

Towards an Archaeology of the Contemporary Past

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An Archaeology of Socialism was originally intended as an ethno-archaeological investigation into the relationship between the material environment, behaviour and cultural change. It was an attempt to engage the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens and their respective understandings of *habitus* and structuration and relate them to a body of material culture (the Narkomfin Communal House: Fig. 1) derived from an intellectual tradition similar to Anglo-American archaeology. Quite simply, the main question posed was, if the material world were indeed consciously constituted according to such principles, does it in fact work the way we would expect it to? The short answer to the question is of course yes and no, or rather that the terms of materiality are contingent upon the success of the social effects of our material interventions and strategies; that is, we constitute the materiality that we

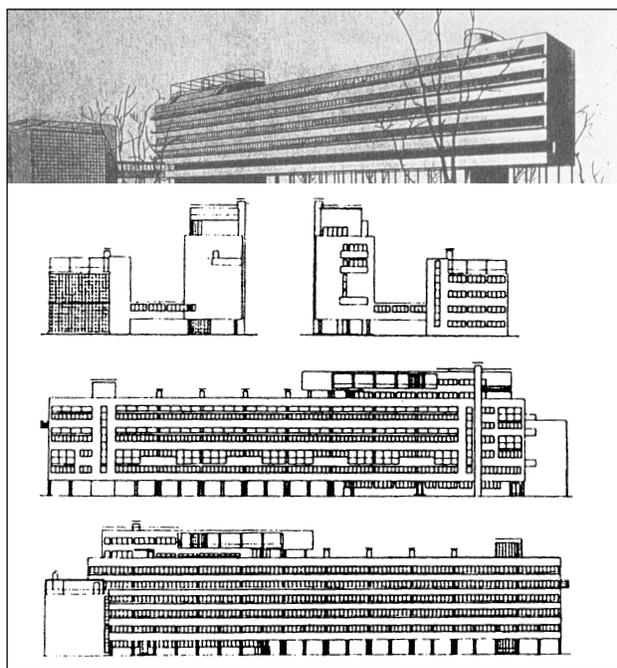


Figure 1. *The Narkomfin Communal House* (Sovremennaiia Arkhitektura 1929, no. 5, 158).

need to work and if it does not, we constitute another capable of coping with changing contingencies. These competing materialities and their social effects is what the book is about. It was also an attempt to address indirectly the line of work established by Mathew Johnson in his book *An Archaeology of Capitalism*, hence the similar structure of the title. If Johnson's work was an investigation of rising capitalism and structuration on an architectural subject (the medieval English farmhouse), mine then was an investigation of post-capitalism (emerging socialism) on a similar subject (the socialist communal house: Fig. 1). I rather hoped that someone might read them one after the other.

The book was written with an eye on being current with recent events, but now in 2002 it appears to be very much a historical piece describing a tumultuous period just before what we now call, rather problematically, the period of transition from socialism to post-socialism. At the time of field research (1992) most of the social institutions of the Soviet era were collapsing, with no clear idea of how things would proceed. People were confused, but very talkative and willing to share thoughts and ideas. Thus the research provided an opportunity for focus and reflection during a period of rapid change.

The choice of topic was inspired partly by the general problem of how one approaches the archaeological study of the recent past. *An Archaeology of Socialism* was the precursor to a later independent study of the recent past that Gavin Lucas and I have written about in *Archaeologies of the Contemporary Past* (Buchli & Lucas 2001). One significant aspect of our work has been the methodological significance of working on recent material. Rather than having to cope with the dearth or lack of textual data common in traditional archaeological contexts, work with the recent past is characterized by a superfluity of information. We have far too much data, and far too many discourses, with the result that many voices are obscured or unconstituted. It is precisely the methodologies developed within archaeology to cope with a dearth of data that permit one to constitute these obscured, lost realms of experience, because the superfluity of information in the recent past have equally obscuring effects which inhibit our understanding. This is not unlike Michael Schiffer's investigations into 'corporate crypto-histories' of twentieth-century America material culture (Schiffer 1991) or the highly significant insights William Rathje's work has provided on the experience of twentieth-century life in his garbology work. What

Gavin Lucas and I have identified in our investigations is that the archaeology of the contemporary past typically engages the unresolved and traumatizing aspects of recent experience and as such functions in many respects as a therapeutic device for coping with the as yet unsaid, unarticulable and unconstituted: those aspects of experience obscured by dominant discourses and the superfluity of information. The Narkomfin case study in *An Archaeology of Socialism* was one attempt at understanding how a very rich textual tradition under the conditions of totalitarianism obscured a great deal of what we might be able to constitute as the experience of socialism at a historical juncture that would permit its constitution when it otherwise could not exist. The study was an attempt to understand how socialism functioned at the very politically and socially significant level of the household for which traditional archaeological methods have produced extremely useful analytical tools.

