

Olga Shevchenko, Williams College

**Resisting Resistance: Everyday life, practical competence
and neoliberal rhetoric in postsocialist Russia**

forthcoming in *Everyday Life in Russia: Past and Present*, edited by Choi Chatterjee,
David L. Ransel, Mary Cavender, and Karen Petrone. Indiana University Press.

The notion of "everyday life" seems to hold an instantaneous, almost intuitive, appeal for ethnographically inclined observers, whose interest in lived experience thrives in the investigation of quotidian details. I share this fascination with the "everyday," but I must start this chapter on a skeptical note: I am not entirely sure what "everyday life" meansⁱ. My reservations arise from the difficulty of creating a working definition of everyday life that is simultaneously narrow and rigorous, and that does not smuggle in a number of problematic assumptions.

Approaches to defining the everyday often begin at one of three interrelated points: a dubiously bounded range of subjects (usually "the powerless"), a particular way of looking (the everyday as the repository of resistance), or an arbitrarily pre-defined range of topics (such as leisure, consumption, morals and manners, or another interest of the author). None of these points is wholly satisfactory, yet we would be throwing the baby out with the bathwater if we tried to avoid the range of topics and questions usually lumped together under the rubric of "the everyday." It is better that we carve out a more precise working definition of the everyday, while taking care not to load it with value-

laden assumptions that burden the notion by default. I would like to outline and critique these problematic assumptions, using my own work on everyday life in post-socialist Russia as an illustration.

Current work on everyday life owes much to the German tradition of history of the everyday (*Alltagsgeschichte*), which is most often taken to mean “history from below” – an investigation into the lives of “historical ‘losers’” or into ““nonestablishment views of the processes of change”” (Eley 1995:ix, quoting Medick and Sabean 1984:1). This interest in history from the ground up has yielded rich results, but as a definition of the everyday it appears deficient because it seems to treat everyday life as a class category. In other words, it implicitly presumes that historical “winners” — economic elites, intellectuals, or members of the political establishment — have no everyday life of their own.

Aside from sneaking in assumptions about social class into a category that should not be limited in this manner, we also risk embracing a number of problematic dichotomies, such as the above-mentioned “losers” and “winners” (with seemingly little space needed for anything in-between) or — perhaps more insidiously — between domination and resistance.ⁱⁱ While numerous *Alltagsgeschichte* studies avoid this danger (for example, Alf Lüdtke offers the example of studies on everyday life under Nazism that unveiled how deeply “ordinary people” were implicated in the support of Nazi ideology), sociological inquiries into the everyday tend to take seriously Everett Hughes’ dictum to “elevate the humble, humble the proud” (quoted in Bosk 1992: xiv) and proceed in its spirit.

As a result, sociological studies of the everyday often suffer from limitations imposed by what John Roberts (2006) called the “redemptive model” of the everyday. In this model, everyday life as a focus of inquiry designates not so much a bounded range of subjects (the powerless) but a particular way of looking, one that tends to emphasize the spontaneous, subversive and anti-authoritarian character of daily practices. Traditionally deemed marginal and unimportant, these daily practices are taken to represent acts of resistance to the dominant rhetoric and official codes of behavior.

In its American formulation, this “redemptive model” is best exemplified by the work of James Scott (1985, 1990) whose approach to the everyday combines it with the class-based principle that I mentioned above. Scott interprets everyday discursive forms (such as anecdotes, rumors, jokes, etc.) and rituals of subordinate groups as acts of their collective resistance to domination. Denied the “luxury of direct confrontation,” Scott argues, these groups follow elaborate strategies in order to express themselves in disguised and indirect forms (1990: 136). The multifaceted and polyvocal character of everyday life makes it particularly suited for diffusing resistance, channeling it through a multiplicity of alternative acts and even masquerading it as compliance.

Insofar as Scott identifies everyday life with the practices of resistance among subordinate classes and social groups, this notion of the everyday appears far too narrow. But it can also, paradoxically, turn out to be too broad, as happens when the everyday is taken to designate the transformative and creative potential of daily life, as is often assumed in the French tradition of the “sociologie de la vie quotidienne”:

The everyday is platitude (what lags and falls behind, the residual life with which our trash cans and cemeteries are filled: scrap and refuse); but this

banality is also what is most important, if it brings us back to existence in its very spontaneity and as it is lived – in the moment, when, lived, it escapes every speculative formulation, perhaps all coherence, all regularity.

Maurice Blanchot (1987: 13)

Blanchot (as well as Guy Debord, Henri Lefebvre and others) sees the individuals' ability for creative action as part and parcel of the structure of everyday life, with the latter being viewed as a benign and utopian space capable of preserving the human potential of individuals against the cold embrace of modernity with its propensity to “turn the world into prose” (Lefebvre 1984: 30).

The trouble with uncritically adopting this vision as a starting point for a study of everyday life is that it offers no guidance for what everyday life is, with the consequence that it can be practically anything in which a trace of spontaneity can be detected. There are numerous studies of consumption, popular culture and the media, habits, morals and manners and so on, in which “the creative powers of the consumer [are seen to] operate freely in the heartlands of mass culture” (Roberts 2006: 2). But they typically don't offer compelling reasons for why these, as opposed to any other fields of practice, should be considered constitutive of “the everyday,” leaving one to wonder whether “everyday life” excludes anything at all.

