

FIFTH EUROPE-ASIA LECTURE

‘Between the Holes’: Emerging Identities and Hybrid Patterns of Consumption in Post-socialist Russia

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IN THE SUMMER OF 1998 participants of an international social science conference held in one of the leading Russian research institutes in Moscow witnessed the following scene.¹ The speaker, a Russian academic in his 60s, was presenting a paper dedicated to the social and cultural developments that took place in Russia over the past 10 years. Dressed in a grey three-piece suit and holding himself very upright, he spoke slowly and emphatically, and one could see from his looks and demeanour that this was far from the first time he was addressing large audiences with his concerns regarding the moral and sociopolitical decline of the country. The rhetoric and presentation of the speaker all worked to suggest the gravity of the events he was assessing, and he frequently used superlatives, such as ‘unprecedented’, ‘ultimate’ and ‘irreversible’. ‘In short’, the narrator concluded, ‘the social fabric of Russia is gone. All that we have left is merely the existential holes’. The audience was silent; while some were deeply impressed and ready to accept the argument, others remained unconvinced. After a few seconds, somebody raised a hand and asked, sceptically: ‘Well, what is between the holes?’ It took several minutes for the presenter to grasp the point of the question, but as soon as he did, he answered without hesitation: ‘Between the holes are also holes’, he said, ‘but of a different order’.

The logic driving this exchange is not too hard to understand. The decade of 1990–2000 has been a time of dismantling, both physical and conceptual, of many structures and legacies left over after the collapse of the socialist regimes in Russia and Eastern Europe. Both in the eyes of the local population, and in those of the social scientists and outsider observers, this period presented enormous challenges to the habitual organisation of social life and the constitution of identities and groups in an unstable and risk-ridden setting. Socialised to see and value particular kinds of

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opportunities, skills and resources, post-socialist actors felt their demise much more sharply than the emergence of new possibilities and trajectories of action. The dissolution of enterprises at which people have worked for years, reorganisation of the educational system, continuously changing rules and regulations—all of these realities had a great immediacy and disruptive power that could not be overshadowed by elusive opportunities and personal achievements which may have also occurred in the course of the decade, but could be easily written off as accidental strokes of luck.

Similarly to their subjects, social scientists dedicated much attention to the dilemmas and gaps inherent in the post-socialist condition, sometimes at the expense of exploring the nascent and often hardly discernible forms in which these dilemmas are not only articulated but also resolved on the level of daily practice. They have carried out detailed and imaginative work outlining the symbolic and linguistic inadequacies of the categories and frames of reference applied in the post-socialist context (Guseinov, 1989, 1996; Urban, 1994; Oushakine, 2000a, 2000b). In other works, scholars explored the challenges that the transforming social order has posed to the conduct of everyday life, to the coherent conception of national history and to the identities that derive their foundations from them (Kon, 1993; Lapin, 1993; Evgenieva, 1999; Kara-Murza, 1999). Without denying the heuristic value and accomplishments of this research, the present study will attempt to refocus the analytical lenses through which it views its subject and concentrate on the matter that is 'between the holes', i.e. on the interests, agendas and rationales which underlie the fabric of post-socialist society, informing both its ruptures and the ways through which these ruptures are bridged and navigated.

To bring to the forefront the issue of emerging social forms does not mean that dilemmas of post-socialism are to be discounted. Rather, it means that their persistence itself accomplishes something as it participates in the formation of the post-socialist landscape, evokes patterned responses and contributes to the formation of the rhetorical identities of post-socialist actors. Ten years into the post-socialist period, it seems well warranted to dive deeply into the multiplicity of practices and arrangements which have been and are emerging as the post-socialist actors go about their lives, daily resolving the difficulties and challenges of their condition. In what follows, I attempt to do just that, and show that new identities and forms of solidarity are often formulated not in a conscious effort but in the course of mundane interactions, coexisting with and often feeding upon the narratives of disjuncture, decline and universal collapse. I will start by discussing the routine and extended nature of the post-socialist discontents and address the implications this carries for sociological research. I will then look into how my respondents themselves expressed their critical sentiments about the 'existential holes' of the post-socialist condition, and outline the themes that will guide my inquiry. I will address the issue of consumption as a vantage point on both everyday dilemmas and their solutions, describe the hybrid patterns in which objects are obtained by Moscow households and inquire into the role that narratives of late socialist and post-socialist perils play in shaping the symbolic meaning of the retained old and the acquired new products. I will then proceed to discussing the ways in which consumers handle challenges through strategies of consumption and discuss the multiplicity of roles objects play in contemporary Muscovite households. Finally, I will look into how these consumption strategies are involved in the formation of post-socialist identities and raise questions for future research.

The implications of permanent decline

There has been undoubtedly enough in the lived experiences of post-socialism to provide ample material for discontent. Apart from the large-scale social problems (rapid inflation, increasing social polarisation, political and economic instability, to name just a few). Russians faced dilemmas which seemed more subjective and personal, but no less relevant, such as breakdowns of work collectives, changes in professional identity and prestige of one's occupation, and reconfigurations of opportunity structures for current and future generations. As some authors suggest, the changes in most cases have been multidimensional, with some aspects of the individuals' lives undergoing improvement at the same time as others experience decline (see Gordon *et al.*, 1998; Gordon & Klopov, 2000). But the perception of the overall direction of the transformation has been predominantly critical, framed in terms of 'complete disintegration' and 'uniform impoverishment' (Golovakha, 1996; Ries, 1997).

In my fieldwork, which took place in Moscow over a two-year period (from 1998 to 2000), I uncovered multiple forms in which discontent with the post-socialist condition was articulated and expressed. In the course of these two years I recurrently visited the homes of 33 Muscovites, exploring the narrative forms and practical strategies through which my respondents (men and women from 29 to 68 years old, predominantly of worker and city intelligentsia backgrounds) contended with the uncertainties of the protracted post-socialist transformation. I combined recurrent in-depth interviews with participant observation, and used ethnographic details observed in the course of my daily rounds in Moscow as the basis for further altering, specifying and developing the interview themes.

The goal of my fieldwork and analysis has been to address the ways in which routine activities such as shopping, socialising and caring for the household are implicated, both practically and symbolically, in the project of dealing with the uncertainties of the post-socialist period. Moreover, I wanted to uncover the forms of post-socialist public talk and identities that emerged in these forms of everyday practice.

More than 10 years after the beginning of *perestroika*, the form that critical discussion of the situation took in the narratives of my informants was not substantially different from the "litanies of 'total collapse'" observed by Ries (1997, p. 181) at the end of the 1980s, but with one important caveat: it was hard to ignore the fact that the discontents being addressed have been a part of the respondents' everyday life for a substantial period of time. Thus, another theme was added to the one of decline and collapse: the theme of permanence. This created a paradoxical situation in which the post-socialist crisis was at the same time acute and long-term, demanding not temporary adaptations but patterned and stable solutions, because the predicament was permanent and was not expected to change for a long time. Permanence in this context has two aspects: the permanence of unfavourable social circumstances and the permanence of the daily life which has to be achieved through growing accustomed to these circumstances. As one of my respondents, a 53-year old male engineer, put it,

I had no panic in August [1998], or any special moods that, you know, I won't be able to feed the family or something. These times, of the Great Depression, or this crisis of 1930s

that they had in America, as they showed us on TV—with suicides, and all that—it makes me laugh. Someone went bankrupt. So what, he went bankrupt. I don't know. For Russia ... In Russia ... we've been living that way for a long time ...

What is implied in this comparison between Russia of the 1990s and the USA of the 1930s is that, while a sudden economic breakdown may come as a shock to unaccustomed individuals, such a breakdown will not be able to affect a community which has been exposed to a chain of equally grave developments over a long period of time, and which has developed an entire infrastructure to withstand similar shocks. In the light of this routine nature of post-socialist instability, and the significance it held for my informants, I found it difficult to think about their daily behaviours in terms of survival—the concept which recently emerged in sociological literature on Russia and seems to be gaining intellectual momentum in discussions of micro-social processes.² While the aptness in its application clearly depends on the economic and social circumstances of the specific group under study, the tendency to use this term as an organising framework of conceptualisation of the post-Soviet society appears somewhat problematic, both methodologically and substantively. The connotation of exceptionality and extremity this term bears, not unlike the term 'crisis' in conjunction with which it often appears, obfuscates the routine and normative character of activities carried out under this title, and makes one insensitive to the recurrent patterns that structure action and reproduce themselves across various contexts. Thus the view taken in this article would be that the subject under study is life rather than survival, and coping rather than the more purposive and rational adaptation. This would allow an interpretation of everyday choices as being made under a variety of considerations, not all of them strictly rational, and not all of them even conscious. Moreover, it makes it possible to interpret daily actions in the spirit of Bourdieu's 'fuzzy logic of practical sense', when coping with everyday chores is seen as rooted in situational considerations, and when it is logical only 'up to the point where to be logical would cease to be practical' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 22).

