Time, Sociability and Postsocialism

Submitted by

Dawn Nafus
Sidney Sussex College

For the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Social Anthropology
Petersburg not only appears to us, but actually does appear, on maps in the form of two small circles, one set inside the other, with a black dot in the center. And from precisely this mathematical point, which has no dimension, it proclaims forcefully that it exists: hereby from this very point surges and swarms the printed books. From this invisible point speeds the official circular.

--Andrei Bely
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................... 4  
Abstract .................................................................................................................................. 5  
Chapter 1: Introduction ........................................................................................................ 6  
  Hybrid Categories .................................................................................................................. 12  
  “Doing Nothing” as Analytic Device ..................................................................................... 16  
  Looking Ahead ..................................................................................................................... 23  
Chapter 2: Resources and Social Models ............................................................................. 25  
  The Even Bigger Picture ......................................................................................................... 27  
  Life Strategies ..................................................................................................................... 31  
  Feel for the Games .............................................................................................................. 40  
  Money .................................................................................................................................... 49  
Chapter 3: Personhood and Sociality .................................................................................. 57  
  Individual and Collective in the Soviet Era ........................................................................... 59  
  Everyday Sociality and Sociability ....................................................................................... 66  
  Self, Society and Process ...................................................................................................... 72  
  Coda: Returning to Sociality and Society ............................................................................ 76  
Chapter 4: Time ..................................................................................................................... 80  
  Time in Ideology .................................................................................................................. 80  
  Socialist Temporalities in Practice ....................................................................................... 85  
  Postsocialist Working Times ............................................................................................... 89  
  Doing Nothing Time ........................................................................................................... 92  
Chapter 5: ‘Cultural Capital’ in the Cultural Capital ............................................................. 102  
  Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 102  
  Gulian’e As a Practice .......................................................................................................... 105  
  Gulian’e as Aesthetic Production ......................................................................................... 111  
  Other kinds of movements .................................................................................................. 122  
  Conclusion .......................................................................................................................... 126  
Chapter 6: New Communications Technologies, or How Information and Society Does Not Make an Information Society ......................................................................................................... 127  
  On progress ......................................................................................................................... 132  
  Practices of “Doing Nothing” on the Internet ..................................................................... 136  
  Imagining “Doing Nothing” on the Internet ....................................................................... 142  
  Making Boundaries ............................................................................................................ 148  
Chapter 7: Conclusion ......................................................................................................... 152  
Bibliography ......................................................................................................................... 162

---

Note:  
I have used the Modified Library of Congress system of transliteration from the Russian, except for words in common English usage that have acquired anglicized spellings.
Acknowledgements

This work would not have been possible without the tremendous patience and generosity of spirit of numerous St. Petersburg residents. Although I cannot name you (you know who you are!), you showed us all that was wonderful about conducting fieldwork in Russia. We cannot than you enough. I say “we” because my boyfriend, Steve Marsh, was good enough to put his life on hold for me for the entire fieldwork year and beyond. In many ways he proved to be a much more able fieldworker than I. Besides his ethnographic efforts, he ensured the perpetuation of this project and salvaged my grasp of reality on days when all seemed lost. I know how lucky I am.

Of course, this enterprise could not have taken place without Carrie Humphrey’s incisive commentary and encouragement to take intellectual risks. Other students and faculty of the department have been extremely helpful and supportive. The student residents of the Eagle listened patiently as I tested early and half-baked arguments on them. Andrew Moutu in particular directed me to just the right concept or material on innumerable occasions. I would like to thank also Frances Pine, Marilyn Strathern, and James Leach who all provided valuable input. Alexei Yurchak luckily visited Cambridge at a time when I was in a position to make use of his many insights. His challenging input renewed my enthusiasm for the project, which I was beginning to slowly ‘dissimulate’ from myself. Catherine Cooke provided insight into all things visual, and is always a delight to ask questions of. Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov, Anita Herle and Ami Henare provided generous support in making an art exhibition from our fieldwork materials.

Outside Cambridge, Christian Sandvig, Dieter Zinnbauer, Gus Hosein and Eszter Hargattai provided a challenging interdisciplinary forum in which to learn, debate, and barbecue. This kind of camaraderie is a rarity indeed.

My funders at British Telecom and its subsequent institutions provided generous and unfettered financial support. The individual researchers at BT and Chimera provided far more than this—an interdisciplinary perspective, raw data and references, and most importantly challenged me to think laterally about the wider context of my research. In particular I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to Ben Anderson for his intellectual challenge, support, patience and faith when the project stopped going according to plan. Joy Van Helvert and her family showed me a different perspective on social relations entirely, one which permeates the writing throughout.

I am convinced the unsung heroes of academic research are the thousands of school teachers that are somehow able to convince children that the wider world is interesting enough to dig deeper. This is particularly true at the high school level, where they must compete with all sorts of untoward circumstances for attention. Anthony DiBattista and Michael Huff in a sense produced this dissertation, even though they do not know it yet. Later on as an undergraduate, Katherine Verderay provided the most engaging introduction to anthropology possible. I can only hope that this project does their efforts justice.

Finally, I am just beginning to fathom the depth of support my parents provided for me, even when I thought I didn’t need it. It’s a good thing they knew I was wrong. Very few children get to thank their parents publicly for their sacrifices so here it is: Jim and Penni, thank you.
ABSTRACT

My dissertation explores Russian practical models of ‘postsocialism’ through everyday encounters with time and space. My fieldwork was in St. Petersburg where I initially explored the ways in which global communications technologies were becoming meaningful for local sociality. In the course of research, a curious gap emerged: why were some aspects of the global economy, such as food imports, seen as visible incursions on an already problematic social field, whereas technology remained almost invisible as an artifact of social change? In the dissertation I push this question further to explore how ‘invisibility’ itself might be strategically created in order to actively manage and shape profound social transformation. If in Russia public/private distinctions were even less relevant than in the West, how did some activities count as visible evidence of relations beyond oneself and some did not? I argue that my informants’ perceptions of what counts as “doing something” and what counts as “doing nothing” can provide insight into how they imagine postsocialist relations, as well as how they constitute their subjectivity within this set of circumstances. Drawing on Wagner’s (1973) and Strathern’s (1988, 1999) approaches to cultural production, ethnographies of lived experience of radical social change (Greenhouse, Mertz and Warren (eds) 2002) and regionalist scholarship, I explore the ways in which Soviet-era concepts of self and personhood are now being used to make working models of social organization.

Moreover, I argue that St. Petersburgers accomplished this in an extraordinary way. Through constant manipulation of cultural constructs of time and space, my informants were able to produce personhood in such a way that simultaneously rejected Western notions of individualism as well as current dynamics in their own society. In making implicit agreements to fail to represent time, my informants built social networks as well as an entire spatiotemporal aesthetic that came to constitute the relations of that network. In this way, postsocialist time works similarly to Soviet-era linguistic cultures, where absences of information and knowing glances were critical for social networks. I use the work of Bachelard (1969) and Benjamin (1979) and to a lesser extent Harvey (1989) and Munn (1996) and to throw into analytic relief my field observations, and to make these broader links between sociality and the aesthetics of time and space. Through everyday reconstructions of time and space, I argue that St. Petersburgers forged a particular kind of intentionality which generates important cultural resources without putting them to use as social capital.

Regional scholarship in anthropology has emphasized that postsocialist transformations cannot be assumed to be “transitions” to capitalism or democracy (Verdery 1996, Verdery and Burawoy (eds) 1999, Berdhal et al (eds) 2000, Humphrey 1998, 2002, Humphrey and Mandel (eds) 2002). My contribution to this literature is to suggest that there are analogues to anthropological theorizing about social transformation in Russian indigenous working models of self and society. By suggesting this parallel, I also seek to raise questions about the extent to which, over a decade after the fall of the Soviet Union, we might be able to speak about the present not in terms of atypical crisis, but as a set of relations that are themselves more enduring than they might at first appear.
INTRODUCTION

This is an ethnography about doing nothing. “Doing nothing”, I argue, is a euphemism for doing quite a lot. Doing nothing is not the same as wasting time, just as it is not the same as working or resting. By talking about this “quite a lot” in terms of “nothing”, people put these activities to particular social uses. Like silences in a text or blank spots on a map, activities that count as “nothing” bear a particular relationship with those that count as “something.” Calling something “nothing” deliberately (if temporarily) creates another layer of social context and frustrates usual forms of intentionality and conventions. Of course, in doing nothing one is never completely free from the larger context of moral and social prescription; the way in which one switches from work or rest to “doing nothing” is socially constructed, just as there are loose templates for what gets accomplished in periods of nothing. It is my task to account for how these constructions are made, but the constructedness itself does not negate the kinds of autonomies at work in doing nothing. In this dissertation I explore what it means to do nothing in postsocialist St. Petersburg. If Bourdieu talks about how language is more codified in situations of increased social danger (1990), then this dissertation is an investigation into the sociality of the inverse. What makes for ‘safe’ talk and informal ways of relating in the topsy-turvy world of postsocialism? This safe mode of action is critical to social life. If doing nothing were really nothing, the streets would be desolate, the chat-rooms dead, and barely a cup of tea drunk. Yet the substantiveness of this ‘nothing’ is largely obscured; it still appears to subjects (and perhaps ethnographers) as nothing.

I must pause here because no doubt my reader thinks I am playing some kind of anthropological joke. Scholars of postsocialism, after all, are supposed to write about markets, gender or ethnicity and nation-building. Tea sipping and city walks should only come into the picture as evidence of fieldwork methodology. There is a growing literature on the theme of the everyday, and in particular Russian discourses about the everyday (Boym 1994 and Ries 1997 being two leading examples). My work shares much in common with these, but what seemed so extraordinary to me was that these discourses reflected real, everyday actions that were themselves part of a web of unsteady postsocialist relations. Most extraordinary of all, while my informants were always conducting some amazing feat of social gymnastics they still found possibilities to do nothing with one another as if these opportunities were effortless coincidence. Why does sitting across the table sipping tea with a friend appear as nothing when so many other circumstances, not just at work but pushing one’s way through the metro or traipsing around shops looking for the best deal, appear as something? Furthermore, why is this so in a part of the world where material resources are circulated not by mimicking languages of auditors to make action count in terms of a

---

1 This distinction is recognizable to my informants, but is also reliant on my own interpretations. Below I do address this problem.
singular hegemonic regime of knowledge, but through interpersonal networks which themselves straddle incipient and flexible institutions? It occurred to me that they way in which concepts of the everyday were actually enacted in social life suggested a problematic that went beyond identifying local ideas about work and production, and begged broader questions about social organization.

Indeed, the concept of “doing nothing” did originate as a provocation to unsettle my own ideas about what constituted production. As Roy Wagner (1973) aptly describes, the first time fieldworker is invariably plagued by doubts about whether he is ‘getting somewhere,’ and often develops an excessive zeal for interviewing in order to make his work explicit to himself. In conference corridors it is widely recognized that the biggest fieldwork challenges revolve not around cross-cultural misunderstandings, access or power asymmetries, but sheer boredom. I was no exception in this and yet upon my return, the obsessive care I took to record my friends’ and acquaintances’ minutiae still appeared to add up to nothing that sends immediate flags of academic worthy-ness: no markets, no isms, no fought-over identities. Instead, I had volumes on the techniques of everyday socializing, on walking round the city and eclectic accounts of happenstance that seem to lose all effect when taken out of the immediate, embodied context.

A series of further ethnographic puzzles suggested to me that perhaps this was more than an after effect of methodology, or clutter which I would simply have to sift through in order to unearth the real situation. Rather, there was something particular about the context of St. Petersburg that led me to record voraciously events that do not add up to anything readily visible as evidence of ‘society.’ As Ulf Hannertz’s work suggests (1980), the swirling phantasmagoria of all great cities do not make them particularly good places to look for this kind of evidence. Yet, the people I met had a very stylized way in which to conduct themselves as if the big, sweeping questions that so fascinate foreigners had little to do with their own lives. But this observation is a post-hoc reinterpreted assembly from the point of view of a would-be academic with scholarly interests in postsocialism. What would more closely describe my actual experience was a fascination with a group of people who managed to

inhabit
time. The people I met were usually in circumstances that rendered them both busy and exhausted, working in waged and unwaged labor on a time regime that was at best unpredictable. Their daily activities made the kinds of laments I hear so often at home of “I must do this, then I must do that…” laughably cushy, and yet rarely did I hear analogous laments about busy-ness.² Instead, in informal social situations, usually described as
obschchenie,
time takes on a new character. Sociality involved a kind of creative effervescence which had a certain urgent rhythm all its own, always promising more knowledge.

My recordings in turn were written as if they always revealed the penultimate clue to who so-and-so really was. There always remained the promise of more. It was as if these recordings were being dragged unwillingly into a Dostoevskyian social life, where relations were deeply personalised, and lived in a kind of immediacy such that attempts to explain action with easy

² As Reis (1997) argues, there are plenty of lament genres in Russia. I am arguing that time is not one of them.
reference to the past or social position would only serve to point in the wrong direction. But my Dostoevskyian world recorded in fieldnotes was not the direct result of theoretical mindset, nor was it executed with a literary acumen able to articulate the sense of situational urgency to anyone who might have the misfortune of reading it. Only after the fact does this process appear to me in this literary metaphor. Instead, the form my fieldnotes took was the result of my informants leading me into their own sense of temporality in trying to get to know who I was. It was their ideas about time that made social relations appear in a certain way.

This temporality that was thrust to the forefront of my account is only one of many at stake in St. Petersburg. Nevertheless, in my view it links some of other puzzles that suggested to me that perhaps my recordings of circumstantial happenstance would have been less central if I were to work in other parts of the world. To take a small puzzle, when I traced social networks, I found that it was possible to not know an acquaintance’s profession until quite late in the encounter. Professional identity in Russia is in fact strongly felt, and relate much closer to notions of ‘who you are’ rather than ‘what you do at the moment.’ "Kto ty?" (who are you?) is often asked without needing to state that this refers to profession. Yet people were even more likely to conduct a relationship without establishing knowledge of this part of identity, at least at the outset. Two people I knew claimed total ignorance to a friend’s profession years into the relationship. Professional identity provided some connections to ‘society’ while excluding others, reflecting a quite nuanced sense of where and how stakes in social processes were being built. My informants did not live constantly in the temporality that marks easy sociability, but also had to reckon with those of economic relations or bureaucratic encounters. They made it abundantly clear that work and skill are key ways of imagining social participation—key ways of “doing something” rather than “doing nothing”, and yet the question of “who are you?” remain unanswered if friends could otherwise claim good knowledge of each other?

Other puzzles echoed this phenomenon. Discussion of national events were often framed as if they had nothing to do with ‘us.’ The state takeover of nearly all media channels, for example, was worth talking about only to explain to the inquisitive foreigner the profound stupidity of it all, that “it is all about money.” “All about money” seemed to act as a rhetorical stand in for whatever is pointless and empty, and that which simply had to do with the banality of other people’s greed. Others treated economic institutions as irrelevant; what mattered was the nature of the individuals who ran them. Within this talk that lumped together an absence of systematicity with a hyper-systematic ideas about money, one can also find sweeping visions of social change. Ordinary people did not shy away from big questions of social organization, but the very temporality of the contexts in which questions of social organization were addressed had a profound influence on the kinds of questions asked and answered.

---

3 In fact, fieldwork induced such a crisis in my sense of legitimacy of purpose that older empiricist habits emerged unexpectedly. Postmodern literary license was worryingly paralyzing to me, not enabling.
So much had changed, yet it was not difficult to find discourses of continuity, as if one bad situation were simply swapped for another equally bad one. Individual time horizons suggested that economic uncertainty had been a fact of life for so long it began to seem like a given, not a crisis around which one actively strategizes. Strangely, these puzzles suggest that Zinov’ev’s opening of *The Yawning Heights* (1979) could just as easily apply to everyday experience of the hyper-irregular, ad-hoc formations of the post-socialist period as to his original target of rigidly bureaucratized Soviet life. He writes, “The Ibanskians do not live, but carry out epoch-making experiments. They carry out these experiments even when they know nothing about them and take no part in them, and even when the experiments are not taking place at all” (1979:13). To take Zinov’ev’s metaphor a bit too literally, the ability to carry out experiments while not actually taking part in them would seem to depend on stability. One would have to have the ability to predict when to make the appropriate grunt so as to appear not to conflict with the experiment. New experiments in markets and money are even more demanding, less predictable, but it became apparent in my fieldwork that selectively not taking part in them is all the more essential to survival. “Normal people” (a local phrase) just get on with their lives. Yet cynicism was not so complete as to prohibit often dreamy accounts of past and future social worlds. “Society” may have been a “thing out there,” but it seemed my informants wanted more of it, not less.

“Doing nothing” at first appeared as an initial solution to these puzzles. The phrase is itself a conundrum; “doing” implies action, and it is impossible to enact the absence of something. It is difficult to literally do nothing—sitting in a chair staring at a wall either becomes thinking, meditating or grows agitating. Either way, it is always possible to find something that has been done, however minute. Yet the phrase nevertheless has common English usage, and this contradiction encapsulated my own conundrum of how it is that my field notes filled so readily with actions that seemed urgent to both my informants and me, and yet on both sides our tea-sipping counted as nothing at all. It was ‘nothing’ to me because of my own paranoias about work, and ‘nothing’ to them because they were quite sure that nothing was being produced. During these meetings I would be asked how my work was going, as if it had nothing to do with the present gathering. These actions were absolutely *de rigueur* for social survival, yet their substantiveness is so terribly difficult to pin down. Upon reflection, it did take me a long time to develop the finesse with which to be able to pull off my own everyday interactions as ‘nothing much,’ so there must be an implicit technique to it. Perhaps this was precisely the point. If I could work out what the action was that made these other, more eclectic actions seem like nothing, then I could also come to understand how and why these other, more obviously ‘societal’ issues were being treated as background rather than foreground.

To see the problem in this way opens up yet another set of questions. First, it prevents us from using the analytic device of ‘levels’. That is, here it is not the case individual persons and instances remain insignificant until they add up somehow to ‘social structures,’ at which point they are the agents of social change. Rather, the relationships that make these contexts meaningful are
built in such a way as to make operational indigenous theories of the significance of ‘social structure’. This is no pedantic academic problem: Russia has become synonymous with radical social transformation, and to understand how these changes are experienced, attention to rather basic questions of the way in which Russians come to think about themselves as located in ‘society’ (and thus in what respect it is possible for it to change) is critical.

Deploying the device of “doing nothing” also opens up critical questions of intentionality. The intentionality makes the context; that is, there is something about the intention behind informal relationships that makes car repairing the same as, or just as good as, sitting in a coffee shop. These are everyday acts which in a sense do not add up to anything—the goal is internal to the action. Unlike instrumental actions, such as building a house in order to live in it, or displaying a taste for expensive wine to assert one’s place in bourgeois society, “doing nothing” claims to rescind all relevance after the fact. My wine example is deliberate, for the kinds of actions that appear as nothing do not unproblematically count as social capital (Bourdieu 1984). However, if the intentionality were completely unlike social capital, and it would have been simple for me to know how to ‘hang out’ with people in the field without actually learning its techniques. To some extent the techniques of doing nothing can be carried around like capital, and the other knowledge developed as a result of that interaction used instrumentally, but the techniques themselves do not accumulate.

Anthropology has always taken seriously everyday practices which might be regarded as informal, the ethnographic gaze upon which—i.e., seeing first hand—has traditionally been conceived of as its disciplinary raison d’être (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). We go to the field because we know that what a person says he does and what he actually does are two different things. Informality itself, however, has often been viewed as ethnographic smoke and mirrors. We try to show that while this or that action seems unimportant, or casual, in fact it has great “real” significance that is simply imperceptible by other methodologies. Yet here we have a case where informants themselves are working to obscure the “real” significance. Walking round the city or chatting with one’s friends cannot be seen in any direct way to have implications beyond itself without destroying its very nature. I argue that there are quite serious implications, but because of the nature of these practices I must take a rather circuitous route to get to them. That is, my ethnography is not a story of Foucauldian domination, where micro-actions are constituted by the very regimes of power which control them. “Doing nothing” is highly volitional, and to some extent a politics of constituting life away from rather than in direct dialogue with forms of power, yet still is firmly rooted in a context that does make certain actions meaningful and does compel people to act in certain ways. So we have a case of a phenomenon which sounds rather postmodern in the sense that it constitutes a discursive silence, and relies on embodied actions and dispositions for its existence, yet it nonetheless engages with concepts of ‘society’ through the back door, and thus forces us to return to some rather old-fashioned problems to do with ‘social structures’. I do not claim to be alone in wrestling with this sort of object of enquiry, and no doubt my reader can
see that I have looked to the work of Strathern (1988, 1999), Wagner (1973), Herzfeld (1992) and a recent volume edited by Greenhouse, Mertz, and Warren (2002) in delineating the problem. I hope, though, that by situating “doing nothing” next to these other ethnographies, I can both understand more clearly the kind of theoretical object “doing nothing” might be, as well as what is at stake in “doing nothing” in the particular context of St. Petersburg. I do not think, for instance, that St. Petersburghers act as if they were “dividual,” and yet Strathern’s attention to the way in which some sets of relations transform and appear as other relations offers an apparatus with which to envision a ‘society’ with regularities that do not add up to ‘structures.’ This also begs the opposite question of what would count as doing something if “doing nothing” appears as activity quite separate and distinguishable by a bodily and emotional experience, and whether it appears as an objectification.

As a whole, then, this dissertation broadly explores three things. First, it explores why and how older ideas about personhood and sociality have served as a central basis for engagement with new and radically different economic and political forms. As Burawoy and Verdery (1999) argue, ‘vestiges’ of the past do not simply linger, but rather are reworked and put to new ends. Drawing on Bakhtin, Yurchak describes the postsocialist social landscape in terms of hybridity (2001), where rules do exist but different spheres are layered onto one another, and moving between them can create economic value. In this hybrid state, do people imagine themselves as participating in society? I argue that there are in fact instances where this is the case, especially when the context is related to labor. To this day, labor, and particularly skilled labor, is imagined as a privileged means to contribute to the wider social good (cf Humphrey and Mandel (eds) 2002). This participation implies subtle differences; the phrase “participate in society” is rendered in Russian as “prinimat’ uchastie v obshchestvennoi zhizni” (participate in social life). ‘Society’, as it relates to actual participation, is only thought of as a sealed, constructed affair in the right contexts. Equally it is locally rendered as an ongoing dialogue: social life. ‘Society’, as an image of a mechanistic set of cogs and wheels, reached its height in the Stalin period but is still recognizable to Russians in a way that would not be by Strathern’s Melanesians (1988). But the relationships between cog and wheel ‘society’, society as semi-conventionalized hybrid contexts, and interpersonal sociality, imagined as much more amorphous relations, are problematic. Why does this latter sociality, which to some observers appear as a kind of dissimulation from ‘society’ (Kharkhordin 1999), still have the capacity to generate meaning in a very different social context?

Second, the dissertation reverses a more obvious point of entry in order to make it apparent what St. Petersburg residents get out of doing nothing. That is, I have maintained the heuristic category of “doing nothing” rather than organized the work as an enquiry into alienation or anomie in order to show in qualitative terms the kinds of social relations that are being built rather than simply mark the incipient social institutions4 which people feel alienated from. I argue that these relations, while deliberately invisible as ‘social structure’ can in fact be discerned

4 I use ‘institution’ in Bourdieu’s (1991) sense of a durable set of relations that endows persons with resources of some kind.
through careful attention to time and space. The kind of relatedness formed in practices of *gulian’e* (walking) and *obshchenie* (visiting, chatting) builds a spatio-temporal aesthetic, reminiscent of Bachelardian ideas of the poetics of space (1990). This aesthetic draws on a range of social forms in ‘wider’ society, yet precludes the visibility of these connections.

Third, it uses this reversal to explore the theoretical questions of visibility, intentionality and postsocialism that I alluded to above. Some interesting interconnections might be made amongst these concepts. Russia’s seeming liminality dominates anthropological accounts of the region. This has been put to fruitful analytic ends; to make the unpredictable nature of the future evident in the analysis is extremely useful in showing the contingent nature of the social processes which are being forged. It has been more than a decade since the fall of the Soviet Union, however, and there is a sense in which present relations have had a chance to become an entity in their own right, beyond their relationship with the past. The situation begs the question of the extent to which their imagination of social interconnectedness sits at the edges of anglophone notions of social life. Perhaps our intellectual toolkit, designed either to account for social structures or as a reaction against them, allows us to hold onto the notion of instability and crisis for such protracted periods. The proclivity to see resistance against big social systems wherever non-systemic actions can be discerned did not necessary falter with the decline of structuralism. Put differently, the drive to systematize is strong, in fact necessary in our everyday affairs as Herzfeld (1992) reminds us, and perhaps latently persistent in our intellectual lives as well. Mike Crang (2000: 147) remarks how De Certeau saw in Foucault’s work “a rhetoric of clarity, where one thing is cut out and turned upside down to reveal everything else, [which] makes the theoretical stance almost panoptical itself.” Because “doing nothing” is a construct about the present itself, and a way of making a certain kind of present, it helps me to establish a point of departure separate from transformations from the past, while still using Verdery’s insights about the importance of not making assumptions about the nature of the future. It allows me to explore how relations which do not send up visible flags as a kind of authorship of incipient economic or political structures might be the very reason one might still speak of “postsocialism” ten years later.

**HYBRID CATEGORIES**

What counts as doing nothing and the way in which it is possible to do nothing varies hugely cross-culturally. What counts as doing nothing in St. Petersburg in 2000/2001 is somewhat similar to the West: spending time with friends, in coffee houses or bars, or walking round the city. Although, this latter practice seems to hold far more interest for St. Petersburgers than elsewhere, and the words used for these activities (*gulian’e* for walking around and *obshchenie* for talking and

---

5 It would be tedious to list out this scholarship, but I mean simply that Verdery (1996) first posited the discussion of what life after socialism could be like through a profoundly active cautioning against an assumption of simple ‘transition’ from socialism to capitalism. This was a seminal work and continues to frame the field.

6 A prominent example would be Scott (1990).
visiting) do not correspond comfortably with their anglophone variants. The social construction of
doing nothing draws on many aspects of social life; in some ways it is a true eclectic, denying any
division between political, moral, aesthetic and economic life and emphasizing lived experience
rather than discursive social ‘structures’. This eclecticism, however, is not cause to resign ourselves
to ethnographic murky waters. There is every reason to believe that there are identifiable concepts
and relationships which make “doing nothing” in post-Socialist St. Petersburg what it is. We know,
for instance, that “doing nothing” appears as natural, perhaps even more natural than other practices
more easily identifiable as social, such as domestic work or gifting. This is our first clue that it is
anything but.

I had originally designed this project with Marcus’s idea of multi-sited ethnography (1995)
in mind. My site was singular in geography, but multiple in terms of the way I tried to draw
together everyday experience, as I deliberately “followed the metaphor” from one sphere of life to
the next:

“Other modes of research are self-consciously embedded in a world system. It
defines for itself an object of study that cannot be accounted for ethnographically
by remaining focused on a single site of intensive investigation… Just as this
mode investigates and ethnographically constructs the lifeworlds of variously
situated subjects, it also ethnographically constructs aspects of the system itself
through the associations and connections it suggests among sites” (1995:96).

The “site”, as it were, I began with was that of communications technologies. I examined everyday
uses of information and communications technologies (ICTs)—phones, mobiles, the Internet,
etc.—and sought to identify the points of contest, the politics of access, symbolic values and
patterns of strategies of interpersonal communications more generally. I wanted to know what was
particularly local about the use of ICTs in order to contribute to the academic debates about
globalization and consumption (Lash and Urry 1994, Appadurai 1990, Gupta and Ferguson (eds)
1997b, Miller (ed) 1995). In order to accomplish this, I had to be open to as many “sites” of my
informant’s lives as possible. As Miller and Slater found for Trinidad (2000), ICTs were most
definitely made local through their being apprehended in terms of local ideas about proper
sociability and interpersonal conduct. However, the ways ICTs were used all but prohibited me
from converting their acts of consumption into my arguments about globalization. ICTs are
arguably a unique place of overlap between ‘our’ ideas of “doing something” and the aftereffects of
‘their’ “doing nothing”. I take the issue up further in Chapter 6. The question why these ideas about
sociability made sense in the context of postsocialist urban life became quite an urgent one, as I
began to see resonance in discourses and practices of what it meant to be “sociable” in other
contexts, from consumption of other goods, to perceptions of city space and even how people were
making sense of postsocialism itself. So I had my answer: the Internet was indeed local, but in a

7 This was not because of any particular theoretical attachments; rather, it made the most sense as a
methodology for the particular project I had initially envisioned.
way that made a mockery of my pre-conceived notion that it somehow must speak to problems of globalization. Without understanding how this form of the ‘sociable’ person becomes meaningful, any postulations about the local and the global seemed empty.

I did follow Marcus’s ‘metaphor’, but “metaphor” needs to be kept in inverted commas because what it was I ended up following turned out to be quite different. “Doing nothing” as locally understood is not the same as being a sociable person, but one would have a hard time being sociable without it. It is an artificial term, albeit drawn from observation, but there are certain categories that overlap. One can account for one’s time by saying ‘I did nothing’ (nichego delala) or ‘we just went out’ (guliali prosto). However, this accounting in terms of nothing is more an after-the-fact impromptu description rather than an intellectual apparatus with which to reflect on the activities bracketed by it. Moreover, the accounting itself is rarely even called for in St. Petersburg and people tend not to think of their non-work activities as accomplishments to be recounted. “Doing nothing” carries no imagery in the way a metaphor does, and is very much accomplished by way of physical rather than discursive action. Locals would be more apt to describe what differentiates doing nothing from the rest of everyday life through the characteristic of good moral feeling (kaif, moral’noe oshuschenie). If I were to emphasize the merriment making, however, this would unduly emphasize the outcome over the complexities of the process itself. “Doing nothing” captures better the analogy between these types of informal activities as part of everyday life and the significance of silences in a text, and reminds us that construction per se is not the intent. Similarly, I have chosen to focus on “doing nothing” rather than leisure, which wrongly introduces the sense of going out to a particular place or intended activity and has been somewhat politicized in older sociological debates over standards of living (see Chapter 4). It also leads readers to think about the consumption of entertainment which, while indeed is a part of what is happening, is the wrong starting point to account for the moral feeling informants describe.

Another Russian category, otdykh, overlaps with my sense of “doing nothing”. Otdykh is usually translated into English as “rest,” although in Russia rest is taken comparatively more seriously. It can be used to cover a range of activities one might think of as appropriate for a Sunday afternoon—visiting with friends and family, going to the park, strolling through the city, going to the museum, etc.. Even car repairing, which, like in the American suburb of my childhood, largely consists of more advice giving and clowning around than instrumentally minded repair, is often brought up when I ask informants about otdykh. It can also mean rest in the sense of the production of a rested or recovered body and mind. Indeed, the Soviets built a large system of sanitoria that combined these two senses of otdykh by bringing together recovering hospital patients and holidaymakers into the same buildings. But I do count otdykh as a separate, if overlapping, category because the intentionality can be totally different from “doing nothing” (the production of the rested body and mind) and can therefore connote a sense of instrumentality. This also could be

---

8 Strathern (1996) argues for the need to separate “sociality” from “sociability”, which unduly introduces assumptions of emotionally warm relationships. I agree with her fully on this count, but the rendering of
an interesting site of investigation but in these Sunday afternoon kinds of contexts a physical
resting is not at the forefront of people’s intentions, nor does it explain why otdykh is often so
profoundly social. As I will show, it is precisely because the non-restful qualities of otdykh cannot
declare its significance in any direct way, that it has become invested with alternative visions of
social relations.

“Doing nothing” as I traced it contains aspects of these indigenous categories, as well as
carefully deployed silences that have to be made visible through ethnographic means. The hybridity
itself therefore poses ethnographic challenges. Because the goal is internal to the action, the
sociality of “doing nothing” beyond immediate participation cannot be understood directly. If we
see these activities located in, and constitutive of, social constructions of time and space, then their
relationship with other activities becomes discernable. Thus much of the ethnography will focus on
those time/space constructions, and how people come to “make time” for these things in their
everyday lives. “Making time” is not shifting around schedules, but “making” in the sense of
socially constructing and deploying a disposition towards time. Thus arrangement making and
daily routine are just as important as the action itself. Similarly, I devote another chapter to the
spatial dimension of these activities, and ask what kind of space is at stake in comparison to other
experiences of space in other more socially locatable actions. The kinds of readings and
experiences of space are constitutive of the action, but also reveal the significance of that action
when juxtaposed with other kinds of space.

There is one final sense in which “doing nothing” is a hybrid. In Europe but more
particularly in middle class America (the part of the world I know best) there has been a recent
outpouring of cultural production of time. Capitalist ideas about time and its supposed natural
affinity with mathematical calculation are undergoing a renaissance. Not only has spending, saving
and wasting time been a source for renewed anxieties, but as droves of the population become
middle managers, it becomes possible to “manage” time. Stress and busy-ness were last year’s
fashion items; now the metaphor seems to be one of a “balance” between work and “life.” “Life”,
being only half of the total of human existence, includes everything besides work—religion, sex,
politics, art, etc.. The balance is thus a peculiarly capitalist imbalance. In my view this world is not
colonized by commerce as much as by management: love relationships are managed via
professionals, anger has to been managed by giving it bounded, contextual autonomy in the
same way as one’s employees, and now ultimately time itself is put into a management paradigm.
This endless economizing and parsing of minutes, the anxieties over productivity and self-
assessment over whether one is a proper time manager/martyr has reached an unprecedented scale.
Bourdieu’s theory of codification and social danger could not be more appropriate to 21st century
capitalist time: the more time anxiety, the more work for professional “life coaches”

9

“sociability” precisely my object of study; this is an enquiry into the sociality of sociability.
9 This is a self-description of an occupational group in the United States. They conduct the activity of “time
management” for consumers. This constitutes a further colonization of the managerial culture, in which the
In contrast, I wish to show that it is possible for perfectly sensible people to do nothing at all—indeed, do nothing without feeling as if they have to “find” the time in one’s mathematical schedule planner. Admittedly, I rather gleefully shocked an economist colleague by pointing out that the people who see time in this way often have more to do in terms of domestic and waged labor than do economists. So another aspect of this hybrid does indeed have to do with my own particular social concerns at home; it is to provoke our own lazy use of the phrase and to remind my reader of what he or she is doing whenever the need to lament ‘having done nothing’ seems to arise.

“DOING NOTHING” AS ANALYTIC DEVICE

In making a single phrase a part of description, I am making the claim that there is something that unites heterogeneous activities, and thus in the very act of describing the phenomenon I am also analyzing it. What brings the hybrid together is an aesthetic of time and space, a ‘form’ rather than any specific ‘content’ that is nevertheless built in the process of everyday practice. Therefore, as an analytic category it must build on time and space studies, as well as theories of everyday action. In this section I address some of the analytic dimensions that I use to mobilize “doing nothing” as a descriptive category. I mentioned earlier that I saw “doing nothing” as an entity first in the guise of communications technologies. That is, the uses of communications technologies are dominated by non-instrumental chitchat and arrangement making for the continuation of chitchat, despite the plethora of possibilities these technologies pose. The way in which social arrangements are accomplished reveals dispositions that make possible decidedly non-instrumental horizontal relationships. These arrangements then lead into a host of contexts, from the Internet to kitchen tables to city streets. By paying attention to how these contexts become meaningful, or what is relevant about their elements that give them a certain look and feel, I hope to describe the fullness of what I see as a qualitatively distinct way of relating.

Without delving into the ethnography, perhaps it is possible to see already that what makes arrangement making “nothing” and visiting with friends “nothing” is that they both are constitutive of a disposition towards time that make any link with formal institutions difficult to establish. Even spatiality itself, I argue, is framed temporally, or rather given an aesthetic through time. “Doing nothing” I see as primarily a temporal category—it gives its activities its character according to the kind of time in which they are completed.10 This formulation is substantively different from the managerial sense of “doing nothing” that I am trying to provoke. This latter sense would bear more emphasis on the lack of (waged or unwaged) production rather than a kind of communication and arrangement making.

10 I am aware of the argument that space and time are inseparable (Harvey 1990, Munn 1996), and that spacetime can be used as a single word, but given the particularities of the ethnography, I argue that time is the dimension manipulated more directly than space, although there are spatial consequences and attention to both is indeed necessary to understand the phenomenon as a whole.
of temporality that is itself produced. This too operates temporally, as time clearly is money, but its logic is different. In the time-is-money sense, “doing nothing” places the emphasis on nothing, i.e., lack of end result, but in the context of the ethnography here, the emphasis is on the doing of things whose outcome is immaterial. What is produced is a particular kind of time; when outcome comes into play the thing that was produced had already passed.

The time construction at stake here is complex; to make it into a “construct” we must artificially piece together a number of temporalities involved. There seem to be three broad elements to this construction. One portion of it is made through the process or organizing (or refusing to organize) mundane acts of sociability. This is the strongest sense in which it is a cultural blank spot, for it is through this arrangement-making that one would expect to see some form of cultural elaboration: clocks, calendars, or even references toward the sun. Instead, there is only an implicit agreement to fail to make reference to representations of time. A further aspect of this temporality is created through imagining qualitatively what kind of time is being experienced. Again, we can only do this through a kind of inversion. We must account for the kinds of imaginings which take place in activities framed by this kind of time, often turning to time’s cousin—space—for clues. To enquire directly about a sense of time would be fruitless; “doing nothing” in the local context really is experienced as doing nothing. More than direct contemporary experiences of time, though, there is a broader history of ideas about time which are at work in constructions of “doing nothing”. Hanson (1997) applies Weber’s typology of leadership into concepts of time, and argues that Soviet institutions were designed to fuse “rational” and “charismatic” time. The state’s insistence on a certain kind of socialist subjectivity was operationalized through time, and permeated a wide range of temporal sensibilities. I explore how time continued to serve as the lynchpin of relations between ‘self’ and ‘society’ into the postsocialist period, even though what this ‘society’ was imagined to be transformed radically.

Ways of accounting for time has always been a crucial dimension of any society, and a standard of anthropological enquiry since Durkheim. There is an enormous body of literature on the kinds of time which have a relatively identifiable aesthetic—cyclical time, calendar making, or ideas about historicity, “tradition” and “modernity”—in other words, representations of time. Other ethnographies, such as Munn (1986), show space-time to be constitutive of social reproduction, and how the co-existence of incommensurable space-time frameworks enables value-creation. That is, the uses of space and time, rather than their representations, assume center stage. Not that these two aspects are unrelated—as Harvey argues, “representations of space and time arise out of the world of social practices but then become a form of regulation of those practices, which is why… they are so frequently contested (1996:212). “Doing nothing” clearly constitutes both this broader nexus of social reproduction as well as a representation of sorts. Its “substantiveness” comes in the way in which it is constitutive of social reproduction, while its “nothingness” comes to the fore in terms of representation. It is a kind of representation in negative, acting in the same manner as a silence in a text.
“Doing nothing” is intrinsically a temporality, but it also very much belongs to the realm of everyday action. This could not have come to the fore without developments in theories of practical knowledge (especially De Certeau 1988, Bourdieu (1977)). De Certeau makes an interesting distinction between “strategy” and “tactic” which I will use here. His view of social life pits culture-producers against the consumers, who he argues in turn are producers of modes of consuming in their own right. Culture-producers have locatable and identifiable objects of discourse and positions from which to argue (“strategy”), whereas consumers have only bricolage, moments of action, and a seemingly infinite arsenal of ruses to mock acceptance (“tactic”). Inevitably, the consumers are a more diffuse lot, as their tactics are always situational, and different consumers have different tactics at their disposal. He argues that interpretation in acts of doing things escape even discourse—the very object that enables social scientists like me to interpret social life. “The intellectual synthesis of these given elements take the form, however, not of a discourse, but of the decision itself, the act and manner in which the opportunity is seized.” (1988:xix)

De Certeau, though, has a different view of how things and persons move from everyday tactical action to discursive strategy from what will be presented here. For him, everyday action, such as walking, cooking, and reading, are social, indeed political, because it forms a response to Focauldian ‘discipline’ or domination. He suggests that non-discursive action is a means of mass resistance, by capturing moments and using it to one’s own ends:

“Increasingly constrained, yet less and less concerned with these vast frameworks, the individual detaches himself from them without being able to escape them and can henceforth only try to outwit them, to pull tricks on them, to rediscover, within an electronicized and computerized megalopolis, the ‘art’ of the hunters and rural folk of earlier days.” (xxiv)

One seeks, reads, and retells a story for ends which lie outside its intended meaning. In this way, these actions shift the grounds of power from space to time. Location—in the form of position in discourse—moves to the background as contingency, the here and now, comes to the foreground. Tactics thus either have the possibility of a fleeting resistance or exist as a stockpile for potential strategy to be seized upon by those who gain location. My experience in the field suggests that this relationship is more complex.

De Certeau’s use of time and space metaphors is provocative, but too abstract for the task at hand. Discursive “location” is neither real space, nor are fields of action ever really specified. His idea of ‘time’, of seizing the moment for one’s own ends, is not a moment in any embodied way. His sense of resistance to cultural producers therefore remains equally removed and diffuse, although as Crang (2000:149) suggests his targets were always intellectual rather than intended to directly transpose onto institutions. Although he never puts it in these terms, for me “location” is a meaningful term if one understands it to be a kind of legitimacy in a particular field of action, or a way of imbuing power in position. I would further argue that in conducting action outside of “doing nothing”, everyone inhabits ‘location’—whether as a particular profession, domestic role, or
customer in a shop. These locations are not originally of one’s own making, but by inhabiting them these same “resisting” masses are none the less partially producing them.

So here I will broaden the sense of “strategy” and “discursive location” to incorporate these forms, as I do agree that a kind of power, in the form of legitimacy, is imbued in these locations. But I disagree with De Certeau in the sense that I do not see having a location as necessarily a privilege; the ability to do legitimized activities is a kind of power, although not a terribly great one if those around you may do so as well. Humphrey (1994), for instance, argues that in Soviet-style organizations nesting hierarchies ensured a fluidity between different locations, so that people on lower levels use many of the same techniques of garnering resources as their higher-ups, and the same kinds of discourses circulated at either end of the hierarchy. If we expand the candidates for holding “location” from a small set of elites to masses, De Certeau’s ideas about strategy would then appear somewhat similar to Bourdieu’s: that one may use these positions to a variety of ends, rather than simply enable them to function. We are all caught up in social fields of various kinds. De Certeau argues that the masses have become marginals who must resort to tactics in getting round cultural elites, but if power is infused in a broader nexus of structures, then there is also a broader set of people inhabiting and manipulating those structures as well as using de-legitimized “tactics” when one does not have a location to stand on.

Nevertheless, his idea of “tactic” is extremely useful in foregrounding the fact that everyday action does not always constitute some kind of subaltern perspective or alternative, “unofficial” discourse. What happens at the level of everyday action is the very action itself, which is not reflective or intellectualized. Everyday reflective, artistic and creative activities do occur, and in this account occur with great frequency, but they themselves are not subsequently reflected upon in any literal way, as if they were discourse. I am not claiming that my concept of “doing nothing” is directly a form of De Certeau’s tactic, but these un-reflective aspects of tactic are relevant here. Tactic is not always strategy in its infancy. Therefore we must look elsewhere to show that “doing nothing” has a sociality that is significant beyond this immediacy.

Bourdieu’s idea of habitus is not analogous to De Certeau’s tactic. The sociality of De Certeau’s tactics is obscured from view; they are simply innumerable, and stuck in their own level of action. “Habitus”, with its idea of generative structures similar to Chomsky’s generative grammar, implies a broader disposition. Although unspoken, it exists beyond the immediate action, and lends a kind of contour to multiple actions. Between these two ideas, a sociality to ‘tactical’ behavior can be discerned. “Doing nothing”, I think, contains tactics, and the actions within it must be understood as such, but it is not itself entirely a tactic. It can be part of a tactic in the sense that you might summon it for various tactical reasons. “Doing nothing” is a form of time making that relies on habitus rather than an explicit reference to some social rule. In order for it to be “nothing”, or appear as a spontaneous “nothing”, this must be so. This form of habitus, if it can even be called
that, would have to place far more weight on the generative aspect than regularities. Bourdieu writes:

“…[T]he modes of behavior created by the habitus do not have the fine regularity of the modes of behavior deduced from a legislative principle: the habitus goes hand in glove with vagueness and indeterminacy. As a generative spontaneity which asserts itself in an improvised confrontation with ever-renewed situations, it obeys a practical logic, that of vagueness, of the more-or-less, which defines one’s ordinary relation to the world.” (1990: 78, emphasis original)

It is this vagueness which helps to hide the substantiveness of everyday action, and keep its “nothingness.”

Just as there are good social reasons for summoning reference to social codes or rules, there must also be good social reasons too for relying on habitus, and failing to take up code. Indeed, Bourdieu’s ideas about strategy rely on just that. Bourdieu’s (1990) essay on codification revisits what he calls the products of “legalism” (the exclusive gaze on explicit objects of culture) after having developed the concept of the habitus. “Codification”, “objectification”, and “rule making” all posit action in a certain direction: that the implicit sensibility of the habitus is made into an object or rule. For his purposes this is necessary to show that social structures are not external to human agency a priori. For the moment we must put a twist on Bourdieu’s logic while keeping to its spirit. Instead of taking the starting point that societies must convert unsaid, vague interests and actions into rules, what if heuristically we started from the idea that explicit rules are the objects to be unmade, rather than the thing to be constructed? That is, let us assume for the moment codes to be already ‘fixed’ in the sense that encounters with them are encounters with that which has already been constructed in the past (this is not a plea for a return to structuralism!). Given that the object of study is an inverse of a code, a silence or blank spot, would it not be appropriate to make this kind of reversal? Perhaps the issue at hand is one of unmaking rather than making. Wagner (1973) would argue that this need not be a heuristic inversion; rather, society is regularly unbuilt. In real life, of course, the existence of rules as well as uncodified action are both perfectly ordinary and necessary modes of human existence. Heuristically “naturalizing” rules may not be so far-fetched. After all, as Bourdieu tells us,

“[i]n societies in which the degree of codification is slight, in which the essential things are left to a feel for the game and to improvisation…you have to have a certain genius for social relations, an absolutely extraordinary feel for the game. You doubtless have to be much more cunning than in our societies” (1990: 81).

A lack of rules is just as tricky as having them. What this reversal does, however, is it forces us also to reverse the traditional “roles” of informant and ethnographer. That is, the informant becomes the one who does the unpacking or deconstructing, and the ethnographer

As a fieldworker, I lacked this kind of legitimacy as I had no official role. This sense of apartness, not as a result of being foreign but as a result of having nothing useful to offer, is probably what made me sensitive to ideas about social location.
becomes the one who makes constructs in order to make this activity evident. This is the rationale for focusing on such a self-consciously artificial concept. Through this reversal, processes of “doing nothing” then show themselves to be processes of loosening codification itself, and so we have an ethnographic object of a slightly different order. Instead of actors strategizing with and between social codes, here we have a case of a strategy that itself addresses codification through ideas about time.

Is all this intellectual trickery justified by the ethnographic data? Does the ethnography suggest that it is codification itself at stake? The evidence for why someone would want to engage in the undoing of rules is laid out in Chapters 2 and 3. Perhaps ‘undoing’ is too strong—maybe it is better to say that people make active use of their relative flexibility. No doubt my reader will want to offer the counter argument that while it is conceivable that a particular construct, code or social object would be contested, surely codification itself, in this larger sense, would remain unchallenged. It is the ethnographers who have obsessed over the significance of social rules, not our informants. This objection raises the classical sociological interest in the relationship between individual and society, where the former would descend into self-interested disorder if it were not for the regularizing effects of the latter, the two locked in a kind of stability/change struggle. I do not, however, see the problem necessarily in these terms. “Doing nothing” does not constitute a direct subversion or resistance to rule making, and my informants do not imagine themselves as anarchic questioners of “society” and its powers to compel. If anything, in St. Petersburg the situation is much the reverse. In fact there is a great longing for “society”, from those who long to see the communist state restored across the spectrum to those who are anxious for that generation to pass on in order to build “normal” relations. A small but substantial part of “doing nothing” entails imagining more legitimate uses of social power. These postulations really only remain in imaginative form: the same informants who engaged in this kind of imagining also told me how foolish it was to bother with direct forms of political action.

Direct challenge to the current social order is also thwarted by the fact that one does not perpetually inhabit a state of “doing nothing”, and thus posit oneself “against” society. Rather, one slips in and out of modes of doing nothing, and in doing so separates everyday forms of De Certeau’s “location” and compulsion from opportunities for creativity. This can be seen in concepts of byt (everyday life) and “ceryi liudi”, or gray people, both of which I see as totalizing ways of imagining “locatability” as a phenomenon. This sense of locatability connotes containment and even a sense of mild but consistent oppression. The distinction is built through ways of using and experiencing space-time. In terms of space, while one is contained by relations of compulsion, the world is a flat, unreadable place, and persons themselves become “gray”. In periods of doing nothing one’s entire visual field become potentially evocative. Evocative space made in this manner is quite similar to Bachelard's poetics of the house. For Bachelard, “space that has been seized upon by the imagination cannot remain indifferent space subject to the measures and
estimates of the surveyor. It has been lived in, not in its positivity, but with all the partiality of the imagination” (1990:xxxvi).

