfume atomizer connected with a pump compressor taken from an old refrigerator.

Valentina (b. 1937), a professional engineer and follower of the Theory of inventive problem solving (TRIZ),²³ said she referred to Kulibin in one of her books in order to explain to readers one of the principles of invention:

In fact, one can say, he [Kulibin] knew one of our principles: when he put mirrors in a narrow corridor and therefore illuminated the space. Because before, there were four candles there and they died away because there was not enough air. And these poor waiters who had been bringing nice candles and swans [across the corridor], fell down and hurt themselves. And broke all this beauty down. And when he made mirrors, it created a scattered light, and one could cross the corridor without danger. [... This is how I explain] the construction of the reflection.

Another example is the former Soviet magazine *Young Technician*, which is now renamed *Levsha*. Finally, a new school kit on “inventorism” (*izobretatel’s tvo*), indeed a rather bad one, according to Nikolai, is called “Kulibin.”

In short, in the contemporary Russian language, both characters – Levsha and Kulibin – became common generic names and may be applied to describe a gifted and self-educated person endowed with ingenuity and “golden hands” (*zoloty ruki*) or an activity performed by such a person. Moreover, the story *Lefty* (or *The Tale of Cross-eyed Lefty from Tula and the Steel Flea*) is included in the obligatory school program of Russian literature; the image of a simple but gifted, artful and, importantly, patriotic craftsman continues, therefore, to circulate in the Russian collective imaginary as an example of Russian national character and to reproduce the notion that manual skills are its important element.

It is, however, worth looking in more detail at the content of the story, as it reveals important issues mediating the cultural essentialisms that inform the relations between the realm of DIY skills, social imaginary of Russian citizenship, and the state.

²³ The abbreviation corresponds to the Russian *teoriia resheniia izobretatel’skikh zadach*.

Leskov's text is constructed as a semi-historical story stylized as a folk tale. The story starts at a moment when the Russian emperor Alexander I (who governed from 1777 to 1825), remembered for his victory in the war against Napoleon but also for his liberal reforms in Russia, travels across Europe and observes with admiration the novelties and craftsmanship of the European masters. During this voyage, the emperor is followed by his servant Cossack Platov, who is homesick and constantly reminds the emperor that things are "no worse at home."²⁴ At some point, while visiting England, Alexander is invited to see the local armory chamber and addresses Cossak Platov, saying:

They have such perfections of nature there, that once you've seen them, you'll no longer dispute that we Russians, with all our importance, are good for nothing.

The next day they both visit the collection of armory, and the best gun they identify happens to be made by a Muscovite gunmaker. Regardless of this evidence, the emperor remains skeptical of Platov's comments and compassionate towards the English, who feel themselves confused by the situation. Finally, to compensate for the discomfiture, the Englishmen present a minuscule mechanical dancing flea, which surprises and overwhelms the emperor; he immediately pays the Englishmen a tangible amount of money for the crystal nut which serves a case for the flea; the flea, in turn, is "granted" to the emperor. On the way back,

the sovereign considered that the Englishmen had no equals in craftsmanship, while Platov argued that ours [Russian craftsmen] could make anything shown to them, only they lacked useful education.

In the meantime, the emperor Alexander I dies and his successor Nikolai I (who governed from 1825 to 1855), remembered (in contrast to his father Alexander) for his conservative reforms, inherits the flea and decides to give it to Russian craftsmen "to see whether our masters can surpass it, so that the Englishmen won't go putting themselves above the Russians."

To execute this order, Platov goes to Tula, the city known for its craftsmanship and for its residents being "intelligent and experienced in metalwork" and "foremost connoisseurs in religion." Tula's masters accept the challenge to produce something capable of surprising the Englishmen. In two weeks, they give the flea back to Platov with an invisible modification: "the rogues have shod the English flea in little horseshoes!" Answering Nikolai's query as to how

²⁴ Here and after I use the translation by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (Leskov 2013).

were they able to produce such a marvel, Levsha, the master responsible for nailing the horseshoe, modestly explains:

We're poor people, and from poverty we don't own a meagascop,²⁵ but we've got well aimed eyes.

Nikolai celebrates Levsha and sends him to England to represent Russian craftsmanship, "so that they would understand there that for us this was nothing astonishing." The emperor is happy that his Russians don't let him down and asks Levsha to bring the shod flea back to London. The Englishers are impressed with Levsha's art and propose that he stay, but Levsha cannot imagine living abroad, where all of the customs are so different; after making a tour of English collections and workshops he comes back to Russia.

On the way back, he drinks heavily with the skipper of the ship, an Englishman, and both lose consciousness by the time the ship arrives in St. Petersburg. There, the English skipper "was brought to the embassy, a doctor and an apothecary were called for him," and he was soon brought back to life. In contrast, no hospital wanted to accept Levsha, who did not have any documents on him, until he was finally brought to a charity hospital "where people of unknown estate were all brought to die." Before dying, Levsha asks the doctor to transmit to the emperor an important message:

Tell the sovereign that the English don't use bath brick to clean their guns: let us not use it either, otherwise, God forbid there's a war, they'll be no good for shooting.

Yet, Levsha's message got lost on the way to the emperor, because of the mistrust and arrogance of the superiors, and Russians soldiers continued to use bath brick to clean their guns "right up to the Crimean campaign" (1853-56), known in Russia as a painful failure and experience of national shame in the 19th century, which occurred due to the bad diplomacy and technological backwardness. Leskov's story provides, therefore, a metaphorical explanation for that failure:

At that time, they started loading their guns, and the bullets were loose in them, because the barrels had been cleaned with bath brick. [...] But if they had made Lefty's words known to the sovereign in time, the Crimean War would have turned out quite differently for the enemy.

²⁵ In Russian, the Latin word *megaskop* is used to signify an optic device to examine precious stones.

Thus, as early as in 1881, Nikolai Leskov presented Levsha as a “fabulous make up” and “epic character,” “a myth embodied by popular fantasy,” disappearing with the technological changes and modernization, and yet essential for transmitting crafts. In the final paragraphs of the story, he writes:

To be sure, there are no such masters as the fabulous Lefty in Tula nowadays: machines have evened out the inequality of talents and gifts, and genius does not strive against assiduousness and precision. While favouring the increase of earnings, machines do not favour artistic boldness, which sometimes went beyond all measure, inspiring popular fantasy to compose fabulous legends similar to this one.

Workers, of course, know how to value the advantages provided by the practical application of mechanical science, but they remember the old times with pride and love. It is their epos, and, what’s more, with ‘a man’s soul inside’.

The *Lefty* story proved to be very relevant to my field data, as it provided a common fable form for the interpretation of different kinds of social tensions, notably those between craftsmanship and citizenship, Russia and “the West,” knowledge and national security and, finally, inventor (and, more broadly, individual citizen) and the nation-state.

Importantly, the story created a kind of script for interpreting these social relations and tensions through the following emotional contradiction: the simultaneous attachment to the motherland (patriotism) and recognition of its technological backwardness, even though caused not so much by a lack of ideas or talented people, but rather by the lack of education and mistrust and indifference of officials.

Before moving further in time and analyzing how the *Lefty* story informed later cultural narratives of the relationship between inventors and the state, I would like to make a more general deviation on the role of technologies in constructing national narratives.

Leskov’s story is also very eloquent in demonstrating how apparently neutral knowledge, such as knowledge of crafts, is in fact woven into the national narrative and statements about military power and national security. Although science and technology are often represented as global and universal characteristics and vehicles of modernity, they are in fact closely integrated into national narratives of progress and are symbols of “national modernities” (Ninetto 2001), which explains their political sensitivity and relevance for identity politics. This is true not only for the Russian case, but for the whole of the world that decided to measure its success on the basis of technological achievements.

Although Nikolai Leskov believed that Levsha-type craftsmanship was to vanish with the mechanization of industry, not only did artisanal elements successfully penetrate modernized economies worldwide (Adamson 2009), and even more so in the Soviet Russia (Alasheev 1995; Reid 2014), but the very narrative which Leskov created proved to be in demand for centuries to come.

2.3. RUSSIAN *UMELETS* IN SOVIET DECORATIONS

2.3.1. LOPATKIN: THE SOVIET LEVSHA

Much like Leskov himself, Soviet official discourse used the *Lefty* story as evidence of the mistaken recognition of talented people popular milieus, and of the social carelessness characteristic of the pre-revolutionary period. The reproach for neglecting the human capital of the people was one of the central leitmotifs in the discourse promoting inventorism in the young Soviet Union (more on this in Chapter 4). Yet, although the new Soviet authorities openly called for people's participation in the technologization of the economy, the cultural narrative conveying Levsha as both an anonymous national hero and a victim of the careless state was smoothly incorporated within the broader narrative mediating the relationship between talented and inventive people and the bureaucratic state.

For instance, in the mid-1950s, Levsha received its new literary incarnation in the novel *Not by Bread Alone* (1956) by Vladimir Dudintsev. A new Soviet Levsha was embodied in a provincial engineer, whose knowledge and expertise were neglected by the authorities.

The novel presents the conflict between an engineer, Lopatkin, and the director of a provincial factory: Lopatkin develops a new machine; however, implementing it would mean crapping the one already slated for adoption, which although inferior, was developed by an authority figure in the branch. Afraid of eventual problems, the director Drozdov blocks the project.

In *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (1981), literary scholar Katerina Clark points out that Dudintsev's novel is characteristic of the discourse of "Truth" that appeared as a phenomenon of the post-Stalin "thaw" period, characterized by the general return to revolutionary ideals. The discourse of truth voiced the social problems of Soviet society and marked the end of the Stalinist period, when fear of repression kept people silent regarding the problematic aspects of social development. Criticizing scholars who interpret the discourse of truth in terms of antagonism between orthodox communists and dissidents, Clark claims that these two possible

ideologies “are not two opposed traditions, but different forces locked in a dialectical relationship within the one system, each feeding on the other” (Clark 2000 [1981], 219).

