

# “WORKING FOR YOURSELF”: RESOURCE THEFT AT A FACTORY IN THE LATE SOVIET ERA. *Summary*

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This article focuses on the common late Soviet practice of “working for yourself,” which entailed making or repairing household items at one’s workplace. These were objects intended for personal use at home (pots, pans, kitchen knives, etc.), but they were created/retrofitted by workers using industrial resources (raw materials, equipment, technologies, and so on) and on the company’s time. The purpose of the article is to present the practice of using factory resources for personal purposes as a phenomenon embedded in the system of industrial relations but closely connected to the household. Investigation of the utilization of workplace resources for personal use helps shed additional light on the permeability of the boundaries between domestic and work spaces, as well as the peculiarities of labor relations in Soviet enterprises. A focus on manufactured objects and the meanings that they encapsulated and expressed allows me to conclude that access to factory resources was expected as part of respect for labor and was regarded as the realization of the socialist idea of collective ownership.

The article consists of three parts. The first part describes the study’s methodology and sources. The second part analyzes the particularities of the use of enterprise resources for personal purposes. The third part is devoted to the study of the meanings that the created objects have for their owners and informants’ perceptions of the nature of the relationship between factory employees and managers in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods.

## **TRAVELING THINGS AND “WORKING FOR YOURSELF”**

For the description of the practice of using factory resources for personal purposes, I use the term “working for yourself,” which is a gloss of the French term *la perruque* (literally “wig”), introduced by Michel de Certeau to describe the same practice common among French workers (1984:25; 2013:96). In his work, de Certeau repeatedly refers to the practice of *la perruque* in order to more convincingly depict those everyday practices that he defines as tactics. The tactic, according to him, is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus and which therefore must adapt to the existing social order; it is the art of technical ingenuity, the practice of sabotage against the profit economy, the interplay of voluntary allowances that counts on reciprocity and organizes a social network (de Certeau 1984:26–37). Practices of

a tactical nature, in de Certeau's conceptualization, are a manifestation of soft individual resistance to the social order of industrial society. The author describes the practice of *la perruque* in the peculiar context of the industrial capitalist economy. Its prevalence results from changes in the conditions and organization of work—not only at assembly line factories, but wherever the technological process is associated with assigning a separate operation to a specific employee.

Following de Certeau, "working for yourself" is understood here as one of those practices of a tactical nature. It is not part of the institutional arrangement of the industrial factory but can flexibly adapt to the existing disciplinary regime, traversing the frontiers dividing time, place, and type of action into work and leisure (de Certeau 1984:29). The objects associated with this practice do not draw attention to themselves inside the boundaries of the factory but acquire significance as interesting and creative handmade articles once they are outside of the plant (29). This practice is based on the preindustrial form of voluntary reciprocal exchange, which makes it a form of soft resistance to the profit-focused economy (27).

This study builds on and advances de Certeau's observations. The flexibility and mobility of the "working for yourself" practice are not limited to the factory, but can be described more broadly as the ability to transcend boundaries not only between work time and lunch break but also between profession and hobby, between work (public sphere) and home (private sphere). Inside the factory, the status of manufactured things cannot be determined because the practice of "working for yourself" depends on individually negotiated agreements between the employee and the manager. Going beyond the plant's boundaries, moving into the space of the private sphere, these manufactured objects are viewed positively, as a sign of their creator's abilities. They become the result of a socially endorsed and encouraged activity—the practice of technical creativity at home. Based on voluntary reciprocal exchange, the practice of "working for yourself" plays a part in the organization of quasi-professional networks within the factory. It also contributes to the formation of relationships—affective attachments—with colleagues and the workplace. However, shared ideas regarding interaction between the company and employees included the expectation that the latter would have access to enterprise resources as a sign of respect for their labor and as part of the fair distribution of socialist property.