After traveling in these concentric circles, we then arrive at the paradoxical conclusion that everyday life seems simultaneously too narrow and too broad a term. All of this was very much on my mind when I was doing the fieldwork for what eventually became my book (2009), in which I talked with Muscovites from various walks of life

about their experience of the post-socialist transformation. While I started telling both my subjects and myself that I was interested in the changing structures of everyday life, the breadth of that term, as well as the multiple assumptions with which it was laden, quickly became apparent and unsettling. At the same time, the term seemed to make immediate sense to my Russian interlocutors, for whom the sphere of the everyday – or *byt*, or *povsednevnost'* – referred to all those tasks of running the household and making ends meet that suddenly became so problematic after 1991. Perhaps more importantly (and flying in the face of visions of the everyday as a class category), conversations about post-Soviet *byt* appeared to cut across social and economic boundaries, providing the same currency of sociability as baseball in America and weather in Great Britain. In other words, while there was no doubt that the post-Soviet era affected everyone differently, my interlocutors seemed to assume a layer of shared meaning and discourse on what the changes entailed for everyday life, and on what it took to stay afloat in their midst.

This assumption of a shared, common sense understanding is exactly what Harold Garfinkel examines in his writing on the indexicality of social behavior (1967), when he observes that every social interaction is premised on a tacit agreement of the participants not to question the nature and properties of the surrounding context in which issues are embedded. This observation might explain why I found it so hard to part with the notion of everyday life despite all of its problems – for it points out that some aspects of life, at any time and place, are marked as self-evident and are expected to be mastered by any member of a given social group. These are areas of what I came to call practical competence (a term inspired by Berger and Luckmann's notion of “pragmatic competence in routine performances” [1967: 42]), the social stock of knowledge that all

reasonable people can be expected to understand, and which is, of course, in fact all but self-evident. Rather, it is an outcome of a complex process in which particular aspects of reality are highlighted, institutionalized and marked as important and relevant while others are de-emphasized. This process is both cognitive and institutional and thus invites questions about the mechanisms through which a particular symbolic universe, and with it, a particular definition of practical competence, comes to take precedence.

A question framed in terms of practical competence, then, shares some of the elements that I have mentioned in my cursory review of approaches to everyday life (for example, an interest in the paradoxical coexistence of banality and spontaneity in daily practices), but it is more explicitly centered on the nexus between the cognitive and the institutional, on how particular structural conditions both inform and reflect taken-for-granted definitions of what constitutes a practically competent person. In their article on everyday life in Cameroon, Achille Mbembe and Janet Roitman articulate this connection between the cognitive and the institutional when they remark that any approach to a social crisis needs to pay attention to the “regime of subjectivity” that it forms, through concentrating on “a *shared ensemble of imaginary configurations of ‘everyday life,’* imaginaries which have a *material basis*; and, *systems of intelligibility* to which people refer in order to construct a more or less clear idea of the causes of phenomena and their effects, to determine the domain of what is *possible and feasible*, as well as the *logics of efficacious action*” (Mbembe and Roitman 1995:324, 325, my italics). Using their terms, I was after both the postsocialist “regime of subjectivity” and the material, or rather, social-structural basis that informed it.

One thing that the notion of practical competence does *not* presume is the intention of resistance through everyday life. Indeed, I will try to show that the post-Soviet definitions of practical competence turned out, albeit unintentionally, to be rather compatible, if not with the neoliberal market reforms that were introduced in the early 1990s, then with the forms of neoliberal political subjectivity that followed in its wakeⁱⁱⁱ. In a further ironic twist, the one notion that invited resistance in the postsocialist cultural context was the notion of resistance itself, i.e. the assumption that the obligations of citizenship somehow entail a readiness to adopt and enact an oppositional stance. If anything, a competent postsocialist subject could be first and foremost recognized by his or her political disengagement and readiness to leave, as I frequently heard it formulated, “politics to politicians.”

“The state owes me nothing, and I owe nothing to the state”

Let us drink to our attachment to our country, ... to the minimum of contacts with power, with medicine, with the police, with the press, with television, with wherever we may learn the things we'd rather not know.

Mikhail Zhvanetsky, *Dezhurnyi po Strane*. December 30, 2002.

Pierre Bourdieu summarized the neoliberal political project as “a programme of the methodical destruction of collectives,” which is achieved, among other things, by the imposition everywhere, in the upper spheres of the economy and the state as at the heart of corporations, of that sort of moral Darwinism that, with the cult of the winner, schooled in higher mathematics and bungee jumping, institutes the struggle of all against all and *cynicism* as the norm of all action and behavior.

Bourdieu 1998, italics in the original

The fieldwork for my book was done very far from the upper spheres of the economy and the state,^{iv} and I had little interest in, or expectation to encounter the species of the Russian neoliberal that Alexei Yurchak (2003) has described in his work on the culture of business in the new Russia. Indeed, while the popularity of bungee-jumping might be on the rise in Russia, the most interesting way to deploy Bourdieu's definition in the context of postsocialist Russia might be not the descriptive, but the *prescriptive* one. By this I mean to say that, although neoliberal economic axioms of free markets and free trade may remain controversial for many, and although Yurchak's "true careerists" may be few and far between, the prescriptive model of subjectivity that Bourdieu describes resonates in important ways with the model of post-Soviet practical competence that is shared far beyond the upper spheres of the economy and the state.