Everyday life in a post-socialist metropolis

To live in the post-socialist Moscow implies, according to my respondents, 'always [being] ready for everything'. 'There is no time for strategic planning or even any planning for the future', one of my respondents, a 31-year-old male freight operator, told me during an interview: 'Blows come from this direction and from that direction, from all over the place, and all one has time for is petty everyday tactics'. 'The metro system is in an emergency state', said a 49-year-old female accountant; 'I am surprised more catastrophes don't happen'. 'We are waiting for something bad to happen all the time', seconded Valentina, a 31-year-old day care teacher,

Lately, what El'tsin has been doing, what's been happening in the country has been constantly hitting all of us on the head, so that one can't even relax or have a break, because I feel like we are constantly waiting for something. Like, aha, right now he's going to do something else, some other folly, and we again will have to suffer, the ordinary people (*prostye lyudi*). Because they always know in advance, and even if they don't, the same Berezovsky, what, will he suffer if he loses some 3 million, I mean if he has 20 or I don't

know how many millions he has, but it won't have the same impact on him as it would on a person who has 300 [rubles] and loses 50.

The unpredictable and erratic nature of political developments is the major factor structuring the population's idealisation of and gravitation to stability and lawful order as the two fundamental values lacking in the contemporary post-socialist order³ (Dubin, 1999). The volatility of the state and its infrastructures is reproduced on the day-to-day level by the equally predatory nature of the market, the whims of which are not limited to fluctuating prices or the inflation of the national currency. Central to the imagery of the market in post-socialism is the imagery of transgression, deceit and disorder which individuals discern in their most minute and routine encounters with trade in all its manifestations (Humphrey, 1995; Lemon, 2000). In many cases deceit is portrayed as merely the 'local' face of the global predicament of infrastructural disorder. In the following quotation, this sensibility takes the form of distrust towards the capacity of law enforcement organs to perform their duties:

... What's been going on all across our markets—this is just some kind of mockery at us, Muscovites. I feel humiliated. When I go to the market to buy apples or potatoes let's say, and I feel that I am being cheated, deceived, that scales are wrong, that they are just openly mocking me. Or I go to the market to buy shoes for my son, and I know that they don't cost the sum I'm asked, that I'm being deceived. But I can't resist because I do need to buy something.... Or take Luzhkov, people say he sold the Moscow markets for how many years!⁴

Olga: Luzhkov sold markets?

Vera: He did, to these, to the Azerbaijani diaspora or whoever they are. For I don't know how long, I think 50 years or so.

Olga: This is quite amazing. Where did you read this?

Vera: I don't remember, but it's widely known that he did ... And again, supposedly it was for our benefit. But how can we benefit if they don't produce anything, they just trade the things they did not produce. And at the same time, I can see how the old ladies are being chased away by the police, those who are selling the produce that they themselves, perhaps, have grown. And to compare it with the way the police treat these [outsider] traders.

(Vera, cleaning lady, 43)

Vera's juxtaposition of the elderly ladies to the business-minded representatives of ethnic minorities is employed to highlight the responsibility of the police for perpetuation of the unfair market practices and their implication in the very networks they are supposed to prosecute. It also demonstrates her fundamental suspicion and distrust of two things: trade as opposed to production (hence the moral superiority of the old ladies who are selling their own produce) and the 'trading minorities', i.e. members of ethnic diasporas which are stereotypically considered to be the ones carrying out the bulk of trading activity in the former USSR (Armenians, Azerbaijanis, Georgians etc., who have been more recently joined by foreign traders: the Chinese and the Vietnamese). These attitudes, themselves not uncommon for other cultural and social contexts,⁵ have been reinforced in the Russian case by the legacies of socialism, throughout which ethnic tensions have been closely connected to

consumption as 'locals' and 'outsiders' competed for scarce resources (Verdery, 1993; Nikolaev, 2000). Further compounding these legacies was the post-socialist collapse of the many all-union institutional structures and networks which used to provide an antidote to such fierce regional and ethnic particularism (Humphrey, 1999).

The belief in the pervasiveness of deceit is also related to the complex encounters that contemporary Russians have had with the nascent market and with the forms of communication associated with it.⁶ Having a long experience of exposure to propaganda images of the socialist consumer paradise, which stood in sharp contrast to the far less attractive reality, post-socialist consumers found it hard to believe both the images of abundance they were observing in the shops after 1991 and the advertising messages related to them. But beyond the influence of the past, more recent developments have played their role as well. Lack of confidence about the international standing of Russia in the world made many consumers simultaneously desire the imported consumer goods and fear that their disrespected country received shipments of inferior products, while the better quality ones were kept by the advanced countries for domestic consumption.⁷ On a more general level, as Lemon (2000) has argued, shifting market relations and social hierarchies in post-socialist Russia have inspired a growing anxiety over sincerity and legitimacy in a variety of contexts, from heightened concern with counterfeits and forgeries to ambivalence towards everything foreign and visibly different.

The sense of vulnerability associated with this shifting social landscape is exacerbated by the collapse of social security arrangements and protective mechanisms that were in place during the years of socialism. Individuals who, to quote another respondent, 'all knew what was in store for [them]' and 'what [their] retirement would look like', suddenly discovered themselves without a clear conception of even a minimally distant future. Their social worlds, clearly demarcated for them by the 'system' into distinctive periods of 'school', 'institute', 'work' and 'retirement', each following in strict order one after another, and each systematised and ordered within itself, started to crumble. It became not unthinkable that 'retirement' might mean a need for new schooling and a new job, and that education might become impossible without a simultaneous side job which, in its turn, might grow into a full-time activity before graduation and even result in a career at the price of interrupted schooling. This happened in the context of profound restructuring (or collapse) of the very institutions of education, employment, 'organised leisure' (i.e. summer camps, enterprise-sponsored recreation trips etc.) and other systems involved in providing what Giddens (1990), following Laing, calls 'ontological security'. A retired female chemical engineer recollects the times of certainty as follows:

When we worked in our research institute, and it was a prestigious organisation, we received decent salaries, we could afford to go on road trips in winter and in summer, we've been all around the European part of Russia, in the Baltics, in Ukraine, in the Carpathians. Back then, we all thought that we'd be living that way forever. That with our two retirement packages we'd get by well enough. If I knew the way things would turn out, I would never have left my job ...

Finally, the lived experience of daily life in post-socialist Russia is marked not only

by the breakdowns in the infrastructure but, more generally, by what Bourdieu (1977) terms the hysteresis of habitus, i.e. the lack of fit between the social conditions for which an individual was socialised and the social conditions of the moment. Individuals who grew up under state socialism with its relative income equality and social guarantees, and who mastered skills tailored to this particular social context, could not help but experience a sense of disorientation when this social environment was replaced with one which required assertively entrepreneurial behaviour, a certain adventurousness and a number of other qualities which were not a part of their cultural tool-kit. This is not to say that success was unattainable, or that cultural tools could not be transposed into the new context. However, even where that was the case, the respondents continued to sense the lack of fit between their former cultural capital and the skills that they perceived essential for success in the post-socialist economy, which made them experience their occasional successes as random, unexpected and unearned, since they often were not convinced that they possessed the competence required to systematically reproduce them in the future. In this respect, even relative well-being did not automatically bring to the actors a sense of confidence and mastery of the world at large. A comment made by one of my informants, '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', could not be a better illustration of Bourdieu's concept of habitus hysteresis. It highlights the tension between the skills and strategies which were a part of the respondent's interiorised repertoire prior to the transformation, and which were experienced as natural, and the ones which the respondent had to develop under the pressure of changing circumstances. While the former were so much a part of the speaker's habitus that they had no overtone of social determination whatsoever, the latter were unequivocally conceptualised as enforced and forcibly imposed by society.

