MIDDLE CLASS WITHOUT CAPITALISM?
SOCIALIST IDEOLOGY AND POST-COLLECTIVIST DISCOURSE
IN LATE SOVIET UNION

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Seven years after the official demise of Soviet socialism and introduction of democratic and market reforms, Russians still thought there was no middle class in their country, according to an American observer. Harley Balzer explained that the middle class in Russia had “failed to recognize its own existence...[and hadn’t] yet defined itself” to play a viable role in society (Clark 1998). But five years later, a full half of the country’s population considered themselves middle-class (Izvestiia 11/12/03). And even though subsequent studies place only 15-25 percent of the population in this category, it is clear that discourse of the middle class has gained a strong footing in people’s consciousness, sociologists and general public alike, during the fifteen post-socialist years.

Today’s studies of the middle class focus on “objective” and “material” attributes of the group – such as income, education level, and type of work – as well as lifestyle choices and attitudes, as both dependent and independent variables. To be considered middle-class, these studies argue, one needs to have at least some college education and work a non-manual job (with a few exceptions allowed). The income factor is less important since there are significant regional variations, as well as many instances of underreported earnings. Notably, a 2006 study of the middle class in Moscow stipulated that even to be considered part of the group, its prospective members ought to own at least five of the following items: a color TV, VCR, camcorder, two or more cars, camera, personal computer, electric drill, deep-fryer, clock radio, second apartment or a summer house (Komsomol’skaia pravda 6/27/06). Researchers who designed the survey did not explain how and why these particular items ended up on the list, but one can assume that it is not so much their exclusiveness determined by their price – electric drill and a second home are obviously in different price categories – that is significant, but a certain “middle-class lifestyle” they create and that sets their owners apart from others. On the one hand,
they approximate an image of home owning, technologically savvy, and easily mobile (for work or pleasure) middle-class households in the West. On the other, in post-socialist context, these consumer goods may signify their owners’ aspirations for individuality, autonomy, and self-reliance when it comes to leisure, entertainment, travel, house repairs, and work.\textsuperscript{1} Surveys testify to this more directly as well: Two thirds of the members of the middle class, according to a 2003 study, lived by an old Russian saying that “everyone is a blacksmith of his own happiness” and believed they themselves could determine their life goals and achieve them on their own. More than fifty percent (as opposed to less than thirty among general population) thought they were capable of providing for themselves and their families without any help from the state (\textit{Izvestiia} 11/12/03). To prove these claims realistic, the majority diversify their skills (foreign languages, computer knowledge, etc.) and are four times more likely to acquire second and third educations and professions than other social groups. In 2006, sixty percent declared they liked to “stick out” and were not afraid to find themselves in a minority by taking risks in private and professional life (\textit{Komsomol’skaia pravda} 6/27/06, \textit{Izvestiia} 1/13/06). Clearly, uniformity of lifestyles and life philosophy is no more.

There is no doubt that the reappearance of the term “middle class” postdates the death of the Soviet Union and the rise of the group – both on paper and in reality\textsuperscript{2} – is a product of post-Soviet development. However, perhaps its meaning for today’s Russians is rooted not so much in political and economic reforms of the last fifteen-twenty years, but goes back more than a decade and a half before the “New Russia.” Is it possible that such a comfort with this concept that the society displays (in contrast to, for example, much debated notions of democracy and capitalism)

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\textsuperscript{1}This, again, resembles certain values exhibited by American middle class in the post-Depression era: “individualism and achievement, privacy, familism, consumerism, and conventionality” (Archer and Blau 1993, p. 34).
\textsuperscript{2}On “real class” vs. “class on paper” see Bourdieu 1998, p. 10.
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originates in pre-\textit{perestroika} years when the seeds of middle-class lifestyles were sown by the party-state? Can we say that socialism, as it was presented (although not necessarily practiced) by the Communist Party to the Soviet people, if not created either “real” or “paper” middle class, then at least introduced and embedded in its subjects values other than workerist and collectivist? And, did the Communist Party become the champion, the vanguard of not just the proletariat, but the middle class as well? Did it begin to exercise symbolic power, “the power to make groups and to consecrate or institute them” (Bourdieu 1987, p. 14), on behalf of the group whose name would not be even mentioned until after the virtual political death of the Party?

In other words, if the Soviet project throughout its existence was a familiar Enlightenment-inspired modernist endeavor albeit pursued in a distinct, even extreme way (Kotkin 1995, Hoffmann 2004), is it also possible that some of the outcomes it yielded were recognizable, even though somewhat surprising in its Communist context? More specifically, I suggest, the Communist Party introduced the ethos of a particular version of middle class, analogous to the Central European cultural bourgeoisie (\textit{Bildungsbürgertum})\textsuperscript{3}, to vast segments of the Soviet population. It is not to say, however, that the end of socialism in the Soviet Union and “transition to democracy and capitalism” were inevitable: due to historic and ideological peculiarities, the Soviet rendering of this ethos lacked, for the most part, its Central European counterpart’s ultimate goal, pursuit of bourgeois liberalism (cf. Eyal et al. 1998, pp. 10-11). Furthermore, how much this ethos “took” remains an empirical question for further investigation. However, the fairly enthusiastic support for the promises of \textit{perestroika} and, on the other hand, indifference, if not outright opposition, to the retrograde calls of the ultimately failed coup of 1991, both of which went far beyond a small group of dissidents; and the present-day appeal of a

\textsuperscript{3}See Eyal et al. 1998 on the history of the \textit{Bildungsbürgertum} in Central Europe and its role in the transition from socialism to capitalism.
lifestyle that affirms individualism, independence, and upward mobility among many “ordinary people” and not just economic and cultural elites indicate that the values of cultural bourgeoisie, however nascent they might have been, transcended a small group of dissident intellectuals and technocratic inclined Party bureaucrats. Maybe, in some places 1989 was a radical rupture from the past brought about by these two segments of the elite. But in others, and Russia/Soviet Union is the case in point, the upheavals of late 1980s-early ’90s often obscure important continuities between the ancien régime and new one, and to understand contemporary social dynamics we need to look further back than any year in the 1980s.

A close analysis of Soviet newspapers and public speeches at various Party and state functions between 1970 and 1985 reveals that alongside predictable rhetoric about fulfillment and over fulfillment of Plan, the leading role of the working class under the guidance of the Communist Party, creation of the “New Soviet Man” and the “Radiant Future,” there was another discourse that promoted values conflicting with the workerist and collectivist spirit of the Soviet project and that now are so readily displayed by the emerging middle class, such as individuality, self-reliance, privatism. To be sure, that alternative discourse never mentioned middle class (which is usually believed to be, not only by Party ideologues but also social scientists, a product of capitalism) and was framed in customary terms of socialist ideology, but the contradictions are nonetheless obvious. Since these values cultivated by the Soviet state so much resemble ethos of the Western middle class, I look at three areas of life where distinctions between middle class and other social groups are formed and manifested: work, consumption, and leisure (see, for example, Archer and Blau 1993).

Pravda, Trud, and Literaturnaia gazeta – between 1970 and 1985, and looked at random issues of Izvestiia, another major publication, from 1970-1980. I chose these papers because, on the one hand, they were nation-wide publications of the four main Soviet institutions – the Communist Party, the Council of trade unions, the Writers’ Union, and the Soviet parliament, respectively – and everything printed there (including items from citizen-correspondents and letters from readers) was sanctioned, if not directly commissioned, by the authorities. Therefore, nothing that contradicted official point of view could appear in their pages. On the other hand, they had somewhat diverse audiences: while Pravda and Izvestiia did not target any specific segments of the population and, hence, published materials presumed of interest to all, Trud had a more working-class readership and paid more attention to their specific milieu, while Literaturnaia gazeta was mostly aimed at professionals and, particularly, cultural elites and had a more “intellectual” bend. However, despite these differences, all four printed stories, editorials, letters to the editor, and other items that in one way or another reproduced the ideas of what I call middle-class, or post-collectivist discourse demonstrating its uncanny pervasiveness. Because of the constraints of space, I reference only a narrow selection of materials.