And yet, while the literary style points to a particular historical period, the main plot can be read as a new reification of Levsha. Both characters are gifted individuals striving to put their ingenuity to use for the sake of the public good; both are under-recognized and reach unhappy endings because of the mistrust and disinterest of the empowered but incompetent administrators. In other words, folklorists could recognize in this story something akin to local versions of the same narrative “invariant” (Levinton 2000). Similarly, as I was able to observe in the field, in the 2000s this narrative was widespread among professional inventors and journalists writing about inventors. For instance, a series of articles published in the professional magazine *Izobretatel' i Ratsionalizator* (Eng. ‘Inventor and Rationalizer’) in the 1990s was explicitly devoted to those unrecognized but talented inventors who fell victim to bureaucrats and incompetent authorities.

Along the same lines, Natalia – an excerpt of whose interview I have cited above – while talking about her unsuccessful attempts to promote certain autodidact inventors in the late 1980s and beginning of the 1990s during the early years of the cooperative movement, concludes the following:

You know, this was very much a sign of the times. Because this was a brilliant article [about invention], it was published, the [invention] application was submitted, the patent was received. And nothing. It’s like in Leskov’s *Lefty*. Nobody needs Levsha. He made for a good show, and that was it [*posmeshil liudei – i do svidaniia*]. Though this was a real handyman (*umelets*), and perhaps of state [significance].

Natalia’s reference to a strong cultural stereotype is, perhaps, made even more understandable by the fact that she worked for a long time as a journalist in this field and, therefore, got used to professionally mobilizing cultural clichés. While others do not always explicitly allude to Leskov’s work, the very script of the story, depicting the inventor as an anonymous national hero and, at the same time, the victim of bureaucracy and circumstances, persisted in the collective imagination.

2.3.2. GOSHA: SOVIET HANDYMAN AND “CREATIVE WORKER”

In addition to the old narratives, late Soviet culture produced new images of *umelets*, namely positive images of characters well integrated into society. Thus, when talking about people with

“golden hands” (*zoloty ruki*), my subjects sometimes referred to Gosha, the protagonist of Vladimir Menshov’s popular film *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* (1979). For instance, while telling me about a housemaster from the enterprise she worked for, Tatiana (b. 1954) characterizes him as “a kind of Gosha from the movie” (*on byl takoi, nu Gosha iz fil'ma*).

In the movie, Gosha is a highly professional worker with “golden hands” – a particularly gifted and socially responsible worker. Tatiana narrates:

We had this Tolia, and all of the women of our enterprise were coming to him, when an umbrella was broken, or an alarm clock, and he could repair all of these things.

Officially, the housemaster was responsible for maintaining technical order in the building of the enterprise and solving minor technical problems. However, his outstanding manual skills, ability to repair all kinds of things and eagerness to provide others with help made him an important person within the organization.

As one can understand from this quote, Tolia’s services went far beyond his formal duties, and he was often presented with private issues that he solved during his working hours. Indeed, the importance of having such a handyman “in house” was proven by the fact that with time the head of the enterprise not only set up a special position for him, but even organized a small office, a workshop, where Tolia could work calmly – or just spend his work hours if there was no emergency issue for him to tend to.

Although this case can be interpreted as proof of the inefficient infrastructure and lack of reliable service in the Soviet Union – a common argument within the discourse on Soviet inefficiency – it is my intention to show that individuals with good manual skills did enjoy a particular social status and were viewed as “necessary people” (*nuzhnye liudi*). Moreover, as we can see from Tatiana’s story, manual skills and technical assistance could be employed to mediate social solidarity. On the one hand, Tolia contributed to the well-being of his colleagues; on the other hand, his contributions – even though they sometimes had nothing to do with the main activity of the enterprise – were recognized as socially important and praised not only by the direct beneficiaries but also by the director, who allocated him a separate workplace.

By the same token, Gosha’s character calls for the discussion of a more specific issue, namely the importance and the high status of “creative workers” within their professional contexts. In the movie, Gosha is characterized as a unique kind of expert in his plant, one “without whom no single dissertation can be done.” This characteristic, voiced in the film by one of his

colleagues in order to compliment his unique professional expertise in front of Gosha's beloved, references the practice of applying scientific research at plants, where theoretical arguments were to be proven through practical experimental prototypes. Gosha, therefore, is presented as the one individual able to bring a theoretical project into its physical form, that is to realize a unique functional prototype and bring an idea into life. This quality can also be read metaphorically: theoretical technical knowledge cannot survive without the manual skills of experts, who materialize ideas. Thus, Gosha is symbolic of a Soviet modern ideal that combines ingenuity with working profession, and maintains the equality between intellectual and manual work and thus the prestigious status of the proletariat as a social group.

Although such a vision of the Soviet worker was, of course, an idealized one, it should not be understood as a complete fiction. Indeed, Gosha and similarly qualified workers are sometimes mentioned by interviewees to describe a particular type of "creative worker" who is able to execute and autonomously design non-standard complex artifacts. A typical context, in which Gosha might work, would be, for example, the so-called "special workshops" (*osobyie tsekha*). Galina (b. 1943), who worked for many years as an engineer on two different plants, explains:

On the big plants, there were usually special people who worked with non-standard equipment, who were able to construct a unique copy [of a special machine] for industrial purposes. [...] There was a special shopfloor of non-standard equipment. And for instance, Nikolai Efimovich, he worked in this shop of non-standard equipment. This was an *umelets*! He passed through the whole war, but unfortunately, he is not with us anymore, naturally. But I have kept a memory of him my whole life. This was a fantastic person! I have met many smart people in my life, but people like him, I haven't met since.

Galina's quotation demonstrates one way in which the image of a creative worker merges with the broad character of Russian *umelets*, a smart and skillful individual, important for society. Moreover, the quote shows another particular feature of this discourse: outstanding technical competences are often contextualized through experiences of the war – that is, an environment where the ability to solve technical problems with a minimum of help and instruments has a life-price value.

The special shops that Galina mentions were famous for having people not only able to build a new tailor-made machine, but also to repair old equipment. Due to a relative economic and political isolation, Soviet industries had a permanent shortage of modern equipment. Many plants operated for decades on old (sometimes pre-revolutionary) machines or foreign machines, such as German "trophy equipment" (*trofeinoe oborudovanie*), for example, acquired at the end of the World War II under the reparations. Thus, an important quantity of industrial

equipment was constituted of non-standardized machines, which often lacked technical documentation but still required regular service and repair. In other cases, for economic reasons, foreign machines could be purchased without the corresponding service package (Interview with Pavel, b. 1947). In such instances, once a machine needed new parts or a more substantial repair, it was up to local experienced professionals to “decode” the technology and design anew elements of the machine that could substitute for the originals. Sergei Alasheev, in his sociological study of the working culture on an old Soviet plant in the early 1990s, describes this condition:

Foreign equipment is finished off and adjusted to suit local conditions. Thus foreign machines which come into the factory are initially looted, and then parts are made in the factory by the local skilled craftsmen. As a result the new parts do not quite fit, and they have to remake the original parts too, and it turns out to be a completely different machine. (Alasheev 1995, 81)

Under the circumstances, performing a good job was not so much a matter of the accurate execution of routine tasks, but rather an art – of understanding and “feeling” a particular machine. Old experts, working on such machines or able to repair them, enjoyed high prestige, as they had unique “tacit knowledge” that could not be easily transmitted. Moreover, the importance of individual performance in difficult conditions contributed to the development of a particular work culture, which valorized the capacity of a worker to solve non-standard problems and find original and workable solutions. As sociologist Simon Clarke and his collaborative group discovered while studying organizational relations within big enterprises in Russia at the beginning of the 1990s,

Soviet workers were not only induced to work, in often appalling conditions, but showed high levels of positive commitment to overcome technical and supply difficulties, frequently working double shifts and weekends without additional pay, in order to meet the plan month in and month out. (Clarke 1995, 7)

This context hints at how manual skills mobilized with the industrial context can mediate individual craftsmanship and a sense of national belonging. Producing or repairing unique non-standard machines for national industry is a way to participate in the national construction of modernity, even though this modernity is “low-tech” and relies heavily on individual manual skills. Much like Natalia’s father, who launched an aviation plant in Siberia, or Levsha, who refuses to stay in England, Gosha and the workers observed by Alasheev and Clarke shared the belief that their skills are needed by their country and were thus committed to contributing to

its technological development. Yet, contrary to Levsha, the non-fictional workers of the mentioned sociological studies knew they were the recognized heroes of their time. The compliments offered by Gosha's colleagues, educated engineers and researchers, are demonstrative of the Soviet politics of public appreciation for manual competences and working professions.

Finally, Gosha's popular character shows how manual skills participate in the construction of gender. In fact, Gosha is not the protagonist of the movie, but rather the partner of Katerina, a "self-made woman," who made an uneasy way from a provincial village to the leading position in Moscow. In her early years in the capital, when she struggled to combine shifts on the plant with her studies, Katerina had an affair with a Moscow intelligent, who abandoned her soon after she got pregnant. Gosha is, therefore, a "true love" that Katerina meets in her 40s. This context is crucial to understand Gosha's cultural profile.

In the movie, Gosha is represented as a masculine hero who is proactive and implicated in both family and professional life. His ability to constructively contribute at work is paired with his positive social behavior. Gosha's romance with Katerina, the director of a textile plant, is therefore a proof of his ability to think and act beyond the stereotypical roles laid out for him by building (though not without difficulties) a family-life with a single mother who occupies a higher social status than himself.



