RECONSTRUCTING THE HOUSE OF CULTURE

Community, Self, and the Makings of Culture in Russia and Beyond

Edited By

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This book—in a nutshell—is about the postsocialist condition of culture. A few words are in order to unpack these two key terms, so much contested in anthropology, and to explain how they play out in our story.

Postsocialist . . .

All the chapters in this volume investigate the makings of public culture as exemplified by a particular institution: the House of Culture. There is one question that has consistently popped up throughout this research: to what extent can we identify lines of continuity that run from early-Soviet to late-Soviet and through to post-Soviet modes of cultural practice? Clearly, such labels as postsocialist and post-Soviet have been worn thin from unreflective overuse. In the last twenty years, states and people(s) have embarked upon very divergent trajectories; some social scientists talk about first-generation and second-generation change in erstwhile socialist societies, while in some states socialism is alive and very “real” even today. The explanatory clout of “transitology”—the scientific study of large-scale political and economic transformation towards market economy that was the approach du jour of the mainstream Western academic set in the 1990s—has been largely discredited because of its Eurocentrism, teleological and normative assumptions of unidirectional transition, and tendency to overgeneralize. “Postsocialist” as an attribute can no longer do justice to the entangled political and social realities of present-day life in the countries that once were under the influence of the Soviet Union (nor for any other part of the world). And yet, some commonalities appear to have “survived,” like sublime leitmotifs that come up even though the tune, the language, and the orchestra have changed. Part of the story that we and the contributors to this volume want to tell is about how such seemingly small and peripheral phenomena linger on. The setting of this story is the sphere of culture (more exactly, the public sphere of culture work and cultural production, as shall be specified below). This is not to say that the sphere of culture is the main or only sphere where the tenacity of

Epilogue

Recognizing Soviet Culture

Bruce Grant

The Puzzle of Recognition

Where do anthropologists look for culture? The British dean of the field, Edward Tylor, once eased the way by suggesting a rather mechanistic definition that many historians of the discipline could likely rehearse from memory: “Culture, or Civilization taken in its widest sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, morals, art, belief, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (1920: 1). By Tylor’s program, one went on the hunt for distinctive trappings of material life and, in turn, extrapolated a program of belief to which all Kulturträger, or culture-bearers, were understood to subscribe. The induction of Herder into anthropological circles upped the ante: the mapping of Volksgeist, loosely defined as a collective esprit de corps, could be done without recourse to fieldwork on the basis of texts alone. But the reigning premise that was to settle into both social and cultural anthropologies across the twentieth century is that culture is, by definition, an elusive quarry. One could not walk up to a House of Culture, knock on the door, and simply find it.

By most common methods, culture has been sought through a number of displacements: For Malinowski this meant the work of taking up the native’s point of view; for Lévi-Strauss, trained in both geology and psychoanalysis, it meant an archaeology of the mind, the uncovering of deep structure. But perhaps the apotheosis of this paradigm of elusiveness comes in Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of misrecognition. By Bourdieu’s rendering, for any number of culturally informed practices to operate, they may be semi-recognized, but only grudgingly, or better, misrecognised entirely. “If the system is to work,” Bourdieu wrote, for example, about gift-giving in Outline of a Theory of Practice, “the agents must not be entirely unaware of the truth of their exchanges … while at the same time they must refuse to know and above all to recognize it” (1977: 5). “Systems of classification,” he continued, “make their specific contribution to the reproduction of power relations of which they are the
product, by securing the misrecognition, and hence the recognition, of the arbitrariness on which they are based” (1977: 164). All of this leads to the famous line in Bourdieu’s classic work,

Because the subjective necessity and self-evidence of the commonsense world are validated by the objective consensus on the sense of the world, what is essential goes without saying because it comes without saying. (1977: 167)

My point for this brief tour through the history of anthropology is to visit a fact not often mentioned in studies of culture under state socialism (or more specifically, state cultures, the cultures of state socialism of which Houses of Culture were an integral part). By some contrast to a long history of assumption about culture’s elusive nature, from Tylor through Bourdieu, the USSR joined with many other modernizing powers over the course of the twentieth century in launching very explicit attempts to make socialist culture “said,” in effect, to render socialist culture immediately recognizable through a variety of scripts and forms. Socialist culture, in some contrast to many other world-cultural forms, very much then, “came with saying.” It is the puzzle of this recognition that I look to consider in this closing essay.

