

# The Warm Home of Cacti and Other Soviet Memories: Russian Workers Reflect on the Socialist Period

JEREMY MORRIS

*University of Birmingham, UK*

This article examines ‘lay’ memory and understandings of the Soviet Union within a working-class community in regional Russia. Based on ethnographic fieldwork and materials, it presents informants’ narratives on the past as seen through the division of lived experience into the present and the ‘time before’ 1991. Positive associations of the past refer to the benefits of the social wage under socialism, the loss of which is keenly felt even while paternalistic relations continue to be expected by workers from enterprises. Shared class-based memory is a resource articulating a ‘lay’ reasoning on the supposed superiority of the socialist social contract, rather than any articulation of political support for the Soviet system. What endures is a clearly articulated, morally normative understanding of social justice, mythical in the past and absent in the present.

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I AM SITTING IN THE ‘BREAK ROOM’ of a local company that employs just over one hundred workers. It is rather daunting to be confronted with Boris’s brigade — in the middle of their twelve-hour shift — grimy, chain-smoking, and eyeing me with a mixture of curiosity and caution. However, Boris is a long-standing informant, can vouch for me, and puts his workmates more or less at ease. Not for nothing is he one of my best informants! A few anecdotes later, to which I contribute a few details with self-deprecating humour, at least some of the ice is broken and conversation moves on to working conditions, pay, relations with management — all the key questions for my current (in 2009) research project on blue-collar workers after socialism. However, in this period in the field and subsequent encounters with informants, I am struck by the strict diachronic understanding of changes in work, living conditions and satisfaction with life in general on display. This is prompted by my interest in three artefacts adorning the ‘break room’ in the bowels of the Soviet-era factory: the

beautiful, carefully tended cacti on the windowsill;<sup>1</sup> the locked refrigerator belonging to this brigade which turns out to be empty apart from half-consumed bottles of vodka; and the new and rather fancy radio system sitting atop the refrigerator, blaring out the latest pop hits.

The female technicians have, according to Boris, tended the cacti since the 1980s. They are an obvious material link with the otherwise disconnected past of the factory, when it employed thousands and was a well-oiled cog in the Ministry of Defence supply chain. The plants are from the ‘*time before*’;<sup>2</sup> my attention to them prompts a discussion of their survival despite the temporary closure in the early 1990s of the administrative building in which the technicians worked and in which the break room is located. When the building was abandoned (and left unheated) the technicians saved the cacti by taking them home. When one of the engineers raised enough capital to reopen part of the factory as a private concern, the cacti and technicians returned. The ‘*time before*’ takes on a demarcating role of enormous significance for all my informants over the age of thirty-five. The conversation turns quite naturally to the imminent increases in utility costs — particularly the district heating charges. In the ‘*old time*’ there were no sudden spikes in the price of gas, or interrupted electricity supply: ‘no grannies should freeze in their flat because of conflicts between the settlement bosses and the suppliers’, adds Boris’s *naparnik* (workmate).<sup>3</sup> He continues: ‘*during the Soviet period*, my mum could have carried on in her flat without my help, but now me and the wife have decided enough is enough — they’ve not maintained the temperature this winter in her block *like in the time before* and so we’ve brought her to our place where it is warmer’. The *slesar’* (general workman) chimes in: ‘Do you realize [indicating me] that we pay a quarter of our take-home in utility bills!’ While, revealingly, no one can quite remember what subsidy pertained to the late Soviet period, a similar comparison to the ‘*time before*’ is made through observations about the rise in the general cost of living.

Attention turns to the communal mini-fridge adorned with a padlock. There are a number of these stacked in one corner, each belonging to a brigade. I do not need to ask what is inside. The fourth brigade member, the most junior worker, Kolya (35), fishes a key out of his grimy blue overalls and dishes out a quick shot of vodka from the otherwise empty fridge. Fortunately, Boris’s wife has prepared a full packed lunch for all the brigade members and there is more than enough to soak up the vodka. I comment, perhaps too pointedly, on the lack of fresh and processed meat in the many fridges I have seen so far in my travels in the settlement and the recent erasure

<sup>1</sup> Cacti and ficuses have always been a common decorative and personalizing feature of homes and workplaces in Russia. For an insight into the ideologically charged nature of domestic decoration, including frequent discussion of ficuses as house plants, see Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge, MA and London, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> Literally, *pri sovetskoi vlasti* or *kak ran’she* — respectively, ‘during [the period of] Soviet government/power’, and ‘as [things were] before’.

<sup>3</sup> There were a number of incidences of black-outs in the settlement. This in turn put out of action the district heating station that supplies all the hot water to the settlement. The black-outs were due to disputes between the electricity supply company and one factory that had a large outstanding debt to it. As there was a single shared transmission supply to the town and the factory, the electricity suppliers cut off the whole town in a blatant attempt to blackmail the whole community. This occurred in November, when the average temperature was around freezing.

of the last sign of the former factory canteen in the middle of town: its rather attractive metal frontispiece sign — featuring imbibing figures and a samovar — was pulled down for scrap; ironically, the building is now occupied by a shop selling Chinese imports of, among other goods, fridge-freezers. The fact is I already know that the subject of provisioning and ‘meat’ in particular, is a hobby horse for Boris, and I am interested in the others’ reactions.<sup>4</sup> Sure enough, the team take my cue: they all know about the canteen sign — and this time all remember well the price of ice cream and pies (*pirozunki*) in the 1980s. What pastries! What meat pies! ‘Meat is so important when you’re out in the yard working all day’, remarks Boris, in a line of reasoning that is very familiar. ‘We used to have *kolbasa* (cured sausage) coming out of our ears. It would go green in the fridge by the time we got around to finding it — the fridge was so full all of the time’. Previously Boris’s wife, Tanya, has embarrassedly shown me the near empty fridge at home. It is used for self-provisioned preserves in jars, but rarely sees any meat — processed or otherwise.