Figure 18. Gosha. *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* (1979)
by Vladimir Menshov. Film frame. Courtesy of Mosfilm

Moscow does not Believe in Tears is a melodrama that became a cult-movie of the 1980s in the Soviet Union and, indeed, received the Oscar for best foreign film in 1981. Aleksei Batalov, the actor who plays Gosha, in turn became a masculine hero for years to come. As is typical for successful melodramas, such popularity was due in this case to the film's successful mixture of

recognizable social contexts with unrealistic developments that provide its audience with hope. The recognizable portrait of a “strong” single woman coupling professional responsibilities with child care and skeptical of the eventual help of her partners is smoothed over by her unusually high professional status and the appearance in her life of Gosha, who challenges her previous negative experiences and provides her with a hope for intimate happiness. As should be the case for movies of this genre, Gosha’s personality is a perfect marriage of socially appreciated traits and individual charisma, which makes him different and unique. Thus, Gosha’s ideal masculinity combines ingenuity and social responsibility and demarcates manual working skills as “masculine.” The paradox of this construction lies in the understanding of manual skills as simultaneously masculine and expected from men, yet often lacking in the masculine gender and, therefore, performed by women. I frequently encountered a similar construction in the field.



Figure 19. *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears*. Film frame. Courtesy of Mosfilm

One visitor of Arkhipov’s exhibition, to give an example, left the following commentary:

Amazing exhibition! This is a history-exhibition! The immersion into that life, where men were men: smart, with wit and hands (*smekalistye i rukastye*)! All knew how to do something with nothing (*iz nichego*), and were afraid of nothing. [...] Would be good to bring more children here! Thanks a lot!!! (Arkhipov 2012, 60)

This female visitor, who put her full name after the commentary, frames manual skills and manual intelligence as normative masculine characteristics, yet characteristics belonging indeed

to the past and therefore missing in the present. Similarly, in my interviews, women who told me about their experiences of performing “male manual jobs” often expressed a kind of sorrow rather than pride about their skills, thus demonstrating their agreement with a “traditional” gender division of labor, even if it is not always carried out in practice (I will discuss this further in Chapter 5).

2.3.3. SHURIK: THE SOVIET ENGINEER

Another movie character that I would like to discuss in contrast with Gosha is Shurik, the protagonist of a popular comedy *Ivan Vasilievich Changes Profession* by Leonid Gaidai (1973). Shurik is a professional engineer and impassioned Soviet amateur who is crafting a time machine in his modern Moscow apartment. Shurik, who is married to an actress, is so busy with his dreaming about the time machine that he does not even notice when his better half starts an adventure with her film director. Shurik is portrayed as a highly knowledgeable though kiddish subject unaware of the risks involved in his intended undertaking: to challenge the logic of history and bring Ivan the Terrible, a Russian medieval tsar, to contemporary Moscow (the Moscow of the 1970s).



Figure 20. Ivan the Terrible and Shurik in Shurik's kitchen in *Ivan Vasilievich Changes Profession* (1973). Film frame. Courtesy of Mosfilm



Figure 21. *Ivan Vasilievich Changes Profession* by Leonid Gaidai (1973). Film frame.
Courtesy of Mosfilm

His passion for engineering is both admired and ridiculed. His character is soft and compliant: facing a potentially conflictual situation at home, in the neighborhood or even during his time traveling, he always avoids altercation and does his best to remain good in everybody's estimation. While both Shurik and Gosha were *en gros* good Soviet citizens with generally positive professional and social behaviors, they manifested quite different approaches to work and citizenship. While Gosha is actively engaged in both his professional and private life, Shurik lives in his imagination and is absent from any real social life, though he lives in modern Moscow, he exists beyond the confines of history.

This kind of irony is typical to the late Soviet period, in which engineering professions became the most common, and an anonymous Soviet engineer entered the folkloric discourse of jokes and anecdotes. Moreover, it uncovers important tensions at play in the image of the Soviet engineer as being professionally and socially well integrated but deprived of social prestige and subjective will. On the discursive level, the prestige of the engineering profession was maintained through the importance of science and technology for the construction of a modern society, yet downgraded when not coupled with manual skills and, ideally, a working professional background. Popular technical magazines promoted the image of the engineer, who reached his position only after having worked at the factory as an expert for some years.

Another element that downgraded the social prestige of engineers was their overproduction. In fact, by the late Soviet period, the number of high schools and universities preparing engineers became so high that the profession of the engineer began to stand increasingly for an everyman, a *monsieur machin*. Graduated engineers were guaranteed employment in multiple Soviet industries, research institutes, construction offices and other state enterprises, yet, at least as the common story goes, had limited opportunities for career-making and professional self-realization.

Already during Perestroika, when the first economic reforms allowed for the creation of cooperatives, many engineers dreamed about alternative tracks under the capitalist economy. As Yurii, one of my informants, put it, this was a period of “romantic capitalism.” Trained in science and technology, as well as in economic and systematic thinking, engineers of this period imagined themselves to be well prepared for a new economic order. (More on this in the next section and in Chapter 5).

The popularity of both characters – Gosha and Shurik – speaks to their recognizability within the late Soviet social landscape. With all of the differences in genre and plot between the two movies and the moral portraits of their protagonists, both pieces of popular mass culture manifest a general appreciation for technical knowledge and skills, the omnipresence of technical amateurism and even the crystallization of a portrait of an amateur. Moreover, in both movies technical expertise and skills operate as a cultural code, making both characters recognizable for the public, even if Gosha is a rather unrealistic ideal pairing of the ideological privileges of the worker and the cultural baggage of intelligentsia, while Shurik is a parody presenting a qualified engineer as a kiddish amateur performing interesting but useless and even socially dangerous experiments. In other words, both films portray a positive image of technical knowledge and skills, which have their recognized place in the society and which are valued as a necessary expertise in the professional context (in the case of Gosha) and as a well-regarded hobby and an “intellectual” amateur practice (in the case of Shurik).

2.4. RUSSIAN *UMELETS* AS ENTREPRENEUR

My final example comes from the beginning of the 1990s. I would like to address yet another movie, which gained less attention but is still illustrative of how the character of Russian

umelets and the ambiguous image of the late Soviet engineer informed the late Soviet social imagination of the entrepreneur, the new cultural hero of the Perestroika era.

The film *Genius (Genii)*, directed by Viktor Sergeev, is a rather “second range” movie which was shot in 1990 and appeared on the screen in 1991 – that is, during the years of extremely rapid social and economic transformations.

The protagonist of the movie, Sergey Nenashev, is a young late-Soviet entrepreneur who takes advantage of the new economic context allowing for private businesses. Nenashev, a trained engineer, leaves his research institute and runs a small cooperative in the vegetable trade and, indeed, makes fair profit. Unable to find provisions in the state-sponsored stores with fixed prices, citizens accept the high prices of Nenashev’s vegetable kiosk.

Through his engagement with the market economy and his relatively wealthy style of life (Nenashev lives alone in a large apartment, has a car, and pays a double price to his hairdresser), the protagonist is depicted as a representative of a new economic class, the New Man of post-Soviet Russia. Even his name, Nenashev – which literally can be read as “not ours” or “not from ours” – marks his difference from the main population of “ours,” the ordinary Soviet people. However, the character, played by Alexander Abdulov, one of the most popular young actors of the era, in some way challenges his alterity, helping the audience to recognize his familiarity and even rootedness in the Soviet context.

Nenashev is depicted as a well-educated young man who lives in the historical part of Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) and is knowledgeable about history and culture, an important characteristic indicative of his belonging to the intelligentsia. He appreciates poetry and collects antiques. Moreover, trained as an engineer, he is author of multiple technical inventions that, however, never brought social recognition or economic success. In other words, Nenashev is portrayed in such a way that an anonymous spectator would certainly recognize him as, in fact, one of “ours,” an ordinary Soviet engineer, a Shurik who finally had a historical opportunity to fully realize his potential and put his knowledge and creativity to good use.

In the context of the early post-Soviet years, Nenashev’s character served to legitimize the failure of the Soviet order and provide hope for a future Russia based on capitalism and honest competition among creative individuals. The Soviet system is presented as inefficient and blocking talented individuals in their self-development and public service: Nenashev, a multifaceted and rich personality, remained unrecognized under the old economic system. None of his technical inventions were implemented, and neither he himself nor the society benefited from his knowledge and skills. Disappointed by the lack of interest in his work at the research

institute and inspired by the changes in the country, Nenashev glues all of his inventor certificates (*avtorskie svidetel'stva*) onto the walls of his toilet and starts a new life. Moreover, he intends to run his business in a socially responsible way and calls his business a “socialist shop” (*sotsialisticheskii magazin*). Not only is he very honest in his pricing politics, preventing his companions from taking advantage of the food shortage by cheating buyers on the weights, but he also redistributes wealth. Sergei Nenashev appears to be a kind of post-Soviet Robin Hood: applying his technical skills and his gift for inventiveness, he creates all kinds of tools and gizmos ranging from candid cameras to self-made explosives to collect damaging material against corrupt and graceless functionaries, material which he then uses to blackmail them. All of the profits gained through these activities are fairly distributed among Nenashev’s partners. The policemen hunting for Nenashev cannot but admire his ingenuity.