Like many scholars of Soviet society, I once spent much time poring over the many volumes devoted to kul’turnoe stroitel’stvo, “culture building,” printed foremost from the 1930s onwards. These texts called upon culture both as a developmental project (harking back to the culture concept’s original etymologies in agriculture and cultivation), as well as a disciplinary project (given the etymological roots of colonization [Williams 1985: 87–93]). The latter was evidenced particularly in Russia where Montesquieu’s “civilizing mission,” literally the tsiivilizatorskia misisia so favored by Catherine the Great, was far more often crafted as a kul’turnaia misisia, a “cultural mission.” Both these senses of culture call up the normative labors of Houses of Culture across the former Soviet bloc. But these texts also called upon a notion of culture as a collective noun (like “furniture”), what Heidegger once called an “equipmental whole,” a package deal, something that consisted of multiple parts forming a whole, and without which no modernizing state, in this case, could be understood to operate without. Heidegger writes,

Equipment—in accordance with its equipmentality—always is in terms of [such] its belonging to other equipment: ink-stand, pen, ink, paper, blotting pad, table, lamp, furniture, windows, doors, room. These “things” never show themselves proximally as they are for themselves, so as to add up to a sum of realia and fill a room. What we encounter as closest to us ... is the room; and we encounter it not as something “between four

walls” in a geometrical spatial sense, but as equipment for residing. Out of this the “arrangement” emerges, and it is in this that any “individual” item of equipment shows itself. Before it does so, a totality of equipment has already been discovered. (1962: 97–98, original emphasis)

In this roundabout style Heidegger offers us something key, a chance to think about the cataloging of culture—not simply in the Tyloren sense of culture as a complex set of objects fused by belief—but with a view to the very specific forms that containing culture under state socialism could take. With Heidegger in mind, the idea is not to look so much at the assemblage of “realia” but at culture’s “equipmentality,” as it were.¹

Several decades later, the prevalence of those early Soviet documentary anthologies gave way to the programmatic texts of advanced socialism—books like The Communist’s Moral Ideal (Bychkova 1987), The Soviet Citizen’s Primer (Romanova 1980), or any of the dozens of works written by political philosophers such as Arnol’d Arnol’dov (1973, 1976a, 1976b, 1977, 1978, 1980, 1984a-d, 1987, 1988). For myself, it was not in Moscow, but on Sakhalin Island, in the spring of 1990, when I began collecting these books in earnest in a fishing community where I was doing research—gently surprised to find them piled up in outhouses, awaiting a sorry fate. When I turned to the librarian in the local House of Culture, and later to the manager of the village council office, to ask whether this might not be a quiet blasphemy, both women smiled, and said they would be happy to set aside any “double copies” they could find in their collections. I was soon loaded down by well-wishers happy to divest their long-ago-acquired editions.