Finally, we discuss the radio; having previously interviewed the director of the enterprise I know this is a collective ‘bonus’ awarded to the workers for the tender they successfully delivered to a new client in a different region.<sup>5</sup> This was specialist welding and cutting work to construct a bespoke scaffolding system. The workers all received small cash bonuses as well. Boris even got a certificate. As I have written elsewhere, he is one of a small group of workers with prestige both among confreres (meaning circles of worker friends and acquaintances not confined to the enterprise) and the management.<sup>6</sup> This gives him special unwritten privileges — one small one is choosing the CDs for the break room. Boris, who is unaware that the firm’s director is also my informant, seemingly genuinely praises his boss’s enlightened management:

he’s like the *old* bosses [*kak ran’she*] — you can go to him with a problem and talk to him like a person [*chelovek*]. When I had a bad back problem last year he paid me throughout the months I was in hospital and made sure the operation went well.

From my knowledge of the firm and director I have no reason to think these are empty words. I also remember Boris’s well-stocked bedside cabinet in the hospital ward.

The ethnographic moment above introduces three everyday categories of interpretation by blue-collar workers that allows them to access ‘the past’ through the present. At few, if any, points do they use the words ‘socialism’ or ‘Soviet Union’. For them comparing the working conditions, material wellbeing, and relative social wealth of the present to the past is not so much a constant, as an aspect of ‘lay’ reasoning about

<sup>4</sup> Processed meat products in general provide a strong mnemonic link between the past and present, sometimes in highly politicized form for inhabitants of the former Soviet Union — see Neringa Klumbyté, ‘The Soviet Sausage Renaissance’, *American Anthropologist*, 112 (2010), 22–37.

<sup>5</sup> Obviously, most of the bonus was monetary and shared by the team, but a small amount left over was spent on this communal affordance.

<sup>6</sup> Jeremy Morris, ‘Socially Embedded Workers at the Nexus of Diverse Work in Russia An Ethnography of Blue-Collar Informalization’, *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 31 (2011), 626; Jeremy Morris, ‘Beyond Coping? Alternatives to Consumption within a Social Network of Russian Workers’, *Ethnography*, 14 (2013), 91–92.

their relative marginalization in recent years. It is always close to the surface and, while the above examples were provoked by my intervention, such a diachronic compartmentalization was frequently observed. This article will explore such interpretations in greater detail and is organized in the following way. First, I give a short account of my informants, the field-site, and methods employed in research. Secondly, I discuss the theoretical approaches to ‘mnemonic resources’ specific to post-socialism outlined by Straughn<sup>7</sup> and contrast the classed form of narrative remembering by ordinary people in the Russian margins to public memory of socialism. In this section I argue that while a mnemonic resources approach is useful, it needs to be framed less in terms of political economy (views in favour of the socialist system) and more in terms of an enduring and partly cultural, partly class-based morally normative understanding of social justice and responsibilities. Then in the third section of the article I present a summary of ethnographic materials from fieldwork carried out in regional Russia from 2009–12. These wide-ranging materials support the argument that the working poor<sup>8</sup> and other marginalized people in Russia do not express support for ‘socialism’ as a political-economy concept in their accessing of mnemonic resources. Rather they use memories to show their understanding of the superiority of life before 1991 in terms of restating and emphasizing the loss of a perceived social contract between state and citizen and a moral imperative for social justice that transcends political affiliation.

### Field-site, informants, and methods

The field site encompasses a district (*raion*) with two small towns (populations 15,000 and 20,000) about 40 km from the regional (*oblast*) capital Kaluga. During the Soviet period both towns were dominated by single employers. The smaller town, which I give the pseudonym ‘Izluchino’, was a ‘company town’ — built from scratch in the post-war period around local extractive industries and manufacturing.<sup>9</sup> ‘Company town’, or ‘monotown’, translates the Russian term ‘town-formative enterprise’; in practice this was a single, extensive, industrial enterprise responsible for building the housing and other social infrastructure throughout the town and industrial zones. The enterprise provided the vast majority of the relatively well-paid blue-collar work in the town as well as work-benefits (the ‘social wage’) such as

<sup>7</sup> Jeremy Brooke Straughn, ‘Culture, Memory, and Structural Change: Explaining Support for “Socialism” in a Post-Socialist Society’, *Theory and Society*, 38 (2009), 485–525.

<sup>8</sup> I use this term to encompass the large mass of blue-collar workers, most of whom remain in Soviet-era or inheritor enterprises and who receive lower wages relative to white-collar workers than in Western European countries. A discussion of the changes in composition and meaning of the category working poor from the socialist to post-socialist period is beyond the scope of this article. Rural workers and many municipal white-collar workers (librarians, school teachers) could be included in this category both in the socialist and post-socialist period, but my focus is on blue-collar workers. See Alexi Gugushvili, ‘Material Deprivation, Social Class and Life Course in the Balkans, Eastern Europe and Central Asia’, *Studies of Transition States and Societies*, 3 (2011), 39–54.

<sup>9</sup> The original project that brought me to this field-site involved researching informal economic practices, some of which were illegal. This along with other ethical considerations means that I wish to protect the anonymity of my informants and therefore I use a pseudonym for the town. I have also changed individuals’ names and obscured some details pertaining to the nature of enterprises.

canteens, childcare, transport, and leisure facilities to the chiefly male workers and their dependents. Like most company towns, Izluchino exerted a strong pull-effect on labour from neighbouring districts and regions, partly because employment guaranteed rapid access to company-provided housing (in the early 1980s some workers were allocated permanent housing in five-storey apartment blocks within six months of arrival). In the 1990s most of these flats became the private property of the occupiers, providing both a significant disincentive to labour mobility despite the economically parlous situation in the district, a sense of security to owners, but also generational inequality.