Figure 22. Nenashev in his office. *Genii* (1990) by Viktor Sergeev
Source: <https://www.kinokopilka.pro/movies/5360-geniy>. Accessed January 3, 2019

Particularly interesting in this movie, is the fact that Nenashev, the Soviet engineer and inventor, symbolizes a collective hope for an economic transformation of the Soviet economy without giving up the socialist order. Not only does the vegetable kiosk – “the socialist shop” – serve as a sign of “repair” of the inefficient mechanisms of the planned economy, but even Nenashev’s

criminal activities aim at restoring social justice within the society.²⁶ In other words, Nenashev – Russian *umelets* and Soviet inventor – stands for the creative potential of the ordinary people that have enough knowledge and skills to make the Soviet Union a better state. In this respect, the movie resonates with one of the principal discourses of the Perestroika era, that associated with Mikhail Gorbachev and, arguably, with the late Soviet working class (Baysha 2014). According to this discourse, the partial introduction of the capitalist mechanism was not to question the basic socialist principles of social organization, but rather to “improve” the national economy by rendering it more flexible.

2.5. SHORTAGES AND SOVIET PLAN ECONOMY AS A NEW CONTEXT OF “CULTURAL INTIMACY”

Let me now come back once again to Natalia’s narrative cited in the beginning of this chapter to demonstrate, how the late Soviet context of shortage and the criticism of the planned economy was embraced by the cultural narrative of social abandonment and entered the realm of cultural intimacy analyzed by Herzfeld. While telling the story of the aviation plant, Natalia says:

And the first ship which arrived brought only a huge amount of cart wheels. Later, [other things] finally came. Well, this was an anecdote, an anecdote about our planned economy. And then they started to finally bring the equipment for the aviation plants.

In this particular sequence it is distinctly obvious that the reasoning around the planned economy is a kind of remark in brackets, an addition brought into the story of 1932 during the late 1980s. Still, it is instructive. The point, which I would like to emphasize here, is that by the late Soviet period, the image of careless bureaucrats (as in the case of Levsha and Lopatkin) has been replaced by the cliché of the planned economy. In other words, the anonymous state machine depicted as a Plan became both the main point of reference to explain multiple everyday problems and, at the same time, an argument for justifying certain personal irresponsibilities – typically, when someone needed to be absent from work during working hours, this could be explained by expressing the necessity to go shopping. Nevertheless, as in

²⁶ On the ambivalent image of “criminal businessmen” as both “bandits” and a “potential source of justice and order” in the post-Soviet period see: Ries 2002.

the plot of Levsha, the very “inefficiency” of the state appears to be indispensable for the emergence of creativity, which is to make up for the “mistakes” of the state.

This discourse was particularly strong in the late 1980s, when political and economic transformations were still filled with hopes for the improvement of life, rather than with disappointments. By 2010s – the period, when I conducted my fieldwork – such interpretations persisted sometimes, yet they were rather integrated in complex and contradictory monologues, where opinions and evaluations were getting lost behind the flow of emotions.

One aspect of this interpretation, particularly relevant for the late 1970s-1980s, stands the description of Soviet shortages as opposed to the Western (imagined) abundancy. In this context, “Soviet deficient economy” is presented in contrast to “normal” Western modernity, in which the market economy is supposedly able to procure all citizens with high quality industrial goods. Although today this discourse is less and less relevant, especially among social groups able to travel abroad. Yet, in the late Soviet and early post-Soviet years this discourse was very common and was documented by ethnographers, who worked in Russia and other former socialist countries.

Several of my interlocutors who were professionally involved in writing about DIY as journalists of popular magazines confessed that they were surprised to learn that DIY is also widespread in Europe. For instance, Natalia herself was impressed when she first read the English book *Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management* (1861), by Isabella Beeton, and realized that it was all about thrift and saving in the household.

The same implications about the essential difference between Soviet and Western European everyday life are sometimes uncritically transferred into academic literature. In one such case, my Russian colleagues, sociologists Ekaterina Gerasimova and Sofia Chuikina published in 2004 (English publication in 2009) an article in which they characterize the whole of Soviet society as “The Repair Society,” according to the title of the piece. They write, in the introduction:

Soviet society may be called a repair society. The planned economy was not self-regulating (as a market economy is) and was therefore the object of constant improvement, experiment, and mandatory anticrisis campaigns implemented by the authorities, meaning that it was perpetually under repair. The citizens were also actively involved in the system's “repair project,” in terms both of officially sanctioned social activism (consumer movements, the fight against substandard products, letters of complaint to the newspapers)

and of everyday economy, in which case they adapted the system for their own comfort (by pulling strings, visiting flea markets, using homemade goods, pilfering products from factories, informally reallocating goods, etc.).

A repair society shares many characteristics with preindustrial societies, where things were also kept in use for a long time... (Gerasimova and Chuikina 2009, 59)

This quote implicates the authors in the imagination of the western market economy as a perfectly functioning self-regulated system, free of state-initiated interventions and “anticrisis campaigns”; this imagined reality moreover depicts the West as a totally industrialized society where practices of home-making and buying from flea-markets are replaced by perfectly organized modern consumption. Finally, the last sentence, about the “preindustrial” characteristics of the repair society, openly challenges the modern nature of the Soviet state and therefore pushes it outside of the realm of modernity.

The fact that this type of argumentation is present in academic literature in both Russian and English also documents the fact that assumptions that the Russian experience of the 20th century was marginal and essentially different from that of the west is not only shared by lay people and scholars in Russia but also by editors of the international English language journal “Russian Studies in History.”

More recently, Valerii Podoroga, one of the most prominent and worldwide recognized contemporary Russian philosopher concluded while commenting on Arkhipov’s collection,

The most important thing about the home-made things exhibited here is that they tell us about poverty of their creators (especially the “Soviet things” do). Poverty in Soviet and post-Soviet society remains a sign of social sentiment, uniting the masses, regardless of whether they want to be poor or not. Poverty does not correspond to scales of prosperity and wealth. In this sense there was neither poverty, nor poor people in the Soviet era. Poverty entails cunning, agility and an ability to make do with a minimum. If there is artistry here, which the authors of these small “hand-made things” have in abundance, then it is the art of survival. [...] the creators of the collection, gathered together in Arkhipov’s catalogue entitled *Born out of Necessity*, are distinguished by an extreme poverty of imagination – everything is reduced to the solution of primitive problems. There is a simple lack of an aesthetic value. [...] Basically, each thing here points towards a global lack of being. (Podoroga 2011, 36, 38)

This passage is followed by a footnote, where Podoroga explains the concept of “lack of being” by Jean-Paul Sartre and reapplied by Jacques Lacan, all this to conclude:

I think that the Soviet system of consumption attempted to block the threatening desire of equality by equally distributing poverty (and, of course, a total shortage of goods) correctly anticipating that envy is a more powerful feeling for the communal subject than the desire for a better life. The distribution of envy and a spirit of “equality in misery” consolidated Soviet society (Podoroga 2011, 38, footnote 16).

What I hear in Podoroga’s interpretation, just like in the article by Gerasimova and Chuikina, is not so much an analytical reflection on the Soviet economy and everyday life, but rather yet another expressions of cultural intimacy that my interlocutors deliver in less elaborated narrative forms. With all my respect to the authors, I cannot help but read these contributions as examples of that aspect of cultural intimacy that Russians perform through feelings of shame and embarrassment when they look at their everyday life through the prism of an internal “Western gaze.” This discourse is particularly frequent and, indeed, understandable among those Russians who are regularly exposed to the “Western modernity” and, therefore, are in the position to constantly identify themselves in relation to both sides. Blaming the “Soviet thing” helps, therefore, to distance oneself from the “abnormal” Russian past and/or present and insure the legitimacy of the current affiliation within the “normal” West. This discourse is well documented for the Russian emigrés, the discourse which, indeed, contributed a lot to the production of the image of the Soviet society as “abnormal” and essentially different from the West. It is, however, ironic that Podoroga’s essay is published in the catalogue, where Russian self-made objects are published under the same cover with similar kind of objects collected by Arkhipov in Switzerland, the country that symbolizes Western European richness and prosperity.

My next example is how this discourse is reproduced in the contemporary Western academic discourse. French sociologist Elisabeth Anstett build her recent contribution “L’ingéniosité face à la pénurie” (Anstett 2015) on the conceptual oppositions that perpetuate essential differences between Soviet/Socialist and Western worlds. This is particularly stiking, as French sociology has, indeed, a rich tradition of studying practices comparable to what I refer to as a “system of provision” in the French context. Well studied are, for example, phenomena, such as “pérruque” and other forms of side-production and autoconsumption documented among French workers (Anteby 2008; Bannville De 2001; Kosmann 2010; Weber 1989; Weber 1998). Moreover, Anstett herself uses the French expression “système D” to refere to the Soviet domestic practices; she does not, however, engages with it critically, and instead reproduces a strong analytical opposition between capitalist and socialist worlds. Furthermore, typically for these kind of works, Anstett mobilises examples from the post-Soviet context to support her argument

about the “Soviet shortages.” For instance, she borrows a case, dated 1998, from Arkhipov’s book where a subject made a shovel out of the road sign. Anstett uses this case to argue about the continuity of practices of “technological disobedience” as forms of political protestation characteristic for “the societies marked by State socialism” (Anstett 2015, 26).

It is, however, ironic that both authors, Podoroga and Anstett, uses artifacts from Arkhipov’s collection to argue about “Soviet objects” and “Soviet economy.” In fact, the majority of the artifacts from Arkhipov’s collection were made during the 1990s. Even in the Arkhipov’s first book, published in 2003, more than a half are dated later than 1991. Indeed, the period of the 1990s was a period of “survival” in a literal sense for many Russian families who found themselves far below of the poverty line, a poverty they had not known under the Soviet order. Although in memory this period remains very distinct (Shevchenko 2009) – the 1990s (*devianostye*) – the material culture of this time and the experiences related to it semantically bridged the more general “Soviet past,” in which do-it-yourself practices were omnipresent and unproblematic, with and the present, in which they looked awkward and “cheap” compared to the new ready-mades available in the stores.