Worker-Intellectual and Professionalization of the Proletariat

In early 1970, Trud, a nationwide newspaper primarily for the working-class readership, published, less than two weeks apart, two reports on meetings of Soviet writers, where prominent authors discussed various aspects of what was usually called the “workers’ theme” in Soviet literature (2/10/70, p. 3; 2/21/70, p. 2). Participants of both gatherings were in agreement that their work should reflect new realities in the lives of their subjects: As one of them summarized, “Today’s working class differs greatly from the working class of 1920s-1930s. Now, we see an
educated, philosophically thinking worker. At times, I don’t know where a worker ends and an 
inelligent begins” (Trud 2/21/70, p. 2). Several years later, one of their “subjects,” a coalminer from Siberia, addressing a Party Congress, echoed writers’ position: in his words, miner’s working conditions had changed dramatically, but more importantly miner himself – and, by extension, the entire working class – had changed: “He has not lost his physical strength, but the most important thing in our work today is knowledge and ability to use technology” (Trud 6/4/76, p. 2). Sociologists sealed the consensus: “While workers were formerly valued chiefly for their physical endurance, what is most important today is the level of their intellectual and cultural development,” which brought them closer to technical intelligentsia (Iovchuk & Kogan 1975: pp. 102, 23; see also Shkaratan & Rukavishnikov 1974, pp. 41-42). Rabochie-intelligenty,4 as they became known and whose numbers were reportedly in the millions, brought “creative spirit, scientific approach, daring exploration” into their day-to-day work and were a living testimony to the eradication of distinctions between physical and intellectual jobs (Pravda 8/25/73, p. 1).

This creativity and inspiration were, a Trud editorial said, what set Soviet workers apart from their Western counterparts. “‘You do not need to think. Others are paid for this!’ the famous innovator of the capitalist labor process F. Taylor was telling his workers,” according to the newspaper. Contrary to that, Soviet “worker ceased to be a mere appendage to the machine, but became a true creator, master of technology” (8/24/72, p. 1). So, whereas in the capitalist West the working class was not only exploited by factory owners but also subjugated to managers and intellectuals, in the Soviet Union it was rising to the professionals’ level in terms of education, creativity of the work they did, and control over production process. Although the

4 I translate rabochii-intelligent as worker-intellectual, even though “intellectual” in Russian does not have the same exact connotation as intelligent.
attempt to bridge the gap between manual labor and intellectual work was not new, it was in a stark contrast to earlier approaches: in its rhetoric, and frequently in its policies, official discourse of the 1970s elevated the blue-collar workers to the plane of white-collar professionals.

Educational credentials and the type of knowledge each group used in their respective work was the most obvious distinction between the professionals and the proletariat. Unlike its predecessor, the Brezhnev administration introduced a law making secondary education (which one could get either by finishing high school or three-year technical school) mandatory and universal. Special pressure to comply was put on younger workers, who were encouraged to continue schooling by appeals to their political consciousness, but also by offers of extra material rewards, such as passes to summer resorts, bonus pay, and extra vacation days (*Trud* 10/24/70, p. 2; 8/11/72, p. 2). On regular basis newspapers published and Party and state official invoked in their public addresses the growing numbers of manual workers with secondary, and often more advanced, schooling. They were meant to signal to workers that they, as a group, were gaining on the professionals in terms of complexity, creativity, and importance of their work even without necessarily moving up the occupational and social hierarchy: even though some workers who went through additional schooling became technicians or engineers, majority were expected to continue at their job or, at best, to only advance to a higher grade within their current occupation. “Not all [of us] are engineers, but [we] all study,” wrote one foreman about his brigade in response to a letter from a young turner who was reluctant to continue his education because, as he explained, he was not going to become an engineer since he was already making more money than an average specialist with a university diploma (*Pravda*, 11/30/82, p. 3).

But even those blue-collars who for whatever reasons did not what to pursue education formally could choose to participate in the so-called “schools of communist labor” – often
referred to as “workers’ academies” – set up at many factories. There, as part of the effort to professionalize their positions, the most capable workers were prodded to defend “worker dissertations.” By the late 1970s-early 1980s, hundreds of manual workers had gone through the process: The papers eagerly reported, often on their front pages, about seventy-two worker-dissertators at “Red Vyborzhets” plant in Leningrad, twenty-six in Berdiansk, fifty-nine at “Red Boiler” in Taganrog, seven at a Khabarovsk ship-building facility (Pravda 5/25/78, p. 2; Pravda 10/10/78, p. 1; Trud 5/25/80, p. 3; Pravda 12/28/80, p. 1). Even though the workers were not granted scholarly degrees and their projects usually were not nearly as “academic” as real dissertations because they mostly dealt with particular and narrow improvements of production (rationalization of labor use, growth of productivity, reductions of cost) at specific factories, the press presented them as more than just mere tweaking of production process. Since, as Pravda pointed out (4/21/72, p. 2), “the word ‘dissertation’ is from academic vocabulary,” to merit the title, the workers’ theses had to satisfy certain requirements as to complexity and sophistication of the innovations. And they did, as the newspaper reports testified: Every worker’s dissertation at “Red Vyborzhets” included original calculations and blueprints, as well as extensive secondary literature review. For example, when a steelworker was presenting his dissertation in front of the committee, “it seemed everyone forgot he was a worker…[He] freely used scientific terminology, referred to diagrams…convincingly demonstrated viability of his technical ideas. In front of us,” an observer concluded, “was a worker-intellectual, worker-scientist” (Pravda 5/25/78, p. 2).

These workers’ dissertations were demonstrating that Soviet blue-collars had not only exceptional handiness and knack for innovation, but also analytical skills, as well as broad and theoretical knowledge beyond their machine tool or shop floor. The papers profiled and praised
workers who had a full comprehension of the technological process and were not meager executioners of engineers’ designs (sometimes flawed because of engineers’ lack of first-hand experience with industrial equipment). They also noted with satisfaction that “schools of communist labor” successfully offered “purely theoretical subjects” to their students, as well as presentations by factories’ economists, industrial designers, and managers who lectured about different aspects of industry’s operations (Pravda 4/21/72, p. 2).

This broad knowledge not only “expanded intellectual horizon” of the worker, but allowed him to learn second and third trade. Professional branching out was good not only for business, but for workers themselves: diverse skills allowed them to perform different tasks and avoid “monotony, tedium, and boredom of labor and increase its productivity” (Pravda 6/3/70, p. 3). It also made workers more independent, put them in charge of their own work process and time. This was, according to newspapers, especially true – although somewhat paradoxical, perhaps – for conveyer-belt operators, whose work seemed to be entirely regulated by the production line. As a conveyer-belt worker at the Minsk Automobile Plant confessed, he was “fed up” with narrow specialization: “A narrow specialist needs an entire army of controllers, repairmen, foremen, fixers….And a specialist with various skills [like me]? Myself assign tasks – a foreman. Myself fix – a repairman. Myself fine-tune….Now, to push a button [of the assembly line] is a pure pleasure.” In another case, an assembly line of the transistor radio factory in Riga, Latvia, where before workers had performed only a handful of operations each, was broken up and each of them was now responsible for the end product herself. As a result, a featured female worker, Svetlana, became “the mistress of the conveyer and hence her own mistress.” She regained independence from the assembly line and gained control of her own time (which she could use to get a haircut at the factory salon “at the time convenient for her”)

For a manual worker this was probably the equivalent of a professor’s summer off from his teaching responsibilities.

Even if additional education did not yield formal degrees for workers or admission to scientists’ professional associations, public discourse nonetheless often likened at least some of them to scholars. Frequent were headlines and stories that featured “professors of fittery” and “professors of assembly line” highlighting their exemplary professional skills and knowledge albeit without academic seal of approval (Pravda 3/18/70, p. 3; Pravda 11/16/70, p. 1; Trud 10/26/73, p. 2; Pravda 11/5/74, p. 3). As one of such “professors,” making a “professor’s salary” of 300 rubles a month, said about himself, twenty years of practicing fittery at his plant “were worth any academy” (Pravda 11/5/74, p. 3). Similar sentiment was conveyed in an ode – likely autobiographical – simply titled “A fitter” published in Trud two weeks after May Day in 1970. The author, we learn, flunked entrance exams to three different universities and had to take a job of a fitter at a local factory. Unhappy about his plight and taunted by his co-workers for ineptitude and college aspirations, the young worker gets comforted by a kind old-timer who opens his eyes to the true value of the profession by equating it with that of a rocket scientist:

Stand firm, my son!  
To be a fitter is not that simple!  
Here, knowledge  
with skillfulness you must combine.  
Technology advances!  
It’s tough to keep up with its progress.  
But, no, it  
can’t do without fitters.

