

Call for papers

International Colloquium

The Making of the 1990s: The Genesis of Post-Soviet Society through Its Material Culture

Paris, 8-9 March 2022

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(CERCEC / EHESS - CNRS)



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Conference languages: French, English and Russian

This interdisciplinary colloquium explores the social dynamics of the 1990s through the period's changing material culture. Everyday "stuff" was transformed by the disappearance of the Soviet system, the irruption of the market, and the opening to the world. The aim is to investigate the long disintegration of the Soviet system by looking at how populations which are caught in a state of uncertainty react with material inventiveness in order to adapt.

The imprint left by people on things inherited from the Soviet past or newly introduced by the economic and political opening of the system generates a human-material interplay. This transforms social relations over time and fulfills a structuring role in societies. The choice of a material approach combines the universe of things (objects, consumer goods, but also real estate and technical infrastructures) with the space of social relations. It also opens a door on the ordinary intimacy of material arrangements that make

everyday life “liveable” in unsettled times. The event is planned as a multidisciplinary dialogue between history, sociology, anthropology and economics.

A lost decade? Ordinary perceptions and academic analyses

The 1990s have left such a negative mark that the period has been either pushed into oblivion as a repressed memory or put forward as a political scarecrow. In post-Soviet societies, the 1990s were met with disappointment with soaring democratic and liberal expectations, hopes for widespread prosperity, and modernization through the market. "The 1990s" were so turbulent and feverish, so equivocal and uncertain for many post-Soviet societies that their popular and political narratives are torn between dichotomous representations: an era of moral and legal decay ("Lykhie 90"), on the one hand, and a liberal experience ("ostrov svobody") on the other. The narrative also varies by country: it can be one of nation-building as in Ukraine, or one of exit (from communism) and entry (European) as in the Baltic countries. These years – the chronological boundaries remain fuzzy - were experienced in a variety of ways by societies of the former USSR: it is a period of social, political, and economic production that cemented the political dynamics of the 2000s in Russia, Belarus, the Baltic countries, Central Asia, and the Caucasus.

There is one experience that binds these societies across the region in the immediate post-Soviet aftermath: a shared loss of certainty in the broadest sense of the word. Whether by the trauma of war or otherwise violent social collapse, populations lost their points of reference and of visibility in daily life, they saw their horizons of expectation contracted to address the immediate present. In short, the world had become unpredictable and unreadable.

Numerous works of economic and cultural anthropology dealing with the post-Soviet space explore the management of these states of uncertainty from the point of view of adapting practices and strategies of economic survival, cultural practices, consumption, state regulation, and property (Morris 2016, Verdery 1999 and 2013, Allina-Pisano 2008, Hann & Gudeman 2015a 2015b). As for the political science perspective, it draws a connection between the 1990s and the legitimization of authoritarian and statist regimes. The existential uncertainty of populations has been commonly identified as the generator of a social demand for "order" and as the foundation of the Putinist social contract (Garrigues, Rousselet 2004, Cook and Dimitrov 2011, Feldmann and Mazepus 2017).

Academic research has brought nuance to the understanding of the 1990s, in particular by analyzing the weight of legacies from the past and adaptations in a context of social collapse (see bibliography and references). However, the 1990s have not yet been put into historical perspective. We frame the experience of the 1990s as one of populations caught in a state of " permanent liminality" (Szokolczai 2014) where they are forced to reinvent in a continuous loop a "new normality" through the mediation of practices but also of everyday objects (Maček,2016).