Thus, while the early British school crafted kinship charts of a complexity intelligible to few whose lives they were believed to map; while Lévi-Strauss created homologous pairs of binary oppositions that were destined for deep revelation; and while Bourdieu urged us all to swim upstream against the tides of the naturalizations of social life—with all three of these scholars, in effect, suggesting ways for us to decode the mysteries of inherently elusive cultural forms—I would underscore instead that, under state socialism, we encounter something of a different stripe. While perhaps no less mysterious than any other set of societies in the world, the socialist ambit offers something relatively distinct—systematic and voluble professions of cultural knowledges. Through Houses of Culture (among other institutions), alongside a myriad of texts and practices, the message is, in effect, “Here is our culture, come and get it.” This is to say, the Soviet cultural project was unabashedly public, rife with intended for mass consumption and intended most importantly to be widely shared.²
Other states (many states, in fact, driven by market economies) undertook and continue to undertake public self-definitions: in fraught debates over national patrimony, as Richard Handler demonstrated for Quebec (1986); in finely tuned pageants and competitions in seemingly apolitical zones of the arts, as Virginia Dominguez documented for Israel (1988); and more commonly in tourism campaigns around the globe (see for example, Ivy 1995)—to mention only three anthropologists among a wide range of scholars and disciplinary approaches. One could add to this any number of works on Ministries of Culture (Fumaroli 1999; Lebovics 1992), monuments (Mosse 1990) or national museums (Karp and Lavine 1991). But I want to suggest that something different is going on under state socialism. The perceived social pluralisms of most market economies, I would argue, have conventionally held the government's open control of the power to name, or the power to define the collective in cultural terms, at relative bay. Soviet society may not have been any less pluralist, but its government profile was. It had almost no competition in official pronouncements over the directions of social life. What stands out in the Soviet context therefore is the braver of trying to capture a single cultural project under one roof, as it were: literally, in Houses of Culture, and metaphorically, in hundreds of efforts large and small to foster shared sensibilities across eleven time zones, some fifteen national republics, and at least two hundred active language communities. Long before Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) made "the invention of tradition" a commonplace in studies of national histories and nationalist movements, one of the world's growing superpowers put culture at the forefront of its business.

A significant part of the puzzle in studying such an eminently recognizable cultural enterprise is that so many scholars have insisted it is not worth the effort. Some who have ethnographically taken up cultural management by states emphasize the artificiality of state sponsorship, arguing that its preoccupations with Gesellschaft over a more organically perceived Gemeinschaft doom such efforts to skeletal receptions among diverse citizenries (Handler 1986; Lebovics 1992). In the Soviet context, such views found easy resonance in Cold War logics that portrayed the Soviet state as a Leviathan divorced from any actual or genuine participation. Yet as so many excellent studies have shown, we know that for better and for worse, millions of lives were wholly invested in what came of this Soviet cultural engineering. To recall Katherine Verdery's phrasing, socialism, in its extraordinary reach over concepts of power, time, and space, organized an entire "cognitive organization of the world" (1996: 4). So how does one best study places such as Houses of Culture, dismissed and embraced by so many in such tandem?

**From Pokazukha to Pokaz**

The books on Soviet culture building by authors such as Arnol'dov and others surely might rank among the many kinds of texts and practices that long ago earned the title of *Pokazukha*—that which only seems, that which is done purely for show, all form, no substance (see Sántha and Safonova, Chapter 3 of this volume). For many the very mention of Soviet culture, as such, is synonymous with dissimulation.

One day in the Spring of 1989 I was walking past the House of Scientific Atheism in Moscow, on Ulitsa Radishcheva, not far from the Taganka Theater. It was a large, two-story, neoclassical, columned building from the early 1800s, and featured a poster advertising a series of lectures to be held throughout the spring on Soviet state ritual. A few weeks later, I showed up at one such event at the appointed time, wandered into the lavish but near empty building, and did not find a soul. I located the porter, who was squirreled away reading novels in a room behind the coat-check. When I told him I had come for the lecture, he looked very pleased. "I've worked here for two years," he said, "and you're the first person who's ever come! They don't really hold the lectures. The posters, you know, they're just for show." A few times later that season, I visited the library there to read about early Soviet campaigns against shamanism in the Russian Far East. As before, there was never anyone about (the extensive library had to be opened specially for my visits because it, too, rarely received any readers). And on at least two evenings following my library work, I sat with the porter, upstairs, in the leather-paneled director's office. There was not a shred of paper about to suggest an ounce of activity, and I often wondered if anyone but the porter and librarian ever set foot in the building to run its affairs. The spacious director's office was most prominently outfitted, instead, with a television, where we watched old movies and dined on potatoes. In this near-empty structure at the twilight of the socialist period, Soviet atheism was performed by little more than the building's very naming.