The ‘company town district’ has been identified as one of a small number of types of urban neighbourhood in the USSR.<sup>10</sup> The social character of such a locality was and remains overwhelmingly blue-collar. Despite the bankruptcy and splitting up in the mid-1990s of the main Izluchino Construction-Machine Plant enterprise into much smaller privatized companies, resulting in the loss of over 50 per cent of Soviet-era blue-collar jobs, there are still a few significant (c. 1000 workers) factory- or shop-floor-based enterprises, as well as specialist shops that employ from 10 to 100 workers each. The fact that Izluchino contained extractive and processing industry, as well as manufacturing, meant that its employment was, by Soviet monotown standards, diversified, and this had an ameliorating effect on decline in the later 1990s and 2000s. While the core enterprise no longer pulls workers from outside the district, and struggles to attract skilled workers due to low wages, the industrial zone contains a hinterland of inheritor businesses of the ex-autarky type, now disaggregated from the main firm and fending for themselves.

Despite the demise of the single industrial employer, blue-collar work continues everywhere, along with the building of personal networks predicated on social and occupational positioning. Most work pays only about \$600–\$700 a month. Well-qualified professionals earn from \$1200 a month, while living costs like food, heating, and transport are comparable to those in much of Western Europe. Many people regularly spend over half their wages on basic foodstuffs; the declining purchasing power of workers is well documented as a key issue in industrial relations literature on Russia<sup>11</sup> and in-work poverty is characteristic of post-socialist countries.<sup>12</sup> Because of the poor wages in manual labour, informal work is highly valued. Work like skilled moonlighting as a plumber or electrician can provide double a monthly wage in a matter of days (although the frequency of such work depends on luck and the extent of the worker’s contacts and social network). Some younger workers commute to Moscow, three hours by bus to the north, or live on site there for weeks at a time. There are very few other work opportunities for men in the formal economy: the service and retail sectors continue to be seen as ‘women’s work’, and agricultural jobs are scarce and poorly paid.

<sup>10</sup> Susan Goodrich Lehmann and Blair A. Ruble, ‘From “Soviet” to “European” Yaroslavl: Changing Neighbourhood Structure in Post-Soviet Russian Cities’, *Urban Studies*, 34 (1997), 1085–1107.

<sup>11</sup> Claudio Morrison, *A Russian Factory Enters the Market Economy* (Oxford and New York, 2008), p. 143.

<sup>12</sup> Alison Stenning, Adrian Smith, Alena Rochovská, and Dariusz Swiatek, *Domesticating Neo-Liberalism: Spaces of Economic Practice and Social Reproduction in Post-Socialist Cities* (Malden, MA, 2010).

In terms of everyday life, settlements like Izluchino could be said to have undergone a near complete loss of civic identity since the demise of the enterprises which supported them. Even in the Soviet period, little attention was paid to creating a town-space and infrastructure suitable for the needs of a high-density development. Now, civic, leisure, and consumption-orientated amenities are poor by regional standards. Unlike the district-centre town about 20 km away, Izluchino has many unpaved spaces, large abandoned brownfield sites, and almost no street lighting between its arterial roads. It had a civic building housing a theatre stage, but this is partly in disrepair, as is a large secondary school complex. Its communal canteen closed down some years ago. There is a small open-air market once a week selling local produce, and a dozen or so shops, dominated by small businesses selling mainly foodstuffs. Many families, regardless of their current economic status, maintain a small wooden village house and private vegetable plot a few kilometres outside the town. This, as in many small towns in Russia, gives the settlement an ‘urban peasant’ identity.<sup>13</sup> Even those who have no plot come into daily contact with local produce through their social network and therefore have some understanding of the significance of self-provisioning. However, perhaps 75 per cent of plots nearest the town are abandoned due to lack of water pumping equipment, again as a result of the loss of enterprise patronage.

Ethnographic materials (recorded and unrecorded interviews, participant and non-participant observations) for this research were gathered in winter 2009, summer 2010 to winter 2010/11, and summer–autumn 2012. I have also spent many extended summer periods in the field since the late 1990s. Both participant observation and semi-structured interviewing were conducted in a variety of settings: sometimes at work, frequently in the spaces of domesticity and leisure — summer houses, vegetable plots, park benches, and vehicles. I lived for much of the time in three different workers’ homes. I was also able to try my hand at some of the trades and practices of informants, such as welding automobiles and constructing double-glazing units on a shop-floor. Long-term interactions with approximately ten family groups of informants living in Izluchino in the Kaluga region of Central European Russia are formative of the bulk of the materials. While the informants ranged widely in terms of age, gender, and socio-economic status, I concentrate in this article for self-evident reasons on the men and, to a lesser extent, women, of the birth cohorts from the early and late 1960s, and the early to mid-1970s. In addition to anonymizing workers’ names and jobs, various minor details pertaining to the identity of the settlement have been obscured or changed.

## Approaching ‘memory’ of the socialist period

A common approach to studying memory of the socialist era, particularly in history and social science research, is to examine the

<sup>13</sup> Andre Czegledy, ‘Urban Peasants in a Post-Socialist World: Small-Scale Agriculturalists in Hungary’, in *Post-Socialist Peasant? Rural and Urban. Constructions of Identity in Eastern Europe, East Asia and the Former Soviet Union*, ed. by Pamela Leonard and Deema Kaneff (Basingstoke, 2002), pp. 200–20.

rhetoric of historical representation and [...] the ways in which the collective memory of communism is managed in the context of how post-communist democracies reckon with former regimes. It specifically centres on the public accomplishment of coming to terms with the past.<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, researchers often emphasize the public, institutional, and political accessing of the past (and its ambivalence in the Russian case) as ‘reflected in school history texts that emphasize Soviet achievements [...] and in monuments and commemorations’.<sup>15</sup> Verdery’s study of the burials and reburials of public figures, mainly from the post-socialist space, shows how memories and rituals can be transformed in an overtly political or ideological context, as well as revealing the disturbing and equally political process of social forgetting.<sup>16</sup> The struggle over the symbolic capital of the past is a very public one in her account.