What I am arguing here is that the discrepancies between commentaries, meanings and emotions that I encountered in my field demonstrate conflicting discourses about the Soviet past that coexist today and are informed by different discourses and experiences that have been internalized and lived through since the late 1980s.

The economic logic, implicit in works cited above, has, however, important political implications: firstly, it analytically follows and, therefore, reinforces the binary of “abnormal Soviet” versus “normal western/capitalist,” and secondly, it ignores those cases of “remont” (recycling and re-using) that did not fit the frame of “consumption” as it is known under a capitalist economy. I suggest that this rhetoric and its underlying economic logic paved the way for the narrative that presents Soviet DIY as an abnormal if not shameful and ridiculous phenomenon produced exclusively by the Soviet economy of shortages. In the same vein, Alexander and Reno note in their “Introduction” to the recent book *Economies of Recycling*,

What filled the global vacuum of the Cold War policy was a vision of capitalism as the natural movement of market forces, whose growth required the spread of private ownership and the selective repeal and reform of state regulations. (Alexander and Reno 2012, 16)

Yet, this rhetoric was efficient. Within a very short time, in the course of the 1990s, the practice of recycling paper, metal and glass were condemned to be the fate of the poor; young and successful parents started to encourage their children to leave leftover food on their plates (as opposed to the soviet convention of finishing meals); and new fashionable stores started to supply their customers abundantly with disposable shopping bags (in contrast with the Soviet practice of shopping with an *avos'ka*, a durable cloth net bag).²⁷ In contrast, *avos'ka* itself became “the Soviet object,” bearing a stigma of shortages, queues and inefficient economy (Idov 2011, 72-73).

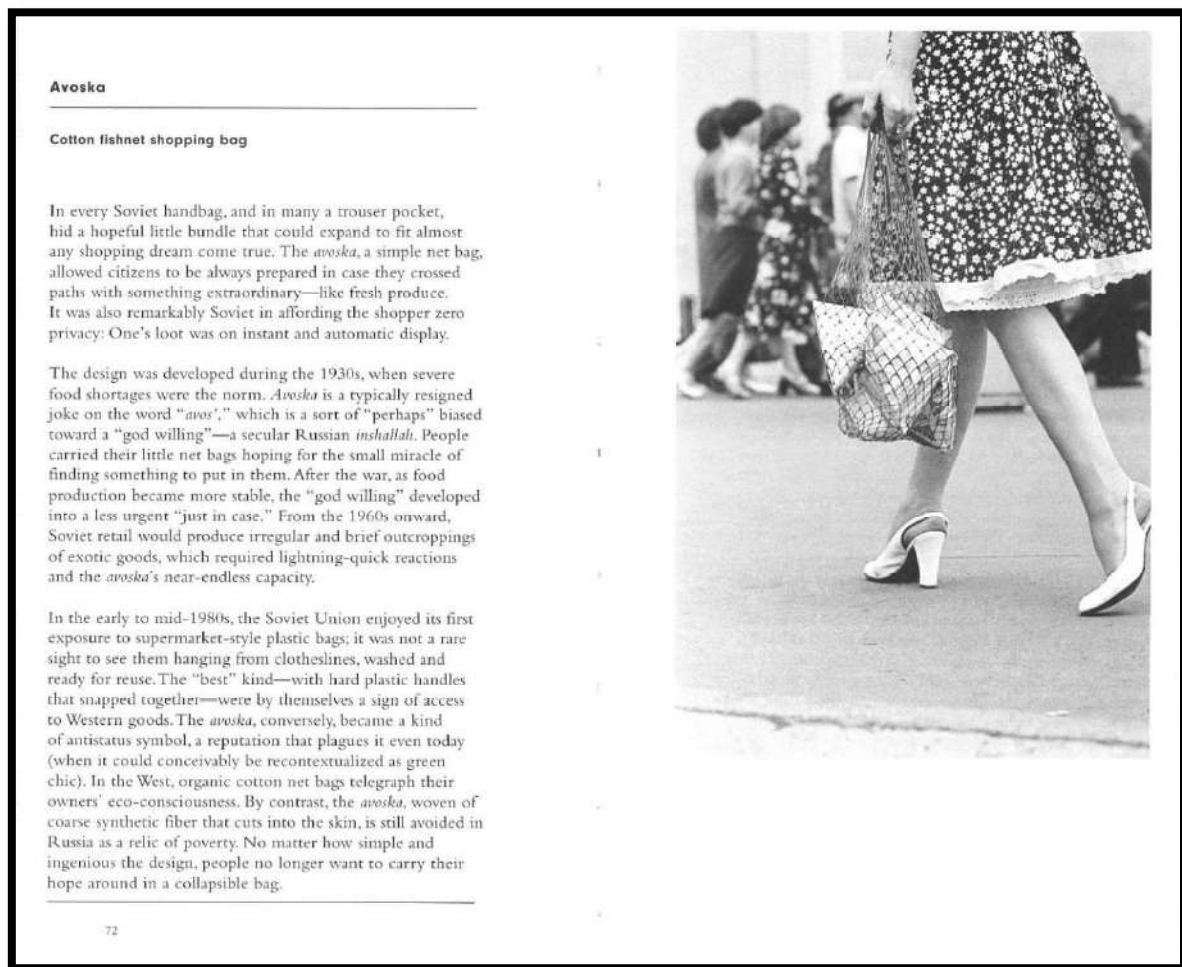


Figure 23. The Description of *Avos'ka* in: Idov 2011. *Made in Russia: Unsung Icons of Soviet Design*

Thus, DIY materialities are part of the Russian self-stereotypes and western stereotypes about Russia. The idea is not to argue about it, but rather to emphasize that Russian DIY as a particular social phenomenon is constructed by a discursive surface producing a difference. Moreover,

²⁷ Such bags can now be bought in online vintage shops for the price of about 10 euros.

this discursive surface is filled with emotions and therefore corresponds to a collective “structure of sentiment,” to use the term of Appadurai (Appadurai 1996, 181).

2.6. CONCLUSION

In this chapter I demonstrate how technical knowledge and skills come across Russian cultural narratives as an axis mediating the relationships between individual and materiality, and between the individual and the state. I suggest that there is a particular literary tradition that offers a narrative to describe DIY-like knowledge and skills (manual craftsmanship, making do, inventiveness and intellectual ingenuity) as simultaneously enclosed in the struggle of survival yet necessary for the social and national good. This narrative tradition provides the character of Russian *umelets* with the archetypal traits of the victim and the hero at the same time, and makes him or her an (unrecognized) driver of social and technological progress. I suggest that this narrative tradition can be productively analyzed in the terms of “cultural intimacy” proposed by Herzfeld, which touch upon the contradictory sensibilities of national imagination.

Looking from this perspectives, Russian low-technological modernity, and DIY practices, knowledge and skills as crucial to it, constitute an important nerve of the national imagination of modernity. The Russian *umelets*, therefore, can be read as a key figure and a symbol of hope for both society and the state, as he is able to patch holes and “repair” the tissue of the imperfect Russian modernity, and yet is inseparable from the very mode of “low-technology.”

Although Soviet popular culture produced alternative narratives in which the *umelets* is praised and socially recognized, the context of shortage and the discourse of inefficiency, which was omnipresent in the media of the late Soviet and post-Soviet years, rendered these positive images caricatural: Soviet workers became alcoholics and Soviet engineers were depicted as making up an under-qualified population lacking of motivation. In this context, Soviet technology was disqualified altogether and Soviet industry stigmatized as wasteful and inefficient.

Even though the narrative of the unrecognized *umelets* was successfully incorporated into a new discourse of “romantic capitalism,” which encouraged engineers and experts from the industry to reform the national economy, the rapid social and economic crises that came after the withdrawal of the welfare state and the subsequent introduction of so-called “shock-therapy” reactivated old narratives of survival and social abandonment and brought practices of technical do-it-yourself back to the realm of cultural intimacy.

CHAPTER 3

GENEALOGIES OF THE SOCIALIST MODERNITY: INVENTORISM, CREATIVITY AND SELF

Contrary to the first two chapters, which explore certain DIY contexts and narratives as they inform the contemporary post-Soviet perspective, this Chapter focuses on concepts and meanings that inform Russian and Soviet DIY culture, but that do not necessarily appear on the surface. In other words, I propose a kind of archaeology of discourses that are hardly recognizable for contemporary Russians, and yet which inform discursive and institutional logics of the late Soviet period.

Building on the analysis of Russian concepts such as *byt* (Eng. ‘everyday life’) and *samodeiatel’nost’* (Eng. ‘self-activity’), I show how Russian revolutionary thought, inspired by a Marxist analysis of socio-economic change, constructed links between the idea of self-development and participation in the production of the material world. Moreover, I demonstrate how this particular approach to materiality downplays differences between art and technology, the two material realms that today are imagined as conceptually and institutionally separate one from another. Rather than dividing art and technology, revolutionary radical thinkers conceived of all practices of material production as co-participating in the formation of a new society, materiality and citizenship.

In this chapter I also demonstrate on the one hand that the Russian socialist project was in dialogue with the global context of emergent modernities, and, on the other hand, that it developed its own historically specific meanings. From this perspective, the project of the New Soviet Man appears less a specific feature of Soviet ideology and more a historically contingent interpretation of a new modern social and political philosophy, which imagined the “self-made man” and his agency as a key engine of the new times.

