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**Autor:** Vasilyeva, Zinaida

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# DO-IT-YOURSELF PRACTICES

## Technical knowledge in late Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia

**Text:** *Zinaida Vasilyeva*

**Keywords:** *materiality, DIY, self-made objects, appropriation, Soviet Union, post-socialism*

In 2006 in Moscow, an exhibition titled *Gifts to the Leaders* presented to the public a considerable number of gifts, offered to the Soviet leaders between 1920 and 1990. Ironically, journalists called it an «exhibition of popular art». This euphemism was provoked by the fact that a considerable number of artifacts were self-made presents of «ordinary people» who wanted to express their feelings towards their leaders. One of these gifts was a portrait of Lenin made out of human hair. This gift was created in the early 1930s by Grigory Borukhov, a hairdresser from Moscow. In his letters, written to the People's Commissar for Military and Naval Affairs, Borukhov sought support for his «absolutely original» works – tapestry pictures of human hair: «I am proud that in my person a Soviet working man, a citizen of the USSR, became the first to lay the foundations of this rare type of art» (Sosnina & Ssorin-Chaikov 2006: 15). The catalog commentators noted that this gift was in line with the long-standing tradition of presenting rulers with samples of innovative technology and art with the aim of securing a high-placed patron. In his letter, Borukhov stressed that the Commissar «saw and appreciated his art and volunteered to help. Bearing in mind your advice..., I left the barbershop two months ago and started working on a new picture. Among other things, I want to make a big panel for the future Palace of Soviets in the belief that it would be appropriate there...» (Sosnina & Ssorin-Chaikov 2006: 15).

This example, taken from early Soviet history, illustrates several important points for the research of do-it-yourself practices in the USSR. First, it shows how the immediate surround-

ings provoke a creative rethinking of elements that constitute such environment. Second, it illustrates the process of converting specific professional skills, leading to the invention of a new technique. And third, this example reveals how an object brings about social realities: ideological content, valorization of crafts and self-made things, as well as exchange practices.

My PhD project seeks to contribute to the anthropology of everyday life in socialist and post-socialist societies by examining an important but previously neglected social phenomenon under late socialism in the Soviet Union. The research investigates practical knowledge in the USSR focusing on do-it-yourself (DIY) practices that were widespread during the Soviet period. In addition to traditional arts and crafts, ordinary Soviet citizens constructed television sets, radios, refrigerators, and a number of smaller appliances used in everyday life. Furthermore, they did so in the context of official Marxist-Leninist ideology, which asserted the indivisibility of the worker and the product of his/her labor. I inquire into: (a) the relationship between, on the one hand, practical skills and day-to-day routines and, on the other hand, knowledge and ideology; (b) the ways in which a particular knowledge is mobilized across spatial and temporal contexts (e.g., shifts from workplace to domestic space, from work hours to free time); and (c) the controversial meanings of «materiality» in Soviet and post-Soviet society. This project challenges commonly constructed oppositions between consumption and production, manual and intellectual labor, work and leisure time activities, invention and routine, high and popular design, and educated and everyday taste.

My initial interest in practical knowledge derives from an observation of how widespread self-made, remade and repaired objects are in post-Soviet Russia. The fact that these practices continue in the post-Soviet period challenges the commonly held assumption that they developed as a result of the shortages in consumer goods that characterized the Soviet era. Rather than reducing the prevalence of DIY practices to economic inefficiency, I investigate them in the context of the institutional organization of both the economic and educational systems, particularly with respect to professional and common-sense knowledge, and practical skills. Thus, I study the construction of knowledge while contributing to a larger field, that of the social history of the late USSR. This project will rely on a research design that combines historical and anthropological approaches in order to perform multi-sited ethnography of the DIY phenomenon in the USSR. Data will be gathered through observation, interviewing, collecting and visiting material cultural objects from private and state museums, and a thorough literature review. I will interview different groups of people: DIY amateurs, qualified workers, engineers, inventors, instructors in state-run technical clubs, and journalists who have been working for technical magazines.

The project is designed as empirically based, whereby theoretical hypotheses are developed and tested in the process of analyzing the results of field research. However, my preliminary investigations have already given some indication as to the possible interpretive approaches to be used. The next sections present some conceptual and methodological approaches to the analysis of DIY as a specific social phenomenon and practice.