This was evidenced, for example, in the spontaneous reader reactions to a recent newspaper column in the popular daily *Moskovskii Komsomolets* written by the journalist Yulia Kalinina (2011). Responding to the invitation issued by President Medvedev on the eve of September 1, 2011 to Russian millionaires to visit Russian schools with a lesson on "How to achieve success in life," Kalinina attempted to speculate on what such a lesson would look like. Her hypothetical millionaire arrives at the school in an armored Mercedes with bodyguards, and after a comprehensive search of the school staff for firearms and explosives, starts his lesson by offering the following recipe for success: "Rob and steal, and if someone objects, beat the hell out of him." The list of pointers goes on in the same spirit, and ends with, "remember, children, man is wolf to his fellow man."

The online comments the column received were overwhelmingly enthusiastic: Kalinina's readers found the satire not only accurate but also fair, and one of the commenters extended the column's logic further by suggesting that “the only thing left to mention [was that] those who are unable to follow such ‘recipes for success’ are the so-called ‘losers’, i.e. misfits.”^v While this reader did not miss the satirical tone of the column, and was far from morally endorsing the offered “recipe for success,” this response also indicated s/he considered the fault lines between the “winners” and “losers” in post-socialism to be roughly equivalent to the line separating “wolves” from “men,” and that, consequently, anyone interested in leading a successful life in Russia could not dismiss the millionaire’s advice.

How does this admittedly extreme rhetorical position translate into Mbembe and Roitman's domain of everyday notions of “what is *possible and feasible*, as well as the *logics of efficacious action*,” if it translates at all? To explore this question, let me dwell for a moment on the politics of the Russian playground. I spent much of 2007-2008 in Russia, where I was doing fieldwork for a study of family photography and generational memories of socialism. My infant daughter and my husband relocated with me, and due to Mila, I got to spend quite a few hours of my sabbatical outdoors, on the playground located in a park just across the street from where we lived. On one particular April morning, Mila was in an especially rambunctious mood, and before I had any chance to protest, I witnessed her rapidly expropriating sandbox equipment from one of her toddler playmates and throwing it as far out of the sandbox as her 18-months-old throwing skills allowed. The culture of the Russian playground is generally non-interventionist, with parents (mostly mothers and grandmothers) sitting on the benches and observing from a

distance while their offspring sort things out amongst themselves. But the infringement seemed grave enough, and I leapt at the victim's defense, while offering apologies for Mila's bossy ways to the little girl's mother. "Don't worry," the young woman generously reassured me with a casual gesture. "That's a good thing. That's how one should be these days." Grateful as I was for her giving me a way "out" of the situation, I protested that, while assertiveness was a good thing, aggressiveness was not. But the girl's mother simply shrugged her shoulders and reiterated, "I don't know, I would be happy if I were you. She will not let herself be bossed around."

In singling out a child's ability to stand up for herself as a particularly useful character trait, this young mother was not alone. Indeed, a national survey conducted in the same year by the polling agency Levada Center found that "the ability to stand up for own interests" and "the ability to achieve one's goals" were the two single most-important qualities that respondents wanted to develop in their children (by contrast, "love of learning" ranked seventh, down two points from an identical survey conducted in 1998) (Sveshnikova 2011). But while these aspirations might sound similar to the cult of the winner decried by Bourdieu, my contention is not that they are in some fundamental way inherently "neoliberal." Instead, I would like to suggest that post-Soviet standards of practical competence and political subjectivity have origins that are far from Bourdieu's "hearts of corporations": they can be traced to both the Soviet-era political imagination and in the more recent social and cultural dislocations. However, despite their local origin, these sensibilities do align surprisingly neatly with a number of values Bourdieu associates with a neoliberal outlook (aggressive emphasis on personal autonomy and self-sufficiency, the "cult of the winner" at all costs, a moral legitimization

of inequality and aggressive pursuit of self-interest, to name a few). As a result, they may indeed be co-opted to facilitate the acceptance by the population of the on-going neoliberal political and economic reforms on the national level.

My argument goes against the grain of the resilient master narrative, which describes postsocialist political subjects in terms of their supposedly entrenched paternalism. Barely reconstructed *Homo sovieticus*, so the criticism goes, was all too ready to trust the state with solutions to all major social problems, all the while having no aptitude or desire to take the responsibility for one's own life. Drawing on nearly ten year's worth of ethnographic fieldwork in several Russian cities and towns, I suggest that this criticism is inaccurate on several levels. First of all, even in the last decades of socialism, paternalistic rhetoric went hand in hand not only with frequent cases of de-facto self-reliance, but also with the tendency to view autonomy and self-interest as a measure of cultural and class distinction. Second, and more importantly, the cultural shifts that occurred after the fall of socialism further contributed to the legitimation of inequality and to the attractions of autonomy and personal independence as the new ideology of citizenship.