In temporal terms, the dynamic at work is more difficult to describe, because we do not have a straightforward case of a mathematical periodicity of “9 to 5” to set against an effervescent creativity bound by “free time”. The time politics here are extremely subtle; in many ways invented in a contingent, semi-ad hoc manner. The Russian byt, despite its appearance as a kind of frenzied catch-as-catch-can, does entail a sense of immutability--of going through the motions even though those motions can be wildly unpredictable. Yet the temporality which breaks up byt informants are rarely able to describe. This discursive silence, I argue, is the logical outcome of seeing the temporality of “doing nothing” as just the inverse of “locatable” temporalities. It seems that this silence is perfectly logical, necessary even, in the context of postsocialism. What is at stake in the context of postsocialism is not a clear case freedom versus compulsion, where the two forces (whose attributed strength would depend on the speaker) would contest one another. Instead, I would like to focus more purely on location and non-location. Non-location, as a nonentity, cannot fight battles. In this sense, then, “doing nothing” incorporates elements of the carnivalesque, but does not easily contain its inversions within its conventions. This temporary loosening of codification is a way of opening up a space that stands somewhat apart from other social spaces without being extra-ordinary.

In what follows, particularly in discussion of space, I place a heavy emphasis on how my informants exercise their imagination. I see imagination as central to these practices of “doing nothing”. The imagination, it should be remembered, is no extraordinary thing, requiring some transcendental being out of time. There is no mystical removal of actors from their social context. It is, however, not easily addressed directly, which for me partly accounts for the reliance on habitus rather than explicit rules. Bachelard (1990 (1964)), for example, argues that imaginative action is a kind of reverberation: in the mental to-ing and fro-ing between subject and object, image and reader, a kind of poetic communion is created--a “shimmering” in his words. He separates this from the problem of professional poetic composition that for him entails “certain psychologically complex elements” that are different from the initial attachment to images (1990 (1964): xxv). This communion is not the same as expression or judgement. Bachelard makes a strong contrast between his phenomenology of reading with literary critics, who sourly construct and deconstruct rather than the felicitous acts of enthusiastic enjoyment of readers.

On literary aesthetics Bachelard writes: “Nobody knows that in reading we are re-living our temptations to be a poet. All readers who have a certain passion for reading, nurture and repress through reading the desire to become a writer” (xxvi). His sense of poetics goes beyond literary prose, and is as applicable to the everyday as to Keats or Flaubert. There is a crucial moment just after the point at which one first spots an image and just before one feels compelled to expound on his or her interpretation in some thought-out, public way. Besides the immediate visual or linguistic experience, there is also the pleasure that comes with not putting an idea to some strategic
end, or instead of taking it to its logical conclusion, allowing it to evoke yet more meandering thoughts. This pleasure is just as important for space as it is to reading; he refers to his work on houses as an enquiry into “felicitous space” (xxxv). Similarly, in his personal letters Walter Benjamin fretted over the felicity with which he jumped from fragment to fragment (Gilloch 1996:38). While his *Denkbilder*, or thought-images, were a deliberate experiment in putting into literary form the fragmentary nature of the urban experience and its sensory immediacy, even he felt uncomfortable with the removal of all literary “theory”; i.e., forms and conventions which render literature and criticism a discipline. In a sense, much of the experience of “felicitous space” is the construction and reconstruction of *Denkbilder* without the desire (or apprehensions) to subsequently translate it into literary form.

It would be difficult to deny that this was a regular feature of human imagination, but as a human feature it cannot remain asocial for very long. Social and cultural conventions must cope with these states somehow, and bring it into the social fold, just as ‘society’ inhabits bodies and nature itself. Accounting for these states as “nothing” is part of its sociality—the denial of any activity at all allows half-thoughts to work on their own terms, and maintain their integrity as imaginative acts. These acts, however, are contextualized by as well as constitutive of post-socialism. Therefore we must ask what makes the way in which these acts are conducted sensible in this context. This is precisely where I begin my account.

**LOOKING AHEAD**

The following chapter, then, starts to build a picture of that context. It looks closely at the circumstances of six individuals as they leave university, and discusses what kinds of options are open to them, the processes implicit in finding work and moving on from studenthood, and how they interpret these processes. Certain generational rifts are revealed; one of which is that now there is no obvious system that brings people into workplaces. Equally, though, some continuities exist, but in ways that are not simply passed down from parent to child in one contiguous flow. This has implications for locally nuanced understandings of social ‘systematicity’.

Chapter 3 addresses historical constructs of personhood, and the assumptions embedded in the Soviet state regarding the relationships between ‘individuals’ and ‘society’. These assumptions became real social institutions and took on a life of their own by late socialism. I highlight some inconsistencies between Western traditions of understanding political participation and the ethnographic facts that sit counterintuitive to this logic. Here I am concerned primarily with the specificity of Soviet constructions of what Kharkhordin calls “the collective individual” and what phrases like dissimulation, hidden transcripts and official transcripts (Scott 1990) reveal and fail to reveal. I suggest that this gap is more that simply a problem of the limits to analytic categories, but is related to the way in which people can conceive of themselves as not having done anything and yet have been quite active in doing so.
In Chapter 4 I build further on the theme of time, and show how time is crucial to, and constitutive of, interpersonal relationships. I show how this sensibility towards time is different from the temporalities at stake in economic life. Knowing how to deal with time, when to address it and when to fail to address it, where ideas like discipline and punctuality enter into the equation and what this signals to others in terms of personal dispositions is, in my view, a central technique in friendship making. I argue that friendships are developed through the “nothingness” of “doing nothing” not because of the need to hide from the state or postsocialist oppressors, but because portions of the self are revealed by not representing time.

In Chapter 5 I discuss how this temporality manifests itself in terms of space, and how very different aesthetics of space emerge depending on its use. I argue that the way Bachelard sees the poetics of space deeply resonates with certain spatial practices (gulian’e), becoming embedded in the relationships that elicit the imagery in the first place. It is in this context that spectacularly heterogenous (and aestheticized) images of ‘normal’ and problematic relations emerge, drawing on an active and creative sense of historical memory.

In Chapter 6 I return to my original area of enquiry, technology, and ask how we might interpret local constructions of the Internet. The relations I had been describing as “doing nothing” are central to the Internet both in terms of its everyday uses and the material forms embedded in it. In one sense the Internet has all the makings of social capital: a connection with locally potent ideas about modernity, relatively accessible as a material resource and cultural cache in terms of innovative visual design. Drawing from some of the particularities of the social relations built in “doing nothing”, I explore why this has not been mobilized as capital per se, and contrast this with Euro-American populist discourses that have claimed the Internet as an alternative social space.

Finally, in the conclusion I address the question of what kind of a ‘society’ might be imaged from the standpoint of “doing nothing” relations, and the theoretical issue of why postsocialist relations continue to appear to be something after the event ten years later.
CHAPTER 2: RESOURCES AND SOCIAL MODELS

The discussion in the Introduction is necessarily very theoretical, and absent from it is any sense of who might actually be “doing nothing.” In the present chapter, I redress this imbalance. I try to show some of the decisions, circumstances and tradeoffs this thing called “postsocialism” asks of my informants, and how they interpret their decision-making. I do this by examining the decisions facing six recent university graduates. This is with a view to coming to terms with the question of why “doing nothing” would become a meaningful practice in this particular context. Here I draw together some of the contemporary economic circumstances that contribute to “doing nothing”, and in the following chapter I will approach the same question from the standpoint of historical constructs of personhood.

While there were certainly some patterns in the kinds of persons I encountered in St. Petersburg, as a practice “doing nothing” is surprisingly open to most across gender, economic and age boundaries. “Doing nothing” is highly heterogeneous in terms of who does it as well as the content of discourse and imagery it demarcates. Some have the luxury of doing it more often than others, there are some generational and gender differences in the kinds of “doing nothing” activities that take place, and money does dictate the extent to which consumption can play a role. Simultaneously, though, one can find some striking continuities and shared practices warranting these heterogeneous activities to be treated under the same umbrella. For the purposes of this account, ethnicity does not play a significant role, as I spent time with almost all ethnic Russians. In St. Petersburg people not of Slavic or European descent are marginalized in sometimes the most heavy-handed manner, making it seem to the overwhelming majority that ethnicity only exists in limited spaces. The easy freedoms of strolling through the city are, in reality, only available to those who physically look like the majority population. In a way this grim exception proves the rule that “doing nothing” is a cultural construct open to anyone considered part of an otherwise egalitarian ‘us’.

Its heterogeneity, though, parallels postsocialist conditions more generally. One strategy would be to shy away from addressing “postsocialism” altogether, on the grounds that it is too big a category to be meaningful. It nevertheless lingers in academic discourse, meaningful either to show the regional commonalities built by Soviet systems or to show up the inappropriateness of attributing sweeping and inevitably politically loaded ‘isms’ to lives as they are lived. Both these strategies in my view are necessary and correct for the various ends to which they are put. There is also another way to use the problematic nature of the term “postsocialism” productively. This would to try to discern what kind of heterogeneity is involved in everyday experiences of

---

12 I do not think, although cannot conclusively confirm, that my idea of “doing nothing” would make sense for rural contexts. I did visit a small village in the south of Russia, where, of course, people did socialize in public spaces and forged bonds with one another. How this fit in with the demands of agriculture and other temporalities they face I suspect is different from the city even though the village was connected with urban relations.
postsocialism in particular places. In this chapter postsocialism is described in predominantly economic terms as it relates to St. Petersburg everyday life, which to some extent reflects my own interests but also speaks to the idea that economy is itself a dominant regime of power in the region (Humphrey and Mandel 2002). It is the way this heterogeneity hangs together that makes “doing nothing” a sensible thing to do. Again, I keep “doing nothing” in quotation marks precisely because it is both drawn from ethnographic realities as well as a particular reading of the heterogeneity in postsocialism in a particular place. It is an acknowledgement of the artificiality of “postsocialism”—an artificiality I think that can be productive.

The six people described in this chapter tend towards the young and economically secure. I should explain that this was not conscious choice. Because I was concerned about being able to communicate at all, I struck up relations with people I was most likely to have something in common with: people of roughly my generation (about 18-35), and ‘middle class’ to the extent that there can be such a thing in Russia. But this does not define my entire social network while in the field: I had reasonably substantial relations with neighbors, landlords and the like all the way up to the age of eighty two, and ate meals with people who lived on next to nothing as well as those who had personal chauffeurs. This is simply to say that what I have chosen to write about these six I do so with some knowledge of the wider context in which they are situated, and have tried to draw out elements of their lives that these other informants could potentially recognize themselves in, at least partially.

There is much in common between the present chapter and James Ferguson’s *Expectations of Modernity* (1999). Ferguson writes about how in Zambia, discourses of modernity and progress—and the fall therefrom—permeates the life strategies of city dwellers. In the 1970s Zambia was considered proof-positive that the modernist vision could work in Africa. When the carpet was pulled out from under the copper-led economy, people in urban centers that depended upon its production were thrown a precarious position. On one hand, expectations about leading a “modern” life had become part of everyday experience; on the other, there were growing economic and social pressures to “go back” to rural environments, of which many had little to no direct experience and were maladept. As Ferguson astutely points out, while ideas about “going forward” or “going backward” in both time and geography are indeed in operation, what “going back” might mean in practice is deeply problematic. For some, the modernization story had permeated identity to the extent that it could not simply be removed in the absence of economic buttressing. For others who had maintained ties with relatives in the countryside, it meant a different range of practical and emotional difficulties and possibilities. For others still, it meant forging strategies which could not be accounted for on a simple urban/rural scale.

For St. Petersburg there are many parallels to be found with Ferguson’s account. Rusting factories speak to the economic prowess of a past civilization, and libraries filled with nothing but outdated texts serve to remind lecturers and students of being cut off from funding, and thus in a sense also cut off from the wider world. The 1990s were talked about as a time of having to
partially “go back” to the land, although this return—which in a very loose sense was indeed
thought of as going back to a former, if psychologically persistent, peasant way of life—was never
thought of as a complete transformation of person and residence. Even today, Russia has perhaps
the greatest population of what economists would be tempted to call urban subsistence farmers: that
is, people who travel to semi-rural allotments and dachas to plant vegetables and fruits for
household consumption.\textsuperscript{13} There are, however, major ethnographic differences with Zambia.
Currently the economic climate of St. Petersburg is much more robust, “demodernization” was
perhaps less of a concern than simply standing still,\textsuperscript{14} and the networks of exchange within and
between households work on different principles. Economic and stylistic choices are not so heavily
informed by an imagined rural/urban axis as in Zambia.

Nevertheless, Ferguson’s emphasis on the range of strategies deployed by his informants,
as well as the interpenetration of cultural style with economic strategy, could not be more
appropriate. It re-orientates the analysis to show how large-scale transformation is not just something
that happens to ordinary people, who must in turn adapt. Rather, what they make of the initial crisis
in every way constitutes the relations of that transformation (also Greenhouse et al 2002). Here,
too, there are slippages between theoretical models and ethnographic points, as many people do see
themselves as caught up in a transformation not of their own making, and some people are better
situated than others to invent or legitimize new kinds of social relations. I do not deny that
‘structures’ in their various forms have put some in positions to wield brute power. All the way up
the economic chain one might find bigger fish swallowing up and spitting out smaller ones, and this
is widely considered an axiomatic fact of life. Equally there are instances where people try to make
sense of their own participation in social change; and even when people do conclude that their
circumstances are the result of problems outside themselves this should be looked at as itself a
mode of social engagement. In fact, the forms “outside my control” might take are multifaceted
themselves. One is far less likely, for instance, to encounter talk of “the system” or other
abstractions as having to do with “the way it is” as Herzfeld (1992) describes in engagements with
‘Western’ bureaucracies.

\textbf{THE EVEN BIGGER PICTURE}

Describing postsocialism in this way highlights the contingent nature of social situations,
but does so at the risk of implying the authorial ability to delineate the scope of postsocialist
relations—an ability I nor anyone else has. Because of this trade-off (inherent in all descriptions),
before introducing the ethnography, it is worth considering some of the language that has been used
in addressing postsocialism as a moment in history. In some ways Russia changes in the blink of an
eye—I began writing this very chapter in a café that did not exist the year before, having finished a
conversation about the new-found importance of paying one’s taxes, in a city covering itself in

\textsuperscript{13} For discussion of new rural/urban connections, see Kanef and Leonard (eds) (2002). Aspects of this
relationship are taken up in Chapter 5.
scaffolding in order to prepare for its 300th anniversary. This scaffolding will no doubt appear dated by the time my first reader reads these words. The wonders of instant messaging over mobile phones have been popularized despite widespread assurances to me a year ago that it was totally useless. Utilities have begun cutting off those who fail to pay, and I have been duly updated on the new lovers/children/jobs/living arrangements of my re-acquainted friends. During my fieldwork, “reform” and “crisis” were being referred to in the past tense in everyday rhetoric. The discursive uses of the word “reform” positioned it a thing of the late eighties, sometimes conflated with “transition” (as in Figure I). “Crisis” tends to refer specifically to the 1998 financial crash rather than Russia being some generalized state of liminality. If words like “crisis” and “reform” are making their way into the past as if they were a paradigm made evident by its passage, then what is considered to be the present is even less clear.

Traditionally, the chapter proceeding the introduction is used to offer background information or historical accounts that inform the problematic at hand. How is this possible in a situation like Russia, where not only everything changes quickly, but concepts of historical periodicity are themselves in flux? It its clear enough that a focus on some simple “then” and “now,” delineated by Yeltsin’s standing on a tank in 1991, tells a tautologous story by inviting assumptions about what constitutes “modern” living. Anthropological studies of the postsocialist world have rightly argued in both theoretical and ethnographic terms against assuming the current situation to be one of transition to capitalism, democracy, market economy, etc., a position taken up first by Verdery (1991). This suspension of judgement of the future has quite serious implications for the present.

14 Although demodernization is precisely what was at stake for other parts of the former Soviet Union (see Platz 2000 in Armenia and Humphrey 1999 in Buryatia).
15 For contrast, see Woodruff’s seminal article on “the barter of the bankrupt” (1999), in which utility non-payment had become regularized.
Figure I. Advert in Central Petersburg for “Russian Kitsch: Period of Perestroika Café.” The Russian literally translates to “the café of the transitional period.”

Treatments of the so-called “Soviet legacy” are deeply informed by the extent to which the analyst is prepared to suspend judgement over the outcome. “Shock therapy”, the policy of total obliteration of the past devised by Jeffery Sachs and adopted the international lending bodies, presumed that a totalitarian state must collapse totally. In business and economic regulation circles, for example, past social forms are still spoken of as axiomatically obsolete. If by some accident of history they are still in operation, then they are either obstacles to progress or the root of corruption sullying capitalism’s supposedly good name. For example, one economic analysis of the telecommunications market (Cambell 1995) emphasized the need for replacing “out of date” equipment whether in good working condition or not. The fractured nature of the telecoms market is talked about as a legacy of underdevelopment, and evidence of chaos. In the United States, however, a fragmented market it is a barometer of progress away from ‘traditional’ hierarchical business organizational models. Flexibility in one economy is underdevelopment in another. For many business managers, the only means out of this quagmire situation is a kind of release from history in the form of management by Western expats, or a transferal of Western “mindset” (cf Dunn 1999 in Poland, Bruno 1998 in Russia). Similarly, until recently US foreign policy acted with its gaze set exclusively on the past, and was overrun by concerns about Russia’s potential for

---

16 See Verdery (1996) for a full critique.
17 This shift in policy at time of writing had less to do with a rethink of policy principles and more the need to gain Putin’s practical support for the war in Afghanistan. In fact, the principle of making policy by essentializing Russia by way of its past goes at least to the very beginning of the Cold War, when the Kennan doctrine of containment was based on the ‘inherent’ Russian drive for expansion.
‘backward’ and ‘inward’ authoritarianism. Economically, the international lending tap was turned on and off depending on whether Russia’s economic relations could be made to appear like the West’s idealized image of itself, which was the future the IMF’s know-how was about to create. I am not suggesting that ideas about a release from history exclude entirely local ideas about postsocialism. In fact, what these models can only read as chaotic relations are to some extent locally seen as an obstacle to progress. Many of the people I met saw president Putin’s talk of “rule of law” as both sincere and desirable—it was explained to me that there were other powers, ‘higher’ than him, that prevented him from bringing it about.

These kinds of arguments leave ‘legacies’ (or “path dependencies” as David Stark (1992) calls them) visible only through the problems they cause for ‘development’. The question of ‘to what?’ always remains assumed. Once we suspend our judgement about the nature of the future, however, present forms of apparently past phenomenon become more discernable. The works collected under Verdery and Burawoy (1999) show how what appears to be simple holdover are quite often strategies for adapting to present conditions. For Humphrey (1998), the relations built through the institution of collective farming are remarkably resilient, creating meaning in everyday life. From the means of accessing economic resources (securing them from the federal center) to the continued central significance of workplace institutions and ideas about property, a whole mode of civilization cannot be erased by changing the symbols of the state. By removing the ideological evaluations implied by tranistology, one can see why erasure of these ways of life often makes little sense locally. Or as my own informants constantly reminded me, “why throw out the good with the bad?”.

Formulating time in the sense of marking the big questions of the day as periodization is thus not an entirely academic project. These ways of talking about how one assigns periods to history are relevant for business circles and foreign policy as well as academics. But there is more to the story: this chapter shows that these discussions about social transformation are not simply “high level”, i.e., abstract notions gathered by an outsider in the act of observing and generalizing. There are also specifically local ideas about how social transformation might occur. This must be so for the simple reason that after fifteen years of what Western observers see as “crisis” one must find a way to get on with life and understand the situation enough to implicitly or explicitly make plans for the near term. Even though time horizons are not very long, people do make plans for the following year, save for weddings or computers, etc.. Even this could not happen without at least some concept of consistencies in social organization.

In the right context, sometimes my informants did indeed normalize their images of the West to show up the ‘abnormal’ situation locally. Western-generated transitology sometimes does feed straight into indigenous concepts of progress. For example, In St. Petersburg, quite a few employees of multinationals did describe their working environments as “progressive,” and the

---

18 Again, this version of ‘progress’ does not hold elsewhere, and as Platz’s and Humphrey’s work shows, the word “Soviet” implies a path to progress lost in their respective field sites.
most prestigious employment to have. These multinationals (and here it deeply depends on the particular product—see Chapter 6) in turn often advertised their wares by building normalizing images of progress: what wasn’t normal in this advertising world was to not have an electric kettle or washing machine. Even though these adverts appeared fantastical and laughable to my informants, I also did indeed hear the word “Soviet” used as a gloss for things old-fashioned, stodgy or out of date. As I explore in Chapter 6, this progress talk is not hegemonic, and at every turn one might find rejection of the capitalist middle-class package alongside normalizing talk of electric kettles.

This small discussion of ideas about progress and the past shows that while there are indeed discourses in circulation locally about postsocialist social organization, some of which are necessarily framed by the global capitalism that heavily informs Russia’s economic fortunes, each of these discourses relates to on-the-ground situations in a slightly different manner. There are also quite significant ways in which the ‘suspended judgement’ stance taken by anthropologists is also the indigenous one. My informants demonstrate through their statements and actions that they too often avoid definitive conclusions about the nature of the system, present and future and this stance is related to particular kinds of situations. Ultimately, I wish to show that this suspension of judgement has less to do with Russia’s supposed liminality than one would initially suspect. In my view their time horizons and life planning decisions reflect a consciousness of the present as is, rather than a deeper concern for a future assumed to be in crisis. In my own take on postsocialism I am suggesting that the ‘suspended judgement’ model, which locals also use, has certain implications for the way in which heterogeneous social forms interpenetrate in the city.

**LIFE STRATEGIES**

During my fieldwork I came to know a group of university students in their penultimate year of study. I visited them again in the summer of 2002 while they were undergoing graduation festivities. The process of leaving university forces one to confront all at once a plethora of decisions about what it means to be a social person, from where to live and work down to how to exercise networks of friendships and relatives. I will introduce a sampling range of economic strategies now possible through this group, and draw in the experiences of others in the course of analysis. A short while ago, there was significant academic interest in survival strategies (Bridger and Pine (eds) 1998, Buckley (ed) 1997) as a way of ethnographically revealing what constituted the new, semi-market economy. For my case, it is inappropriate to use the word “survival”. While the strategies I will discuss are indeed necessary for one’s self-perpetuation, what is imagined is not an immediate, physical urgency. Rather, this is social reproduction over the medium-term. The extent of their time horizons, shown through the examples below, to me suggests much about how they imagine “society” as a whole.
The group had completed a philology degree at a local university, but only a few of these people fit the traditional student profile. Instead, their course had been shifted to evening classes to allow for daytime employment. The group was five at its core, although two or three others had joined and left over the years, and I have added one member’s boyfriend who studied at a different university. The youngest member was twenty one, the oldest thirty nine. Two had full-time jobs in addition to their university schedule. One had to quit when final examinations approached, while the other, a man who worked as a tugboat driver, worked day shifts for only part of the year. With one exception, the others in the group did occasional waged work as it came along, usually translation work. Two were married with children, one was co-habiting with her boyfriend in a communal flat (kommunalka), and one had moved into a new boyfriend’s flat shortly after my first trip.

To begin, it is worth noting some of the particularities of their studenthood. Part of being a student certainly had to do with the arsenal of documentation identifying one as such. Student I.D.’s can sometimes be used instead of internal passports for purchasing rail tickets or leaving deposits. Technically, it is a student union card although the union barely exists outside the issuing of identification. More importantly, the student is responsible for his or her own recordkeeping. Students are handed small books into which grades are entered; instructors merely sign for their veracity. God help the student who forgets to bring this book to an exam or even worse, loses it: you do not count as a student without it. All production is lost. The issue of passports and identity in the broader sense is a fascinating one which I cannot go into here (see Lemon 2000, Humphrey 2002), but suffice it to say that the way it marks a person in terms of identity fits readily into the kinds of identities the state is prepared to acknowledge. One can claim oneself to be an entity in the social world through studenthood.

Being a student in Russia draws upon Soviet-era ideas about the organization of work. As one might expect for a small group thrust into the same circumstances over a long period, a good deal of camaraderie had been achieved amongst the group members. The metaphor with which they understood these circumstances was the kollektiv (work group). The kollektiv was a crucial building block of socialism and the term is still used with overtones of good, egalitarian relations. The organization of the educational system, factories, and all workplaces into kollektivs was part of a broader process of developing the Socialist individual (Kharkhordin 1999). I was told this kollektiv ideal is not always the reality in other groups, but in this particular group it was important. Phone calls about this or that assignment and working together in each other’s flat was frequent,
and birthdays or other holidays/outing were shared. Resources were circulated through and by the group in the kollektiv ideal: knowledge about the work was shared uncompetitively, and a calling circle had developed to transfer information from the day students about cancelled lectures, examination announcements, etc.\textsuperscript{22} Agreements could be reached about feigning to instructors collective misunderstanding of assignments,\textsuperscript{23} and at graduation time collections were taken up for buying the examination committee flowers. This latter ritual was experienced as a kind of burden shared; a pointless expense that did no one any good but merely existed to show the hierarchies at play. Instructors were nevertheless highly respected by the students. Their strict but almost parental demeanor was seen as serious evidence for caring for students, and deflected resentment of this and other forms of tribute. To talk about this mutual scratching of backs within the group as anything more utilitarian than “help” is to negate the relationship itself. I, for instance, was not allowed to pay anyone for the work they did for me because I was a fellow student and not a rich corporation. They in turn would endeavor to create the work context to make it impossible for me to pay, by suggesting I bring along a recorded interview particularly difficult to understand to one of their working sessions and we would decipher it all together. The group atmosphere worked to negate the fact that I was now indebted to them.

Despite serious differences in age and background and commitments outside the university, a quite strong identity with the group and studenthood was achieved. Yet for all the ways in which the university makes these social identities and networks possible, there are interesting patterns in who constitutes Others for this group. Gossip about how much other students had paid for their places was a main area of concern; but chatter always focused on students outside the immediate group. It is an open secret that a complex system of economic exchange makes university places available. A small handful of exceptionally bright students can sometimes escape making payments, while outright bribes are the option of last resort, and even then open only to a wealthy minority. The rest are subject to a sliding scale of payments and fees for “preparatory classes”. Presence in preparatory classes ensures no outrageously obscure question will be asked in entrance exams.\textsuperscript{24} Once the place is gained, a variety of top-up payments to the university and gifts to teachers in the name of politeness are necessary from all. Everyone is subject to one kind of payment or another; but the gossip chiefly concerns who made the most payments and who purchased outright their place. The implication is that those who resorted to bribes could not possibly have the intellectual wherewithal to earn the place, thus cheapening the degrees of others. Not having to pay formal and informal fees was indeed a source of pride for students, but it was such a rarity that openly making reference to it comes dangerously close to tactlessness. I mention this because it is important to note that the stereotype of the excessively cynical Russian economy,

\textsuperscript{22} It was not possible to phone the university or relevant department for this information.
\textsuperscript{23} According to the original sense of the term developed by Makarenko, this would have been evidence of a false kollektiv, meaning that it detracted from the wider social goal for which kollektivi were invented.
\textsuperscript{24} Markowitz (2000) sees her informants’ attendance at these classes as evidence of students’ level of commitment to university entrance, but they were reported to me as a regrettable part of ‘the system.’
where everyone is on the take, no one bats an eyelid and no regard is given to actual labor or production is only partially true. Humphrey (2002) also makes this point in her work on bribery. Even in this institution, where semi-acknowledged payments are a condition of entry, students still talk about their own educational endeavors as serious labors compromised only by “others” who buy places outright. It is significant that exceptionally bright students can get round the worst of it: it is not just economic exchange at work here. It is even possible to buy their degrees from those selling them at metro stops, sometimes in cahoots with personnel at the records offices. Properly earning a degree still does have rewards, however, in terms of skill and social capital.

The strongest invective is reserved for the dean, who is reputed to own multiple properties and luxury cars. He and not the instructors who take the payments is recognized as the real beneficiary. Of more distant concern but equally frowned upon are the students at another university in the city. I listened to hours of animated talk about how it is no coincidence that the wealthiest families send their children there, how their parents use chauffeured luxury cars and mobile phones to control their every move, and how they must not be “real” people leading such sheltered lives. At graduation time, this talk grew into discussion of how these students must be celebrating: “They go to restaurants and drink tequila [i.e., drinking expensive drinks when there is perfectly good Russian vodka to be had.] And they wore suits at the graduation, like businessmen!”

“How can a person practice law if he has paid for his law degree [at that university], and doesn’t know the law?” I asked one of them naively. “Oh, they have a law degree, but they won’t do anything. They’ll just look after some business of theirs.”

This is a fascinating formulation: “others” are people who do not take their degree seriously, and the worst offenders fail to work in their profession. This failure is not individual laziness; rather, the sheer fact of being wealthy sets up a whole set of circumstances which prevent the person from becoming a working being. The English football star David Beckham is understood in this rubric. The fact that he is a millionaire means that all his talents are “na pokaz” (for show), and his wealth indicates a lack of talent rather than a reward for it. “It is not interesting to watch millionaires play football” I kept hearing during the World Cup. The comment that the law students of this other university will “just look after some business” came from a 22 year old member of the group, whose memories of Soviet days consisted of pioneer camp and didactic if creepy tales of Pavlik Morozov, the child made a hero by revealing to the state that his own father was a kulak. This person has no explicitly communist sensibility, and yet “looking after some business” does not count in the sphere of real work.

What makes for real work is work according to one’s profession (po profesii). This entails using some existing skill—engineering, computer programming, knowledge of languages, journalism, medicine—to some socially useful end. This profession is decided in higher education and in theory should rarely changed. Work in some other capacity simply does not count as

25 Legends of unfathomable wealth always center on their visible manifestations in St. Petersburg. The car with its tainted windows is just a hint of more, less visible depravity.
contributing to work identity, unless some retraining is involved, and the new work is of equal or greater social value. Interestingly, accounting, finance, and economics all count as legitimately skilled specialisms, on par with journalism and engineering, while “looking after some business” does not. Labor continues to be valorized, but the main thing is that the fruits of one’s efforts should be evident. The subject of degree is thus crucial in formulating one’s professional identity. A degree in Russia confers both general educatedness as well as who one is professionally. Whereas in the U.S., what a person was going to be “when he grew up” is a decision taken after university, sometimes delayed well into the mid-thirties or avoided entirely, for students in St. Petersburg, university had already produced this identity. “Others” are people who negate this aspect of identity through the wealth. Yet the variety and prevalence of economic strategies outside of work po professii suggest that this Other-ing is also a means of recategorizing one’s own activities. The people I knew who were not working po professii (outside these six) would emphasize that it was just work, “not for the soul”.

To my surprise, life after graduation was not a very popular topic of conversation. Their avoidance of the topic in St. Petersburg was positively striking to me. In fact, asking questions about what would come next just after graduation was downright awkward. The conversation around graduation festivities did largely center on the act of accomplishing the course, on helping each other finish and the fun had along the way. Some of this might be because having to find a job is a relatively new thing in Russia: in the Soviet period the university coordinated with employers to allocate jobs. However, the younger graduants did not grow up with the expectation of job allocation. I discuss the repercussions of this in the next section.

Alexei, the member of the group who had a job as a tug-boat driver consistently throughout the degree, had the most certain future. He was already established in life before the degree, with a wife and children. He had found the job through family members, and his language of work remained tied to notions of trust and intimacy:

“It is not open to the public, this job, you cannot just apply for it from the outside… We’ve got something like a family, we’ve known each other for quite a long time and that is why it is not just job relations. I think it is because we are a little ship. Everyone sits down together to eat. I hear on the big ships there are separate rooms for officers and crew.”

In the year between my visits the management had changed, and with it the firm’s raison d’être. What he originally saw as good work in a stable, legitimate business has now been clouded by a new atmosphere of intentional mismanagement and asset-stripping. One would expect this to be part of the larger story of privatization, where state assets were sold to cronies at rock bottom prices, but in this case the reverse is true: Alexei’s company was taken over by a state entity. “But it is not because it is state-owned that it is not managed correctly—state, private doesn’t matter” Alexei remarked.

He had taken the degree to improve his prospects for employment in a general way, but he is concerned that given the change in management he might have to use his degree sooner than
anticipated. His job is well paid, and now that he has a philology degree he has significant earning potential. Yet help from his parents and his wife’s parents was critical:

“If I had a flat or a house, I would live easily, but I rent. It would be much more difficult to live [if it weren’t for] my parents and my wife’s parents. They support us. It is a tradition in our country. Parents always support their children. As for money I have enough for living, but they just give me help. I am going to make a house, I’ve got the land but I don’t know how to build a house. My father knows how to build a house—that is why I took this burden.”

Rent is widely seen as an excessive burden and a last resort for those who can pay up; housing is more typically circulated through relatives. Where he feels burdened is precisely when he evokes parental help, the most significant aspect of which will help him escape renting. As a father, husband, and someone who works in a skilled profession, Alexei is perhaps the most secure of the group. Yet he in no way sees himself as an independent entity, bringing home the bacon to a self-contained nuclear family. Instead, he situates himself in a loose network of help that spans different circles of persons.

Of those who did occasional work throughout university, some had already taken steps to find permanent employment, po profesii. The youngest member of the group, Katia (21), had already worked various translation jobs during the year and in summers. Working in her profession is not just economic need but also gives a sense of achievement, as she is the first member of the family to go to university. At one job at a software development firm, however, she received a rather startling introduction:

“I was asked to translate at this conference with American and German businessmen. They put a translator at each table, but then I noticed at each table was also a woman, who sat absolutely silently. As the business talk finished, the men—the foreigners!—would start with these women, and I understood what job they were to perform. Some of the businessmen were looking at me and the other translators in this way; I was really frightened! I just sat there frozen, I did not know what to do.”

Despite this experience, Katia is still determined to work as a translator. Next she tried the Internet, explaining to me that since I left Petersburg it had become popular to look for jobs over the Internet. “But I thought the only way you can find a job in Russia is to know someone?” I protested. “Yes, that is true, but you can also use the Internet now. Many serious companies look for employees this way.” Katia had posted her CV, and received a phone call from a major oil pipeline company. She eventually got an offer, and the money was considered excellent. “They promised even more if I worked even harder. But they wanted me to work too hard. There are only 24 hours in a day, and what they wanted me to do to earn [the basic salary] was too much. Who are these people who do this job—robots? I told them no, I am not a robot.” Eventually she found work translating for a pharmaceutical company through a cardiologist neighbor. She now assures me that she has found a good kollektiv.

Up until December 2001, Katia lived with her parents and sister just outside of the city. She then moved into her boyfriend Zhenia’s flat. Zhenia’s father is wealthy, and purchased the flat
for him to live in but also as a kind of general family asset. Zhenia does not own the flat, and must vacate it when relatives come to visit. The couple has made no mark on it of their own, and relatives come by with rugs and decorative items that often bear little relation to the original décor, as if to reify its no-mans-land status. In addition, he and his mother, now divorced from his father, are both given generous sums to live on each month. The divvying up of resources is problematic, however. Despite being teased by her groupmates that she was lucky enough to find a sponsor,  

Katia has access to this income only sporadically, and quite often it is the case that after Zhenia’s purchases are made she must radically economize until the next month. There is some conflict over what she sees as extravagant spending on Zhenia’s part. Nevertheless, she sees economizing for the household as a whole as her responsibility, and feels that she cannot ask Zhenia to spend less, as it is “his” money. So her family in turn sends help, in the form of home grown potatoes and enormous jars of pickles and jam. Two ends of the Russian economy, embodied in dacha potatoes and a wide-screen TV, are thus incorporated oddly into this household. Zhenia’s mother objects to the relationship and regularly uses the difference in wealth as a tool to try to break it up, accusing Katia of siphoning off family wealth and nagging her about when she is going to get a job. Zhenia’s mother’s own claims to family wealth is precarious as well, which fuels the accusations. The father supports the relationship and continues to position himself as benefactor to everyone, attempting to keep the peace.

Katia is fortunate: in possession of a defined, skilled profession, a wealthy partner who treats her well and a natal family with a good network of support. But even in this enviable scenario much is compromised and sacrificed. Access to wealth is fraught with all sorts of devil’s bargains, whether it be working to the bone, being subject to the lurid advances of foreign businessmen, or leaving oneself open to accusations of manipulation and mooching. I do not think she sees Zhenia as a sponsor, as I did encounter other instances of women reporting their relationship strategies as ‘sponsorship’ in the most matter-of-fact way. I do get the sense that for her in general the goal is not aggressive accumulation of money, but living and working in what she sees to be a normal, productive manner. Her view of what constituted “normal” echoed discourses of a “normal life” studied by Rausing in Estonia (2002) as well as Humphrey (2000) in her work on businesspeople. Humphrey writes of ideas of a “normal life” as linked to “ethical values such as honesty, reward for merit and working to good effect” (2000: 187)—a notion implicitly evident in the actions of the rest of Katia’s group as well. Although ethnic claims play a part in Rausing’s ethnography that do not exist in St. Petersburg, nevertheless many of my informants would agree with the Estonian notion that “normality” is suitably expressed through consumption: not conspicuous consumption, but “the solid ordinary comforts of Northern Europe” (2002: 132) of which past generations have been deprived. This brings Katia into contact with money which in a sense is also the source of the trouble.

26 A sponsor is the Russian equivalent of a sugar daddy; an extremely common economic strategy in Russia—see Bridger et al (1996). The teasing was done in a semi-ironic tone.
Zhenia, unlike his girlfriend, was keen to emphasize the centrality of contacts and networks to find work. For him, it is impossible to find good work without it, and so it made little sense to make attempts to send out resumes or post them on the Internet. At the time he had been in and out of contact with a friend of his father’s to try to orchestrate work in criminal law, his university specialism. Outside these infrequent phone calls, Zhenia concerned himself with consumption and socializing, essentially fulfilling the stereotypes of the new elite. It is only Others who have no genuine interest in working, and he makes self-mocking jokes that he is himself a byk (bull—slang for a particularly crude kind of *nouveau riche*). Zhenia presented his interest in the law as genuine, regaling us with horror stories of police brutality and ineptitude. He saw the prosecutor’s office as the only counterweight to the arbitrary and simple-minded police force, and very much wanted to participate in that. He had no desire to “just look after some business”, even though his social profile would suggest this was a proper course of action. At the same time he knows full well that working in the prosecutor’s office means forfeiting other opportunities for money-making and he is not willing to make this sacrifice over the long-term. In financial terms, Zhenia has relatively unlimited resources at his disposal, and yet he too sees his options as essentially entailing compromise. Further adding to the sense of unavoidable compromise, he and his male colleagues were due to be pressed into military conscription. One key advantage of attending university is that you become automatically an officer upon graduation, but nevertheless actually taking up the post is to be avoided at all costs. This fosters an immediate and frightening education in the necessity of acting against one’s morals, or creating new ones, in order to survive.

If Katia felt compromised through encounters with money from men, other women formulate their strategies entirely around wifehood. Also part of the graduating group was Yulia, a 39 year old woman and mother of a 14 year-old. Her husband has a good job fitting sprinkler systems, and they live in a large two-bedroom flat. Yulia took the course mostly for intellectual stimulation, and it seems had no immediate plans for seeking employment upon graduation. Yet this was not a fact that could be discussed openly, as more than one of the group later commented to me about how they were curious about her plans but did not wish to raise the issue in front of her husband, who had been with us for a post-graduation gathering. I did not raise the issue directly either, although the husband had dropped hints that the status quo would continue to his chagrin.

The way she presents her circumstances to others reveals her own equivocal view of them. Each time I saw her she has a new term for the new elite that she insisted I know, or reported some over-the-top manner of their behavior that I should take note of. While it is not uncommon to make the wealthy the butt of one’s jokes, this level of constant attention is very unusual. At the same time, she is also known within the group as the “mother”; i.e., the person who bakes pies from scratch, who knows how to sew well and the general expert on all things domestic. She also plays a critical role in inter-household exchange within her apartment building. From time to time she

27 Zhenia is not strictly part of the philology *kollektiv*, although families and partners are drawn into the group somewhat.
helps orchestrate circulation of second-hand clothing from the “new Russian” neighbors through her own network of friends and family and (subsequently) to poor neighbors. Her talk of this second-hand distribution is accounted for in terms of the Other’s extravagance. This neighbor is reputed to purchase new wardrobes every season, and she talks about the clothes redistribution as making good out of the neighbor’s wastefulness. The hyper-exaggeration of the Other’s wastefulness combined with the extraordinary efforts to complete domestic tasks and engage in other forms of economy suggests to me that she is carving out for herself a way of making labor, or showing herself to be contributing to those around her.

With Yulia, a tension becomes apparent between my “doing nothing” as a positive mode of social action and the accusations of Others acting as social parasite by not doing anything understandable by others as worthwhile. Indeed, one can see from Yulia’s talk about herself and others, and also from the accusations that Katia mooches off of her boyfriend, that labor is key to making it appear that one is doing something worthwhile, and therefore is a worthwhile person. Yulia’s talk shows that this labor does not have to involve financial remuneration, although certainly if she did work for a wage her contribution would be much more clear-cut. I would point out that “doing something” in this case does not center around time, or the rushing to squeeze in accomplishments and so does not necessarily compete with “doing nothing” as a temporal experience. Nevertheless, it is possible to disdainfully accuse someone of doing nothing as a general state of affairs, or “just” sitting at home in the case of (wealthy) women. But “doing nothing” as a temporary, contextualized set of practices would not invoke this disdain, or rather could only invoke this disdain if it involved some form of conspicuous consumption that would call into question the person’s ability to do anything productive.

The way Yulia makes her social participation known reveals an immense flexibility in ideas about what might count as work. Even though waged work outside one’s area of expertise is usually seen as a regrettable activity necessary to get by, equally unwaged work opens up a whole separate and flexible field of legitimizing economic relations. Yulia does not even feel the need to draw upon gender as a means of making her productivity evident. She does not put her domestic skills into the metaphor of going back to some former womanly duty; in fact she made a point of demonstrating how she has a very “contemporary” relationship with her husband, and that she can return home drunk in the wee hours of the morning without him questioning her. This she opposes to the “backward” relationships of what she calls “typical Russian men” with their wives. Even when there is no need for her to contribute monetarily, she finds every possible way to separate...

---

28 This was Zhenia’s usage, although it does also mean a bully-boy in Mafia terminology.  
29 This formulation would make it appear as if entrepreneurs do not exist, which is not the case (see Yurchak 2001). But entrepreneurship as a source of professional identity offers less cultural cache than elsewhere in the world. The converse is also true in that in order to perform a range of jobs not explicitly to do with business one has to act in quite entrepreneurial ways. Yurchak (2001) reminds us that this itself has its roots in late socialism. 
30 The stereotype of gender relations involves the appearance of male constant control.
herself from the imagery wrapped up in the contemporary notions of “sitting home” for well-off women. This must be done by making claims to productivity of some kind.

The two others in the group have uncertain futures. When I first met one of them (Galia, 26), she was quite serious about trying to find a sponsor, and spoke in quite pragmatic terms about it. Galia, like Katia, encountered some devil’s bargains in working life while at university. At the time she was working in an office in which she was regularly called upon to lie to customers and pretend that non-existent shipments were on their way. Russian businesses are frequently talked about as untrustworthy, but one neglected aspect of this is that they employ plenty of otherwise reliable, honest people. A constant stress for her was the fact that the customers were correct to launch into vicious tirades about how they had been cheated, and the only thing she could do was make more empty promises. The management in her account made every effort to insulate themselves from these tirades. Given this experience, it is of little wonder that she had no immediate plans but to visit her parents in Moscow. The final member of the group (Anna, 25) was in a similar situation, and had plans to go to relatives in a nearby town, where she would help everyone cope with a family crises that had recently arisen. This constituted the horizon of her current situation more than finding employment, or indeed anything else. Anna’s case serves to remind us that even though a range of choices exist in principle, these can escape from the horizon of possibility all too easily.

FEEL FOR THE GAMES

I discussed the key choices facing this group (or rather, a student kollektiv plus one of its members’ boyfriend) at some length because taken as a whole they show up a number of unexpected problems. Firstly, the range of available options at least for some is far less bleak than it was five years ago. As serious as deceit and sexual harassment are, the situation is not one of widespread forced prostitution (as it was reported to me in other regions), nor is the choice only between selling ice cream on the street or praying that the wage arrears might actually be paid. These are still realities for many, and outside the city a different picture entirely might be painted. It is also significant that within Petersburg there are opportunities to be had beyond the asset-stripping or positioning oneself to be a recipient of tribute. As one jazz club owner, who had been a well-known musician in Soviet times, put it to me: “We lived at our dacha then [after 1991]. Everyone did: it was like exile. But then a few years ago our son went back to the city and said to us ‘hey, life has returned.’ So when life returned we returned.”

One way to think of this is to see it as a case of an externalized crisis easing, and having an impact on ordinary lives. Yet the return of life somehow managed to survive the August 1998 crisis for this man, which leads me to believe that he had something larger, more processual in mind. By claiming “life has returned”, this man is making certain acknowledgements and evaluations of new forms of social action. If the economy were all about negative forms of economic power and the strategies to cope, for these six very different people it would make no sense to take a university
degree, especially later in life. Employment would have nothing to do with skills, therefore time spent in education would only decrease one’s chances. It is a remarkable turn of events that return to education after a period of working is even conceivable. I also take this as an indication that the use of the word institution\textsuperscript{31} is now warranted in St. Petersburg. Implicit in taking a university degree is a set of expectations about how to use this social capital, although what those expectations are is more complex than the term “social capital” implies.

This “return to life” is different from the usual imagery of the Russian economy: racketeering, asset-stripping, capital flight and other economic forms glossed under the category of “corruption.” Humphrey (2002) shows how the particularities of these politico-economic forms have different social logics to them, and cannot be lumped together as simply “corruption.” An extension of this principle is warranted for my own material. The other, more legitimated practices I described above should also not be lumped together as some normalized vision of market economy, which would render them bellwether signs of improvement along a set trajectory. Some of these forms, such as the building of informal networks and mutual help, do not at all sit unproblematically either inside or outside institution-making (see also Bruno 1997, Ledeneva 1998). Yet the statement that “life has returned”, just like statements about “corruption”, needs to be recognized as a way of coming to terms with a new constellation of possibilities in the city.

Although she does not put it in these terms, Humphrey’s (2002) work seems to me to be about showing the durability of relations in practices that for one reason or another are clouded by dubiousness, and made to seem to come from nowhere rather than being the institutions that they are. In her discussion of racketeering, for example, the mafiosi not only provide techniques of negotiation and order, but also a cultural aura of themselves as disciplined persons, a practice which can be traced historically (2002: 125). I cannot conduct such a rigorous archaeology of the institutions that currently make up my informants’ concerns, but certainly one can see, for example, how her analysis of bribery and Othering is also lived experience of these students. My purpose is different in that I wish to underscore the experience of attempting to juggle these institutions in practice. I do take seriously the postmodern claim that social life does never fits neatly together in the way that “society” used to be imagined as consisting of a machine with many cogs. But at the same time, I wish to highlight that it is particular individuals who go about engaging in these institutions that do not fit together, and must make sense of it in some way. While nowhere are coherent wholes to be found, this does not mean there are no ethnographic differences to be found in the kinds of congruities an incongruities that exist in a field situation.

In her work on bribery, Humphrey writes interestingly about how it is “surrounded on all sides by other kinds of relations, which it partially overlaps, but it is sufficiently distinct to generate characteristic behaviors” (2002:145). One of her examples of a commonplace transaction between traffic cops and drivers. Essentially, traffic cops stop drivers for some minor, semi-invented

\textsuperscript{31} As in the Introduction, I am using “institution” in Bourdieu’s (1991) sense of the term, to mean a durable set of relations that endows persons with resources of some kind, not necessarily a named, formal entity.
infringement, and the driver pays. But this is known locally as something closer to tribute rather than bribery: a bribe would be if the driver had indeed committed an offense. What is of interest for my purposes is that the distinction depends on “real” state-based law, or moral rules otherwise laid out explicitly. That is, not only is tribute paying a recognition of who rules the streets, but it also indicates that traffic cop’s power is indeed limited by explicit rules. If he wanted to, of course, he could simply pull someone over, flash a gun and say “pay up!” without any pretense to law enforcement whatsoever. He could also prosecute the driver for a non-existent offense in order to extract additional payment, but to do this in the absence of any offense would indeed require a great deal of effort. He would need to plant evidence, garner false witnesses, etc., in order to maintain the fiction further up the chain. The pretense of law enforcement is maintained: in fact, that they do not ask for tribute more often is a sign that it is more than just pretense. Tribute-taking still takes place within a context of actions that are recognized as legitimate: cops are supposed to arrest unruly drivers, and their more usual actions of tribute-taking are informed by this.