Look, in the sky  
a rocket treads a virgin path  
and spacecrafts glide in space.  
But they, you know, are also made from metal.  
Which means  
they were assembled  
by the fitters.  
And fitter everywhere reaps respect  
when he works from his heart, his soul.  
You – are a Doctor here!  
Professor of the metals –  
in your hands  
is the steel life of the machines.  
(Trud 5/15/70, p. 4)

In addition to drawing comparisons between manual and highly intellectual work, this poem, like many other newspaper publications, emphasized the individual’s professional self-
worth, as opposed to his political consciousness as a member of the proletariat. “Reaping respect” and recognition for his knowledge and skill was, according to the ode, as important for the worker as actually building communism (in the form of spaceships in this case). Likewise, an article in *Trud* titled “A man with a notion” profiling two highly-skilled turners saluted them for “finding their place [in life] and making a wonderful career. Because the mastery they possess has brought them recognition, respect, [and] realization of their self-worth” (2/14/73, p. 3). Moreover, in a number of articles appeared in 1980s, “the Stakhanovites of the 1930s [were] presented as having been motivated by concerns for self-actualization” rather than driven to overfulfill the Plan by ideology or economic necessity. In other words, “official statements have recognized that workers may find satisfaction in the ‘content of their work,’ irrespective of its contribution to societal development” (Shlapentokh 1986, p. 52). This stress on individual professional satisfaction and advancement was yet another signal that manual labor and people who performed it were catching up with white-collar professionals, in whose line of work individual contribution is more evident and pride in personal achievement is more legitimate.

Workers, nonetheless, often complained about the low prestige of their work in the eyes of the society, especially compared to artistic and intellectual professions. As a turner from Kazakhstan wrote in *Pravda*, “We are thrilled by [performance of] a virtuoso violinist, talented sculptor, fast-legged soccer player, but a fetter, cutter, turner, whose labor is also akin to art, we often fail to notice” (1/10/70, p. 2). His fellow turner from Yerevan, Armenian SSR, had a similar story to tell: When, at his high school reunion, he compared manual labor with inspiration and called his colleague’s work art, his former classmates “rose up in arms” against him. “Your work is mechanical labor, while virtuoso is an artistic notion, of a higher matter,” his ex-classmates told him. The author was hurt to hear this: “In my opinion, creative work is not
constrained to a scientist’s lab…or an artist’s studio.” But the work of “thousands, hundred thousands of talented workers [who] everyday make their valuable contribution…is rarely known beyond their shop floor or factory.” He added that a person who did seemingly simple work could be a maestro of his profession if he executed it creatively and expertly (Pravda 3/23/78, p. 3).

And it was not only the workers themselves, who admired their own creativity and compared their work to art. A prominent Soviet writer, Vadim Kozhevnikov, expressed similar ideas in a long article about Soviet working class published by Pravda in 1983. He praised precision and beauty of manual labor, its “mesmerizing perfection,” and compared a first-rate manual worker with a musician: “Reading musical score, a virtuoso musician can play [a piece] in a way that will thrill its composer. So will a worker of highest qualification, having carefully consulted with the blueprint, with the help of his tools and due to his natural talent, create a part that will delight people [who have the ability to evaluate his work] no less than a performance of a famous musician will elate music lovers” (Pravda 1/3/83, p. 2). Such comparisons between manual workers and artistic professions were generally very common in the Soviet press: It likened, for example, a steelworker, who liked to have all his instruments handy, to a pianist and his keyboard (Trud 10/20/72, p. 2); a construction foreman responsible for three work shifts to an orchestra conductor (Pravda 11/21/70, p. 1); an assembly worker at a Moscow electronics factory to a psaltery player (Pravda 6/19/78, p. 3); a blast-furnace operator at the legendary Magnitogorsk steelworks to an artist (Trud 4/1/71, p. 4). Generally, articles titled “Creator, not a workhorse,” “Ode to the working class,” and “Worker – a creative vocation” and the like were a commonplace.
In addition to symbolic comparisons with artists and informal academic honorifics, Soviet manual workers wanted to, and the press supported them, receive more tangible – although not necessarily material – rewards similar to those of the professionals they were being likened to. At the Party Congress in 1971, a grinder from Leningrad complained about a lack of “moral stimuli.” In particular, he was upset that many workers were not permitted – and not because of low quality of their products – to put a personal stamp on the parts or goods they made (Archives, film #2.537, f. 582, op. 1, d. 12, p. 14). Such a stamp, analogous to an artist’s signature on a painting for example, would not only indicate the worker’s mastery, but also mark his particular contribution to the overall product instead of it being lost in a collective effort. He proposed to hold nation-wide and local competitions for workers, especially beginners, in various occupations: “We have young musician laureates – vocalists, violinists, pianists. Why not establish a contest for turner laureate?” he posed under the audience’s applause (ibid., p. 15). The Congress attendees were also enthusiastic about his other idea (which was, undoubtedly, dictated by the Party, just like his entire address): Keeping at his comparison between the work of blue-collars like him and Soviet professionals, the grinder suggested that, just like “members of scientific and artistic intelligentsia, doctors and teachers” were often honored with official honorary titles and special prizes (the Honored Artists/Scholar/Musician etc. of the Soviet Union or a specific union republic), it was now time to institute same honorifics for manual workers. “It would sound so great, ‘The Honored Worker of the Republic’!” he exclaimed (ibid.).

And sure enough, by the next Congress blue-collar workers with extraordinary achievements in their fields were receiving a special medal, “The Labor Glory.”\(^5\) Moreover, the USSR State Prize, that had been previously awarded only to professionals in arts and sciences,

\(^5\) This medal, established in the year of the 30\(^{th}\) anniversary of the victory in WWII was analogous to “The War Glory,” a decoration given to many participants of the war.
was also extended to the workers who, in the words of a working-class Congress delegate, “considered it only appropriate” (Archives, film #2.573, f. 604, op. 1, d. 5, p. 12). Newspapers annually reported the names of the workers receiving the high honor, and often profiled winners of the “professional mastery contests.” In short, workers were revered in a similar way and for similar skills and knowledge as were engineers, artists, and other professionals.

Newspapers also covered the fading of probably the most acute and visible distinction between blue-collars and professionals, their working conditions. While working in a coalmine or operating a blast-furnace was still far from a scientist’s lab or an artist’s studio, even here significant portions of the working class were catching up to the intelligentsia. The manager of Taganrog steelworks in southern Russia proudly wrote in Pravda that there were a lot of factories in his town, including his own, where manual workers dressed in lab coats to work and hard physical labor that previously could have been done only by well-built men was now performed by machines operated by young women in white robes (7/29/70, p. 2). Workers at a Moscow electronics factory also wore “sterile, spotlessly clean coats and snow-white caps” (Pravda 6/19/78, p. 3), the description of which evoked in reader’s mind a laboratory or a hospital. Many facilities in different industries were also reportedly working to reduce industrial noise, blue-collars’ big foe. The Taganrog factory manager enlisted several research-and-development outfits to make “noiseless machines” (Pravda 7/29/70, p. 2); the transistor radio factory in Riga built a “recreation room” with soft music, dim lights, and plush armchairs for its workers (Literaturnaia gazeta 10/23/85, p. 10); and a Leningrad timber-cutting shop, with the help from experts from a horticultural academy, potted greenery and put up mini greenhouses at its factory floor to moderate noise and dust pollution (Trud 2/6/80, p. 3). Even industrial machines were becoming more “cultured,” the press reported. “Their movements are now
quicker, more precise, more intricate…. They are attractive in their modern beauty of smooth concise lines, hidden inside impetuous force, matt white or multihued panes of facing,” poetically described new lathes a Trud reporter (10/26/73, p. 2). Such tools were obviously “smarter” than old ones and made work of their operators less strenuous. But, more importantly, they were designed (by engineers, the ultimate Soviet professionals) with much attention to their exterior, the description of which brought to mind a doctor’s scalpel, architect’s compass, and possibly the most sophisticated and sleekest of all devices – a space rocket. Although Soviet blue-collars were still mainly doing physical work, at least their work place was changing to approximate, more or less, offices of clerks and professionals, which were clean and pleasantly lit, sported comfortable office furniture and modern slick tools, and where the only sound was a nice, soft music.

In a society of “developed socialism” the party-state, for reasons of politics and economics, could not allow everyone to become a white-collar professional. But it had to demonstrate to its people that some tangible progress towards classless, homogeneous social system was being made and that more and more of the barriers among social groups were being stamped out. Still maintaining the notion of the working class as the “vanguard of the society,” the Soviet press – indubitably with the consent of the state and Party leadership – worked hard to prove that members of the Soviet working class did not need to actually move up into the ranks of intelligentsia to be performing equally intellectual, creative, and sophisticated labor in similarly comfortable working conditions, enjoy same symbolic rewards, and be honored and respected in comparable ways. By likening the blue-collars to Soviet professionals, “the scientific and artistic intelligentsia,” in so many different respects rather than visa versa, public discourse under Brezhnev signaled to the Soviet workers that professions were more desirable
than trades, that white-collars were superior to manual workers, and that the future of socialism lay in professionalization, individual or collective, of all labor.