However, despite increased attention to memory in qualitative social science research, this subject remains on the margins.<sup>17</sup> This is particularly the case in the movement from examining collective memory to that of subaltern groups and from public to private memory of ordinary people under socialism. Anthropology is something of an exception, with a rich literature appearing in the 1990s on the understandings of ordinary people of the present grounded in their lived experience of the socialist period.<sup>18</sup> While on the whole not directly addressing the issue of memory, but rather the fragmentation of identities and livelihoods in the immediate post-socialist period, this ethnographically grounded research laid bare the chasm in worldviews and values that opened up between winners and losers of monumental social and political changes. For example, Hivon, exploring community opposition to private farming in 1990s Russia, finds complex reasons for distrust of marketized relations in agriculture that go beyond enduring cultural values of envy and egalitarianism and illustrate alternative understandings of private property rights based on just needs.<sup>19</sup> While she does not pursue the question of informants’ evaluation of the present based on their experiences of the past, Hivon shows that understandings of the moral inadequacy of the land reforms are firmly rooted in longstanding community ‘mentality’ formed in a prior period.<sup>20</sup> While Hivon is keen to avoid psychological reductionism in the typifying of the Russian peasant population, her research

<sup>14</sup> Cristian Tileagă, ‘Communism in Retrospect: The Rhetoric of Historical Representation and Writing the Collective Memory of Recent Past’, *Memory Studies*, 5 (2012), 462.

<sup>15</sup> Nanci Adler, ‘Reconciliation with — or Rehabilitation of — the Soviet Past?’, *Memory Studies*, 5 (2012), 327.

<sup>16</sup> Katherine Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Post-socialist Change* (New York, 1999).

<sup>17</sup> Emily Keightley, ‘Remembering Research: Memory and Methodology in the Social Sciences’, *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 13 (2010), 55–70.

<sup>18</sup> Elizabeth C. Dunn, *Privatising Poland: Baby Food, Big Business, and the Remaking of Labor* (Ithaca, NY, 2004); Sue Bridger and Frances Pine, eds, *Surviving Post-Socialism: Local Strategies and Regional Responses in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union* (Oxford and New York, 1998); C. M. Hann, ed., *Postsocialism: Ideals, Ideologies, and Practices in Eurasia* (London and New York, 2002); Caroline Humphrey, *The Unmaking of Soviet Life: Everyday Economies after Socialism* (Ithaca, NY, 2002); Caroline Humphrey and Ruth Mandel, ‘The Market in Everyday Life: Ethnographies of Postsocialism’, in *Markets and Moralities: Ethnographies of Postsocialism*, ed. by Ruth Mandel and Caroline Humphrey (Oxford and New York, 2002), pp. 1–19.

<sup>19</sup> Myriam Hivon, ‘The Bullied Farmer: Social Pressure as a Survival Strategy’, in *Surviving Post-Socialism*, pp. 33–52.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

implies individual, kinship group, and wider access to, and reinforcement of, norms about land use that are predicated on memory of former practices (both socialist and earlier), however defined.

The present research takes its cue from the anthropological literature on ‘surviving post-socialism’. However, it seeks to move on from the neo-institutional focus of that body of research, which often, understandably, privileged analysis of the social and economic consequences of neoliberal reform. In this way, the neo-institutional approach moved swiftly from ordinary interpretations of lived experience by informants to conclusions about the failure of Soviet and transitional institutions as a hermeneutic for answering a raft of complex questions from cultural difference to state-society relations.<sup>21</sup>

Much of the ethnographic research based on fieldwork from the 1990s took for granted the shared values and beliefs of informants that were at variance with the new social order erected overnight in 1991 in Russia and elsewhere. This was understandable — informants had lived all their lives up to that point in a relatively socially and culturally homogeneous environment. However, I argue that, more than a generation later, it is important to move beyond the ‘survival’ prism of responses to post-socialism and use ethnography to excavate deep into the lifeworld of the generation most affected by wholesale change — those who came of age before or on the cusp of the end of the Soviet period.<sup>22</sup> They have had twenty years to reflect, interpret, and experience the contrast. Yet, for all, their fundamental ‘cosmology’ was formed prior to 1991 (while it was reinforced during the 1990s destruction of social contract and further honed by middle-class increases in wealth in the 2000s). Verdery prefers the term ‘cosmology’ to culture when speaking of the worlds of meaning she studies in post-socialist spaces. This is because even for anthropologists, ‘culture’ can too easily be elided into ‘ideas’<sup>23</sup> — the kind of textual-orientated approach to mythologies and counter mythologies of the past that dominates memory studies on the Soviet period.<sup>24</sup>

The parallel yet underexplored ‘everyday life’ approach strongly informs the present work. Memory of the socialist period is not to be reduced to cognition; it is equally valid to explore it through feelings, everyday material objects, absences (whether inside a refrigerator or in the central square of a town), relationships between kin and others that change or, more significantly, endure, reflecting remembered relations of reciprocity or, equally, hostility. For Verdery, post-socialism represents a problem of ‘reorganization on a cosmic scale and it involves the redefinition of everything including morality, social relations, and basic meanings. It involves a reordering of people’s entire meaningful worlds’.<sup>25</sup> But what about where public texts of meaning (the graves and monuments of Verdery’s study) meet the micro-scale of individuals’

<sup>21</sup> Tatjana Thelen, ‘Shortage, Fuzzy Property and Other Dead Ends in the Anthropological Analysis of (Post)socialism’, *Critique of Anthropology*, 31 (2011), 43–61.