Several themes that emerge from the above discussion are relevant for our investigation of the everyday responses to uncertainty and the kinds of identities embedded in this project. The first is the theme of structural inefficiency and the high degree to which the responsibility for the volatile nature of post-socialist daily life is placed on the state and the inefficient bureaucratic structures associated with it (frequently referred to as 'the system'). On the most general level, 'the system' was frequently used in the interviews as the opposite pole to morality, as a symbol of all the negative features of today's situation, the site of chaos and disintegration the effects of which my respondents felt on their lives. At the same time, the system itself was described as so riddled with gaps and inefficiencies that, even as it was being criticised, its images oscillated between those of a powerful structure and those of a weak, predatory bureaucratic network, so that it was difficult to understand whether it was the strength of the system that was being lamented or its perilous weakness.

The second theme relevant to the discussion of everyday concerns is the issue of identity in a changing environment, and the foundations for one's conceptions of self that are available in the context of shifting social institutions and hierarchies. Perpetual fluctuation of class, citizenship and professional identities only emphasises the persistence of others, such as kinship and family-based ones. This of course does not necessarily mean that family relations became any more loyal or loving,⁸ but simply that they can be experienced as more permanent than other kinds of ties: one

could stop being a Soviet citizen or an engineer, but one still remained a daughter, a sister or a wife. Apart from the family, there is yet another foundation for constructing one's sense of self, and, paradoxically, it has to do with the very circumstances that seem to endanger it, i.e. the faulty and malfunctioning infrastructure. In the midst of an unreliable 'system', the measure of the individual's worth (and by extension, the moral boundaries significant in his/her relationships with others) is closely connected with his/her capacity to demonstrate independence from this system, both emotionally (by displaying cynicism and demonstrative disengagement) and practically (by engaging in forms of action which do not rely on systemic resources). The task of demonstrating one's independence from the 'system' (whether real or merely aspired), then, becomes central to being able to perform what Berger & Luckman (1989, p. 42) call 'pragmatic competence'—an actor's ability to master routine problems which unites him/her with the other members of the particular knowledge community (in our case, the community of those whom Valentina called 'the ordinary people').

The third and final implication of the discontents discussed above is the surprising centrality that themes of consumption hold for post-socialist actors. The larger motives of capitalism, social differentiation and systemic inefficiencies coexisted in discussions of consumption with fears of deceit, ambivalence towards foreign products and expressions of insecurities about the future. Because the field of consumption lies on the intersection between the personal (identity, convenience, self-expression) and the political (market, production, price policy), it translates political and economic processes into immediately understandable and consequential trends experienced by every Russian household. Consumption decisions, hence, allow us to approach the tensions and dilemmas between economising and gratification, security and comfort, subjectivity and control in a concise, almost concentrated form which reflects the conflicting demands of the post-socialist milieu.

Post-socialist contrasts

Images of capitalist contrasts, which emphasise that proliferation of advertising and the affluence of newly built shopping centres and restaurants catering to the 'new Russians' and expatriates exist side by side with the hardship and privations of the impoverished majority, are ubiquitous both in the media and in academic accounts of post-socialist Russia (see for instance Gregory, 1996, as well as the selection of materials in the *New York Times Magazine*, 1998). Less noted, although at least as remarkable, are the contrasts not *between* groups in post-socialist society but *within* the lives of many post-socialist households, and it is to these latter contrasts that this section is devoted.

Evidence of consumption in post-socialist Russian households both supports and refutes the standard complaint about the continuous deterioration of everyday life during the past decade. On the one hand, my respondents frequently reported having to economise stringently on many everyday needs, such as purchase of food, small clothing articles and other basic household necessities (detergents, toiletries and so on), to say nothing of larger purchases, such as coats, furniture and household durables. Such reports were particularly pervasive after the economic breakdown of

1998 when many families found themselves forced out of their habitual spending pattern by the sudden devaluation of the ruble, with the concomitant rise in prices it entailed.⁹ On the other hand, this conservative pattern of consumption was often accompanied by occasional purchases of expensive household items. Thus, during the two years of my fieldwork, eight of the respondents reported buying new major pieces of furniture, kitchen durables or expensive equipment (computer, TV/VCR system etc.), and several managed to afford other investment-intensive projects (house repairs, installation of fortified doors or bars on the windows, construction of summer houses). Looking at the decade as a whole, the change in material circumstances of households becomes even more perplexing: according to market research data provided by COMCON-International, 80% of Russian households have purchased at least one TV set during the past 10 years, 62% have obtained a new refrigerator, 37% a new VCR, with figures somewhat higher in large cities, such as Moscow and St Petersburg.¹⁰ Instances of multiple ownership of large durables are frequent (nine families in my sample had more than one refrigerator, and 14 owned multiple TV sets).

This discrepancy would be easily understandable as evidence of growing social polarisation, were it not the same households that combined laborious economising on daily needs with sudden bouts of generous spending. Embodied in the physical lay-out of the apartment, these seemingly contradictory orientations often produced an almost shocking effect, when post-socialist contrasts between affluence and poverty, usually thought of on a societal scale, were manifested side by side in the lived environment of the same Muscovite family. A fortified entrance through several impressive metal or solid wooden doors with many locks on each could lead into a decent but unambiguously modest apartment whose owner, laughingly, would be the first to announce: 'our door is our most expensive possession'. A newly repaired bathroom, to which I would be escorted by the proud respondent upon arrival to witness the 'Italian taps' the family had installed since my last visit, would contain sheets and covers soaking overnight to be washed by hand, because they are too large for the washing machine and 'the dry cleaners are too expensive.'¹¹ My interviews routinely took place in bedrooms where the old models of household equipment (refrigerators or washing machines) were housed after their replacements had been purchased because the kitchen did not have space for them. Most of these appliances stood unplugged waiting 'in case of emergency', when they would be used again. In the meantime, they fulfilled the function of a storage space or a TV stand, and on one occasion I observed a small refrigerator mounted, unplugged, on top of a wardrobe. In the kitchens, where the conversation continued after the interview, and where I was often served tea with preserves, shining new appliances coexisted with plastic shopping bags washed for recycling and hung up for drying, and plastic yogurt and margarine containers which were used instead of soap dishes, or lined the windowsill in the capacity of flower pots. Because of the lack of space in small Moscow apartments, these tokens of scarcity and achievement not only coexisted but practically fed one upon another, as in cases when families used the old appliances to replace the furniture items they did not have (the old speakers would be turned into a nightstand, and the old refrigerator, unplugged, could become a cupboard to house jars of pickled cucumbers, tomatoes or cabbage prepared yearly in order to avoid the unnecessary expense of purchasing these products on the market).

The fascination of Russian consumers with investing in their homes, maximising household security and providing their families with new and modern technological gadgets seems to conform to the logic of late capitalism in its obsession with novelty and pushing the boundaries of affordability (the latter, however, being limited by the moral and practical constraints associated with borrowing from kin and close friends whose financial circumstances are typically not substantially better than those of the ‘overspent Russian’,¹² him/herself). Unlike Drazin’s Romanian informants, who portrayed their post-socialist furniture choices as ‘not ... a marker of difference, but [as] avowedly local and bought by simple convenience’ (Drazin, 2001, pp. 175–176), my respondents took a marked pleasure in discussing the venues and product aspects which they considered in the process of making the purchase decision. Living in a large city and surrounded by commercial establishments, they took a great pride in being able to competently explore the variants they offered, and were keen on taking from the market economy what it has to offer, if only within the limits of what they can afford. Yet in many other ways they echoed the sensibility of Drazin’s subjects, treating consumption in Russia as a uniquely local affair, so ridden with dangers and local idiosyncrasies that no stranger could find her way through the post-socialist marketplace. And, as the following section will argue, the prefix ‘post’ here may be superfluous.

Consumption and the flow of history

Memories of consumption experiences under late socialism occupied such a central place in the narratives of my informants that it would be impossible to understand the significance of their consumer sensibility today without relating it to the ultimate ‘other’ with which it is perpetually contrasted—the times of the distributive economy and shortage. The close connection between the two is apparent, among other things, in the fact that it was never necessary to ask a direct question about people’s memory of socialist-era consumption. Usually, a probing question about the felt effects of the transformation sufficed to provoke a virtual outpouring of consumer memories, as was the case with Ksenya, a 43-year-old woman who spent 20 years working at a watch-making plant before she left the badly paying job in order to work part-time, first as a market saleswoman and then as a cleaning lady. She spent most of her time looking after her two school-aged sons and taking care of the house, while her husband, who worked in a construction brigade, was the main breadwinner for the family. My conversation with Ksenya took place in her neat living-room furnished with newly purchased armchairs and a sofa; the first several minutes of the conversation were relatively unanimated until I unwittingly hit a virtual golden mine by opening up the issue of consumption:

Olga: I want to ask about changes in big politics, how did they affect your life, if they did at all? ...