By contrast, the House of Culture that I later came to know much better, in the small fishing village of Rybnoe on northwest Sakhalin Island's Tatar Strait coast, home to some two hundred and fifty people, was a much busier place. It was, like many of its counterparts across the former USSR, simultaneously library, discotheque, cinema, town square,
and club house. Yet it, too, like the House of Scientific Atheism I had once visited in Moscow, was prone to scenes of abiding absurdity, as on one occasion when a full orchestra on tour from Vladivostok arrived by helicopter without notice—all tubas and horns—one weekend morning. In theory their job was to bring high culture to the masses, but few masses could be found early on a Saturday after a long work week at the height of the summer fish run. An impromptu concert on the steps of the House of Culture was performed before an audience of five—two grandmothers, two children, and a tired, bored-looking village council chairman. In the distance, passersby could be seen, darting from house to house, hiding behind fences so as not to be snared into attending. I asked the village secretary later why the musicians bothered to perform at all, when it was obvious no one was interested. “They didn’t come to perform,” she said, “they came to shop.” And indeed, Rybnoe’s town store, normally a well-stocked paradise at the time by comparison with mainland shops, looked like it had been looted by vandals by the time the helicopters lifted off several hours later. The village’s bootleg caviar dealers fared all the better.

Clearly either of these illustrations could be written up as evidence of pokazukha’s past, if not its present, and for sound reason. In looking at the social lives of these physical spaces, it is incumbent upon us to distinguish the bustling from the simply bust. But the question I would ask in this context is: Is the empty city palace of atheism any less effective than its crowded village counterpart for purposes of advancing a perceived project of Soviet civilization, or in contemporary terms, a Russian state culture? As I would suggest, pokazukha, too, can be generative and productive in ways that are often overlooked.

One book for thinking along these lines is Alexei Yurchak’s felicitously titled, *Everything was Forever, Until It Was No More* (2006), where it is precisely the slippage of recognition in the socialist cultural project that Yurchak has on the table. The subject is late socialism, Soviet society from the 1950s to the 1980s, with a heavy tilt to the years immediately preceding perestroika that Yurchak knew best, when he was a student and later working as a manager for the Leningrad-based rock band AVIA. How is it that one can account for the perceived stability of the Soviet system, Yurchak asks, for the probity of Soviet culture’s edifice, and the shock felt by so many at the Soviet system’s collapse when at the very same time, he points out, so many Soviet citizens simultaneously found themselves entirely prepared for it?

A first step comes in recognizing the efficacies of Soviet culture’s categories of experience, against the work of so many scholars in the Cold War tradition who see only fraud at work in a Soviet world defined by binary contrasts: “oppression and resistance, repression and freedom, the state and the people, the official economy and second economy, official culture and counterculture, totalitarian language and counter-language, public self and private self, truth and lie, morality and corruption, and so on” (2006: 5). Yurchak observes,

What tends to get lost in the binary accounts is the crucial and seemingly paradoxical fact that, for great numbers of Soviet citizens, many of the fundamental values, ideals, and realities of socialist life (such as equality, community, selflessness, altruism, friendship, ethical relations, safety, education, work, creativity, and concern for the future) were of genuine importance. (2006: 8)

Thus we find recognition, on the one hand, of Soviet values, coupled with a readiness to see them slip away (as unexpectedly as they did) in the autumn of 1991.

Borrowing both from Bakhtin and the contemporary French socialist writer Claude LeFort, Yurchak’s direction is to consider the key contrasts between the constitutive (that which was stated, the speech acts and scripts of Soviet life tracked in books such as Arnoldov’s and at work in Houses of Culture, among other places), and the performative (which is to say, the Austinian effects of those utterances, scripts, and practices). Consider, therefore, the kinds of ritualized acts like voting at Komsoomol meetings, or in municipal elections where only a single candidate runs. “It would obviously be wrong,” Yurchak writes, “to see these acts of voting simply as constitutive statements about supporting the resolution that are either true (real support) or false (dissimulation of support). These acts are about stating facts and describing opinions but about doing things and opening new possibilities.” Indeed, “It became increasingly more important to participate in the reproduction of the form of these ritualized acts than to engage with their constitutive meanings” (2006: 25, original emphasis).