There is a confluence of multiple logics here: the assertion of ‘authority’ by taking, the limiting of one’s takings through asserting ‘the law’, and, if our hypothetical cop got his job through some acquaintance or relative or strategically let his friends go rather than making demands, the logic of help. Moreover, the police in St. Petersburg have competitors: gangs drive round the city initiating minor accidents, and then tell the other driver that the repairs he would have to make will be outrageously expensive “but we’ll let you off for a few hundred dollars”. They prey on the fact that owing somebody for damage in an accident is a socially visible phenomenon. Logics that entail DeCerteau’s location—the necessity of a ‘real’ offense for a cop to further pursue drivers (real relative to the discursive existence of state law—are neither more nor less powerful than informal forms of legitimacy, such as help giving or, or those that seem morally indifferent or ambivalent, such as tribute taking or debt owing.

We can see a similar confluence of logics in my own informant’s lives. The rules of one logic are contextualized by the rules of another. If Bourdieu focuses our attention on how subjects develop a “feel for the game”, then in this instance it seems as if my friends are forced to play three or four games at once, confusingly intertwined. Drawing on Bakhtin, Yurchak (2001) calls this state of relations a hybrid social system— hybrid not in the sense that it draws on elements of both capitalism and socialism (which would not distinguish it from any other system), but hybrid in the sense that various conventions and institutions exist in dialogue with one another. I will try to discuss some of these new institutions in terms of their interpenetrations as they are manifested in the particular individuals I know. It seems the first thing one learns in gaining a feel for the games is how to enter them. Connections (sviazı) do play a vital role in matching employers and employees, and these connections are fostered through the successful maintenance of social networks and the morality of help. The way Alexei speaks of his tugboat, for instance, could not be more diametrically opposed to our ideas of cronyism or nepotism. Yet, an unemployed man sitting on the docks would have a different interpretation of Alexei’s family-like workplace. As Ledeneva
(1998) documents, the morality of using connections (an unavoidable practice for everyone) depends on how one is situated. Relatives orchestrate ‘help’, but an equal amount of efforts go into showing these matches to be worthy. Alexei emphasized that the main thing with new employees on the boat is not to show them how to get along, but to train them how to do the work itself. “Others” are the ones who do nothing at work or at home because they are protected by some connection. Work must still be done.

Help is so central to everyday life that geographically, the group sees their choices as limited by where they have relatives. I never met a person during my stay that had not lived in the city all their life or did not have relatives in it prior to moving. The situation demarcating “help” is never fixed, though: our hypothetical unemployed man in turn may have access to something else from which he could exclude Alexei by helping his own network. The situatedness of economic activity pulled off via connections illustrates the point that St. Petersburg hybridity entails a unique relationship to time. Successful networkers can accumulate possibilities, but they remain in their incipient form, as possibilities, until actually enacted. Networks of friends, family and acquaintances do not count in the way “social structure” is normally understood not because they go unnamed, are considered informal, or because they are incapable of garnering resources, but because it is unpredictable what one might use a contact for. They therefore do not accumulate and endow resources in the same way that De Certeau imagines ‘location’. Instead they shift to contextualize a given situation, and then dissipate into possibilities once more. Both the kinds of institutions Humphrey specifies as well as the networks that bring them to life are durable. Durability, though, is not enacted as if it came through objects built for posterity, and thus, building-like, visible and ascertainable from any perspective. In this sense, the present plays a far greater role in economic life than one might at first suspect, as these otherwise durable forms are much closer to incipient possibilities once the immediate context is disassembled.

Hybridity does not mean the absence of form; Humphrey’s discussion of bribery, for instance, is a clear example that categories of practices have relatively durable meaning. Hybridity does suggest, however, that the way in which one might view the ‘wider’ context is less apt to make use of ‘levels’ higher on the conceptual totem pole. Instead, one situation’s ‘wider’ context is another practice’s immediacies, on the same ‘level’, as it were. Yurchak’s entrepreneurs make active use of this fact, and create value by moving both things and institutionalized ‘structures’ between contexts. It is relevant for the present chapter that Yurchak’s entrepreneurs claimed to find it impossible to survive without breaking one law or another. That is, contexts can contradict one another if one were to view them as a system. This perspective is sometimes taken up; in fact it is central to the rule of law rhetoric in circulation in Russian media. But simultaneously, echoes of

32 Here language shows its slipperyness, as the time argument holds for the idea of hybridity taken from Bakhtin’s dialogism (raznorechie, lit. ‘multi-voicedness’), but perhaps less so for Latourian ideas of hybridity as literally embedded in objects. Latour (1993) is concerned with the social and material conditions of possibility for technological innovation. In Latour’s work hybrid artifacts stay on, lingering not just as possibilities by as actors themselves, in a way that the Bakhtian hybrid constellation of possibilities does not.
the anthropological ‘suspension of judgement’ model might be found in how people act on their understandings of hybridity, and particularly in how present immediacies of one situation inserts itself as a means of suspending judgement on the ‘wider’ context. One might not speak of an indigenous model of social life but models in the plural.

These shifting immediacies can be traced through my informant’s decisions. For the people I described, ideas about what constitutes work mediate, as well as are mediated by, both the logic of help as well as the logic of ‘the market’. Stories are circulated now of people who have degrees from prestigious institutions who must trade on the streets or in the marketplace. The problem is not one of working simply below one’s station, but working in a way that is seen as fundamentally unproductive. Trading for many people is still looked at as “speculation”, i.e., not contributing to the value of the good in any way (Humphrey 2002). The overwhelming persistence of references to this or that being “just for money” must be a newer manifestation of the old view of “speculation”. This kind of work is not just trading on the street, although that is the specter most commonly used in litanies. Another one of my informants, a 41-year-old man who used to teach mechanical engineering in a naval academy but now sells wholesale goods, saw his job as a regrettable thing, done just for money. It can be difficult and unpleasant to perform, but because production is not evident it also is not necessarily seen as ‘proper’ work. Work seen as just for money tends to focus on the exchanging of things. Yet if the exchange engaged in by the enterprise as a whole is sufficiently abstracted from the work of an individual, then the work can be counted as satisfying even if the salary is high. AccountancySoftware programmers do mention their good salaries, but the challenge of the work and the need for technical prowess fills the “emptiness” of money relations. In this statement, though, I have allowed my informants’ slippage to become my own: money is not a relation, nor does it necessarily stand for ‘exchange.’ To my informants, though, money does perform this slippage, which in turn has implications for how hybridity might be perceived, and perhaps it is telling that not one person who found themselves in “empty” working positions mentioned their kollektiv, an ideal still central to satisfying working life.

These ideals about labor seem almost Marxian, or perhaps more accurately drawn from Soviet Marxism/LeninismIn Petersburg value is still imagined in terms of general social usefulness, or contributing to something greater than oneself. This is a long standing trope deriving from official Soviet exaltations to work, as in communism, “‘self actualizing’ labor would become ‘life’s prime want’” (Hanson 1997: 203). Doctors and teachers are seen as far more ‘useful’ than factory managers, who “just look after some business”. At the same time, the morality of production extends beyond formal workplaces. One’s participation in the household and claims to membership is done through labor. Activities of circulation, such as Yulia’s second-hand clothing ring, are part of “help,” but also help makes her other labors visible by showing her to be in general a person who conducts her affairs with a view toward contributing to a wide network of people.

It is interesting to note that even people who do “just look after some business” share these ideas about production. Volodia, a 55 year old factory manager who benefited greatly from the
semi-market economy, pointed exclusively to physical outputs of the factory as the main source of satisfaction. My partner, who had been photographing his factory, asked what was beautiful to him. He remarked, “real beauty? I’ll tell you what real beauty is. Real beauty is that pile of fresh timber over there, waiting to be shipped.” Later, he made parallels between the stacks of lumber awaiting shipment and a particularly well-done paint job he completed on a submarine in Soviet days:

“In those days, we had no rights, only the right to work. That was the only thing we had… I worked in the shipyards. One day they ask me to paint a staircase in the submarine. I did it, I used a special color. It was not the color they said it should be, but it looked good. Really beautiful, everybody said so [...] Our submarine was… it is hard to say to you. But I was satisfied on that day.”

Volodia sees a kind of aesthetic in work, the most successful of which results in beauty. He also used to play ice hockey at the national level, and even hockey gets its beauty from work in his view. Volodia shows that the ideal of skilled work of wider social value can be fulfilled unproblematically within a wide range of contexts. He saw a qualitatively similar kind of satisfaction across a strikingly wide ranging working life. Legitimized work can be the context of a profit-making business, as in Katia’s translating for a pharmaceutical company, or remain unaffected by a change in ownership type, as in Alexei’s indifference towards whether his boat was state-owned or privately owned. Volodia’s relation to his timber should have been closer than the one with his submarine—this may be the case but nonetheless a kind of continuity can be discerned. What I saw as a contradiction between Katia’s anti-managerial tirades and the fact that her translating in some way enables “speculation”, if noticed, certainly was no cause for concern.

Work, then, is viewed with the help of a moral sensibility that comes into contact with other sets of relations. The strategies for finding work could not be accurately described as career strategies, where one begins on one rung of a ladder and ends on another. “Help” from the informal economy is coeval with employment. The jars of preserved vegetables and strings of onions grown at the dacha are imagined as different from but nonetheless having the same power to “contribute” as waged labor. This goes some way towards explaining why plans for life after graduation were not really a point of conversation. Many were already engaged in production and circulation of goods through some aspects of the economy, and would continue being its recipients almost until their parents’ death, so to earn waged income did not constitute a definitive initiation into becoming an adult. At the same time, who they were professionally had already been produced by the university course itself. To express a serious attachment to some future improvement beyond what has already been produced would imply ambitiousness. It would be a negation of present labors through trying to gain a position that was not earned.

My emphasis on employees’ indifference to ownership forms should not be taken as an indifference to “privatization” more generally. The owners of the business are apt to have a different perspective on the matter, and effects can be found despite professed indifference (see Ashwin 1999). Other kinds of privatization (housing, for example) can reorganize possibilities of using that resource. See for example Humphrey’s (2002) discussion of the kottedzhi of the new elite.
Wanting to work in a good profession is a good thing, but to call somebody ambitious in Russian is not a compliment. Ambitsionyi (ambitious) implies aspiring to too much, or aspiring to empty status and doing it through means other than labor. “Too much” and non-labor are ontologically connected. Ambitious people get jobs for which they are not qualified by manipulation, working people get jobs they are qualified for through help. This equation rarely falls together this way in practice; much discursive work is undertaken to make it so. When ambitious people fulfill their goals by means of money itself (as in cases of investments and “speculation”) this is simply the end of the scale predicated by more commonplace encounters with money. On the other hand, “helping” a friend or relation is seen positively, but it is not entirely fully legitimate in the sense of Gramsci’s notion of the hegemonic. Discursively, help always stands next to other relations or logics which the helper has merely pushed along.

The way my informants moved through heterogeneous systems had implications for the way in which daily routines are imagined. No one I met expressed concern over balancing employment with other relations; rather, production, circulation, friendships and even aesthetic concerns existed in multiple, often deeply intertwined spheres. Making a living could hardly be said to interfere with ‘private’ life in the sense of household domesticity. ‘Privacy’ does exist in a sense unfamiliar to ‘Western’ tropes of ‘public’ and ‘private’, and has its part to play in this account, but certainly does not emerge as a counterweight to ‘balance’ social relations. Being simply exhausted can be lamented, but being “imbalanced” does not really enter the discourse. This alludes to temporal implications. Saving and spending time is not an act of accountancy in the way the term “balancing” suggests. Saving and spending time are also concepts in the Russian language, but there is a sense in which one can only save time with respect to a particular context, not as a wider balancing act. In formal interviews, the most common examples the group gave of saving time either had to do with the day students helping them avoid unnecessary trips to the university, or else tricks designed to minimize the traipsing around food shops. These feats only shift round the contexts immediately adjacent to them, enabling slightly less exhaustion. These acts of saving time do sound familiar to Western life, but importantly, they do not add up as a matter of durable principle.

The issue of how the process of job seeking occurred in the past suggests some of the practical ideas about how these heterogeneous forms fit together in contemporary life. From the perspective of the present, imagining the ways in which people formed attachments to and engagements with ‘wider society’ could not have been clearer than in the Soviet Union. People were caught up in the system in innumerable ways; as Yurchak (1997) argues ‘the system’ delineated by the state was so unavoidable as to call into question what might constitute a space outside it (a theme I explore in Chapter 3). One could do a great variety of things legitimately by doing it under the auspices of some entity of the state. Even rock bands were rendered as state-sanctioned youth clubs—this was the only way they could stay in existence (Troitsky 1987). The

34 See Boym (1994, 1995) and Chapter 3.
power of formal institution-making was squarely in the hands of the state, cradle-to-grave model of state provisioning legitimized (to varying degrees throughout the socialist period) state control.\textsuperscript{35} Even when the state’s legitimacy was being contested state institutions remained a central factor of social organization. Mapping the ways in which one engaged with power and garnered resources entailed a negotiation with unavoidable state institutions.

The notable absence of any sort of named, formalized infrastructure for moving from education to work speaks to profound changes in perceptions of systematicity. When I spoke with middle-aged people or older, the Soviet cradle to grave model of society was often invoked in talk on the topic of “why throw out the bad with the good?” That is, one important thrown-out “good” of the Soviet system was the fact that it was indeed a system, and while there were irregularities, constraints and numerous failings, the process of finding employment was in principle an understandable and visible one. Institutes and university departments fed relevant establishments or professional unions with the year’s crop. The employer found the employee, and not vice versa. Some older people described their career choice as simply volunteering for what “they” (i.e., the state) needed. There was choice in professions, although some courses were more difficult to get into than others. Nevertheless, the process was \textit{managed} by the state, and understood as a managed phenomenon. This moment in the life cycle served as a key point at which one could imagine oneself acting as part of a social ‘system’. Some of the discourse about former systematicity may be the selective omission of the importance of ways around that system, but it is also the rubric used to throw into relief contemporary job-seeking practices. For those generations, the lack of employment systems was considered a profoundly disorienting loss.

When my informants look across the spectrum of possibilities open to them, there is no system to serve as a referent. There is no hegemony of representation (Yurchak 1997) from which to deviate. No entity has a monopoly on legitimized power, and power tends to be separated from concepts of legitimacy. Arguably, part of what makes the institutions described by Humphrey not seem like institutions (and thus invites talk of “corruption”) is the absence of formal, identifiable organizations which would embody durable practices. The “Wild East” imagery derives part of its wildness from the fact that its institutions do not declare themselves; in this way Russia could not be further from our own audit culture (Strathern 2000). My friends are being asked to recognize and place themselves in a multiplicity of incommensurate but interrelated logics: what is there to choose amongst the devil’s bargains? At least in Soviet times, the choice between professions was clear, if limited.

Yet something interesting has happened. Younger generations, and certainly this group, have developed a different interpretation of the unmanaged nature of employment-seeking. Some read it simply as an aspect of “what is”, that certain actions are outside the sphere of management via formal institutions, and this is one. Others place this change squarely in the rubric of freedom, and speak of the Soviet way of managing the process as constraining. Even people who did not see

\textsuperscript{35} Verdery (1996) has theorized the power of socialist states as largely preventative.
the systemless system of finding jobs as actually enabling possibilities, no one of this generation expressed exasperation at it being incomprehensible. Not knowing where to turn or get advice is not an issue talked about, if an issue at all. Nor do they voice expectations that the state should protect people from their employers. The state provision of recourse against an unfair employer was seen as another great loss by older generations. Vulnerability is certainly a central aspect of participation in the new economy, but the link between personal vulnerability and state protection is less likely to be made in this group. They imagine their immediate bosses as the responsible entity; what is lamentable is the shortage of individuals willing to assume that responsibility for employee’s welfare.

Similarly, Markowitz (2000) emphasizes the freedoms offered by instability in her study of urban teenagers in the mid-1990s. The hyper-pragmatic dispositions of teenagers (who, given the timing of our studies, would be cohorts of the younger members of my group) supports my own observations that instead of reading talk of “our problems” as a source of distress and disorder, young people see a society they must forge over time. As Cushman (1995: 292) has it, “contrary to conventional wisdom, it is not Russia’s younger generation which is the ‘lost’ generation, but rather the old generation.” Indeed, members of my group and their generation expressed to me in various ways that they understood change as the long term result of ploddingly slow microtransformations in everyone’s actions, not some prophetic leader or all powerful “ism”. Work is precisely the rubric under which young people are seeing themselves as building a stake in the order of things. New opportunities in professions seen as socially redeeming are signs that “life has returned”. Moreover, these young people have a medium to long term disposition towards it. They talk about work as the thing that will forge society, steadily and ploddingly. In this sense, the idea that they are responsible for their social future is very much on the tip of their tongues. Interestingly, where they see a field of possible action over the long term is precisely where they draw so many of their ideas from the past—i.e., in the realm of ‘real’ work.

In sum, what is at stake in talking about the formal institutions of job seeking is not just a single institution that would help the process, but rather an entirely different disposition towards what makes a “society” and what makes action count in terms of it. In 2001, this same age group is forced to come into contact with realities outside their control, and is coming to realize just what their parents are lamenting. The double coincidence of their cognizance of their own participation in forging society and the constellation of powers out of their control yields a peculiarly equivocal sense of what it means to be a social being. “Real work” is still sought, even though finding a sponsor or otherwise empty work is more likely. But if we understand that this generation has had a decade to look plainly at the incommensurable logics (in different ways at work in all societies) without the veneer of society as an impeccably built machine with interlocking gears, then perhaps we can understand how their persistence coincides with their equivocation, and how it is that one individual might undertake such a future-oriented action like enrolling in a university course and at
the same time reject the notion of “career planning”. The “suspended judgement” model is not an academic theory for them, but everyday and operational habitus.

**MONEY**

In this section I would like to address the relationship between money and interpretations of social relations. My discussion of interpenetrating multiple logics as a model of ‘society’ does not explain why, on the one hand, the jazz club owner could proclaim that “life has returned”, and in doing so reflect some of the new possibilities open to these six people, and on the other hand discourses that “it’s all about money” are widely performed in a spirit of disdainful disgust. All people come into contact with and use money for a range of relations, and yet it is so powerful a tool for delineating immoral Others. In the previous section I left in the text a slippage which would have been edited away if it were not so revealing: I had referred to trade and exchange as “money relations.” This is a slippage my informants might also have made. In the local view—a view shared by and derivative from long standing Judeo-Christian traditions—money is equated with exchange and that with self-interest and selfish immorality, or at best, amorality.\(^{36}\) This equation Bloch and Parry (1989) explain as a fetishization; in their view authors such as Bohannan (1959) and Taussig (1980) read this equation into money as an object and subsequently attribute to it powers to transform relations that it does not possess. St. Petersburg talk about money to an extent does the same thing, and here it is worth remembering that Russia is very much a part of this Judeo-Christian tradition.\(^ {37}\) Instead of coming up with a less than ‘accurate’ analysis, this view in turn transforms the experience of some sets of social relations. Money is seen as, and therefore becomes, a slippery slope, drawing people into unfavorable situations against their will. From a certain perspective, social life is not at all hybrid, but appears all too clearly to be dominated by money.

Let us recall some aspects of money in the ethnography presented thus far. On the one hand, it is treated as having divisive powers. In Russia generally, money is widely seen as an intoxicant, warping people and society itself (see also Ries 2002, Lemon 1998). We can see this most clearly at work in Katia’s relationship with Zhenia, where its distribution is fraught with problems. Yulia distanced herself from money, lest she become one of the women who “just sits at home.” Money is most destructive if brought into relations of mutual help. It is as if the pyramid scheme, of which many have direct experience, is a metaphor for its very essence: a fallacious beast that forces one to prey upon friends, only to have the whole lot taken at the very end.\(^ {38}\)

---

\(^{36}\) Money as alienating force is a common theme in anthropology, from Bohannan’s (1959) early study of the impact of money on Tiv exchange systems, to the famous gifts and commodities debate, to Marxist accounts of labor relations such as Taussig (1980). An excellent recent coda on the question of money, value and alienation is Gregory’s (1999) *Savage Money*.

\(^{37}\) Ries (2002) presents a similar view of money fetishization in Russia, although here I will draw out aspects of it with reference to St. Petersburg for consistency.

\(^{38}\) Verdery (1996) talks about how the pyramid scheme in Romania had indeed become a local metaphor for postsocialism. In conversations with some middle-aged informants, I found a few cases where their friends’
that it is not possible to earn wealth is both a commentary on the criminality of ruling oligarchs as well as a way of constituting money itself as destructive of the ability to work. David Beckham’s footballing skills are thus seen as “just for show.” Critically, money acts on persons and not organizations. Yulia’s lying was talked about as a direct consequence of her boss’s conscious greed: there could be no room for mitigating circumstances, problems ‘out there in society’, in her account. Alexei’s workplace had changed because the individuals controlling it did, and their respective relation to money. The notion of building into the system good or poor relations through organizational engineering does not hold much sway in this context. The more important question is the way money itself is handled by particular persons.

On the other hand, the people I knew were no ascetics, and did not shun the resources that money enabled. Indeed, many of them had taken up the degree precisely to get more of it. This action did not have the overtones of the seductive powers of money that people use to describe other ways of sourcing it. Money can even be said to be hard-earned if in modest enough amounts. Where one draws the line between earned and unearned money has to be constantly re-negotiated if money itself is seen as making the slope slippery. Yet in another sense, money can be downright good: frugality is performed with the utmost vigor. The elaborate traipsing around shops and market places in order to save money is also a moral labor.39 The fact that money is seen as alienating is no reason to fail to save it. “Having” to save it is one way to ensure that it does not begin to warp persons, yet the people I knew neither “had” to save it, nor were they in any danger of becoming warped by vast sums of it.

As many anthropologists have observed, money does not always serve as the absolute, abstract scale for measuring value described by Simmel (1978) (Bloch and Parry (eds) 1989, Carsten 1989, Zelitzer 1994, Hart 1986, 2000). Above I had mentioned that potatoes from the dacha and a wide-screen television sit together uncomfortably in Katia’s house, reflecting different circuits of value. The tension emerges, though, because of the interpersonal politics at stake, not necessarily because of the gap in monetary value between potatoes and televisions. Before Katia had met Zhenia, her family had spent $70 on a spring jacket for her and her sister. Combined, the family earned $200 a month, and $70 seemed to me an impossible price for them to pay. Katia explained that her family grows their own potatoes, and therefore has less expenses and so can afford things that the household income would seem to disallow. The next day I returned to her house: “Katia, you know you have to grow over 300 kilos of potatoes in order to pay for that jacket.” She and her mother laughed hysterically at my literalness. “No, you don’t understand. We make our own jam, too.” The foodstuffs and the jacket were seen as commensurable in some way, as one had ‘purchased’ the other. But the commensurability happens in a strange way. Needless to say, one for one swaps of jam jars with market prices does not work—my attempt at such an analysis was laughed at.

involvement in pyramid schemes had indeed severed long-term relations by forcing the participant to ask friends for money they do not have.
I think (although cannot prove conclusively) that in this instance the jacket could be bought because both contributing factors—domestic produce and wages—were the result of labor. We might even understand the relationship between potatoes and jackets by way of reverse engineering Zelitzer’s (1994) influential notion of ‘earmarking’ money. A heterogeneous grouping of efforts (growing and both parent’s waged labor) done by multiple persons (both parents plus grandmother’s gardening) can be said to produce a jacket in the absence of monetary calculation, leaving calculated money ‘earmarked’ for other (im)moral purposes. Katia later told me that “it all adds up”, but both she and her mother found actually doing the sums a laughable activity. In this sense, Katia’s household follows closely Judeo-Christian traditions that eschew calculation as an indication of self-interestedness (Parry 1986: 458). In this case, Others are imagined to calculate money, having been “warped” by it.

The profound sense of alienation many people attribute to money and the way it compels people offers a good rationale for trying to avoid it. But it is neither accurate nor terribly sympathetic to simply say that locals feel alienated by money (or, in the past, the state) and therefore stick their heads in the sand. Despite the over familiar trope of money as the root of all evil, and a multitude of ethnographic accounts of money intertwined with alienation in many societies otherwise disempowered groups find creative ways of appropriating meanings of money. As Gregory reminds us, “people create multiple value systems for themselves and are constantly switching between them according to the dictates of the moment” (1999: 8). Stewart’s Gypsies, for example, use money encounters to thumb their noses at the way in which non-gypsies marginalize them (Stewart 1997). Pine’s Gorale (2002) demonstrate a sophistication towards cash that reflects both a sense of empowerment as well as experiences of encapsulation, and Carsten’s (1989) Malaysians make a gendered conversion of alienated money into money for social reproduction. While one might detect a degree of appropriation in terms of how Russians earmark different currencies for certain purposes and symbolic values (Lemon 1998), equally one might detect a degree of equivocation amongst these monetary forms, whether it be Zhenia’s self mocking that he has become a byk or Lemon’s informant’s remark that with the national obsession with dollars “we are all becoming Gypsies” (Lemon 1998: 49).

‘Real’ work has some ontological distance from money, and we saw how group members go to great lengths to keep them separate. Nevertheless, doing something for ‘just’ money also informs the way in which people can make sense of social action, and in this sense demarcates a social field otherwise ‘hybrid’. In the local view, money makes visible one kind of location, and conflates otherwise different activities, from trading ice cream on the street, to wholesaling, to hiding in the office while forcing your secretary to lie to customers. The ‘plodding

---

39 Miller (1998) makes this point in relation to shopping in the UK.
40 Following critiques of Marx and Simmel’s approaches to money as inherently alienating or abstracting, such as Bloch and Parry’s (1989), Zelitzer shows how people’s setting aside funds for either particular purposes or in a particular physical form introduces a qualitative embeddedness of money into social life.
microtransformation’ model of change would be even more empowering, in fact downright happy clappy, if it did not constantly clash with constructions of money. Money seems to draw people into relations that are exploitative, but when combined with contemporary acts of excluding money from better relations the effect can be to make money seem to have this generalized warping power. It appears as a system of power more than a system of economics. It makes a suspiciously regular appearance across these disparate but nonetheless problematic relations. This regularity is the crux of the matter.

The seeming persistence of ‘empty’ money has its own effects. Money does not have to really be connected to ‘empty’ relations all the time to give the appearance of regularity. For instance, all my informants would recognize that money does not automatically spoil relations between mother and daughter if the mother gives the daughter a few rubles to go out for the evening. Yet the slippery slope where money becomes “too much,” “corrupting” can be projected across society. So, when the state took over NTV, the last remaining non-state television channel, both the state and the journalists fighting the takeover were seen as lacking credibility because they both had access to large sums of money, which then was reason to believe that the dispute must be all about money. The connection between money and resources becomes embodied in the elite, whose very humanity is in constant question. Money makes resources visible, and in this sense makes enough institutions of ‘society’ visible to make it seem as if it is society.

The tension between the perception of being constantly at the mercy of other’s greed and the necessity of money for survival (along with satiating one’s own desires for the “solid ordinary comforts of Northern Europe”) is renegotiated daily. Because money warps persons and not institutions, and because people are, well, everywhere, another image of ‘society’ emerges. This image entails positing a kind of monetized entropy, where increased acquisitiveness at the top forces those further down the chain to squeeze their own subordinates out of their last dollar for their own survival. The entropy is imagined as a crude, almost animalistic force, showing persons in their most uncultured state. During my stay a television show, “Boi Bez Pravil” (Fighting Without Rules) was constantly on the airwaves. Russian reality television does tend to show high levels of violence usually thinly veiled as reportage of the criminal underworld. But “Boi Bez Prazil” was somehow less seedy in presenting itself as two men duking it out, fair and square. Only one of my informants stated directly how she watches this program as if it were her and her boss in the arena. It was satisfying to her, almost relaxing, to come home to watch her situation metaphorically rectified. This was just one person, but I do not think it is too much of a stretch to suggest that laments about “it’s all about money” are related to the idea of having been drawn into an economic slugging match, and that the way elites are talked about as having nothing to do with

41 Again, the list of anthropologists who have made this point is long. Accounts which have informed this particular study are Zelitzer (1994) and Hart (2000).
42 Similar tropes come out in other ways. Another example would be my neighbor, who informed me that the her children’s schoolmates were often violent because “their parents told them that in order to get what you
“us” is a way of suggesting that the most unpleasant matches are at the top, where the entropy ‘completes’ its journey.

With the forcible removal of the hegemonic form of Soviet formal organizations it seemed like postsocialism was doomed to an extended problematic absence of ‘society,’ not just to Western political scientists looking to capitalist futures, but also to locals experiencing money as a profoundly problematic way of connecting people. Institutions shaped into being through money, as the most explicitly visible social constructs, approach mechanistic images of society, and approximate what ‘society’ would be if only Russia actually had. Within this approach we must make some distinctions. From the point of view of, say, foreign development agencies, money’s capacity to approximate ‘social structure’ is to be encouraged in the hope that eventually structures would then approximate the rule of law holy grail. Given the extent of dialogic hybridity involved in everyday life, it seems to me that the notion that regularities in social groupings where money accumulates would, given enough time and stability, somehow become principle of action for everyone and discernable from some panoptical perspective is deeply ethnocentric. On the other hand, local ideas about “rule of law” are in turn related to a set of ethical concerns involving what it means to live “normally” (see Humphrey 2000). These echo the moralities of skill and social engagement espoused by my informants. Humphrey regards entrepreneurs’ talk of rule of law as dream-like but nevertheless a critical recognition of the confluence of economy and power, and a potential site of political struggle. We might take from this simply that ideals of “rule of law”, dystopian visions of entropy through money, and the more cautious but fundamentally optimistic ideal of microtransformations forging new relations en masse are all situationally-relevant fantasies. In their different ways, they all reflect a certain flexibility in social fields particular to postsocialism.

CONCLUSION

If my informants do not rely on mechanistic ‘society’ in imagining their social worlds, then they are keenly sensitive to the persistence of money and the way in which it seems to group together incipient institutions. Its regularity enables yawn-worthy expectations of the plot. The NTV takeover by state-owned Gazprom was not seen as saintly independent media beaten up by big, bad authoritarian Putin, as reported in the Western media. Instead, it was a bore: childish greed had predictably overcome the wealthy on both sides of the table, and as an afterthought perhaps less interesting news will be shown on the TV. The predictability could all too easily have happened in Zinov’ev’s Ibansk, an imaginary town of spectacular Brezhenevite banal predictability. If St. Petersburg has yet to reach the yawning heights, it certainly has made it to the foothills through the everyday persistence of money.

want you must hit others.” Her emphasis on parents suggested to me that she was in fact talking about adult relations.
The perceived predictability, or perhaps inevitability, of ‘money relations’ would make “doing nothing” appear as political anomie. Why attach oneself to economic life if it is only destined to draw a person into an amoral, animalistic state? “Doing nothing” could be one way of denying engagement in these relations, and setting a life of apartness from these Others. Petersburg social life in many ways works to mitigate against this logic, however, as what may appear as “nothing” in one context might in fact be quite central to the next. Part of “doing nothing” is in fact about producing moral persons who in turn engage in economic life, and help along opportunities for deploying skill—a notion still not given up on. Getting along in St. Petersburg without “doing nothing” is impossible because the people with whom you do nothing are often the ones willing to push along some other relations, which, of course, would have gone in your favor if they were not artificially held back by some formality or ‘crude’ interests of others.

Putting the networking aspect of “doing nothing” in the center of the analysis makes it seem as if interpersonal relations were simply the grease between the wheels of ‘society’. This metaphor is not the most appropriate one for St. Petersburg for two reasons. The first is ethnographic, in that my informants insisted that the importance of relations built in “doing nothing” superceded their usefulness in garnering resources, and that they had value in and of themselves. This can be corroborated with historical work that suggests that the formulation is less a cover-up for Machiavellian intentions and has more to do with local ideas about personhood (see Chapters 3 and 4). The second reason is more polemical and theoretical. Carol Greenhouse writes, “classically, social anthropology—indeed, modern social science in general—makes ‘social structure’ the template for agency” (2002:21). She goes on to comment that individuals tend to be associated with agency, or—to extend the present metaphor—act as the ‘grease’ that keeps things in motion and every now and again causes slippages and breakage between the ‘wheels’ of social structure. The relationship between structure and agency, and the relative weight of the constituent components, has been a long standing matter of debate. One could trace the issue at least back to Leach’s ideas (1954) about the pliability of political systems, and find it again in scholarship following on from Bourdieu’s ideas about social capital. Greenhouse (2002) finds that these categories falter when applied to situations of radical social change, noting that they are also part of the fictions with which ‘we’ are called upon to imagine the reality of stable institutions that exist only in the imagination. Postsocialist St. Petersburg poses further challenges to our ideas (and ‘theirs’ too) about what might constitute a social field, structure, agency and so forth because in a sense the city can no longer contribute to ethnographies of radical change. The radically ‘liminal’ period when life was really turned upside down people say took place in late perestroika, and there still has not been successfully hegemonic assertion of systematicity.

The model of hybridity suggested by Yurchak (2001) suggests a social milieu where heterogeneous social forms are situated in dialogue with one another, making the grease (as it were) impossible. In the paper where he introduces this concept of hybridity (2001), his examples do correlate to one another as a dialogue of sorts. One situation contextualizes the other: the value of a
car entrepreneurs imported is constituted by both the state and the suppliers, potentially mutually incompatible institutions. This could also be seen at work in the example I offered above, where police are dependent on the official law in order to collect unofficial fees from motorists. Even though the ‘actual’ value of the car changes if one were to attempt to view it from both the perspective of the state and the supplier at once, there would be no value at all if the entrepreneur were not able to bring the car in contact with both forms of knowledge. This suggests that the entrepreneur has not gone from structure to structure forearmed with a car whose value subsequently changes as each structure puts its stamp on it. Instead of an evolutionary sequence, where ‘structures’ evolve by the actions of the people that engage with them, hybridity suggests a kind of simultaneity where each ‘wheel’ casts a different light on the other. These regularities in knowledge (officialized-public and personalized-public spheres as Yurchak has it) are not tied to any fixed and separate social grouping, through which an entrepreneur (the ‘grease’ in this case) might pass. The entrepreneur shepherds the agents around him across spheres. Perhaps this latter point helps us to see how many of the choices facing the group of students could be seen as ‘hybrid’. For example, when work is construed as contributing to ‘wider’ society as a moral good in the context of a private enterprise, the enterprise makes that labor possible, and at the same time that labor also becomes moral by some imagined relationship outside the enterprise.

Hybridity on its own, then, would suggest more of a neural network than a mechanistic image. However, the range of possibilities open to individuals (particularly this well-positioned group) invites another layer of complexity. There are multiple games going on at once here, not all of which are commensurable with one another. Perhaps the pervasiveness of hybrid relations forces the question of what kind of regularities one is likely to find in Russia. On the one hand, institutions (in the sense of regularities endowing some resource) can be found: even the ‘Mafia’ relies on a set of practices and knowledge that did not simply spring up after 1991 Humphrey (2002). Formal institutions, too, are called upon to act as whole institutions sometimes and do not always act in hybrid ways. A company can place an order with suppliers as a company, for example, or a theater can take actions to increase its prestige, or the prosecutors’ office can wage unofficial bureaucratic war against the police. The managers of the capitalist firms I formerly worked with in the US went to great lengths to ensure that the company exclusively did exactly what it said on the tin: any other activity was usually scrapped in the name of efficiency. These students, however, seem to assume that myriad redirections and partial redeployments are possible in any institution, and that while institutions could act as ‘real’ entities, equally their fictional qualities could be revealed. Sometimes these institutions were seen as corporate wholes, and sometimes criss-crossed by interpenetrating ‘parts.’ As Ssorin-Chaikov (2000) shows (albeit for somewhat different circumstances), what constitutes barter or trade in one moment could count as a gift in the next, even amongst the same group of actors. Equally we could see a similar pliability in the way the artifacts in Katia’s house were accounted for. In this light, perhaps it is possible to suggest that the heterogeneity in postsocialist relations runs deep, not because of instability but
because of a multiplicity of forms of interrelatedness. For this student group, it seems that in addition to finding themselves caught in one logic contextualizing another, these logics are not always compatible. Their predicaments seemed to be more unsettling than selectively choosing what is a formality and what is meaningful—a disquiet that places further doubt on whether contemporary institutions will simply coalesce into one coherent form or another with time and stability.

Within this complexity, there are also techniques to getting along in it that go beyond reactive and defensive strategies. I might cite Yurchak’s examples of entrepreneurial governmentality—practical techniques of setting up procedures for transferring money and knowledge between contexts—as one. To this we might add Ries’ (1997, 2002) Boym’s (1994) and Humphrey’s (2000) studies of discourse which, in their different ways, all show how discourse is a vital way of hanging together complex pieces of the puzzle and formulating social possibilities. I hope to show that uses of time similarly constitute practical techniques for re-orienting one’s social field, although I suspect there is much more work to do along these lines beyond a single enquiry into time. The theme has got to be unavoidable for the simple fact that more than a decade after the fall of state socialism, there still are no good answers to Verdery’s (1996) question of what comes next. It does make sense to treat, as Verdery does, socialism (and capitalism for that matter) as a way of assembling relations with its own set of tendencies knowing that they are contingent on local specificities. But claims over the kind of social system we might expect in Russia have not been made as they were in 1917. Postsocialist relations do not have any tendencies other than an absence of tendencies, and yet even in this situation my informants found it useful to sometimes deny any ‘significant’ activity whatsoever, which to me suggests a practical awareness that some actions ‘count’ in different ways than others—a distinction that would not be possible in a completely chaotic free-for-all. Indeed, the days surrounding the August 1991 coup were described to me as a time when it was impossible to make even this distinction. In order to begin this argument, though, I must explore how Russian personhood has been thought of historically. This scholarship has, in my view, revealed interesting points of equivocation in how academics imagine social fields, which in turn gets us some way towards understanding why ‘denials’ of action are locally sensible.
CHAPTER 3: PERSONHOOD AND SOCIALITY

Professor: Society hopes to raise you up to a human level.
Prisypkin: To hell with you and your society! I didn’t ask you to res resurrect me. Freeze me up again! So there!!!
Professor: I don’t understand what you’re talking about! Our life belongs to the collective, and neither I nor anybody else can make this life…
Prisypkin: But what sort of a life is it when you can’t even pin up a photo of your best girl on the wall? All the thumbtacks break on the damned glass…
Comrade Professor, give me a shot for the morning after.
Professor: (fills a glass): Just don’t breathe in my direction.  

--From Mayakovsky’s The Bedbug

In the previous chapter I argued that everyday experiences of postsocialism are characterized by multiple conflicting yet interpenetrating logics which inform everyday choices about economic survival. I also suggested that my informants have developed some practical sense to more or less engage with a wide range of them, and that they possessed a feel for multiple games simultaneously. Yet, another layer of ‘sense’ also emerges from this everyday experience: a kind of working model of what it all adds up to, of what being a social person in a society entails. I had also suggested that persons, rather than abstract structures or systems of power, play a much larger role in indigenous social theories than ‘Western’ models might anticipate. In this chapter I pursue further how individuals come to feature in everyday working models of society. This is a crucial aspect of “doing nothing” because the one thing “doing nothing” does produce over the long term is ideas about personhood. Indeed, a central claim of this thesis is that time is integral to personhood, and therefore constructs of time have the capacity to alter the very notions of what sociality entails. Here I explore the ways in which ideas about personhood relate to collectivities. However contingent on and meaningful for the present, they make use of constructs that reach much further back in history. Indeed, Kharhordin’s work (1999) reveals remarkable consistencies in certain qualities of sociality throughout some equally astounding changes of the previous century. Here I argue that what he calls “the collective individual” is the historically constructed apparatus which makes acts of “doing nothing” sensible in contemporary hybrid relations. Following Yurchak (2003), I do agree that there are analytic as well as political problems with how Kharkhordin characterizes this phenomenon for the late socialist period. I do not pretend to simply be able to solve them; instead I hope that one of the analytic tasks my device of “doing nothing” could serve is to provide a new angle from which to triangulate the problem.

Perhaps, though, the fact that personhood is at stake is more than just the result of historical precedent. As Mertz (2002) argues, in situations of profound instability and uncertainty, “we see anthropology pressed to its core, as the women and men who perform the ethnography find themselves asking not only about the role of their own concepts and cultures in their research, but side-by-side with their subjects, digging down to examine the very constitution of selves, agency and society as it occurs from minute to minute in action and interaction” (359). But this is to raise the question of what certainty is: as Mertz and others in that volume point out, there is a danger in normalizing “stable” systems, and then lumping uncertainty together with events that “fit poorly with models of progressive rationalization or order in society” (360). Self does not emerge from instability, rather, the everyday uncertainties of the constant re-rendering of it simply make its wider relevance more easily noticed. Postsocialist studies are often framed as studies of life under extraordinary uncertainty, but Mertz’s paper suggests that in a sense these kinds of situations merely bring to the fore everyday unpredictabilities. I would argue that this is especially true for Russia, where regularities incoherent to the ‘progressive rationalization’ model have been developing for over a decade. But here as well, theoretical ideas both intertwine and remain separate from actual lived dispositions. As I discussed in the previous chapter, the very image of the systematicity of Soviet society, and former engagements with that assumed systematicity (such as commencing employment), is used by many people to show up the incoherence of current economic relations. This kind of talk also fits uncomfortably with capitalist models of progressive rationalization. As Buck-Morss shows (2000), both “progress” and “rationalization” feature heavily in Soviet state discourse about itself, in dialogue with industrial capitalism and yet, with brutal irony, ideas about rational systematicity in the postsocialist context are either related to discourse of the past or a highly nebulous, dreamy talk of “rule of law”.

The kinds of ideas about personhood in the material that follows, then, cannot be seen as outcomes of or reactions to instability, but part of the project of constituting society itself, where ‘society’ is assumed to be always partial, summoning connections here and there. By configuring ‘the person’ in everyday contexts in a particular way, ordinary people also come to understand what it means to get on with life in a social world so deeply contingent on having the ability to shape the present. These everyday constructs of personhood are both more contingent, ad-hoc, catch-as-catch-can than formally institutionalized power as well as more enduring. If we view stability and its visible structures as the deviation from the norm rather than the situation from which to deviate, then this is not so surprising.

There are parallels, too, with the other visions of society that draw on the symbolism of money (see previous chapter). Contextually feigned oblivion to the pseudo-official world of ‘money relations’ simply echoes too strongly Soviet-era feigned oblivion to officialdom for contemporary and past ideas about social engagement simply to be coincidence. Personhood,

I recognize that selfhood and personhood are two different but related ideas. While this chapter is about personhood in the sense of the cultural ideas about how one recognizes another entity as human, equally
according to Khakhordin, was historically constructed out of practices of ‘dissimulating’ self from one kind of society and implicitly making another kind of society in doing so. This analysis relies on Western ideas about systems of power. But the fact that the slippage has some plausibility in a postsocialist version is revealing. The kinds of relationships forged in the very act of (seeming to) feign oblivion to ‘money relations’ do indeed evoke Soviet-era sociality and ideas about self in relation to collectivities. This suggest that the parallels are more rich than a simple inert holdover from socialist-era ideological oppositions between empty commerce and meaningful labor.

Yet far from solving the problem of the historical origins of contemporary personhood, it simply presents a further problem. On one hand, extended practices of jumping through and reconfiguring contexts would require an extremely flexible and constantly reworked idea of the self. This flexibility can be traced ethnographically in different forms from late socialism (and perhaps earlier) to today. Pesmen’s work (2000), for example, shows how the interiority of selves, ambiguous ‘depths’ of soul and its subsequent revelation indeed has retained its significant long after Soviet forms of hegemonic public discourse had gone. Yurchak’s (2001) work on entrepreneurs suggests that Soviet skills of being able to present different versions of the same thing in different situations is critical in contemporary entrepreneurship, and yet entrepreneurs do not think of themselves as having split personalities. On the other hand, all the elements that this word “dissimulation” imports into the situation: pretense, split personalities, hidden and official transcripts, etc. are entirely inappropriate. Money acts as an artifact that makes visible a wide range of economic relations, and does provide fuel with which to imagine one kind of ‘society,’ but these relations are not seen as an entirely ‘official’ world to which one must be seen to adhere. Money does not carry the self-legitimating power it did in Weber’s account of the Protestant work ethic (1985), nor is it hegemonic as certain language forms were in the late socialist era (Yurchak 2003, see also below). This problem compels us to look closely at what exactly these constructs of personhood and ‘collective’ sociality are.

INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE IN THE SOVIET ERA

Oleg Kharkhordin argues that the strategies and practices people use in developing dispositions about their own sociality have their origins in practices of collectivization by the Soviet state. What is most relevant to the contemporary practices I witnessed is the configuration of this phenomenon during the late Soviet period, but it is interesting to note that Kharkhordin convincingly found antecedents prior to Bolshevik life. Church and monastic practices had particular ways of constituting the self, and these were not lost on the young state searching for means of arousing socialist consciousness. What were these practices of collectivization? In

---

In this section I rely almost exclusively on Kharkhordin’s (1999) work. To avoid tediousness, I explicitly cite only page numbers of direct quotes.
general, the techniques revolved around building individuals from collectives, and collectives from individuals. Recall from Chapter 2 that the *kollektiv* is a small circle of peers, all of whom have face-to-face knowledge of one another, which is brought into existence to perform some work. The *kollektiv* itself is a product of social experiments devised by Makarenko in the 1920s, and was intended as a technology of building socialist consciousness in accordance with Marxist-Leninist principles. The word *kollektiv* is still in circulation today, stripped of explicit reference to its original socialist meaning.

Exactly how *kollektivi* were supposed to build socialism has direct consequences for selfhood. *Kollektivi* were made through interpenetrating practices of subjectifying and objectifying. In the Stalin period, the state obliged its citizens to reveal themselves to the group, conceived of as a *kollektiv*. In revealing the self, one submits oneself to the group as an object of knowledge. Revelation meant showing one’s inner consciousness through deeds, but the revelation only became meaningful through the judgment of one’s peers. In this way one was an object of surveillance, but concurrently, one had to actively build an internal consciousness through a variety of self-fashioning techniques in order to have something to reveal. Subjectivity had to be produced, as socialist consciousness was not considered an *a priori* core, as in Euro-American notions of ‘finding oneself’. It had to be developed deliberately; practices generated knowledge, which in turn revealed the ‘real’ inner self (albeit newly invented). Self-study programs were central to this process, and were intended to enable a person correct himself by imagining an outside accuser pointing out faults to correct. The success of self-study in turn was monitored by rituals of progress-checking and character assessment. Kharkhordin identifies how the central logic of these monitoring rituals was transmuted straight through all organs of society: schools, workplaces, the army, and prisons.

The inner workings of the *kollektiv* were central pedagogical concerns, and the relative success of the *kollektiv* as a building block for society had the effect of making the individual a central aspect of sociality. Indeed, Kharkhordin observes that the word we might approximate as “individual” or “personality” (*lichnost’*) only appeared for vast portions of the population in Stalin’s time. This particularly collective sociality of the individual also means that we must at once rubbish our expectations about public and private spheres. It is commonplace to argue that ‘the private’ is historically constructed, but in this particular context before ‘the private’ even came in to existence in a way we might recognize, vast tracts of ideas about interiority were thought of as self-conscious acts of developing the self in relation to ‘wider’ social forms. What was inside a person was built by that person with the express purpose of revealing it to the group. The ‘wider’ group was also not *a priori*, but fashioned through individual selves. Through this mutual fashioning, even wider social forms, such as the state or the nation, could be imagined as just a matter of scale, not of increasing abstraction but of widening participation. In this way, interiority here stands in relation to selves, which in my view to this day remains the primary locus of Russian analogues to the private (to the extent they exist) and not the household (see also Pesmen 2000, Boym 1995).
What is revealed in practices of collective individuality is what lurks within the soul (dusha), not the relations one has inside the house. It is only much later that interiority takes on overtones of ‘privacy’. Interiority itself was both developed and exposed by the kollektiv. The constructedness of individuality is part of the experience of making that individuality (self-fashioning) for this period.

Mutual surveillance practices had been demonized in Sovietology work as state control through ‘atomization’ of the population. It is true that these practices of mutual surveillance set the conditions for the horrors of the purges by making it all the more imperative to inform on one another. But in my view (a view implicit in Kharkhordin’s work) it would be unfair to judge the interdependence of individual and collective by the purges alone. The collective individual has antecedents before the purges, and survived well after them. To see it in terms of its most violent moment in history would prevent us from seeing the often positive relationships that are built through it, or why, in the current moment when it could so easily have been cast aside like an old telephone book, it has become more meaningful than ever. As Kharkhordin himself argues, talk of the individual has become ever more enthusiastic in life after perestroika, while discourse of ‘capitalism’ and ‘the market’ have waned. When one sees that the ‘individual’ his informants have in mind is not at all a capitalist import, this simultaneous discursive presence and absence makes sense. I wish to expand on the post-perestroika manifestation of the individual/collective dynamic, but in order to do this I must return to his historical work to examine how ‘the private’ as something separate from the structures that invented it became part of this mix. It is through these analogues of ‘the private’ that the debate on the relation between personhood and its deeper connections with increasingly fractured constructs of ‘society’ can take place.