**From Worker to Consumer: Post-Collectivist Lifestyles**

The Soviet Union was never a land of abundance. Nor was it a land of equal access to commodities. Proverbial shortages and long lines even for basic goods are well known – even if only from the depiction in American movies such as *Moscow on the Hudson*. And so are the special stores for the party and state functionaries. While General Secretary Brezhnev had a garage full of exotic cars, ordinary people often could not get hold of many everyday essentials. Whether this was a result of gross corruption and managerial incompetence or intrinsic feature of the centrally planned economy, it was not what the Communist Party and the Soviet state had in mind for their citizens, at least not how they presented their policies to the country’s population. The Brezhnev administration was actually turning its people into a class of individualistic consumers.

Attention to consumption was not new in late socialism. In the 1930s, consumption was envisioned as a part of a “civilizing process” to convert Soviet workers, especially newcomers to the class, into cultured builders of communism (Hessler 2000, Volkov 2000) who, at the same time could, at least in theory, indulge in consumption of luxury goods (such as champagne, chocolate, caviar) previously available only to nobility and bourgeoisie (Gronow 2003). In the following decade and a half, Stalin’s policies rewarded the midlevel managers of the Soviet state with expanded consumption options that instilled middle-class, or rather petty bourgeois, values in their clients (Dunham 1976). But under Brezhnev, the state not only expanded the discourse of

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6 I borrow the term from Yurchak 1997. See also his 2006, chapter 1.
consumption to the rest of the population, but presented it in qualitatively different terms: the goods and services provided had to be modern, high-quality, fashionable, aesthetically pleasing, and often “meeting western standards.” And even though the party often framed consumption discourse in usual propaganda terms of creating the New Man in a New Society, it at the same time was elevating the value of individuality, self-reliance, and privacy – attitudes that are usually associated with and are a result of consumption outside of state socialist societies. In short, it was undermining the main tenet of socialism – its collectivist spirit.

The March 1971 Congress of the Communist Party was the first occasion where the highest governing body of the Soviet Union explicitly asserted its policy shift in the consumer-oriented direction. In his report to the Congress, Brezhnev not only declared that “the fullest satisfaction of people’s material and cultural needs” was the socialism’s, and therefore the Party’s, primary and long-term objective (*Materialy*, p. 41), but also that even a small sacrifice of people’s material comfort was no longer acceptable and that those comrades who failed to recognize this, did not understand Party’s current concerns (ibid., pp. 51-52). Prime Minister Kosygin’s pronouncement during the same congress described the Party’s new course even more forcefully: “For the first time in history, socialism is turning the wealth of the society into the wealth of its every member” (Archives, film #2.537, f. 582, op. 1, d. 11, p. 71). This was undoubtedly an announcement of an audacious turn in priorities: away from austerity and minimalism of individual demand and primacy of social/collective (*obshchestvennye*) over personal (*lichnye*) interests, now the state would work for the benefit of men, rather than men working for the benefit of the state.

While this rhetoric somewhat dissipated at the next Party Congress in February 1976 (Breslauer 1977, Grossman 1977), it did not mean the party abandoned or even lessened its
dedication to people’s well-being. While financial commitment to the production of consumer
goods indeed decreased, the party re-oriented its discourse to the quality of consumption, both in
terms of the quality of goods produced (rather than sheer quantity) and of satisfying the
consumer demand, rather than producing to meet the Plan. The report to the Congress delivered
by Brezhnev insisted that “the Party did not intend to veer off its adopted course” of saturating
market with consumer goods and that decreased financial commitments to consumer output,
outlined in the next five-year plan, were considered as “bare minimum” and expected to be
adjusted upwards every year of the piatiletka by all planning agencies (Archives, film #2.573, f.
604, op. 1, d. 1, p. 92). Brezhnev also stressed the need to improve quality and expand inventory
of manufactured merchandise: if the consumer demand was not yet satisfied, “the problem was
not with the amount, but rather lack of high-quality, fashionable” products (ibid.). Even in their
internal communications, where, presumably, there was no need to pretend to care, the Party’s
Central Committee and its Secretariat upheld this position. Secretariat’s resolution of June 11,
1979, stipulated that “the Central Committee once again underscores topmost significance of an
all-out increase of consumer goods output, unequivocal compliance with the set goals of their
production and improvements of their quality….These issues at all times ought to be in the
center of attention of all Party organizations because satisfying consumer demand is one of the
most crucial economic and socio-political tasks” of the Party (Fond 89, film #1.1000, op. 32, d.
4, p. 4). Catering to consumers and their ever-rising expectations regarding quality and variety of
products had safely taken place of a political and economic priority in the first socialist state.

These themes played out even more cogently in the Soviet press. Throughout 1970s-early
1980s, Pravda, Izvestiia, and Trud ran, on average, four front-page editorials a year each, usually
titled “Goods – for consumers,” “For people’s well-being,” “To make consumer happy,”
“Industry – to the service of people’s consumption,” “More goods, better quality!,” “Consumer’s demands – a priority” and the like. While not necessarily adequately portraying the reality and achievements of the Soviet consumer industry (although there were plenty of accounts of failures or, at least, shortcomings), they nevertheless were sending a particular message to the readers: The Party cared about the well-being of Soviet citizens, this well-being was to manifest itself not just in the rise of country’s industrial output and military might, but in concrete goods and services for individual consumers with their expanding demands – goods that “ought to be faultless, satisfy up-to-date aesthetic requirements, please the eye with their appearance” (Trud 1/26/71, p. 1) and services whose “main guiding principle is consumer demand” (Pravda 10/31/71, p. 1) and “main purpose – protection of consumer interest” (Trud 2/10/74, p. 1).

Consumption discourse was not constricted to regular front-page editorials and occasional announcements “From the CPSU Central Committee and USSR Council of Ministers” detailing “measures to further develop manufacturing of high-demand products” (often dealing with specific types of merchandise – footwear, apparel, household chemicals) (e.g., Pravda 10/29/71, pp. 1-2; Trud 10/29/71, p. 1; Trud 8/28/73, p. 1; Trud 1/6/77, pp. 1, 3; Pravda 1/7/77, pp. 1-2; Pravda 5/17/77, pp. 1-2; Pravda 5/7/83, p. 1). On almost daily basis, Pravda published news items under the rubric “More of better goods,” Trud ran column “Reklama-reklamatsiia,” a sort of consumer report based on readers’ letters regarding quality of various products, and Izvestiia printed ads for new merchandise from textiles to kitchenware to motorcycles on its last page – all often with photographs and drawings of the products. And although the ads and product placements in the Soviet press were not as colorful and elaborate as we know them today, it was impossible to miss them (even for numerous those who never looked at the papers’ front page).
However, it was not so much the goods themselves that mattered, but lifestyles they represented and how they were to change the lives of people and society. Of course, the official discourse tied consumption to the construction of the “society of the future” and the “New Soviet Man”: It was usually implied and often explicitly stated that “material well-being is to serve as a basis for personal improvement…as well as social progress” (Pravda 12/9/71, p. 1). Much attention was paid to the production of goods and promotion of services that would modernize, rationalize, and ease everyday existence, in short, to use Marx’s language, shrink realm of necessity and expand realm of freedom. What was never acknowledged, was the fact that consumption, unlike production, is not a collective but individual pursuit. Official rhetoric about consumption failed to address how exactly modern, fashionable, handsome products were to benefit not only an individual, but the entire socialist society. If household durables and means of individual transportation could save people’s time and energy to be used instead on collective endeavors, it remained unclear how fashionable and often custom-made clothes, stylishly decorated apartments, and high-tech sound- and video-recoding and reproducing devices would necessarily contribute to the advancement of collectivist spirit and socialist values. Instead, this rhetoric fostered “a new ethos [of]…the pleasure of purchasing goods, including new gadgets, the placing of personal interests at the center of one’s private life and the acquisition of as much money as possible to satisfy the new wants” (Hirszowicz 1980, pp. 116-117).

