

## Challenges in re-imagining the Soviet everyday

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I find the theme of *imagining* has particular resonance in my own area of interest, which is the study of everyday life and everyday culture of the Soviet period in Russia. In the case of daily life, I think attention to imagining is important on many levels. On one level, it is important to recognize that, even before daily life became something of the faddish topic it appears to be at present, it was an essential, if largely *unacknowledged* force in this area--a deep and complexly imagined sense of daily life informing, in both more and less productive ways, scholarship on the Soviet system. As one very small for instance: the durable power of Janos Kornai's political economy of the Eastern Bloc had a great deal to do with his ability to think about daily routines and mundane processes outside the formal purview of economics, even though his work was not in any sense directly trained on daily life. So while straightforward attentions to daily life were--until recently--largely unsatisfying, the imagination of daily life has always been, I would argue, a key factor in work on the Soviet period. And, indeed, as scholarship has progressed since 1989/91, it has become increasingly clear that to more fully grasp (as in Katherine Verdery's title), *What the Soviet Union Was and What Comes Next*, we need to more fully account for everyday coping mechanisms, informal markets and informal safety nets, patterns of pleasure and consumption, and so on. So there arises a particularly *urgent*

need for challenging and refining our imaginings in this area.

The reasons that, until the past decade, straightforward attentions to daily life in Soviet Russia have been less than satisfying are largely well known. I'll review some of them briefly, as this is an audience of mixed interests. A major issue was that until the '90's, western researchers spending time in the Soviet Union were impeded in their access to many sites of daily experience, compounded by the fact that visa rules restricted travel outside a certain radius from the city center where they were authorized to live. And the pervasive sense of risk that attended unofficial contact between Westerners and Soviet citizens made traditional ethnography and interviewing nearly impossible. (Even today I find that elderly respondents are reluctant to go on tape, afraid that information they reveal will somehow be misused--though as I have been doing work on dachas and rental practices, this often points to a fear of the tax collector more than anything.) Finally, it was not until recently that certain archival records central to an understanding of daily life throughout the Soviet period became open to western scholars, for instance the massive results of public opinion monitoring, which have the potential to shed light not only on daily culture, but--more critically, as innovative scholars such as Holquist have shown us--on the relationship between daily culture and the state.

However it is equally important to note that the lack of attention to daily life was not merely conditioned by lack of access, but was rather, very much a reflection of the limits to scholarly imagining--an inability to imagine daily life as a field of signal importance, leaving it to be crowded out, or made auxiliary to, more "heroic" topics, such as revolution, Stalinism, labor as construed in masculinist discourses, kremlinology... (And, though my focus is on Western scholarship, it should be noted that a similar dynamic was at work in mainstream Soviet academe. Here, particularly in connection with *povyshenie zhiznennogo urovnia* --the raising of

living standards--daily life came actually to constitute an important arena of inquiry by social scientists. However, it was conceptualized as a neatly bounded phenomenon, constituted by planned/plannable processes and contained within certain narrow topics: time management, household budgets, individual access to cultural products, and so on. The kinds of densely theoretical work on daily life that has become so important recently--ranging in focus from worker identity to ladies' housecoats to prisoners' tattoos--would have, within this framework, appeared intellectually bizarre, *unimaginable*.)

Thus, the rich set of recent work on daily life is by no means simply the result of new opportunities (access to archives, comparative ease of ethnographic work, and so on) but has been enabled by a new/revived set of theoretical lenses. These include: feminist and queer epistemologies which break down assumptions concerning the division between public and private; Foucauldian conceptualizations of a social body shot through with power (and de Certeau's response, which sees individual actors as able to seize and play with that power); oral history/life history approaches in the social sciences, which place "unexceptional" lives center stage; the German Alltagsgeschichte movement which seeks to trace the detailed circuits of everyday life and reflect their connection with broader social processes; and a revival of interest in the work of Henri Lefebvre, who--while fundamentally Marxist in his critique--pulled playfully and ardently from movements as diverse as surrealism and Lacanian psychoanalysis to try to fully grapple with the phenomenon of the quotidian. The end of the Soviet era approached just as these streams of work were gaining broad acceptance in history and the social sciences--particularly in the US, where we have often been a bit late--and, indeed, as others have suggested, there may be intricate links between the end of the Cold War and the rethinking of basic social phenomena and of established scholarly boundaries.