Kharkhordin argues that after the Stalin period, practices of collective individuation, self-criticism, and self-fashioning became ritualized. By “ritualized” he means they were emptied of real consequence, and that the main thing was to perform the appropriate form at the appropriate time at state rituals. Particularly in schools and workplaces, the emphasis shifted from the rooting out of enemies within the kollektiv to evaluating and revealing individual merits and faults. Even “people’s patrols”, originally developed to fight street hooliganism, by 1985 “stroll[ed] brightly lit alleys in demonstration of their loyalty to the absurd demands of the aging saintly regime, rather than expressing any real zeal for fighting petty hooliganism…” (p. 301). ‘Ritualization’ was concurrent with Khrushchev’s “socialist self-government” drive of the early 1960, which sought to introduce official kollektivs across prisons, the army, schools and workplaces with consistency, and thus end the chaotic terror of the Stalin years through discipline.

Kharkhordin argues that the extent and scope of post-Stalin rigidities provided less space for individual liberties than there was during the height of the purges. Early rigidities were far more

46 The notion of the “Russian soul”, that is, a nationalized construct of the soul, is much older than the Soviet era collectivization drives, and still is locally talked about as evidence of timelessness of Russian life. What arguably was new about Soviet interpretations of the soul was that for the first time the soul was the object of explicit manipulation through everyday practices of self-improvement.
47 A good recent critique is Hellbeck (2000).
physically brutal, but also less consistent in application of rules across the population. It would be hard to see this more consistent if less violent form of oppression outside the context of what Vera Dunham calls the “big deal” of post-war Stalinism (1990). In this period the state made concessions to the population’s war weariness by making less demands on the ideological front. Kharhordin (p. 275) cites Dunham’s examples of 1950s middle-brow fiction, where the excessively zealous party member finds his zeal unrewarded. Thus, just before demands for formalized, mechanized performances of allegiance to state socialism were widened, a notable qualitative transformation in the kind of enthusiasm required took place. Too much enthusiasm could also endanger the kollektiv and production by unnecessarily making waves.

Instead of constantly renegotiating the complexities of demonstrating too much or too little socialist zeal, the majority simply stopped practicing potentially suspect behavior in public. This turn had the consequence of developing a politics of closures—a retracting of suspect behavior—in formal contexts and cautions openings in informal contexts. Boym (1995) writes “[the intelligentsia] rewrote the official “collective” as an unofficial association of friends, a rather casual community of transient soul mates who had their most important conversations in the small, overcrowded kitchens of a few noncommunal apartments” (148). Similarly, Kharkhordin’s “dissimulation” describes the practice of feigning adherence in the visible world while creating collectivities and individualities in parallel invisible spheres. In turn,

“new means of self-fashioning also developed, characteristic only of this informal sphere. The first development was the spread of individual dissimulation, the practice of protecting the individual from any interference, which resulted in the creation of a secret sphere of intimate life, available to the gaze of the closest friend or family members but sometimes kept secret even from them. This proliferation of secret, intimate spheres, created and controlled only by the individual, prepared the way to the easy public assertion of the value of privacy after 1991” (p. 358).

In order to demonstrate how ‘public’ and ‘private’ action are very much two sides of the same coin, Kharhordin notes some interesting slippages between rituals of collective individuation in the official sphere and informal variants. Birthday parties, for example, feature heavily on the social calendar. The ritual of toasting is a practice that circulates knowledge of oneself from peers to the individual, echoing in form Stalin-era mutual surveillance. One by one, guests make sometimes elaborate evaluations of the birthday celebrant’s character. Also, the ground which had been laid for self-fashioning formed the basis upon which to forge new cultural techniques outside of state rituals. Horoscopes and self-help books were proliferating as new ways of reinventing the self as meaning was being piled into the ‘unofficial sphere.’

Kharkhordin cautions us against viewing the Soviet public sphere as encroaching on a pre-given private sphere, which in turn must be protected. Instead, as he shows through a Foucauldian historical analysis, ‘the private’ came into being by a particular configuration of ‘the public’ in the late Stalinist period, indeed brought into being and largely sustained itself through practices of
mutual surveillance that interpenetrated *both* public and private life. The individual became an entity first through public rituals of personal evaluation as well as the invention dissemination of technologies of self-fashioning. As these rituals became emptied of meaning and consequence, informal ways of forming and monitoring the individual became increasingly important. “Dissimulation, therefore, would appear not as a derivative of a split between public and private in Soviet Russia, but as a central practice constitutive of this split” (270). “Privacy”, in this reading must be a double privacy, first in the building the sense of interiority that may or may not be revealed, as well as making unofficial contexts for that revelation.

Yurchak (1997) makes the crucial point that in order to be a successful participant in socialist life, it was necessary to misrecognize the very act of pretending. It is not necessary to see one’s official participation as fully genuine, but to acknowledge the pretense itself in any consistent way would mean an engagement with that official world; it would be an act of taking the whole thing seriously, which would defeat the point. He gives the apt example of a komsomol meeting, where the participants read books, play cards, and have a chat with acquaintances. If it appears they must vote on something they simply unthinkingly raise their hand: all votes turn out to be unanimous. Yurchak’s informants regularly conducted their own, affairs while otherwise attending some official function—drunken sociability, for example, took place concurrent with otherwise somber May Day parades. The *anekdot* (joke), a genre of Russian oral tradition that proliferated during the Soviet period (see Krylova 1999), Yurchak argues was a means of partly acknowledging the pretense. The telling of jokes, literally reeling them out, was part of building intimacy of the informal world. Indeed, in Markowitz’s (1991) work, Soviet immigrants to America and Israel cite anecdote-telling as the central embodiment of intimacy.

Crucially, what Yurchak calls the pretense of misrecognition—that is, feigning obliviousness to the empty, false nature of official events—was necessary because the system itself was seen as immutable. “The logic of the late socialist realm of ridicule was not in resisting, exposing or ridiculing the officially imposed representation of reality, but rather in adapting to it while suspending belief” (1997:181). Where the Soviets failed in building a party-centered consciousness it succeeded in creating what Yurchak calls a “hegemony of representation”. That is, there was a “symbolic order of tightly interconnected signifiers that were exclusively state controlled and permeated most aspects of everyday life in the official sphere” (166). The literal message became meaningless, and “instead it became a signifier of immutability” itself (167). Thus attempting to expose official lies with any consistency—as dissidents were calling for—was just as inconceivable as actually believing it. In Russia, “the ‘domestication’ of power by this subject entailed not its humorous subversion, but rather its transformation into a trivial backdrop of the seemingly more meaningful parallel event” (Yurchak 1997:164).

Yurchak explicitly argues against using a dichotomy of official culture and counterculture, as the critical task in this period was to conduct a “normal” life despite the system, not to counter it. Both *aktivisti* and dissidents were equally suspect because both conducted an active engagement
with the system. Developing “private space” was for ordinary people a fleeting pleasure of making moments away from the language of officialdom; “privacy” often entailed simply enjoying camaraderie with a small circle of trusted friends, only sometimes overlapping with nuclear families (Boym 1994). The collective capacity to increase one’s involvement in the parallel sphere while maintaining a stake in the official one grew in late socialism as strategies for doing so became more numerous and sophisticated, eventually putting the system itself under strain through sheer scale of non-participation.

It seems that non-involvement was seen at least partly reciprocal agreement: the famous phrase “mi delali vid, chto mi rabotaem, a oni delali vid, chto oni platiat” (we pretended to work, and they pretended to pay us) invokes a kind of social contract in reverse. If there was a mutual turning of backs, it could not have been with much consistency. Yurchak’s (2003) informants, for example, spoke with real pride in the actual work of the komsomol in much the same way as my own informants, both middle aged and of younger generations, speak of professional skill as a kind of moral social participation. Works by Humphrey (1983, 1998) and Kotkin (1995) show the seriousness with which a range of socialist values were, and still are, taken. Dissimulation implies that ordinary people located the ‘really real’ exclusively in interiorities of the ‘unofficial world.’ It could not have been the case that all engagements with the official world were a pretense, however well misrecognized. To take a more concrete example, blat, the Soviet practice whereby individuals would circulate favors in circles of long-term reciprocity, could not exist if the ‘official world’ were successfully rendered meaningless. The favors circulated, such as getting children into good schools or helping to secure a decent flat, exist because of the supposedly meaningless official sphere. Blat and the related ‘second economy’ are so often cited as the undoing of a system, where in fact it mobilized and made meaningful the social artifacts that system created. The problem is that this phenomenon appears so similar to dissimulation, and yet maintained itself in a context where people made investments in ‘the system’ that went far beyond instrumental garnering of resources.

Part of the problem is language. Yurchak has been central in mounting criticism against importing Western concepts of resistance to Russia, and yet even he in his anekdot article (1997) uses language such as “official sphere” and “informal sphere” in the act of arguing against the use of the word “counterculture” (although in a later talk (2003) he drops these terms altogether). Kharkhordin is less equivocal, speaking of official and unofficial worlds, even though he takes seriously the ‘structuring structures’ of the state and how it in turn generated knowledge and practices invented outside of the state’s direct grasp. The state’s hegemony of representation, achieved through a politics of form (Yurchak 2003), further contributes to the appearance of there being two social worlds, one official one unofficial, split off from one another, as if the intimacies of kitchen table talk was successfully delineated as a kind of counterweight. While one can trace irrefutable evidence that many stakes in the system were not simply pretense, with equal vigor one can find evidence that Svetlana Boym was not alone in imagining small circles of friends meeting
in kitchens as alternative kollektivs existing in a kind of symbiotic alterity. Something *like* dissimulation must have been at least imaginable in that context if, by *perestroika*, radical artists, musicians and so forth were purposely putting themselves in the most lowly, non-responsible jobs possible so as to remove as much stake in the system as possible.

Even today one need not scratch the surface too hard to find stories that interpret feigned indifference to the wider world as an important strategy, but at the same time do not connote pretense in the way “dissimulation” does. I had interviewed a man in his mid fifties, a former Red Army officer who now gives English lessons alongside a prestigious and lucrative job in the private sector. We were talking about fairly broad economic questions, and I had asked him about currency crises. He had given some information about inflation, its catastrophic effect on electricity and petrol because these are priced in hard currency at the wholesale level. Then, with a slight pause, he started talking about how clever his students are. There had been a class discussion about how each of them deals with stress, and one fourteen-year-old had said that when she feels stress, everything becomes like a movie, and she imagines she has no stake in events around her. He countered, “‘So your house is burning down. You stand there watching it burn like your are watching a movie?’ She said, ‘No, of course not. I would try to put the fire out. But the only way you can do anything is if it is like a dream, that it just goes by and you are not really in it.’” He saw this as more than a coping method, a sign of maturity beyond her years and social intelligence that should only grow with experience. She knew the specifics of how to perform a closure of selfhood, and how to act even though the individual actor had detached herself from the context.

However, we must be cautious about reading into this man’s observation a kind of ontological stasis or permanent sealing off of two worlds. Just as Kharkhordin’s model locates individuality and collectivities both in official and unofficial spheres, perhaps it is warranted also to maintain the possibilities for both pretense and authenticity in both these spheres. At the risk of sounding pedantic, we might steer away from calling informal and formal contexts “spheres” or “worlds” altogether, simply because a context is much more easily dismantled or arranged. Using the word “contexts” also alludes to the possibility that when contexts come into being, their very manifestation (i.e., sitting in a particular room for a formal ritual or an informal cup of tea) is itself the result of social action, as someone has made these arrangements. More careful attention, therefore, might be paid to the importance of *temporary* context as opposed to spheres or worlds, and the inconsistency with which actors flit between one context and another, both official and unofficial. In my view, it is precisely this lack of concreteness that has allowed the practices which could count under the banner of the ‘collective individual’ to proliferate with such vigor under postsocialism.

This would also serve to remind us that ‘informal’ relations do in fact rely on a kind of ‘form’, different from official forms but not necessarily always in direct relationship to ‘content’. Rituals like toasting (see Chapter 4) need not be public to be effective as ritual. But the ‘form’ I have in mind is much more like a regularized, almost prescribed formlessness. This too can be
pretended or feigned. Imagine attending a picnic with friends, but others who you dislike have also been invited. This entirely disrupts the form of time for you: instead of feeling yourself in the moment, able to make jokes about this or that, thoughts begin to wander in such a way as to make you absent from your immediate surroundings. This numbs you to the physical sensations of the environment, the sand starts to feel grating and itchy, the food starts tasting bland, and surely enough you begin thinking only of the moment of departure. Time becomes an imaginary beeline from now until the moment of escape; nonetheless out of respect for the people you do like you say how good a time you had upon departure. A less than successful moment of “doing nothing” to be sure, but it shows that a person can close oneself off as well as open up to others through time. In the next chapter I explore how these temporal openings are, in a way, prescribed.

Which constellation of official and unofficial, pretense and authenticity is assembled in a particular situation could then be viewed as a matter of strategy. But here too the word “strategy” carries extra connotations. If we take it from Bourdieu’s social theory, strategy would imply an ability to pick and choose possibilities as if they sat on a bookshelf. Issues of form and content to some extent disrupt this imagery (also related to the mechanical metaphor I examined in Chapter 3). In Yurchak’s view, Soviet socialism called into question strategy models for the reason that it is the form that is unavoidable while the content may be flexible. Plural and competing practices themselves involve unstable relationships between form and content; a situation which does not preclude rational decision making but it does serve to obscure all the ‘factors’ one potentially could need to consider in making decisions. An emphasis on strategy in Bourdieu’s sense would also imply that the actor would gain in some way through his strategic decisions, and this gain could be carried around and recirculated as if it were money (hence, cultural ‘capital’). The ability to use a relationship for garnering resources (whether economic or in the form of prestige) depends on one’s ability to act in non-strategic ways. If we were to think solely in terms of strategy, it might be said that failing to leave some of that ‘capital’ behind, in the sense of not using all that had been constructed in that relationship, leaves a person open to accusations of ambitiousness. But if the very idea of having a ličnost’ used to bear such a strong relationship to interpersonal interactions in Soviet times, such that even having a self to promote would rely on collectivity of some kind, then it is hard to see how developing and exercising the self could have been about developing potential for capital with any consistency. In the postsocialist context, too, ‘collective individuals’ sustain themselves without recourse to instrumentality.

EVERYDAY SOCIALITY AND SOCIABILITY

In order to discuss how the collective individual is (re)produced in postsocialism I should say a brief word about my own participation in everyday sociality and sociability. Of course, as this is an ethnographic account I am the epistemological vehicle through which a view of social relations is presented. What is sought, observed, and edited is therefore intrinsically linked to my
academic concerns and sensibilities, as well as my wider social concerns at ‘home’ (wherever that is!). In a discussion that addresses friendships, the issue is all the more acute. To address the topic at all, I had to make them, be an active partner in them, etc.. Furthermore, as I am interested in not just discourses about friendships, but the actual physical ways in which they are pulled off in everyday contexts, there is an even deeper sense in which I simply do not have access to relationships outside my particular set of circles established in the field. Part of my argument relies on a historical turn, in that I attribute the differences I perceived and felt to what might have developed well before my arrival. For this I have to rely on the accounts of others; and these are permeated by nostalgia, explicitly addressed in academic work (especially Boym 1994 and 1995) and when I would make attempts to enquire about them in the field. But here, too, the topic of friendships feeds this rosiness, as accounts of old or former friendships are bound to entail a heightened romanticism. This problem cannot be surmounted, although instead maybe my dissertation might be able to show that there is much about contemporary interpersonal relations in St. Petersburg to be romantic about.

If the techniques of establishing friendships rely on a habitus, that is, a complex of dispositions that develop over time that in turn develop the ability to generate new phenomenon themselves, one would rightly question the extent to which I, as an outsider, could actually establish ‘authentic’ friendships in a way that would be locally understood as having the right constellation of factors. I only had a very short period of time in which to learn, and any direct experience of Soviet life was impossible. I suppose in one sense it did help that many of my informants were too young to have adult memories of Soviet life, and, like me, rely on stories from their parents for the ability to imagine what it must have been like to sit round kitchen tables, each knowing that the other knows something potentially subversive. Although, my relationships with their seniors did not entail entirely insurmountable barriers. I did try to follow others’ lead wherever possible, in terms of when and how to meet, what to do, etc., and when I created some awkwardness or another this was usually forgiven and attributed to my foreignness. As I am an American by citizenship, I did inadvertently bring along all the imaginative baggage this entails, whether positive (as in the endless speculation about New York City being a land of opportunity for everyone) or negative (“It is impossible you are American, you look too nice” one woman told me). Nevertheless, eventually I did get to the point where, after being introduced to someone, I would later get feedback to the effect that I appeared and acted like an ordinary person (obychnyi chelovek), which was reported to be ‘surprising’ given my nationality.

The language surrounding friendships are rich in untranslatables (especially obshchenie), which helped identify the specifics of local sociability. Some things became apparent right away, such as the embarrassment I caused by suggesting to a new acquaintance we go out to a restaurant, whereas I should have suggested going to a café or simply to walk around. Restaurants were reserved for special occasions. Others sunk in more slowly, such as the importance of duration in

48 Anti-American sentiment had not at that point been flamed by the international crises of 2003.
meetings or the extent to which one is expected to act as if one is at home in someone else’s home (rasslabliat’cia) if good relations exist. Part of the repertoire for me to learn friendships was also learning how one acts towards strangers, and this involved physical gestures such as learning when to (not smile) and tone of voice. 49

Most importantly, the only way I could get anywhere, research wise, was through the vehicle of friendship, or something approaching it. I had come to St. Petersburg assuming that because I was working in a big city, there would be little interest in just sitting around talking. I thought conducting formal interviews would make my presence understandable as well as containable, so I would not be seen to interfere. While I do not think I actually offended anyone with my officiousness, I did come to notice that any encounter that began with an interview ended there. The converse was true too, and later I found that the best interviews came while sitting around with a small group, playing as if we were doing something “official”. If I began with an interview and pushed for a second, something changed. It was downright awkward not because my potential target was unwilling but because it was out of place. If an interview with me was like a conversation, why not just have a conversation? But I had already introduced a level of structured officiousness, and so we had already begun as researcher and informant, which would take some doing to get over. The semi-structuredness put the relationship in limbo whereas if it was unstructured from the beginning it would have been more understandable to them (albeit less so to me).

If cool to warm did not work, somehow warm to warm did. While we were in the field my partner Steven was on the market for some companionship, and managed to get far more of it than I did guinea pigs. I had imagined a plethora of ruses that might get me involved in the lives of others: me as the poor lost foreigner in need of help and advice, or me as the gatekeeper to English lessons. In the end the only thing that seemed to work was not only stripping the anthropological agendas, but really any categories or reasons why one would want to have contact with me. This might seem obvious to the extent that it fits in Western ideologies of what friendships should be, but it was jarring to find that they could be made in this fashion too, and not under the pretext of common interests. In this context it seemed there was no other way.

My reader might see how this process structured the way in which I interpreted other accounts of Russian friendships. One might imagine my excitement upon coming across some sociological work claiming that Russian friendships were distinctly “diffuse”, that is, they tended to have no other purpose at all other than the relationship for its own sake (Kas’ianova 1994). Borrowing from Parsons, Kas’ianova argues that diffuse interactions act as ends to themselves, whereas in concrete interactions people choose the milieu of persons which will contribute to their own goals. If we believe this claim, then my blunderings came not because I attempted to mix work with pleasure, but because I attempted to establish the relationship with a distinct set of

49 English is a much more singsong affair than Russian, and I suspect I inadvertently sent signals that I was perpetually excited. I did not master the more serious tone suitable for formal occasions.
coordinates: me as researcher, the other person as informant. Mixing ‘work’ in any of its manifestations with ‘friendly’ relations could (and often does) take place. Humphrey (1991) shows, for example, how barter partners necessarily build friendly trust while trading over the long term. However, my own field experience suggested that whatever this “diffuse” characteristic was had to be established first, and then these other factors seemingly come out of the woodwork. Maybe it does not always turn out that way chronologically, but this would not preclude the idea that diffuse-ness could be interpreted as otherwise prior. Furthermore, because I could see that any number of openings came forth once I had managed to approximate this diffuseness, and because the way in which one might open up was not intuitive from my own social background, Kharkhordin’s work focusing on interpersonal openings and closing of the self was bound to become central the present analysis. That is, relationships were not constructed for their own sake in any literal sense; but for the purpose of, as Kharkhordin puts it, mutual self-fashioning. Lest we romanticize the diffuse interaction (and by implication demonize ‘strategic’ thinking), Kas’ianova reminds us that it involves a great deal of rummaging through other’s lives and having others rummage through yours. The interaction of diffuse relationships is not “pointless”, rather, the point is the production of persons, and to some extent you have to allow yourself to be produced. One knows who one is through knowing one’s friends.

As Pesmen (2000) argues, in local theories of the soul, deep within the soul lurk the gems as well as the cringe-worthy faults of each person. Ideally, groups of friends reveal the soul for better or worse to company that will accept you and defend you. Openings and closings of the soul do not come always through confessional revelations, but through deeds. In practice this means one can ‘know’ someone through things like sharing jokes, but also through mutual bodily physicality and shared experience of the material world. Without the time and space argument fully in place, we can nevertheless rely on Kharkhordin’s work to draw out the idea that mutual self-fashioning does not just mean that one person draws out of the other his own sense of self. Rather, the mutuality of knowledge of selves has its own power to compel. My informants’ talk of the importance friendship revolved around tropes of “a friend in need is a friend indeed.” Doing something for a friend is a highly moral act at the pinnacle of good relations. Yulia (43) explained it to me this way:

Time—I always say—if a person cannot do something, he refuses, this means he doesn’t want to. When you need something—I mean really need something—usually you can turn everything upside down (perevorachivat). You get what you need, go where you need…you can find whatever is necessary. But when it’s not that important to you, we find excuses…time, health, problems. In life there is only desire.

Not only does a person go the extra mile for a friend in need, but a person does so also when his friend is not in need. A friend puts other things aside not ‘for’ his friend, but because he himself wants to. One gives spare change to people begging on the street for the other person. “A friend in need is a friend indeed” in actuality takes a rather circuitous social logic to achieve the kind of
relationship where one person knows the other would help not out of guilt or pity, which could motivate helping a stranger, but because he knows him. The knowledge becomes evident when the ‘real’ self on the inside pushes time constraints away, and allows these activities such as sipping tea or going to the banya to take place. When a friend does need something more ‘useful’—whether it be a shoulder to cry on or a broken sink mended—one asks knowing something about that ‘true’ person. That knowledge rarely comes through confessions about morality.

“Real” friendship (druzhba) as opposed to acquaintances or people to simply pass time with (priiateli, znakomi), is a much more intimate relationship than it is in the West, and therefore one must utter the word with some care. I saw that, true to Khark hordin’s and Kas’ianova’s account, that friendship means accepting the faults of others, and simultaneously making certain investments in collectivities. Breaking up groups of friends is a very serious thing; people do not simply drift apart unproblematically. The “unconditional acceptance” of others’ flaws, however badly the phrase reeks of popular psychology, is taken fairly seriously. I learned this lesson at my own peril: a friend of mine (one of two ‘real’ friends in the field) bailed out of her own party, which I was asked to initially hold until we could all venture out to a nightspot. After three hours of waiting with her acquaintances and friends, I became extremely angry and refused to go on to the nightclub. Everyone was indeed annoyed, but I was the only carrying on like an indignant politician. As they left I said to one of her friends, “I am really impressed by how calm you are about this.” “Calm?” she said, “what do you expect me to do, start shouting and scolding her?” “Yes!” I said emphatically. She replied, “she always does this—this is Katia. Yes it is uncomfortable. But it is useless to scold. We all know how she is; she knows this too. What is there to say?”

In explaining the individual’s relationship with the group (“it is useless to scold”), this person had summoned Katia’s essence of self, to which the group had knowledge. And the group in turn has made this character trait apparent to her: she was gently but regularly teased about her more general disinterest in clock-watching. Of course, all manner of bad behavior is not tolerated, falling-outs do occur and people are selective in who gets let into the inner circle of friends. If someone outside the group did this, this would be considered very bad behavior indeed, and not likely to be tolerated. People do not ask outsiders to host their parties, either, and I had agreed to do it accepting this about her as a member of the group, even though I did not yet fully know what I was in for. Through this mutual interaction, one can see how a circle of action, deed, and character revelation is formed.

The reader might be wondering why it is friendships and a rather nebulous concept of ‘informal networks’ that frames unofficial social contexts, rather than families and kinship—the more “logical” choice in traditional oppositions between public and private. Intimacy, as I witnessed and experienced it, seemed to circulate almost independently from the cultural facts of kinship. Or rather, while it is assumed that in most cases one will have opened oneself up to one’s closer relatives (thus, know each other’s souls) by the fact of daily proximity, this is not necessarily...
a precondition of the kin relationship. Also, there is a remarkable ease with which relationships can be forged where the participants can make the same level of demands on one another as siblings or parents and children might do.

In the field I was struck by a total absence of coyness surrounding the fact of relationships. That is, in negotiating social networks, the fact that spending time together is about the person and not the activity is discursively more plainly in view. References to time were even flimsier excuses for not agreeing to meet someone than they are in the West, while it is far more acceptable to account for a failure to show up as simply “I didn’t feel like it.” One woman pointed out to me that accepting someone’s phone number in Russia signals a sincere intention to use it, and that one would not offer their own number simply out of politeness. After returning from a trip abroad she encountered an old schoolmate she had not seen in years, and offered him her phone number, “just out of politeness.” He refused it, explicitly declaring that he did not want to call her. In an attempt to position herself as knowledgeable about Western ways, she declared to me that “Russians just don’t know how to be polite!”

There are also varying levels of intimacy outside the “official” realm: it is not the case that all relations outside official life are of the warm, deeply authentic variety. A secondary, perhaps more accurately tertiary, circle of people are maintained for the purposes of exchanging experiences, how-to, etc.. But these are maintained in a more passive way, and it is perfectly reasonable to use the phone numbers of people who one has not seen in years to find out some information—what to do when a cat gets sick, how to sell a flat, etc.. Znakomi can be maintained in a manner closer to friendships than to ‘contacts’, but if they are to remain as simply ‘contacts’ then it is important that it is only knowledge that is asked for. The category of znakomi, meaning people who are known to you but not friends, is slightly more intimate than our sense of having “contacts”, or at least is not exclusively instrumentally-focused. On the other hand, real friends are the first port of call when more instrumental things have to be accomplished. This is particularly true when something morally dubious has to be accomplished: after all, only Others use blat (string pulling).

What I am suggesting is that constructing these first ports of call is more than just putting out feelers in hopes of getting what is desired; rather, it is a way of incorporating oneself into others as well as others into oneself with a view to building a constellation of people populated by moral actors, not, perhaps, unlike a ‘society’.

The historical construct of the “collective individual” is too close to these experiences of making friends in the field for it to be solely an artifact of the past. Collectivity is important not because of the formal system of work kollektivs, but rather as a disposition. “Collective individuals” are collective on the basis that knowledge about the self is built and elicited by one another. In a sense, circles of “collective individuals” form the other side of blat (nepotism, string pulling). Ledeneva (1998) argues that while blat is a term to describe connection pulling in a negative way, it is in fact based on circles of long term reciprocity, and contained a system of

50 A similar distinction exists in Lithuania (Abrahams 1999).
morality limiting the proper scope of “needed” favors one could ask for. \textit{Blat} is not a term commonly used today, although “helping one another” as we saw in Chapter 2 is still central to survival. These circles of friends and acquaintances are not just some social primordial soup that a person simply exercises when the time comes. But if the circles rely on long-term reciprocity to circulate resources, then the reverse is also true: circles have to come to appear to have an existence prior to the favors that come out of them. This brings us back to the problem of social theory that “dissimulation” opens up, because it is not clear how these relations could become seen as ‘prior.’

**SELF, SOCIETY AND PROCESS**

The language of anglophone social analysis gets us to a partial understanding of how self and society interconnect in Russia. At moments this partiality is deeply problematic, as in cases where ‘atomization’ becomes an explanation for ‘totalitarianism.’ In other contexts (such as, I think, the present analysis) accepting this partiality simply opens up one layer of terrain. Put another way, Kharkhordin’s reading of dissimulation shows up the commonalties of Russian processes of making sociality with those in other parts of the world. If, for example, we were to compare Soviet ideas of social participation with Herzfeld’s (1992) work on everyday indifference in bureaucracy, what would it show? With some irony, Herzfeld shows that the symbolic roots of “Western” bureaucracy, both stereotypes of rationality as well as notions of blood and kinship, are used in everyday contexts to create insiders and outsiders and justify cruel indifference to the plight of others. “The system” itself comes to serve as symbol in both the actions of bureaucrats as well as tales of bureaucratic incompetence told by the infuriated and dejected persons unsuccessful in their dealings with bureaucrats. Soviet state structures also drew upon ideologies of rationality to describe themselves. State institutions relied upon the particular symbolic markers of a heavily interlocking Marxist-Leninist language, and that language itself was caught up in imagery of a mechanistic scientism that painted all social phenomenon in strictly objectivistic terms (Humphrey 1983). Symbols of ubiquity and permanence in the Soviet Union were used for denying citizens participation in that system arguably in precisely the same manner as the West. If the system was objectively progressive, some elements ‘objectively’ backward had to be eliminated. The game of making outsiders and insiders, and using the symbols of objectivity to do so is certainly is played by states that profess to protect individual rights as well as authoritarian ones. And while the Soviet Union might have been Other for NATO countries during the Cold War, Marxian inspiration for the system is irrefutably “Western.”

However, the comparison also shows how the process of using bureaucratic symbolic systems to make insiders and outsider was also in some respects different for socialist systems. A key difference could be found in language. Besides the oral genres of the litany and \textit{anekdot}, a second, concurrent genre relied on linguistic techniques that might be described as the inversion of litanies. There was a mode of speaking, now said to be able to successfully be done by those who actually have adult memories of the Soviet Union, of speaking between the lines, or subtle
techniques of assuring the listener knows the meaning without actually stating it. This never existed in the West; rather, Hertzfeld’s examples rely on showing up Others as irrational and non-transparent. Pesmen provides a good example: “a former partokrat, giving me official statistics of regional industry, added up petrol, tires, tractors, chemicals, all nonclosed industries, to sum up at 100 percent, then paused and grinned an abyss of ‘you know that I know that you know.’ He then added, ‘but now, of course, everything’s open.’” (Pesmen 2000:198) While it could not be said that an entire reified counterculture existed in the Soviet Union, it could be said that a counterlanguage did exist. By ‘counter’, I do not mean a necessarily a resource of political opposition, but as something that develops on the back of the original in contradistinction to it. This would then avoid the assumption that we already know what kind of political artifact this language is by virtue of the fact that it is different from official discourse. Signals could be sent, and assumed to be received, by those in possession of the technique. This dual signaling could happen in the most intimate of contexts through anecdot telling all the way through to journalistic discourses, in which I was told it was possible to discern the real news by subtle signals embedded within the newspaper text. Humphrey (1994) speaks of a similar phenomenon as “evocative transcripts” to describe speech that is ambiguous by design and intended to provoke a dual reaction. In socialist Mongolia, there was very little in the way of hidden transcripts, because nearly everyone could imagine themselves as both dominated and dominator, and so otherwise ‘subversive’ talk was familiar to and used by people at either end of hierarchies. In Pesmen’s description, one can see how the intent of speaking is indeed counter to the literal utterances, and yet it is only part of the dual the intent that is hidden, not the entire ‘transcript’. Although there are ethnographic differences with Mongolia, and the idea of resistance did take hold amongst Russian intellectuals (see also Krylova 1999) where in Mongolia it did not, arguably the idea of both domination and subordination flowing up and down hierarchies according to the same principle at both ends was common across Soviet-type systems (Humphrey 1983:258-66). Russian anekdoti to some extent transcended public acceptability, but even in public rituals one could find satire and joking practices where ‘officially’ they did not belong (see Yurchak 1999). So, whereas in Hertzfeld’s account, transparency is equated with the rationality of the system, transparency in Russia had a completely different social life, and opacity served both ‘official’ and ‘unofficial’ interests.

To the extent that perestroika made it possible to speak ‘openly’, this counterlanguage is obsolete. Its implications for contemporary sociality can be drawn out by way of Wagner’s Invention of Culture (1973). In 1973, the notion that society was an invention and reification was a radical transformation in anthropological thinking, of which no one needs didactic reminding. The way in which he arrives at that idea, however, is of some interest for the present analysis. Wagner sees all cultural phenomenon as a process of convention and invention. Convention and invention are two sides of the same coin for him; a person summons conventions while doing something novel and invents while seeming to act conventionally. This is a rather usual claim now glossed as social constructivism, but in discussing Soviet-style ‘dissimulation’ the techniques involved in
actually doing this cannot be assumed. Wagner shows how counterinventions are always made in the act of making inventions, but that these counterinventions must be masked. One act always ‘counters’ another. For example, one man’s act of “building a marriage” is a reinvention of a convention, but in the very act of bringing conventionalized ideas about marriage and family into focus, the particularities of what is being built—the way in which he goes about it, has to be masked as ‘just who we are.’ The novel bits cannot stand for marriage if marriage is thought of as a convention. The reverse can be true as well, different societies can attribute differentiating and collectivizing actions to either convention or invention in any array of situations, giving yield to creative styles. His Melanesian examples show people differentiating themselves through convention, and idea radically counterintuitive to ‘our’ ideas about how individuals innovate and distinguish themselves.

The real action, in his view, lies in where the actors draw the focus of their actions (‘control’) and what is therefore masked. In order for cultural constructs to work effectively as a whole, i.e., for “building a marriage” to be a sensible and meaningful idea, the degree of relativity of cultural constructs, their abstracted arbitrariness, must itself be masked. To use Wagner’s example (1973: 56), Euro-Americans think of ‘serious’ culture as an artificial accumulation of conventions (a ‘canon’); technologies develop, opera houses flourish, etc. These are made from a combination of genius and toiling, not innate facts of nature. When these constructs fail, when the artificial accumulation is made from overly easily accessed conventions, the relativity of their meaning becomes apparent, and we say that the person “just made it up”, or “I could have done that”. Conversely, when the controlling context is nonconventional, about “creativity”, research curiosity or recreation, the use of highly relativized symbols appears “forced”, “too serious” or even “commercialized.” 51 For example, the best way to delegitimize an American punk or goth is to point out to him that he is expressing his supposed individuality with precisely the same relativized symbols of his peers. New York band King Missile in turn distinguish themselves by satirizing this point, singing “I want to be different, just like everybody else…” Masking the arbitrariness of symbols is important in any system of meaning, not just official discourses seeking legitimacy.

I went into some detail about Wagner to provide principled grounds for suggesting that if Euro-Americans and Melanesians deploy styles of creating culture differently from one another, then Russians must also have developed in the course of social life their own creative style. One claim that might be made if we looked at Yurchak’s and Kharkhordin’s work through an Invention of Culture perspective, is that Soviet approaches to self and society entail a disposition which is able to uniquely approach recognizing counterinvention without actually doing so. Soviet era

---

51 In my own experience, visual artists are particularly confounded by this problem, as they are required to demonstrate innate personal creativity, “unforced” by the market, in work that simultaneously must appear to use conventions discernable by their critics and audience. No wonder so few are successful in making a living at it!
“evocative transcripts,” is clearly a counterinvention to the hegemony of ubiquitous and highly conventionalized, indeed relativized and thus almost appearing ‘artificial’, Soviet-speak. Yurchak (2003) talks about transformation of linguistic form and its relation to content during this period. Playing with this form, evoking ‘other’ unofficial meanings as a technique is counterinvention not because of the political implications, because it is also recognized as a convention, explicitly post-perestroika and perhaps implicitly during Soviet times. But the counterinvention, the new convention of speaking between the lines, itself relies on a play on innateness: it is speaking from an ‘innate’ soul, ‘just between you and me’. An explicit tuition in the technique would appear (using Wagner’s terms) “forced”, “too serious”. The whole point is to use delineated, stylized absences to make the point obvious but not directly visible. What makes this phenomenon special, then, is the high degree of nuanced manipulation of what is masked and what is left as control. It is almost a practical semi-recognition of the necessity of convention to invent. From another angle, one might say this disposition is the ability to conventionalize acts of masking.

This ability to speak in an evocative manner does appear as innate or natural rather than an act in opposition to ‘the system’. Similarly, other Russian constructs that work in the same manner. The soul is thought of as a ‘natural’ thing; not only in the sense that Russian consider that they have them as a matter of course but also in the sense that the things they do to activate their souls are often themselves connected with the physical, natural world. As I will discuss in the following chapter, activities ‘good for the soul’ but otherwise unrelated to work could be described in way that the regime might approve of, but more often ‘masked’ as something simply ‘apolitical’. Those with a talent for evocative ways of speaking could interpenetrate or separate playful and serious acts, focus and background, at will. The ability to play with one’s own acts of masking, then, is more than a counterinvention to a hyperserious officialdom. Masking, when we view it from the position of Wagner’s work rather than Kharkhordin’s, becomes not about hiding from an oppressive social system but about the opening out of possibilities. This is accomplished with its own particular style, using local conventions (or ways of inventing—two sides of the same coin).

I prefer to use Wagner’s language rather than Bourdieu’s habitus because it captures the spirit of flexibility that habitus was invented for (see Introduction), but does not invoke assumptions about how people carry round ‘structures’, dispositions and the like. If we see what appears to ‘Western(ized)’ eyes like dissimulation as a kind of generation of a stylized creativity, we can see how on the one hand, Kharkhordin can claim that the private was an entity that emerged out of practices of mutual surveillance in the public sphere, and Svetlana Boym (1995) can claim with equal justification that “privacy” as an English speaker might understand it is a nonsensical term in the Russian cultural milieu. “Privacy” as such is not at issue; what is at issue is a particular skill in summoning multi-stranded speech and burying one’s intentions within it. As Boym argues,

52 Yurchak (2001) calls this phenomenon a “heteronymous shift,” heteronyms being words such as “bass” (the fish) and “bass” (the instrument), that look the same but the meaning is related solely to the context.
Russian “privacy” is in relation to interiority of the self (*dusha*), not as a permanent and cozy spatial stake of territory, but an unsettled wandering.

In a newspaper article I read while in the field, a journalist lamented that people capable of reading between the lines were a dying breed. Academics, too, sometimes betray a certain nostalgia or sense of loss. Markowitz is of the opinion that “with the end of the Soviet Union, people lost the necessity of these behaviors, the ‘practical consciousness’ (Giddens 1984) that had once undergirded their ability to go effortlessly about daily life” (2000:213). Instead of this practical skill dying out, I argue it has been redirected to more urgent ends. More than just making contexts apart from official life, it developed its own trajectory of nuancing the conditions under which one’s actions are made visible or masked that does not depend on a particular regime of power. The ability to do nothing involves the ability to circulate and build knowledge about others and oneself and keep some of it within the temporal context in which it is elicited, while simultaneously motivating some of it for other, hybrid purposes. My idea of “doing nothing” as theoretical convention, then, would be an attempt to recover the senses in which maskings do occur without assuming them to be a kind of weapon of the weak (Scott 1985) for resistance.

**Coda: Returning to Sociality and Society**

My emphasis on hybridity and the ability to nuance one’s intentions by summoning multiple contexts simultaneously may give the impression that my informants did not think of themselves as having durable personal characteristics, or even if they did they kept these personal issues separate from larger ideas about ‘society’ and the practical ways one must work within it. This is far from the case; rather, mutual self-fashioning builds on and adds to previous experience. We knew what to expect from Katia because of her past behavior, but this does not mean that we know all there is about her and stop eliciting knowledge of her. In this final section I suggest some of the ways ‘society’ can come to appear when one’s own participation is at the forefront, and this nuanced evocative principle of speaking becomes the assumed point of elaboration.

In the previous chapter I had mentioned the way in which a kind of anti-politics persists in St. Petersburg, and how current events such as the state takeover of important media outlets is quite often interpreted as childish games affecting only warped people, who are barely human and obsessed with money. The way in which this discourse can be turned around to account for one’s own social participation simultaneously leads to and diverges from, concepts approaching the dissimulated self. Sometime in the spring I was sitting in a bar with my acquaintance Sveta, a 27 year old secretary, and my partner Steve. We were discussing Putin’s popularity, and Sveta had commented that she supports Putin because even though probably nothing has changed in reality, she *feels* more secure and more stable with him as president. To my advantage Steve possesses none of the anthropological phobias regarding blunt use of isms, and he blurted out, “Sveta, are you a communist or a democrat?” I glared at him mercilessly, as if a question unsuitable for seminar
culture were unsuitable for the rest of life. Sveta in turn glared at me unsure of why I was glaring at him: this kind of question is my job, isn’t it? She responded with similar directness:

“I don’t believe in communism, democracy, nationalism, any of it. I just believe [pause], just that we are all people, and we have to decide for ourselves what to do, and what is right and wrong. We have to be individuals. I know that I am an individual, and I manage [just like that]... Yes, I would like to stand out from the crowd, but I’m not so egotistical to think that I can do this.”

In this tidy comment, Sveta brushed aside the politics of institutions, and turned the question of how societies should be organized from a question of allegiance to a question of how persons should be organized. The real action is located in the interiority of individuals. That individual must be responsive to collectivities (“I’m not so egotistical to think that I can [stand out from the crowd]”), but not so unmasked as to take named, conventionalized representations of collectivities like political parties too seriously. Internal depth also had to be built; what matters is dispositions revealed through deeds (deciding what is right and wrong). The contemporary manifest context is again trivial background to a nuanced interplay between self and collective (“I don’t believe in communism…” etc.). I can still imagine her very clearly, sitting on the sofa in a bar suitably named after Dostoevsky’s *Idiot*, uttering these words. The name of the bar is fortuitous, although admittedly we chose that particular place for the free shot of vodka with every beer rather than literary interest. Dostoevsky’s idiot does not so much refer to simply mental deficiency, but rather the ‘pointless’ sufferings and wanderings of the soul. In pointing out the impossibility and undesirability of absolute individuality, Sveta echoed Dostoevsky’s view that the self suffers in all its convention-less (in Wagner’s sense) wanderings.

The way in which Sveta linked ‘the individual’ with ‘society’ then also bears some relation to that much older Russian concept of sobornost’. Sobornost’, an untranslatable communitarianism idealized by nineteenth century Slavophiles, comes from the word for cathedral (sobor), and connotes the kind of equality implied by fraternity as opposed to equality of rights. In explaining Berdiaev’s development of the notion of sobornost’, Boym writes that it is “radically anti-iconographic, antirhetorical, and anticonventional….Sobornost’ and true spirituality can only be but not mean; they can be intuited mystically but not read or interpreted” ((1995:143) emphasis added). Sveta may or many not have had sobornost’ in mind when she discussed what politics meant to her, but sobornost’ is a concept kept alive in contemporary circulation. One university professor commented in a lecturer that “Westerners do not understand sobornost’ because they have never had bezspokoinost’” (uncertainty, literally without calm). Sobornost’ is an ideal, itself a highly politicized and clichéd symbol, yet the practices of making selfhood through unnamed collectivities and making kollektivs come to be without meaning anything beyond themselves, seem to me little moments of sobornost’ actualized in all but name.
Through work many people, particularly younger generations, envision themselves building a new society, but this new society they understand is in the distant future; it cannot be accounted for in concrete terms of social structure. Part of this is realism about the present, but while in the field I was struck how methodical many people imagined the long approach to this far-off new society. The distant future came at the end of their own lifetimes (fifty years from now), and was imagined as emerging through small changes in everyday action, not policy or regime change. Here they are projecting indeterminant action, sobornost’s’ quality of being without meaning, into more visible constructs of society, far off from their immediate lives and equally far off from “our problems” that seem endlessly constraining. The minutiae of everyday sociability is important for “Society” because it is precisely in this minutiae that prospects for change are conceptualized.

Yet notions of plodding change exist side by side with ideas about enduring oppression as simply the way of things. In a follow-up trip in 2002, I was visiting with my friends Vica and Zhenia, and I asked them about their own practices of dissimulation during the Soviet period, which they remembered vividly. I had used Yurchak’s “parallel event” of reading a book at a komsomol meeting to explain the kind of thing I had in mind. I then said I was writing about the extent to which there are contemporary variants. Vica smiled, and in the one fleeting moment that relieved me of my paralyzing suspicions of my own fakery, she said:

“Of course, Dawn. It has always been this way—the tsars did things and we ignored them, the Soviets we ignored and the shit that happens now we ignore. You know this is important because you have lived here, and you felt what we feel. And you know that it is a question of emotion and psychology. The psychology is first, the politics is second—not vice versa.”

Vica overestimated me: I did not know at the time about the centrality of what she calls “emotion” and “psychology”, but what I am calling “self” and “personhood.” The way this one mention of reading a book at a komsomol meeting so easily prompted her outflowing of associations—of timelessness and self, the contrast between ‘politics’ and people, the privileging of inner states over forms out there in society at large—assured me that inner states were thought of as more than just personal ethics, but matters of social organization. Vica’s comment shows how the privileging of inner states masks other social forms, leaving it as a vague idea of “the shit that happens now.” ‘Society’, from the point of view of someone articulating their own participation in it, is a fractured, inarticulate thing, while personhood, even on a scale beyond the immediate self, is controllable and fashionable. Moreover, like the construct of the Russian soul, practices of closure, of ignoring things, is given legitimacy through appeals to history (“it’s always been this way”). Simultaneously, its significance beyond itself is masked through the very same appeal—things are just like that, why expect them to change? Even in this instance, which seems like a direct

---

53 I stick with personhood with on the grounds that it seems more analytically neutral, enabling me to talk about the sense of interiority suggested by “psychology” and “emotion” without additional baggage.
confirmation that dissimulation takes place in Russia, discourse is produced through a play with convention, invention, and masking *par excellence*.
CHAPTER 4:
TIME

In Chapter 3 I argued that contemporary forms of personhood entail a mutual interpenetration of individuals and collectivities. That mutual interpenetration is accomplished while doing nothing with one another, in the banya, at the kitchen table and on the street, and is accomplished such a way that puts the absence of goals for the relationship into the foreground. This foregrounding makes “doing nothing” a highly significant mode of sociality more generally. I argued that instead of viewing interpersonal networks as a private sphere only occasionally brought into public activities, or there to act as a counterweight to the ‘system’, instead we might view the process of making seemingly ‘private’ relations as the very same skill that enables a single person to move through multiple and hybrid sets of conditions while conceiving of himself as one and the same person (i.e., not as a Melanesian “dividual”). One could evoke strands of discourse and at the same time create multiple circles of intentions through subtleties in language, bodily comportment, and so on.

If the technique of reading between the lines is said to no longer exist predominantly through language (although language forms are still important if not entirely hegemonic), how is it that time is able to fulfil this role? It is useless to argue that postsocialist sociality is exactly the same as socialist sociality, with different cultural bits simply swapped around (time for language). Nevertheless some remarkable parallels can be found in how both postsocialist time and socialist linguistic practices forge intimacy. Postsocialist forms of time, for that matter, are not entirely unlike socialist ones both in terms of leisure time and working time, and in this sense the importance of time may be more of a continuation than transformation. In this chapter I first address the wider historical trajectory of socialist and postsocialist constructs of time, and then I examine the temporalities of “doing nothing” fit within that context. Much of doing nothing appears natural and ordinary, both to Petersburgers who participate in it as well as anglophone readers. The particular history of ideas about time in the region, I think, renders “doing nothing” a remarkable social construct.

TIME IN IDEOLOGY

Kharkhordin aptly notes that friendship was peculiarly missing from Soviet sociological discourse, which otherwise emphasized collective social forms. Early Bolshevik pedagogues were worried by the problem of “spontaneity,” (stikhiinost’) which they saw as any activity working against the deliberate directedness of socialist man. Not an ounce of energy was to be wasted! “Spontaneity had stood for a refusal or a failure on his part to so mediate his responses to the world and to his own impulses, it had stood for a desire to give free reign to his own feelings and to the
‘elemental’ forces in the external world” (Haimson 1955, in Hanson 1997: 76). Directedness or purposefulness was the performance of methodical self-fashioning, a slow, long-term dialectic between one’s inner state and outer actions, whereas stikhiinost’ was an almost animalistic, asocial matter. But the problem of stikhiinost’ as a lack of social control in turn bled into the related problem of unmethodical, ‘purposeless’ relationships. Makarenko, the pedagogue who originally developed the Soviet theory of kollektiv, was also concerned with spontaneity as a problem, but in a slightly different sense. His worry was that allegiances within the group may not necessarily engage with the group’s explicit (socialist) tasks (Kharkhordin 1999). Undirected alliances were dangerous ‘false kollektivs,’ draining energy away from the task, encouraging stikhiinoe behavior and thus disrupting the wider society kollektivs were meant to build. Makarenko was working in the context of controlled group experiments—the whole premise was to explore the ways in which small groupings could be pre-engineered. That it would generate relationships which would retrofit onto the original engineering but still have a life of its own was worrisome to Makarenko: the experiment could get out of control. So, under the notion of a false kollektiv, in early Soviet social theorizing, peer-to-peer friendships were interpreted as potentially subversive by diverting allegiances away from goal setting. This carried the undertones of diverting labor into fruitless pursuits.