Ksenya: Politics is politics, when a government changes ... as they say, the new broom sweeps differently, right? So a government changes—it means new laws, something else changing here and there, new regulations ... (pause) In 1990 you were in school still, so you

probably don't remember ... There were these personal cards that we had to use when shopping¹³ ...

Olga: Why, I remember, I even still have mine somewhere ...

Ksenya: You do? Well, then you know what I am talking about. We would go to shop and would queue for God knows how long—for hours. Even back when I worked at the factory ... We had a very nice supervisor, Masha. So we would be like, 'Masha, this and that is on sale in the store',—'Well, ok, go, get in the queue.'¹⁴ And what could one do? You had to feed the family somehow ...

Olga: So speaking of changes, do you remember how they started? Did you notice them?

Ksenya: The political ones ... Starting from 1991 the price increases started. So the most [central] one was 1991. Which was an insane year (*beshenyi god*) when we chased and hunted for children's clothes, for something else. At the enterprise, we got coupons for The Children's World,¹⁵ and we queued forever, almost for an entire night. At some point, before the New Year, we had this coupon ... So on 1 January, or around then anyway, it was an entire night, I mean, at 5 in the morning they would bring us there in a car so that we queued before the opening of the store, before 8 AM, in order to get in and purchase something ... I knew I needed it, I had to dress two children, so I arrived, I stood there, I warmed myself at the bonfire ... Afterwards, things started getting easier. But 1991 I really remembered. Later—things started to appear in stores, and you could buy something much easier. And I know because ... if I'm not mistaken we even have some boots that I bought back then, for ten years ahead of time. Yes, size 37, I remember I purchased, I just don't know if I still have them or we gave them away. Because I bought them for my son. And he grew up, looked at them and said, 'Mom, are you kidding? I won't wear these'. Whereas before, we chased them, we grabbed everything we could for as long as the money lasted. Everything. Now, there is everything in the stores, and there's no reason to buy ahead of time. But back then, I used to buy five, two, several years ahead all the time. By the size. Let's say, he [the son] was size 15, and I could buy size 17, or 20. Just because we had no idea of what was to come, and right now, everything is right there in the stores—suit yourself ...

The talk about the stores did not end there, and several times in the course of the interview Ksenya returned to the topic with the same verbosity, adding new details to the picture she had created, and concluding the interview by saying:

Awful, awful. It was something horrendous, people grabbed on to anything, literally anything. Everything, all goods, all produce, I mean, I am talking to you now, and in my eyes I have this vision of The Children's World. When we would run up and down every floor, fixing places in lines, exchanging—you will stand in this line, and I in that, and then you will come to me, and I will come take your place in yours. And I have two children, I had to make sure I get everything in two copies, and to have money for both ... It was scary. I wouldn't want our children to see this.

The centrality of the imagery of consumption in the memories of my informants is partly explained by the fact that, during the years of late socialism and in the early 1990s, obtaining goods and products for the household was a major undertaking which, in terms of the amount of time and effort it required, could be effectively compared with a second job, especially for female household members who did the bulk of the shopping (Nikolaev, 2000). Yet the consistent pattern of evocation and the pleasure many of my respondents appear to derive from contrasting their own

behaviour during shortages with their current shopping experiences seem to have a deeper root. Recollecting the absurd and comical elements in the shopping experience of the 1980s and early 1990s (such as the boots bought 10 years ahead of time, or soap and shampoo still remaining from the period), the respondents seemed to put the experiences they were retelling narratively past themselves, into the safe category of the 'closed chapters' in their lives, and thus to emphasise a sense of personal progression and transcendence of the past. This sensibility became especially apparent precisely when the social and economic circumstances seemed to challenge it, as was the case with the economic breakdown of August 1998, when the impetus to stockpiling and hoarding was given by the uneven but rapid process of price growth. To quote another informant, a retired chemical engineer,

I even borrowed some money from a friend of mine, and we went to the market and made an effort to buy everything that was still available at the 'old' price. Not so much, of course, and, as you understand, this couldn't save one for long. You can't stock for your entire future life. But it did help us out a bit. We bought some grains, and tea and coffee.... I never had this attitude, that one should always have everything stocked up. To compare with the old times, it [the period of the past few years] was so good. Before, you had to queue so much: for meat, for bananas, for what not. And this life, it forced us to stock up, because, you knew, if you came across something, that this opportunity might not come again for another six months. And during the past few years, it was really good, that you could just go and buy anything. I already got used to not stocking up. And now it turns out that I was wrong, that in our country you always have to be ready for emergencies. Our country is unpredictable that way.

The emergencies for which one has to be prepared in the context of post-socialism are, admittedly, of a different nature than those described by Ksenya. They include unexpected price jumps, unpredictable earnings and a marketplace widely perceived as unregulated and ridden with dangers of deceit. Correspondingly, a competent performance on it implies not unlimited queuing and networking to obtain scarce goods but vigilant and alert navigation of the sea of products and services, the very abundance of which is often interpreted as a sign of potential fraud (Humphrey, 1995). Multiple strategies which are implemented daily to this end involve meticulous inspection of the product packaging, looking for smeared paint, uneven lines and other indicators of phony merchandise, and grilling the salesperson regarding the location of all the processes involved in manufacturing the product, from design to assembly to packaging. With home electronics and appliances there is an elaborate hierarchy involved in determining their value, which has to do with the place of assembly and which is generally consistent across consumers and salespeople. A Russian market researcher summarised it to me as follows: 'The highest ranking is "white" assembly (Europe or America), the second is "yellow" assembly (Asia), and the lowest is our own, Russian. As for Japan', he added with some bitterness, 'it's the highest of all, but we've known for a long time that things assembled there do not get here'.¹⁶

Manufacturers and salespeople should not be seen as excluded from this social context of negotiating authenticity; on the contrary, they are actively involved in it and often use it for enhancing product appeal. Thus I witnessed a shop assistant recommending a housewife to purchase a Moulinex food processor not on the grounds

of its superior quality but because it was assembled in Poland, while an almost identical Braun one next to it was allegedly assembled in Indonesia and only packaged in Eastern Europe. Similarly, producers of Borzhomi mineral water advertise it by emphasising the uniqueness of the product and its insusceptibility to fraud due to its unique packaging. Others are more blatant: take for example the manufacturers of 'No Deceit' (*Bez obmana*) dumplings, which were advertised in the winter of 1999 on the Moscow subway. The poster featured a pack of dumplings and had their ingredients, in traditional Russian jars and packages, displayed in front. The slogan proclaimed: 'We guarantee the meat', which addressed a deep-seated conviction of many consumers that manufacturers routinely replace minced meat in dumplings and sausages with bread or other substitutes (ironically, and perhaps by the artist's oversight, it was precisely meat that was absent from the colourful ingredient display at the front of the poster).

Most of the information about obtaining credible products and services is circulated in conversations between friends and acquaintances. Everybody has a story to tell concerning the risk and danger of consumption, and everyone has advice about the way of avoiding it and obtaining a dependable and trustworthy service. Apart from the advice from the network of one's acquaintances, it is also common to draw on print media of the recently mushroomed genre of consumer advice.¹⁷ Sometimes distributed free of charge and sometimes sold on an equal footing with other journals, these publications discuss instances of deceit and fraud, and provide the reading public with examples of an appropriate response, further solidifying consumers' conviction both that the market is 'out to get them' and that they nevertheless possess the resources to reverse the market encounter in their favour.

Coming back to Ksenya's account, then, it seems fair to say that, first, both socialist and post-socialist consumer experience represent for today's individuals evidence of their achievements, albeit of different nature, and, second, the memories of socialist-era consumption serve as a springboard for evaluating the progress of their household in the uneasy task of navigating the post-socialist economy. The progress and the hostility of the context here are hard to disentangle; take for example the case of Klara, a 45-year-old registrar who purchased her new refrigerator through what she characterised as 'enforced savings'—two-years worth of pension arrears which were paid to her and her mother in one instalment a year and a half ago. Yet, while in this respect the new fridge is symbolic of the 'disorder' of the 1990s, it also stands for the period's accomplishments: further commenting on the purchase, Klara recurrently emphasised the surprising ease with which it was made. 'Still, it's pleasant (*vse-taki priyatno*)', she said. 'In the old times it would take up months, and here—I just made a phone call, and they delivered and installed it the same day'.