The ways in which the policies of the Soviet state underlay the current tendency to dismiss egalitarianism and concern with social justice as signs of residual Soviet mentality are well discussed in the recent article by Michele Rivkin-Fish (2009). Rivkin-Fish is concerned with the recent embrace of inequality in Russia, and she traces its roots to the late Soviet conflation between class and moral caliber, which can be seen, among other places, in the popular reception of the film *Heart of a Dog* (1988). Based on the satirical novel by Mikhail Bulgakov (1925), the film tells the story of a well-intentioned

surgeon, Professor Preobrazhensky, who in the course of a medical experiment transforms a sympathetic mutt into a vulgar and aggressive human being, of unmistakably proletarian provenance. The story chronicles the ease with which this crass “human” rises to prominence in the new Soviet society, eventually turning against his educated and benevolent benefactor, whom he threatens to denounce as an “alien class element.”

Rivkin-Fish points out that the film’s main character, Professor Preobrazhensky, is taken by her contemporary informants to represent both the historical fate of pre-Soviet Russian intelligentsia, and the traits of character that were lost with the elevation of “uncultured,” uneducated social classes on to positions of social prominence after 1917. Chief among these features are a sense of earned privilege, disdain for state intervention and a fundamental insistence on one’s personal autonomy that borders on demonstrative disengagement. In one of the most loved and often cited episodes of the film, the professor disdainfully refuses to buy a magazine to benefit German war orphans - a move that was often cited to me during my own fieldwork in support of a point that a precondition for a good society is that “everyone should be minding their own business.”^{vi}

There is, of course, a world of difference between the principles espoused by Professor Preobrazhensky, and the more brutal models of social and moral Darwinism one encounters in today’s Russia, even if the latter may (and often do) cite Bulgakov for support.^{vii} What happens here is not by any means direct lineage, but rather a borrowing in which the fierce individualism that often comprised the oppositional stance of a

Soviet-era intellectual gets deployed as a moral justification for radical social disengagement in a dramatically different, post-Soviet setting.

An additional line of borrowing concerns class subjectivities. In the 1980s, when the film came out and generated a cult following, the earned and morally justified privileges of the essentialized and much mythologized intelligentsia were pitted in opposition to the undeserved privileges of the “proletariat.” This “unnaturalness” of the post-revolutionary situation bemoaned by Professor Preobrazhensky is now seen as a justification of the naturalness of the rampant inequality and social disengagement of today. And the fact that the more brutal elements of the post-Soviet business outlook are reminiscent of the Soviet-era caricatures of capitalism, with their emphasis on aggressive competition, exploitation and the “war of all against all” only contribute to the further naturalization of the new order. “Everything they told us about socialism was a lie,” went a particularly pessimistic postsocialist joke. “But everything that they told us about capitalism was true.”^{viii}

This brings me to my second theme – the ways in which the social and cultural transformations of the 1990s may have contributed to the appeal of neoliberal-sounding rhetoric in Russia. I would particularly like to concentrate on the allure of self-sufficiency to which this section’s title alludes (the quotation comes from an interview with an entrepreneur who did not seem in the least burdened by his disconnection from the state – or aware of the multiple ways in which this independence was imagined rather than real) and connect it to the question of freedom, both economic and political, as it was experienced in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet Union’s collapse.

An irony that was not lost on many Russians is that, while the 1990s marked the end of strict ideological controls and censorship, most of them felt not more, but less free in their everyday life. This came through clearly in the conversation I had in 1999 with Victor, who worked as a lathe operator at the ZIL factory.^{ix} Victor said,

In the very beginning of perestroika, a bit more freedom appeared. If a person wants to do something, no one would forbid him. Maybe there was even a little illegality at times, they would look the other way if you are breaking some regulation, as long as you're working. Before that, there was no possibility for small business to exist, none at all.

And yet, economic freedom notwithstanding, Victor considered himself at the time peculiarly unfree:

Our freedom exists only in words, and as for reality... The mass media, they all depend financially on those who pay them. So they are not free, we have no freedom of the press, or of information. And as long as they are financially dependent, they will not be free. Even me, I may stand at my lathe at work and feel free, but I'm not. Because financially, I depend on the boss.

Victor was not alone in his sense that, despite — or, in many ways, because of — the expansion of the market, the individual freedoms of rank-and-file citizens shrank instead of expanding. This includes not only those the political scientists call “losers of the transition,” but also the individuals who fared relatively well. For example, around the same time, Mikhail, a well-placed state bureaucrat in the Ministry of Construction confessed to me that “until fifteen years ago, I was doing the things I wanted to do, and afterwards — the things I was forced to do by external circumstances.”

If we were to take Victor's words for what they are, his claim is that genuine freedom is impossible in the conditions of the market economy when “financially you depend on your boss.” This statement is as far from the neoliberal rhetoric as one can possibly get, far enough to make Marx very happy, because its logical conclusion is that

no genuine freedom is possible unless the institution of private property is abolished. Victor's politics, however, were far from communist, first of all because it left space for enjoyment of the purely economic freedom, the freedom to compete and consume, and second, because it coexisted with an intensely private outlook, an emphasis on personal responsibility in providing for his family, and an outright dismissal of any political solutions. A supporter of Putin, Victor voted for him in both elections solely for pragmatic reasons: he wanted to avoid the second round of elections that were bound, he was convinced, to squander taxpayer money. "One needs to work," he repeated, as if paraphrasing Professor Preobrazhensky. "Work at one's own workplace and not waste time on politics."