Yet other aspects of Soviet discourse reflect a certain enthusiasm for spontaneity in the hands of leadership, or at least something close to spontaneity disguised as human will. Hanson (1997), applying Weber’s typology of authority to ideas about time, argues that a charismatic-rational conception of time was institutionalized in the young Leninist state. What is “charismatic-rational time”? One debate within Marxist circles just before the revolution had to do with the speed with which Communism could and should be achieved. Marx himself primed his adherents for such a debate, as there is in his work a fundamental tension between the Hegelian notion of history marching forth as a kind of logic, and the call to revolution which relied on surmounting temporal obstacles. Human will needed to surmount the constraints of the historical conditions that would-be revolutionaries found themselves in. Revolution brought time forward through sheer human will (hence, ‘charismatic’ time). Simultaneously, human will had to be disciplined in order to be effective. Discipline here means an appreciation of the constraints of history—a proper historical grounding. To have this historical grounding one must engage with time as a sequence analyzable by rationality, but also the new temporalities to be formulated in future institutions also must be subjected to mathematical time reckoning. Hanson writes vividly about how the Soviet state, almost quixotically, attempted to fuse these seemingly contradictory modes. “The very phrase ‘professional revolutionary’ neatly combines the charismatic essence of revolutionary action with the rational time discipline characteristic of the modern professional” (Hanson 1997:77).

54 My use of the phrase ‘peer-to-peer’ is deliberate, because the parallels are strong between the Soviet situation and the current battles over peer-to-peer technologies which allow computer users to avoid money relationships with record companies. These companies make similar demands of total allegiance as the Stalinist state.
For a revolution to happen at all charismatic time is necessary, yet Hanson notes that Lenin attributes “spontaneity” to his political opponents on the left and right. Labor unionism, even though it rested on a far less radical break with the past, Lenin considered “spontaneous” because it failed to have a truly disciplined revolutionary consciousness (vanguard of intellectuals), and anarchical terrorism because it was non-systematic and drew the attention of the police, thus breaking any systematicity already achieved. Spontaneity, as framed by early revolutionary debates, then, set the tone for the later concerns of the individual spontaneous action within the kollektiv. Lenin, of course, was directing his What Is to Be Done? polemic at the institutions of the party, which, with enough disciplined zeal, would in turn have the opportunity to lead the rest of society. The party was to be the locus of revolutionary charisma (Hanson 1997:79), but later charismatic time extended to the masses in the widening calls for overcoming time in feats of work. Building the revolution by overcoming time in a disciplined manner became a mass challenge.

Stikhiinost’ emerges as problematic in later Soviet sociological discourses on leisure. Quantifying and measuring time use was somewhat of a preoccupation for Soviet sociology, and in the 1960s and 70s there was an explosion of surveys using time budgets (Moskoff 1984, Bushnell 1988, Zuzanek 1980). The use of the word budget (biudžet) is misleading, though, as a budget is a predictive plan of allocation, and it is far more likely that these budgets were actually expenditure estimates. In this sense, every basis of these studies assumed a decidedly non-stikhiinoe disposition. I highly doubt time budgeting actually took place amongst ordinary Russians; it seems the only actors in a position to budget would have been managers budgeting other people’s time, and even then their capacity to do so by late socialism relied increasingly less on any explicit day by day plan. The categories transformed over time from survey to survey, but the point was rather consistently to combat stikhiinost’, and to seek ways of convincing the public to spend their time in purposeful ways (“purposeful” in this context was always permeated by the ultimate goal of building socialism). This reflects an interesting commonality with neoclassical economics in that non-purposeful activities carried a worryingly high opportunity cost. The very act of measuring time implies a person can make trade-off decisions about it, and that those trade-offs occur within defined time horizons. Like the capitalist “time is money” formulation, nonpurposeful activity to these sociologists did not represent a postponement of purposeful activities but a substitution for it; more effort squeezed in would have meant more progress towards socialism in a shorter period. Figure II shows an early time use schema. Although later studies couched their judgements in terms of high and low culture, very similar principles shape their categorizations.
B. Free Time
I Physical development: athletics and sports walks, tourism
II Cultural amateur activity: social work education, lectures, museums reading amateur artistic activity
III Cultural leisure activities: cinema, theatre and other performances home games: chess, draughts and others
IV Other entertainment: inviting guests and visiting other wastes of time
V Doing nothing

Moskoff notes that “unavoidable requirements” (neustranimye potrebnosti) is a strong term implying an obstacle to alternative uses of time, so eating and sleeping as well as these other “wastes of time” in the second column were obstacles to labor. “Doing nothing” did feature on some of the subsequent studies as a kind of catch-all category, as it was sometimes substituted for “other expenditures of time”. It was more likely to feature in studies that did not specify visiting or going for walks as potential activities. In a 1959 Krasnoiarsk study, “doing nothing” was listed next to “other entertainment, visiting”. People on high incomes were much more likely to report that they spent their time on “cultural activities”, but outside this category as income increases respondents seemed to swap “doing nothing” for “other entertainment, visiting”. These surveys seem to corroborate my suggestion in the Introduction that “doing nothing” is a peculiar kind of activity where actors somehow know how to do it, want to do it, and yet the after-the-fact accounting for it is a kind of afterthought to activities more easily interpreted as production.

This early schema is an extreme example. Throughout the Soviet studies, though, nonworking time was delineated as “free time”, which was both a good thing and a dangerous thing. Life had become happier, the Stalin-era slogan went, and women in particular were supposed to have been liberated by the socialization of domestic tasks. Interestingly, In 1967 the Soviet Union actually shortened the official work week from 6 days to 5 while lengthening the days, and the time use studies seemed to suggest that the rearrangement was in fact used as free
One could improve oneself during free time: improving activities included social work as well as reading or attending cultural events. Sports were a good thing, too, having been elevated as “physical culture”. Being a cultured person to some extent was dependent on free time. It must be remembered that being “cultured” entails something close an evaluation of the person’s very humanity, not necessarily someone with lofty concerns. But the free time in question ideally was not freed from the goals of the state and building socialism. One study reported by Moskoff further differentiated between organized and unorganized outings to cinemas, theatres, museums, etc., as well as countryside excursions and even trips to cafés and restaurants. Unorganized holidaymakers (i.e., people who spent their holiday not at a state owned facility) were colloquially known as ‘savages’ (dikari). If these activities could not be related to high culture or labor, at least they might be redeemed by the fact of being organized.

Some pursuits, like museum attendance, easily stood for high culture and some, like drinking or card playing, low culture. Other activities, such as reading and cinema going, could not stand for either stikhinoe or purposeful pursuits so easily. It was the quality that mattered. A 1973 Gorky study (in Moskoff 1984) listed “1) reactionary bourgeois culture, e.g., trashy novels, commercial films, abstract art, modernism pop art, 2) drunkenness, hooliganism, playing cards, and 3) bad pieces of art which are only a fascimile of real culture” as aspects of aimless time, and counted as “anti-culture” (antikultura). Their popularity in turn was seen by the authors as the cause of antisocial behavior. In this way, aimlessness was conflated with artifacts of culture of dubious value to the Soviet state. What went on in all this on-the-fly dithering away of time was precisely the maintenance of friendships and family networks. But friendships and kin relations could not have been considered antikultura, not least because the state littered its own diplomatic discourse so heavily with “friendship” words. Kollektivs depended on friendships, while the idea of the nation relied on imagined extended kin ties (rodina). Instead sociologist could only note the diversion of time away from “directed” habits like reading and consuming “high” culture.

Working time was not exactly a straightforward matter. Perhaps the most striking and well researched discourse of mass persuasion was that of Stakhanovism. Through Stakhanov’s example ordinary workers were exhorted to overcome the state’s own temporality by overfulfilling set norms of working pace. Labor achievements did in fact come with rewards, as people could receive titles for it and access to better flats, consumer goods and other privileges. But the ideal of shock work exhortations masks ambivalences and controversies within the party about what kind of working time was in fact appropriate for socialist life. Taylorism entailed the physiology of labor, but much of it also had to do with time, in terms of working pace and the appropriate choreography of motions at any given moment. The notion that working pace could be rationalized to effect the

---

55 The slightly longer working hours per day, which made long periods of housework after work difficult. Women did not, however, seek to “catch up” with this work on their days off. It seems the rearrangement of working hours, rather than novii byt had the bigger impact on women’s lives.

56 The uses of “high” and “low” culture in the postsocialist context is further explored in Chapter 5.

57 Stakhanov was a Donbass coal miner said to perform astounding feats of labor in the 1930s.
greatest yield was not without controversy in the early days of the Soviet state. While Lenin in 1918 had suggested an “Institute for Taylorism” be created, the left communists objected on the grounds that Taylorism amounted to a “sweat-shop system” (Beissinger 1988). Taylorism and Fordism triumphed in the 1930s industrialization drives under the banner of “rationalization,” the left and trade unionism having emphatically been squashed. Kotkin’s (1995) famous study of the Magnitogorsk steel works makes the uncomfortable symbiosis of American factory “know how” and Soviet efforts to “catch up” now well known, and reminds us about how postsocialist framing of past economic forms as a historical slumber is far from novel. Perhaps what should be emphasized is that quite a lot was at stake—not just technology but technologies of time. Embodied in those factories were assumptions about working pace and the availability of shifts to keep machines running. In a way Fordism created Stakhanovism by setting the constraints to be overcome. A lesser known work by Beissinger (1988) chronologizes the fits and starts that Western technologies of time actually went through in the Soviet Union. The extent to which capitalist time discipline could be extracted from capitalist systems as mere technique continued to haunt planning elites all the way through the Soviet period. At issue was precisely whether human work can be rationalized as a choreography of activities tightly choreographed with others’. This sort of discussion did not end with the period of rapid industrialization, but Beissinger reports was actually renewed in the 1960s and 1970s. The US was at the time inventing management science (the MBA and so forth), and Soviet economists debated whether this new science was objective and therefore game for appropriation or whether it constituted bourgeois vulgarity in the way it ignored “human factors.”

SOCIALIST TEMPORALITIES IN PRACTICE

The state claimed for itself extensive powers to coordinate time, or at least the ability to deprive others of it (Verdery 1996). Like Verdery’s descriptions of Romania, the state could compel attendance at political rituals, imposed a “time tax” on consumption through queues, and, of course, set working hours. Still in St. Petersburg, the state arbitrates some temporalities by its control over utilities. The heat comes on in flats across the city at an administratively set date, and every summer residents are deprived of the ability to bathe so that the state may work on the pipes. Drawing on Verdery’s (1996) idea of the etatization of time in socialist states, we might observe that while Yurchak’s informants effected innumerable parallel events at state rituals, the state nevertheless had the power to force them to show up. While the “state” arbitrated time, it should be remembered that the “state” was not a limited affair but permeated all formal institutions;

58 This discussion is addressed as an entirely domestic matter by Hanson (1997).
59 This latter argument echoes the aestheticization of work practices, which sought to introduce subjectivity into Taylorism in the 1920s (Buck-Morss 2000).
60 Even the ability to make warm water out of cold was centralized.
perhaps it is better to say that people had different capacities to compel others to spend time through their capacity as state actors.

The time regimes that evolved in practice were unsurprisingly quite different from the whole notion of a time budget. Socialist economies were famous for their unpredictability, but it was a particular kind of unpredictability with particular consequences. One famous aspect of the Soviet Union’s economy was storming (Kornai 1980). Plan cycles for the nation at large were on five-year intervals, but this was broken down into nesting time frames down to a one month period. Production goods, not just goods for consumption, were in constant short supply, so much of the beginning of the cycle was spent simply acquiring the appropriate provisions, leaving much of the labor force idyll. The problem could be traced in near infinite regression right across the Soviet Union. Factory X cannot produce its widgets because some inputs have not arrived, say wheels. The wheel manufacture in turn tries desperately to source the rubber, his official source being himself short this month due to a breakdown in extractive equipment, and so forth. Towards the end of the planning cycle, time was spent frantically trying to fill or ideally overfill production quotas. Storming made for irregular working hours, but the irregularity was contingent on planning cycles. This left managers to some extent dependent on workers’ willingness to storm, which in turn affected other kinds of temporalities. In this sense, though, the notion of overcoming time examined by Hanson was commonplace reality in storming. These periods of effort were then themselves punctuated by periods of extra effort to complete work in time for some ritually important date, say, the first of May.

Filtzer (1992) and Moskoff (1984) report that within production cycles themselves there was much to interrupt working pace quite independent of storming. Machinery broke down with astounding frequency, and therefore a worker might have to trapse across to the other side of the factory in order to find the appropriate tool to fix it or else make this tool it himself. Commonly, interruptions did not have anything to do with production whatsoever. Filtzer reports that workers at Leningrad’s Arsenal Association regularly left work early to queue up for a meal, because the queue was a half hour long and if they did not do so there would be nothing left by the time they arrived. Another manager estimated that 10-15% of working time was spent queuing up for foodstuffs: even though the manager had managed to bring them into the factory for distribution for workers through barter, still the queue to receive them substantially took away from production.

Soviet factories in principle used Taylorism and its descendants as a means of coordinating working processes through time. In practice Soviet workers, like their capitalist counterparts, had at their disposal a wide range of options subverting these processes. Extended smoke breaks, clocking off early, conducting some other personal business while at work, was the purview of both blue collar and administrative staff. The state in turn had sporadic campaigns against absenteeism, alcoholism etc. under the guise of labor discipline. But as Filtzer notes, the Soviet supervisor was far more apt to overlook these pursuits because he needed to rely on workers’ willingness to put in extra time during the storming period. Fulfilling the plan was good for both manager and worker,
what Clarke calls a “production pact” (Clarke et al 1993: 99). Also a significant factor was the fact that the Soviet Union suffered from enormous labor shortages as a result of the war. Having a bad worker was better than having none at all. In fact, Moskoff documents ways in which the state attempted to recruit labor from students and pensioners as well as maintain high levels of employment amongst women. Labor too was hoarded. However, some workers’ time practices could not really count as employees taking back ‘their’ time. As the example of the workers clocking off early to assure themselves a spot in the dinner queue shows, conducting personal business on the job was often necessary for the reason that failing to do so would mean nothing on the dinner table. What manager in could possibly attempt to ‘discipline’ a worker for that? The amount of time queuing unsurprisingly failed to appear on any of the household budget research.

Soviet labor law was quite extensive. Strict norms were set as to the length of the working week, holiday time, and the circumstances under which workers could be asked to work overtime. Although storming made for a rather chaotic work temporality, when I asked people about working hours they always referred to the regularity and predictability of working hours in Soviet times. According to Moskoff (1984), the Revolution shortened rather than lengthened the working hours per week. The work day slowly shortened until 1967, at which point the 6 day week was abandoned in favor of the 5 day one, with a longer (i.e., 8 hour) day. This was by legal decree; in reality a combination of negotiated early departures and unplanned accompanied the new work week. There did exist a formal system of overtime in the Soviet Union, although it was rarely used. Overtime was legal only in certain limited unforeseeable emergencies affecting wider social interests, and even then required formal trade union approval. Moskoff (1984) indicates that there was a second system (pererabotka po grafiku smennosti) in which supervisors could add overtime hours beforehand to the shift schedule. Unlike unplanned overtime, planned overtime could be compensated for with future time off and did not require additional approval. Another kind of ‘unplanned’ overtime was the subbotnik, an extra day of voluntary labor intended as a kind of acknowledgement of work as social obligation.

There were other senses in which ‘work time’ was officially fixed but in reality more flexible. The seasons proposed a temporality quite different from that of the factory. In the Soviet Union, this did not just affect rural areas but urban ones as well. Either factories would send workers to help with the harvest (often in exchange for a portion of the result), or people would opportunistically go offer themselves for work. According to Moskoff (1984), the latter demanded and actually received pay well above the official rate. Pay was particularly good for a month’s (hardship-ridden) construction in Siberia. Supervisors would acquiesce to a worker’s month-long holiday which he would spend working in Siberia. The ‘home’ factory, however, would end up paying double when the worker returns sick and exhausted, unable to work. Officially, part-time work was possible but few managers knew that it was legal, and at any rate their productivity figures were based on the amount of workers the enterprise had, whether full or part-time, so there was no incentive to allow it. The term “moonlighters” (shabashniki) was used to describe a range
of working activities outside ‘official time,’ i.e., a five day week with eight hours per day outside the home. This often includes people who work seasonally for a state agricultural enterprise, as it was not necessarily clear under what kind of exchange relationship they arrived. It also includes professors giving language lessons, doctors receiving extra patients at home, and industrial workers performing repair jobs.

Officially the rhythms of Soviet working life were set by state norms. One might add to the list of norms the fact that urban geography and transport was planned with strict norms in mind as well: time to and from work, walking time between shops, schools and home, etc. Of course, the walk to and from the shop paled in comparison to the queuing time spent in it, or the rush to the other side of town because a shop there has butter today. There were innumerable exigencies that might make one’s day unpredictable above and beyond the more easily recognizable (to us) transport failure or wait at the dentist office. Periods of storming, periods of waiting for supplies, periods of working elsewhere whether officially or not, and working as officially intended all made for irregular rhythms. The unpredictability in non-working time complicated things further: queuing, waiting for state rituals to end, or enduring a nippy October because some bureaucrat decided the heat was due to be turned on the following week. Seasonal and planning cycles overlapped and conflicted, and working time was often spread across several ‘jobs’. For women this included the notorious double burden of domestic work, denied the dignity of any official temporality. While it was possible to work a shift, and have the shift itself stand for evidence of having worked, even this was denied to domestic work that was supposed to be squeezed around working hours as if it were ‘free’ time. Workers could ‘steal’ time to go to the shops, but the shop then ‘stole’ the time right back in the form of a queue. The official temporality was not irrelevant, rather it created many of these irregularities.

While I have found Verdery’s ideas about the etatization of time indispensible, with postsocialist hindsight, one could equally look to the relative power people had over their own time in the Soviet Union. While formal, organized work stoppages were illegal until perestroika, in reality all kinds of stoppages and diversions took place partially or wholly under workers’ control. Non-working time was not necessarily entirely the workers’ to use in any way possible. Even in periods of idleness people were still required to at least show up. Nevertheless in the absence of formal negotiation managers knew they were not in a good position to make demands with any consistency. There were moralizing campaigns against absenteeism, but like contemporary talk of corruption, it seems that “absenteeism” came to stand for a host of interpenetrating temporalities that prevented work, only some of which were subject to the morality of discipline. In reality there seemed to be much more negotiation and flexibility in decisions about time. Even this control was lost after socialism with little material gain.
Postsocialist Working Times

The state’s powers to compel time have dwindled, although there are some continuities. It supposedly has power over the ritual calendar, although no one seems to agree on the name or purpose of many holidays. Getting things done in time for some ritual date is still important. In fact, often this is the only way work gets accomplished at all. St. Petersburg (coincidentally) will have celebrated its 300th anniversary within days of this PhD being submitted. From the moment of my arrival in August of 2000, plans to repaint buildings, restore important courtyards, erect monuments, etc. were afoot. Scaffolding slowly enveloped the city, although in true Potemkin tradition, one could see very few workers making active use of the scaffolding; rather, the purpose was to give the appearance of transformation. Nevertheless, the difference made by this city-wide coat of paint was remarkable by the summer of 2002.

Some working temporalities, too, have remained similar. People who worked in the dwindling numbers of state enterprises worked regular hours and were allotted holidays with some consistency, as per labor legislation. However, reflecting their new position vis a vis a vast unemployment pool, they had little leverage with respect to when this holiday might be taken, and it could not be broken up into shorter chunks. The doctors I knew also moonlighted during their holiday period not as doctors but in a variety of non-professional jobs, just as they might have in the past. Plenty of people had enterprises on the side, not necessarily seen as businesses but things that earned extra income, such as taking in sewing. One man I knew ran his scheme off the back of the shop he worked in. He knew much more about the equipment being bought and sold than the proprietor, and as such he was able to hold back the best stock by buying it himself and then selling it to the shop’s customers on the grounds that he ‘happened’ to have it and the shop did not. This meant that he worked longer than his allotted hours, but then some of the hours he did work were not for the shop at all. The seasons continued to play a role in the temporality of urban economic life, but under different conditions. I did not encounter anyone who was sent to assist with harvests or went with the expectation of high pay. Instead, people would either work at one’s own dacha or, just as likely, ‘help’ with the harvest for some rural relatives perhaps some distance from Petersburg.

Given that by late socialism the Soviet workforce had become synonymous with inconsistency and inefficiency, after ten years of supposed ‘market’ reform efficiency in some respects has been one mantra of transformation. From my informants’ experiences it seems that efficiency with respect to labor, however, is at the bottom of the agenda. Talk of business process efficiency did not translate into efficiencies in working hours. From what I could tell—and here my qualitative rather than quantitative method has proved a hindrance, as there were a limited number of people in any one profession that I had contact with—working times are even more likely to be all over the map than in Soviet times in ways that could not be plausibly considered efficient by the most creative rationalizer. It is true that the unpredictability of stoppages has lessened even though the supply chain is still not as reliable as managers would like. But the
stoppages that do exist are less likely to be put to good use by the immobilized worker. During the work day it is not possible to take extended lunches, smoke breaks or nip out on personal business with socialist-era regularity. Occasional things, such as taking care of documents at the passport office, most of my informants could get out of work for, but they were not able to make a habit of it with impunity.

Amongst my informants who had jobs in the private sector, it seems that their employers saw few limits with respect to the proportion of employees’ time they could control. In some extreme cases employers felt they owned outright their employees’ time. A few weeks into starting her job, a secretary I knew knocked on her boss’ office door at seven in the evening to ask if there was anything else for her to do. The boss, watching television, replied that there was not. She then asked if it was possible to leave. The boss looked at her disapprovingly and said he supposed it was possible if she had some kind of emergency. She understood at that point that her job was only nominally related to work, and instead she has simply sold her time to her boss. I do not take this particular situation to be typical, but it does exemplify the complete absence of recourse that workers feel they have should they find themselves on the receiving end of a megalomaniac employer. For people with prestigious jobs such as translating or in the legal profession, the amount of overtime usually required was far heavier than it would have been before, and there is no expectation of compensation. Even Katia (see Chapter 2), who turned down a job on the basis of working hours, finds herself returning home at nine in the evening. With very few exceptions, the people I knew in these sorts of jobs were not working long hours in an attempt to ‘get ahead’. For the doctors I knew, staying late was understood as a function of patients’ needs, not exploitation on the part of the hospital. More typically, long hours simply was the job which was completely at the mercy of the employer. In addition, in the private sector it is not clear when and how one will receive holiday time or days off for personal business (or even illness). In principle, all Russian workers have a legal right to holiday time but in practice many people do not expect that they will actually get it as a matter of course.

While Soviet industry made use of shift work, I saw an astounding variety in the kinds of shifts possible. A small handful of the people I knew went through long periods in which they were called upon to work twenty four hours straight, followed by two days’ rest. These were jobs that required someone to be on duty at all times, such as in water filtration facilities and on the docks. Of these, about half said that they were not against this arrangement but that it was physically taxing on the body and did not expect to be able to do it over the long haul. For the people I knew who worked shifts, control over working hours was usually cited as the largest point of job dissatisfaction, making the coincidence of having time available at the same time as friends and family unlikely. Besides scheduling the shift within the day, days off could be endlessly postponed by managers, or managers could keep employees in the dark as to when their next day off would be. I did find two instances where the supposed ‘flexibility’ of market labor did suit the employee’s needs. In the first two sisters had convinced a café owner to allow them to share
employment, with each working two weeks on and two weeks off. In the second a computer programmer was allowed to go home early if the day’s work was done, a liberty he described as progressive and unusual. I did not encounter anyone who was able to work from home as an employee.

There is a great variety of time relations in both socialist working temporalities and postsocialist ones, neither of which could be characterized as the purposeful, Taylorist-like regularities at stake in ideological discussions. There are still some transformations. In Soviet times, time away from the factory could be negotiated to do some other work, whereas now one is far less likely to be successful in that negotiation. While some sociologist called Soviet-era time practices “time theft” (Gregory 1987), in fact time as theft is more likely to occur in private enterprises, such as the equipment specialist who was able to divert money by starting the sale in working hours, and completing it after hours, making it ‘his’ sale. Time is more likely to be ‘stolen’ because private enterprises tend to put more claims on it as ‘their’ money. This cannot be seen outside the profound change in relations of production. In a twist of the politics of labor mathematics, for the years leading up to 1991 the Soviet Union considered itself to have a labor shortage, as did the Western scholars who studied it. Then, with a blink of an eye, it suddenly had a surplus, leaving people exposed to the temporal whims of employers and the physical world more than ever before.

Perhaps the one thing that does emerge from all these disparate time relations is that one-for-one temporal substitutions cannot be made. Time was never mathematically managed, it could only be brought into the social life of other relations. Sometimes, as in the case of the Stakhanovite movement and storming, it could be overcome. While the state can no longer appropriate time directly for its rituals or as a queuing “time tax” (Verdery 1996). having to survive in a money economy means that one’s ‘own’ time is also rarely ‘free’ for disposal. The equipment specialist saw himself treading water, and the scheme simply was unavoidable. The professionals I knew certainly thought of working time as ‘not theirs’, even in cases where skill was being exercised and they did feel a strong sense of attachment to the actual work performed. With the exception of the case of the megalomaniac employer, most professionals also did not see their time as owned outright by someone else, even if their time was made vulnerable to the peculiarities of employers. While arguments could be made that workers have less control relative to their employers (and on this count more research would be needed to do so conclusively), equally the situation does not lend itself to an us-them, employers-employees scenario, with twenty four hours to be divvied up. My informants did not imagine themselves juggling discrete balls of time, and having to make one for themselves as free time. How does one juggle the unavoidable? When ‘they’ decide to provide hot water ripples across the configuration of one’s day, but it is not as if the day could be scheduled to begin with. Instead, people would simply complain about exhaustion. In St. Petersburg free time is not an artifact of budgeting. Perhaps our own ideas about “making time for yourself” in fact reflect the relative success of the notion of time as mathematical discipline.
**DOING NOTHING TIME**

If a person’s productive life is unscheduled, irregular and in any case subject to a variety of unfree temporal relations, then free time would most likely be informed by the conditions of unfreedom. In Petersburg it was not the case that people did not wish to work, or felt unconnected to their labor, but there was a startling disconnect between labor and time. Labor involved their own subjectivity whereas time was more often than not unavoidable. Time ‘spent’ doing one thing or another did not easily correspond with the result. The notion of free time does exist in Russian, as does spending and wasting time, and was quite a highly charged political issue about the fashioning of socialist man. But if there is not at least a semblance of expectations about work and compulsion *vis a vis* time, then it is impossible to expect free time to simply be a matter of “time off”. Instead I argue that free time draws upon older notions of subjectivity to produce a kind of ‘inner freedom’ relative to subjects situated ‘inside’ the time spent not producing.

The relationship between subjectivity and time comes through form, or rather formlessness. Of course, it might be argued that the different kinds of working times I have described are also a kind of formlessness in that they do not stand up easily to mathematical calculation. But these were always in some relation to something else that the individual did not feel he could control, let alone juggle. But in free time—i.e., time that is really felt to be free, not that which simply sits as the ‘other’ category in a time budget—this formlessness appears as a kind of flow in which persons can participate. It has an aesthetic other kinds of erratic time lack. This is a profoundly creative time, the sharing of which helps to feed and perpetuate the creativity. Importantly, it is more dependent on aesthetics and moral feeling rather than duration. Nor can free time be effortful. As I will discuss it can be quite active either socially or physically, but it does not entail any kind of willful achievement. Conversation, ideas, and experiences are elicited, not created. Although at first the difference seems semantic, it is in fact important. Perhaps the best way to show this is by explaining what goes on in the *banya* (steam baths).

The *banya* tradition is much older than Petersburg itself (Bogdanov 2000), and remains popular amongst younger generations. People either go to the *banya* in small groups, or arrive with the knowledge that their friends will be there around the same time. *Banyas* are in principle single sex, although it had become fashionable to hire an entire *banya* for the evening, which allowed for mixed groups. The *banya* is experienced as a time natural and relaxed, but also special and out of the humdrum of everyday life. It also has its own cyclical character. In the *banya*, people subject themselves to extremes of hot and cold in a cyclical manner. People sit in the steam room, and when their bodies have had enough they either plunge into a pool of cold water or (in wintertime outside the city) roll around in the snow. Having done this they then sit round a table, drinking and having some snacks. The idea is to slowly increase the intensity of the heat cycle by cycle, either by sitting on a higher bench or by laying down and having a friend hit your body gently with perfumed
birch leaves (veniki) in order to increase the steam. It was during this hitting session that I was told I would become “real friends” with my interlocutor. How was that conceptually possible?

Recall from the previous chapter that knowing somebody in this context involves moral rather than informational knowledge. We know from Kharkhordin’s work that this knowledge arises out of practices of mutual self-fashioning. Friends let you know what kind of a person you are and you them. But more than just a series of confessions and evaluations, friends allow each other to constitute parts of each other, and be part of the production of that identity. The person is thought of as not entirely ontologically discrete, but dialogic. Russian moral knowledge relies on a phenomenological turn. Souls (dushi) themselves have a kind of physicality, an interiority internal to bodies (Pesmen 2000). The heat and cold makes people feel its existence, and these shared ‘trials’ elicit the personhood out of each other. There are some who say that the process gets the inner dirt out. The soul is considered to be expansive, and can take on many things. There are, however, some moments such as the banya where it can be almost physically brought out by feeling the physical world around it, in this case being mindful of the temperature. I find myself having to resort to near mystical terminology where it perhaps does not belong. The banya did at one point have more devotional connotations than it does now, and while people are allowing the senses to somewhat take over they are not meditating on it or contemplating it in the way that “mindfulness” suggests. Nevertheless, I do not think it its coincidence that there is this kind of semi-structured parade of experiences in the banya and it is also the place where I was told I would become “real friends” with my veniki-wielding friend. Something about me and something about her was about to make itself apparent in the steam. This indefinable was somehow experienced as more than physical but at the same time quite plainly physical. It could not be said to be exchanged as something that existed prior and simply swapped. We were bringing it out, forgetting that in reality we were inventing. Maybe this masking of the fact that knowledge is being produced is what gives the appearance that we were getting to know one another by sharing. This indefinable factor seems to us to have been there all along, we just came to recognize it in experiential rather than verbal dialogue. These flows are experienced as somehow special outside the realm of everyday life, embedded in the time itself, and yet also an ordinary part of it. As the banya case exemplifies, the mutual self-fashioning of people requires people to be very much in the moment and a part of its rhythms. Whatever these rhythms are, they resist explicit form.

The banya idealizes and intensifies similar principles in other common practices such as visiting and walking through the city. It is worthwhile noting that domesticity in St. Petersburg does not entail any discernable rhythm. Some of this can be attributed to the exigencies of productive life, which would make things like meal times and the like difficult to maintain with any consistency. However, set meal times were not necessarily seen as desirable even when it was an option. In homes, there was usually a large pot of something or other on the go, some soup perhaps, or some fried potatoes with some cold meats in the refrigerator, and the various members of the household simply ate it when they were hungry. Often eating together was considered important,
but the eating did not have to happen at a specified meal time. Large ritual meals served in the home, such as New Year, birthdays, and Christmas\textsuperscript{61} (if it is celebrated) are served in some succession, with first, second and third courses, but then the courses never really end once they are started. At a Christmas gathering I attended, I was struck by the ability of guests to leave the flat and come back in the middle of the meal. The way food is served helps free people to come and go as they please; courses are served, but many of them are cold and they are served to the table as a whole rather than to individual plates. In this way, a guest temporarily parted does not face the awkwardness of returning to his appetizer just as the main meal is served.

At this particular meal toasting was taking place almost continuously. As soon as one drink was drunk the next toast would begin. The man generating all the toast was particularly enthusiastic, but he is not entirely uncommon. My friend and I left the table, came back, and the same toast was still going on upon our return! Toasts are obligatory in ritual occasions. They usually acknowledge the host, important guests or elaborate on the meaning of the occasion. They are usually more earnest and serious than a quick quip. It is considered rude to drink in between toasts, although on non-ritual occasions, with drinks other than vodka, I have seen it done. Normally toasts are quick enough to make our disappearance seem disruptive and rude, but the liberties our speaker was also taking demonstrates an important point. Toasting is interesting because it is one of those rituals which make the personality of those being toasted immediately visible through a convention (making a toast to them). On this count, Russian toasting is analogous to the Daribi practices Wagner describes of particularizing persons through convention. But Russian toasting is different in that just at the moment it approaches convention, it denies it. Sincere toasts are a play among friends, and therefore not serious or meaningful outside the circle. Good toasts are formal enough to be taken seriously but not so formal that they come to appear insincere. The conventions with which to toast do not yet appear arbitrary, as if they had been fished out of a book. Toasts can be quite serious, even competitive, but do not depend on a rigid concept of time or succession of events. Instead, time necessarily lacked form.

Other domestic activities further negated the idea that time might have any structure or form. Laundry was usually constantly on the go and there was no indication that cleaning house was a thing to do all at once, as in the idea of the big spring clean. Times for sleep were also highly individual, as was the length of time one may choose not to leave the house at all. But perhaps these things occlude what is really going on when time is not a factor. Like gulian’e, obschenie as a practice has some contours, but its real significance lies in the ability to generate a flow of images. Obschenie is best translated as communication, and Bushnell (1988) translates it as “visiting” for his discussion of leisure time, but it is also a category not easily rendered in English. Its root is related to the word for common, general or shared (obsche), and is also the same root for the word used for society. Obschenie implies the kind of relaxed intimacy, and a common, but

\textsuperscript{61} Christmas is celebrated on January 14, and is commemorated with a family dinner. The real highlight of the Russian calendar is New Year’s Eve. This is when Father Frost comes and distributes presents to
also completely unspecific, understanding. Personal identity and subjectivity is left open in a way analogous to the formlessness of domesticity. Conversation is expected to be more than dry ‘discourse’—a discourse never made anyone laugh. The relative openness implied to visitors does depend on the closeness of the relationship, but once a closeness does exist, a guest is expected to act with the same formlessness of the host. This means both speaking in certain ways as well as eating, washing, and even leaving articles in the knowledge that you are bound to turn up again. I got the sense that people do not have strict categories about when obshchenie is an appropriate activity as opposed to guli an e or actually visiting a bar, theatre, or banya. The main thing is that there is some sort of creative flow generated in the interaction of participants, and that the participants are the ones who motivate this rhythm. To some extent we all have this in our own lives, as we all can cite moments when “you just had to be there”. The domesticity example serves as a reminder that creativity does not need to be elaborate, just well timed.

Accounts of the late Soviet period (Boym 1994, Condee 1999, Ries 1997) suggest that the sense of interiority of meeting in flats was socially significant. Domestic interiors echoed the personal interiority that was being opened up to the circle of friends. Recall from Chapter 3 that in intelligentsia circles obshchenie practices were especially important in creating a social world with which to imagine one’s position of apartness from the official regime. Moreover, it was not just the flat, “domesticity” as distinct from “public” space, that created this sense of interiority. Kitchens symbolized the kind of intimacy that could be achieved in such a context. Sitting at the table and sharing food were (and still are to some extent) embodied ways of opening up to each other. Dispositions would necessarily be revealed physically, through the willingness to drink tea, or the visible relative comfort or discomfort. “Kitchen table talk” has become shorthand in these accounts for what people “really thought”, but this needs to be seen in the broader context where ‘maskings’ did not always mean a particular political disposition (see Chapter 3). Today, the kitchen table still has similar connotations of intimacy and revelation, although not nearly as strongly felt in the way that Boym and others appear nostalgic for. Even though a meal table might be in another room, the kitchen is usually the scene of the conversation, and the place where people imagine themselves to ‘really’ open up.

It cannot be assumed that everyone has some sort of inner clock that would even recognize time as having some form that could be subsequently represented. The irregularness of free time is more than just a matter of choosing when to have a cup of tea. Its significance is corroborated by the fact that people choose not to make representations of this kind of time. One of the things that drew me to time was a peculiar practice of avoiding the mentioning of time, or postponing it to the last possible moment. It was as if the sociality of informal gatherings and arrangement-making worked very hard to make the event appear as a felicitous coincidental encounter. The barter comparison is all too tempting: here we have a case where the difficulty of stumbling across a “double coincidence of wants” itself adds value to the “exchange”. Although, this comparison is
dangerous because Russian friendships also work very hard at avoiding the appearance of exchange, and refuse to conduct accounting of who gave what. The appearance of the happy coincidence seemed to me extremely important. More than just avoiding formalities by agreeing to meet someone at a designated time, the consistency of avoidances suggested that perhaps there was no internal clock to represent, and that this was itself meaningful enough to be communicated. The language of the clock does exist, and people do wear watches and know in an informational way what time it is. But these representations did not represent what kind of disposition existed internally, which seemed to be the point of sharing free time.

Let us examine the techniques of arrangement making. I discovered these through my attempts at scheduling interviews. If I was to phone a potential interviewee on a Wednesday, and we would decide an intention to do something on, say, a Saturday, I would ask, “okay what time on Saturday?” the reply was usually “I don’t know. Call me closer to the time and we will decide then.” If I rang on a Friday, there was a very good chance I would be asked to call again, closer to the time. What that time was, was exactly what I wanted to find out! During the early stages of the fieldwork I would sometimes try to force people to agree on the final details ahead of time, but failed. “I am not sure”, “maybe something will happen with you or me” “we cannot know what the weather will be” or just simply “no, it is better to decide this question later.” At first I thought people were avoiding me, but I kept getting reports from my closest friend that such-and-such is worried about whether I would get round to interviewing him. One man kept calling hoping to get English lessons from me. I would say “Okay, I am ready, absolutely any time. When can we meet? I will come to you.” “Well, I don’t know when the next day is that I will have off work. I will call you when I have an opportunity, okay?” He would call, and we would repeat this little scenario. I ended up seeing this man only twice during his long holiday (отпуск). Not surprisingly, interviews happened with either remarkable quickness, or else months passed before they actually materialized. The appointment book which I optimistically purchased remained blank, the pages mocking me with their stark whiteness.

I then began to notice that the practice of setting firm plans only at the last possible moment extended to friendly outings and visiting, both those that directly involved me and those that did not. Later on in the fieldwork, I had attended the opera with Oleg and Marina, a young professional couple. Marina and I teased Oleg about his “Swiss” habits of time keeping. Oleg had bought the tickets and invited us three days ahead of time; Lena commented over coffee that her colleagues expressed surprise that she had made Saturday night plans by Friday. This surprise must have been a bit of a performative exaggeration. If it was all that unusual for people to have at least made for themselves some possibilities for Saturday nights beforehand, more people would sit home as a result of uncoordinated accident than the city’s full theatres and restaurants would suggest. What may have been surprising was that she had stuck with one particular option, rather than a potential option, in agreeing to a time and place.
Marina then explained to me what was subsequently confirmed by others: what I was reading as excuses for not wanting to set a time to meet (‘the weather might be bad’, ‘something might come up’) were not excuses at all. Rather, the people I was trying to see valued the encounter, and as such it is important to make sure that all parties are in the proper frame of mind. I was doing interviews in the context of informal visiting, and was not asking them to speak in their professional capacities. In return they were offering to show me themselves as persons. When getting together comes about specifically as a result of a coincidence of feeling, this is the best kind of encounter. It is much more difficult to plan and then hope it comes about on the day. The best things in life cannot be planned. As Lena (22, journalist) put it:

“I think things are better when it’s spontaneous. There’s more spirit in it. Like when I go swimming. If I could, I wouldn’t plan it at all. I’d just go, and the effect will be greater. You just let your body work, don’t think-just swim. But now I have many things to do and I can’t change them, so that means that I can go to the pool only at certain times. But if I could, I wouldn’t plan it at all.”

The importance attached to ‘feeling like it’ might seem odd at first, but a number of related time practices supports Marina’s suggestion that creating a context where everyone ‘feels like it’ is what is at stake.

Although more men than women tend to claim that they just use the phone for “purposeful” arrangement making, rather than to chit-chat, consistent across both genders is the importance of the immediacy of the telephone encounter. Once on the phone, it is considered self-evident that the other party is not concerned about time constraints. I mentioned to Lena the habit I had picked up while working in banking of asking people “do you have time to talk?” after I identify myself on the phone. She works with many Americans at a multi-national corporation and recognized this habit. She says it sounds silly in Russian: “Of course I have time, if I didn’t I’d tell you.” By entering the conversation, the person has already shown himself to be open to conversing, and thus part of who you are is manifested in the deed of talking. The politics of relating to one another lies partly in the fact of a shared immediacy itself.

Similarly, it is much more problematic to specify duration in Russia. In English, it does sound fairly officious to actually state the end time of a party, unless it is a work-related gathering. Amongst American ladies of a certain class and generation, however, stating the end time is actually a courtesy to one’s guests, as it allows the guest to make further plans. Not only is it strange to state an ending, but from an American perspective, Russian friends tend to avoid endings altogether, staying over at each other’s houses after drinking bouts, going to dachas for days on end, and leaving belongings at each other’s houses as if it were one’s own. Going to the theatre rarely implies simply going to the theatre; activities are strung together as if to make the point that

---

62 I posed this question to a variety of informants and most heartily agreed. No one I spoke with disagreed.
63 Among my informants who claimed this, their arrangement-making also avoided reference to time until the last possible moment.
the time in question is not directly related to the activity. Amongst good friends this can go on for
days if the conditions are right.

In tracing people’s telephone patterns, I found that a cultural premium on immediacy
framed a number of practices of interpersonal communications. There was a marked preference for
repeatedly calling until the person arrives home, rather than leaving a message. That is, it is better
to not establish contact at all until it can be fully commenced. Leaving a single message with
another member of the household is possible, but elaborate games of “phone tag” do not really take
place (hence, a low uptake of answering machines). There was also an underreporting of call
avoidance practices in comparison to UK studies. In the UK, when researchers asked people about
what they do to avoid calls, informants had developed a rather elaborate repertoire of gatekeeping
strategies: from having the kids answer the phone, allowing the machine pick up, telling friends not
to call at certain times, etc. (Anderson, Lacohee et al 1999). Not much of that seems to go on with
my informants. One can call late into the night, and calls during a meal is not terribly upsetting.
When I push the issue, some have said that they sometimes tell the family to say that they are not
home, but this strategy would only be used with the most unpleasant of persons, usually a former
lover. In addition, it is surprisingly common to happily entertain random caller and to chat with
people who have dialed the wrong number. Teenagers often phone random numbers when bored, in
hopes of meeting members of the opposite sex this way. I bore the brunt of this practice, as a group
of young men “accidentally” dialed my number for a period of 6 weeks, and each time attempted to
initiate a conversation with me.

Mobile phones were generally greeted with a good deal of enthusiasm. At the time of my
first field trip, people were unaware of or did not use the voicemail function, and text messaging
was virtually non-existent. In between trips, a new mobile phone company had entered the market
and text messaging became advertised as a feature. On my subsequent trip, I found that actually
phoning—even mobile to mobile—still took precedence over the cheaper option text messaging. As
an object, the mobile remained primarily ‘for’ talking. This was remarkable in a market normally
extremely price-sensitive. In contrast, working with UK university students, Standen (forthcoming)
argues that technology of text messaging can be used to avoid other forms of communication,
which is itself a kind of enhancement. This avoidance is accomplished with reference to time and
labor:

‘I suppose it’s a time thing, that perhaps having to actually dial the number, wait for them
to answer the phone, speak to them, have a conversation...that lasts longer than you typing
in the message just to say, ‘I’m going to be at such and such in 10 minutes, I’ll see you
there.’’

UK students see contact as something to be negotiated, carrying signals and symbols to be
potentially (mis)interpreted. Or rather, the negotiation itself is culturally more visible, something
kept in focus, and therefore the play of selecting which technology to use in sending
communication to others becomes its own drama. In the St. Petersburg case, the relationship is implied by the facts of temporal immediacy, and the negotiation is sent to the background.

In Russia, messaging of any kind is not instant, although the British students see it as such. Because it is asynchronous, it does not really count as an act of communication (or at least a significant one), and therefore it is illogical that messaging of any kind could enable spontaneous sociable action. Whereas texting someone in the library to meet up later for lunch is a kind of on-the-fly action here, in St. Petersburg the planning labor would be seen as a bit more onerous, and therefore not really spontaneous. In comparison with Standen’s research, it seems that it is not only the act of planning that is being rejected, but asynchronous action itself. Pagers, at one point, were very popular and still are more so than in the West. But they are not perceived as “useful” in the sense of enabling action. I had also been told on that pagers make matters worse, because if there is an emergency you know about it but still can do nothing about it.

Arguably, these practices to some extent could be accounted for as simply crystallizations of unthinking habit—a certain empty ritual that one simply performs knowing the expectations of others. However, the fact that so many new communications technologies have become available and have not seriously challenged the centrality of immediacy in interpersonal communications suggests to me that these ‘habits’ are rather more serious than they appear. In St. Petersburg, there is little conservatism towards gadgetry itself, although many an anecdote does circulate in self-mocking gestures that position Russians as backward, without the knowledge necessary to make good use of these gadgets. Instead, the disinterest in technologies of asynchronous communication has to overcome a certain interest in appearing “modern.” While some technologies enable both immediate and asynchronous communication (mobile phones, the Internet), others are left completely out of the set of “modern” objects to own and display (answering machines).64

What does not representing time do for relationships? It seems to me what it does represent is a certain kind of personhood. By inventing conventions for masking time, people send signals to one another. Indeterminant time becomes important at the very moment of opening dialogue. The interaction starts out with an implicit agreement to fail to plan both future face-to-face meetings as well as the present technology-mediated communication act. Through this play with discursive silences, participants know what is at stake in the interaction. This contextualization happens in a very particular manner: failures to represent time also reveals information about a person’s disposition—whether or no he or she ‘feels like it’. That is, while it is true in a theoretical way that relations are built in this kind of time, the idea of building implies a kind of artificiality, as if the relationship was somehow outside oneself. The knowledge about one another should seem like it was there all along and that it simply came out through the fortuitous coincidence of sharing

---

64 It is necessary to bear in mind that our own rhythms which demarcate the parade of objects signaling modernity is different from theirs. In Russia it is much more fluid through the ways in which technologies are used and consumed, but also because the time lag between when answering machines and the Internet became part of the scene is shorter by over a decade. Pagers are still in circulation in this part of the world,
experience. In this sense free time is a kind of denial of the outcome, which is why I refer to it as practices of “doing nothing.” Not talking about time makes meetings appear almost as if they occurred by happy coincidence of two individuals’ desires to see one another. Time appears to be invented on the fly even though it makes use of conventions to do so. Knowledge of the ‘true’ selves as respective individuals is produced through the very act of inventing a coincidence of feeling, ‘mysteriously’ showing up. An individual comes to know himself as a sociable person because he himself was part of that collective will that ‘happened’ to wish to come together at the same time. I see the failure to invoke representations of time as a performance of implicit group will—‘will’ here almost evoking Lenin’s call to principled social action when he disparaged ‘spontaneity’.

‘Spontaneity’ here is not at all something that arises without rhyme or reason, as in Lenin’s view of it as a lowly state of existence. In ensuring that the other person(s) in a social circle are in the mood for a get together, rather than planning ahead and hoping for good emotional weather, one can ensure a certain authenticity in mutual bringing out of selves. This is because part of the ‘true’ self has already been revealed in the arrangement-making. By making the encounter so highly volitional, a context is created which allows for the more positive sense in which collectivities rummage around individual’s mental interiorities. One has effectively let the other person into themselves by performing their very state of mind through time. Again, though, the very lack of representation suggests a communication not based on exchanging of views but something more phenomenological.