The research methodology is inspired by Igor Kopytoff's (1986) concept of the cultural biography of things, which presupposed the study of culture through the social life of material objects. According to Kopytoff, creating an object's biography means placing its life experiences in chronological order. The researcher is to trace its movements in social space, paying particular attention to the object's contact with different practices, social relations, attitudes of participants, and social processes. This article considers the movement of things between the private and public spheres as a fragment of their biography, which I call travel. Depending on different routes and journey objectives, there are several types of biographies: (a) things that travel from homes to the factory floor to be cleaned and repaired and then brought back, (b) things that were made from leftover raw materials at the factory and brought home, and (c) things that were the property of the factory and were to be

utilized there but came into the possession of the employee who then brought them to his home or dacha where they were retrofitted. Therefore, my study focuses on what the journey of things between home and workplace can tell us. For example, I examine a fragment of the biography of a kitchen pot that was cleaned not with household chemicals at home but by electrochemical polishing in the shop of a mechanical factory. Such an approach allows us to establish where, how, and with whom the object interacted in this matter, how rare and exceptional this interaction was, and what it meant to the participants.

This article is based on nine interviews. The pool of informants formed spontaneously, and facilitation and help of colleagues and acquaintances in establishing contacts were an important factor in its creation. Primary analysis of interviews revealed the recurring types of objects' biographies, demonstrating that this relatively small number of interviews could provide sufficient material for such a study. The interview material is supplemented with photographs of objects whose biographies are similar to those discussed in the interviews.

### **TRAVELING OBJECTS AS INSTRUMENTS OF SOCIAL NETWORK CREATION**

This section argues that things that were made or repaired at the factory and then traveled into the private sphere initiated the voluntary reciprocal exchange of professional knowledge and skills among workers.

The article discusses several examples of factory employees cleaning kitchen utensils using industrial technologies, such as galvanization and thermal treatments used in mechanical engineering. Using the following examples I show how workers combined the treatment of industrial parts with the cleaning of household items: (a) a galvanized steel dish drainer was coated with a new protective layer, (b) a cast-iron frying pan was cleaned of burnt-on fat in a thermal furnace, (c) an aluminum pot underwent electrochemical polishing. As a result, these things became "like new," that is, they returned to the "vendible condition" that they had lost during use at home. These examples also demonstrate peculiar interactions between foremen and shop floor workers (i.e., superiors and subordinates). I note that the participants in these interactions used professional knowledge to complete the task, as well as professional language to communicate with each other. Nevertheless, these interactions are not in the context of performing their respective job functions: the common interest, uniting the superior and the subordinates, is not associated with production. I particularly emphasize that the foreman and the workers had equal access to industrial resources that were available to them in their respective positions and that they were equally involved in the practice of "working for yourself." Nevertheless, technological decisions about resource usage were individual, based on personal skills and knowledge: the forewoman (one of my informants) did not share her ideas about how to make use of the factory technology and equipment to clean kitchen utensils with the workers she supervised. At the same time, she could ask her subordinates to perform such tasks if requests came from colleagues in other departments.

Next, I study in more detail the interactions among employees within the same shops and between shops. I do so through the following examples: (a) the process of forging a meat cleaver from scrap metal, which involved a supervisor and a subordinate, and (b) the process of making an ice pick from leftover raw materials, involving employees from different departments because it required the use of know-how located in different shops of the factory. I emphasize that, as in the previous examples, the participants in these interactions used their professional knowledge and skills and established ties that went beyond the relationships regulated by workplace guidelines. I particularly underscore that the practice of "working for yourself" facilitated the realization of the need to demonstrate knowledge and skills, provided an opportunity to share them with others who were socioeconomically equal as well as to derive pleasure from performing complex creative tasks. Furthermore, I consider the fact of the interaction between a superior and a subordinate in the process of making household items during working hours and with factory resources as a sign of the supervisor's recognition of the worker's right to personal autonomy, as well as of his/her personal and professional qualities. As workers saw it, the right to "work for yourself" was a natural consequence of properly set priorities, which meant that the primary concern was for the execution of production tasks. In this case, a prohibition from the supervisor against using factory resources for "personal matters" would be perceived as a sign of distrust in the worker's professional ethics. Overall, the analysis of various examples allows me to conclude that the practice of "working for yourself" was based on individually negotiated agreements between superiors and subordinates. These examples also make the point that the recognition of employees' right to privatize the time and resources of the enterprise was the realization of the socialist idea of collective ownership and an expression of respect for workers' labor.