3.1. *BYT* AND CREATIVITY: THE MARXIST APPROACH TO EVERYDAY LIFE

Many scholars dealing with early Russian history and Russian everyday culture more broadly struggled to define the Russian concept of *byt*. Anthropologist Victor Buchli explains that it “encompasses all the following English terms: ‘daily life’, ‘domesticity’, ‘lifestyle’, or ‘way of life’” (Buchli 1999, 23). Caroline Humphrey, a key author in the field of Russian anthropology,

limits herself to a short phrase, “the comforts of everyday domestic practices” (Humphrey 2005, 40), while Sheila Fitzpatrick, the historian who brought the concept of “everyday life” into the field of Soviet history (Fitzpatrick 1999), decides in her recent contribution on a negative definition of the term:

It is a realm defined by what it is not: *not* the realm of states, institutions, structures, purposes, ideologies, grand designs but what is left when you take those things away. (Fitzpatrick 2015, 390)

Fitzpatrick’s decision for a negative definition was probably inspired by Anatolii Lunacharskii (1875-1933), the first Bolshevik People’s Commissar responsible for Education, who in his famous paper *On byt* defines this realm of domesticity as follows:

What do we understand by the word *byt*? We extract from all the fields of our existence state life and economic life; after the deduction of these two spheres we get *byt*. (Lunacharskii 1927)

Without trying to offer yet another description of the term, I would like to emphasize that *byt* strongly connotes materiality, the immediate material condition which is inextricable from social interactions in everyday life. This is why early Soviet Marxists considered *byt* to be “the great threat to the revolution” (Fitzpatrick 2015, 390), as, according to Marxist materialism, *byt* is the base that determines the superstructure, a logic which deeply penetrated the imagination of people brought up in the Soviet Union (Humphrey 2003; 2005).

Using Marxist logic, Anatolii Lunacharskii emphasizes in his paper the importance of revolutionizing *byt*, the immediate environment in which the subject acts with a minimum of self-censorship and in which he therefore performs and reproduces either old patterns of behavior or new ones:

As far as a worker works with a machine, a peasant with a plough, as far as this or that *intelligent* [member of the intelligentsia] teaches or cures or sits in some office, etc. – this relates to his economic life, to the execution of [his] professional, public duties.

As far as he finds himself in his apartment, as far as he is a father, husband, member of the family household, as far as he uses his salary for his existence, as far as he organizes his leisure, his self-education, his advancement forward – all this relates already to *byt*.

What up to now has been called a private life, cannot escape from us. It is specifically in the transfer on the clear rational rails of what is called private

life [...] that the ultimate goal of the revolution consists, its main, its highest achievement. But here we face the biggest challenges. (Lunacharskii 1927)

The importance and the challenging character of *byt* for the whole revolutionary project was raised for the first time a few years earlier by Lev Trotsky in his 1923 article *To Reconstruct Byt One Needs to Cognize It*, which is sometimes translated in English as *Habit and Custom* (Trotsky 1923). For Trotsky, the question of *byt* became central at the moment when, six years after the revolution, he identified the conservatism of everyday behavior as a “swamp” which could render all revolutionary achievements worthless. He did not consider it only as a danger, but rather as the crucial point to be targeted for transformation, as he believed that this immediate condition could either enable the “permanent revolution” or, on the contrary, block and arrest it.

In the study of *byt* it is peculiarly manifest to what extent a singular person is the product of [external] conditions rather than the creator of them. *Byt*, i.e. the material condition [*obstanovka*] and customs, are even more than economics, unfolded “behind the back of the people” (Marx’s expression). Conscious creativity in the field of *byt* occupies but a miserable place in human history. *Byt* has accumulated though the elemental experience of people and it changes in the same elemental way, in response to pressure from technology or to pressure from the revolutionary struggle and finally it reflects much better the past of the human society rather than its present. (Trotsky 1923)

Trotsky aspired to render the discussion on *byt* as open and as large as possible and to reach in particular a younger audience, the social group which he imagined to be the main driver of change and social transformation. As the historian Alexander Reznik recently documented, his communicative strategy proved to be successful and the discussion received a wide popular response: both intelligentsia and the proletarian student youth population agreed that they needed “conscious creativity in the field of *byt*” and demonstrated readiness to become activists of the movement. However, the escalation of the economic crisis in the country and the logic of the political struggle of the early 1920s, particularly after the death of Lenin in 1924, rendered Trotsky increasingly powerless and, therefore, dangerous to cooperate with (Reznik 2013). A few years later, the discussion was raised again, this time by Anatolii Lunacharskii:

Communism has as its goal the change of the regime of production and distribution of goods. Already now, it [communism] wishes to draw gigantic and ever growing means of production off the hands of the ruling and exploiting classes, to get moving – on the basis of science – the planning economy, that is a low-governed (*zakonomernoe*), regulated [process of]

production of goods and of their fair distribution among all members of human society.

But even this goal, this monumental economic task [...] is not final, because man lives not [in order] to run the economy (*hoziaistvovat'*), he exists not [in order] to work, but on the contrary, he runs the economy and works in order to exist.

When Karl Marx defined the criterion, that is the measure of the given social formation, he said that “this measure is to what extent this social formation insures the maximal development of all human potentialities.” This means that the economy itself – the way humanity produces necessary material goods for its existence and how it distributes them – makes sense only from that point of view, to what extent it allows for the organization of the happy, regulated fraternal life of people, [to what extent] it gives an opportunity to develop all talents dormant in a human, into a creative, solemn and brilliant life. And this very life, this life as a goal in itself is *byt*. (Lunacharskii 1927)

Both Trotsky and Lunacharskii identify the transformation of *byt* as crucial to the success of the communist project. Both agree that every individual is a central actor of this project. Yet, while Trotsky remains analytical in dealing with the very sociology of the revolution and opens the debate in order to reach the political consciousness of the young worker and involve him or her into the “permanent revolution,” Lunacharskii focuses on the “final destination,” the imagined communist ideal.

As I have mentioned above, Lunacharskii was the first People’s Commissar of Education (the literal translation of his title from the Russian being ‘Commissar of Enlightenment’), and the pedagogical agenda is already very tangible in his texts. For him, the transformation of *byt* is a means of awakening a “dormant” human potential.

My short overview of this debate serves to contextualize the way in which early Soviet theorists imagined *byt* and the immediate material and social environment as a condition that mediates the relationship between the economy, social organization, and the individual. Several elements are particularly important to this theorization: 1) the material aspect that penetrates all levels of life, from everyday *byt* to complex processes of organization of economy; 2) the isomorphic character of all human activity; and 3) the emphasis on the individual and his or her creativity as a driving force for social change.

Although there was no agreement on the means or speed necessary for this transformation, all of the perspectives shared the dialectical understanding of human and material development and envisioned it as an interdependent and mutually co-constituting process.

Humans were to make new things in a new way. And, in turn, new things were to transform humans and their social relations. Individual happiness and fulfillment would result therefore from the development of economic and material conditions, while material conditions and the economy would themselves progress due to individual efforts and the struggle for creative self-fulfillment through labor.

This dialectical logic informed a larger debate on how the new socialist person was expected to emerge, and how this socialist person would change the world. In what follows I will address yet another Russian concept – *samodeiatel'nost'* (literally, 'self-activity'); based on the discursive analysis of this term from 1840 to the late Soviet period, I will demonstrate how this dialectical thinking and the discourse of everyday creativity penetrated the Russian socialist imagination at the end of the 19th century, entered into the revolutionary vocabulary and, finally, was normalized and even bureaucratized over the course of Soviet history (Vasilyeva 2014). At the same time, the history of this concept shows to what extent the debate about creativity was not merely a Soviet domestic project but rather a broader European debate about the place of the individual in a new modern world.

3.2. *SAMODEIATEL'NOST'*: FROM REVOLUTIONARY CREATIVITY TO SOVIET AMATEUR CULTURE

The Russian word *samodeiatel'nost'* is a compound noun consisting of two different roots: *sam* ('self') and *deiatel'nost'* ('activity'). In the contemporary Russian language it is strongly associated with the standard name for the Soviet institutionalized practice of amateurism in general and more specifically with the artistic amateurism (*hudozhestvennaia samodeiatel'nost'*) that was widespread and supported by Soviet officials. Contemporary dictionaries no longer record the synonymy between *samodeiel'nost'* and various other Russian nouns that, in the late 1800s and early 1900s, could be used to express 'initiative', 'beginning', 'new departure' (*initsiativa, nachinanie, pochin*) (Vorkachev 2012); likewise, it is unusual for a contemporary Russian speaker to use or encounter the word *samodeiatel'nost'* in a context where it would correspond to its original meaning of "the manifestation of a personal new departure in a public affaire" (Ozhegov 1970, 686). Yet, it is instructive to look at the history of this lexeme which, I suggest, informs the transformations of the relationship between the individual and the state during the 20th century, within which the place of individual action, which was negotiated.