Again, while my focus is on western academics, I thought I would raise one example to give a very brief sense of how profoundly these trends affected Russian academic life as well. In 1990 I was working in Leningrad and hanging out with a group of young Tartu semioticians (Tartu itself having played a unique role in promoting semiotic analysis of the everyday in Russian history). One day when we met up I showed them some recent bookstore purchases, which included a pack of laminated mini calendars which were something like trading cards in size and sensibility. In the series I had bought, each card featured a female model, a "Russian beauty," posed with great examples of Russian gemstones (Faberge eggs, ornate pins, etc.) arranged in her hair! My companions were absolutely shocked and disturbed that I would have purchased anything so vulgar. I myself--fresh out of a program of undergraduate language study--had not found a way to articulate a framework for the importance of these things; I could only describe what was a sensual attraction to petty shards of everydayness in Soviet life--teapots, suites of living room furniture, the calendar cards and the like. This attraction, however (for reasons I will return to) had little resonance for my friends. Several years later, among the same group, Engelstein's groundbreaking *Sex and the Keys to Happiness* had already made the rounds and Boym's *Common Places* had just come out, raising with elegance the topics of kitsch and commonness in Soviet life. Not only was my old interest now "comprehensible," it was nearly on the verge of becoming routine, and I was behind these same friends in working to theorize it; it was, in fact, these scholars--rather than anyone back home--who first suggested I read Michel de Certeau's *Practice of Everyday Life*.

[If time, speak of specific works that have been important and exciting in this area.]

Given a scenario, then, in which daily life has become not only an imaginable topic, but a sought after one, I wanted to propose three points of awareness, or points for meditation, that I believe are important for *western scholars* to keep in mind as this field of inquiry develops.

First, I believe we have to begin with an appreciation of the overwhelming burden that has been placed on the chance-observed *detail* in much work on Soviet daily life by westerners. For instance, in the 1920's and 30's, there emerged a very particular literature written by western visitors to the Soviet state. Here I am thinking of people such as Negley Farson, Maurice Hindus, Malcom Davis. The authors of such works--though they had different political entry points--clearly sought out details of daily life to contribute to the moral and political assessment of Soviet rule, and possibilities for long-term political and social development. Farson, in *Seeing Red*, for instance, fixates on the cockroaches in a peasant hut, running along the walls and over the table, as the critical detail, bracing his argument that these peasants "were a good hundred years behind us in evolution....I felt hopeless and helpless before their dark minds..." (pp.128-129) In the post-WWII variant of travel writing and journalistic observation--which often fused with academic accounts (journalists being "called in," for instance, to handle issues of daily culture in edited collections)--this overtly evaluative tone was replaced by a focus on the bit by bit unraveling of Soviet mysteries: daily queues, unofficial barter, political perks, *samizdat*. Much of this was conveyed with great skill, as well as with a durable tone of head-wagging bemusement. For instance, in *Main Street, USSR*, Levine pauses to consider the lack of mechanization in Soviet life through the vignette of a floor-waxing: "A workman removes one shoe and sock, places his bare foot through a strap attached to a brush, and by a jerky, jogging movement, limps along, slowly polishing the floor." (p. 87) Here, rather than clues to an unfolding world-historical drama, each detail is situated as a crucial, tiny opening to a panorama

of entrenched strangeness--this is Soviet life as *eksotika*.

It would be possible to go on for quite a while exploring the permutations by which details were "stressed out" in such accounts. Overall it suffices to say that, rather than anything approaching a Geertzian thick description, much of earlier work by Westerners on the Soviet quotidian represented a kind of casual trade in iconic moments, which left daily life and daily culture itself unproblematized and untheorized. These details became a way to give firmness and validity to assumptions that grew out of other quarters, other concerns. Moreover, they conveniently provided a very un-challengeable firmness, precisely because it was a firmness composed of *fleeting details*. This, of course, is a problem in ethnographic observation that is by no means limited to work on the Soviet Union, but it was exacerbated in this context both by a lack of access as well as by the intensity of politics, as daily life was called on to brace geopolitical concerns.