In a similar way, we might extend this principle to the way in which “doing nothing” time fits in with other temporalities. ‘Free’ time shifts the terms of the experience from being compelled to sharing a supposed coincidence of disposition with others. This does not mean that agency necessarily rests in individuals, who subsequently make a space of their own in resistance to compulsion. Rather, the importance of the coincidence suggests that in thinking about “doing nothing”, we should start from collectivities and observe how they individuate or particularize people. The appearance of the simple coincidence between mood and availability also precludes the idea that ‘free’ time can be stolen from other activities. “Doing nothing” time, one could say, is drawn out of other temporalities. It ‘evokes’ the clock without referring to it, it ‘evokes’ the idea of compelling one another to show up without making demands, and, as we will see in the next chapter, it ‘evokes’ cultural production while denying the result. The way “doing nothing” inhabits social lives suggests the kind of play of language that used to take place. ‘Free’ time can in fact ‘produce’ persons who understand their social world in ever-more creative ways, just as the anekdot produced ideas about social life in contradistinction to official discourse taken literally. Because it is not seen as stolen from the myriad political and economic forms that impinge, personhood is also ‘particular’ to the relevant collectivity and instance, not ‘split’ across spheres.
CHAPTER 5: ‘CULTURAL CAPITAL’ IN THE CULTURAL CAPITAL

“Saint Petersburg is the touchstone of a man: he who is living in it has not been carried away by the whirlpool of phantom life, who has managed to keep both heart and soul, but not at the expense of common sense, to retain his human dignity without falling into quixoticism—to him you can extend your hand…as to a man.”

Vissarion Belinsky

INTRODUCTION

The epigraph above rather grandly romanticizes city space as a kind of transformer of persons, a trope at work in literary imagery of St. Petersburg at least since Pushkin (Kelly 1998). These tropes often strike a sardonic note: Dostoevsky famously wonders in *A Raw Youth*, “and what if this mist suddenly evaporates and goes upwards, won’t all this rotten, slimy city go up with it, rise with the mist and vanish like smoke, and there will remain the former Finnish swamp, and in its midst, perhaps, for decoration, the bronze horseman on his hotly breathing, exhausted horse?”

While in the field I perpetually worried whether I was guilty of donning rose-tinted spectacles, mistaking people for literature, but I argue here that my suspicion of the existence of a romance of some kind was not my invention. Petersburg is quintessentially an evocative, transformative space, and these tropes, albeit a step removed from their literary form, inform inhabitants’ engagement with it.

In this chapter I argue that the evocativeness of city space is part and parcel of the temporal politics of building informal relationships. In this sense it could be considered a kind of cultural capital even though it does not function in a game of one-upmanship as Bourdieu originally envisioned. A thorough investigation of spatial imagination would be a thesis in its own right and I only wish to examine how evocativeness appears and disappears depending on the context. In the previous two chapters I examined how cultural constructions of time were used to forge new possibilities for making selfhood out of collectivities. The ability to play with representations, strategically half reveal them to one audience while denying their importance to another, was part of a wider process of loosening or undoing the ‘facts’ of culture without raising issues of belief or

---

65 Originally cited in Kelly (1998:208). Belinsky was an early radical socialist literary critic and member of Turgenev’s and Goncharov’s circles. He would later influence Chernyshevsky, but of most interest here are his parallels with Bachelard, in that he also saw that literary criticism began not with systematic academicism, but enthusiasm.

66 Ibid, 205.
pretense. In the postsocialist period, time has become a vital field for openings and closings of the self. A key technique to developing intimacy is the ability to share a formlessness of time constraints. This technique in turn has its own effects, one of which is spatial. If, as David Harvey argues (1989), the quickened pace of industrial capitalism has the ability to compress space in terms of both transport and visual culture, then what happens to space under different temporal politics is a compelling comparative question. I argue that in St. Petersburg, acts of failing to represent time generate an aesthetic of space that is fundamentally evocative. Space is given the power to evoke only in situations where time is stripped of possible form. Again, this formlessness could appear to people as natural rather than stripped of pre-existing cultural forms. It probably does appear as natural to the extent that “doing nothing” forms are quite often connected to the body and health. This temporal formlessness, though, is put to use. It also disassembles space, allowing persons to re-aggregate constituent parts. In this chapter I will argue that the disaggregated space that emerges in these contexts in turn has a number of social uses, from imagining social futures, to linking up people by constituting each other as a part of urban space, to reconstructing one’s own sense of moral being. I see all these things intertwined; in fact their very interconnectedness is what makes the respective elements effective.

To see how this is possible it is necessary to return to the discussion of poetics I began in the Introduction. Bachelard (1990) linked poetics and the imagination with reverie. Bachelard always described himself as an enthusiastic reader rather than literary critic. For him, reading was an act of imagination which built bridges between subject and object, reader and text. The literal reading of words was for him an exalted case of the wider phenomenon of imagination, which he saw as a joyous process of moving back and forth between subjects and objects, or a kind of dance with material, ideal and human forms. In some of his work this dance takes place in ordinary spaces rather than on the page, and in this transferral he also grasped the point of walking round the city. The constant refocusing on different forms, including constructions of self and society, produces its own poetic reverie. It is this constant refocusing, rather than a physical fragmentation and rearrangement of the space itself, which creates the overall aesthetic effect—a kind of effervescence. But of course, what you get is what you put in, and an enthusiastic reader must come forearmed with an otherwise serious unseriousness. In Wagner’s language, it gives us “unforced” opportunities for inventing and re-inventing culture. In this sense, play is just as much a means of inventing culture as the more deliberate endeavors of symphony writing or designing nanotechnologies. I see a kind of magical confluence at stake: a prescribed temporal formlessness does not generate a poetic aesthetics independently; rather, in making these contexts, people draw upon literary tropes of the city, artifacts of architecture, a geographic palimpsest of personal history and all sorts of ephemera to bring to life a Bachelard’s “shimmering” (1990). In this sense, there is a two-way flow between constructs of time and constructs of space. Time politics help to bring participants together, and establishes the context within which a certain kind of imagination can be

67 Most directly Poetics of Space (1990 (1969)).
forged, while the experience of this evocative space in turn makes the non-representation of time useful and meaningful. “Doing nothing” involves a chronotope where “time, as it were, thickens takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movement of time, plot, and history” (Bakhtin 1981:84).

The relation between visual assembly and time in capitalism is well known through David Harvey’s work (esp. 1989). The pastiche quality necessary to effect ‘shimmering’ is somewhat different from Harvey’s capitalist pastiche, which can be literally built into architecture (see also Mills 1998) and into other cultural forms. These too are less durable than they once were because of the premium capitalism places on speed and turnover. By contrast, the assemblages created while walking remain in the moments in which they were assembled, and so in a sense are more ephemeral but also invites the experience that the immediate present never had a sell-by date. Nevertheless, the undoing of space to some extent relies on how material forms are fixed to begin with. The relationship between space and identities has been well explored in contemporary anthropology. As Bourdieu puts it, space acts as “locus for the objectification of generative schemes” (Bourdieu 1977: 89). My question is, how are these generative schemes altered by time? For Petersburg, in the context of “doing nothing”, space does indeed constitute social relations. Identities and attachments around the city do exist and are significant, but they also partially dissolve, not necessarily through contestation, but in that their relation to subjects is thrown open for play. Selfhood and personhood are both important in the analysis, but in this case they do not emerge directly through a mapping of self and Other, but more through what Walter Benjamin calls “thought images” (denkbilder). Half-thoughts, leaving the possibility open for more discourse, is just as important as the content of who said what. The material ‘facts’ in city space are dissolved in terms of their representational qualities in the way they enable people to articulate and explore alternative social worlds, and experiment with the possibility of transforming boundaries.

This jumbling of persons and things can only be weakly traced to the disorientations at stake in other accounts of urbanism. Urbanism by definition entails a compactness, and thus necessitates a certain fluidity in the circulation of people and things that are bound together by physical proximity (Hannerz 1980). What Hannerz calls traffic relations or stranger encounters are indeed important, and in St. Petersburg too do involve a Goffman-like staging of personas. However, the city is not always a disorienting whirlpool of phantom life, the whirlpool only becomes meaningful in certain social situations. What makes Petersburg an evocative space entails a simultaneous construction and deconstruction. The deconstruction of time enables the construction of space in a way that builds on the natural facts, as it were, of urbanism’s fluidity. This also disrupts to a certain extent the model of consumptive reinterpretation, wherein elites

68 Examples of this vast literature might include Carsten and Hugh-Jones (eds) 1995 and Feld and Basso (eds) 1996. More broadly, this spatialized theme forms a central point in discussion of new configurations of anthropology as a discipline (Gupta and Ferguson 1997a,b).
produce an artifact of culture (“the city”) and the consumers rework it to their own ends. They are contemporary attempts to package St. Petersburg as an article for consumption—in fact, one could argue that there are innumerable historical precedents for this, starting with Peter’s founding of the city itself, and Catherine’s subsequent efforts to build a city to visually surpass other great European capitals. Petersburg’s sumptuousness was precisely for the consumption of foreign elites. The outcome of consuming the space for ordinary people, however, is not the conversion of the artifact into something of one’s own, but rather more limited to a fleeting chronotope of sorts. Here, as it was for Douglas and Isherwood (1979), objects do make analogies with and for cultural categories, but what people do with those analogies overrides what Douglas would have found to be structurally important about the analogies themselves.

In showing some ways that space is connected with time, I also suggest how this might contrast with the aesthetics of urban space in other contexts. If Belinsky’s Petersburger is not carried away with the whirlpool of phantom life, I am arguing that he certainly uses it rather effectively to create the kind of person to whom “you can extend your hand… as to a man.” But he only does this sometimes, in his own time; in other contexts he is elbowing little old ladies to get on the metro or jostling for an advantageous spot at the butcher counter. In these contexts time is decidedly not his own, as his workplace has the power to make him rush, and the shopgirl has the power to deign to serve only the other customers. There he is one of the Others; he does not extend his hand nor expect others to extend theirs. The image of fighting without rules I mentioned in Chapter 2 also has its own aesthetic and temporal flow that takes over in these contexts. So, with this heterogeneity in mind I first unpack the category of “guliat’” (to take a stroll), and describe who may participate in it, what kinds practices it entails. Then I explore some of its aesthetic qualities, drawing historical considerations into relationship with some of the more prosaic concerns of walking. Finally, I describe other movements around the city, such as provisioning and commuting, in order to put guliat’ and its spatial engagements into context.

GULIAN’E AS A PRACTICE

Petersburg does not lack for things to do; from sports, theater, and nightlife to the less formalized obshchenie and gulian’e are all vibrant aspects of everyday life. It is this latter practice of gulian’e that I shall focus on in this chapter. Gulian’e, together with obshchenie, is often what people have in mind when they agree to not represent time (see previous chapter). Guliat’ (the infinitive) is usually used to mean to go for a walk, although in colloquial usage it can mean a) to not be working, b) to make merry or live it up, and c) to go out with as in to have a sexual

69 An extreme example of this would be the marketplace, where many traders are from Central Asia and their ethnicity, combined with the activity of trading, demarcates the market as outsider territory, the border of which is perhaps least likely to be dissolved.

70 For geographical work along these lines, see Gold and Ward (1994).
relationship (ORD). All of these can be imminent in the same outing. The English “to go for a walk” often connotes doing it alone, and guliat’ usually refers to a small group activity. It is impossible to guliat’ to a particular place, like we would “go out” to the movies. It is an end to itself, although it is possible to combine it with other activities: you can go to the museum and then guliat’, or vice versa. It is possible phone friends and suggest going for a walk without seeming to lack funds to do other activities.

Bushnell (1988) shows how Soviet sociologists were perpetually fretting over “traditional” forms of leisure (gulian’e and obshchenie) impeding the development of cultured, developed Homo Sovieticus. “[Sociologist] Boris Grushin complained that the traditional leisure culture ignores ‘vitally important elements of culture, lacking which one cannot conceive of the development of the human spirit’” (Bushnell 1988:70). Recall from the previous chapter how time politics throughout the Soviet period largely consisted of the state attempting to inculcate a love of “high culture”. The state did, however, try engage the public through “low culture” forms which were nonetheless roughly acceptable to the state (Stites 1992). Bushnell himself, while accepting the legitimacy of the genuinely popularity of gulian’e, terms it “traditional” culture, in contrast with “modern” culture—i.e., the offerings of the performing arts, sports, and media. He locates the origins of progulki (walks) in a timeless peasant culture, and assumes largely that the practice of meeting on the street self-evidently contains few other social markers other than its dictionary definition, although as I argued in Chapter 4 everyday ‘unplanned’ sociability is a cultural achievement in its own right. If we remain content with concepts like “low culture” or “traditional culture”, then we miss entirely the ways in which gulian’e is about engaging with the “high culture” of the architectural legacy, or the very “modern” ways in which people talk about what this space means to them. Gulian’e, in its current form, is very much a process of using aspects of past and present embodied in the city landscape to constitute a particular kind of disposition to the contemporary world.

I did not systematically enquire about past forms of leisure, but I do have some evidence that gulian’e has in fact changed over time. According to one elderly woman with whom I was particularly close, it was in the early 1960s when socializing on the street first seriously overtook other forms of informal sociability. The preference up to that point was for young people to visit in each other’s houses. Even romantic relationships she says were conducted in this way, with young couples sitting at the dinner table sharing a meal with parents. Around this time young people moved out of doors and onto the streets, park benches and courtyards well into the night. The guitar played a critical role, and groups of acquaintances sang and caroused into the night. Yekaterina Yakolevna was keen to emphasize that this was not hooliganism, and that being out of the house did not constitute anti-social behavior. She attributed no other reason to this change in preference other than style. With her impressively extensive library of rare books which dated from the nineteenth century, Yekaterina Yakolevna was a member of the professional classes and conducted herself with the comportment of a woman with some status. Given that Bushnell and others trace
its origins to a time long before urbanization, perhaps her comments reflect the spread of this kind of entertainment to wider social groups rather than its reinvention. It was also around this time that informal kollektivi first became a part of sociality for urban intelligentsia and professional classes. Perhaps these invisible networks of relations took place in the streets as well as around kitchen tables.

The form of gulian’e that she describes, however, is somewhat different to what I was experiencing. Now, the guitar does not make its way onto the street, although is sometimes used in homes after prodigious intoxication leads to self-ironic singing. I was told during one such session that the Beatles’ Yesterday was the informal Russian national anthem, but “could you tell us what the words are, because no one knows them other than ‘Yesterday…’?” Another difference is that in its contemporary form in principle one may guliat’ at any time of day, but in practice I observed a tendency to do so before it has become fully dark. When it is dark, people tend to stick more to centrally crowded areas, partly for atmosphere and partly to avoid crime. Late-night carousing is more likely to take place in a night club or private homes outside of the White Nights period, at which point in twenty-four-hour light students, having finished their exams, lead the charge in holding a seemingly perpetual street fair. In interviews, people downplayed the tendency to avoid nighttime: the point to gulian’e was precisely its spontaneity, and the mood could conceivably strike at any time. The word guliat’ does not connote an evening stroll; rather, the proper social disposition for gulian’e is signaled through a shared ‘oblivion’ towards time.

The part of the city does not necessarily have to be an interesting one: I came to know a group of young men who would take a stroll every evening through the Pionierskaia region, a twenty-year old spalnyi rayon (sleeping region) which even to its inhabitants makes Birmingham’s Bull Ring look positively quaint. In these ‘boring’ everyday places, an informal typology of the housing stock has developed to keep things interesting (tochki, “points”, korablia, “ships”, and names according to who was head of state when they were erected). Parks, which varied from an empty city block to entire islands and lesoparks (forest parks), were more heavily used than a Westerner might expect. In one telling interview I asked a young couple how often they went to the island parks north of Vasilevski Island, which would constitute a small excursion. They lamented the time available for such activities, and then said “oh, very rarely…maybe once a month.” This was in addition to spending time in the park smaller two blocks away, as well as all the other sociable activities of visiting, and “high culture” entertainments. Many people felt that market pressures had shrunk the possibilities for making good use of the urban environment, yet these were precisely the same people who were so successful at ensuring these outings came off at all, and during these outings making it seem as if time had no power to constrain them.

71 This comment was made while there was debate over the ‘other’ official national anthem, which at the time was a complex wordless composition.
The level of conscious engagement with the environment varies from outing to outing. Some excursions are more akin to going out for a pint, others assume the character of a day out playing tourist. On four separate occasions I heard people sarcastically remark that for those who live in Kupchino—a sleeping region in the south of the city with a severe problem with transport connections to the rest of the city—to \textit{guliat’} down Nevsky Prospect is like a holiday. There is some truth to this: on civic holidays or when schools let out Nevsky is in fact noticeably more crowded. And, of course, some holidays such as Victory Day or the famous White Nights, are largely a \textit{progulka} en masse.

There are no entirely “off limits” areas of the city, especially in comparison with American cities,\textsuperscript{72} although industrial areas are seen as unsuitable for these purposes. One is more likely to \textit{guliat’} in one’s own neighborhood (which is usually delineated in the imagination by the metro), the historic center, or one of the larger parks scattered throughout the city. One would not go to a different residential area just to \textit{guliat’}. In fact, Petersburgers are relatively loyal to their neighborhoods. This is partly because of convenience, but also partly because the way in which social networks are located in neighborhoods makes for an element of spectacle. More often than not when adult children finally do find separate flats, these are either within walking distance or, ideally, in the same building as one of the extended families. Neighbor-ship is not a close social relationship on its own as it is in Armenia (Platz 2000), but friendships between particular

\textsuperscript{72} There are some neighborhoods which are known to have more crime than others, but it is not the case that certain categories of people may not enter.
neighbors are frequent. The term “neighbor” (sosed) is used most commonly for those living in the same building, or perhaps adjacent buildings. Relations of friends, neighbors and kin tend to be distinguished not by these terms, but rather the practical, everyday intimacy that exists between persons of any of these categories (see previous chapter). Extended families often chose to live within walking distance, and schools act as a force for bringing social relations into the neighborhood. Classmates grow up together, and can visit each other without parental bussing. There are not so much networks of neighbors as much as networks in a particular neighborhood. So, when a person chooses to go out to guliat’, the potential to see familiar faces is real. The potential is also there for popular areas of the historic center, because metro stops often act as a bottleneck for pedestrian traffic. However, while neighborhoods in St. Petersburg do have a discernibly high level of social connectedness, it is by no means the case that they function as little villages. Everyone does not know everyone else, not even on the same staircase. The presence of “anti-social neighbors”—heroine addicts, rich people, rowing alcoholics, and thugs—and the perceived Herculean efforts necessary to initiate even the cleaning of the stairwell generally prohibits the prospect of neighborhoods developing overly village-like coziness. This spatial configuration of people also contributes to the sense of unexpectedness central to gulian’e.

Who may guliat’ and what is the appeal? Indeed, for men especially guliat’ corresponds to our sense of “going out” in yet another way. They tend to take a stroll with beer in hand, and perhaps some nuts or dried fish, so in a sense they too are “going out for a pint” of sorts. One man told me of a conflict he had with a Frenchman over this. He had suggested they take a stroll, and pointed in the direction of the corner shop where they could purchase beer. The Frenchman was puzzled, and said “no, we can stop in a café if you want some beer.” My friend said he actually felt uncomfortable for the rest of the time, not quite knowing what to do with himself in all this empty-handed stopping and starting. When I informed him that walking with an opened beer is illegal in the United States, he was downright shocked. Sociability itself was banned! This, however is not a direct incarnation of the notorious Russian love of alcohol. Legally, beer is not treated as an alcoholic drink, despite the glaring defiance of facts. It is improper and shameful to drink vodka on the streets, but appropriate to drink beer. Interestingly, sales of beer have more than doubled since 1996, putting many vodka firms under economic pressure.73 The leisurely, subdued sociability which characterizes gulian’e and is associated with beer drinking may in fact be on the rise, quantitatively speaking.

Gulian’e is a practice open to everyone physically able to walk. It can be a family activity, or for young and old groups of friends, couples, single sex and mixed groups. Rain makes for an unpleasant outing, but the cold does not automatically constitute a hindrance. Our local city-block wide park was always teeming with life, whether it be the mums with prams in the morning, or the mix of students and working people in the evening, regardless of temperature. Pensioners seemed to rule the park roost. While men usually occupied themselves with chess, the women engaged in

what can only be described as pigeon-like behavior. A ‘flock’ of babuski typically occupies a set of benches, two more ‘fly’ in from the other side of the park and the rest rustle around a bit in acknowledgment of the new arrivals. The eating of the sunflower seeds then continues unabated.

I am being tongue in cheek about the babuski, not because I found them unpleasant or disagreeable; in fact I admired them for their steadfast refusal to retire from life on the street. However, my younger and middle-aged informants see them as partly public fixture, and partly mode of surveillance. Members of younger generations do empathize with pensioners’ suffering on the whole, and recognize the sacrifices they have made, but there are some inter-generational antagonisms, and street life is one way that antagonism manifests itself. That is, the babuski keep themselves active in public spectacle through their knowledge of comings and goings, (as well as maintaining their own intragenerational relationships), while younger generations counteract this knowledge by talking about them as if they were part of the furniture. Their presence on the street is nonetheless marked, and part of the social landscape activated (or strategically de-activated) in the process of gulian’e.

There does seem to be an economic component to gulian’e, although this is overemphasized by sociologists. The cost of doing other forms of leisure—whether it be going to a café, doing some sport activity, or attending a night club—make these activities not impossible, but impossible to do with any regularity. This, of course, varies hugely according to the venue and how much one actually consumes or participates. Gulian’e offers more economical possibilities for socializing, and can easily be combined with some of these other commercial offerings. Commerce, in turn, does respond to some of the creative inclinations of would-be punters. To some extent nightclubs and bars do reflect the imaginativeness of gulian’e and further the possibilities of the city’s Gogolesque unreal guise. In the past two years the amount of coffee bars has skyrocketed, leaving inhabitants to sarcastically wonder where they can get a cup of tea. Interestingly, theater productions typically cost half as much as going to see the latest Hollywood blockbuster. My informants therefore could tell their Puccini from their Wagner partially from interest, partially from economic necessity. Part of it, though, has to do with perceptions of value. Restaurants tended to be avoided unless some ritual called for it, because there was very little perceived value in paying for what could be prepared at home for a fraction of the cost. Because of these ideas about consumption, gulian’e is not necessarily in direct competition with other forms of leisure. Many of the new postsocialist entertainments, such as the “prestigious” gambling halls and strip bars catering to the elite, hold no interest and are even ridiculed outside their narrow clientele. Even for venues which are not aimed at these types of people—such as jazz clubs or youth-oriented night clubs—the act of going out to a nightspot has a certain kind of deliberateness to it anyway, and is almost qualitatively different from gulian’e. A person might call into a coffee bar, but never really “just pop in” to a nightclub in a similar way. The extent to which people participate in gulian’e is

74 In terms of economic activity (rather than leisurely street life) pensioners are often economically active not out of choice but out of necessity.
not just the product of economic default but offers certain pleasures which other activities cannot. The interest held with people I had just met who were concerned to show me their city, as well as for people I had come to know quite well. I kept being shown the city long after I had ‘seen’ it, and so I am convinced that my attributing such importance to city space is not just a function of people trying to help orient me to a new place. I think it is the other way round: that gulian’e is so central to local ideas about friendliness and sociability, the best way for them to show me something of themselves was to take me round the city.

GULIAN’E AS AESTHETIC PRODUCTION

It is doubtless that analogues to gulian’e could be found elsewhere, not only in Mediterranean strolling but right here in London (Reed 2002). Reed’s work amongst London city history enthusiasts shows how for them, walking is about imagining past visual forms through small clues still in the present. In doing so, they reify the city as a person: they say it has a personality. Acts of visual imagination is what makes gulian’e so important in St. Petersburg, some of which does involve historical reconstruction. The visual aspect of gulian’e relies not so much on getting the reconstruction right, nor making the city appear as a person, but rather throwing multiple elements into play, including buildings and passers-by. A kind of historical sensibility is nonetheless central because in Petersburg “history” is quite frequently bundled with places otherwise appropriate to leisure. Surrounding the city are five tsarist-era palace-park complexes which locals use for informal outings. In the center, parks the size of Cambridge city center are littered with former stately homes, some of which have been restored as museums, others taken up by the beneficiaries of privatization. Other parks served as Soviet memorials to the military or war dead. In strolling around these places, one gets the sense that the point to such memorializations is very much to attribute enormous scale—through sheer size or ornateness—to that which is being memorialized. While they are typically used more for the park space than the historical value, it is impossible to ignore entirely.

In a sense these places suggest themselves as sites of memory, and require some discussion of them as lieux de memoire (Nora 1996). Equally, however, people approach them in quite active ways. Places labeled “historical” still manage to attract the lion’s share of attention, and bookshops are brimming with sections devoted to local architecture and history. It is difficult to find a household which does not contain a selection of them. There are also evening classes for adults and children on city history and architecture which enjoy a fair degree of popularity, and it is recognized as a hobby. Even those who have not made it into a hobby still engage with this aspect of city life at a remarkable level. In fact, it is possible to go overboard, as one woman explained: “I sometimes find it interesting [people in my company talking about the buildings they pass by], but sometimes it is annoying because I cannot take in that much information when I want to relax.” Part of this is caught up in sober sharing of knowledge, particularly when children and ignorant

75 Roberts, Boutenko et al 2001 see leisure possibilities as a function of economic resources.
foreigners are involved, but buildings on the whole are rather plainly addressed, not made into sites of homage.

Historian Pierre Nora (1996) observes that memory and history two different things. History, in the sense of professional re-accounting of events, is meaningful only when some rupture in memory occurs. Memory, real memory, is “life, always embodied in living societies and as such in permanent evolution” (1996:3). Embodied in social habits, and transmuted across time, Nora finds a modern gulf between memory and “history, which is how modern societies organize a past they are condemned to forget because they are driven by change…At the heart of history is a criticism destructive of spontaneous memory. Memory is always suspect in the eyes of history, whose true mission is to demolish it, to repress it” (ibid). One need not accept his implication that modernity has a geography to accept his insight that the disenchantment of History need not have the final word. “Lieux de memoire are fundamentally vestiges, the ultimate embodiments of a commemorative consciousness that survives in a history which, having renounced memory, cries out for it” (1996: 5). These can be literal places, such as museums and archives, or festivals, calendar rituals, and canonical historical accounts. Nora is ambivalent about the connection with literature, flinching at his own reference to Proust, but in the Petersburg context literary canons must count as lieux de memoire. The significance of lieux de memoire is not in their one-for-one relation to history, but in their ability to act as “a circle within which everything counts, everything is symbolic, everything significant. In this sense, the lieu de memoire has a dual nature: it is a hermetic excrescence upon the world, defined by its identity and summed up by its name but at the same time open to an infinite variety of possible other meanings” (1996: 21).

Nora’s work is in this sense not unlike Walter Benjamin’s (1970, 1979). Benjamin too is concerned with both de-mystifying and re-enchanting. For Benjamin (1977:177) the events of history shrink up and become absorbed in the setting. History as it is lived (i.e., Nora’s memory) is not told through stories but images. His denkbilder, fleeting fusions of thought and vision, achieve this social re-enchantment. Susan Buck-Morss (2000), drawing on Benjamin, conducts an interesting exercise in writing a history of 20th century Russia as a meta-assembly of denkbilder, with the express purpose of sifting through the rubble of modernity to see what might be recovered. Her work resonates with Nora’s sense of historical rupture, although her usage of rupture is to contest the very notion of the supposed rupturing effects of the progressive march of modernity. Petersburgers, too, seek connections amongst time’s ruptures, and this seems possible only because sites of memory can act, as Nora suggests, as an idea that seems to be summed up in its name but insists on very few concrete meanings. Also following Benjamin, Kathleen Stewart (1996) observes that in Appalachia, memory sits in places, but does so nervously and hauntingly. I did not detect the kind of haunting poetics of Stewart’s Appalachia in St. Petersburg. Although there is much that is lamented and even scolded, my informants considered themselves at the heart of cultural production, in the “cultural capital” rather than its outskirts. The other stereotype—the
“window on the West”—does not summon equivalent interest or elaboration. Perhaps because of this they are more likely to find, like Buck-Morss does, cause for ‘modern’ redemption in these lieux de memoire.

Just as Nora suggested, Petersburgs’ lieux de memoire have power as re-enchantments with the past while at the same time remaining symbolically within themselves—that is, they do not propose an unfolding of a definitive narrative beyond themselves. At its most crudely literal, the city houses lieux de memoire whose prominence and importance as symbols of national past cannot be overestimated: Tsarist empire building, the “storming” of the Winter Palace, the shifts in capitals, and of course, the wartime siege, the latter of which helped the then Leningrad ultimately achieve lasting legitimacy as a properly Russian city. The connection of these events with physical places have in many cases been deliberately made into lieux de memoire by the memorializing practices of the regimes which followed them. If geography is a palimpsest, then this is a frighteningly rich one. War dead, artists, poets, generals, the inevitable Lenin and even architects themselves are all hyper-memorialized into urban space, through sculpture, park space and/or preserved buildings. It is hard to overestimate too the importance of the literary and musical canons as lieux de memoire in St. Petersburg. Dostoevsky in a sense inhabits Cennaia Ploshad’, which has retained the underbelly character of Crime and Punishment, Akhatova, Shostakovich, and Mussorgsky all “live” in their respective museums and concert halls. Some sites are known more for the stories behind them than their present-day attributes, such as the Enzhineernyi Zamok, which Alexander I built as protection against assassination only to be assassinated within its doors. Others are simply remembered for their unfathomable grandeur, as in the oft-repeated postulations about the number of staircases contained in the Hermitage. Still others are more kitschy reminders of what once was memorialized, such as the busts, statues and plaques of Marx and Lenin to which no one seems to pay any heed (see Boym 1994).

Walking round Petersburg often gives the sense of walking around ruins; a sense felt by foreigner especially but locals also in more laconic moments. Contemporary city planning politics now revolve around restoration of Historic Petersburg rather than putting a new, post-socialist mark on the landscape or for that matter making acutely needed repairs on the transport lines. Luzhkov’s Moscow is the precise opposite, becoming almost a Russified Disneyland (see Grant 2001). However, despite official interest in rebuilding historical space, there is not one narrative that one might contest or subscribe to, and I could find few consistencies in what locals seem to think these spaces suggest. City space does serve to remind people about morality and the frailty of human behavior as for Basso’s Apache (1996). But in Petersburg there is an enormous ironic distance and

---

76 It is worth noting that up until the late Soviet period its “Western” elements were thought to contribute to its supposed unnaturalness by its critics. The “window on the West” trope was not originally an indigenous one, but an invention of an Italian traveler. Peter I was famous for saying “We need Europe for a few decades and then we must show it our ass” (Volkov 1996).

77 The visual arts play somewhat second fiddle to these canons, as they have historically had more problematic relations with the powers that provide official memorialization. They do have a kind of geography, if less well known.
eclectic selectivity placed between persons and what is being ‘remembered’. This distance resonates with Nora’s argument that professional history interrupts memory (a discipline not alien to Russia), but to this we must add that the recent past dismantled any comfortable certainty about time always moving ‘forward’ and history having a logical progression. Some people do take the idea of going back in time quite seriously. Sometimes going back is seen as the only way forward, such as the man who claimed that pre-1917 history is the only ‘real’ history, while others used the ruptures of the 1920s to suggest that a future rupture is needed to wipe away the postsocialist trash. With all these different narratives, visiting lieux de mémoire in Petersburg is like entering a temporal Moebius strip.

There is also a direct way in which the city asks to be read, and this too is equally inconsistent. In the early 90s, there was a flurry of interest in place renaming, and even confusion as both new and old names were used. I find it interesting though, that just as there was never a wholesale elimination of the past from city architecture or social life, in the naming game too there is only a partial changing of the guard. So Ul. Nekrasova stayed as such from before 1917 till the present, 3aia Sovietskaia came into existence in Lenin’s day and still exists, and Voznezkii Propekt became Dzherzhinskii Prospekt in 1924, and reverted to Voznezkii in 1991. As Lemon (2000) points out for Moscow, the metro stop names, all of which evoke one national hero or another, fade into the unregistered background in the context of day-to-day travelling, but everyone has their favorites, and they can fall in and out of fashion. The ubiquitous plaques identifying the historical significances of various buildings are treated in a similar fashion. Quite a few of them relate to the minutiae of Lenin’s meetings during the revolution, but they also announce the achievements, whereabouts, and suicides of various literary figures. So here we have a city which in every way announces itself as a kind of web of significance, and yet in the succession of naming and renaming, there is no sense in which this web imbues its narrative with any identifiable agenda. This is less narrative than it is memorialized cacophony. There is a partial narrative only through its silences: as of yet there is no Yeltsin Street or Trotsky Prospect.

City planning, in terms of the arrangement of space, has been equally fitful. From the promenades, canals and vistas built into the city at its inception, to Stalin-era attempts at shifting the administrative and political center to the south (not coincidentally along the road to Moscow), to late Soviet planning principles based on equal access to distribution points, Petersburg embodies innumerable social projects. As the private car was not a large consideration for socialist planners, the pedestrian is nevertheless catered for throughout these different agendas. With the exception of industrial areas there exists a city which in its entirety does in fact encourage pedestrians, provides discernable routes, vista, green spaces and places to stop and rest intervaled to

---

78 When they are shown attention, it is in terms of kitsch, a theme explored by Boym 1994.
79 Some cities do retain dual naming systems; it is also not uncommon to hear “Leningrad” being spoken of in the present.
80 See Andrusz, Harloe and Szelényi (eds) (1996) and White (1979) for an overview of socialist urban planning.
walking scales. The metro informs where and how people walk, but especially in the center, transport is good enough to make walking more a choice than necessity. The geography did not make the Petersburg love of gulian’ë, but it fairly consistently encourages it.

How does this ambivalence of historical space, which nevertheless insists on its own significance, appear in practice? One might start by noting that while much has been commercialized, that commercial space somehow is not seen as dominating historicized space; instead, both are subsumed by their own ability to provide spectacle. It is true that Nevsky Prospect is Petersburg’s equivalent of Broadway. The interest in Nevsky, however, is not really in the hunt for acquisition (in fact, with some exceptions my informants could not hope to purchase anything there) but in the spectacle of it all—the well dressed and not-so well dressed women, the colorful signs, and the possibilities of the random encounter. In a well-known passage, Gogol describes it using the technologies of his day, but the effect is still contemporary:

“O, do not trust that Nevsky Prospect!… all is deceit, all is a dream, all is not what it seems! … It lies at all times, this Nevsky Prospect, but most of all when night settles on it in a thick mass… when the whole city turns into thunder and glitter, myriads of carriages come pouring over the bridges, the postilions shout and leap on their horses, and the devil himself lights the lamps expressly in order to show everything off in an unreal guise” (as in Kelly 1998: 204)

Gogol suggested that strolling down Nevsky Prospect is also somewhat of a macabre enterprise. His imagery equally applies to contemporary experience, as exemplified in this artwork on recent display locally:
Figure IV. Artist Evgenii Tikotskii’s Nevsky Prospect (2001, top left) and White Nights (1999, top right, both oil and canvas). Gogol’s “unreal guise,” here provided by the midnight sun (bottom) is what the punters come out for.
Nevsky in some respects has retained its Gogolesque atmosphere—legions of local mafiosi and women of varying repute pull up in Mercedes to key establishments along its stretch. This is where ordinary people might get a glimpse of their display as they step out of luxury cars and into casinos. There is, however, no sense of direct danger and for those not involved in their circles these characters are more like actors in a costume drama.

While the shops along Nevsky are usually referred to as pretty or pleasant to the eye, this has not yet been Disneyfied into a total “experience” controlled by marketing artifice. Commercial spaces announce themselves through signage, and in the case of the marketplace, display of commodities. In other parts of the city, there are indeed commercial establishments and marketplaces for both goods and foodstuffs. Outside of Nevsky they are used primarily for provisioning, not shopping as leisure. One would not really go shopping as a pleasurable activity. In limiting its uses, the unarticulated space for commerce is not really made into a “commercial place” as such. With a few exceptions, commerce is still widely denied placehood. In popular areas the colors in the signage for shops contribute to the overall cacophony of life in street. On Nevsky, ‘history’ too is an equal part of that spectacle, contributing to the overall effect.

The spectacle of Nevsky Prospect intensifies the more general importance of spectacle in gulian’e. Besides the intimacy of chatting with one’s family and friends, which could be accomplished in homes, one of the pleasures of gulian’ e is in the sociality of artifice. The artifice is dual, embedded in both objects and people. To guliat’ partly entails to see-and-be-seen, particularly if it takes place along Nevsky Prospect. One woman explained, “guliat’--eto schtobi posmotret’ i pokozat’ cebe” (guliat’ is to have a look and show yourself off). Women are quite used to wearing high-heeled shoes for this activity, and there is a very strongly differentiated set of house clothes and outside clothes which is rarely violated. There is an unwritten requirement to put some effort into one’s display, even for men. Part of what makes it appealing, carnivalesque even, is this aspect of collectively dressing up.

This has certain parallels with political discourse. Recall Sveta’s comment, referring to politics, that, “I know that I am an individual, and I manage [just like that]... Yes, I would like to stand out from the crowd, but I’m not so egotistical to think that I can do this.” It is important to stand out from the crowd without actually appearing as if this is the intent, to be a person without being an egoist, both in politics as well as everyday action. As with Kharkhordin’s account of collective individualism (1999), a certain uniqueness is valued, whether it be talents or, in this case, stylistic acumen. But this uniqueness should not allow itself to be seen as exceptionally showing. So here too we have a prescribed multivocality of intent. A person must appear to have made an effort,

---

81 Actually, there are exceptions: I have on two occasions done some shop browsing with informants, but this was never with the intention of buying. “Shopping” does not have a direct translation, one either makes purchases (delat’ pokupki) or walks around (guliat’).
82 However, amongst the children of the monied classes, the stylistic repertoire also incorporates more androgynous, dressed-down styles imported from Western Europe.
and as such articulate a kind of individual uniqueness, but not so much so that it could be remotely
construed as ego inflating. Artifice is part of the show, but class differentiation is more problematic.
The primary way to get around this is actually avoiding clothing that is obviously expensive, and
instead choose items that are simply hard to find or make them yourself. This may involve some
expense, but the expense itself is not what is being performed. Moreover, like the broader sense of
self made through collectives, groups of friends also work to make each other’s material uniqueness.
One person may know how to sew, and the rest of the group puts in a request for this or that
specification, and supplies the appropriate fabric. Individuality is assured, and any flamboyance no
longer signals class differentiation because the whole group helped to make it.

Gulian’e involves aestheticized encounters with strangers, but as Hannerz observes for other
cities, the possibility of unexpectedly encountering acquaintances and friends has its own social
implications. Babushki famously enjoy spotting the characters going past their benches. Small
groups will often encounter others on the street, or more commonly near the metro, as it serves as
both bottleneck for traffic as well as designated meeting place to begin a progulka. The frequency
with which these coincidences on the street occur suggests that city space is not experienced as a
kind of alienating, anonymous big bad world into which the innocent is thrust. Nor does it foster
characters akin to Baudelaire’s flaneur, who roams elegant Parisian streets finding solitude in the
crowd, perhaps spotting a trinket or two. Here it is best to go out in couples or small groups, up to
about five, and one is more likely to spot familiar faces than something to acquire. Acquaintance-
ship is about establishing familiarity, but is also about the maintenance of possibilities: possible
exchanges of things or knowledge (about the self or something more utilitarian), the possible
introduction to third and fourth persons, or even just the possibilities of imagining yourself
associated with a certain kind of person. Gulian’e is a good way of keeping the possibilities of
acquaintanceships active. But visually, acquaintances are also vital to city space: they are familiar,
and thus a point of interest, but do not necessarily invite obligation to ask the other party to join you,
which keeps the space open for further encounter. By spatially circulating acquaintances and friends,
gulian’e renders the city both familiar and spectacle. In Wagner’s language, gulian’e is a practice of
social particularization in that it is always imagined as something unique or exceptional, particular
to that instance in time. While there are stylized, conventionalized ways to perform gulian’e, a
successful gulian’e is a shared nonconvention. No two trips are alike, which makes it possible to do
many times in the same space. Gulian’e offers a parade of opportunities to express and show one’s
dispositions towards this or that minutiae to one’s immediate company, and so is a collective way of
particularizing. The presence of others create a vibrancy and a participatory element in this visual
cacophony, and doing nothing comes to appear suspiciously like doing something rather interesting.

Just as there are always new characters on the street, new “evidence” for plot generation is
always at hand: a shop opens or closes, a balcony teetering by a steel thread finally breaks off its
edifice, or a stalled construction job has some official-looking man walking round it. The fixtures are themselves ambiguous, and sometimes not even fixed. Fallen leaves, trash, fog—all sorts of ephemera have their parts to play. The city is heterogeneous enough to leave an infinite possibility for retelling, incorporating and leaving out elements, or imagining new possibilities. The circulation of familiar and unfamiliar faces can sometimes prompt a re-orientation of these stories, or sometimes simply reconfirms the sense of the physical immediacy of sociality. Although people would account for their motives behind gulian’e by saying it was simply “interesting” or “pleasant”, the reason it tends to rank higher than film or television must be that it helps the lazy intellect, but does not propose a narrative. Each face or material fragment is an additional potential point of focus, quickening the pace of the constant shifting focus between self and environment. Bachelard saw that space had the power to elicit the poetic imagination just as literature does, and in St. Petersburg strangers and friends are all part of the making of poetics. The stories told never seek to have endings, interrupt themselves, and rely on the physical environment for their telling, and so do not fit easily with our ideas about discourse.

Historicized space is quite often personalized through family history or other attachments. The close social ties to neighborhoods means that even when people in the network no longer live there, their former houses, schools and the like are still places worth remembering. The state of a given park or building might be used to recall what it used to look like, or equally what it could look like if ‘society’ were willing to put resources into it. This in turn might prompt an accounting of the kinds of social relations that used to, or could, take place in it. People often forge deep attachments to particular artifacts situated around the city, as if these things were part of some wider ‘collective’ in which to reveal and refashion the self. Occasionally these can be physically located inside buildings. My neighbor would frequently call into the Hermitage to visit Rafael’s Madonna Connestabile. This piece suggested to her an image of ‘natural’ motherhood, which she contrasts with the “unnatural” conditions many mothers now find themselves in. Sometimes individuals relate ‘society’ s’ history to themselves by claiming unique knowledge. One man, after having shown me his grandmother’s flat from before the revolution, led me just round the corner, approached an unmarked building and insisted that “Rasputin lived here”. He would not say how he knew this; instead he claimed in a mysterious voice that he just knows these things. At other times individual histories are talked about as if they had connections to places by virtue of architectural style (“my family used to live in a building just like that… the flat seemed so big then”). Churches are also not unheard of stops in gulian’e, either for making the connection with life beyond the self through spiritual means, to reassert some personal history which took place there, or sometimes just because

---

83 Some of these women are less mobile than the term gulian’e would suggest, but it is interesting to know that the goings-on of the street are considered to begin the moment one exits the building, and more likely to take place in courtyards and small parks.

84 My partner and I thought he was making it up for our benefit, and making a claim to fame for himself. The reader can imagine our astonishment when, two years later, we were having a quiet supper watching a BBC documentary when the camera lingered over the very same steps we had ourselves photographed to display to this man our interest, and a voice off-screen said “Rasputin rented a flat in this building....”.
they are simply nice places to be. Those who insist that the only “real history” is pre-Soviet history strategically eliminated Soviet era artifacts from the present landscape through feigned ignorance. In contrast, an avant garde artist I knew kept finding birthplaces of the revolution wherever we went.

At other times senses of self are summoned through contemporary alterations to the landscape. There is a large gray building on the Fontanka canal about which all my informants seem to have an opinion. This building, an older building with high ceilings and a courtyard that has had some upkeep (a rarity for the city), has become a focal point for talking about what it means to live in a society stratified by class. The wealthy are gradually buying up the communal flats inside, turning them into single-family flats of locally absurd proportions. Some laugh at this extravagance, some laugh and condemn, and a few simply condemn. Many are ambivalent; after all, at least the building itself is tasteful, unlike the monstrosities under construction in the suburbs. Those with significant resources, however, tend to refer to it as the best address to have and yet themselves laugh at the homogenous sea of Mercedes parked in the courtyard. As I walked by it with my neighbor, the building prompted her to share the more general principle that “you can tell who is who in this city: the flats with new windows contain New Russians, the flats with old ones contain everyone else.” People do talk about class, but in this context it is also thrown open as an article of visual spectacle, and people are far less rigid in what they think class means than when they are lamenting about “our problems.” To borrow from Bakhtin’s phrase, laughter may or may not build stakes. But one could say with some confidence that laughter does manage to throw open multiple possibilities at once. By generating social principles with the unlikely help of windows, or by pointing out that at least “they” had the decency to develop a respectable piece of architecture, passers-by are bringing to the foreground the uncertainty of social life in a way that suits them, and forging possibilities for ‘laughter’ long after the supposedly subversive anekdot had its day.

Another common theme surrounds the importance of trash. Rubbish—and here I mean literal rubbish, not artifacts of bad taste—has the power to bring to the surface strong emotions about postsocialism. For many people, across generational and economic spectrums, the ubiquity of trash signals a betrayal of humanity and society. Trash inevitably summons tropes of “it didn’t look like this before,” and invites theories of why it is in such a state now. These theories were not elaborately reasoned ideas, but emotional ones. Talk about trash seemed to add up to a sense that humanity itself had abandoned the city. The problem was more than just that there were few resources to clean it up, but that it was a sign of deeper breakdown of social relations. This abandonment of social life was talked about as an all-permeating condition. Few people made arguments to the effect that if you do not defecate on your doorstep there is no reason you should pollute the space outside it (although some did; this is a friend’s imagery). More often, trash marked the “now” which “before” didn’t exist. This “now” seemed to be about an absence of social persons, or rather people reduced to acting in a state of animality. Analogies were often made between inanimate trash and the people who had been thrown out on the street like trash. If life had descended into a Hobbesian state of nature, trash signaled that this occurred not because of a lack of
enlightenment-style state, but (to invoke the ‘other’ European tradition of romanticism) because the people had lost their greater sense of humanity, their “culturedness”, and had become themselves nasty, brutish and short. Selfhood had developed without collectivity, and therefore without personhood.

If trash was often used as an indicator for life “now” in a general sense, there is an arsenal of tropes available for articulating ideas about the future as well as one’s own participation in the present. Some use city space to evoke dreamy visions of the past as templates for the future. Tropes of renewed Russian greatness come from the most unlikely sources, usually not out of nationalistic concerns but simply on the back of more prosaic comments about civic art, trash, or (as it was with my artist friend)85 wondering about when a new period like the 1920s would emerge, in which a person could realize himself. Some people in their twenties use all they dislike about their environment to reassert their own control over the future. They frequently use passers-by over the age of forty to talk about previous generations having gone awry (sometimes not terribly sympathetically). They made claims that their generation will gradually teach “society” how to live “like normal people” as it came into positions of power. Images of “normal people” entailed those who simply had the capacity to identify with others and interact with them accordingly. Is there a new generation striving for sobornost’ in all but name?

Of course, these are all dreamy visions of social life, more performative than workable plan. The way in which trash so easily provokes outpourings of social disappointment is, admittedly, a disturbing vision, but no more instrumental than the utopian half-designs for generational takeover. In the very act of sharing these sentiments, and allowing them to be seen by others, people are indeed re-establishing the very sense of social empathy with each other that they see as destroyed. The sense of connectedness travels primarily through face-to-face engagement and interpersonal relations, which makes it very hard to see where the power lies to take on a task like changing ‘society’. Change, at any rate, is almost universally seen as a long way off if possible at all, and so it makes much more sense to invest in interpersonal relationships which, through practices such as gulian’e, really do embody at least for the moment the social forms wished for wider society. Social life is sometimes constituted through the everyday minutia of ordinary life, as in talk of who is wearing what or whether to share another beer or ice cream. Sometimes this minutia itself slides into sweeping visions of past, present, or future. Through these imaginings, which usually consist of half-formed thoughts and visual interruptions reinterpreted as promptings for a different angle or new theme altogether, one puts something of oneself in the social mix. My informants were effectively doing in everyday life what Buck-Morss (2000) seeks to do in literary form. In this way, accounts of social life are often as embodied and unstable as life as it is lived, and doubles as real enactments of social life itself. However central eclectic and unstable tropes are to the process, two factors do remain consistent. The first is that an overall aesthetic of poetic reverie, or the easy

85 The members of the avant garde scene that I knew actively avoided memorialized places of art, such as the state museums. “High art” was more of a concern for non-artists.
jumbling of persons, things, and ideas enables talk to continue to flow with an overabundance of new forms. The second consistency is that small groups of people share this whirlpool of phantom life, and give each other the right context in which to make analogies between their personal immediate circumstances, the past, and the future. In this way, imaginative talk is not some asocial blathering done by “out there” eccentrics, but made social by mutually eliciting the flow of visions. This sociality is undisputedly real, and yet at the same time miles away from the equally heterogeneous everyday social forms which people feel themselves caught up in.