Early 1970s saw inauguration of a new type of a groceries store – the universam. Universams, essentially a Soviet equivalent of typical American supermarkets (with fewer product choices, obviously), first opened in new residential neighborhoods in Moscow and were different from more traditional shops in two respects, as the name indicates (univer, for universal, and sam, for self-service): They were to carry and sell a wide variety of foodstuffs, as
opposed to specialized stores selling just dairy, meat and fish, or fruits and vegetables. More importantly, in these stores, customers were to help themselves to pre-packaged products displayed in the open. Both innovations were to reduce the time consumers spent on acquiring food items: the former minimized the number of stops the shopper had to make to buy all the ingredient she needed to prepare meals, and the latter reduced the time she had to spend in the store (in older shops she usually had to queue at least three times – to have her purchase weighed at the counter, to pay for it at the cash register, and finally to exchange her receipt for her purchase back at the counter – and often more if the products she needed were sold at different counters in the same store). Newspapers, both in their articles and letters from readers, unanimously hailed *universams* for this time-saving quality⁷ (*Trud* 5/22/77, p. 1; 10/20/79, p. 4), but also for greater control customers gained over the process of shopping: “Ordinary shoppers became active participants of the buying-selling process [because] most store counters that for centuries had been an insurmountable barrier for consumers disappeared,” as *Trud* summarized ten years later (9/24/80, p. 2). As a result, shoppers could now touch and smell their purchases before paying for them, they could change their mind about quality and quantity of the product they wanted to buy and whether to buy it at all without intimate supervision of usually surly shop clerks and fellow shoppers (see e.g. *Trud* 7/1/73, p. 3). If there were any complaints about the new groceries shopping experience (except for ordinary grievances regarding shortages of certain items and their poor quality), they usually were about *Universams*’ staff’s attempts to regain control over shoppers: customers – both newspaper journalists in their articles and readers in their letters – grumbled about having to check their bags entering the store and being subjected

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⁷This is contrary to Verdery’s (1992) analysis of “etatization of time” which suggests that state-socialist regimes were seizing time from their subject – often in the form of purposefully creating consumer queues, among other things – in order to minimize free time the latter could spend, outside direct control of the state, socializing with friends and family or making money in the “second economy.”
to searches leaving it (both, presumably, were to minimize shop-lifting). Even though shop clerks were not necessarily viewed as agents of the state, the introduction of the new type of store and its generally positive depiction in the press reinforced for the readers the value of autonomy and self-reliance when making their consumer choices and, possibly, a more general opposition to supervised communal existence.

Soviet consumption discourse encouraged retreat from collective life into private more directly as well. Many of the products publicized by the media – especially home appliances and gadgets – reduced the need to rely on communal services by making “private space” more usable, comfortable, and desirable. In 1973 Pravda and Trud each ran news items, under general rubrics “Household aides” and “New goods”, which featured, respectively, a new model of a refrigerator with an in-built bar and an electric fireplace with one. These two products, we learn, received “high marks from the experts” not only because of the immediate purpose they served but also because they would “adorn [one’s] apartment” (Trud 5/24/73, p. 2; Pravda 1/31/73, p. 6). In the midst of an anti-alcoholism campaign when excessive drinking was depicted as social evil, these products were praised for creating a cozy atmosphere in one’s home where he could consume chilled drinks by the fireplace “with the flickering flame of simulated coal framed by imitated brick” all he wanted (Trud 10/2/73, p. 2). Similarly, proliferation of television sets, transistor radios, reel-to-reel tape (and later, cassette) players and recorders – all of which were among most frequently and proudly advertised gadgets – privatized leisure by allowing people to enjoy various kinds of entertainment in their own home, rather than in movie theaters, concert halls, or sports arenas. Home electronics often had attractive, even poetic, names – Romantic, Youth, Rainbow, Comet, Legend – which signified authorities’ approval for these products and were supposed to entice the consumer. The Soviet press especially enthusiastically described
portable devices: a small color TV (*Pravda* 11/23/77, p. 6), battery-powered tape-recorder (*Trud* 5/24/73, p. 2), and mini-fridges powered by car battery (*Trud* 6/2/71, p. 1, *Pravda* 1/31/73, p. 6). Not only could Soviet citizens evade, with the help of this equipment, entertainment and leisure activities regimented by the state and escape into a relative privacy of their own home, but they also could, if they wanted to, create their own entertainment and carry it far away from, if not the authorities, than their nosy neighbors.

What’s more, the official rhetoric was mixed on how the time saved with the help of the new consumer products and services was to be spent. On the one hand, liberated – more or less – from the household chores, the Soviet people were expected to use free time on socially meaningful endeavors: civic and political engagement, improvement of their professional qualifications and labor productivity, and collective educational leisure. On the other, Soviet newspapers often elevated, if not outright glorified, the most primordial and unproductive form of leisure: food consumption. Whereas the network of basic canteens, often attached to factories and other places of work, was expansive but purely utilitarian, on many occasions the papers lamented about the lack of eateries where “in the evening, one could sit over a cup of coffee, a glass of beer” because “today one wants not only to have a good meal but to relax in a cozy place” (*Pravda* 11/14/72, p. 6). “Points of communal eating” had for a long time been sites to celebrate special occasions with one’s family, friends, and co-workers, but, by mid-1970s, people increasingly enjoyed coming to restaurants and cafes “‘for no reason,’ for a good time,

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9 cf. Merkel 1999, p. 107. As Volkov (2000) suggests privacy cultivated in 1930s “was connected with political self-education and the cultivation of Bolshevik consciousness….But] whatever the initial purposes of regime-approved privacy, its further development was more and more likely to escape direct control” (p. 228).
for pleasant conversation” (*Pravda* 9/1/74, p. 3), most likely to escape, in a small company of close friends and family, from the overreaching rhetoric of Plan, building socialism etc. Many cafes and restaurants featured in the press as examples to be replicated were commended for the distinctive ambiance created by unique décor, entertainment, and menu: *samovar* tea and blintzes in Leningrad’s “Russian samovars” (*Pravda* 9/15/76, p. 3), traditional Ukrainian fare from a 1812 recipe book and folk music at “Café May” in Zhdanov (*Trud* 11/17/79, p. 4), Italian pizza at a Moscow bistro (*Trud* 2/6/80, p. 3), or an old-fashioned tavern in a downtown Moscow basement (*Trud* 3/4/80, p. 3).10 Newspapers especially noted places that created cozy atmosphere conducive to intimate conversations: small but not crammed dining rooms, music that was not too loud, candles on the tables. And if there were too few places to go to, long lines to get in, unfriendly service or limited menu, the paper were not shy to chide restaurants’ management – and, by extension, the authorities – and demanded that customers’ wishes were fulfilled and expectations met (*Trud* 11/17/1979, p., 4).

The cornucopia of products available to consumers meant that everyone was going to find what suited their personal needs, tastes, and budget. The Soviet people were able to afford and industry supplied them with enough variety of brands and styles that a woman’s outfit was not going to be duplicated by her coworker and one man’s apartment would be decorated differently from his neighbor’s. At least that was what the newspapers were saying. In the early 1970s, *Trud* regularly ran a column on its last page where fashion designers informed the paper’s readers what clothes and accessories were in that season and how to update one’s outfit even on a budget. In 1972, apparently, fashion was going to be “simultaneously individual and universal” (*Trud* 1/1/72, p. 4). There were supposed to be different outfits for “the holidays” and “for the

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10 Interestingly, many eateries featured in the press either had a local, ethnic flavor or tried to imitate pre-revolutionary atmosphere and menus, not to mention their names: “Old Mariupol’” (Zhdanov’s pre-revolutionary name), “Stoleshniki” (a historic neighborhood in Moscow) etc.
street.” Few days before the October Revolution Day, Trud fashion consultants advised the readers on how to refresh their wardrobe for the holiday: one could add “an eye-catching detail [or] a fashionable accessory…a jabot or timeless collar and cuffs” to a dress, and “large buckles, broaches, and flowers…will accentuate your holiday ensemble” (Trud 11/3/73, p. 4). By mid-1980, newspapers recognized the existence of “avant-garde” and “ultra-hip” fashions alongside more mainstream styles, although they, of course, were appropriate mostly for younger customers (Pravda 3/10/85, p. 6). Even blue jeans and casual corduroys – often viewed as epitome of Western decadence – got a go-ahead from Pravda and Trud. Both papers proudly reported about domestic and joint-venture factories producing a dozen of different models that were “no worse than leading Western brands” (Trud 10/14/78, p. 4; Pravda 3/12/79, p. 6). Jeans were not only comfortable and practical but also fashionable, Pravda asserted, and there should be more of them for the young people to wear although not just generic cuts but creative ones, of “most artful design.”