3.2.1. THE GERMAN CURRENT

Based on an analysis of the Russian texts available through the electronic resource National Corpus of the Russian Language (henceforth NCRL), it seems that the lexeme *samodeiatel'nost'* appears in the Russian language in the middle of the 19th century. Most probably, it is a linguistic calque of the German terms *Selbstbetätigung* ('self-activity', 'self-work') and *Selbsttätigkeit* ('self-activity', 'self-occupation'), which appear in the works of Baruch Spinoza, Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx.²⁸ Feuerbach uses the notion *Selbstbetätigung*, for instance, in *The Essence of Christianity*, mainly in the sense of deliberate and autonomous activity (including cognitive activity) and the freedom of will converted into action. In his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, Karl Marx uses the concept *Selbsttätigkeit* in the context of the critique of the alienated labor of the worker (*Estranged Labor*, as he refers to it in the manuscript):

Just as in religion the spontaneous activity [*Selbsttätigkeit*] of the human imagination, of the human brain and the human heart, operates on the individual independently of him – that is, operates as an alien, divine or diabolical activity – so is the worker's activity not his spontaneous activity [*Selbsttätigkeit*]. It belongs to another; it is the loss of his self. (Marx 1959 [1932])

The earliest contexts containing the lexeme *samodeiatel'nost'* can be found in Russian texts dating to the 1840s, where it is used to designate a subjective motivation for self-development and teleological action:

The smile of the great and the attention of the crowd may not satisfy someone whose heart is really full of love for the people and for the good, who developed a need for a life of the mind and *samodeiatel'nost'*. (NCRL, Alexander Nikitenko, Diary, Vol. 1, 1826-55)

The only aspect of Romanticism informed by life is the awakening of the *samodeiatel'nost'* of the soul, which we mentioned as a first force that liberates the human soul from senseless immediacy. (NCRL, Apollon Maykov, Poems to Iuliia Zhadovskaia, 1846)

²⁸ I am indebted to my colleagues and friends Michail Maiatsky and Svetlana Sirotinina who assisted me in 2013 with my research of the electronic corpuses of the German texts.

3.2.2. THE BRITISH CURRENT

The word received a new semantic current in the 1870s, when it was largely adopted and stabilized after the translation of the English book *Self-Help* (1859) by Samuel Smiles, a Scottish author. In Russian this book was first published under the title *Samodeiatel'nost'* (1866). In the preface, the translator Nikolai Kuteinikov explained his choice of words in the following way:²⁹

Interpreting the English name of the book by the Russian word “samodeiatel'nost',” we believe that we keep the main idea of the original and possibly closely convey its meaning. We have no word which equally matched the English “self-help” and accepted in Russian: “self-help” [*samopomoshch*] and “self-relief aid” [*samovspomoshchestvovanie*] are both ambiguous and also inconvenient in terms of pronunciation. (Kuteinikov 1866, V)

Although the translator does not explain specifically how he defines “the main idea of the original,” one can understand from his long explanation in the pages that follow that it is comprised of a clear set of ideas: 1) a self-initiated affaire, realized with only self-help, “without any assistance” and designed for practical purposes; 2) persistent, patient, imperturbable work in any field, the “happy results” of which should justify the belief in individual forces and open the way to success; 3) the spirit of “self-relief aid,” i.e. self and/or mutual development.

Working on translation amid the reforms of Alexander II and soon after the highly significant Peasants' reform of 1861, which effectively abolished serfdom in the Russian Empire, Kuteinikov believed that Smiles' book was extremely relevant for contemporary Russian society. As he explains in the “Translator's Preface”:

The *samodeiatel'nost'*, emerging from the current reforms, should awake in the Russian society. In this sense, the translator believes that a close acquaintance with the examples of the energetic *self-help* [*sic*. English term in the original] that are so abundant in the English society and so scarce in ours, would be, in the opinion of the translator, far from useless for the Russian public. (Kuteinikov 1866, V)

This passage explains not only Kuteinikov's motivation but also brings us back to the Russian sense of inferiority in relation to Western Europe discussed in the first chapters of this text. The

²⁹ The book was re-edited several times. It is known as *Self-Help* (*Samopomoshch*'), *Self-reliable activity* (*Samostoiatel'naia deiatel'nost'*), *Self-development* (*Samorazvitie*), etc. For example, in Vladimir Volfson's translation it is *Intellectual, Moral and Practical Self-Development* (*samodeiatel'nost'*)” [*Samorazvitie* (*samodeiatel'nost'*) *umstvennoe, nravstvennoe i prakticheskoe*] (Volfson 1895).

serfdom of Russian peasants constituted, perhaps, the main source of shame among Russian thinkers and contributed greatly to a deep sense of obligation toward the people (*narod*), a feeling that was responsible for creating significant social support for the revolution among the intelligentsia.

The Russian translation of *Self-Help* was, however, not the first one. The practical morals of Samuel Smiles quickly gained popularity in other European societies and soon the book had already been translated into French (1865), Italian (1865) and German (1866) before the Russian version appeared in 1866.³⁰ Such popularity demonstrates the extent to which the ideas of Smiles were in the spirit of the times. The Scottish moralist addressed “the new people,” those who were ready to rupture with the traditional way of life and take their lives into their own hands with the help of self-education, self-management and patient work. The new people, as opposed to the conservatives, were not supposed to be afraid of changes but rather eager to seize the opportunities offered by the new era.

Smiles’ books were, therefore, part of that broad cultural content that united European progressivists in the common conversation about European futures in the second part of the 19th century. Back then, still free of the epistemological heritage of the Cold War, Russia was part of Europe and participated in the discourse dominating the continent using the same conceptual language and vocabulary, even though cultural transfers, of course, created further local vernaculars. What is particularly curious about Smiles’ work is the ways in which this reading allowed for the articulation of both common European ideas about modernity and modernity’s local national(ist) faces.

Whereas the original text of *Self-Help* was largely based on examples issued from British history, the first European translations included examples from their own national histories. Moreover, it is possible that they did so according to an agreement with the author. As Alfred Talandier, the French translator, explains in the preface, Smiles agreed to translation under the condition that Talandier introduce into the text “the great examples from the French history.” By the same token, Vladimir Volfson, who undertook a new Russian translation in 1895, decided to add a new chapter entitled “The Russian Actors” (*russskie deiateli*). In this chapter, following the narrative logic of the author, he explained the new ideas and moralities borrowing examples from Russian history, and thus creating a new Russian pantheon that listed Russian

³⁰ See French translation: *‘Self-help’ ou Caractère, conduite et persévérance, illustrés à l’aide de biographies* (Smiles 1865). An Italian translation was published the same year: *Chi Si Aiuta Dio L’Aiuta Ovvero Storia Degli Uomini: Che Dal Nulla Seppero Innalzarsi Al Piu’ Alti Gradi in Tutti I Rami Della Umana Attività*. Both the German and the Russian translations appeared in 1866.

emperors known for their liberal reforms (e.g. Peter I and Ekaterina II) alongside military leaders (like Alexander Suvorov, famous for his war stratagem or *ruse de guerre* and his simplicity and closeness to soldiers), educators (Princess Dashkova and Prince Oldenburg), entrepreneurs (the Demidovs family), travelers (Ivan Krusenshtern), scientists (the doctor prof. Mudrov), and others.

This selection of personalities allows for the reconstruction of those values that the translator identified as the moral basis of common European modernity, such as democratization, public enlightenment, science and technology, originality of thinking and active individual position. It is remarkable that the birth of the new modern man was imagined here as both common (“global” as we would say today) and national at the same time. Every author-translator inspired by the general idea of a new modern future addressed, nevertheless, the problems and questions of his own society. For instance, Russian translators explicitly aimed not only to help Russian audiences recognize themselves in the new world of modernity but, importantly, to prove the “moral acceptability” of the British method of self-education and self-development for the Russian society.³¹

The popularity and widespread acceptance of Smiles’ work in Russia is revealed by the frequent references and mentions of him by Russian writers such as Nikolai Leskov, Alexander Kuprin, Andrei Belyi and Maxim Gorkii, amongst others. For instance, while describing the life agenda of the young Romashov, the protagonist of the novel *The Duel* (1905), Kuprin writes:

It was necessary to follow the public life, literature and science, and for this purpose Romashov subscribed to the newspaper and to the monthly popular magazine. For self-education he acquired: *Psychology* by Vundt, Lewis's *Physiology*, *Self-help* [samodeiatel'nost'] by Samuel Smiles... (NCRL, Alexander Kuprin, *The Duel*, 1905)

Andrey Belyi expresses his irritation with Smiles’ moralizing in his diary:

...high-school students, we were already dead sick of Smiles, whom we had read over and over in our adolescence ... (NCRL, Andrei Bely, *At the Border of Two Centuries*, 1929)

³¹ The new practical morality implying thrift and pragmatism was not commonly accepted in the Russian society of the mid-19th century and was subject to social debate. For instance, one of the characters of the novel *At Daggers Drawn* by Nikolai Leskov (1870) says, not without regret, “The Liubims Tortsovs are not in vogue, instead *Self-Help* by Smiles is in demand.” In this sentence he refers to Liubim Tortsov, another literary character of the drama by Nikolai Ostrovskii, conventionally understood as a truly national character, unmercenary and even fool in Christ. The national character of Liubim Tortsov is, therefore, opposed to the character described and promoted by Smiles.

Even though negative, this response testifies that, at the turn of the century, works by the Scottish author became a part of the basic educational background of any literate individual in Russia. Thus, the extreme popularity of Smiles' work in Russia demonstrates the social relevance of such content amongst a very wide audience. The idea that even the poorest person may succeed in life, as long as he or she patiently and diligently plan and consecutively realize his or her projects, was met attentively by students, intelligentsia, pedagogues, and, more broadly, socialist-minded people.

It comes as no surprise therefore that Smiles' morality and the concept of self-help (connoting both, self-initiative and self-responsibility) as the only possible way to become a new modern person was well-integrated by the revolutionaries. This particular context of the history of ideas also shines light on the ways in which the Soviet ideology and the Soviet project, understood as a particular modern apparatus, paradoxically emphasized commonality and a predominantly collective way of living, working and making decisions, while simultaneously emphasizing the role of each individual as an agent of change and supplying persistent instructions and practices of self-organization, self-control, self-criticism, self-education, self-development and self-realization.