The sense of divide between the current period and what Klara called 'the old times' explains not only the constancy with which consumer narratives recurrently return to the 'sagas' and 'epics' of obtaining goods in the shortage economy, but also the reluctance to part with those goods as well. Perceived as part and parcel of the 'old regime', these objects embody memories of an era which is thought of not only as gone forever but, as Nadkarni (2002) argues in the case of post-socialist Hungary, 'lost or stolen, inescapably written over with political meaning' (p. 7). Thus, while today's consumers may be ironic or detached about the remaining trophies of their

late-socialist consumer feats, this does not preclude a sense of sentimental attachment, both because of the centrality these now obsolete objects and the task of obtaining them once had in their lives, and because the lives themselves are now perceived as hopelessly entangled with the now obsolete socialist project. The objects hence become witnesses of another era, not simply that of their owners' youth but of the aspirations, hopes and illusions which were associated with late socialism and vanished with it, including the 'lost dream of consumer plentitude which the economic realities of post-socialism have disenchanting' (Nadkarni, 2002, p. 6).

It appears, then, that the sense of time and history which my respondents articulate by manipulating and talking about their possessions is both fractured and continuous. On the one hand, there are realities in their past which they feel the younger generation cannot understand; Ksenya's conviction that I, a 25-year-old Russian individual, cannot remember the times of ration cards, is telling in this regard; other respondents behaved similarly in that they did not presume my familiarity with the principles of the everyday economy of the 1970s and 1980s, and went into elaborate explanations of the process through which one or other old appliance was obtained ('The old TV set we have—I could only get it through my grandfather [a war veteran], the same with the fridge, I could only obtain it through him. And even then—we had to wait about a year for the postcard to come in the mail telling us that our turn had come ...').¹⁸ On the other hand, this motive was so emphatically delivered that the very affirmation of the cultural uniqueness and specificity of the socialist consumer experience began to sound like a credential, evidence of individual success in a world which was most definitely not built to facilitate it, and in this respect not fundamentally different from the equally perilous post-socialist marketplace. Decisions and strategies for obtaining things in the post-socialist era were thus negotiated and carried out in a continuous silent dialogue with the past, through juxtaposition which nevertheless suggested concealed parallels. Ridiculing or lamenting its absurdities, articulating one's sense of transcendence, and yet never completely disposing of it, neither rhetorically (as a point of reference) nor physically (through discarding the old possessions), my respondents were working through the very matter of history, reconciling the contradictory needs to feel one's progression yet not to forgo one's distinctiveness and identity, and healing the very rupture they both experienced and expressed.

Becoming autonomous, or a crash course on being ready for everything

One noteworthy aspect of consumption narratives is their dual purpose: consumers use them to voice their discontent (as when they bemoan the constraints and difficulties of being a consumer in both the 'new' and the 'old' Russian economy), but also to manage their predicament by devising a narrative framework in which the two can coexist and be invested with value and meaning. In other words, *articulations* of crisis function simultaneously as *instruments* through which this crisis is managed and navigated. To an extent, this double function is endemic to the nature of the narrative format itself. 'Everyday narrative activity', Ochs & Capps write, 'offers a forum for grappling with the meaning of unexpected, often problematic life events' (2001, p. 223) Ordered and organised, the narrative assigns order and meaning to the

tensions of everyday life and gives the speaker a sense of control even if the events narrated are uncontrollable. This explains, for example, the pleasure my low-income respondents took in reciting a chain of prices, both current and socialist-time, as a way of indicating their discontent with the rapidity of inflation. Monotonously recounting the amounts charged for various products ('Carrots now are 25 rubles. Eggs—17, three times what they were! Cold cuts—35 a kilo. Sugar is expensive, 11 at the least, and 12 on the market'), the respondents who could not master these prices in reality controlled them at least in the narrative, attaining a fragile sense of competence which would be likely to dissipate again as soon as they reached the market.

But it is not only through narrative that the sense of control can be aspired to. In consumer choices and behaviours, too, my respondents symbolically expressed their desperation with the disorderly state of the post-socialist 'system', but also depended on this imagery in order to assert their own practical mastery of this environment. One way of attaining this effect was through the process of shopping itself, which was replete with expressions of distrust and strategic arrangements in order to avoid potential deceit (from intensive preparatory reading of consumer magazines and mobilisation of information available through networks in the case of large purchases to the use of their own calculator and scale on food markets in order to double-check the salesperson's arithmetic in the case of daily shopping). Another way in which a measure of control could be exercised was not through how shopping was done but through what was being bought, and a few trends deserve special notice in this regard.

The first and the most all-embracing one had to do with the conversion of savings. Given the rapid rate of inflation and the little faith that most of my respondents had in the stability of the companies they worked for, all large sums of money which somehow accumulated in their savings accounts or, more frequently, in the chests of drawers and liquor cabinets in their apartments, had to be turned into objects in order to retain their value. While the instability of the national currency made this a purely rational decision, it had a symbolic component to it as well, since it was the objects, not monetary accounts, that were expected to truly measure one's thrift and foresight, and it was them that were expected to remain and give grounds for certainty about the future. Monetary savings, as many respondents discovered during the 1990s, could vanish overnight and leave their owners with frustration and status claims unsupported by anything but memory, while material possessions, even in the case of such sudden impoverishment, could allow them to continue having a relatively comfortable lifestyle at least for some period of time. Goods, hence, were thought about as metaphorical fortifications against the advance of time with all of the social and financial cataclysms that it is expected to bring with it. And since the cataclysms themselves were considered to be not inevitable, but engineered by the corrupt politicians and other agents associated with 'the system', the entire process took on overtones of a competition of wills and minds. Cases which provided evidence of individuals' successful performance were particularly cherished since they gave speakers an occasion to affirm their practical mastery over their environment and to construct themselves as competent actors *vis-à-vis* the 'system'. It is precisely this feeling that explains the otherwise perplexing expressions of triumph frequently articulated in the aftermath of price increases by those who succeeded in spending

their savings in advance. Phrases like ‘It’s like I felt it coming’ do more than merely celebrate something that has already happened; they also express hope that the speaker’s reactions are attuned to the situation and that he/she will be able to face the future challenges with equal skill. In my conversation with Lyuba, a 38-year-old cleaning lady in a private company, this sensibility was apparent in her evaluation of how the August 1998 financial crisis was handled by her family:

You know, my husband did suggest once to open a ruble bank account [before the crisis], it was called a ‘Christmas Account’ and yielded better returns in one or two years, I even made my calculations. That would mean changing our dollar savings into rubles, and it had to work, but I still said no. I did consider it though for a while, made estimates, because dollars [dollar rate] grow slowly, these are just kopecks, so we might have won if we did it, at least a bit, but I just didn’t feel like all this deceit.

Olga: Why do you say ‘deceit’?

Lyuba: You know, I am just used to the fact that we are always being deceived. (laughs). So I said, ‘You know, Sashka, I don’t believe it’ (smiles with satisfaction). So we just let it rest, and recently, he said, ‘Good thing we kept this money [in dollars]. Had we changed them into rubles—we would have been blown off’ ... And you know, somehow, we’ve been swindled and deceived so much that, whatever forecast they throw out next, people won’t buy it.

The money that Lyuba’s foresightful planning saved from the effects of the ruble devaluation was quickly converted into a new Lada car in September 1998. Because of the lag that existed for a few weeks after the breakdown between the ‘new’ currency rates and the ‘old’ ruble prices, Lyuba managed not only to avoid losing money but also to use the plummeting ruble rates to her advantage: the sum she had to put down for the car was substantially smaller, in dollar equivalent, than the one she would have paid if the purchase had been made before the currency crisis.