The broad resonance of Victor's sensibility in the early 2000s was particularly apparent in the coverage and treatment of the 10th anniversary of the 1991 putsch, which at the time inspired massive anti-communist resistance, and heralded the end of the USSR. This event, which, as Andrei Zorin points out, originally had the potential to become a "regeneration myth, the myth of the people finally realizing their right to freedom, overcoming totalitarian tyranny and joining the rest of the world," by the late 1990s-early 2000s was commemorated solely as a moment of gullibility, the day, as Zorin puts it, "when we were all deceived" (2000: 324, 325).^x At stake here was not only the disappointment with particular politicians (although that was certainly the case), but a broader re-evaluation of the meaning and value of resistance and collective action. "People will be defending their financial interests now, and not the political ones," proclaimed a 26-year old Muscovite cited in an anniversary article published in the

popular daily *Moskovskii Komsmolets* in August 2001 under the telling title “God, how naïve we had been!” (Liuboshits 2001). My contacts agreed:

When this euphoria was with the White House, ... when Gaidar invited everyone to defend democracy, and people came out... My husband's colleague from the university went, and they only found him in several months, killed. Can you imagine? There was such euphoria, people went to defend the White House, Yeltsin, but when they saw everything that followed – that's it, no one will go anymore. People are tired... But the important part is that people understood that they were defending Yeltsin,... and so what?... Nothing changed because of the change in government. And now it's not millions that go to these demonstrations, but handfuls, and it's all because people understand the worth of this activity. They understood that politics isn't worth anything. Everyone should take care of their own business. If you chose the politicians, fine, they should think about the people, but they don't do it, they only look after their own interests. And now people have understood that, and don't even go to vote. Instead everyone started taking care of their own lives. They understood that if they don't take care of their lives, no one will.^{xi}

To understand how one gets from A to B, from the loss of freedom many experienced in the immediate aftermath of 1991 to the pragmatic self-reliance and disengagement, it is worthwhile to consider both in the light of another of Bourdieu's notions – that of *hysteresis of habitus*. While the concept has been frequently, and fruitfully used by many scholars of postsocialism, what interests me here is specifically a new angle it gives us on the question of freedom (or lack thereof). In most basic terms hysteresis of habitus refers to a lack of fit between the individual's internal dispositions (the *habitus*) and the social conditions in which he finds himself. Such a mismatch can happen in a variety of circumstances, both societal – in the conditions of social change, when the logic of the entire social field radically shifts - and personal – as happens in cases of rapid social mobility when a person with the habitus and outlooks of, say, a petit bourgeois finds herself in a university setting where the institutional logic and the structure of expectations are different from those to which she is socialized. This concept

makes it easier to understand why, despite all exterior signs of success, Mikhail had felt “forced to do things” ever since the late 1980s: when the logic of the field comes in conflict with the dispositions of the habitus, the experience is not unlike that of wearing a badly tailored dress or wrong-sized shoes, when every move is associated with the experience of discomfort and constraint, regardless of whether our hypothetical fashion victim makes it to the destination.

So how does this bear out on the question of the meaning of individual freedom? According to Bourdieu, of course, individuals are never truly free because they exist in a field of powerful social forces. But they can *feel* free, provided they do not experience the constraints of the structures that surround them as something alien. This is only possible when a person’s habitus – her internal dispositions - correspond to the social field that exists around her. As soon as a mismatch between them is introduced, the constraints of the structure become apparent, and they do not feel natural anymore. In other words, contexts of social change, where social structure, channels of mobility and criteria for success rapidly shift, make any talk of personal freedom highly problematic. Or to be more precise, they make the personal lived experience of constraint and, hence, unfreedom, so immediate that it can belie whatever appreciation one may or may not have for the more abstract and remote ideals of civil liberties.

Here we come to a point where we can understand why the questions of personal competence, control and safety in the 1990s were so often articulated through the metaphors of separation, boundary-maintenance and disengagement. Everyone who has been to Moscow is familiar with the physical manifestations of this drive for autonomy – fences carving personal spaces and boundaries out of formerly public yards and

passageways, makeshift car shelters, iron doors in the formerly open arches and in building entryways, and so on. What I want to propose here is that these walls and partitions are the physical manifestations of the practices of autonomy and disengagement that are also evident elsewhere in broader public life, from the affirmations of self-interest to distrust of collective action.^{xii} We may think about these actions of withdrawal and self-protection as, among other things, efforts to re-establish a sense of personal freedom by keeping the environment in check, so that in one's immediate surroundings, the logic of the social field is predictable and does not pose immediate threats to the habitus.

I would like to emphasize two key points here. First, the intended function of these arrangements has been, and remains, self-protection, not resistance. In other words, these physical and mental demarcations of autonomy emerged as “fortresses,” not “weapons” of the weak, and as such fortresses, they are in many ways parallel to similar exclusions and partitions that are employed on a grander scale by the newly-formed elites, who are in a much better position to implement their visions in durable architectural forms. At the moment, the entire fabric of postsocialist cities is being reshaped by the many building projects pursuing the same logic of exclusion, privatization and boundary-maintenance at the expense of openness and publicity, a move that Ekaterina Makarova (2007) compellingly connected to the Soviet (and, I would add, post-Soviet) elevation of privacy as the last domain of personal freedom. That this transformation of space is possible, or at least palatable to those whom it excludes is because they, too, have unquestioningly pursued the logic of autonomy in their daily lives.