In addition, the article focuses on workers' participation in the system of reciprocal exchange of knowledge and resources in the process of "working for yourself." Having such resources was a prerequisite for participation in these exchanges. However, most crucial was not the ownership of resources but the ability to use them: to provide a technological solution or complete a technological operation associated with the production of objects. The meaning of exchanges becomes particularly clear through the example of making complex things that required cooperation with colleagues from other departments. Hence, these objects took part in the creation of social networks within the enterprise, establishing a system of resource exchanges; reciprocity, as a precondition for participation in the network, guaranteed the possibility for other things to be created. In the process of circulation of resources and exchange of knowledge among participants, a shared emotional experience was created, which was associated not with factory production but with the pleasure derived from the practice of "working for yourself." Therefore, we can conclude that through the practice of "working for yourself," based on the reciprocal exchange of factory resources, workers formed affective attachments to the objects they created as well as with the other participants in these exchanges. The very ability to participate in the system of exchanges was part of professional competence, which was valued and

evaluated within these networks. Created in such circumstances and having emotional meaning for their owners, the objects were, to use the term coined by Ekaterina Degot' (2000), *veshchi-tovarishchi* ("friendly commodities").

## TRAVELING OBJECTS AS MARKERS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

This section shows how the practice of "working for yourself" was incorporated into Soviet social space and what effects the ban on the use of factory resources have on informants' opinions about the nature of the relationship between employees and managers in the post-Soviet era.

I argue that in the late Soviet era the practice of "working for yourself" provoked a certain ambivalence. Within the enterprise and at the level of the production process, the opportunity to "work for yourself" was connected with the individually negotiated agreements between subordinates and superiors. However, from an ideological viewpoint "working for yourself" was perceived as a violation, often expressed in capacious phrases such as "the violation of labor and production discipline" or "workplace time wasting." This discrepancy was due to the fact that the privatization of enterprise resources, upon which the practice of "working for yourself" in the industrial economy of mass production is based, was seen as an attack on factory property. At the same time, the ambivalent attitude towards the practice of "working for yourself" resulted from the weakness of the official discourse, which could not offer attractive incentives that would encourage workers' voluntary and creative activity for the benefit of the factory. In manufacturing things for themselves, the workers demonstrated their ingenuity and enthusiasm. They applied their professional knowledge to solve technological problems that they would never encounter in their regular work. The possibilities for applying professional skills while "working for yourself" were much broader than those required on the production line. However, official discourse repressed creativity within the production sector if it was aimed at the satisfaction of personal needs.

At the same time, the practice of creating handmade things at home was supported by official Soviet discourse. In a wide range of periodicals, manuals on house-keeping, and other publications, handmade things were described as products of the applied arts. In addition, the official discourse of the late Soviet era made pronouncements to the effect that women were putting double effort in domestic production, while men had withdrawn from it. The fact that many objects could not be made outside of factories, without the use of factory technologies (i.e., they were a result of the practice of "working for yourself"), was simply ignored. Regardless of the origins of objects, of how, by whom, where, and from what they were made, the official discourse "assigned" all handmade things to the domestic space.