Consumers were also encouraged to take advantage of numerous tailor shops and more exclusive “houses of fashion” where clothes were custom made. And if those venues failed to satisfy consumer expectations, they were, like faulty restaurants mentioned above, harshly criticized. Trud printed a letter from a tailor in Yurmala, Latvian SSR, who complained that the shop he worked at, as many other similar outfits, was not getting enough of high-quality textiles, only 25-30 percent of what they requested, because large factories that mass-produced clothes had priority in their orders. “Is this fair? Of course not,” he wrote. “…shops like mine should be supplied with the same share of high-quality fabrics as enterprises of mass production, if not better: because Soviet people, Soviet toilers…want to wear high quality, elegant, stylish clothes” (Trud 9/13/74, p. 2). And when, not infrequently, such small tailor shops chose to make more
off-the-rack clothing to fulfill their production plan, the media deplored them for abandoning “their main task of serving individual needs of their customers” (*Pravda* 11/15/77, p. 3, emphasis added).

*Pravda* (and a well-known Soviet comedy *The Irony of Fate*) also criticized the uniformity of architecture and home décor. “Our homes and things we furnish them with are now being designed and built without taking into account demands of individual consumers….But every person wants to furnish his home in such a way that it would satisfy his tastes…[and] each of us is trying to overcome the faceless standard in his own way,” the newspaper wrote (8/16/74, p. 3). It urged architects, construction workers, and interior designers to make sure that Soviet homes, their layouts, décor, and amenities were less standardized and more distinctive, even unique. For example, the dull brown color of most television sets could be changed to white, red, or any other “depending on how the rest of the room is decorated” (*Pravda* 8/10/76, p. 3). Diversification of color scheme for kitchen furniture was hailed by *Trud* in an article about a new type of store – a sort of Soviet IKEA. “Customers had had enough of monotonous grey plastic [and] standard [drawer] knobs,” and the company that stocked the store was introducing other colors for its furniture: pine, beech, beige, and even flower patterns. Besides, it allowed its patrons to buy as many or as few kitchen cabinets as they needed, as opposed to a traditional practice of selling pre-fabricated sets (*Trud* 9/16/76, p. 2). In other words, the notion of “the average consumer,” especially when it came to apparel and interior design, was unacceptable. As four female (and working-class) members of the USSR’s Supreme Soviet wrote in *Pravda* (the day Mikhail Gorbachev was elected CPSU’s General Secretary), “every product ought to be made with a particular consumer in mind. One – for the young, each for the grown-ups and seniors. Along with expensive, prestigious goods, there ought to be cheap ones as well” (3/11/85,
p. 3). Not unlike in other historical contexts, mass marketing in the Soviet Union not only, and maybe not so much, led to “homogenization of…lifestyle…[but] encouraged experimentation with identity and an ideal of individualism” (Young 1999, p. 66).

Color, shape, style of home appliances and furniture, gadgets and clothes – the exterior of products – became valued in the consumption discourse over the years at least as much as their functional qualities. For many shoppers the design of clothes became more important than their quality, which was usually understood in the Soviet Union in terms of how solidly a product was made and how long it could last (Pravda 6/6/84, p. 6). Domestically produced household durables and furniture were “justifiably criticized” by customers if their exterior was not aesthetically appealing, even if their utilitarian qualities were more or less acceptable (Trud 11/23/75, p. 2). And manufacturers, recognizing consumer’s demands, strove to make goods more attractive to be able to compete with foreign companies whose products were often more popular not only because of the prestige they gave their owners but because of their unusual, elegant design. “More elegant design” of Soviet family cars’ exterior and interior, along with their increased comfort, was invariably stressed by their designers and manufacturers (Trud 11/18/78, p. 4, 4/26/79, p. 3, 8/22/80, p. 4; Pravda 8/28/82, p. 2). An article in Pravda, reporting on an experimental model of Moskvich, a second most popular Soviet family car, began its description by noting the prototype’s golden color, which its creators dubbed “Stradivari” (Pravda 9/11/85, p. 6). In a country where car models had numbers rather than names and most of them came in primary colors, an atypical shade with a foreign name that evoked sophistication of classical music must have seemed extremely desirable even to journalists of the Communist Party mouthpiece.
Media’s ongoing promotion of fashionable clothes, smart-looking appliances, funky furniture pieces, and cars of rare hues was supposed to demonstrate to its audience extraordinary achievements of the Soviet way of life and, in particular, much improved standard of living of the Soviet people who now could afford to buy “quality goods” in large number and variety. But because most of these goods were in high demand but in extremely short supply and, therefore, unattainable for most consumers, it was reinforcing the perception that life without these products was “gray,” dull, and incomplete and that to escape tedium of everyday life – and one’s comrades – one needed not to be constructing the communist future, but to get their hands on beautiful, unusually shaped and colored consumer items. In addition to intent focus on form, rather than content of consumer products, vast share of consumption discourse in the Soviet press was infusing in its readers other post-collectivist values: independence and self-reliance as opposed to submission to societal supervision; withdrawal into private sphere vs. commitment and contribution to collective living and interests; individualistic orientation rather than blending in with the rest of society. Party-sanctioned marketing of products and services that were supposed to be a sign of socialism’s achievements and to sustain, if not encourage, its progress, was undermining its most fundamental precepts. Rather than breeding the New Soviet Man, it gave birth to a tenacious consumer,\(^{11}\) whose values went beyond satisfaction of purely economic needs as they centered on certain ideas that consumption connoted, which approximated contemporary middle-class ethos.

\[^{11}\text{As Zukin and Maguire (2004) observe, “media advertisements…are extremely important in socializing people to be consumers even before the goods are widely available” (p. 190).}\]
Soviet Renaissance Man, the Cultural Snob

The Soviet party-state was nurturing its people to be not only educated producers and savvy consumers, but also active creators and avid admirers of artistic creations of others. Just as broad professional knowledge – for both workers and intelligentsia – was saluted and propagated, so was the notion of a more wide-ranging erudition (*krugozor*) as beneficial for higher labor productivity (always a goal of the Communist Party), as well as for personal growth and success outside of the sphere of production. Soviet people were supposed to become well-versed in social sciences and civics (often a euphemism for Marxism-Leninism) and domestic and international current affairs – both of which were supposed to raise their political consciousness – but also in natural sciences, arts, and culture by and large. General education and acculturation of the people had been the Party’s pet project since the Revolution, but in post-Stalinist times, especially in the 1970s and early 1980s, it took a different direction. In the early Soviet years, eradication of illiteracy and creation of a new and distinct proletarian culture were the two main goals. With quite successful accomplishment of the former and abandonment of the latter under Stalin – often associated with a more general “retrenchment” if not “counterrevolution” – the focus shifted to across-the-board *kul'turnost’* (culturedness) that “emphasized proper conduct in everyday life…as well as a demonstrative appreciation of high culture…[I]t also stressed the elimination of egoism and the championing of collectivism over individuality” (Hoffmann 2003, p. 16). Another goal of Stalin’s cultural policies was to promote social – class and ethnic – unity and sustain regime’s legitimacy, which was done, in part, by inauguration of socialist realism and reintroductory of selected pre-revolutionary works of art

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12 On Bolsheviks’ early attempts to craft a proletarian culture – and the proletariat as a class, – their ambiguities, and outcomes see Fitzpatrick 1988a.

13 For a review and critique of these views see Hoffmann 2004.

14 The idea of the connection between *kul’turnost’* and middle class was pioneered by Dunham 1976. See also Fitzpatrick 1988b and Volkov 2000.
instead of the avant-garde dominant during previous decade (ibid., pp. 159-75). And even though many ordinary people participated, voluntary or not, in cultural production, such as amateur theater performances and physical culture parades, creation of arts per se was left to the professionals. Contrary to this, some forty years later, official party rhetoric pushed ordinary people, especially but not only of working-class background, to acquire encyclopedic knowledge in and the taste for various artistic subjects, particularly those usually considered elite – “serious” music, poetry, theater – and, perhaps more importantly, to make their own contributions, on their free time and as amateurs but of “professional” quality, to these “high art” fields instead of passively consuming “light entertainment.” In short, the idea of distinctive workerist culture (that had never really taken off the ground) was being replaced by energetic promotion of traditionally elitist one, but now also created by the people – workers – themselves who, as a result, were being trained to become know-it-all cultural elitists.