Second, the processes that may have started as compensatory, with time become institutionalized and naturalized. While the Muscovites I spoke with in the late 1990s framed their actions and choices as historically-specific responses to a catastrophic social upheaval, the young mother I cited above seemed to take the “winner takes all” morality as a given. The same spirit pervades a comment by a well-known Russian writer Viacheslav Pietsukh, who in a recent interview remarked that “the chief life’s work of any cultured person, both today and before, is a complete self-isolation from Russian reality.”^{xiii} While the sense of frustration with the structure of political opportunities is palpable in this statement, it is difficult to imagine a stance less suited to challenge it. The political subjectivity that these comments signal is as disengaged and as centered on the freedom *from* (as opposed to the freedom *for*, to appropriate Isaiah Berlin’s distinction) as the practical arrangements that I discussed earlier. And if Bourdieu is correct in identifying the neoliberal agenda with “a programme of the methodical destruction of collectives,” it will not find much to undo here.

But the equation so many Russians drew between practical competence and psychological divestment from politics is not the only problem. Another, related one is that the project of creating practical autonomy from the Russian state was perhaps too successful, in the sense that by the end of the first postsocialist decade Muscovites were quite convinced that, in the words of one respondent,

My only real concern is the health of my parents. Well, and the cat, and what else? The rest of it is entirely irrelevant. Because all of this petty movement and squabbling up above [among the elites], do not reflect on me whatsoever.

Whatever opinion one may hold about the accuracy of this conclusion, it is hard to miss the relevance of the famous W.I. Thomas dictum that “if men define situations as

real, they are real in their consequences.” In other words, regardless of how justified the individuals’ sense of autonomy was, their firm belief that their lives were *already* virtually disconnected from politics (“*the government is on its own, and people are on their own,*” as it were) was consequential because it allowed for the possibility of further retrenchment of state services and obligations. And in some ways, it might have even given a semblance of legitimacy to the less palatable aspects of the postsocialist social and political order. Having partitioned and privatized the formerly public spaces of their own yards and building entryways, rank-and-file Muscovites might find it easier to accept a construction of an “elite condominium” in place of a formerly public neighborhood skating rink, and to generally recognize as legitimate the gated communities, partitioned neighborhoods, and controlled access roads that are popping up all over Russia today, making the urban fabric of the country look increasingly like neoliberal city plans all around the world.

There is thus an elective affinity between the psychological and cognitive autonomy that many Russians embraced as a way to insulate their lives from the effects of the protracted instability, and the political climate conducive to the creeping neoliberal reforms. That is more than a little ironic. As the people I spoke to would be quick to point out, it was the much-detested neoliberal reforms of the early 1990s that triggered massive inflation and social dislocations that they struggled to counteract. There is nothing they would have wanted less than to contribute to their own marginalization. Their goal was simply to retain a sense of personal competence and control in a world that was rapidly shifting all around them. And yet, the ways in which my decisively non-neoliberally inclined informants dealt with their own challenges made the privatization of all things

public look subjectively more palatable than it should have. Any analysis of everyday life in Russia should pay attention to these unexpected, sometimes counter-intuitive resonances.

Abandoning the vision of the everyday as the response of a resilient vital force against the pressures of an impersonal system does not mean that we should deny social actors their capacity for creative action or, for that matter, resistance. Indeed, it would be worth inquiring in the years ahead whether the same spirit of autonomy could be employed in another, more subversive spirit of collective action.^{xiv} However, it would be prudent to avoid presumptions about (a) the ends to which this action is directed and (b) the social significance these actions have in the larger social field, regardless of the intent of their authors. It is all too common for everyday life to play the role of a universal repository for resistance in the eyes of an educated observer. This is because, to quote Stephen Crook, “the everyday comes to bear... theoretical-political weight as radical intellectuals have lost faith in previously favored agents or bearers of resistance, from the proletariat to ‘youth’ to social movements” (Crook 1998: 536). We would do more justice to the richness everyday life if we resist the temptation to reduce it to resistance by default.

Here, I have tried to argue that the taken-for-granted notions of practical competence in post-Soviet everyday life contained the seeds for, if not support, then at least understanding that the neoliberal reforms had encountered in the broad sectors of the Russian populace. If neoliberal rhetoric rang familiar to many Russians, this is to a large extent because some of its themes resonated with the virtues they ascribed to the independent-thinking and anti-collectivist pre-Revolutionary intelligentsia, while others

evoked the caricatured image of the unapologetically self-interested and aggressive capitalist familiar from Soviet critiques of capitalism. These resonances were further amplified in the 1990s by the post-Soviet embrace of autonomy and the tendency to equate practical competence and freedom with distance – almost autarky – from both the Russian state and any framework of collective action.^{xv} What the notion of resistance does push us to consider, however, is this resistance to the very idea of resistance itself, and the role it may play for the kinds of future that is being imagined both for, and by Russian citizens today.

Acknowledgements: I am grateful to the participants of the *Everyday Life in Russia* workshop at the University of Indiana, and especially to the workshop organizers and editors of this volume, for a lively and generative discussion, and for the many helpful comments and suggestions. I would also like to thank my Williams colleague, Michael F. Brown, who generously asserted that “Titles cannot be copyrighted” when I had discovered that the working draft of this chapter bears a title strikingly similar to the excellent essay he had published in the *American Anthropologist* over a decade ago (Brown 1996).