<sup>22</sup> Morris, ‘Beyond Coping?’.

<sup>23</sup> Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies*, p. 34.

<sup>24</sup> Alexei Yurchak, *Everything was Forever, Until it was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton and Oxford, 2006); Aleksandr Kustarev, ‘Mifologiya sovetskogo proshlogo’, *Neprikosnovemyi zapas*, 3.89 (2013), <<http://magazines.russ.ru/nz/2013/3/1m-pr.html>> [accessed 6 February 2014].

<sup>25</sup> Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies*, p. 35.

and communities' continuity of memory of socialism? Personal objects, relations, space, sense of personhood, and wider aspects of material culture are interwoven with public memory, enter the memorizing processes, and move in parallel to a linguistic or cognitive understanding of memory. This article shows how the sometimes ambivalent objects of materiality (food, domestic appliances, etc.) and subjects of relation in personal, generational, and classed memories links to interpretations of the socialist era — the past in the present. It does this by taking a broad 'mnemonic resources' approach to memory of the socialist era.

The 'mnemonic resources' approach has proved important to understanding how socialist 'ideologies' live on and even gain traction.<sup>26</sup> In the East German case, using life histories, Straughn shows that such ideas '(1) remain culturally available as strategies of action that (2) provided material opportunities or symbolic privileges in the past, and (3) promise to ameliorate new problems engendered by alternative strategies'.<sup>27</sup> While the main type of mnemonic resource is autobiographical memory, or 'the stocks of knowledge that accumulate in the course of an individual's life span',<sup>28</sup> others may include 'diaries, photographs, and other personal records, as well as through public technologies of "collective memory" such as museums, monuments, or the mass media'.<sup>29</sup> Straughn highlights a body of work that found that many Eastern Europeans 'tended to support important policies and values associated with the state socialist regimes they have left behind', in particular egalitarianism and just needs, without advocating a return to the political settlement of those regimes.<sup>30</sup>

Here, then, are good examples of a world-view approach encompassing values that extend beyond subscription to ideology and a politicized understanding of positive memory about the socialist period, which otherwise dominates Straughn's analysis. As my informants show, socialist memory is less about ideologically informed interpretations — in fact, many informants show a sophisticated understanding of both the flawed ideology and implementation of the communist project, in contrast to the dominant binary reading of Soviet mythology in textual anthropology.<sup>31</sup> Burawoy has shown well the lack of any naivety in workers' understanding of the 'immanent contradiction' of their position in socialism.<sup>32</sup> Their positive memory and comparison with the present is more about culturally enduring values (which include those coinciding with some aspects of socialism) and both affective and material associations that are evoked and incorporated into a developing discourse among informants of 'lay normativity' about the superiority of aspects of socialist-era lived reality. Lay normativity, a term coined by Sayer,<sup>33</sup> is a way of characterizing the ethical dispositions generated by ordinary people as they encounter the world and undertake action

<sup>26</sup> See Straughn, 'Culture, Memory, and Structural Change'.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 485.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 497. See also Jeffrey K. Olick, 'Collective Memory: The Two Cultures', *Sociological Theory*, 17 (1999), 233–348; and Jeremy Brooke Straughn, 'Historical Events and the Fragmentation of Memory in Eastern Germany', *Journal of Political and Military Sociology*, 35 (2007), 103–23.

<sup>29</sup> Straughn, 'Culture, Memory, and Structural Change', p. 497.

<sup>30</sup> David Stewart Mason cited in Straughn, 'Culture, Memory, and Structural Change', p. 486.

<sup>31</sup> See Kustarev, 'Mifologija sovetkogo proshlogo'.

<sup>32</sup> Michael Burawoy and János Lukács, *The Radiant Past: Ideology and Reality in Hungary's Road to Capitalism* (Chicago, 1992), p. 147.

<sup>33</sup> Andrew Sayer, *The Moral Significance of Class* (Cambridge, 2005).

within in. It informs the present research in that it usefully describes how informants, ‘in their mostly subconscious and fallible, but mostly practically-adequate ways, [...] value the world’,<sup>34</sup> and in particular the intersection in their everyday reasoning of the contrast between the past and present. Thus, although I employ the term ‘reasoning’, this encompasses both an affective, moral, and physical evaluating apparatus.<sup>35</sup> In the rest of this article I attempt to link up material, moral, spatial, and political mnemonic resources available to the Russian working poor that contribute to the enduring cosmology they developed about their society prior to 1991. The materials presented reflect my interactions with a range of informants in a variety of settings over a number of periods of fieldwork.

## Meat and material cultures

In the opening of this article my informants showed how recollections of the ‘time before’ take on a demarcating role of enormous significance. In this section I look at a variety of aspects of material culture that provoke comparison of the present with the past and thereby serve as mnemonic resources. Firstly, we return to food and hospitality, two cultural tropes strongly linked in Russia and highly important in terms of serving as barometers of well-being, dignity, and happiness. In addition they are integral to public mythology of the Soviet period, both pro and contra.<sup>36</sup>

As was seen in the conversation about refrigerators, meat is a key trope for the working poor in Russia today when it comes to evaluating the present in relation to the past.<sup>37</sup> As we saw, Boris associates the socialist period with a time of plenty, while acknowledging his as a non-universal experience. He and others develop this understanding in numerous informant interactions. Meat in the socialist period in the town was ‘so plentiful you couldn’t fit it in the fridge’, he reports. He acknowledges that this was due to the relatively privileged position of the town — as a single-enterprise settlement run for the benefit of the Ministry of Defence, it had access to networks of supply that many in both rural and larger urban areas did not. I mention to Boris the meat shortages in Moscow in the late Brezhnev period.<sup>38</sup> Rather than Boris rolling back his claims, my observation prompts him to extend his reasoning from material well-being, this time in terms of the values and state-society relations of socialism, uniting ‘meat’ and ‘just needs’ in a classed manner. Meat was plentiful in Izluchino because the balance of rewards for citizens in the USSR was not skewed towards the undeserving metropolitan middle class, Boris states. He develops a familiar line I hear from many workers and their families, regardless of age: while not using the term ‘social contract’, the plentiful availability of basic foodstuffs to the working poor

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>35</sup> A similar point is made by Sayer (*The Moral Significance of Class*, p. 25) in criticizing the overly rationalist approach of Bourdieu to habitus which neglects the embodiment of dispositions, which leads to the ‘denial of the life of the mind in the working class in much sociological writing’.