To embrace such performative dimensions of seemingly “wooden discourse” need not, of course, dismiss the idealational struggles that motivated so many. As Caroline Humphrey found in her close reading of the memoirs of Georgii Smirnov, a party bureaucrat who began his career in the Komsoomol in late 1930s and rose to some prominence as a party speechwriter across a succession of political epochs, what was said and what got written did have significant import:

The Party bureaucracy was a way of life, with its own ideals and intimacies, its places, its habits, and its horizons. The woodiness of “wooden language” was one of its ways of performing the ideal of anonymous collective unanimity, but it could not, and did not, eliminate ideas. (2008: 30)
Engaging the work of Humphrey, Yurchak and others across this volume, it seems to me, obliges us to challenge an understanding of the labors of Sovietization undertaken in Houses of Culture as stultifying and predictable, as most accounts normally have it. As Ali Iğmen (Chapter 7) demonstrates for Central Asia, to give just one example, Kyrgyz officials in the 1920s and 1930s may have been working within very set scripts, but what direction the acts they prescribed took, and how predictably they advanced the message advocated by planners in Moscow is quite another story.

For all the necessity in tracking the successes and failures of the work of these Houses of Culture, we should very much see at work a fundamentally performative function that transcends the particular content of one event over another, of the success of one lecture over another, or the path of the civic group under its roof. This is to say, rather than just linger briefly over the masquerade of event planning, as was the case at the House of Scientific Atheism in Moscow, we might wonder instead how much it matters that the lectures never took place. Where something effected simply by the presence of the House itself, even if it were near empty? Perhaps it was the very promise of the structure that mattered. As one Evenk man remarked to Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov in Siberia in 1995, “We are always busy building something… we always live in an unfinished building” (2003: 207). Ssorin-Chaikov’s remarkable observation about the Sovietization of Evenk lives, in fact, was that the Soviet government routinely insisted that almost every expedition out to indigenous Evenk communities, even thirty years on after the onset of the Soviet period, into the 1950s, was “the first Sovietization” (208). In this way, the emptiness of buildings both public and private came to stand in as a mimicry of the deferral of impossible-to-realize state forms.5

This is where I think we can productively shift our focus from pokaz’ka to pokaz. Take, again, the House of Culture I once knew in Rybnoe. It was a constant hub of activity that could by no means be written off as the cipher of a civilization built on false ideals. Some of what it generated was pokaz’ka, and some was not. But that is not the point. What Rybnoe’s House of Culture, a barn-like structure perched on stilts in the sand, some several thousand kilometers away from Moscow, could perhaps most powerfully demonstrate (more so than the village council office, and more so than the kolkhoz) was that there was something, indeed, called Soviet culture, gluing together the Soviet people (and Soviet peoples), “a new historical community,” as it was often called (Kim 1974). Humble as the House of Culture may have been, everyone had one (and many still do).

Consider a quite different example, from a very different part of the world. In 1994, Bill Keller, then a reporter for the New York Times in Johannesburg, wrote on the fate of parliaments in state-organized Bantustans. Bantustans were the territorial homelands created for the black populations of South Africa and Namibia under apartheid; each was outfitted with what most considered to be, at best, Potemkin parliaments, puppet administrations of the coercive regime. The same year as the fall of the National Party government and the dissolution of the Bantustan territories, Keller asked, who would be interested in holding on to these kinds of relics? (One might ask the same, of course, of Houses of Culture whose culture appeared, at ready glance, to have been evacuated.)