Works cited

Alekhin, A. (2008). Pisatel protiv chasovoi: An interview with Viacheslav Pietsukh. *Ekspert* no. 16 (605), April 21, 2008.

Balzer, H. (2005). Ordinary Russians?: Rethinking August 1991. *Demokratizatsiya*, vol. 13, no.2: 193-218.

Berger, P., Luckmann, T. (1967). *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. New York: Doubleday.

Blanchot, M. (1987). Everyday speech. *Yale French Studies*, vol. 73: 12-20.

Bosk, C. (1992). *All God's Mistakes: Genetic Counseling in a Pediatric Hospital*. University of Chicago Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1998). The essence of neoliberalism. *Le Monde Diplomatique*, December 1998. Cited from: <http://mondediplo.com/1998/12/08bourdieu>, last accessed on June 20, 2011.

Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Trans. Richard Nice. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Boym, S. (1994). The archeology of banality: the Soviet home. *Public Culture*, vol. 6: 263-292.

Brown, M. (1996). On resisting resistance. *American Anthropologist*, vol. 98, no. 4: 729-735.

Crook, S. (1998). Minotaurs and other monsters: "everyday life" in recent sociological theory. *Sociology*, vol. 32, no.3: 523-540.

Eley, G. (1995). Foreword, in Lüdtkke, A. (ed.) *The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life*. Princeton University Press.

Elias, N. (1998). On the concept of everyday life. In *The Norbert Elias Reader: A Biographical Selection*, eds. Johan Goudsblom and Stephen Mennell. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers.

Fitzpatrick, S. (1999). *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Garfinkel, H. (1967). *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Gordon, L., Terekhin, A. Budilova, E. (1998). Opyt mnogomernogo opisaniya material'no-ekonomicheskoi differentsiatsii naseleniya (Multi-indicator description of economic differentiation of the population). *Monitoring obschestvennogo mneniya: Ekonomicheskie i sotsial'nye peremeny (Public opinion monitoring: Economic and Social changes)*, vol. 33.

Ioffe, J. (2011). Net impact: One man's cyber-crusade against Russian corruption. *The New Yorker*, April 4, 2011.

Kalinina, Y. (2011). Vy v dole, Marivanna. *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, September 2, 2011. Url: <http://www.mk.ru/social/article/2011/09/01/619912-vyi-v-dole-marivanna.html>. Last accessed September 20, 2011.

Kelly, C. (2002). Ordinary life in extraordinary times: Chronicles of the quotidian in Russia and the Soviet Union. *Kritika*, vol. 3, no. 4: 631-651.

Kimmelman, M (2009). Romania shrugs off reminder of its past. *The New York Times* February 25, 2009.

Lefebvre, H. (1984). *Everyday Life in the Modern World*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.

- Liuboshits, S. (2001). Bozhe, kakimi my byli naivnymi! (God, how naïve we had been!). *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, August 22, 2001.
- Lüdtke, A. (1995). What is the history of everyday life and who are its practitioners?, in Lüdtke, A. (ed.) *The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life*. Princeton University Press.
- Makarova, E. (2007). The changing boundaries of public and private: The new spaces of consumption in Moscow. Paper presented at the American Sociological Association, August 11, 2007, New York, NY.
- Matza, T. (2009). Moscow's Echo: Technologies of the self, publics, and politics on the Russian talk show. *Cultural Anthropology* 24, no. 3: 489-522.
- Mbembe, A., and J. Roitman. (1995). Figures of the subject in times of crisis. *Public Culture*, vol. 7: 323-352.
- Medick, H. and D. Sabean (1984). Introduction, in Medick, H., and Sabean, D. (eds.) *Interest and Emotion: Essays on the Study of Family and Kinship*. Cambridge University Press.
- Mitchell, T. (1990). Everyday metaphors of power. *Theory and Society* 19:5: 545-77.
- Ries, Nancy. 1997. *Russian Talk: Culture and Conversation during Perestroika*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Rivkin-Fish, M. (2006). Tracing landscapes of the past in class subjectivity: Practices of memory and distinction in marketizing Russia. *American Ethnologist*, vol. 36, no. 1: 79-95.
- Roberts, J. (2006). *Philosophizing the Everyday: Revolutionary Praxis and the Fate of Cultural Theory*. Pluto Press.

Scott, J. (1985). *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Shevchenko, O. (2009). *Crisis and the Everyday in Postsocialist Moscow*. Indiana University Press.

Shlapentokh, V. (2010). Dekonstruksia filosofii Ayn Rand: Ee marksistskie i bol'shevistskie korni. April 15, 2010. Url:

<http://vladimirshlapentokhrussian.wordpress.com/2010/04/15/деконструкция-философии-айн-рэнд-ее-м-2/> Last accessed September 16, 2011.

Sveshnikova, O. (2010). Rossiiskie roditeli: Novoe v povedenii i mirovospriatii. *Pro et Contra*, no. 1-2 (48), Jan-April 2010.

Yurchak, A. (2003). Russian neoliberal: The entrepreneurial ethic and the spirit of "true careerism." *The Russian Review*, vol. 62 (January 2003): 72-90.