A reader might counter that I am making far too much of a good day out. Yet these acts are de rigueur for participation in social life, even though the consequences for social life outside the immediacies of the moment are not readily apparent. This must be so, lest a person take himself too seriously and destroy the imaginativeness as well as “egotistically” stand out from the crowd. It is just as problematic to fail to relate lofty with prosaic concerns. The trick is to invoke enough “culture” to generate discussion and not come off as an insular boor, but make that ‘culturedness’ appear as if it were not a lofty thing out there but the same real, immediate concerns which enable two ordinary people to share a beer. ‘Culture’ becomes particular to the individuals in question, not relevant for anyone else other than his immediate company and certainly not ‘society’. After the fact, one can only say that one has done nothing, even though the immediacies of the moment can be quite extraordinary and ‘compel’ action. Perhaps a parallel can be drawn between how a ‘single’ individual can think of himself as the same person and still generate fleeting and contradictory images—indeed the same person even though this endeavor is an otherwise collective project—and how individuals negotiate wildly heterogeneous relations in order to reproduce themselves socially and materially, and do not think of themselves in terms of ‘split’ personalities or lacking authenticity. From this angle, the fragmentary nature of postsocialist relations seems not so impossible to maintain over the long term.

**OTHER KINDS OF MOVEMENTS**

The kind of city one sees while “doing nothing” (here, gulian’e) is different from the ways of experiencing space in other contexts. In this section, I will discuss some of these differences to build a better picture of the temporal transformations taking place. The category of otdykh and its spatial content will be compared with “doing nothing”, and then I will provide a picture of the city from the perspective of commuting and provisioning. There are some commonalities between otdykh and “doing nothing”, as well as some differences. I have not, though, addressed rabota (work) in terms of places of work. Because there are so many different kinds of working times (see Chapter 4) it would be difficult to treat all of these spatially. Instead, I will look at the kinds of spaces that emerge as a result of compulsion, using commuting and provisioning as a proxy. This could be justified by the fact that that byt (of which these activities are a part) is felt to be a form of
compulsion even though on the surface a person is fighting to get what he needs for himself. Also, *otdykh* interestingly enough contains a ‘work’ element which has quite different aesthetic implications from the compulsions of waged labor in the city.

*Gulian’e* and other sociable practices to some extent counts as rest (*otdykh*) in the sense that it is closer to rest than it is to work. When my informants talk about periods in which they are busy, they long for both leisure as well as proper rest. Real rest, though, can only be had in certain places and is a different activity. Physical restoration is taken far more seriously than in the West: astonishingly, the very same state that exalted work also provided a system of *Dom Otdykha* (house of rest) where people could linger for months as a meritorious reward. Some of these facilities still exist, often just barely. Reflecting Dostoevsky’s sensibility over a century ago, for a solid majority, there is no rest to be had in the city, as it is polluted, noisy, stuffy, and in the summertime, uncomfortably hot. The *dacha* (country house) is the primary solution to the problem and place of *otdykh*, and in summers the *electrichki* (medium-distance trains) and roadways are packed with *dacha* traffic around the weekend. *Dachas* are not typically isolated, but rather in small settlements within walking distance of *electrichka* stops, often marked only by the mileage away from the city. A *dacha* is made of wood, typically two-thirds the size of a small Victorian terraced cottage.  

There is always a garden which usually consists of some grassy spaces interspersed with vegetable plots, fruit trees and flowers. There are usually no utilities other than electricity, and a sizable theft problem makes it unwise to bring anything of value. Stays at the *dacha* can last from overnight to an entire summer, depending on one’s obligations in the city. It considered essential for children to spend entire summers at the *dacha*; children do not belong in the city in the summertime and when they must remain behind this is seen as a cause for hooliganism. This notion reflects the association of life at the *dacha* with naturalness, as it is difficult to be raised to be a moral social being if the intrinsic link between the countryside and persons is broken. Adults must simply bear it, but for children to be raised breathing solely city air is problematic. People who do not have *dachas* make every effort to send their children to relatives in the countryside, or children’s camps, which was a robust system in Soviet times. For adults as well, rest in one’s *dacha* is in theory of equal value as rest with relatives in the countryside, although in practice, tense relations might prevent this.

In academic accounts *dachas* have largely been represented as means of economic subsistence (Pine and Bridger 1998), but currently in St. Petersburg the virtues of bodily regeneration and “living naturally” have also been revived. It does necessitate often backbreaking work to produce food from the garden, and maintain the *dacha* itself, yet through all of this it is still the best way to achieve “real rest.” “Real rest” at the *dacha* does connote a sense of being free to doing nothing. But one could do nothing at home, and save a great deal of labor in doing so, so clearly what is meant by rest here is tied to the place itself. The labor associated with the building is seen as regrettable and at any rate inconsistently achieves the desired outcomes. The labor put into the land, however, is somewhat different. Although it is physically difficult and compels one to do

---

86 See Humphrey 2002b for a detailed study of the postsocialist *dacha*. 
it regardless of mood, it is said to have the capacity to help put a person in the correct frame of
mind. The frame of mind does not come about by successful crop yield. In talking about his third
crop of miniscule potatoes, one memorable gentleman told me: “We Russians, you know, are like
Buddhists… We both know that the process is more important than the outcome. Buddhists know
this because they have some special philosophical understanding… some knowledge. We Russians
know it through unpredictable results.”

That working with the soil is considered the only positive aspect of dacha labor gives some
insight into the significance of being in the countryside. It is this aspect of “naturalness” which
makes the dacha the appropriate place for “real rest.” Different people have different ways of
explaining the need for a natural place for rest, mostly because outside of talking to anthropologists
it is not something that normally needs explanation. There is a palatable sense of generalized well-
being which people say is achieved in the countryside. Even people who described themselves as
unrepentant urbanites confessed to me how they were surprised at the transformative powers of
being out of the city. Others attributed particular powers to the natural world which people are
forced to engage with at the dacha, usually located in “the air.” One woman told me that for the
first few days at the dacha, a person becomes lethargic and sleep deeply. This has to do with re-
adjusting to clean air, of which city dwellers are deprived. Another family told me how at their
dacha anyone who sleeps there has vivid, cinema-like dreams with a discernable plot which are
clearly recalled the following day. I spoke to a number of people who been their guests, all of whom
claim that this is true, although I personally failed to have one of these realistic dreams. The reason
for this phenomenon, they say, is a combination of the air, which engenders sound sleep, and the
‘mysterious’ legacy of the former owners, who were “gypsies”. Place-making at the dacha is
largely a process of physically incorporating restfulness into the body, of “breathing the air.”

“Real rest”, then, is not as much a (non)activity as much as a kind of sublime state of being.
If one has no other option other than to rest at home, that still counts as rest, although it is relatively
ineffective compared to going to the countryside. What is needed in order to achieve this natural
state of being is the natural world. This ‘nature’ engaged with at the dacha is neither nature as
untamed force which overpowers persons, nor contained nature which is overpowered by man.
Gardens are not designed with Nazi-like rigidity; they reflect an ideal of an abundant, untidy nature.
Nor is nature at the dacha to do with sense of being “at one” with nature in some cosmic,
transcendental way. People who go to the dacha do not imagine they need to do a great deal of
transcending. Physically breathing the air of the countryside is enough. Space for rest is seen as a
peaceful, clean, and abundant space which is largely about simplicity. The banya similarly performs
these connections between the body and the soul, an association which carries through to emphatic
ideas about food and medicine. Ideas about going to the dacha are related to this bodily discourse.
By contrast, “Doing nothing” is in a sense ‘emptier’ than rest; in spatial terms it is full of fragments
of imagery, between which one is constantly to-ing and fro-ing, but these fragments do not become
the full, stable vision evoked by the dacha. “Doing nothing” in the form of guliand’ë, is a more
active state than rest: the city itself is said to prevent a restive state. It may not be as physically active as rest, but the frantic parade of images is fitful, not restful. In guliian’e, the goal is inherent in the action itself; space becomes not a thing ‘out there’ but an internalized flux which then dissipates into nothing at all if one were to account for it, whereas being “at the dacha” is a sufficient account of one’s activities in its own right.

The spaces caught up in provisioning and commuting could not be more diametrically opposed to this idyll. These are competitive, immutably hostile spaces with little aesthetic elaboration. That these spaces often physically overlap with spaces used in leisure does not mitigate against this; aspects are ignored or brought into light depending on the context. Commuting and provisioning are largely exercises in attempting to achieve the desired goal while preventing others from preventing you from doing so. In shops and on transport, jostling requires a strong constitution. Some younger people see themselves as lacking in maturity if they are unable to do this. Commutes, which average about an hour but can take up to two if one is unlucky, are seen as arduous trials which one nevertheless must perform. A lucky commuter only has to take the metro; more often one must take a combination of metro, tram, bus, marshrutka (a fixed-route minicab). Transport runs frequently but during busy hours queues to board the bus or marshrutka can take longer than the actual time in transit. Similarly, when making food purchases, one must go round to quite a few shops to either get the best price or purchase items that are not available elsewhere, thus doubling queuing time and jostling effort.

Their willingness to nevertheless traipse around the city may suggest that what counts as burdensome to them may be different from our threshold of burdensome. They too, however, see longwinded commutes and the endless calling into shops arduous. “Protivnyi” is the word most commonly used to describe these situations. It is most often translated as “unpleasant” or sometimes “cantankerous”, but it is literally an adjectival form of “protiv”, meaning “against.” Quite often in the field I would complain in exasperation about the day’s protivnyi events on the metro or in the shops; the difference was that I was exasperated because my willingness to fight with others had been exhausted, whereas my friends accepted that these battles had to be fought. “Protivnyi” was imagined as two sides against each other, the speaker on one, the rest of the city on the other. I was capable of imagining only a different word, “nepriatnyi”, or unpleasant, experiences, and that “it” was a thing out there which had nothing to do with my own participation. Through endless perplexed inquiring, it seems to me that Petersburg residents do in fact imagine themselves acting in as well as being acted upon in protivnyi ordeals, often describing their own actions as strength.

Whereas in “doing nothing” there are layers of aesthetic imagination in city space, in the context of provisioning and committing city space contains only infinite streams of others who are perpetually against you, and you against them. Not surprisingly the only notable aspect of these kinds of movements around the city is the opportunity to watch others on the opposing escalators of the metro. Because they pass by so quickly, watching does not develop into outright staring. It is a risk-free opportunity to look the opponent in the eye, if only temporarily. Similarly, when ceryi liudi
are described (gray people, a metaphor for mass mediocrity), they are usually imagined as faces at a bus stop. Other persons become a mass of objects capable only of preventing you from finishing the task. It is not the need for rushing which makes this kind of aesthetically flat, half-human space, but the fact of having to act both inside and outside one’s own desires. The tasks themselves are seen as immutable forms of compulsion, as immutable as the gray people they produce, and in turn this protivnyi immutability permeates the space in which they must be done. One needs strength to fight this boi bez pravil, but the satisfactions from getting one’s way are quite different from “doing nothing”. Space in this context is the inverse of Bachelard’s poetics; it evokes nothing, and forces the graying of objects rather than shimmering. The visual and temporal distinction provides some grounds for people to consider themselves to be acting in moral, humanized ways while “doing nothing”.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have outlined how the temporality of informal sociability affects the way city space appears, and how the ‘unexpectedness’ of city space also serves to confirm the prescribed formlessness of “doing nothing” time. City streets, buildings and parks are caught up in processes of spectacle making, surveying the comportment of others, and story telling. This connection operates at multiple levels: the city constitutes sociality in the form of spectacle, it embodies literary forms and engages people in the art of storytelling, and reproduces social connectedness through chance street encounters and the memories or acknowledgement of others’ dwellings. City space in this context is a constantly changing, ephemeral thing, providing opportunities for shimmering between subjects and objects. Indeed, as I have argued throughout, “doing nothing” is actually about doing quite a lot. Gulian’e very much involves making bodies a part of the physical landscape; to be a social entity is to be part of the embodied world of the cityscape. The ways in which it is acceptable to be out and about in the city are not self-evident “traditional” culture, but modes of relatedness which are historically contingent. In Gogol’s era, for example, people of a certain class could not stroll down Nevsky Prospect, nor would the relationships between neighborhoods and social networks—now informed by post-Soviet economic strategies--engender the ideas about progulki that exist today. In this milieu, social relations rely just as much on practical consciousness as explicit institution-making. While the denkbilder associated with this urban untidiness certainly constitute an important way of imagining and therefore understanding postsocialist life, they are not asserted as agendas beyond their immediate contexts. In the next chapter, I return to the issue of ‘informal’ social relations and political instrumentality through examining the challenges and opportunities posed by new communications technologies.
In the previous chapter I showed how constructions of time and space informed, and in a sense outright constituted, modes of everyday sociability in city space. I also argued that everyday life rhythms themselves constitute a mode of social relations that bears more resemblance to the moralities espoused in ideals than the myriad forms of postsocialist economic power, or, for that matter, the versions of ‘society’ found in classical European social thought. In informal contexts such as gulian’e people play with ‘alternative’ visions of society and social change, but in doing so they conduct the rather more serious business of building social networks and the right kinds of persons to populate those networks. In relying on phenomenological experience, or from another view deeply embedding ‘alternatives’ in time and space constructs, these relations actually manage to stand apart from other visions of society, such as the entropic vision I described in Chapter 2.

We are still left with a conundrum. That is, the social networks built in “doing nothing” are reasonably durable, as are the forms of personhood they create (i.e., the collective individual), but their full meaning that incorporates participants’ intentions can only be made apparent in a phenomenological way because of their connection with time. The “nothingness” speaks to the importance of the immediacy of the action. Certainly nobody would take themselves so seriously as to suggest that they are producing society, even though in a removed sense this is exactly what is going on. If it were only “nothing” that was being produced, if chit chat and banter were really only important in their immediate context, then there could be no further implications. Yet, the unintended aftereffects are serious, if indirect. One way to imagine the aftereffects is in terms of the ideational qualities of moral discourse. Discourses about morals develop ideas that remain ‘in the air’ to be deployed in other contexts, much in the same way that Gudeman and Rivera (1990) imagine it possible to have ‘conversations’ with dead political economists in remote corners of Columbia. Indeed, this is a crucial aspect of St. Petersburg everyday talk, as the realms of historical memory are elicited in everyday talk. I think, however, the conundrum can be explored further as a site of constituting experience and configuring resources rather than discourse. As I mentioned in the Introduction, I first noticed the importance of “doing nothing” in the way people used new communications technologies. In this final chapter I would like to return to ICTs, and in particular the Internet, to explore in what ways beyond discourse “doing nothing” could have unintended aftereffects.

The Internet poses unique challenges and opportunities. I found that on the one hand, the Internet invites talk about progress and goes almost unquestioned as a marker of global modernity. On the other hand, the ways people describe their encounters with it fall largely along the lines of
what counts as “doing nothing” and the privileged place of labor and skill in what counts as “doing something”. This is not just the difference between what people say they do and what they actually do—in fact, in this case the descriptions I received largely corresponded to what I could gather when I sat down at the computer with my informants. As I describe below, in other parts of the world it is quite common to either get access to or use the Internet in ways to connect up oneself with an imagined modernity, but in St. Petersburg this was remarkably absent despite the fact that it was considered an object of modernity. The question remained, what kind of a social space was the Internet that made this absence possible?

Half of the answer to this question is fairly straightforward: modernity had come to be seen as something desirable, but not actionable. But as we saw, people kept their dreams about the future alive in ways that had consequences for the present, and their seemingly apolitical stances do not preclude actively manipulating institutions in order to achieve desired outcomes. To the delight of George Soros and his programs for building “open society,” the Internet in principle makes it relatively simple to simply set up a group as a formal organization with political ends, and to access others’ ideas and promote one’s own. In the same way that Verdery (1996) describes the Western perception that capitalism would ‘naturally’ flourish now that the socialist lid had finally been removed, so too many Westerners felt (and still feel) that the Internet could be a kind of civil society in a server just waiting to be exported. ‘Naturally’ the problem was one of access. But this has not happened even though access is reasonably substantial; in fact, the Internet as a news media is associated with exactly the same unsavory interests as off-line media. If substantial portions of Internet space are described in terms of spaces commonly associated with “doing nothing” then to some extent the ways in which people generate ideas about social life but remain suspicious of political claim-making in the context of “doing nothing” could illuminate why the Internet has not been harnessed as a populist political tool in accordance with Western programs, as well as identify what the Internet does do in this absence.

This raises similar questions raised in Chapter 3 about the political significance of cases where people conduct their lives as if politics and ideology did not exist. In the past, totalitarian theorists used the non-ideological activities of everyday life to claim that ideology was not believed, a sham. Civil society activists now are apt to conduct a similar analytic turn, as they see apolitical activity as apathy or fear to be overcome. Civil society in this rubric is treated as an absolute social good, because it is ‘merely’ a technology of power structurally positioned to counterbalance the state (see Hann’s 1996 critique). The Internet was therefore a particularly good way of effecting that equally ‘technological’ structure. “Doing nothing” could look like resistance to Western ideas about civil society, a kind of hidden perspective on the social significance of the Internet not to be spoken in the open. Any resistance argument, however, would be exaggerated simply because outside of limited development programs, ordinary users are unaware of (and have no reason to care
about) Western ideas about ‘proper’ uses of the Internet. Moreover, ‘civil society’ does have some local currency as a kind of far off desirable state, similar to ‘progress’. Although, civilized society is probably seen as more desirable that a civic one (see Kharkhordin 1997).

Outside of anthropology, and in the popular press, much has been made of the Internet having an ‘impact’ on social life by the sheer facts of unprecedented technological possibility. Strathern (2000) observes that this formulation is itself an artifact of the social life of the technology, particularly in how treatments of the Internet tend to presume a given direction of transformation: “If the [ESRC Virtual Society?] programme seeks to provide contextualisation in order to understand the ‘social and human dimensions’… of the new technologies, it has to be because the electronic technologies themselves are already depicted as ‘decontextualised’” (2000:6). This de-contextualized aspect goes some way towards explaining how both the Internet and civil society were imagined to be unproblematically exportable to other parts of the globe: if they are already ‘outside’ ourselves, export is a mere practicality. Although many of the claims that have been made in its name is now talked about as empty hype, including the idea that it would automatically foster ‘democracy’ (Woolgar (ed) 2002), the Internet does tie production to consumption in unique and interesting ways. This feature has two implications for the problem at hand. First, as I alluded to above, it makes possible certain political forms that could not otherwise occur, as it lowers the threshold of start-up costs for would-be information disseminators. This means that the circulation of knowledge on the Internet does not have to follow along DeCerteau’s distinction between cultural producers and consumers (even though in the West at least it arguably has). Second, it makes it possible to “do something” in terms of material production without actually meaning to. It is worth pausing to examine the particularities of how the Internet does both these things.

The Internet is often talked about as a kind of ethereal neverworld—a virtual reality— but of course it is comprised of real, material wires and artifacts of code. Electronic communication necessarily makes communication into a materiality; one can see a history of emails or go to a “chatroom” where utterances are recorded for the benefit of others. This materiality of interfaces has the consequence of at least temporarily embodying communication, although how people interpret this fact, or whether they even notice it, is a matter of culture. In the late 1990s, as Strathern’s comment suggests, electronic communication was widely seen in the West as an embodiment that demarcated its own space—an objectification that could have ‘impacts’ on the very society that created it. One of these impacts was supposed to a transformation of subjectivity, in that certain dispositions were required to ‘enter’ it (Castells 1996). This then formed innumerable

---

87 Here the “Westerners” I have in mind are the Internet access NGOs active in Russia as well as the World Bank, which funds similar “information society” programs. A similar politics can be found in development work in Malaysia (Zinnbauer, forthcoming).

88 The field is growing and transforming at an astounding rate; key texts would include Steven Woolgar’s (2000) recent edited volume, and Daniel Miller’s and Don Slater’s (2000) study of the Internet in Trinidad.

89 Keith Hart (1999) makes this point with relation to money, and argues that the Internet poses a real opportunity to transform money relations through breaking down monopoly on information circulation.
“digital divides” between people who had a cyberspace-ready habitus and those that did not (see Hargattai, forthcoming).

The turn towards space and subjectivity in studying the Internet is but one possibility. “The Internet” is not one thing but hundreds of ever-changing technical possibilities, and its producers are almost as heterogeneous as its users. This leaves infinite space for stories about what the Internet is and does. The obsolescence rate of Internet-related technologies is phenomenally high, which means that the feedback loop between producers and consumers is relatively tight. Stark and Neff (2002) argue that new information and communications technologies (ICTs) are necessarily in a constant state of flux, which they call “permanently beta.” Beta usually refers to the testing phase of a product, but they argue that in the ICT market, products are never finished and instead tested and retested as part of the consumption process. The circle is drawn even tighter by the fact that many ordinary users (globally but also in St. Petersburg) are themselves programmers, have their own websites, or in other ways customize how ‘the Internet’ might appear on one’s desktop. Choices in use shape which bits of software come to prominence. This happens also because choices enlarge one by one the networks of emailers, chatrooms, gamers, etc, the size of which has an influence on the relative usefulness of the networks (Christian Sandvig, pers. comm.). In this way, choices of consumption unintentionally communicate something about the shape of communications to the product designers, who often are themselves as diffuse as the consumers. Under these conditions, “doing nothing” can come to constitute a digital materiality without anyone claiming territorial sovereignty over it. The ‘facts’ of the technology do not preclude this spatial politics, but do not necessitate it.

To even begin to apprehend the social contexts in which this matrix becomes meaningful requires the gaze of a thousand sets of eyes in any given place. Anthropologists are quite used to tackling this problem when we claim to discuss a “locality” (cf Gupta and Ferguson 1997). The Internet, though, serves to multiply the problem. A biography of things approach (Kopytoff 1986), for example, must be exceptionally selective. Do we study the programmers and other elite users, casual end users in various settings, the NGOs and state programs aiming to inculcate ‘proper’ uses, or the economy of its production and the ways in which it is being configured as an economic force? Can use in an Internet café even bear a relation to use in a multinational corporation or in homes? Most importantly, do we account for the Internet as an object of interpersonal communication, mass communication, self-representation, aesthetic expression or exchange? All of these are separate social activities related only through the network of technologies over which they occur. What could usefully be said about the network as a research object under these heterogeneous conditions is not entirely clear. To get beyond claiming the mere presence of the Internet as a “paradigm shift” we have to disaggregate the dimensions at stake. This necessary step, however, requires the researcher to problematize technological aggregations in the same way as social ‘constructs’.

But one might take comfort to remember that technologies were never one thing. Even the humble axe embodies the technology to carve the handle, to sharpen the stone, to bind the stone to
the handle, the social relations which make it useful, and a cultural apparatus with which to make some of these things meaningful. Latour (1993) usefully argues for technology to be treated as a “quasi-object”, that is, a mutual confluence of persons and things, “real as nature, narrated as discourse, collective as society, existent as being: such are the quasi-objects that moderns have caused to proliferate” (Latour 1993: 90). Indeed we have an obligation to totally suspend our notions that the Internet is a technology outside of this model. That is, it is not a technology because it is new, nor because it is referred to as an article of “high technology” in the cultural imagination. Nor is it a technology because of its resemblance to machinery rather than “softer” artifacts of human curiosity such as art. What makes it a technology is its assembly of its component parts, human and material, which are themselves always transforming.

However, our informants in turn have the opposite obligation of aggregating its bits and pieces into something more or less comprehensible. A technology, in the singular, is indeed ethnographically observable. The key question is, what models do St. Petersburgers use to conflate the heterogeneous mass of technologies known as the Internet? The advantage to keeping a disaggregated model in sight is that one can see if there is a logic to what has been excluded and included. Following Tilley (1999) and Stefik (1996), metaphor is absolutely central to this aggregation process. Here I use the word “metaphor” simply to mean a set of imagery that is open to flexibility, or “fuzzy logic” to use a computing term. I will explore what some of these metaphors are among casual end users. Some of the material presented does depend on proper metaphoric knowledge, such as images of progress and modernity. Metaphor can also gather round more utilitarian uses as well. But this introduces a problem noted in the Introduction, namely that “doing nothing” is a kind of non-representation, or a metaphor in reverse. There are, though, some things that can be inferred from “doing nothing” practices that could be treated as if they were a metaphor in order to compare like for like. I recognize fully that practices are not metaphor, but it is profitable to treat them as such in order to show the mismatch of perspectives that leads to so much confusion about whether apolitical life amounts to apathy, resistance, etc..

There is one further caveat. Since probably Mauss (1990), there is a long history in anthropology that warns that the way societies differentiate between object and person cannot be taken as a universal given. Just as selfhood and personhood are social constructs, it cannot be assumed that Russians, Maori and Melanesians all have the same encounter with the material world, and this has implications for the claims possible for the Internet. It is not axiomatic that the Internet even counts as an object, culturally speaking. For the St. Petersburg case, arguably it is conceptually closer to the status of ‘object’ than in the West, as there is very little in the way of discourse about virtual reality--a formulation which presumes the Internet to be “more than” an embodied entity. In fact, in St. Petersburg (and probably Russia generally) there is a particularly strong assumption that there is nothing magical about technological assembly, and that component parts are subject to manipulation by anyone. My friends had built cameras out of spare parts, assembled computers, and

---

90 The intimate link between art and technology was made by Gell (1999).
wired telephones so that the one that could still ring did the ringing and the one that could carry the voice the owner could talk through. People who worked in office environments with staff of other nationalities frequently stereotyped cultural difference through the approach to objects, and contrasted their ability to work out computer problems for themselves, with their “helpless” foreign counterparts’ habit of calling an expert. The malleability of objects permeates nearly the whole of the material world, not just objects that fit into their own categories of what counted as a technology. I had informants who learned to sculpt wood in the army, who had undertaken a staggering range of bold DIY project, and learned to sew in order to have the best possible means of keeping up with fashion always literally at hand.

Both Alesheev (1995) and Humphrey (2002a) see a kind of personalization of objects at stake in socialist systems. In people’s ongoing dialogue with them, they can become like people, attached and integrated with the person who shaped them by adding bits over time. Humphrey argues that non-capitalist property relations fostered this disposition towards objects. In contemporary Petersburg too socialism may have some role to play. Given the kinds of material manipulations I encountered, it is hard to see how objects could be socially transformative by way of being ‘more than’ materiality, as it is in Western talk of virtual reality. Having an object ‘more than’ material suggests that it transcends alienability, so much so that it can turn round and have an impact as a separate entity. It is not clear that Russians see objects as alienable in quite the same way (if at all). The research for the socialist period suggests that objects become like people in such a way that does not set up a kind of separation that in turn threatens to fold back in on itself, giving rise to ‘impacts’.

Given this background it is unsurprising that I encountered few instances of fear or apprehensions about the Internet; in fact, what I saw was really more a stunning indifference. Part of the indifference is attributable to economic factors, as low incomes would tend to push it down on the list of priorities. But this could be interpreted also as an indication of the relative weight of “doing nothing” practices as a way of framing the Internet, as it is not obvious a priori that the Internet should come lower on the list of priorities than, say, fashionable jackets (see Chapter 2). What this nonchalance actually consists of is shown by the following incident.

**ON PROGRESS**

In August of 2000 I interviewed a local city minister who had just recently initiated a series of programs and orchestrated World Bank funding for the purposes of “bringing” the Information Society to Russia. These programs largely targeted schools, small to medium sized enterprises (SMEs), and governmental agencies for computer provisioning, networking and training of various kinds. There were two things that legitimized this project for him. Firstly, I asked him how he knew that St. Petersburg needed the Information Society: “scientists have proven that the Information Society is the next step in economic development… Both foreign scientists and
Russian.” This is an interesting formulation in and of itself, a hybrid of the techno-enthusiasm of a 90s-style management consultant and Marxian-Hegelian determinism. Secondly, his projects have taken place within the context of the Baltic Forum, a research group that confers on pan-regional economic issues. He emphasized Scandinavian participation as evidence of the seriousness of its importance, and that in Petersburg and Moscow the conditions are ready for the Information Society. Everywhere else is “nyemnozhko nizhe” (a little lower). His choice of words reminded me of how it used to be said that social conditions were getting ready for communism. The idea that it would somehow forge links away from these “lower” places, and the possibility that it would build a Baltic economic corridor, rendered it worthy in his eyes.

I held a dinner party the following week for a group I was getting to know. I anticipated that these people—who were mostly doctors, secretaries, office workers—would have some rude things to say about this project, particularly because the 1998 crisis was precipitated by a default on foreign loans. I was happy to have a definable issue to talk about, and thought the wastefulness of a computer sitting in a classroom, when teachers are paid a pathetic $20 per month, would really fire up a rant. Instead, I was met mostly with blank stares, as if they were still awaiting the punchline. Thinking I was having difficulties expressing myself in a foreign language, I even tried the follow tactic: “Doesn’t it make you angry, that they spend millions of dollars on this stuff, and didn’t ask anyone what they wanted? They didn’t take one survey!”. One guest informed me, “Dawn, you do not understand. Only in rich countries they take care of the poor. Here they only care for themselves.” One person implied the venture was all a pretext to enrich those that had secured the loans, and later I would find a few people who thought it was simply misguided to assume more debt after 1998. Most saw it as purely a non-issue, warranting only a blank stare. There was no need to attribute a “reason” for the Information Society program. Yet neither did anyone express support for the project.

These blank stares perplexed me. At first I thought it was a straightforward skepticism and disillusionment: after ten years of elites siphoning off vast sums of money, it seemed reasonable to assume that of course this would happen with any new large-scale program. But there were certain demands that could be made on the state. At the time there was great popular pressure to increase pensions and make headway on wage arrears, and although the Putin administration certainly has not fixed the problem, there was nonetheless the sense that he had to be at least seen to address it. Moreover, certain objects were more likely to be seen in a far more critical light. Food imports are still seen as deeply problematic, and rumors about the questionable chemical origins of imports were taken seriously. In early 2002, this sentiment was being co-opted in the trade war with the U.S. over imported chicken. Revived memories of the first U.S. chicken imports, the scrawny and tasteless “nozhki Busha”, (literally, leg of Bush) was used as a way of visualizing and criticizing U.S. hegemony in global processes. Cynicism was selective: pensions and state wages were fields of critical discourse, and the Information Society received blank stares. Through the course of research

91 See an earlier study by Humphrey (1995).
I came to understand that the Internet was popularly seen as something wealthy countries had. It was a result of wealth, not a means to that wealth. It could be that they thought I was implying that Petersburg was not yet ready to have this wealth, but after my initial question conversation shifted to explaining to me the cases where it was possible for the computers to be useful: in this instance secretarial and administrative uses were cited as ‘useful’ examples. Even still, there were other spheres of ‘development’, such as pensions, state wages, and the army that elicited much stronger reactions.

The “Internet as development” trope was not so far-fetched as to warrant any questioning from this group. Enough talk of “computers as the wave of the future” had made the idea of the Information Society seem reasonable enough. The people I spoke with were largely aware of the “Information Society” as a phrase, even though it was not imagined to be “here” in Russia. They did not usually have a specific or deterministic idea of what the phrase might mean, other than a sense of computers aiding economic development. The perception that computers had to do with modernity was related to a perceived hierarchy of technology, in which “high” technology objects are foreign made and newer. In one memorable interview I had tried to say that technically speaking, the tea kettle sitting next to us was technology, because someone had to think of boiling water in that way. I was corrected, “no, that’s not technology (tekhnika), that’s dishware (posuda). If it were an electric kettle, then it would be technology.” Another couple reported their purchase of a computer and Internet access by saying “We’ve finally entered the 21st century!” even though by local standards in no way could they be considered “behind”.

Russia more generally has a robust history of “technology as progress” discourses which took modernist visions of the future just as seriously than their capitalist counterparts. In public forms of Soviet representation, “progress” was inevitably and inescapably going to lead citizens boldly into the future. Technological achievements, such as sending a man into space, confirmed and served as a rallying point for progress. More than just a point of ideology, progress permeated innumerable aspects of Soviet everyday life. The reader might recall from Chapter 4 how Taylorist principles were ubiquitously applied in work contexts, in principle at least. Mechanized jobs carried prestige: on a collective farm in Siberia, men would only milk cows if the job was to be done by machine, not by hand (Humphrey 1983: 242). Peasants were forced into mechanized agricultural methods as a way of effecting ‘progress’ by eradicating ‘backwardness’.

There is some evidence that suggests progress as an axiomatic characteristic of social ‘good’ was taken fairly seriously at least in the Stalin period. Hellbeck’s (2000) study of a Stalin-era diary draws a picture of a man fashioning himself with progress as his holy grail, and showing great concern for the backwardness of his own father. To some extent urbanites still identify themselves as the carriers of progress, even though this concept means something quite different today. When I went to visit a friend’s relatives

---

92 See, for example, Grant (1995), Kotkin (1995) and Buck-Morss (2000).
93 It is interesting to remember that the ‘traditional’ plow and hoe are mechanical objects; it seems to me that “progress” is also about forgetting these things.
in the countryside I was warned I would be in for a shock, because they didn’t even know what a computer was. This was not true; some of the elderly women I met knew precisely enough to be able to tell me that it was important for young people to learn so they could get good jobs (what the thing actually did was a different matter).

“Progress”, though, is amenable to manipulation in its specificity while appearing to be shared as a widespread goal. Multiple versions of progress did not destroy its capacity to motivate: the aestheticized ideas of progress of the 1920s avant garde were later considered counterevolutionary, even though progress remained central as an ideological goal. As Buck-Morss (2000) aptly points out, Soviet socialism and Euro-American capitalism came from the same universalizing vision of industrial modernity, despite the divisive one-upmanship that bound them so tightly. Progress was something to strive towards, and certain artifacts of technology could either be evidence of progress or help society draw closer to it. Although people are now more equivocal about what constitutes progress, not necessarily accepting capitalist versions of it, the Internet is seen to be an indication of progress without invoking any specificities about what that might entail, much in the same way that progress could be held as goals of both the US and the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

Perhaps as a result of this history, the Internet could stand for “progress” with very little corroborating metaphoric support. No one seemed to care that Internet and computer technologies originated abroad despite continued talk of nozhki Busha. It was considered inevitable that consumer durables (bytovaia tekhnika, literally, everyday technology) were foreign made, and people had a hard time conceptualizing that they could be made in a country that had been told for so long that it was “behind”. I was told that even if they were made domestically, no one would buy them because it would be of poor quality. This bears only a small correlation to the realities of the PC market: many people do not know that some hardware is produced or assembled domestically (Castells and Kiseleva 2001). PCs are considered “foreign”, but in a way that seemed to signal more of a generally international modernity, as opposed to the more problematic sense of “foreignness” found in discourses surrounding food.

We should not, however, assume this as evidence that St. Petersburgers accept Castells’ vision of the “progress” of the “new economy” and the global relations which make it come into being. Castells’ famous (2000) trilogy envisions a sweepingly new kind of global economy based around computer networks rather than Fordist factories. Having defined modernity as “networked” social relations, Castells then laments the exclusion of masses worldwide, noting that “the price to pay for inclusion in the system is to adapt to its logic, to its language, to its points of entry, to its

---

95 There is a good anekdot about this: a Japanese spy sees the best fighter jet in all the world and after much effort, steals the blueprints from Russia and brings them back to Japan. The Japanese engineers work night and day for three months to build one. They are just about to finish, and it looks like a train engine. They think, ‘this can’t be right, we should rebuild it.” They rebuild, and months later, sure enough they have a train engine. The engineers bring in the spy who stole the blueprints and accuse him of stealing the wrong one. The spy spots the source of the confusion: “The problem is you could not read this note at the bottom of the page, here, in Russian. It says, ‘bang with shovel into shape of fighter jet.’”
encoding and decoding” (Castells 1996: 374). If there is any price to pay, May (1998) suggests more plausibly that it comes through the way in which elites perpetuate capitalist forms through these networks, not any inherent logic of computer networks themselves. It is not the case that my informants accepted ‘networked capitalism’, from which they are so marginal as to not even formulate an opinion of it beyond the symbols of modern progress the PC embodies for them. Neither did they see the supposed logic of computers as a barrier to conform to in order to be let ‘in’ to cyberspace, which shows the ethnocentricity of digital divide talk.

With visions of progress, then, we come across some of the same dissonances between the anthropological ‘suspension of judgement’ model as it emerges in practice and neoliberal models of transition. Progress here cannot be seen as development trajectory plan, but dreamscapes performing the same function as the trash, buildings and strangers that help people tell stories in walks around the city. Whether progress could be effected in the present was still to be determined. This dissonance leaves discourses about “high” technology as social development intact, but in a kind of distantly inevitable but wholly impossible state. These progress discourses were more often performed as if they were axiomatically obvious, as if I was the strange one for questioning it. Whether any of this stuff had something to do with them directly was a matter of strategically invoking and ignoring discourses of progress. While the state could mobilize international funds by assuming progress was new kind of society based around a technology (scientists “both foreign and Russian” having made the determination), ordinary users talked about progress in the other way round. Having a computer was a sign of progress because it was a sign of wealth, not entry into a space that could make them wealthy. In more subtle ways “progress” could be achieved with the Internet through professional skills, but this bore a circuitous relation to flexible, evocative meanings of the “Information Society” of the inevitable future, and absolutely no relation to the Network Society envisioned by Castells and funded by the World Bank.

**PRACTICES OF “DOING NOTHING” ON THE INTERNET**

How does one do nothing on the Internet, and does this in some way actually compete with other visions of what it is and what it is for? One incident leads me to believe that “doing nothing” is a fairly important mode of relating to the Internet. A friend of mine bought a computer and Internet access fairly regularly. I kept probing her about what this changed in her life, and what she gets out of it. After enough pushing, she said to me: “Nothing, Dawn. It doesn’t do anything—I just use it.”

---

96 I suspect I elicited more enthusiastic talk of progress simply because of my own ethnic background. But I never got the sense that people were making up their statements about progress for my benefit. “Progress” in this instance is seen as desirable in the long run, even though their ideas of it and those of foreign NGOs and World Bank programs differ.

97 I recognize that IT specialists would in fact be more likely to have knowledge of and subscribe to Castells-style ideology of development. I did speak with some low-level programmers on the matter who were very ambivalent on the topic of IT and globalization. Nevertheless, more work should be done in this area.
Although I found some surprising parallels with research on UK users, one major difference was that in the UK users more frequently spoke about the Internet as being a kind of utility, or bill you must pay along with the electricity. In St. Petersburg, it had not been elevated to ‘utility’ status, both in the perception of there being a need for it to be constantly on tap and in the sense of general usefulness that this implies. My informants’ categorization of the Internet as “optional” rather than “necessary” did to some extent have to do with their ideas about ‘basic needs’ and consumption, but there were other social factors that rendered Internet an “optional” thing.

Although there was some early entrepreneurial uses to do with late perestroika supply sourcing (Rohozinski 2000), the Internet as something possible for lay consumers to use did not really arrive until the late 1990s. Numbers of users vary according to source and how one defines a “user” from a “non-user”; the penetration rate for St Petersburg was said to be in the single digits at the time of fieldwork (see www.internet.ru/article/analytics/2001/gs/13/5332.html for regularly updated penetration figures). There does seem to be agreement that growth rates are from 25%-30% per year nationally. The fact that personal computers are a rarity in homes obviously contributes to the comparatively low numbers of Internet users. Yet the low PC penetration numbers bear less relation to Internet access than on might think. Access travels through social networks, and people frequently use the Internet in neighbors and friend’s houses, or occasionally in Internet cafes. In this form it is common for multiple users to sit down at the same computer. I have seen on a few occasions groups of acquaintances calling into an Internet cafe as part of gulian’e, and gathering round a computer to wish someone well via IRC or other chat facility. Although, forms of access one might expect to hear about in UK or US studies were rarities in Petersburg. Computers in schools (except for special private schools for children of the elite) are almost nonexistent, in universities computer labs do exists but are so underresourced as to be useless for most students. In workplaces computers are often intended for administrative or secretarial staff only. Email accounts are often for entire departments, and the relevant individual is called over when they receive a letter electronically. Personal accounts are more likely at the offices of multinationals. Email access can become a point of contest between administrative staff and management: one secretary I knew kept pesterling her boss to get Internet access for the ability to send emails “because we should be a modern company”. The example shows how the Internet’s connection with modernity can be self-legitimating.

Surprisingly, the Internet is less likely to be connected to purchasing a computer than in the US or the UK of the mid-1990s, when the Internet was considered the major driver of the PC market. For a well off family, I estimate that a PC costs around a month’s household income. A

---

98 For this chapter I have generously been given access to raw interview data from a 1999-2000 study of technology in UK households conducted by British Telecom.

99 Anything scientific would be impossible in Russia because incomes are so disparate and wealth is either hidden or comes in non-monetary forms. I mean it to roughly indicate people who considered themselves in a position to actually save money for major purchases, such as a washing machine or a computer. The cost also depends on whether the family can find a person who knows how to build computers from component parts (the cheapest method).
PC is an item of luxury for which some are prepared to make significant economic sacrifices, and yet more often than not the Internet is an afterthought, similar to game software. Even when people did purchase access, this was likely to be done intermittently. Unlike in the UK, where access is (now) sold as a flat-rate subscription in the same way as utilities, in Petersburg one is more likely to purchase it as if it were an object. Users buy physical cards that represent a block of time, sold any metro kiosk or on the street. One can buy a card for a half hour, for about seventy cents, all the way up to a month’s worth of unlimited access for $40-$50. I found people buying at most “night only” access, for around $8-$12 for the month, or smaller chunks. Always-on subscriptions are avoided, it is better to purchase whatever you can afford at the moment. Purchases valid for the month are not ‘monthly’ purchases in the sense that a new card is purchased immediately after the old one runs out. Sold next to CDs and magazines, it is a thing one buys with pocket money. Having the Internet or not thus often boils down to whether one can be bothered to pick up a new card, or chooses to go to a nightclub instead. Part of this patchy access reflects decisions about the kind of value the Internet offers.

As a commodity, Internet time acts fairly object-like in the way it gets circulated as a containable thing. This comes mostly through intermittent purchasing and through the use of physical cards rather than utility billing. It can even be an object of gifting: I once saw a block of Internet time being given as a birthday present, tucked inside a bouquet of flowers like a greeting card. These purchases should be seen in relation to those commodities that are thought of as utilities, and are subject to an entirely different set of criteria for social circulation. Universal service for electricity and water are emphatically seen as rights, even if the provision of these is sometimes unfulfilled. Few people now expect that the state will provide in the way it once did, but this does not mean that people expect to pay outright for unsubsidized utilities either. Press stories of utilities companies cutting off hospitals inflame the outrage by playing on the sentiments that social obligation for the state to provide utilities is caught up in utilities provision, and that the breaking of this obligation has lead to madness where lives are put at risk for money. Arguably, part of what makes the Internet emerge as a non-political issue has to do with the fact that the social obligation for the state to provide utilities is taken very seriously indeed. The contrast between utility, both in the sense of usefulness as well as in the sense of an always-on facility provided by the state, and the Internet, which is circulated as an object of consumption and brings into play the moral minefield of frivolity and wastefulness, is made stronger by the strong stance taken on utility.

100 Before flat rate charges, Internet access in the UK was nevertheless tied to phone bills and to my knowledge was never sold as actual cards through retailers.
101 $1=1.5GBP. ISPs advertise sometimes in dollars, sometimes in rubles.
102 This is more true for younger users (say, 15-35) than for older users, who tend to limit their Internet use to professional reasons. But unless they are involved in the IT industry, older users tend not to purchase Internet time for domestic use, or when they do it is for others in the household.
103 These press stories make it appear as if “barter of the bankrupt” (Woodruff 1999), where large debtors do not pay utilities companies and utilities companies keep the flow of electricity in hopes of getting some return, is coming to an end.
Most often, non-users say they did not buy it because it was too expensive. One typical well-off man who already owned a PC told me, “my son is nagging me to buy him [Internet access]. But we cannot afford this—it is too expensive.” The mathematics of “too expensive” are not, however, clear cut. One woman complained to me that her husband was compelled to buy $40 worth of extra computer memory because their son had unwittingly purchased a $3 game that required it. She complained about how she was now bound to this money pit, but in the next breath said the Internet was too expensive, and that “we can’t afford to waste our money like that” and “we have to redo the kitchen—the tiles are cracking”. “Too expensive” is a very common euphemism, a kind of rhythmic refrain that evokes the locally strong connection between domestic frugality and morality. Moreover, prices are more likely to be seen as a means of cheating or deception rather than an indicator of value (see also Humphrey 1995), which adds to the sense that one must not make ‘unnecessary’ purchases. A further element is the opaqueness of household income itself: better declare that something is “too expensive” at the outset than to acknowledge (even to oneself) the possibility of the existence of cash earned through means seen as even slightly immoral (“immorality” here can come through the very act of setting a price on things (see also Ries 2002)). This use of “too expensive” reflects a rather elastic microphysics of household accounting.

In St. Petersburg, the potential for utility was largely seen as related to certain kinds of professions. Most commonly cited were programmers, journalists, teachers, students, and doctors. Teachers were said to need it to get round out of date textbooks, while students shared this interest if in practice were more likely to download and plagiarize essays. Doctors were most interested in finding the latest techniques to help their patients. Some doctors were disturbed by this possibility: One pediatrician scolded her cardiologist boyfriend: “So you want to find out how you could have saved your patients if you had good medicine and equipment?” Indeed, for the survey participants, 104 who were disproportionately teachers or other educational professionals, the sense of “utility” in the responses was much higher than what I gathered in interviews for a more general (if more privileged) population. Useful things can be found for certain categories of people. Compare the situation in the West, where it has largely been pre-defined as useful, and where persons are asked to develop knowledge about its usefulness.105

This sense of utility is related to earlier self-fashioning practices. The categories of people who are said to be in a position to relate to the Internet in a useful manner are those professions most often associated with social purposefulness. Historically, professions are seen to bear a close relationship to senses of self. Recall from Chapter 2 that “who you are” professionally connotes a fixidity of identity that may or may not be manifested in actual work performed. Usefulness came about by enabling people to fashion themselves into being good doctors, teachers, etc., whether it be learning medical techniques or finding material with which to educate. The Internet did not underlie or underwrite a system of relations, economic or otherwise, by enhancing or transforming work-

---

104 I took a written, closed-response survey of 56 users of a foreign NGO-sponsored Internet access center.
105 See, for example, Hargattai’s (2002) work on suburban teenagers in the US.
related communication. Usefulness was related to the person building his own skill, or his own sense of social connectivity through exercising that skill, rather than the physical thing itself performing work. No “labor saving” here.

I hope that my own interest in “doing nothing” does not obscure the seriousness with which these activities useful for society are taken. My focus dangerously evokes ‘our’ cultural knowledge: we all ‘know,’ with a wink and a nudge, that the ‘real’ purpose and success of the Internet is to greatly expand our knowledge of the superfluous. My former workplace found that placing Internet access on workers’ desktops is the worst thing they could do for productivity, and yet denying access was almost as offensive as banning smoke breaks. This open secret to some extent holds true in research: game playing, talking with friends, downloading music, etc. all feature quite heavily in both UK user studies and my own Petersburg interviews, a finding unlikely to be news to my reader. But I do not intend my focus to be an ethnographic declaration that the emperor has no clothes. In Petersburg these things are not considered quantitatively ‘more’ important than here in the West, but there are some qualitative differences in how they are approached and why they are treated as ‘superfluous’ which speak to the otherwise more ‘serious’ issue of how personhood is constructed. I should note that besides these professional concerns of doctors and teachers, there are indeed other uses of the RuNet that are not thought of as “doing nothing.” State bodies and formalized non-profit organizations frequently have websites, and there are sites for political discourse, such as strana.ru. Obviously somebody uses these—but during my stay I did not meet one person who mentioned these things who was not themselves involved in formalized non-profits or the media.

In St. Petersburg the web sites most often visited had anecdotes, sports scores, games, music, news and pornography. Humor is especially important, and featured more in Russian Internet uses than British ones. One phenomenon particular to the RuNet is “exchange of experience” (obmen opita) sites, where people can ask questions about how to find cheap DIY supplies, what to do about a sick cat, moving flats, etc.. Exchanging experience is central to day-to-day life, and having a wide circle of znakomi is the traditional means of ensuring that advice can be called upon for all kinds of unexpected events. The phrase reinforces the idea that what is being swapped is inside and embodied in the person, and feeds into the moral economy of Kharkhordin’s “collective individual”. The exchange of experience, however, was usually explained to me as the primary utility of quite an old technology: the telephone. Information comes from an individual, applies on a case-by-case basis, and is embedded in the social networks created through “doing nothing”. To the extent it can be said to exist, this is the Russian Information Society both online and offline. Although, the exchange that takes place over the Internet is usually between parties who do not have these wider, diffuse connections and so the “exchange of experience” is closer to advice swapping in

---

106 It is significant that for these kinds of organizations frequently the Russian language version is different from the English—the English versions being scaled down and oriented towards funding.

107 The less benign form (telefonnoe pravo) implies a powerful person who can get things done with a phone call, overriding rules that exist through another communications technology—paper.
practice. Nevertheless, the preferred form of sociability at work over the Internet is closer to “doing nothing”, and therefore “exchange of experience” serves as metaphor for these kinds of interactions.