Here I would like to introduce a second point, concerning how we as individual scholars have come to imagine the connections between the isolated details encountered in daily life. In a curious way, there has been a remarkably cohesive school of training in this regard. Adele Marie Baker points to this in commenting on how Westerners "really" got to know the Soviet Union (or, at least, Moscow and Leningrad):

While Western scholars were not urged to explore [daily culture], it was shockingly easy for American professors and students to gain access into nonofficial Soviet life. Sitting until the early hours of the morning in the kitchen of the intelligentsia was one of the ways Western students and academics were able to find out what was really going on in lives outside the prescriptive norms propagated by the media or by official discourse. We

needed that nonofficial version...to construct for ourselves that more complete picture of Soviet life. [*Consuming Russia* p. 32]

Once again, this point is not unique to the Soviet scene: it seems likely that most academics traveling to foreign countries tend to rely on other academics or intellectuals as their main cultural guides. But in the Soviet years, this relationship was invested with a particular intensity, both because members of the intelligentsia were among the few who found it worth the risk to cultivate such contacts, and because western students and scholars depended on their generosity for psychic and material comforts in what could feel like a very harsh environment. (And were we to truly unfold into a sociology of knowledge, doubtlessly we would also have to explore how the denigrated/exalted position of the marginalized Russian intelligentsia articulated with the yearnings of so many Americans, who felt keenly the absence of a well-defined role for the U.S. intellectual.) In any event, to an extreme degree, most of us learned to interpret daily life in precisely the way Baker suggests: by mimicking and mastering rubrics of interpretation from friends in the intelligentsia.

But this raises a very important set of issues, as there has been a carefully guarded distance between the intelligentsia (particularly the so-called “creative,” “marginalized” or “old-style” —v. “Soviet,” “technical”—intelligentsia) and other strata in society, particularly middle strata, who tend to be summed up by the term *meshchanstvo*, meaning petty bourgeoisie, but also philistinism, vulgarity, narrowmindedness--an old, and in this context of use, wholly unredeemable word. (That is to say, it cannot, a la American identity politics, be turned into a badge of self pride.) This was a gulf based not only on differently structured class interests, but an antipathy fed by deep and personal politics. Inhabitants of the Soviet middle were seen by

intelligentsia not only as culturally compromised, but as morally so, the assumption being that their middling aspirations reflected accommodation with the Soviet system. Hence my friends' disapproval when I toted out my calendar cards for show: these reflections of *meshchanstvo* simply could not be counted as charming, or even interesting.

Now my intent here is by no means to argue that this has been a "distorting lens" in our explorations of daily life. We are each of us working from a standpoint, which is much more the issue. And, of course, it is from the Russian intelligentsia that much of the most powerful work on the everyday is now emerging. (Nor does it make any sense to ignore the fact that even *virtuosically* culturally astute outsiders, let alone a comparative novice like myself, cannot compare with the sensitivity to layers of meaning possessed by someone fully steeped both in the cultural history of Russia and in the day to day, lived understanding of the Soviet system.)

But the issue remains that it is precisely within the *meshchanstvo* that one might most hope to find clues to the maintenance and development of the Soviet *quotidienne*. This produces a conflict, which is present but not confronted in much of the literature of the past few years. For instance, in two extremely important recent works on the Soviet everyday, Ries' *Russian Talk* and Boym's *Common Places*, there is a palpable absence built into the analysis. Ries' work explores a late-Perestroika moral imagination of villains and victims, and probes certain semi-structured forms of talk ("litany" and "lament") that have deep roots in Russian narrative tradition and serve to embed a sense of powerlessness among their users. In a curious way, however, Ries herself works to shore up this moral imagination, precisely by *not* probing other kinds of talk: mundane but purposeful talk concerning aspirations, planning, enjoyment of modest luxuries, and so on. These forms of talk do indeed also exist (and they become quite important in untangling market transition). Ries hints, however, that the folks who employ them