<sup>36</sup> See Kustarev, ‘Mifologiya sovetskogo proshlogo’.

<sup>37</sup> For a similar finding in Romania, see David A. Kideckel, *Getting by in Postsocialist Romania: Labor the Body and Working-Class Culture* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2008).

<sup>38</sup> Linda J. Cook, *The Soviet Social Contract and Why it Failed: Welfare Policy and Workers’ Politics from Brezhnev to Yeltsin* (London, UK and Cambridge, MA, 1993), p. 231.

becomes incorporated into a lay moral reasoning about the more and less deserving under socialism. The workers produced most of the wealth of the state, often in terrible conditions, and thus having plenty of meat was a just desert.

Hospitality and both quantity and quality of food continue to be linked strongly in post-socialist spaces<sup>39</sup> and also encompass lay understandings of moral worth.<sup>40</sup> The memory of meat is something almost tangibly painful for Boris — a large man with big appetites. We regularly travel to his rather pitiful country cottage to barbeque chicken wings and eat his daughter-in-law's lovely home-prepared pickled herring. However, this 'frugal' spread of enormous quantities provokes anxiety in my host. Chicken is a sign of poverty to him; the home-prepared herring a sign of straitened circumstances. 'This is all shit!' exclaims Boris, when he has had some beer. 'Oh, if you could see the meat we used to have!' His stepson Grigory is more circumspect: 'well, it was all processed crap anyway, no different from now'. Grigory is thirty-nine and the locus of his reminiscences is different; beer is his interest. While only a teenager in the late 1980s, he keenly recalls the lack of access to beer and today's embarrassment of riches. Ribbing his stepfather, he retorts:

What's the point of meat if you've no beer. I can hardly imagine how you got to work without it. Kaluga has the best beer in the region now — so many choices ... Ah, I suppose you just necked the vodka instead, much like now.

An inebriated debate ensues as the mosquitoes come out to bite and the sun goes down. The stepfather avoiding the issue of the 'beer deficit', and the stepson continuing to wind him up. Grigory, who was twenty years old in 1992, feels keenly the relative intergenerational inequality brought about by the loss of good jobs when he returned from the army after serving in the Abkhazian conflict. His mnemonic resource to the past lies not in food, but largely in the perception of the dignity of labour under socialism and the social wage that is an integral aspect of that dignity. His personal experience of the *loss* of social wage (no kindergarten place for his children, no flat linked to a job) is filtered through his kinship relations and 'family memory'.

## Work and breadwinning: dignity in labour

Grigory, unlike his stepfather, lives in a tiny dormitory room in a run-down block with his wife and two children. Boris has a very spacious flat: three rooms and 80 square metres. Grigory was nineteen in 1991 and remembers well missing out on the enterprise-provided housing for workers. Understandably, intergenerational inequality in housing in the town has been important in forming his views on post-socialism. So bitter is Grigory that on this subject he is speechless, and it is Boris, his stepfather, who picks up this theme: 'we went to the boss and, like for ourselves ten years before, showed that Grigory was a good worker. He deserved a flat like anyone else. For

<sup>39</sup> Kathryn Cassidy, 'Performing the Cross-Border Economies of Post-Socialism', *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 31 (2011), 632–47.

<sup>40</sup> Abel Polese, 'The Guest at the Dining Table: Economic Transitions and the Reshaping of Hospitality — Reflections from Batumi and Odessa', *Anthropology of East Europe Review*, 27 (2009), 76–87.

goodness sake, Dmitry [Grigory's brother-in-law] got a flat in 1986 after just six months in the settlement'. But Boris's 'prestige' (*avtoritet*) as a valued worker was no longer worth anything in the eyes of the 'Lord' of the settlement. The enterprise was now subject to hard budget constraints and Grigory lost out. 'Oh, Aleksei Georgievich, he was indeed like a Lord!'<sup>41</sup> Boris says, referring to the enterprise director, who hung on until 1994.<sup>42</sup> 'In the old days you could go to him with anything — marriage problems, personal issues. Timofei from upstairs, who's dead now, used to beat the shit out of his wife'. Finally, some of the lads in the block had enough and went to Aleksei Georgievich. Timofei never laid a hand on her again — 'he was too busy doing night duty in the lime kiln after that', grins Boris. There are other stories, many stories that depressingly resemble one another, about autonomy within the workshops at the level of the lowest workers, about a common feeling of belonging to the enterprise and of the enterprise belonging to workers, despite cynicism about the project of communism itself and the party and the elite.<sup>43</sup> Now there is no dignity in labour to be found — only if you work for yourself outside the system.<sup>44</sup> 'I was of use to people then', says Kirill, a former co-worker of Boris, speaking of his work in another factory as a welder. 'Now I am just an entry in a bookkeeper's accounts so that X, the current director of the privatized plant, can build another palace on the edge of town'.