The motivation for purchase defines the forms that this investment takes. While Lyuba, due to a unique constellation of circumstances, managed to turn around and purchase a previously unaffordable car, a more standard purchase was less expensive, and therefore requiring months rather than years of saving, but equally durable (such as a household appliance or investment in home repairs). Imbued with the symbolic function to arrest the flow of time, which was always expected to bring increasingly unpleasant surprises, these objects allowed their owners a hope that, through careful planning, their temporary well-being could be preserved within the apartment, and that with ‘yesterday’s’ incomes and prices their family would be able to arrange for itself a more secure tomorrow.¹⁹

While the need to convert savings into objects can be satisfied by a purchase of any type of durable good, there is a sub-category of objects which responds to yet another trend associated with exercising a measure of control over one’s surroundings. This trend has to do with a more direct expression of physical self-protection through purchase and installation of reinforced metal doors, window bars and other forms of enhanced security measures. Fortified doors have achieved particular popularity in this regard, and are intimately familiar to anyone who has visited Moscow apartment buildings during the 1990s. Made out of solid wood or iron, and furnished with at least two locks, these doors typically do not replace, but supplement the standard

apartment doors, creating for a visitor a sensation of entering something of a fortress. The irony, frequently pointed out by my respondents themselves, is of course that the apartments that these multiple doors guard rarely contain anything of a value that would justify such precautions. Yet the need for such purchase is rarely questioned, and is typically rationalised in terms of the ease with which the standard door (or doors, in the many cases when several apartments are separated from the staircase by an additional door) could be broken through.

The peace of mind that my respondents derive from the knowledge that their apartment is duly fortified against attack seems to rest on two assumptions. One is that, in the world my respondents live in, an attack on their apartment and property is highly likely, and the other is that alternative means of securing oneself from attack, such as vigilant neighbours or alert police, are not available. 'Although police are needed, one is afraid of the police these days', said a 50-year-old male geologist whose apartment has a fortified entrance: 'The Ministry of Internal Affairs are the worst criminals themselves, it's better to avoid them with all means possible'. Installation of fortified doors in this context transfers the functions traditionally associated with the institutions of law enforcement to the respondent's own household, and allows him to run this household in a way that enjoys maximum protection against a threatening impact from the outside.

The accuracy of such a sceptical assessment of the 'outside' could be questioned. The number of registered cases of theft and breaking and entering in Russia is still lower than in many developed countries of the West—a third of the level in Germany, despite the difference in size and population (82 million in Germany vs. 146 million in Russia).²⁰ While these numbers refer only to the reported cases, they suggest that the installation of a fortified door could be more of a symbolic act than a practical response to an actual danger. This act affirms several things at the same time: distrust and scepticism towards those officially charged with the responsibility of protecting citizens, a fundamental conviction of a universal moral decline (both in terms of proliferation of potential burglars and apathy and disengagement of neighbours), a proprietor's affirmation of rights to his/her private space,²¹ and eagerness and capability of the household to resolve the issues of self-protection with its own means.

A similar function of self-protection is carried out by *rakushki*²²—easily assembled car shelters built out of several sheets of steel, which can be seen along practically every street and in every yard in Moscow and other Russian cities. *Rakushki* are made for all car sizes, are relatively inexpensive in comparison with traditional garages (\$550–700 vs. \$5700–7000) and are possible due to a loophole in the legal system which does not specify rates for leasing land for structures without a floor (the floor in *rakushki* is replaced by two parallel laths which connect the walls). *Rakushki* are positioned on an intersection of multiple risks: on the one hand, as in the case of metal doors, there is a risk of robbery or vandalism, as well as a risk that the individual's savings will evaporate due to inflation before they are turned into material objects. On the other hand, because of the dubious legal status of *rakushki* (formally legitimate according to federal regulations, they are extremely hard to register and de facto forbidden according to municipal standards), their owners find themselves in a precarious position in which they can never be sure that they will not be ordered by police to remove their *rakushka* in a matter of hours, thus losing both

their money and their security. While the common understanding is that cases like that can be settled by a bribe, the uncertainty that this possibility generates replaces the uncertainty associated with leaving the car unsheltered, and essentially leaves one in a 'damned if you do and damned if you don't' position. Yet, interestingly enough, the manner in which *rakushki* are positioned on the market emphasises precisely the aspect of security that this object provides and, moreover, explicitly equates it with another institutionalised but distrusted sphere, claiming that 'Rakushka is your best insurance'.

Finally, since potential dangers can be represented not only by the scheming politicians, dysfunctional legal system or criminals but also by impersonal and less predictable forces, such as technological malfunctions or illness, there is a third and final motive that runs through consumption, and it amounts to ensuring, to the degree that it is possible, the multiplicity of potential strategies and resolutions available for dealing with every given problem. In other words, the idea of back-ups and alternatives held a wide appeal, whether expressed in terms of preserving an old appliance after purchasing a new one or in relying simultaneously on official medicine, food supplements and 'bioenergy healers' for protection of one's health.²³ These multiple arrangements were all the more appealing since no single strategy could enjoy unconditional trust and legitimacy. While the old appliance could be expected to break, the new one, viewed in the spirit of suspicion and distrust of trade, could inspire caution on different grounds, since it was viewed as a product of the low standards and lax controls structuring the post-socialist marketplace. Similarly, while the official medicine still holds the licence to authoritative knowledge, its infrastructure and capabilities are widely recognised to have been negatively affected by the transformations of the past decade, and the alternative healers who stand outside the corrupt bureaucratic framework of biomedical knowledge could be drawn on instead. However, the legitimacy of the healers themselves is far from uncontested, and the same dangers of fraud and imposture make consumers oscillate between the two, using their own intuition, knowledge and common sense as the guide in the uneasy task of defining the course of action. The frustration associated with the absence of guarantees at every level of the decision-making process was inseparable here from the belief that this uncertainty was indicative of the flaws and defects of the post-socialist order, rather than of a larger condition of modernity with its discontents.²⁴ Expressions in which the rationale for the consumers' actions was explained, such as 'our impoverished so-called official medicine', or 'this brothel of ours' and the like, pointed to the fact that multiple security networks were being forged through consumption because of the failure of the bureaucratic system to control the channels responsible for the fulfilment of the corresponding tasks, from healthcare to social security to product certification. Thus, despite the fact that the problem itself could be caused by factors well outside the domain of the state, consumer practices associated with its solution still carried in themselves an accusatory potential insofar as individuals conceptualised themselves as making up for the failings of the state infrastructure.

It is apparent from the three trends discussed above that the theme of the state, in its presence and, more frequently, in its absence or failures runs through consumption narratives of my respondents, urging them to prioritise certain needs, exercise

particular caution in certain contexts, and organise their desires in accordance with the overarching concern with security and protection of their households. Self-protection here takes precedence over what could be considered resistance, i.e. individuals' effort to 'get back' at the state through some form of practical or symbolic retaliation. Because of the continuous nature of the perceived crisis and the multi-faceted character of the expected dangers, singular acts of resistance appear less effective than a systematic (and thereby matching the continuity of crisis) cultivation of household autonomy, in the course of which reliance on the distrusted agents of 'the system' is gradually replaced with parallel structures and arrangements. In the case of consumption, autonomisation amounts to imbuing shopping with tasks traditionally delegated to such formal structures as banks (when goods are used as forms of investment and protection of savings), social security and insurance (when goods are purchased in anticipation of future accidents), licensing bureaux (when consumers take it upon themselves to monitor the market in search of frauds) and law enforcement agencies (when self-defence against criminals becomes one of the most noticeable household expenditures), among many others.

Consumption practices implemented daily in order to safeguard individuals and their households from the effects of infrastructural inefficiencies play an important practical role in the process of bridging 'post-socialist holes'. The former Yugoslav writer Dubravka Ugrešić has metaphorically called her experience of exile 'life with an adapter', 'so that we don't burn ourselves' while passing through cities, countries and cultures;²⁵ extending this metaphor to the experience of my informants, one may compare the role of consumption practices to a surge protector which shields its owners from the fluctuations and breaks in the electrical current. Softening, mediating and/or substituting for the real or expected institutional failures to serve the citizens, this metaphorical surge protector ensures that, whatever they may be, risks and problems of post-socialism do not have their full impact on the household, and hence promotes a sense of ontological security otherwise endangered by what is seen as collapse of all things public. However, the cognitive and behavioural framework that this orientation entails has several problematic aspects as well.