## Embodied Knowledge

The movie *Andrei Rublev* by Andrei Tarkovsky (1966) contains a scene where the young son of a coppersmith is looking for a specific type of clay in order to make a bell. He has never cast a bell before, even though he used to help his father and knows the feel of clay. The boy also knows that if he fails, he will be put to death. After a long search in the pouring rain, tired and desperate, he falls and slides down the hill. There, the whole surface of his body recognizes the feel of the needed clay! This feeling of matter, as embodied knowledge mediated by touch, smell, sound or taste, as well as the ability «to think through one's hands» and learn from one's material, will inform the direction of my inquiry. Some of my informants tell that they cannot explain how they create their artifacts, but they can easily show how to make them because their «hands know how» (*ruki znaiut*). Moreover, they often use Russian sayings such as «hands of gold» (*zlotye ruki*) or «the task scares the eyes but not the hands» (*glaza boiatsa, a ruki delaiut*). Some of my respondents told me that DIY appeared in their lives as a remedy against depression.

Since Descartes, Western thought has been marked by the separation of body and mind. This theoretical division resulted in the further conceptualization of man as a subjective being guided by an immaterial mind and living within the objective material environment; it also contributed to an understanding of the body as a tool, comparable to a machine. Mauss was probably one of the first social thinkers who challenged the Cartesian model through the discovery of cultural knowledge «outside of the mind». His notion of bodily techniques (*techniques du corps*) described social forms of behavior, value and competence mediated by the socialized human body (Mauss 1950). Leroi-Gourhan contributed to this approach through his famous conceptual dyad, which claimed that gesture and speech (*le geste et la parole*) were two inseparable parts of human activity and treated manufacturing as a dialog between an individual and matter (Leroi-Gourhan 1964). Recent work (Ingold 2000; Marchand 2010; Sennett 2008) has extended the idea of interaction between the subject and the material environment by developing the concept of skills, which integrates knowledge with gestures and, therefore, bridges the gap between the material world and social practice.

In my field, I observe how individuals construct meanings out of their DIY practices and how these meanings respond to official, professional, or common sense discourses. Often, a skill as an embodied knowledge is a starting point for rethinking and creating of meaning. Thus, a hairdresser suddenly reinterprets his routine skills and discovers a new «art». Similarly, routine day-to-day manual work on a factory floor may result in a sudden intellectual insight and further technological innovation. On the other hand, a professional accountant who knits round carpets out of strips of old cloth, may understand her hobby as a philosophy, in which DIY, household pragmatism and charity appear as different facets of the same recycling and exchange system.

## Knowledge through the Environment

Unlike the ideal Levi-Strauss's bricoleur, who operates with a close set of units, my DIY informants are not restricted in their use of a specific number of elements, even though, in practice, they are limited by the available resources. Regardless of the institutional and economic conditions that shaped their lives, ordinary Soviet citizens have demonstrated a remarkable creativity in everyday life (Certeau 1984). This creativity was based on a rethinking of the environment surrounding them.

Thus, in addition to drawing on the literature that challenges the duality of body and mind, I build on the literature questioning the notion of abstract, location-less knowledge. I approach DIY as an interaction of human and non-human elements in a concrete place. The notion of situated activity (Suchman 1987),

further elaborated in Distributed Cognition Theory (Hutchins 1995), as well as the concept of circulation of knowledge (Cohen 2010), all help investigate the interconnections between knowledge, body, locality, material world and social activities.

Specific expertise and skills involved in the activity, objects such as instruments, machines, periodicals, books, or human skills and social conventions constitute different facets of knowledge circulating through various localities (Conein et al. 1993). Thus, a school student reading popular technical magazines starts making hi-tech radio sets at home, while an engineer plants vegetables according to professional knowledge and reaps a bountiful harvest. Similarly, a worker manufactures at his workplace a bronze plug for his neighbor's bathroom while a military engineer creates for his daughter a Christmas garland using space rockets' lamps. The bricoleur's thinking coexists, therefore, with the engineer's one, and professional knowledge, skills and objects penetrate home and hobby spaces, and vice versa.