Reinventing the 1990s? Creativity and revolution in social relations with things

Looking at the "1990s" through the concept of liminality underlines the dimension of creativity that such a state of permanent uncertainty embodies: actors invent and create in order to ensure a semblance of control over their situation and their horizon of expectation (Thomassen et al. 2015). The anthropologist K. Verdery described the introduction of market relations and private property as a period of possible innovation. The 1990s signified a revolution in the way of thinking and interacting to the point of

touching the "foundations of what constitutes a person", through the new relationship it establishes between the person and the thing owned (Verdery 2013). The materialized and starkly visual and aesthetic expression of the break with the past is striking: it can be the sudden irruption of new things like imports of consumer goods, experiences of urban transformation (degradation or aestheticization), social differentiation, the abandonment of Soviet rituals or public practices and the introduction of new ones. Social dynamics of the 1990s such as the transformations of firms, of the relationship to the urban or natural environment, of the management of new private property or that of the public good also deserve a fresh eye through a material approach. Some scholarship has shown how, in a context of shortages, the practices of "home-made" and DIY created a particular relationship to things, constitutive of the "Soviet subject" (Golubev 2020, Gerasimova 2004). One may wonder how material creativity in Soviet everyday life interacts with one forged in market conditions.

We take as a vantage point material objects to build an argument that things lost, repaired, shared, invented or adapted during the 1990s constitute windows on the Soviet social orders, rooted in the past but transformed and continued. The 1990s are treated as a time-space of social creativity, where present mix with an in-depth historical investigation. Through materiality, the colloquium offers the opportunity to throw a fresh look on the research done on informality, entrepreneurship, the market, civil society but also the media, culture ... to go further in seeking to understand what new where new social ties and interactions are made around the material "novelties" in the entire post-Soviet space.

Call for papers

With historical hindsight of nearly thirty years, this conference opens the floor to a less normative, more empirical rereading, closer to people and their material culture. The aim is to approach the 1990s as a field of transformation of social ties resulting from the Soviet order around material and technical innovations. These marked the era, contributing to the de-fabrication of old networks and the development of new ones. Materiality represents, through new or transformed objects, social universes. They establish a connection with the contemporary- or fail to do so. Proposals can address – but are not limited to- the following aspects:

Defecting: breakdowns of things, neglect, shutdowns, degradation, accidents, breakage, destruction, deindustrialization, depopulation, management of new commons and their failure (for example, the pod’ezd, water and electricity supply, distribution and power cuts, life in darkness -Tbilisi, Alma-Ata, Dushanbe, etc.).

Repairing: objects and their reconversion, re-use, sharing; managing shortages and mutual aid (in the light of examples as diverse as the renovation of children's playgrounds, the distribution of clothing to refugees or the proliferation of pawnshops (“lombard”))

Exploring: new places, new consumer and capital goods, new equipment and how to use it, the invention, circulation and consumption of goods and products, the chelnok/shuttle trade (from the arrival of Turkish and then Chinese everyday consumer products (hygiene, clothing, utensils) to the first computers and the use of drugs and adulterated products). These explorations also concern the revolution of intimacy, the relationship to the body and the relationship to gender (feminine intimate hygiene, sexuality, sensuality...), new aesthetics (video-show, media and advertising) and experiences of the senses (songs, smells, tastes).

Conflicting: objects caught in conflicts of claim, appropriation, or expropriation (around coveted apartments or production assets, industrial resources or security assets).

The visual dimension of the conference can be expanded by the use of video, photo or audio contributions. With regard to the debate around historicizing the recent past, the conference organizers welcome papers on sources (public and private archives, testimonies, interviews...) as a subject of contributions.

Submission guidelines:

Abstract submissions are due on **1 May 2021**. They should include the following elements:

- Title
- Abstract (500 words)
- Author's name, affiliation and short bibliographical note (150 words) (in the body of the email)

Authors will be notified within approximately a month of the abstract submission deadline as to the status of their contributions.

Authors of the selected submissions will be invited to confirm their participation in the conference (planned in Paris on 8 - 9 March 2022) in mid-October 2021.

They will be invited to submit the draft of their paper proposals (7000-10000 words) by **15 December 2021**.

Abstract submissions shall be sent to Dr. Sophie Lambroschini (sophie_lambro@yahoo.com) and Prof. Françoise Daucé (dauce@ehess.fr) with "**Submission Making1990s**" as your email subject.

The conference will take place in Paris on 8-9 March 2022. Upon request, funding will be made available, if necessary, to cover the travel costs of participants whose proposals have been selected.

Organizational Committee

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