For one, belief in the ineffectiveness of the official channels and infrastructures is a self-fulfilling prophecy: having no faith in the institutions' capacity to resolve their grievances, individuals may opt not even to bother trying. Quantitative data quoted in Colton (1995) suggest that this is indeed the case: according to a poll undertaken in 1993, Muscovites 'contact local political institutions only *one-fourth to one-sixth as often* as in the early 1980s, before perestroika' (Colton, 1995, p. 74, italics in the original). Instead, the individuals preferred to rely primarily on themselves and, to an increasing extent towards the end of 1990s, on their family and friends.²⁶ Apart from the consequences that autonomisation may have for the vitality of exchange between the citizens and the local public institutions, its practical soundness may be questioned in some instances as well: money spent on an unnecessary durable for the sole purpose of its conversion may turn out to be badly required for other, more urgent needs, while such practices as installation of metal doors or cultivation of a dacha garden plot may give individuals a subjective sense of protection, but they hardly represent insurance against theft or starvation.²⁷ However, these details do not substantially undermine the logic of autonomisation, because its appeal, apart from

being practical, is also ideational and is rooted in the kinds of identities that autonomisation makes possible.

Consumption and identity: making the objects speak

Earlier, I argued that in putting experiences in the form of a narrative, individuals exercise a form of control, so that articulations of crisis function at the same time as instruments of its resolution. But the opposite is true as well. The symbolic importance of the acts of autonomisation described above lies in the fact that, by exercising control over existing or potential dangers, consumers can weave a symbolic narrative which indicts the state for its failure to protect its own citizens. In other words, the project of taming the crisis by developing alternatives to the failing institutions and structures of the state is not only an effort to cope with the times but a moralistic indictment of them. In devising ingenious tactics to detect fraud, preserve savings or ensure their personal safety, my respondents, essentially, were enacting in practice the frequent complaint of the 1990s that ‘no one [else] cares’ (*nikomu nichego ne nado*). The following quotation is representative of the dismissive tone and bitterness with which this theme was discussed. Sasha, a 30-year-old male entrepreneur, says:

We don't have here what is called by people 'the state'. It simply does not exist. The state—it's the apparatus which, although, yes, it exploits and this and that, but the most important thing—it somehow cares for its citizens. And in our case, absolutely no one cares for us ...

The critical sentiment of the citizens which, most probably, was formed by a series of disappointing encounters with the bearers of the attitude Sasha is describing, is an example of what Bourdieu called ‘the *dialectic of the internalisation of externality and the externalisation of internality* or, more simply, of incorporation and objectification’ (1977, p. 72, italics in the original). The first part of this circular process, incorporation, was set in motion every time the drastically changed social environment made it apparent to the individuals that the old ways of acting and achieving their goals applied no more, and that competent action in the new context required a different set of skills and dispositions. This realisation was all the more sharp since it coincided with the loss of credibility of many social institutions, such as trade unions, professional organisations and workers' collectives, and the corresponding demise of the identities they supported. As a result, the instances of misguided decisions or wrong moves which inevitably occur in the course of daily financial planning were increasingly (and very self-critically) attributed to the influence of ‘Soviet thinking’, and psychological or ideological leftovers of the socialist era. Speaking of the early 1990s, one of my respondents, a 48-year-old draughtswoman, said:

I can't believe how naïve we were back then with these [privatisation] vouchers, what a big deal we thought they were, the queues we stood in to invest, putting names on lists, showing up for daily check-ups (*otmechalis' kazhdyi den'*) ... Instead of just selling them right there, on the spot as some smart people did.

Similarly, recollections of the pyramid schemes ubiquitous between 1991 and 1994 were often accompanied by comments on the gullibility and naiveté (or as one respondent put it, 'the pioneer assiduity' (*pionerskaya ispolnitel'nost'*)) of the Russian people of the early 1990s who, still under the illusion of credibility of banks and other financial institutions, unsuspectingly entrusted their money to a bunch of 'conmen'. Convictions that such incidents would be 'impossible in a normal Western country', as well as recurrent references to their Soviet-time experiences as the basis of the early post-socialist mistakes, all pointed to the belief that such economic blunders were based on fallacies in Soviet thinking.

While my informants were perhaps too hasty in assuming that vulnerability to pyramid schemes and investment scams is a characteristically Soviet or early post-Soviet feature,²⁸ this assumption allowed them both to express their discontent with the sudden rupture of the habitual social order and to construct the passing decade as the time of personal progression, in the course of which 'the pioneer assiduity' of the earlier period was slowly being replaced with a more hardened and shrewd attitude. The objectification of this attitude took place, among other things, through the practices of consumption: manifestations of distrust, strategic investments in household goods and domestic repairs and other expressions of autonomisation from the post-socialist state. These practices hence played an important role in this construction of post-Soviet personhood, which was juxtaposed, on the moral plane, to the indifferent and inefficient state, and on the temporal plane to the gullibility and lack of practical competence of the earlier period.

That is not to say that late-socialist consumption, with its shortages, queuing and obtaining goods from under the counter, did not require skill and vigour, but the status of this skill was changing. Without the sceptical sophistication of a wised-up post-socialist consumer, the capacity to spot goods and obtain them through competition with other shoppers turned from an important asset into a questionably useful resource, for all that it could guarantee to the owner was a place on the above-mentioned list of clueless voucher holders.

Ironically, then, for practices some of which were formally identical to those of the late socialist period (after all, accumulation of refrigerators is only marginally different from the accumulation of boots of all sizes Ksenya reported buying during the period of shortages), their significance was based on a sense of progression, not succession. By framing the early 1990s as the period of idealism and delusion, and the late 1990s as the time of sobriety when individuals finally realised that 'in our country you can not rely on anyone but yourself', they suggested that a personal transformation that had taken place was not unlike the process of gradual maturation of a child into an adult.²⁹ In contrast to the relatively innocent albeit materially constrained late-socialist existence, when all one's worries amounted to obtaining 'deficit' goods, today's realities required a much more hardened attitude in a world replete with risks so multiple that they could only be managed if they were forestalled in advance. Consumption here was not the locus of this increased complexity (if anything, it was widely recognised as one of the few spheres which demonstrated not decline but improvement during the 1990s), but rather one of the many tools for managing it with some degree of success.

The representation of self as a mature agent capable of deciphering complex

warning signs and acting in advance is all the more important considering how little other resources for demonstrating competence were available to individuals whose professional or civic self-definition was unsettled by the multiple dislocations of post-socialism. This paucity of alternative venues for identity formation points to the second meaning of objectification intended by Bourdieu. Apart from referring to the physical dimension of dispositions and attitudes (in our case, the actual consumer practices of autonomisation), objectification also designates the process by which individuals themselves participate in the perpetuation of the relations to which they are reacting, by treating them as natural, and by being personally invested in them for their own ends. While the hostility and unreliability of the state is a continuous source of threats perceived and warded off by my respondents by the means of consumption, it is also the force in whose face one's practical competence can be constructed and affirmed. In this light, it is hardly surprising that consumption narratives are so closely interwoven with political criticism, since the disorderly post-socialist environment is the only context against which the most highly valued cultural recourses of my informants, their critical sensibility and vigilant readiness to counter fraud, can be appropriately applied. And while it is true that consumption practices give individuals the vocabulary and the occasion to exercise their skills in a way that gives them, the 'ordinary people', a distinctive identity and a sense of practical competence and moral worth, it is also true that, by this very process, the criticised post-socialist order reproduces itself.

Conclusion

In the famous formulation of Geertz, the significance of a cultural practice is that it represents 'a story [people] tell themselves about themselves' (1973, p. 448). This article argues that choices and dispositions informing post-socialist consumption articulate just one such story. Its plot features heroes (individual consumers or the collective imaginary of *narod*, the people), dangers (from macroeconomic perils of inflation to bureaucratic incompetence encountered on the local level), villains (particular embodiments of 'the system' or 'the system' itself), trials (from everyday market encounters to interactions with banks and hospitals), narrative progression (from the innocence of late socialism to the mature awareness and autonomisation of the late 1990s) and a form of resolution (enhanced protection of the household, reinstalled sense of ontological security, successful recovery of savings). The narratives of deceit, decline and infrastructural collapse (the 'existential holes' from which this article began) play an integral part in this story and enable, rather than obstruct, the formation of identities based on the continuous negotiation and provision of autonomy from the state.