The discourse of dignity in labour of the socialist era is not one-dimensional. While it is part of an important direct comparison of wages, conditions, and industrial relations now and then, it intersects with an important line of reasoning about reciprocity beyond kin — that is, that links of mutual aid, respect, and professional worth were key benefits for socialist workers that are now seen as largely absent.<sup>45</sup> Sometimes this narrative runs into a more general interpretation of paternalistic relations under socialism, not all of which is positive: Kirill adds to Boris's account of the socialist-era director his own anecdote of how his relative was not allowed to marry his fiancée without the permission of the enterprise! Russian workers were the major beneficiaries of the welfare state in the USSR<sup>46</sup> and yet were not well paid by any measure. While sometimes the paternalistic relations of the socialist period they yearn for are related to the particularistic bargaining with 'patrons and authorities'<sup>47</sup> that allowed 'good' workers like Boris a step ahead of others (his nice flat), there is a

<sup>41</sup> Here he uses the word '*kniaz*', translated as 'prince', 'duke', or 'noble' more generally, indicating the paternalistic understanding of worker-enterprise relations.

<sup>42</sup> A number of inheritor enterprises went bankrupt in 1994, but almost all survived in smaller form.

<sup>43</sup> Much of the lay reasoning about the dignity of work in the socialist period and the working-class world-view expressed by informants is uncannily like that in Burawoy's study of workers in Hungary in 1985, twenty years earlier. This is discussed at length in Jeremy Morris, 'Unruly Entrepreneurs: Russian Worker Responses to Insecure Formal Employment', *Global Labour Journal*, 3 (2012), 217–36. One must be careful in taking at face value negative comparisons of a supposedly rigid and punitive present for labour (under conditions of neoliberalism) with an idyllic autonomous past under socialist discipline. However, even the most negative accounts of socialist labour include a 'loophole to happiness' in some of the autonomous practices on the shopfloor that existed, even among workers on piece-rates. See, for example, Miklós Haraszti, *A Worker in a Worker's State: Piece-Rates in Hungary*, trans. by Michael Wright (Harmondsworth and New York, 1977), p. 144.

<sup>44</sup> See Morris, 'Unruly Entrepreneurs'.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Cook, *The Soviet Social Contract and Why it Failed*, p. 4.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

stronger element of this discourse that highlights what informants see as a genuine reciprocity of relations among workers (and some supervisors) that is now lost, despite the absence of a wider working-class solidarity under socialism.<sup>48</sup> The extent of the welfare state is a topic too wide to do justice to here, but other elements informing the discourse outlined above are education, health care, child care, and social security — all elements highlighted in Cook's analysis of the social contract in the late Soviet period.<sup>49</sup>

### **The empty heart of the town: a school with no pupils, a theatre with no stage**

This final section brings into focus the physical absences in the spatial environment of the town. While the enterprise providing the socialist-era social wage was dismantled, its most important projects in the built environment are more enduring, even if in disrepair. These are a constant visible prompt for inhabitants of Izluchino to access their memories of the superiority of socialism in terms of their general quality of life.

The loss of the workers' subsidized canteen has already been discussed. Two enormous structures dominate the town: its once famous 'House of Culture', which used to house two stages for theatre and cinema, and the modern secondary school, which had three swimming pools. The House of Culture still has a functioning stage and a lively mix of traditional shows and contemporary music and dance, but even these events, welcome in the small town, provoke feelings of loss and memories of the 'old time'. Key informants Tanya and Kolya are cultural workers in the House. They lament the renting out of precious rooms and facilities in the House to private business. 'In the old times this revolving stage was the pride of the region', Kolya says. But now they lack the lighting and amplification facilities to put on proper shows on the main stage. Tanya talks about how the small town used to be culturally self-sufficient. The enterprise made sure you did not need to go to the regional capital for entertainment. She is one of the few cultural workers under forty.

Every day I walk past the site of the secondary school in the centre of the town — trees are starting to grow out of the swimming pool building, which is roofless. The site is nearly two hectares, and young people climb through the broken fences to smoke cannabis or drink beer there. One day an informant, Sasha, takes me inside.

It's shameful. I remember being taught to swim here. We had the best facilities in the region [*oblast*]. The town gave something precious to me, but it won't to my children. It's like the Titanic taken out of the water this school. What are the bureaucrats paying attention to?

Sasha's colourful metaphor links back to local understandings of the former status of the town as a powerhouse of production, deserving of just rewards from the state in return for workers' sacrifices on the shop floor. Again, we hear of the 'time before':

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

like Boris's boss at the opening of this article, some 'enlightened' bosses remain, like the chief heating engineer of the town unfairly maligned by Boris due to his mother's unheated flat. Viktor Nikolaevich is praised by his workers and others alike for his taking on the decrepit town boiler plant and expending much sweat and tears bringing it up to modern standards. 'He's like the old bosses', Galina, his technician says. 'If he sees you want to work, he will help you and arrange your shift to fit in with the grandchildren'. The engineer's ex-workman agrees:

The plant is the pride of this decrepit town. Only the boilers and the undertakers have any pride in their work! The rest of the town has gone to the dogs. Look at the electricity by comparison: no street lights on Lenin Street between the cross-roads and the market. It's a scandal. But Viktor Nikolaevich works because he has the heart [*dusha*] of a Soviet person. He won't let the heating plant fall down. He even got in the pit with me when we laid down the cement around boiler two. And he got the German boiler instructions from Siemens translated from German so we wouldn't mess it up! There aren't many like him left. He looks after his own. He knows when to put on a spread.

His last statement refers to the generous annual banquet organized for the workers of the heating plant. Like Boris's comments on his own enlightened management, the 'time before' is characterized by personalized,<sup>50</sup> reciprocal relations, rather than the 'individualized' surveillance and punitive relations of comparable post-socialist workplaces.<sup>51</sup> Soon I am able to see the engineer's work for myself when he becomes the key informant of my main fieldwork in the town. Like Boris's workshop, his plant is festooned with cacti, all lovingly cared for. There is even a flower bed next to the 30 metre chimney, which Viktor, along with his female technicians, tends every spring.