3.2.3. *SAMODEIATEL'NOST'* AND REVOLUTION

In the second half of the 19th century, amid the peasant reform and the strengthening socialist movement, the concept of *samodeiatel'nost'* was increasingly used in the sense of collective capacity for mobilization and collective action. In the corpus I have studied, this collective *samodeiatel'nost'* is, however, often described as something that, while necessary for further social development, is found to be missing. For instance, Fyodor Dostoevsky suggests, in his diaries:

If the people is rather bestial, it is so because it was immobilized, deprived of agency [*samodeiatel'nost'*], [reduced to] a fiscal unit... (NCRL, Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notebooks*, 1850-1881)

In other words, the individual effort to achieve self-development and the subjective need for agency made room for the collective *samodeiatel'nost'* which could be understood as something like social activity from below, in which the individual merged with the community. This meaning has most probably strengthened due to the circulation of Marxist and other revolutionary inspired texts, as, along with the meanings of rationality and enlightenment,

samodeiatel'nost' increasingly connoted materialism and revolution. Thus, the painter Ilya Repin, known for his social criticism of social inequalities and exploitation, explicitly put Smiles in line with French materialist philosophers in his *Book of Memoirs*:

Authorities were overthrown, and everybody believed only in the authority of Büchner, Moleschott, Feuerbach, Mill, Lassalle, Smiles and others... (NCRL, Ilya Repin, *Far and Close. The Book of Memoirs*, 1912-1917)

Another contemporary, the Soviet writer Valentin Kaverin, mentions Smiles' oeuvre amongst the literature then circulating among political prisoners of the Imperial regime:

Along with Lehtweis, the primaries books and the complete work of Smiles, the rest of the prison's library had been circulating from hand to hand. (NCRL, Veniamin Kaverin, *The end of Khaza*, 1924)

One can say without exaggeration that during the period of the Russian revolutions many different political and social forces were united under the credo of *samodeiatel'nost'*. The regular use of the lexeme in both private writings and official documents demonstrates that during the first two decades of the 20th century the concept of *samodeiatel'nost'* functioned as an effective discursive sign with a strong positive connotation, suitable as an instrument of social political mobilization among very different social groups. Rather than defining any specific political idea, *samodeiatel'nost'* connoted a wide range of meanings that all held an aspiration of social and political change and democratization.

The official documents of the communist party, as well as papers by Lenin himself, are full of expressions like “revolutionary *samodeiatel'nost'*,” “political *samodeiatel'nost'*,” “*samodeiatel'nost'* of the masses” (or, for that matter, of the peasants or workers as well). Several times, Lenin criticized the interpretations of *samodeiatel'nost'* proposed by his political opponents, thus specifying the exact kind of *samodeiatel'nost'* that was suitable for Russia and the success of revolution.

Importantly, *samodeiatel'nost'* is used not only as (expected) political mobilization, but also as expected concrete economic activity to solve urgent practical problems. Recognizing the catastrophic state of affairs in a country devastated by the succession of the First World War, the Revolution and the Civil War, in some cases the Party openly called for bottom-up initiatives and cooperation using the discourse of *samodeiatel'nost'*:

Only together with the organized working masses represented by their trade unions and only on the ground of their widely spread *samodeiatel'nost'*, are

significant successes possible on the economic front. (The X Congress of the RKPb 1921 in: KPSS in Resolutions 1953, Vol. 1, 537)

The housing problem may be also solved with help of the *samodeiatel'nost'* of the population itself and its material participation... The best form for such a *samodeiatel'nost'* is the housing cooperation. (The XIII Congress of the RKPb 1924, in: KPSS in Resolutions 1953, Vol. 1, 849)

The maximum *samodeiatel'nost'* of the broad strata of the working class and peasants is a guaranty of economic success and cultural development (The united Plenum of TsK and TsK VKPb 1927, in: KPSS in Resolutions 1953, Vol.2, 261)

The frequency of the use of the concept in official documents demonstrates its successful incorporation into the normative vocabulary of the Communist Party in the 1920s. This incorporation was crucial to insuring the symbolical link between the broader context of European modernity, socialist content shared by very different groups of the population, the stabilization of the modern cultural script for individual self-development, and everyday social practices ranging from elementary self-help to collective mobilization. In the following section, I show how this broader context of the history of ideas informed, perhaps in an unexpected way, conceptualizations and practices of amateur activities during the early Revolutionary period.

3.3. *SAMODEIATEL'NOST'*, REVOLUTIONARY CREATIVITY AND SOVIET AMATEURISM

This stage of the semantic metamorphosis of the lexeme *samodeiatel'nost'* brings us back to the discussion of *byt* and creativity, which I quickly sketched out at the beginning of this chapter. As I explained, revolutionary minded intellectuals believed that social transformation was impossible without the radical transformation of culture, that is a “cultural revolution”; the debate about *byt* was part of this broader agenda.

The cultural revolution aimed at creating a truly proletarian culture (*proletarskaia kul'tura*), as opposed to the bourgeois one of the moment. Moreover, the most radical leftist theorists believed that the spontaneous creative impulse coming from the working class was to become the basis for an entirely new culture based “on the values and perceptions of the victorious working class” (Fitzpatrick 1988; Mally 1989; Stites 1989). Thinking along the lines of Marxist writings, theoreticians of the aesthetic movement, Proletkul't (acronym from *proletarskaia kul'tura*), considered the life and humanity that was embedded in everyday labor as a potentially truly proletarian source for creativity and culture as broadly understood. In this context,

autodidact artists coming from non-privileged social strata received particular attention, as they were expected to carry a virgin source of creativity, untouched by the dominant bourgeois culture. Thinkers such as Platon Kerzhentsov, Adrian Piotrovskii, Avlov, Alexander Gushchin et al. were developing the idea that “the new art would be the result of the amateur activity of the revolutionary mass” (Rumiantsev and Shul’pin 2000, 24). The amateur activities involving workers and peasants as their primary actors and audience were an essential constituent of the culture of the 1920s. Anarchists, Bolsheviks, the intellectuals of the left (*intelligentsiia*), all discussed ways to develop the “people’s arts” (*narodnoie iskusstvo*), which would contribute to the material and symbolical construction of the new world. Specified within those discussions were the terms *samodeiatel’nost’* (literally ‘self-activity’) and *samodeiatel’noe iskusstvo* (Eng. ‘amateur art’, literally ‘self-activated art’).

During the early period, this particular homonymy of two different phenomena – amateur artistic practice and social activity with the potential of collective mobilization – was unproblematic, as, for instance, the revolutionary theater itself was understood less as an artistic practice but rather as a performance, a collective action, enabling and empowering social change. By the same token, after the revolution, it was regular practice to accompany political manifestations and meetings with theater performances, poetic declamations and art exhibitions (Mally 1989; 2000).

This linguistic homonymy became more problematic when, in the late 1920s, discussions gave way to the concept of “culture” (*kul’tura*) being understood as centralized guidance and enlightenment as introduced by Nadezhda Krupskaiia; after gaining the upper hand in the late 1920s, it became the leading framework for the whole later Soviet period. The discourse of *kul’turnost’* (Eng. ‘culturedness’), which has principally been analyzed as a modern disciplinary technology (Kelly and Volkov 1998; Volkov 1996), was part of this broader framework. However, before further discussing this, I would like to take a moment to talk about the experimental collaborations between professional and non-professional artists coming from underprivileged milieus, as I believe it exemplifies those theoretical and practical considerations that inform a much broader context of the Soviet conceptualization of materiality across all spheres of life.

The revolutionary era carried the expectation that the “energy of creativity” would emerge not only in the field of industry, but in all spheres of life. The 1920s was a decade of heated debate about the nature and the role of a new people’s art, which was supposed to introduce a creative impulse into the public bios (*obshchestvennoe bytie*) of the life of the Soviet citizens. Thinking

along Marxist lines, early Soviet theorists believed that human labor, given its everyday immediacy, was to become an emancipatory power capable of recreating the current society and culture. Notably, the arts in this context were seen not so much as a separate area of human activity, but rather a creative way to live and work (produce) on an everyday basis.

An important methodological component of these debates was a detailed study and analysis of the art produced by naïve autodidact artists, workers and peasants, who were seen as bearers of “authentic popular aesthetics” and, more importantly, “authentic creative energy.” The theorists posited that self-activated art (*samodeiatel'noe iskusstvo*) would break with bourgeois aesthetics and become a necessary connection between the realm of public life and that of the new Socialist art. This context gave rise the acute question of the possibility of interaction between professional and amateur artists, and considerations about how these interactions should be carried out. Despite the general agreement that professionals and new-comers from peasants' and workers' milieus should work closely together, the specific forms that such collaboration should take remained subject to debate.

In her dissertation, art historian Nadezhda Musiankova analyzes the dynamics of the experimental collaborations between non-professional artists (mainly workers in Soviet factories) and revolutionary-driven intellectuals within the early Soviet associations and institutions in the 1920s and 1930s (Musiankova 2008). Regardless of differences in aesthetic preferences and methodological approaches, and the at times heated discussions and conflicts concerning institutional support and resources, leaders of those associations shared with the Bolsheviks their leftist political agenda and pursued the mission of promoting the arts among people who were previously excluded from what had been the bourgeois world of art. They agreed that the arts were a public good and a heritage of the people (*narodnoe dostoianie*), and were eager to involve workers and peasants in the process of a revolutionary reformation of the arts.

Musiankova describes three cases of professional engagement with autodidacts that exemplify three different approaches to such collaboration. A brief overview of these three approaches will also help me to illustrate a number of themes that inform the Soviet modern project, namely the relation between the new “people's culture” and “tradition”; the relation between art and technology; and the relation between the old Russian enlightenment project and Soviet modern project.