In 1959, amid USSR’s inroads into space exploration and successes with nuclear and hydrogen energy, Boris Slutskii, a well-known poet, published a short poem (a mere 20 lines) titled “Physicists and lyricists” where he wistfully observed that as of late the former were in high esteem whereas the latter – not so much. He blamed the poets themselves for uninspired writing and all but ceded the hegemony to “the logarithms” (Slutskii 1959). The couplet clearly struck a chord as it grew almost wildly popular and for years to come became an aphorism for a Soviet society’s dilemma: who were more indispensable, technocrats or humanists, and, more broadly, whether the Soviet people were to be a highly competent but “narrow” specialists or well-rounded individuals with wide-ranging knowledge. While the discussions of the topic on newspapers’ pages, often pretty heated, continued for decades, the official public discourse ultimately came on the side of the latter. Various state, party, industry, and culture bureaucrats,
as well as newspaper people themselves, concluded that for all strata of the society, but especially for the working class, having diverse interests when it came to cultural pursuits was better than otherwise.

Like with their professional training, the workers (but others too) were prodded to pursue a variety of interests. Usually, of course, the main reason for engagement in diverse leisure activities was that, as one factory manager (a “physicist”) summarized, a learned worker “gives more to [his] factory, our [entire] society than the one who is limited by narrow professional interests” (*Pravda* 7/29/70, p. 2). *Pravda*, summing up results of a sociological survey on relations between workers’ cultural level and productivity, asserted that “without constantly turning to education, to cultural treasures, one cannot be in the vanguard [*byt’ peredovym chelovekom*]” (8/11/71, p. 3). According to this survey, two thirds of workers polled at a chemical plant agreed with this point of view. But, importantly, a less ideological and dogmatic reason was given as well. As with consumption, people’s cultural attainment did not necessarily have much to do with the benefits for the society, but was more concerned with advantages it created for individuals’ success. As prominent writer and critic Viktor Shklovskii (a “lyricist”) explained in *Trud*, responding to a query from a welder who questioned whether it was necessary and realistic to be an erudite in the times of narrow professional specialization, it was impossible and unadvisable not to be one in the rapidly changing world where broad knowledge served as a roadmap. “If you don’t know it inside out, aren’t capable of exploration, you cannot choose [and] determine your destiny, your life. You are blind,” the writer concluded (*Trud* 2/25/75, p. 4). Such a response, didactic as it was, encouraged individuals, specifically working-class readers of the publication, to be in charge of their own fate, present and future, rather than rely on somebody else, including powers-to-be. Individualism and self-reliance, rather than dependence on
community and its organizations (whether one’s work collective or the party-state), seemed to be the skills necessary in the modern Soviet, not just Western and capitalist, milieu.

Another eminent “lyricist,” a playwright and a State Prize Laureate, made a similar statement, only he spoke about such impact of culture not as something hypothetical, but as already happening. Both in literature and in real life, workers had become individuals who could stand up for themselves, had original opinions and independent perception of the world around them. And all of that was because they took up diverse leisure pursuits, the dramatist explained (Trud 9/30/70, p. 3). Newspapers liked to feature conversations between “lyricists” – writers, poets, filmmakers – and workers, or workers’ profiles written up by representatives of artistic intelligentsia. The common thread in all those publications was the undiscriminating interests and tastes of their subjects and striking similarity between workers’ choices and those of the intellectuals. For example, replying to a writer’s question whether he and his colleagues did more than shop talk in their free time, a welder from Leningrad first turned the question back to the writer and then said, “We are just like you. We have many bibliophiles, aficionados of music and arts, tourists, gardeners among us….Of course we talk about work, but we also have many other interests. For example, we’ll get together with friends and mull over problems of space exploration” (Literaturnaia gazeta 6/1/70, p. 3). One Soviet academician confessed that he had met a lot of workers who talked about arts like artists or art critics (Pravda 1/16/74, p. 3). Newspapers were peppered with stories about such people: a foreman from Chita who sometimes seemed “to be a lyricist, sociologist, economist, politician” and also painted, lectured about art, and had a diverse home library (Trud 8/25/71, p. 2); a Moscow fitter who wrote poetry, collected records, and took night classes at the Institute for Cinematography (Pravda 8/15/71, p. 3); three steelworkers from Taganrog who painted, penned poetry, and played violin,
respectively (*Pravda* 7/29/70, p. 2); a turner who was a regular theatergoer, lover of William Shakespeare, Anton Chekhov, Prosper Mérimée, and H. G. Wells, as well as Chaikovskii, Verdi, and Mozart, and a news junkie (*Trud* 10/26/73, p. 2). In fact, as a leading sociology journal reported in 1974, a small but growing group of worker-intellectuals often surpassed even white-collar professionals in their consumption of “cultural treasures”: almost one third of the former reported to go to the theater at least once a month, as opposed to 16 percent of the latter, and only 3.7 percent of them cited idleness as their main pastime, half the number of the white-collars (Shkaratan & Rukavishnikov 1974, p. 42). Even if these data were doctored for ideological reasons (as might be expected of sociological research supervised by the Communist Party), it was done to stress that manual workers – less educated “physicists” – were expected to lead the way in embracing “lyricists”’ realms of fine art, literature, music, and film.

Ordinary Soviet people not only consumed cultural goods, but also created them, and their contribution was often just as high-quality as professionals’ employed in cultural production, as the newspapers reported. In 1970, *Pravda* profiled a shipbuilder from Leningrad, who not only appeared in lead roles of amateur theater productions for twenty years, but many times had been invited to join a professional troupe (which he always declined). His acting got acclaim among his fellow workers as well as professional actors. The protagonist, along with a few other shipbuilders and professional musicians, was also invited to judge a competition of Leningrad composers marking Lenin’s centennial. “With great interest [he] listened to new symphonies, oratorios, etudes, songs,” newspaper reported. But he also actively critiqued the pieces he heard, on par with professionals. A celebrated song-writer, the chair of the panel, “respectfully [spoke] about the worker-cum-music-aficionado: ‘I like [his] independent opinions
about the material we have heard during the competition. He energetically defends his unique position”” (Pravda 7/27/70, p. 3).

Workers – and others – not only collaborated with full-time artistic intelligentsia, but also criticized their work, and so convincingly that professional critics agreed with them. For example, a worker from Orel sent to Literaturnaia gazeta (a weekly newspaper mostly for educated audience with contributions – articles, as well as poetry and works of fiction – from literati) a letter dissecting a poem the newspaper had published several months prior. In almost word by word analysis, he not only sarcastically pointed out “unpolished” places with improper word usage and syntax, which were many in his opinion, factual inaccuracies, and overall jumble of poem’s imagery, but also tried to engage the paper into a discussion about who the poetry was written for and to what end. Not only the paper deemed the letter worthy of publication, it furnished the correspondent – and its readers – with lengthy reply from one of its staff writers, who, while disagreeing with some of the points made by the worker-turned-literary critic and chiding him for reading poetry too literally, conceded that this particular work did indeed suffer from excessive imagery and reader’s mind, even as trained as his own, was overwhelmed and confused (Literaturnaia gazeta 2/23/72, p. 6). The details of the poem, the worker’s criticism, and the rejoinder are of course much less interesting than the fact that a publication run and read by professional writers felt obliged to publicize a layman’s criticism of the work of one of their own and admit that some, if not all, of his comments had merit. Maybe “lyricists” were under attack from “physicists” but this time on their own terrain and with their own weapons.

While some of the stories about Soviet people’s high cultural achievements smacked of demonstrativeness, newspapers were careful to make the point that their love for arts was not superficial and stressed deep knowledge of and commitment to their chosen artistic fields. The
press also took up the task of educating its readers of all social and educational backgrounds in how to truly appreciate culture and avoid the appearance of being a phony enthusiast of be it music, literature, or fine arts, to transform, as Dunham (1976) would have put it, culturedness into culture. To that end, papers often invited cultural luminaries to instruct their readers in what they need to know to appreciate their respective fields, how to approach and what to look for in objects d'art to enjoy them. It also so happened that most of these educational efforts concentrated on promotion of “high culture,” such as fine arts, serious literature and music, opera and ballet, so much so that even most popular, and somewhat “lowlbrow,” cultural media – TV and cinema – were often primarily seen as vehicles for “quality” culture. For example, the already mentioned Shklovskii attributed a great surge in interest in classical literature, such as novels of Fedor Dostoyevsky, to TV and movie adaptations (Trud 2/25/75, p. 4). Some surveys, however, found out that theater, fine arts, and symphonic music were among least attended, and probably least liked, and even those who went to such events lacked the desired “level of aesthetic perception” (Iovchuk & Kogan 1975, pp. 167, 170). As a pair of Soviet sociologists put it, “This once more shows that it is necessary to develop good artistic taste, to inculcate love for complex forms of art” (ibid., p. 195).