## Ideology Structuring Knowledge

The way of conceptualizing work processes ultimately depends on the economic system of a given society. Built by Marxist ideologies, the Soviet state developed a planned economy that privileged production (labor) over consumption. In Soviet ideology, the possibility of expressing oneself at one's workplace was considered to be the most important right and a life goal for all Soviet citizens. As the study of the basic texts by Marx and Lenin was part of the curriculum at all levels of schooling, the main tenets of Marxism-Leninism ended up being internalized by society in a vulgarized form, often expressed in folk poetry, tales, songs, etc. Thus, the interpretation of labor as a process allowing a person to create him / herself as a subject (the Hegelian idea of exteriorization adapted by Marx) and, therefore, contribute to society, became a notion widely accepted by ordinary citizens.

The Soviet handyman/handywoman (*chelovek s rukami*) was convinced that *anything* could become an object of his / her labor: any material and any item had a potential value insofar as it incorporated some objective physical characteristics that could (and should) be put to good use (Gille 2007). In contrast, the neglect of this potential was considered disrespectful towards material resources and towards the worker him / herself. As Marxism claimed an intimate link between work and subject, the idea that «he who makes it owns it» was intuitively accepted as common sense knowledge. This «economistic» discourse was often underlined or reinforced by idealistic convictions (ethical, religious or superstitious), as well as a rejection of pragmatic values (money, consumer goods, etc.). For example, I was told the following: «When I saw people lining up [at the store], I was glad

to have no money on me» or, «I did not want to finish my PhD because among my friends it was seen as a bad thing to do – you would do the same job, but you earn more money. It was unfair.»

Appealing to the concept of fairness is not surprising once we consider that the ideals of equality and social justice have been a crucial component of communist ideology, and also the easiest ones to internalize since they resonated with traditional peasant «moral economy». Similarly, the official interpretation of Marxism-Leninism as a «science» resulted in the generally high prestige accorded to science by the large public. Science and technology were elevated to the level of an ideal in itself, almost a substitute for religion. In the Soviet period, it is not an exaggeration to say that equality and justice (embodying a popular interpretation of communism) and pure science (the less applicable, the better) represented Mannheim's notion of total ideology (Mannheim 1929). Putting everyday life on a «scientific» basis, along with the rationalization of the economy, was an extremely important point in Soviet ideology. Since the late 1950s, special magazines like *Do-It-Yourself*, *Working Woman*, *Science & Life*, and others started publishing reports on ordinary people's technological inventions. Although most of these reports concerned everyday activities (e.g. practical advice on how to get rid of ants or make ink at home), the argumentation was always supported by scientific reasoning. These magazines also provided the reader with updates on recent technical innovations and scientific research, thus contributing to the promotion of science and technological progress.

Of course, the popularization of technical knowledge was not a uniquely Soviet project. Such magazines were also published during the postwar period in Western Europe, Japan, and the US. However, the state's goal in building this knowledge network was different: not to encourage the readers in the pursuit of their hobbies, but to involve ordinary people, on a practical level, in the construction of a new society. The politics of the Cold War era and the primacy of the military industry both required the prioritization of technical competence in everyday life.

The Soviet state promised official support for inventors, since it aimed to create a new society with a new form of culture. The gift presented by the hairdresser did not look so strange at the time, when a creative rethinking of routine work was almost demanded. In my research, I will explore how DIY practices accord with official and individual discourses, how people employ these practices at different times and places of their lives, and what DIY objects may tell us about Soviet society. Following the concept of the seamless cloth (*tissu sans couture*) (Hugues 1986; Callon 1988; Latour 1989), I consider the object itself, the knowledge and skills activated during its preparation, and the social practices that contextualize it as different facets of the same social fact.

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## AUTHOR

**Zinaida Vasilyeva** is a PhD candidate at the Institute for Social Anthropology of the University of Neuchâtel. She holds two MA degrees in History and in Cultural Anthropology from the State University and European University at St. Petersburg (Russia) respectively. She participated in research projects focusing on the use of technologies in everyday life, ethnography of communications, and oral history of the late USSR. In 2008, she came to Switzerland as a fellow of the Swiss Confederation program for foreign postgraduate students.

*Institut d'Ethnologie, rue Saint-Nicolas 4, 2000 Neuchâtel, zinaida.vasilyeva@unine.ch*