The answer in South Africa, as it turns out, was rather a lot of people. Both patrons and clients of these seemingly bankrupt institutions saw them as by no means evacuated of meaning. For better or worse, they were among the few structures around which social relations in the former homeland territories had been formalized. Networks had been forged in and around them. Moreover, as Arjun Appadurai (1986) once wrote some years back about “the social life of things” more generally, their status was not immutable; they shifted in meaning over time (1986). In a further context still, Michael Taussig had this same idea in mind when he wrote of colonized peoples of South America who turned to the artifacts of colonial life long after colonial rule had ended. Thus, shamans in Colombia conjured visions of invading armies to suggest forces of healing for distressed souls (1986), and crafted likenesses of General McArthur to ward off evil spirits (1993). These were, respectively, compromised political institutions and persons whose stock had long ago faded, but whose forms had been reappropriated and invested with fresh meanings.

We can see this dynamic at work in several of the chapters in this volume where the form and in some cases, the function, of Houses of Culture have very much survived into the twenty-first century. We can also see this dynamic at work in more broadly normative contexts where Soviet-era practices have sustained themselves, transformed. In her studies of the Russian oil industry, contrasting the rise of Rosneft’ with the fall of Yukos, economist Nina Poussenkova argues that Rosneft’ thrived precisely because it reappropriated the semifeudal patron status of the Soviet enterprise, organizing sanatoria for its workers, day-care centers and summer camps for their children, on-site canteens, and even housing stocks. Yukos, by contrast, initially the more successful company, technically invested far greater sums in community life than Rosneft’, but did so in a perceived “Western”-style manner, through public char-
ities or by sponsoring high-profile sports teams. When the government began turning the screws to increase its share of oil revenues, it was Rosneft’, not Yukos, who held the public’s support (2007).

Shifting the context back to Houses of Culture, this invites us to ask whether the task for Russian communities is really to perestroi\', to reconstruct these institutions, or to obustroi\' them (to use Solzhenitsyn’s choice of words for his famous 1990 book, Kak nam obustroi\' Rossii?), to refit them for new times.

Privatizing Public Culture

So far I have dwelt on what I have been calling Soviet culture’s “recognizabilities,” its assemblage of books and beliefs, houses and heresies, codes and practices, the explicit and very concrete nature of which may set it apart in distinctive ways from cultural projects in nonsocialist, market economies. This made the fruits of the Soviet cultural project, for all its dimensions, a deeply public culture in the most literal sense, available to all. However one did or did not subscribe to all its tenets, Soviet culture, through these artifacts, was widely shared. Indeed, if one were sharing nothing else but a distaste for it, one could express this frustration from Vilnius to Vladivostok, and from Murmansk to Makhachkala, with a remarkable degree of uniformity (Kotkin 2007). In the absence of Houses of Culture—long one of the keystones of this ambitious project—community leaders today find themselves in an age where, for all the Putin administration’s efforts, gaining control over such a unified enterprise is not as easy as it used to be.

Soviet culture, perhaps, gets “privatized,” certainly, in the sense found in many of the essays here where Houses of Culture are rented out to a variety of commercial clients or private groups, or indeed in Moscow, where my porter friend continued to work as a watchman in the House of Scientific Atheism. At first they rented out a few rooms to a commercial firm, then an entire floor, and finally sold off the building altogether. But this is only one way of doing it.

The more telling privatization, it seems to me, is the parceling off of the Soviet internationalist project into ethnic units that were long at its heels. The largest House of Culture I know today, in Park Druzhby behind the Rechnoi Vokzal Metro in Moscow, once the site of a large Komsomol office, was recently home to a variety of Russian nationalist groups motivated (as most nationalist movements are) by exclusion rather than inclusion. The smallest House of Culture I know, in the predominantly Nivkh town of Nekrasovka on Sakhalin, similarly has foregone the collections of writers like Arnol’dov to focus on Nivkh language circles, native dance ensembles, and a native natural medicine club. While these kinds of indigenously focused groups existed throughout the Soviet period, one rarely encountered, at least on Sakhalin Island, the same degree of exclusivity.