And so they did. In a long article that took up two entire columns of a newspaper page, a prominent theater critic instructed the readers in many things theater. The article was written mostly for actors and directors of amateur theater groups, but also for the general audience because, as the author explained, due to increasing leisure time, more and more people would soon be combining “their main vocation with the stage…[and] they will fill their lives with special and joyful meaning.” He gave a lot of practical advice to aspiring actors and directors, especially regarding what they should do off-stage to improve their skill. The critic also urged
his audience to read biographies and memoirs of famous performers, to learn about and borrow their techniques. And understanding and appreciation of other forms of art, literature and fine arts in particular, could help amateur performers in noticing small details about life. But he also stressed, as many others involved in propaganda of culture, that to understand art, and classical fine arts in particular, one needed to have a minimum base knowledge of classical texts, such as myths, legends, history. The bottom line was: art did not bear flippancy and to master it one had to prepare for the lifetime of learning (Trud 12/29/70, p. 3).

The idea of a base minimum, of core texts, “one hundred books everyone has to read,” was also promoted in a more high-brow Literaturnaia gazeta. Although “the Soviet Union was the most reading nation,” its correspondent insisted that it was not the quantity but the quality of what people read that mattered because even those who read a lot did not necessarily turn to the right books.15 He told a story about an engineer he had once met who, while being an eager reader, never happened to read Dante, not once touched Homer, did not know Dostoevsky’s The Diary of a Writer, in short, “had a higher education [in engineering] without having secondary.” And those were the books – the classics, originally written by and for cultural elites – that “everyone from an academician to a milkmaid” had to know lest “third-rate” and ephemeral values would take place of the true ones and readers of pulp fiction would forever remain cerebrally and emotionally challenged teenagers (Literaturnaia gazeta 9/1/76, p. 6).

Virtually the same was said about classical, “serious,” music. As another Literaturka article put it, “Classical [music] tests us – tests our spiritual potential…our intelligence” (Literaturnaia gazeta 1/26/83, p. 3). According to Iovchuk and Kogan, among workers “the

15 Iovchuk and Kogan actually reported that slightly over fifty percent of the polled workers did read “serious” literature (Russian and foreign classics – such as Tolstoy, Zola, Dostoevsky, Dreiser – and poetry). Another forty read contemporary fiction, both Soviet and foreign. On the other hand, a full third also liked adventures, mysteries, and science fiction (respondents, clearly, could make several choices) (1975, p. 162).
place of serious music remain[ed]...low, and the level of workers’ musical culture lag[ged] behind the level of their general education” (1975, p. 166). The press decried “the gap between Music with the capital M and mass audience” and called it “the most painful knot of our cultural life.” It blamed TV and radio, as well as philharmonics’ staff musicologists, for inadequate propagation of classical music (which, admittedly, was considered “the most difficult and least accessible art genre”) and called on more energetic efforts to “initiate into music” various audiences (Pravda 10/6/85, p. 3). Not to discourage the readers, Pravda published a letter from a weaver from Ivanovo, USSR’s textile capital, who described her – almost accidental – discovery of classical music. She confessed that when she was going to her first classical music concert, she was skeptical whether she would be able to understand the music. But experienced musicologists, probably sensing the working-class listeners’ nervousness, carefully and lovingly brought them into the world of music. Since then, the weaver, who specially liked Chaikovskii and Bizet, regularly went to the concerts – even to the Bolshoi in Moscow – and played records at home (Pravda 4/29/85, p. 7).

Long was abandoned the project of an original proletarian culture. By late-socialist period, the classics of national and foreign literature, music, and fine arts firmly reentered the canon, but now Soviet people not only had to show superficial familiarity with them, but fully appreciate – even if that required additional and maybe strenuous learning effort on their part – every little detail, be it a changing music tempo or a fading color shade, of a work of art. They also were expected to follow high standards set by the classics in their own careers of amateur artists, to measure up to, if not quite outdo, the professionals. When the people were consuming culture and creating their own, it had to fulfill the standards of high, serious art, not light popular entertainment. But, as a formerly aspiring actress turned blue-collar worker-cum-amateur actress
pointed out, the former were no more prerogative of the elites: “Rich cultural life is not a privilege of actress, painter, writer. Vivid, full is spiritual world of a worker [too]. If one is truly devoted to creative work, their contribution to arts will surely win public’s recognition” (Pravda 7/24/77, p. 3). Not only “social boundaries between the working class and the intelligentsia” were being eliminated in the Soviet Union (Iovchuk & Kogan 1975), the distinction between “physicists” and “lyricists” – technicians and artists – of all social backgrounds was all but eradicated, and the Soviet Man prodded, by the Communist Party, turned into a Renaissance Man with accomplishments in and curious about a wide range of pursuits.

**Conclusion**

As I have demonstrated, in three important areas of life – work, consumption, and leisure – the Soviet party-state supplemented, if not supplanted, its primal collectivist and workerist gospel with its polar opposite, discourse of independence, individuality, and privatism.

In the area of work, this new discourse was promoting professionalization of manual labor. In the era of accelerated technological revolution, the Soviet party-state began to encourage broad professional education for workers beyond skills needed in one’s immediate job that was, moreover, theoretically informed in order to facilitate their autonomy, when necessary, in work-related decision-making. It stimulated workers’ professional initiative and creativity by establishing competitions, awards, and prizes for “best in profession” similar to those of artistic and scientific intelligentsia, as well as allowed factory workers to “defend dissertations” albeit without granting them academic degrees. In short, the image of worker-intellectual, often wearing a white coat on a shop floor more akin to a lab and compared to a professor, doctor, or artist, replaced one of a rugged proletarian in soiled overalls with permanent dirt under his nails.
who was valued for his physical strength and political consciousness. Secondly, austerity of life and personal sacrifice associated with early Soviet years (the Civil War, industrialization, WWII, and post-war rebuilding) was sidelined by the promise of abundance of consumer goods now, rather than in a more or less distant future. More importantly, consumer goods and services (such as customized clothes, uniquely designed apartments and furniture, portable electronics etc.) promoted in Soviet press, or whose absence and low quality due to manufacturers’ incompetence were frequently bemoaned, were admired for the qualities that allowed their owners to set themselves apart from fellow citizens and to rely less on state-provided services and facilitated for their holders a post-collectivist lifestyle: increased privacy, individuality, and autonomy. Lastly, the new discourse also endorsed new cultural tastes for Soviet people. Instead of the natural affinity for “light entertainment,” they ought to display an interest in and knowledge of Soviet, Russian, and world “high culture”: symphony music and ballet, paintings and sculpture, sophisticated literature, some of which not long before had been deemed “bourgeois.” Furthermore, people were urged to create their own works of art – music, paintings, poetry – and get involved in theater productions, dance companies, art criticism, all on amateur level but with nearly professional commitment. This stood out in sharp contrast against earlier efforts (often by Bolshevik elites and not workers themselves) to create a totally new and purely “proletarian culture” that would not aspire to replicate traditional styles and genres; instead, the Soviet Man was invited to become a cultural snob with his own contributions to an array of highbrow artistic fields. In short, if we look closely, we can see inauguration of values and habits that today are represented by Russia’s middle class.

This of course was only part of the story. Just as vehemently, the Communist Party preached and practiced political primacy of the working class, but also the educational
superiority of the intelligentsia. There was “anti-social consumption” and excessive acquisitionism. “Bourgeois” music (rock ’n’ roll) and art (abstractionism) were still a no-no; and cultural elites were still the ones to enlighten laymen, not the other way around. However, what this chapter has tried to demonstrate is the fact that attitudes and practices – the habitus – of today’s middle class in Russia originated in the old regime and, what’s more, on the instigation of the Party itself that through its rhetoric gave them identity and, possibly, mobilization (Swartz 1997, p. 45). Desire for better, more interesting, and satisfying jobs; for custom-tailored and attractive consumer goods that fulfilled one’s pursuit of individuality and certain freedom from society; for more and more varied knowledge, if not necessarily brought down the Soviet Union in a ferocious popular uprising, then at least slowly eroded the legitimacy of the regime that would not allow or was unable to deliver to its people what was portrayed and promised as good, almost middle-class, existence, one quite different from the more orthodox “Soviet way of life.” This post-collectivist discourse not only advanced a new ethos, but, more importantly, gave people a choice between different sets of values and ways of living their lives: “[c]hoice of the kind of person one would like to become…choice of pleasures one would like to enjoy, choice of the very needs one would like to seek, adopt and gratify” (Bauman 1990-1991, p. 188). Maybe Soviet socialism, contrary to what Bauman (ibid., p. 187) argues, was not entirely stuck at the “metallurgical stage” but was, with the rest of the Enlightenment-rooted (read Western) world, moving into post-modernity, even though for now only in discourse, or “superstructure.”
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