Thus the goal of the book was two-fold: first, to attempt to understand the dynamics of daily life in the evolution of a totalitarian society and the role material culture played in social negotiations; and second, to assess how our more recent uses of structuration theory and the concept of *habitus* function in a cultural context where precisely such principles could be described as 'local' — that is in a society explicitly self-described as based on traditions of Marxian understandings of material culture. Thus we have a situation where one might explore Marx's famous observation in the opening of *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* where: 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. *The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living*' (Marx 1987, 15, my italics). This nightmare is of course the nightmare that is the 'cultural dupe', the recurring analytical problem of Giddens and Bourdieu and the central problem of this study. Finally the book itself was an attempt to engage a certain form of 'critical empiricism' that Gavin Lucas and myself have been examining. This is a re-consideration of traditional empiricism as a potentially critical practice, that functions as a deliberately constitutive empirical reality. This would serve as a therapeutic device in the Rortian sense (Rorty 1991) — a contingent analytical trope — constituted to help engage the highly contested and often irreconcilable terms of the experience of Soviet socialism.

The book itself is laid out as follows. The intro-

duction engages and develops the theoretical discussion of structuration theory and *habitus*, and argues for its inadequacies in addressing the recurring problem of the 'cultural dupe' mentioned earlier. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 describe and analyze the historical and cultural context of the early years of the Bolshevik state as it relates to the materiality of socialism and the rise of Stalinism. Specific attention is paid to the concept of '*byt'*' or 'daily-life' as problematized by Soviet theoreticians and manipulated by them in order to induce socialist relations; in particular the understanding of how architecture and material culture structure social relations and consciousness — in short how a Soviet *habitus* was consciously created (Bourdieu 1977, 94).

Chapter 4 discusses the Narkomfin for this period through the examination of archival plans, household records, oral histories, and other sources. Specific emphasis is placed on the Narkomfin's exemplary social program in relation to the domestic sphere and the restructuring of gender roles. Chapter 5 discusses the social and cultural context of material understandings of Stalinist society which I describe as 'contextual' — a 'local' understanding of materiality and meaning which anticipates post-processual debates. These new understandings were deployed by a new socialist Stalinist elite over their Bolshevik predecessors who possessed more objective 'denotative' understandings of materiality. This represents a broadening of the terms of socialist action and material culture — a pluralization established to ensure the enfranchisement of an elite culled from a broader social base and the ensuing social contract facilitated by this relative plurality which made Stalinist totalitarian society possible.

Chapter 6 provides a discussion of the on-the-ground developments of Stalinism — particularly the impact of the purges both spatially and materially on this community and its effects on families: their internal dynamics, spatial use and the general materialization of Stalinism in the domestic sphere. Stalinism was facilitated by a certain accommodation to populist aspirations particularly in the domestic sphere. Here at the level of the household, it is possible to show how the study of Stalinist domestic material culture is then key to understanding one of the significant ways in which a social consensus could have been achieved to realize a totalitarian state.

Chapters 7 and 8 discuss the process of de-Stalinization in post-war discourses on the material culture of the domestic sphere. I analyze the micro-level changes of individual households at

the Narkomfin to examine how these changes at the macro-level of official discourse had an impact on people's lives. I argue that a return to pre-Stalinist 'denotative' understandings of material culture facilitated the rejection of the Stalinist legacy through the course of the so-called 'Thaw' of the Khrushchev era. This was an attempt to realize the materiality of the early Bolshevik state within a fully urbanized and industrialized society. In particular the material legacy of the early Bolshevik state was re-considered and re-worked by cohorts of a later generation whose explicitly revived 'denotative' understandings of materiality facilitated this change. Over the course of time, however, a number of materialities of different social cohorts and generations existed in conflict throughout the Brezhnev and Gorbachev periods.

I conclude in Chapter 9 that as a result of the analysis of micro-level changes in individual households in the community at the Narkomfin, our pre-occupation with structuration theory and *habitus* are not helpful except as an interpretive intervention of a special kind. One that exists as an intervention of the analyst attempting to constitute a continuity with a specific kind of social effect (often 'nightmarish' as first described by Marx). The micro-level analyses of the inhabitants' uses of space at the Narkomfin show that structures and structuration exist as you need them to facilitate local contingent social goals. In short, one sees the alternation between two understandings of material culture, described as 'denotative' and 'contextual', used by two dominant and competing elite groups with which to assert different social strategies. They can be as meaningful and meaningless as contingencies require. The hope of my particular intervention was to break up the procrustean effects of earlier theorizing and attempt to delineate the multiple ways in which individual agents cope with changing social contingencies with varying degrees of success and failure. Furthermore, I wanted to understand how totalitarianism could be addressed in the domestic sphere; how the materiality of domestic space and its discourses can constrain action as well as how it can be variously appropriated, resisted and reconfigured. This was done with an eye towards providing a means for understanding how the totalitarian state of the twentieth century could be constructed in terms of the household and the minutiae of the material culture of the domestic sphere, the traditional units of analysis for the archaeologist, and how in turn, totalitarianism might be understood to have collapsed.