A world that turns inward to admire its own reflection is nothing new. But the question it leaves me with, to ask of those doing active fieldwork in Houses of Culture today, is whether we might still see Soviet-style efforts to sustain a federal discourse of a shared cultural project, whether we find the pursuit of things “Russian” in the sense of rossiskoe, the civic project, or russkoe, the ethnic marker. If not, we move away from a socialist cultural formation—surprisingly explicit in its architecture, its scripts, its practices, and its locations—toward one that looks quite a bit more familiar. It was Fredrik Barth (1969) who years ago put it most simply: Most cultures spend a great deal of time policing their boundaries, announcing what they are not (and by extension, who does not belong). Few, by contrast, invest in definitive projects of who they are. By Barth’s rendering, culture, again, as in the brief tour of the history of anthropology by which I began, emerges elusively, with regular and clear efforts made by many to mark the boundaries, and yet seemingly no one found at the center.

The Soviet cultural project, instead, with its Houses of Culture, Komsomol groups, and a robust rule of civil society taken to perhaps its greatest historical limit by the Communist Party, was one such example of profoundly public culture invested in articulating its centrality to the fullest. Houses of Culture were among its foremost sites of struggle, and its sites of performance. In recognizing the forms of this cultural enterprise, and not just its contents, I would contend, we can begin to do a better job of grasping a Soviet project laid all too much to waste in Cold War–era caricatures, of understanding its force, its appeals, and its afterlives.

Notes

1. This concern for outfitting Soviet culture on par with other modernizing states of western Europe is underplayed by Vadim Volkov, who saw the 1930s campaigns for the cultivation of “cultured” behavior as part of a broader, Stalinist law-and-order campaign (2000). While these two positions (Stalinist culture in step with western Europe; Stalinist culture as distinct unto its own Soviet logics) are not mutually exclusive, the point is to not overly functionalize the culture concept as it evolved across western and eastern Europe. See Buck-Morss (2000).
2. While legions of studies on Soviet mass culture outline a great deal of the country's projects and predicaments (e.g. Cherdenichenko 1994; Condee 1995; Von Geldern and Stites 1995), the goal here is somewhat different in aiming to consider the status of the Soviet culture concept as it played out in a variety of arenas.

3. The reference is to Austin (1962). Yurchak's insistence that the constative and the performative are not, in fact, a new binary of the type he is eager to diminish, but are instead, "indivisible and mutually productive" (2006: 25) may not satisfy. But in trading one set of binaries for another in this instance, we get closer to the understanding of the form Houses of Culture advocated, rather than solely focusing on their content.

4. Humphrey's essay provides a useful rejoinder to Yurchak, arguing that the propositional dimensions of official party discourse could be read quite differently across generations.

5. Pekmans excellently makes a similar argument about "the social life of empty buildings" in postsocialist Georgia (2003).

6. In a fascinating study, Luehrmann demonstrates how atheist activists in a House of Culture in the Mari El Republic of the Russian Federation shifted seamlessly to "desecularizing" work after the fall of the Soviet Union (2005).

References

APPENDIX 1

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY OF THE COMPARATIVE RESEARCH PROJECT

"The Social Significance of the House of Culture"

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Background

This appendix details how this comparative research project came into being and how we designed the methodology and research instruments. Further, we describe the period of fieldwork, paying special attention to the problems we experienced while applying the methodology and research instruments.

Considering the trend in Western social-cultural anthropology towards individually designed research projects with a strong preference for qualitative methods, some of our team members at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology expressed their intention to address what they perceived as a lack of methodological rigor in the discipline. Others sought to enhance their experience in quantitative research methods. All team members shared an interest in trying out a combination of qualitative with quantitative methods. We became convinced that by designing and conducting a comparative project with qualitative and quantitative methods defined a priori, we would be able to make a useful contribution to the further advancement of methodology in anthropology.

Methodological Preparation

With this in mind, we started intensively planning the comparative research effort in late 2005. Our intention to undertake a comparative team-research project posed special requirements for and limitations on the methodology and research procedures to be used. First of all, the methodology and procedures had to be unambiguously understood.