This raises a number of questions. One has to do with the unit of autonomisation. While it is the individuals that are involved in implementing and narrating the practices described above, the object of their protection, implicitly or explicitly, is assumed to be the entire household, and the nature of the objects obtained in the course of this strategic consumption (refrigerators, furniture, cooking equipment) further reinforces this impression. This calls for a study of the family as a symbolic refuge from the uncertainties of the transformation, but also of the inequalities and

tensions that family rhetoric conceals as the interests and issues of the individual family members are expected to be subservient to the collective interest of the household.³⁰ Another issue to be pursued in depth is the implications of the autonomisation rhetoric for the formation of collective identities. While an effort to optimally insulate one's household from the post-socialist context implies a degree of atomisation, in practice this effort does not exclude cooperation, but in fact encourages it insofar as participants share the same interpretation of what makes a competent actor and are willing to cooperate in the way of providing early warning, information or collective support. Activity that ensued after a series of residential building explosions in several regions of Russia in autumn 1999 is a case in point, for the first response to the blasts (two of which occurred in Moscow) was not to rally for greater security city-wide but for the residents of most apartment buildings to collectively implement a number of self-protective measures, from organising a neighbourhood watch to installing a fortified building door, at their own expense and without the involvement of municipal or federal forces.³¹ Finally, it seems fruitful to probe into the existence of class, age and gender-specific strategies of autonomisation, and the implications of this rhetoric for the spheres other than consumption.

The issues of identity construction and the role of consumption in this process thus raise a host of further questions that extend far beyond the realm of this article. What the material offered above suggests is the open-ended nature of these issues, and the fact that the emerging formations and social structures may exist side by side, and often symbiotically, with the narratives of collapse and disorder. Feeding on the memories and standards of the past, but responding to the needs and interests of the present moment, these narratives are being used as building blocks in the creation of an edifice the contours of which we are yet to discover.

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² See Johnson *et al.*, 1997; Bridger & Pine, 1998.

³ This explains much of Putin's popularity during the electoral campaigns of 1999 and 2000 (Delinskaya, 2001).

⁴ Vera implies that the Moscow mayor, in exchange for a substantial, although unspecified, sum of money, gave to the ethnic Azerbaijani diaspora the exclusive monopoly on running the produce markets in the city—a rumour which I have not heard from anyone else in the sample but which goes well with the general logic of total corruption and deceit.

⁵ See Joyce, 1990.

⁶ See Verdery, 1992; Humphrey, 1995.

⁷ This concern is especially relevant in discussions of Western food products, which are often considered unnatural and full of preservatives, in opposition to the healthier domestic ones. However, the issue is not limited just to food. In fact, my own cousin has expressed repeated disappointment and surprise upon discovering that most of the gifts I brought her family from the USA were made in China. Previously, she was convinced that third world products were used exclusively in third world markets.

⁸ In fact, the divorce rate has remained relatively stable over the past 15 years (Vishnevsky, 1999).

⁹ I have discussed some of the changes in consumption patterns and political talk after the August 1998 financial breakdown in Shevchenko, 2001.

¹⁰ The COMCON-International data are based on R-TGI (Russian Target Group Index) surveys carried out under licence from BMRB International—a detailed monitoring of lifestyles and con-

sumption patterns of the Russian population, which has been conducted since 1995. In 2000 the data were collected from 14 000 households in 42 Russian cities across the country and explore consumption of more than 400 categories of goods and services and over 3900 brands. For similar evidence of the increased household possessions among Ukrainian households see Golovakha, 1996.

¹¹ 'Dry cleaning' (*khimchistka*) is the generic name for facilities that provide cleaning services for customers, whether they imply actual dry cleaning or just laundry.

¹² I am paraphrasing the term given to the new American consumer by Juliet B. Schor (1998). Since, unlike his/her Russian counterpart, the 'overspent American' engages in 'competitive spending' with the help of credit card companies, the concept of affordability loses its relevance faster and more dramatically in the American context. However, the issue is not unsalient to my Russian respondents as well, since a large purchase often causes the family to cut back on their daily spending, fall into financial and moral dependence on the lender or, as can happen when the purchase is made in instalments, lose the prior instalments when they discover that the price exceeds their means.

¹³ Ksenya is talking about *vizitnaya kartochka pokupatelya* (literally, 'shopper's visiting card') which was introduced in Moscow in autumn 1990. These cards were issued to all Muscovites in an effort to limit shortages in the city by excluding out-of-town shoppers from obtaining products in the better-provided stores of the capital. For an excellent discussion and analysis of this and other rationing practices, as well as their effects of fostering particularistic solidarities and reinforcing ethnic and regional chauvinisms, see Nikolaev, 2000.

¹⁴ Literally, 'Go stand' (*Idite stoite*).

¹⁵ Detskii Mir, the largest children's department store in Moscow, located in a monumental building on Lubyanka Square.

¹⁶ There are finer sub-categorisations in this hierarchy too. Thus an appliance assembled in Malaysia ranks higher than an identical item assembled in China. These positions are not fixed and can undergo transformations: thus, under the influence of aggressive LG and Samsung advertising, the image of Korea as a manufacturer and assembler of equipment has evolved from a 'secondary one, worse than Malasia/Indonesia' to one of the 'market leaders'. What remains unchanged is the salience of this information for consumers.

¹⁷ See the magazines *Spros, Klient, Denezhka* and *Tovary i tseny*, as well as the daily TV programme *Vprok*.

¹⁸ While Ksenya's assessment was a little off, an individual 5–10 years younger than I am would almost certainly not identify with her story. In this respect, my sample, all members of which were older than myself, did not open up the generational divide which can be expected to exist in post-socialist Russian society with respect to the lived memory of socialism (cf. Nadkarni, 2002; Dubin, 1995).

¹⁹ Note how far this cautious orientation stands from the resignation usually projected onto statements about uncertainty about the future and compulsion to live 'simply from one day to the next' (Alexander, 1998). While uncertainty about the future is certainly one of the distinguishing features of post-socialism, daily living implied for my subjects not resignation from all efforts to cope but rather preserving, indeed 'from one day to the next', the continuity of their resources and assets against the drift of potential impoverishment.

²⁰ The data are for 1999, and are taken from Gudkov, 2000.

²¹ The installation of fortified doors blossomed as the apartments in Moscow were becoming increasingly privatised, and can be interpreted, in this light, as a symbolic affirmation of property rights entangled with lack of confidence in the capabilities of the state actors to protect them (I am grateful for this point to Yakov Shchukin).

²² Literally 'shells'.

²³ See Lindquist, 2002, for examples. In order to describe the coexistence of multiple medical frameworks used by the patients simultaneously, Lindquist uses the notion of *pentimento* (first introduced to medical anthropology by Arney & Bergen), 'the term from art history, used to describe old paintings in which one image has been painted over another, but the overlying image is so thin that the one under it still shines through' (Arney & Bergen, 1984, p. 1).

²⁴ See Giddens, 1990; Bauman, 1991; Beck, 1999.

²⁵ Ugrešić, 1999, p. 113.

²⁶ See Colton, 1995; Dubin, 1999.

²⁷ Alashev *et al.*, 1999, convincingly argue that cultivation of garden plots can by no means be considered central to subsistence of urban households. As for the metal doors and other methods of self-protection, they seem less effective (although still more popular) than the alarm service offered by the municipal police itself. In the latter, a signal of unauthorised opening of the entrance door is transmitted through telephone lines right into the police station. The service is substantially cheaper

than the installation of the second door and is available to anyone with a telephone line (Smirnova, 2002).

²⁸ Financial pyramids, including those masterminded by the Russian pyramid magnate Sergei Mavrodi and his associate Oksana Pavlyuchenko, find clients all around the world (for an account of Mavrodi's Internet-based and Dominican Republic-registered pyramid scheme, see *RFE/RL Security Watch*, 1, 7, 4 September 2000.) See Verdery, 1995, for a first-hand account of Romanian pyramid schemes in which the anthropologist herself had participated.

²⁹ Cf. Nadkarni's (2002, p. 7) discussion of the recent film depictions of Hungarian society under socialism which parallel 'the youth of their protagonists to the perceived overall immaturity of Hungarian society'.

³⁰ Telling in this regard is the tendency to purchase large pieces of household equipment as presents on purely personal occasions. Thus, several of my respondents, both male and female, reported receiving a microwave or a vacuum cleaner as birthday presents.

³¹ While the city government supported the notion of the lockable fortified door for every building, and took it upon itself to provide them after the explosions, most respondents reported that the quality of these doors was low, and that by the time they became an option, the resident community of their buildings had had the doors installed already on their own initiative and at their own expense.

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