Zhuravleva, N. (1998). Subbotniaia vstrecha: Interview s Elenoi Safonovoi. *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, December 26, 1998.

Zhvanetsky, M. Дежурный по стране, 30.12.2002 Url:

<http://www.jvanetsky.ru/data/text/vs/dejurnyi07/> Last accessed May 12, 2011.

Zorin, A. (2000). In search of a new identity: Visions of the past and present in post-communist Russia, in Strath, B. (ed.) *Myth and Memory in the Construction of Community*. New York: Lang.

Endnotes

ⁱ This is an embarrassing thing to admit after having just published a book with "everyday life" in its title. But luckily, I am not alone. Writers from Nortber Elias to Catriona Kelly -- who both have examined various aspects of everyday life, especially manners -- profess a similar ambivalence (see Elias 1998 and Kelly 2002).

ⁱⁱ For a theoretically sophisticated critique of the notion of resistance which remains relevant, see Timothy Mitchell (1990).

ⁱⁱⁱ See Yurchak (2003) and Matza (2009) for a discussion of the contours of this subjectivity, as well as of some the mechanisms of its production.

^{iv} The book was based on ethnographic observation and informal conversations in various urban sites in Moscow from 1998 to 2000, as well as over 110 more formal interviews with 33 Muscovites whom I recruited through a modified snowball sample. My respondents (16 men, and 17 women) belonged predominantly to lower and middle income brackets, but came from a variety of educational and occupational backgrounds, which enabled me to trace the commonalities in which these divergently positioned individuals approached, both practically and rhetorically, the complexities of the postsocialist transformation. In accessing the respondent's income, I used the definition of VCIOM (now Levada Center) which identified as low income individuals those whose per capita household income in 1997 was 200-400 thousand rubles a month (about \$40-\$80), and as middle income bracket – those with 400-600 thousand rubles a month (\$80-\$120) per capita (Gordon et al. 1998).

^v Comment from "Spetsialist" to Kalinina (2011), available online at: <http://www.mk.ru/social/article/2011/09/01/619912-vyi-v-dole-marivanna.html?action=comments>. Last accessed September 20, 2011.

^{vi} Compare this to the rather categorical statement made in an interview by the popular actress Elena Safonova: "Community work [*obschestvennaia rabota*] is when you have to do what was overlooked by others – those whose responsibility it was to do it in the first place. It is not my thing. And in general, it is my opinion that it is absurd, illogical, wrong to lead a public life. People are born not for that, but for living a private, own life in their families." (Zhuravleva 1998:2).

^{vii} For one, Preobrazhensky's individualism did not preclude active membership in professional (and one might speculate, pre-revolutionary civic) associations. His protest against the aid campaigns of the early Soviet era could also be read as a protest against the authoritarian style in which they were conducted, against the substitution of distant causes for the causes that were in plain sight, or against the lack of accountability that characterized these efforts. None of these interpretations are evident in the readings of *Heart of a Dog* that Rivkin-Fish explores.

^{viii} In a similar spirit, the Russian-American sociologist Vladimir Shlapentokh (2011) notes the correspondence between the capitalist utopia of Ayn Rand and Marxist critiques of capitalism, writing that "[o]ne of Rand's chief goals were, it seems, to verify that the vulgar Marxist image of the capitalist, as described, for example, in [Maksim] Gorky's *The City of the Yellow Devil* or by [Samuil] Marshak in *Mister Twister*, is truly accurate. Rand's heroes profess the same [traits] that Maxists had deplored in capitalists – egoism, lack of interest in the common good, indifference to the suffering of others." In other words, Shlapentokh suggests that Rand and the Marxist writers are in complete

agreement about the fundamental features of capitalism -- except, of course, that they assign inverted values to them.

^{ix} All respondents' names have been changed.

^x This re-evaluation of the meaning of popular resistance may be one of the key factors behind what Balzer calls "one of the most politically debilitating myths about August 1991" – "the claim that few people supported Yeltsin or opposed the coup" (2005:195). Indeed, those members of my sample who spent their days (and some, their nights) on the streets of Moscow in August 1991 tended to minimize their involvement with the events, or downplay their emotional involvement with the resistance, often asserting that they had *already* been divested from politics when they went onto the streets.

^{xi} Interview with Karina, a 63-year old retiree.

^{xii} I take up these manifestations of autonomy in much greater detail in Shevchenko (2009).

^{xiii} From the interview with Pietsukh, in Alekhin (2008).

^{xiv} The rising popularity of such figures as Alexey Navalny, who positions himself as an independent crusader against government corruption, and yet de facto serves as a catalyst for collective action by inviting whistle-blowers and rank-and-file supporters to contribute to his cause, suggests this as a possibility (for more on Navalny, see Ioffe 2011).

^{xv} There are reasons to think that these changes are not confined to Russia; one distinguishes a similar legitimation of self-interest, for example, in the words of the Romanian journalist Cristian Stanescu. Stanescu explained the political clout of Ceausescu's son, which enabled the latter to successfully lay claim to much of his father's art collection, in the terms directly reminiscent of the Russian rhetoric of self-interest: "Since the revolution the country is only about private enterprise. Romanians sympathize with Valentin because he worked the system to his advantage. Our idea of culture now is making money. We still have too many basic needs to worry about elevated ones like art and the state." (Kimmelman 2009).