## Conclusions

Straughn, writing on mnemonic resources and legacies accessed by East Germans, suggests that support for the idea of socialism is sometimes 'rooted in memories of educational, occupational [...] opportunity in the GDR, perceived in retrospect as superior'.<sup>52</sup> This is a store-house shared by the Russian informants of Izluchino who materially benefited from socialism for over forty years. However, for the working poor in Russia today, return to socialism is rarely articulated as a political ideal, either in 'theory' (a Marxian interpretation of the present) or 'practice' (the willing of a revanchist political movement in the here and now through a revitalized Communist Party). Mnemonic resources from the socialist era are more like a pivot around which people leverage a continuity of enduringly recalled moral values concerning dignity, social justice, just needs, and duties, the latter binary sometimes identified with a Slavic communalist imperative that harbours dangerous myths of organic community and class conformity.<sup>53</sup> However, in Straughn's framing of socialist remembering, the operationalizing of political conceptions, ideational strategies, and

<sup>50</sup> Morrison, *A Russian Factory Enters the Market Economy*, p. 135.

<sup>51</sup> See Morris, 'Unruly Entrepreneurs'.

<sup>52</sup> Straughn, 'Culture, Memory, and Structural Change', p. 497.

<sup>53</sup> William Leatherbarrow and Derek Offord, *A Documentary History of Russian Thought from the Enlightenment to Marxism* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1987), p. 77.

repertoires around the ‘idea of socialism’ crowds out less rationalist understandings of such memory. ‘Socialism’ as a preferred social reality is quantitatively measured by Straughn, but in the Russian case analysed in this article, it is concrete, personalized, and moral understandings of a lost social ‘reality’ that weigh on the memories of informants, often very heavily indeed.

In addition, a clearly classed conception of the superiority of the social contract for labour under socialism is articulated. It remains to be seen whether at the elite level such a conception of welfare and social wages as part of a social contract really existed,<sup>54</sup> but the informants of this research in retrospect unequivocally construct their memory of the socialist period in terms of such a contract, or rather, a reciprocal relationship between state and worker. This is revealed through looking at the present state of disillusionment with insecure work, measured against a putative ‘normal’ working-class existence before 1991. To many informants so much was ‘normal’ before, and ironically, so little is now, in their current reality. Access to mnemonic resources beyond autobiographical memory — crucially the ‘lay normative’ resource of shared class identity and material cultures — then allows sharp comparison of the present with the past. For the working class, post-socialist reality does not measure up. Workers were corporatized; while lacking an organizational base to challenge the often terrible working conditions and pay under socialism, they wielded some power and, more significantly, autonomy at the shop-floor level<sup>55</sup> and, due to the ritualized transparent exploitation of labour, were able to develop an immanent critique of their society — the ‘negative class consciousness’ of workers.<sup>56</sup>

It would be easy to argue that the working-class today are the main interpellated subject of the countermyths propagated by mainstream media and culture, which aim to offer vicarious and affective compensation for their parlous material circumstances in the form of feel-good nostalgia about the Soviet period. However, the ethnographic materials taken as a whole point to a non-politicized and grounded understanding (however infected by nostalgia that is partial, incomplete) that is not reducible to a simple duped masses argument. This article, then, and the ethnographic research underpinning it, could be seen as contributing to a call for the usefulness of an *Alltagsgeschichte* approach in memory studies, where ‘everyday history’ is accessible through basic experiences of ordinary people in a society, their memories, and the broad social and political changes that occur in that society. In some respects this is equivalent to attempting a form of memory microhistory, with an accent on the agency of people and, therefore, unwilling to see national culture (and public memory discourses) as an all-determining force.

It is through an enduring classed identity — despite the ravages of de-industrialization — that a continuity in memory is possible that is not collective, but local, particular, biased, partial, but simultaneously persuasive, strong, and most of all more than a resource for these people, but their *property* in a country where they have lost more than others. They hang on for dear life to access to the memory of the ‘time

<sup>54</sup> See Cook, *The Soviet Social Contract and Why it Failed*.

<sup>55</sup> Sergei Alashev, ‘On a Particular Kind of Love and the Specificity of Soviet Production’, in *Management and Industry in Russia: Formal and Informal Relations in the Period of Transition*, ed. by Simon Clarke (Aldershot, 1995), pp. 69–98.

<sup>56</sup> Burawoy and Lukács, *The Radiant Past*, pp. 134–35.

before'. In looking, too, at the material spectrum of mnemonic resources, it may be possible to avoid the problems of theory that Straughn identifies and the access to a more 'nuanced theoretical toolkit'<sup>57</sup> in thinking through memory as a resource. An ethnographic insight grounded in the lived experience of informants in the present and based interpretively on their 'worlds of meaning' can deliver a balanced portrait of memory, neither privileging socialization and culture, nor methodological individualist notions of material interest (memory as part of a purely strategic responses to circumstances). Memories of socialism in Izluchino reflect a nexus of moral, material, physical, and affective 'reasonings' about the superiority of life in the 'time before'. Even where they revolve around a loss or lack — as in the built environment — they leave a bitter taste in the mouth that is all too real.

### Notes on contributor

Jeremy Morris is Senior Lecturer in Russian Studies at the University of Birmingham. His research interests include informal economy, class, precarity, and post-socialism more generally. His current research is focused on ethnographic approaches to understanding 'actually lived experience' and personhood in the former Soviet Union.

Correspondence to: Jeremy Morris. Email: [j.b.morris@bham.ac.uk](mailto:j.b.morris@bham.ac.uk)

<sup>57</sup> Straughn, 'Culture, Memory, and Structural Change', p. 488.