Particularly for informants in their early twenties, the possibilities to be had via the “chat” function were of notable interest. Chat is locally referred to in the English to describe a range of applications that enable instant exchange of messages, often displayed as a continuous scrolling discourse. For them chat includes technologies such as IRC, an instant messaging program, as well as chat rooms. Email tends to be used more for business communication, and for communicating with people who have since moved to other cities, but quite rarely for local acquaintances or friends. Chat in some ways eclipses email as a mode of interpersonal communication over the Internet, bearing in mind that most work-related email does not go to individuals but anonymous department. The potential to see the person before he receives the email is strong in a context where most friends and family are in the same city. More importantly, as I described in Chapter 4, the staccato back and forth of email simply is inappropriate where spontaneity is itself part of the exchange. Even people who have private email accounts, not connected to work, still usually preferred chat rooms or other forms of communication.

Internet communication, of course, is not limited to chatrooms. Another particularity of the Runet is that poetry was an especially common format of both expression and interpersonal communication, and displayed on personal websites with startling frequency. Circles of amateur poets sprung up through the Internet, but in the cases I am familiar with were supported by physical geography for meetings. Poetry, like the banya, is considered to have connections to the soul. My informants did not share poetry with just anyone—poetry is a deeply intimate affair, more intimate than romance (amateur poetry does not have to be of the romantic variety—it is more often philosophical). This echoes one of Ries’ (1997) informant’s view that drinking tea with another person was a spiritual act, but sex downright profane. Like so many of the mutual self-fashioning practices I discussed earlier, poetry ontologically comes from within the depths of the interior, but is revealed to trusted cohorts in order to partake in its fashioning. Even outside active poetry circles, we might infer from the frequency of poetry on personal websites that personal expression on the web is more connected to communication as an exchange than declaration and dissemination.

The Internet in many ways adds on to social processes that could (and do) take place without it. It is widely seen as a luxury, and luxuries are by definition optional. However, in the course of the lifespan of technologies there is not always and naturally a simple trajectory from “optional” to “necessity”. In the technology boom in the 1990s in the U.S, before it had achieved any significant penetration, the need to be included in this fundamental social change, or have one’s children seen to be included, was absolutely paramount. Computers had to be in every classroom, even though those computers will be obsolete when the children become adults. Only after a spectacular equities implosion did there emerge any sensibility akin to ‘optional’. But in Petersburg ‘optional’ has a remarkable resilience in terms of both purchasing practice and everyday

---

108 I suspect teens as well, although I did not work with them extensively.
engagement, and ‘necessary’ uses are removed from any a priori transformative power it might have. The ‘optional’ Internet added to the possible ways of fashioning people, even though this fashioning was not itself a process one could simply go without.

IMAGINING “DOING NOTHING” ON THE INTERNET

The Internet is ‘optional’, and therefore unable to make the kinds of demand for itself in the way it has elsewhere, because the social practices associated with it tend to cluster around “doing nothing” (although not exclusively so). What kinds of images of the Internet does this usage generate? The circumstances under which the Internet is thought to have arrived plays a role in this. I was in the field at a time when the Internet had been around long enough so that it was no longer an exciting, exotic new thing. In comparison, though, it was never as exciting as the stylistic performances that were taking place with mobile phones a few years before fieldwork. Then the mobile phone was the key object to be flaunted wherever possible, usually provoking the ire of passers-by. The mobile phone went far beyond the tame practices of collective artifice in gulian ’e. Mobiles were an unambiguous assertion of wealth, which is problematic for sociability (see Chapter 5). They still signify wealth to the extent that most do not have them, but the display lost much of its effect when it lost its novelty. The Internet offers none of these possibilities for display, although the domestic PC is a prestige item. Perhaps tellingly, though, American chewing gum during perestroika evoked more comment, enthusiasm and imagination of possibilities than either mobiles or the Internet could muster. To this day, tales of “when I first saw chewing gum” carry far more rhetorical weight than the accounts of first encounters of new communications technologies.

In terms of the physical space of the city, the Internet has made its presence known. Internet service providers (ISPs) advertised heavily on the metro and on television. If the Internet is not one thing but several, then the same is true for the Internet café. It is possible find places from dungeon-like abodes populated by fourteen year-olds milling about in a cloud of testosterone, to “business centers” aimed at foreigners, to places that presented themselves as a fashionable place to be for those in the know. For these latter establishments, the sense of sophistication came through the ways in which it approximated a nightclub, rather than anything to do with computers themselves or technical prowess. At one particular place there were bouncers, and I saw people who obviously knew the bouncers and attractive women jump the queue. Even within this one locality of St Petersburg, there was an arsenal of creative ways the Internet could be co-opted into processes of place making. Nevertheless, in terms of visual space, even for non-users there is a sense in which the Internet has “arrived”, and that physically it was an inescapable part of everyday life.

Given the level of presence the Internet has in St. Petersburg it is unsurprising that I did not find anyone who had never heard of the Internet, nor did I find anyone who was fearful of it or
expressed some strong distaste for it. One thing that could be said about images of the Internet is their openness and flexibility. This is not surprising being that I am focusing on images related to “doing nothing”, which I have previously argued enable people to mediate social heterogeneity. But there is a sense in which this openness is also a result of the fact that people simply may not have made up their minds yet. Just how open minds were was revealed to me in the survey I had taken. I had asked users to imagine in various ways what kind of an impact the Internet could have in the future for Russian society. There were few discernable patterns. One of the questions was whether the Internet posed a threat to “Russian traditions”. The vote was split: about half (54%) saw the two actually working in tandem, while the remaining half was divided about whether there was a threat or whether the two were so different as to not be in competition.

This is not to say, however, that they had failed to postulate some idea of what it was. To begin with the broadest of representations, one of my interview questions was to ask people to describe for me what the Internet was as if I were from Mars (“or Siberia” they would often supply). The most common answer I received across the spectrum was “eto bol’shaia biblioteka” (it’s a big library). This formulation was interesting, because it did not suggest some brave new cyber world. Nor did it suggest an entity that was half-in and half-out of the ‘real’ world, or something ‘more than’ an object. In UK research, there was much more referencing to a space half in existence and virtuality. This is not an absolute difference; in the UK there were some ‘big library’ references and in Russia, there were some instances where people would talk about it being a thing in parallel with society. In St. Petersburg I did not get the sense that “parallel” meant a kind of postmodern cyber-subjectivity, where subjects dangled between worlds. Rather, what was parallel about it was also the way in which a library is also a microcosm of ‘society’: the knowledge contained within it embodies and collects the knowledge produced outside it. The big library metaphor also means that unlike a utility, which must be always available, it could be used in discrete instances and then easily left alone.

In the previous section I noted how the potential for the Internet’s utility was imagined to be connected to professional skill, The converse, however, was also true. The Internet was unproblematically not a ‘useful’ thing for people who did not have these morally charged “socially useful” professions. This does not stop the droves of users from engaging with it. Note how the assumptions built into the English language become apparent here: to engage with an object is to find some utility in it, and be a “user”. In Russian the situation is somewhat different, as a direct translation of “useful”, poleznyi, is more likely to be connected with the body, with the connotation that the thing described is useful for health. The banya is more poleznaja than the Internet (see Chapter 4). Technologies are much more likely to be described as udobnyi, or comfortable, as if the thing in question did not obstruct the purpose one had for it. The Internet as ‘optional’ is imagined as udobnyi without needing to be poleznyi. A “user” is translated as potrebitel’, which might be

109 There were some concerns about the Internet becoming addictive, but these were usually balanced by assertions of self-control.
literally rendered as requirer, giving the sense of a person who demands. It was easier to see how those who had morally charged professions could actually be a potrebitel’. This echoes the views on utilities I mentioned earlier as a kind of right received through labor.

As I indicated above, in both UK interviews and my own, non-utilitarian uses emerge as a big part of everyday Internet experience. There are differences in what these non-utilitarian uses are, but one critical difference is that British informants invariably apologized for this, or giggled about how they do not really use it for what it is intended. In St. Petersburg these kinds of sites were reported to me straight away, whereas in UK research usually some hobby was first invoked in accounting, and then they might get round to addressing these more prosaic uses. There were even instances in the UK where parents justified the purchase of a game console on the grounds that it was a “computer” and “computers are educational—the kid’s got to learn how to use them.” The Petersburgers I spoke with made none of these kinds of apologies. While it is possible to elicit “Internet is changing the world” remarks in a removed way, a non-utilitarian model is comparatively stronger in the imagination in the Russian case. In the UK, Internet hype is also taken with a grain of salt given the realities of everyday use, but ideas about what the Internet “should be” were comparatively stronger.

There are also some differences in the kinds of communications imaginable on the RuNet and elsewhere. How my interviewees imagined chat rooms and what the BT study shows is vastly different. Even though chat room use tapers off at about age 25 in Russia, the differences are nevertheless instructive of the respective kinds of sociality imagined to be possible on the Internet. UK users were more likely to report an alien, dangerous world where the only reason a ‘virtual’ person would be there is to hide something. In the more positive version, chat rooms afford the possibility to explore new identities, but at any rate separated from the ‘reality’ of the ontologically offline person. If this personae manipulation actually went on in St. Petersburg it was not of great concern. Rather, the hierarchy of intimacy, from Internet chat to telephone to face-to-face, was a more straightforward one. One used technologies of the lower rung either as simply light banter or a step to more intimacy. Chat rooms are understood to work in exactly the same manner as other forms of social sincerity. Just as one never offers his telephone number thinking it is politeness, nor does one offer different versions of his or her identity for the sake of entertaining conversation. Here too, just as in gulian’e, bits of the self are both fashioned and revealed through one’s peers; insincerity would be much more likely if there were some money at stake. The distinction between these technologies is a matter of depth. It is considered hard to make a “real” friend in a chat room not because he is invited to up a façade by the ‘virtual’ technology, but because friendship relies on shared bodily practices such as gulian’e and banya, and the chatroom is limited in that regard. Here

---

110 There was one instance where a young woman met a man over a chat room and agreed to spend three days with him in his Moscow flat. There was uproar about this amongst friends and family, but not to do suspicions of radical deceptiveness made possible by the chatroom, but that she had no other context on which to base the decision.
again, the Internet is interpreted with reference to longer standing practices of building selfhood from collectivities and vice versa.

With that said, the spaces used for obshchenie and gulian’e offline have also come to serve as metaphoric knowledge for aspects of the Internet as a space. In accounts of Internet use, talk of the kitchen table was fused with imagery of night clubs. I do not think it is coincidence that engaging with an Internet chat room is said in Russian to entail sitting at the chat (siditsia u chat), just as one sit at the table in face-to-face contexts. In chat rooms conversation follows the rhythms of face-to-face interaction over a kitchen table more closely. More than that, it is quite common to have a small group of young men or women together using it, often constituting one “person” online. It is as if the computer had been given a seat and a cup of tea in the kitchen, rather than the participants entering into the space inside the computer.

The possibility of the new or unexpected is what gives chatrooms their nightclub quality, although sometimes this atmosphere is deliberate (see Figure V). “Chat” bordered the practices of spectacle making and friendship-making. Messages relayed to the group are like displays of linguistic acumen, and the same principles of showing oneself without being too “showy” apply. For men going to nightclubs usually has the singular and straightforward purpose of meeting women. While male informants were quite forthright about this, they did not report the same kind of sexualized atmosphere as part and parcel of chatroom space. This difference is why I think the phrase sitting at chat is more than an arbitrary verbal marker. Sitting in chatrooms is actually tamed by its kitchen table qualities.
Just like a nightclub, user’s interest centered around the possibility of further interaction, without any connotation of obligation. In one instance, a group of young men from Moscow had been chatting with some of my Petersburg acquaintances late into the night and agreed to come to Petersburg for a visit, at that very moment. They trotted off to the Moscow station within the hour, made the seven hour train ride, had day out in the city, and went home that very night. They saw the situation as sociability and not, as I initially thought, sexuality. This, of course, was told to me as something unusual, but at the end of a spectrum of actions that are still within the realm of possibility and desirability. This kind of spur of the moment action was talked about as the height of what good social relations were, and the greater the caution thrown to the wind, the more chance the story has of developing a social life of its own. Television advertising for ISPs played on these ideals of the easy banter in life at the kitchen table and the spectacle in the nightclub. Nightclubs and kitchen tables act as images for the same forms of sociality that we saw in other instances of “doing nothing” offline. This continuity of imagery suggests that locals tend not to think of themselves as doing anything different from the flexible and multifaceted ways of communicating face-to-face.

While metaphor can be revealing, equally the absence of metaphor can be revealing. I was surprised to find that the “global” aspect of the Internet, in the sense that it could foster global
interpersonal connections, did not feature heavily in the imagination, if at all. The possibilities of speaking with anyone in the furthest corners of the earth is quickly thwarted by the language barrier. Even for English speakers, which were not hard to find in St. Petersburg, there was a limit to this being desirable. English-speaking informants in Petersburg were talking to people in Moscow and Novgorod, not Michigan and New York. Both these Russian cities are within access of Petersburg; it is less common to find even truly national Internet chat.

Nor was there a sense that the Internet constituted samizdat writ large. Perhaps disappointing to George Soros and other NGO leaders seeking to provide “freedom of information” over the Internet, the social life of media fit poorly with this idea, and did not become important for the symbolism of what the Internet “is”. In terms of news, one would expect that this would be the one area that the Internet would have a kind of direct impact, because presumably it expands access to “independent” voices in the media. My survey showed little agreement on whether the Internet has more reliable news than other media or less. Through interviews I learned that “independent” media was widely seen as simply dependent on some other non-state entity with its own vested interests.¹¹¹ My informants were not seeking out supposedly “independent” voices, but rather looking up their favorite TV channel, or simply reading whatever comes up via the search engine. It is also worth noting that the RuNet is comparatively less a commercial space than other sections of the Internet. People tended to steer away from commercial uses in explaining to me what the Internet is or could do, and the amount of advertising-sponsored webspace is in fact comparatively less. I had not met anyone who purchased anything over the Internet (impossible also because credit cards were a rarity), and the survey suggested “commercial sites” were the least likely to have been visited, well behind “art/literature/poetry sites” and the potentially embarrassing “sex-related sites”. Both the uses of formal media and commercial establishments may in fact transform over time, but people had managed to keep them marginal to their experiences of the Internet.

The most interesting silence, which speaks directly to the original problematic, is that in St. Petersburg, the imagery of Internet as a kind of stake in the ground, or publicity vehicle for the nation does not really exist (excluding, perhaps, the concept of the RuNet). Miller and Slater (2000) found that in Trinidad, the Internet is seen as a way to “express Trini-ness” upon an imagined world stage. Personal websites often incorporated links to the Trinidad Chamber of Commerce, carnival organizers, histories of Trinidad, etc. The nation plays a comparatively smaller role on the RuNet. Personal websites are typically very much projects of individual expression, and make little if any reference to nationality—one is much more likely to find poems, photos, music and the occasional philosophizing. The connections made over the Internet were most likely made within the city, or else between St. Petersburg and Moscow. Unlike in Trinidad, what takes precedence is either the ways in which it adds to highly volitional forms of sociability, such as poetry exchanging, and its

¹¹¹ Before the takeover of NTV, the last remaining non-state television channel, NTV was seen as marginally more reliable, but only in the sense that it offered a different perspective in order to balance the state channels, not because it held a monopoly on objectivity.
metaphoric proximity to kitchen tables and nightclubs, or else its direct relation to skill-building for the professions.

**MAKING BOUNDARIES**

On the Internet “doing nothing” could be seen as a kind of production because of the issue of materiality I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter. A digital artifact is made, and the question is whether this counts as a space, and if so to what extent is this politically relevant. Some of the metaphors which speak to the Internet as a space are connected with “doing nothing” sociality, such as the kitchen table and the night club. But this space is not an artifact to be owned, not only in a capitalist sense of having exclusive rights over it, but also in the sense that it does not exist as something constructed and authored for and by particular groups. Perhaps my friend who insists that she “just use[es] it… it doesn’t do anything” would nevertheless agree that a kind of experimentation is at stake implicitly if not explicitly. This seems to be a particular moment in RuNet history where people are testing its boundaries, making evident to themselves what it can and cannot do. In late 2000 there was an experiment conducted by a Kommersant journalist and sponsored by Alfa-Bank, in which a man locked himself in an empty Moscow flat for three weeks with nothing but a computer and a modem. He was to do everything over the Internet—buy his food and furniture, give media interviews, talk to his friends and conduct distance-learning. Unsurprisingly, all of this half-worked: his food arrived late, not at all, or the wrong items showed up, and he was forced to neglect his tasks. The commentary people sent into the site reveals two themes. First, there were many concerns that this was just an empty publicity stunt, and therefore was insufficiently scientific. It was “empty” because of the bank’s sponsorship, and thus the presence of money invalidated whatever might have actually occurred, and gave it a fictional quality. The second theme was that it would have been far more interesting to do it outside of Moscow—and on this count I am not sure if they wanted the entertainment value of the man starving or if this was a broader commentary to show the falsity of its real world development. That is, Moscow was partly seen as beyond reality in that money created unreal possibilities. The experiment might half-work in Moscow, but this simply confirmed the impossibility of it serving as backbone for “our” economy. There was interest in it as an experiment, enough to warrant these angry complaints of it being a commercial publicity stunt. Despite (or maybe because of) this skepticism, the site was hugely popular.112

The main search engines enable a similar kind of introspection. They publish statistics on data traffic volume, numbers of websites, and most common search terms. This is not aimed at researchers, but aimed explicitly at curious users. Similarly, satire has grown hugely popular on the Internet, but this too entails a great deal of joking about and exploring what the Internet is good for.

112 The site still works, and has become a center for discourse about the state of development of the Runet. See [www.ione.ru](http://www.ione.ru).
In early 2002, a digital cartoon called Masiania was the most often entered search term on the RuNet for February and March, according to the major search engine Yandex.ru. This popular cartoon character spends her time doing the things I have been describing as “nothing”, going on a fruitless adventure when she meets a friend made through a chat-room, and together with her friend beating her computer into submission when it fails to download music. What makes for ‘proper’ use of the Internet is being constructed not by direct forms of education, a project well funded in the UK and US, but in the often on-the-fly developments in chat-rooms, Internet cafes, and experimentation with websites. What seems to be at issue in all this experimentation are the very same issues of personhood and ‘society’ at stake in gulian’e and obshchenie: questions of money and ethics, cultural creativity, and developing interpersonal knowledge. Moreover, they come up in exactly the same way, as ‘unserious’ humor, or ‘unimportant’ ordinariness, which can be so easily dismissed as low culture.

Trinidadians see in the Internet a potential for claiming a social field on the Internet that St. Petersburgers do not. In other respects, though, the Internet does give material form to new social relations as they emerge. How do we interpret the preference for experimentation over agendas of building alternative social spaces—agendas which do suggest themselves from the perspective of both neoclassical social theories (‘civil society’) and postmodern alterity (‘subcultures’)? The case of the Internet in St. Petersburg I think exemplifies the real social power to be had in not making social claims. To go the extra step and claim the Internet as a populist space would be problematic. Unlike Ione, Masiania maintains her legitimacy because she was developed in the interest of experimentation.  

Masiania is evidence of the advantages to remaining “undeveloped” in the eyes of the World Bank. Her inventor would have lost his authenticity if he claimed to do more than muck about with some code. As a cultural icon, Masiania is a play on ordinariness that stands to lose its playfulness and slip into straightforward cliché if its social effects were not masked. While there might be overtones of populism, sobornost’, etc. that might be abstracted from “doing nothing” practices, this is entirely different from practices which are generated under a discursive umbrella that incorporates these things. Ideological rhetorics in Russia usually make claims to populism, whether it be contemporary nationalisms or the Soviet habit of naming things the people’s such and such. Populism does ring as a kind of a deceit. Information that smacks of ‘the market’ too is simply ignored, or worthy of blank stares when raised by overly enthusiastic foreigners over a cup of tea.

Suppose, though, some language could be invented to overcome the connotations of populism. Claiming the Internet as a form of populist space would nonetheless works about as badly as the rhetoric of “freedom” in the phrase “freedom of information”. In St. Petersburg “freedom of information” was a failure not because people did not believe in it, or somehow preferred to be unfree, but because freedom or belief was neither here nor there. There was not an array of positions from which to pick and choose; instead, each had a vested interest in each other, or

113 Interview with Masiania’s inventor, Oleg Kuvaev, Sobaka, June 2002.
something else. Similarly, a space carved out for the people, independent of government or other interests, could not stand alone in any kind of independence. But Russian theories of the person suggest that people are always in dialogue with one another, constituted by the collectivities of persons that they make for themselves, which somewhat negates the need for a ‘space’ of one’s own. Building collectivities and individuals does happen on the Internet, for example in the prominence of poetry on websites. Even the importance of professional skill could be seen as evidence that the Internet is widely used as a tool for self-fashioning, even though this fashioning relies heavily on other persons rather than the fantasy possibilities suggested to Western users by the digital formatting. This interconnection of personhood with dialogue means that it does not appear as obvious that the Internet would foster or further dialogue through a politics of domain names.

The trajectory of the Internet in the West did (and still does) involve populist and libertarian discourses. These ideas had a large say in how the Internet was perceived, and therefore developed. The model of the open source code and the “end-to-end” network is still imagined as a counterweight to increasingly commercial proprietary interests (Lessig 2000, Sandvig 2002). But this kind of politics is limited to the parts of the world where a social field is imagined in roughly the same manner. What I am suggesting then, is not that the Internet is irrelevant for Russian society, or that somehow it is stripped of politics in St. Petersburg. Instead, there is a politics at stake that sits uncomfortably with Western theories of sociality. Russians do imagine a society as a thing that exists as something impractical, and the Internet does speak to dreams of progress. Impractical ideals are not irrelevant; the projects of the 1920s could hardly be seen as unimaginative or ineffective! But the politics of the St. Petersburg Internet leaves some gaps in Western eyes because we see politics largely as a process of articulating claims. The relative everyday insignificance of formal organizations appears to Euro-Americans as underdevelopment. Russia in turn appears as a kind of developmental quagmire, too traumatized by the suddenness of change to effect development. But this is a function of our metaphors for social interaction, not necessarily theirs.

Internet use in St. Petersburg speaks to a social disposition that sits uneasily with a politics of claims. Questions of social organization were seen as deeply ethical ones—an ethics which resides in persons and not things, in relations and not structures. Non-governmental organizations are a perfectly reasonable politics in a social milieu that conceives of society as a thing with structures that must themselves be balanced. Their existence sits opposite the state, and their very structuredness is itself effective. Chris Hann argues for an “inclusive usage of civil society, in which it is not defined negatively, in opposition to the state, but positively in the context of the ideas and practices through which cooperation and trust are established in social life” (1996:23). In Hann’s sense St. Petersburg certainly has civil society, but his formulation presents a political problem. Why expand this usage to its breaking point? In Strathern’s description (1988) Melanesia has ideas and practices that establish cooperation and trust but no concept of society as we recognize it. The

---

114 “End-to-end” refers to a style of network infrastructure where the network itself uses a simple, accessible code and complexity comes through the end users.
expansion reads as a kind of plea for alternative forms of political legitimacies. But this is wrong to do for the Russian case because Russian sociality is precisely about not making social claims in an explicit and generalized manner. The problem with civil society is not its reliance on formalizations in opposition to another formalization (the state), but its assumptions about the very constitution of persons, which are not always ontologically discrete entities like the structures they invent. The problem with ‘civil society’ does not arise from the assumptions about the state and its counterweights, but ‘society’ as an unproblematic fact of social existence. A similar conclusion about the Information Society can be drawn. Information and knowledge has an important social life in St. Petersburg, fully amenable to new technologies, but not as a reification via digital networks.
CONCLUSION

Like Susan Buck-Morss (2000), I too have tried to salvage possible dreamscapes through the catastrophes of the late twentieth century. Buck-Morss is bolder than I, though. She actually assembles a dreamscape through her own arrangement of the stories of history, making a *denkbilder* by making juxtapositions across time. Instead I tried to show how this could be achieved as a matter of day-to-day affairs. Buck-Morss, like Walter Benjamin whom she draws upon, relies on a temporality of interruption to achieve the effect—a temporality, as she notes, also central to the artistic *avante garde* projects of the 1920s. My informants, too, build a non-linear temporality that enable these thought-images to come forth, but the temporality is less an interruption than it is a kind of formlessness experienced as if it were somehow there all along. It is unsurprising that temporalities in which to dream are different from the 1920s, even though in many respects the goals of envisioning and building social relations are shared across time. My informants did not imagine they had the capacity to surprise and interrupt, or to be at the vanguard of anything. Even my artist friends knew they would never be central in anyone’s project, let alone a project so bold as building socialist modernity of the 1920s. Yet walking those streets and listening to the stories told, the reality and effectiveness of their *denkbilder* cannot be denied.

The imagined persistence of formless time has consequences beyond itself. It is what enables my informants to conceptualize themselves as ontologically coherent individuals. They carry their perceived individuality across time, twisting and turning with the needs of the moment but also to some extent maintaining the idea that inside lies an inner core. Temporal formlessness also enables the importance of collectivity for individuals to persist. Sharing time means you let the other in, and practices of letting each other in through phenomenological experience, even though reliant on ephemera for their effect, are carried across time, evoked in other situations as a mutual ‘insider’ knowledge of one another. Evocativeness plays a further role in my account, as processes of making moral persons in “doing nothing” relies precisely on the ability to evoke. Being sociable means being able to tell relevant stories, and evoke other times and places without losing the proper sensibility of the particular temporal context—a skill that to me would appear essential if one’s practical and economic life is so deeply informed by criss-crossed interconnections.

Bakhtin makes the striking point that “an idea, removed from the interrelationship of events of consciousness and forced into a systematic monological context, even of the most dialectical sort, inevitably loses its uniqueness and becomes an inferior philosophical assertion” (1973: 7). This recalls the ethnographic quandary I began with in the Introduction. Upon return, my fieldnotes appeared to me as inferior philosophical assertions. No matter how much context I gathered round
them, no matter how poetically I managed to describe the particular situation in which they were uttered, they would remain as just that: people doing nothing. In fact, my emphasis on abstract concepts like hybridity and “doing nothing” is not out of an obsession with theory, but out of the acknowledgement that I am not writing the kind of dialogic novel Bakhtin describes, and that in order for my subjects to ‘speak’ they would have to be made to speak to each other, just as they were doing in situ. What could not be recreated was that practical, almost emotional sense of time that constitutes the in situ part of it. What I hope I did in fact accomplish was to suggest how that particular kind of “in situ”—the particular way of gathering together a “doing nothing” context, and ways of talking and relating as part of that context—inform other aspects of social relations.

“Doing nothing” is not a way of life, but it does have some far flung connections, from the production of poetry, informing the trajectory of the Internet, developing understandings of moral and aesthetic values, and, of course, maintaining interpersonal networks.

But all these things require a counterintuitive process of showing connections; people really do experience these moments as doing nothing of any consequence. This in part can be explained that Russia is a complex place and this is not the only form of sociality possible (although it is directly linked with ideas of the soul and personhood, and thus incredibly important). Indeed, it assumes the forms it does because of the heterogeneous institutions that surround it. This is most clearly seen in how “doing nothing” works within and is constituted by historically-informed constructs of time and personhood. Throughout I tried to keep competing visions of how society works in sight, whether it be talk of “it’s all about money”, understandings of progress as social principle, and the dream of “rule of law”. So in this sense “doing nothing” constitutes a site in which to imagine a multiple versions of social relations at once, an undertaking that remains far more elusive in other contexts.

The multiplicity in social imagination which I have tried to highlight also speaks to the way in which there are multiple forms of power in Russia. In Chapter 3 I indicated that we may have underestimated the kind of complexity at stake by showing how Foucauldian approaches to power both are effective as well as have their limitations in postsocialist applications. It is this area that in my view postsocialist studies is so interesting, as anthropologically-minded works do recognize the problems of bringing pre-formulated theories of power to the region. Although my work could be criticized on the grounds that power appears distant from the analysis, equally this could be seen as a strength, as it enabled me to document at least one instance where not making social claims, and not delineating spaces as spaces of power, was in fact integral to sociality as well as significant for the trajectory of an important technology in the city. By not organizing the study around power explicitly, I have sought to further pry open the space in which to ask whether postsocialist relations have something unique to offer our concepts of social relationships more generally. To the extent that I have been able to show that activities that really do exist as “doing nothing” are also of some social consequence, without being acts of ‘hiding’ in resistance to a regime of power but instead

115 Benjamin’s (1970) term for thought-images.
integral to a system of relatedness, I do think there is something unique going on. There is a system of relatedness here which we only partially understand. The best we can do is call it postsocialism—after something that at least declared itself as a mode of social organization.

In acknowledging the plural nature of imagery of social relations and the power relations that inform them, I also recognize that there are certain categories in St. Petersburg which do appear to map onto ‘our’ ways of knowing what is and what is not a social category. My informants did recognize certain sites of cultural knowledge as some sort of unit—the capitalist firm, the revolution, the army, etc. “Doing nothing”, in its propensity to unsteady categories of knowledge, raises the issue of how these things coalesce into units. Is the metaphor of building and constructing the right one here? Do these ‘constructs’ have the same fate as those in firmly capitalist countries, where ownership and authorship of knowledge seems so central to political life? That is, while anthropology now tends to emphasize the contingent nature of social life, there must also be some ethnographically specific ideas about the grounds on which that ‘contingency’ rests.

I have relied on Yurchak’s work rather extensively because he shows how contradictory sites of knowledge, which do not just rest on different imagined ‘levels’ but are forced to come into contact with one another, do not necessarily induce a kind of social schizophrenia in the actors that deal with them. The truth value of one is not less than, more than, nor unrelated to the other. While Yurchak deals in specific social fields, and not sociality as a general condition of relatedness, nevertheless I suspect that he is onto something that is symptomatic of a particularly postsocialist sociality. What is at stake in both of our projects is a kind of practical consciousness, and I wonder about the extent to which we are interpreting two different sides of the same coin. His work has helped me to connect up peoples’ practical consciousness of “doing nothing” with their economic lives. The economic help they give each other is based on the knowledge of one another developed in “doing nothing” time, not because “doing nothing” sits between structures ready to be deployed, but also because “doing nothing” assembles and creates the ‘right’ agents, not unlike how the entrepreneur is able to corral the right context into shape to get the job done. The multiplicity of ‘games’ I described in Chapter 2 precludes the possibility that active management of the social connections which cross them is simply low-level socializing. To the extent that social fields and institutions are also sites of knowledge, across which individual actors are able to move quite fluidly, forging interpenetrations as they go along, it does have to be examined why and how ‘constructs’ do sometimes appear as unitary. This is particularly perplexing as some anthropologists such as Strathern (1988) do address the apparent unitariness and concreteness of ‘our’ constructs as an artifact of capitalism.

This is an issue that perhaps warrants its own thesis. “Doing nothing” gets us part of the way there by pointing out some of the ways this fluidity appears to real people in St. Petersburg, and how they acquire a modicum of phenomenological concreteness despite being ‘nothing’ of any consequence. It is also not to hard to find cases where the very actors who are most successful at harnessing this fluidity to fruitful ends see it as problematic and yearn for universalized laws.
(Humphrey 2000 is perhaps most clear on this point). Although I do not pretend to solve this problem (for which a comfortable resolution seems unlikely), it might be worth comparing some of Strathern’s (1988) ideas about how constructs in capitalist societies achieve their perceived wholeness with some speculations about how this might work in Russia if we were to start from concepts of ‘the person’ and work outward. While this is a speculative endeavor, and inevitably excludes more than it includes, it has the merit of locating “doing nothing” in some sort of theoretical perspective on social life as well as showing its limitations. Here I ask what kind of a social world could be theorized for postsocialism if “doing nothing” were actually indicative of a far more pervasive dialogism than perhaps exists on the ground. Such an exercise would assume the power of not making explicit claims to be more pervasive than there is ethnography to support, but would also push somewhat the issue of just how this power can exist at all when there are claims being made all the time about where businesses, the state, etc. begin and end. Speaking of “doing nothing” as a way into dialogism would also suggest a kind of person-mediated enterprise, almost in a way individualistic, or perhaps more accurately personalistic as those individuals admit other individuals into themselves far more than the English term allows. While this seems to suggests a kind of anthropology that contests whole swathes of anthropological traditions (especially those stemming from Marx and Durkheim), I do not see this as proposing a new way of doing anthropology. Rather, it is a contrivance to come to terms with the kind of social change that has taken place in St. Petersburg, even though it may have some resonance with other situations of radical upheaval.

In speaking of dialogism my reader no doubt has already guessed I will look towards Bakhtin. Bakhtin also features in this account through Yurchak’s uses of Bakhtin’s idea of hybridity, which posits the idea that social institutions, persons and objects can constitute the terms of one another, as if they were in dialogue. I will speak mostly of Dostoevsky, though, because I think it is somewhat unfair that dialogism and dialogic thinking is usually referenced as Bakhtin’s when Bakhtin himself credits Dostoevsky with dialogism’s invention. I also will borrow from Marilyn Strathern’s *Gender of the Gift* (1988). It is impossible to present a full theory of what is ‘capitalist’ about social construction, but I rely on her insights about how ideas about physical commodities have been transferred to social categories because they were drawn out of an ethnography that emphasized radically different ideas about personhood. While Russian theories of personhood would not emphasize partiality, they do, like Strathern’s Melanesians, admit far more in the way of collectivities, which has similar implications for the way in which people can impose themselves on one another.

The aspects of everyday life I have drawn together under the umbrella of “doing nothing” come close enough to Dostoevsky’s view of the human condition to warrant using his philosophy as the appropriate stand-in for ‘Russian sociality’. However, to claim that this is happy coincidence would be misleading, as I have argued that Bakhtinian ‘hybrid’ relations stretch our understandings of how social relations can work. We should remember, though, that Dostoevsky saw his works as
deeply realist: he was addressing the human condition, not “sociality” as anthropologists are likely to more cautiously say. Although Dostoevsky is usually identified with Slavophile traditions, he was actually quite opposed to philosophizing without clear referents to the perspectives of actual people, even as fictional characters. Bakhtin reports that Dostoevsky saw in psychology “a humiliating reification of the human soul”. However, to the extent that psychology and other reifications in other parts of the world do not necessary destroy and humiliate local analogues of the human soul we should recognize that the human soul in Dostoevsky’s world is in fact the Russian soul. While Dostoevsky’s view that objectifications are a humiliation of subjectivity is to some extent shared by Strathern’s Euro-Americans, in some ways, they are quite different and lead him to completely different conclusions.

Kharkhordin (1997) also uses Dostoevsky to describe postsocialism. A theme that emerges in Dostoevsky’s work is the possibility of sobornost’ (see Chapters 3 and 4) as a mode of social organization. Sobornost’ as a Slavophile project suggests that state power would at some point no longer be needed because eventually, through dialogue and through a shared understanding that we are all in the same sobor under the eyes of God, ethics would be housed in people rather than formal apparatuses. The critical thing about sobornost’ is not that everybody is the same, but that the sobor engages the plurality of unmerged consciousness. Kharkhordin notes that “Dostoevsky’s project” has indeed come to pass in the most dystopian manner possible. The state does not have a monopoly on violence, nor for that matter do abstract laws, but neither is there the civilized society promised as a world of ethics.

I would like to take up Dostoevsky as a thinker of social organization not through the ideology of sobornost’ (although it is by no means unrelated), but through his literary technique, his realism, as a Russian theory of the person. Dialogism is a way of writing which allows for multivoicedness, or heteroglossia as it is usually translated (raznorechie). Dialogism conceives of a novel in terms of the unmerged consciousnesses of its characters. Its characters interact with each other and elicit action from one another in the fullest possible sense. A monologic novel, by contrast, unfolds events which to some degree necessitates characters’ interaction, but characters interact only to the extent that they unfold the plot. Thoughts expressed dialogically are always true to that individuals’ consciousness. Words also become double-voiced, so that one may always hear the echoes of another character in the speaking character. In this sense, the characters recognize each other as they recognize themselves. They permeate each other, but do not think of each other exclusively in terms of each other. The fact of consciousness—one’s own as well as others—is what is recognized, and it is important that two consciousnesses do not merge fully.

Importantly, dialogism is not simply asserting the value and sacredness of the individual person; this, as Bakhtin reminds us, is well and truly part of European romantic tradition. One could argue that the importance of just such assertions has been made part of the postmodern
tradition as well, disregarding the more unsettling idea that Dostoevsky as the inventor of
dialogism was no romantic. Dialogic persons often subsume themselves to ideas (Bakhtin 1973:71),
or rather allow ideas to manifest in full without ‘appropriating’ them as identity. This aspect of is
often glossed over in Euro-American projects of reasserting voices. While we postmoderns like to
think of ourselves as sympathetic to dialogic forms of discourse, the reality is that it remains jarring:
unless we are reading fiction, we still want to see the voice, have its existence monologically
confirmed for us. As we will see, Dostoevsky’s treatment of time suggests a social milieu
unconducive to the very idea of struggling for assertions and representations.

Strathern describes Melanesians as acting as objects or like objects, which to an English
speaker seems to disturbingly exclude agency. In Dostoevsky’s world, moreover, people are also
objects—in fact, the only ‘real’ objects going. Dostoevsky considered himself a realist, and realists
deal in facts. People’s consciousnesses, their souls, are facts in Dostoevsky’s worlds. Souls are
completely and utterly absolute truths, and this fact is the ultimate objectivity. To have a dialogue,
people submit themselves as objects of knowledge to one another. They have to, to some extent, be
‘alien’ to the other person in order to not be subsumed by that person. To have agency is to have
‘objective’ truth of consciousness. “Only the objective world—the world of other equal
consciousnesses—can be counterposed by the author to the all-engulfing consciousness of the hero”
(Bakhtin 1973: 40). The use of the word “object” and its derivatives is tricky here, as Dostoevsky
was largely against other kinds of objectifications. The objectively existing subject is an object of
special category. The ‘objectively’ existing persons does not always have to make assertions about
itself, and can submit itself to others and ideas without losing ‘voice’. This would suggest that not
making social claims had less to do with a problematic ennui than a social ‘resource’ that people
assume they have all along.

Lest we settle into thinking we know what a ‘complete’ person is, Dostoevsky’s claim to
realism rests in the idea that the human (Russian) soul is ‘objectively’ never finite. Whole persons
only exist as unfinished entities, and it is the unfinishedness that should be maintained. Things
should be constantly interjected, and the penetrations of others means that the individual appears to
have less independence than his Western counterparts. This is just an appearance, though, because in
this dialogue he has agency. He can elicit actions from others through ideas. His ideas may at times
appear to take over his personality, leaving perhaps, just the depths of the soul. In Dostoevsky’s
worlds, ideas contain with in them their own latent potentialities (Bakhtin 1973:74). In this respect
they are fairly people-like, also never complete. Bakhtin writes that “every thought represents a
whole person” (1973: 76), but this whole person is assumed to be whole in a way that appears rather
partial to Euro-Americans.

Euro-American critiques of reification rest on the opposite principle. Objects do sum up
people in commodity logic, and this is the point of having them. “When Westerners regard persons

---

116 There is, of course, a variety of writing strategies in response to the “crisis of representation”, not all of
which address voice in this manner. But arguably, it is a prominent strategy. For instance, James et al (1997)
as having to overcome polymorphous states, this is taken as evidence of proper (human) drive
towards internal consistency; in commodity logic, the separate person is also the whole person”
(Strathern 1988:321). We put out our objects for perusal, not ourselves as amorphous depths
because we like to think we have the capacity to define ourselves. We may do this in multiple
capacities, but the definitions still stand as complete wholes. Whole cultures also can be authored as
a summing up of the identities of their makers, made for their authors and imposed on everyone else.
Feminist critiques, as Strathern points out, start from the idea that men have monopolized the
capacity to make culture at the expense of women. This proposition, she argues, is nonsensical in
non-capitalist contexts because a ‘culture’ does not raise questions of ownership elsewhere. If
authorship of one’s objects is not immediately apparent, it raises questions about whether a person
has been made to act in somebody else’s authorship schemes, which makes him an object of
somebody else’s object, and therefore owned. Being an object is exclusive to subjectivity because
objects are alienable. A proper Western politics is that of identifying (resorting) the real authors or
create opportunities for authorship. The key problematic from a Western standpoint is the rightful
ownership of that summation, not the fact that a summation has occurred.

Dostoevsky’s person is not driven to internal consistency; his separateness and wholeness is
an ontological a priori. This means that he does not have to ‘overcome’ polymorphism, but rather
expand it, widen (or more likely deepen) his dialogue with others and expand his kulturnost’. He
does make plenty of objectifications for himself: institutions and institutionalized speech is a
familiar social phenomenon, and all dialogue evokes ideas and images ‘out there’. He can
personalize objects through extensive dialogue so they become intimately attached to their
inventors, as Alesheev and Humphrey argue. But he does not have to relentlessly author them as his
own exclusive objects under his possession because they do not sum him up. Instead, if they are
important enough to be like a person, he assumes them to be under constant production, unfinished.
Similarly, his capacity for communication with others is not assumed to be based on “common
ownership of a [shared] culture” (Strathern 1988:322), but instead in his own unfinishedness, which
others come to understand and provide their own participations. Nor do the objectifications of others
sum him up unless this is the direct intent of that objectification (as in his view of psychology).
Therefore there is only a limited sense in which culture can impinge on and limit him. Money
impinges greatly, but this is not imagined to be achieved via systematicity, that some groups have
made it and kept it for themselves. Excessive contact with money warps people, making them grab
ever larger quantities of it. Having money is no heightened awareness of ‘society’, but makes one
even more unreflective and unresponsive to social relations.

For the Russian case, building on Alesheev (1995) and Humphrey (2002) as well as
Bakhtin, one could argue that objects represented more ideational qualities than sealed-off facts
capable of impacting on people, like billiard balls. Through the constant adjustment of objects, an
describe Rapport’s (same volume) strategy of presenting 31 indigenous ‘voices’ as “multivocality” (1997:8).
idea latent in that machinery is generated whose builder brings it out. Bakhtin writes of Dostoevsky’s uses of ideas, “a thought, drawn into an event, itself becomes part of the event and takes on the peculiar character of an ‘idea feeling’ or ‘idea force’” (1973: 7). If we were to think of dialogic social life as a dominant form of sociality in Russia (and again, it has yet to be proved that this is indeed the case), this perspective would lead us to believe that constructs such as ‘the capitalist firm’ and ‘the revolution’ were less constructs and more idea-forces: that is, they derive their force as ‘facts’ not because they are thought of as sealed-off things separate from their human interlocutors, but because they have incipient ideas within them that promise to perpetuate the ‘conversation’. Our ideas about defining things, by contrast, seek to exclude uncertainties by triangulating with other artifacts of knowledge in an effort to crowd it out. This idea would also be at odds with the Marxian objectivism that so permeated Soviet socialism, but it would also contribute to an understanding of how knowledge built in “doing nothing” so easily transcends its boundaries, both in late socialism and now.

Instead of finished things to be owned, physical objects, ideas, feelings, etc. derive their force from movement as they are transmuted between subjects. The submission of oneself as an object of knowledge then also is a kind of movement, and it is here that agency can be found. Dialogic persons submit themselves to one another as if they were objects of knowledge, but do so knowing that their souls exist prior to and separate from this submission. It follows, then, that people who thought of themselves in this way would not need to subordinate themselves to a social contracts in order to communicate with other owners of it (as in commodity logic). Rather, they submit to each other in the recognition of the ‘objectivity’ of the other’s subjectivity, which is always on the move. Dostoevsky’s worlds were often murky underworlds, always described as “life on the brink” (Bakhtin 1973: 56)—a trope not unfamiliar to anthropological descriptions of postsocialist life. Being on the brink, then, would have just as much to do with a more enduring sociality as economic and political transformations.

Dostoevsky’s ‘realism’ about social life relies on a distinct conceptualization of time. Although I have been speaking of dialogism as a heuristic proposition, it is the ideas about time embedded within dialogism that generates the continuities with what we do know about postsocialism. Dialogic social worlds have a deep commitment to the present. Events do not evolve, but coexist: “only those things which can conceivably be presented simultaneously, which can conceivably be interconnected in a single point in time, are of the essence and enter into Dostoevsky’s world; such things are also capable of being carried over into eternity, for in eternity, according to Dostoevsky, all is simultaneous, everything coexists” (Bakhtin 1973: 24). The ability to stand side by side with one’s opposite, or with the artifacts of life as they are drawn into the dialogue, makes for the essential constellation of factors in social milieu. “Therefore there is no causality in the Dostoevskian novel… no explanations based on the past, on the influence of the environment or of upbringing, etc.. The hero’ every act is in the present and in this sense is unpredetermined…” (ibid). This presentism speaks to how ephemera used as props in “doing
nothing”, when given the force of subjectivity, also take on the appearance of something that has longer lasting weight and therefore people experience some urgency in engaging with it.

Dostoevsky’s absence of causality could be taken as the final link between “doing nothing”, personhood and postsocialism. While we have seen that Petersburgers imagine themselves revealed in doing nothing time, and rely on the connections forged by this exchange of knowledge in countless ways, Dostoevsky gives us a theory as to why time as a phenomenologically experienced formlessness, as an engagement with the present, can do this. When a person engages all the essential factors at once, summons things from the past or future, imagine the voices of others as if it were his interlocutor, he realizes his subjectivity. Here I mean engagement in the fullest sense—material objects become part of the present, bodies are jarred or relaxed so that one might take notice of it. By two (or more) persons bringing the same artifacts into their gazes, or suggesting different ones to one another, they are also granted the force of ideas because the other person recognizes the speaker’s uses of them. The two subjects are themselves in dialogue, eliciting from these objects each other’s subjectivity. Bachelard’s shimmering is Dostoevsky’s sociality at its most essential: moments of shimmering are when an aesthetic of speed is achieved, and the simultaneity of social life comes to actually exist in a real moment. But this speed is a particular kind, more eclectic than frantically directed. It absorbs rather than tries to get somewhere. Bakhtin says that Dostoevsky’s dialogism overcomes time, but if this is true it is certainly in a different manner from the ways in which socialist practices of production overcame time by setting a goal and then surpassing it through sheer human will. Benjamin’s Denkbilder in a Dostoevskian sociality would indeed be fleeting images, but fleeting only inasmuch as they bring into view an expansive present, which is itself experienced as eternal. Of course, a novel can contain a single present in a way that real life cannot. “Doing nothing” realizes personhood through a similar present, because the essential simultaneity of sociality is most closely recognized by being enacted. Things shimmer in an act of realization—realization not as an acknowledgement, but in the lesser-used sense of come to fruition. In other modes of acting, going to the shops, working, commuting, etc., one is not the entirety of oneself, not only because people are unfinalizable but also because there are a great many things that are filtered out, not even penetrated into subjectivity. The essentials come out in doing nothing, though. With friends, one gets back to oneself—all the more so if it is accomplished in some naturalistic physical manner, such as in the banya.

Bakhtin’s observation of Dostoevsky’s use of space and time provides an interesting counterpoint to DeCerteau (1988), whose ideas about everyday life opened up this thesis. Whereas for DeCerteau space was durable, against which ordinary people only had stolen moments, Bakthin argues that there is much space in Dostoevsky’s otherwise narrow present. Dostoevsky shortens time precisely through expanding space. This reverses Harvey’s (1989) idea about capitalist time annihilating space though shortening time. Maybe it is the coincidence that both kinds of time are ‘shortened’ that makes it possible that my informant’s ‘stolen moments’ are more than just stolen, but assemble a social horizon beyond itself, and at the same time persist in the context of global
capitalism that demands ever increasing time ‘discipline’. When my informants did nothing with one another, they also set up a field of moral persons and ideas, and knew where to look as a first port of call to get something done. De Certeau’s positions of authorship are themselves Strathern’s authored objects of Euro-American society, and these have pasts as well as futures. Harvey would argue that their expiration dates are constantly being shortened, while Dostoevsky’s expansive present in contrast enables an imagination of endurance. The person is unfinalizable not because he does not make objects of culture, or they bear no relation to him, but because he realizes himself in the present.

The capacities imbued in Dostoevsky’s conceptualization of voice are quite different from how postmoderns have taken up the cause. For Western postmoderns, identities still come in the form of assertions. Euro-American postmodernism took up dialogism to stand for making the an associations between voice and institutionalized power apparent, and battle lines were drawn over who has the right to speak for whom. It seems that Russians assume ‘voice’ is something they have, but because of the relationship with time it does not add up to, nor is even directed to, social structures or ‘the system’ as a set of representations. Where does this leave postsocialism, then, if it does not declare itself as a system of organization? Perhaps what Dostoevsky could tell us is that the postsocialist moment could be seen as an expanded one, not necessarily as a protracted period of time, but as a time expanded by the inhabited ‘spaces’ of subjectivities. Such an expansion would preclude a hegemonic metaphor (including dialogism itself), along with the logic to underwrite it. There is the possibility that an absence of hegemony may in fact have already become the answer to Verdery’s question of what comes next, at least for Russia--a prospect that will keep anthropologists just as busy as the revolutions of 1989 and 1991.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Benjamin, W. 1977. The origins of German tragic drama. London: NLB.


Yurchak, A. 2003. “The Soviet hegemony of form: Everything was forever, until it was no more.” Paper given at Cambridge University Department of Social Anthropology.