*actually are* morally compromised, making them recede further from view: a population that cannot be discursively redeemed. There is a subtler tension at work in Svetlana Boym's *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia*. In the study of the Soviet *quotidienne*, this was a groundbreaking book, employing a compelling range of "lit crit" approaches to plumb the mysteries of communal apartment living, Russian *graphomania*, and the tactical deployment of everyday objects such as doilies and teapots. Analytically, Boym frames this endeavor with the charge that Russian intellectual culture has persistently placed *byt*--the densely packed Russian word for the details of everyday life--in subjugated opposition to *bytie*, or Being. Mundanity versus transcendence. In *Common Places*, she seeks to raise contemplation of the Russian everyday out of this binary tension, envisioning it as a place of slippages and double-entendres--a realm of appropriation and mis-appropriation as well as domination, and a realm which bears a certain intellectual charm-in-itself. However, Boym's analysis may end up relying on these very oppositions, perhaps precisely because her informants are, in the main, fellow *intelligenty* and her preoccupations are theirs. For Boym, elements of the everyday become topical in their incarnation as kitsch, Baudrillardian simulacrum, mundanity sanctified by irony.

There is a telling moment in her description of "Liuba's apartment" where she locates a space where kitsch and irony fall short in accounting for the mundanity of objects and their arrangement. "In other words," Boym comments, "these objects are impure and outmoded on all grounds." (p. 158). For Boym, this is a stopping place to a line of inquiry. But it leaves me wondering if there is a way, as well, to make it a starting point, allowing ourselves to enter the fully into the mundane, to allow ourselves to be tainted by the *experience* of it? If, in other words, there is a way not only to supercede the binary of *byt*-*bytie*, but to begin understanding without it?

This observation leads finally to a third point for meditation, which concerns both the importance and the precariousness of using theory in attempting to work through the Soviet mundane. Much of the exciting work on the everyday is focused on consumption of various kinds, and much of it draws—either implicitly or explicitly—on a post-structuralist reading of texts, including objects, sites, practice, etc. as text. As a result, much of it is work that does not contain an ethnographic component, rather—in the enticing manner of much post-structuralist work on culture—allows the author to range freely over the sensual surfaces of daily life. This is wonderful work but it can be tricky, given that it *heightens the burden placed on the reading of the detail*, the very problem that we would want theory, in this context, to “save” us from. More troublingly, perhaps, the proliferation of textual approaches ensures that one that does not have to brush up against *meshchanstvo* as embodied in real people. I am reminded of Geertz's offhand comment that linguistic structuralism in anthropology developed in part from a desire to ward off contact with real populations of "natives." Indeed, at a working session at the Institute of Sociology in 1999, a scholar who is doing innovative work in this area praised textual approaches for precisely this reason: they allow her to avoid having to talk to the ranks of middling folks whose presence she finds so distasteful.

A linked issue is that the remnants of Soviet daily life—from childhood songs and lessons to toppled statues—are treated most consistently these days in terms of kitsch, and in terms of their ironic redeployment in art, advertising, and in everyday practice. I myself certainly never tire of reading this kind of work, but I do wonder if it becomes easy for us to avoid treating the fact that Soviet tropes and slogans are also employed everywhere in daily life in much more earnest ways. It is, after all, not only the Communist elderly who take seriously the moral precepts they associate with Soviet training. The conversion of non-ironic communist daily

culture to non-ironic capitalist daily culture seems to me a still wide open field for exploration.

My comments, in this sense, have less to do with a critique of existing work, which is really quite exciting, than a sense of promise: that there are particularities to the post-Soviet everyday (understood as an extension of the Soviet everyday) which outstrip our existing theoretical vocabularies and which could lead to new ways of seeing everyday culture. Tapping these, I would suggest, will mean finding our way to reconceptualizing the importance of the detail in everyday life, combining ethnographic practice with theoretical enterprise, and, finally, allowing ourselves to wander into the very heart of the mundane—the place that is “outmoded on all grounds.”