Next, the article demonstrates how the practice of "working for yourself" was adapted to the existing social order and how individuals found ways to legitimate manufactured things. I discuss two routes to such legitimation. The first was to give the manufactured objects as gifts from the work collective on the occasion of an anniversary or a retirement. Such gifts expressed the respect of colleagues and helped

to preserve the emotional connection between the employee and the factory. I discuss in greater detail the second way to legitimate things produced while "working for yourself," namely "writing-off." This refers to the opportunity to buy leftover resources, scrap metal, and other objects that belonged to the factory but had outlived their usefulness, at their residual value. Strictly speaking, this procedure is not exclusively associated with the practice of "working for yourself," but biographies of several traveling things made at the factory point to this option. I discuss the procedure of "writing-off" as gaining access to enterprise resources through several examples: (a) a bathhouse heater, manufactured at the factory from a single leftover metal sheet; (b) scrap metal purchased for the manufacture of a fence at a dacha; (c) vats, provided for private or shared use after the expiry of their services at the factory, used as reservoirs to store water for summer cottages; (d) an army thermos turned over to personal use after the expiration of its service life. The meaning of the "writing-off" procedure lies in the fact that it provides another access point to factory resources and is an indicator of management's attitudes toward the employees. Things received from the factory remind their new owners of their labor and workplace, evoke positive emotions, and create the impression that the company cares for its employees and values their work. In contrast to the practice of "working for yourself," the "writing-off" procedure is based on exchanges that in their meaning are close to the reciprocal exchange of gifts. The results of my study show that employees perceived these objects as gifts from the factory in recognition of their professional and personal qualities. At the same time, like the practice of "working for yourself," "writing-off" was seen as the realization of socialist ideals of collective ownership in the late Soviet era.

In order to understand the meaning that the practice of "working for yourself" had in the social space of the late Soviet era, this article analyzes informants' assessments of the relationship between workers and management in contemporary Russian industrial enterprises. Informants express extreme dissatisfaction with the post-Soviet system of monitoring labor and production discipline. The hottest point of conflict concerns the factory gates. New control methods allow for the inspection of personal belongings and searches of employees, which is perceived as demeaning to employees' human dignity. The sense of injustice is especially exacerbated by a lack of access to factory resources imposed by the administration. In other words, in the new conditions "working for yourself" is seen by employees as very difficult. Denial of access to enterprise resources is perceived by informants as a sign of social injustice and the new rules of discipline as signs of disrespect for employees' personal and professional qualities.

## CONCLUSION

The results of my study show that, for industrial workers, engaging in the practice of "working for yourself" provided a chance to apply knowledge and skills that were otherwise unused under the conditions of standardized production. The problem was that in the Soviet social space individual technical innovation was confined strictly

to so-called amateur engineering clubs (*kruzhki tekhnicheskogo tvorchestva*; mainly for children and youth) and the domestic sphere. On the whole, this activity was experimental and only occasionally led to the creation of practical and/or necessary household objects. In this respect, the practice of “working for yourself” made home improvement possible. Worth noting is that men showed great interest in the practice of creating and repairing things for the home and family, which gives us reason to take a fresh look at common social science evaluations of the gendered distribution of domestic work, especially since we are talking about practices that were organically integrated into industrial rather than domestic production.

Based on this study, the practice of “working for yourself” is defined as a system of voluntary reciprocal exchanges of available resources inside the factory. As resources I count time, materials, and technologies of industrial production, as well as professional knowledge and skills belonging to participants in these exchanges. Participation in exchanges for the repair or manufacturing of objects during working hours is associated with a desire to experience the pleasure of unusual application of one’s knowledge and skills, to show them to others who are equal in socioeconomic terms, and to receive recognition for one’s personal and professional abilities. In this sense, the need to engage in the exchange is connected to the expression of professional identity. At the same time, because the practice of “working for yourself” establishes connections beyond those prescribed by workplace guidelines, we can argue that such a system of reciprocal exchanges is a sensitive indicator of social emotions. The importance of these reciprocal exchanges is due to the fact that they incorporated access to resources in the expectation of respect for workers. In the social space of the late Soviet era the practice of “working for yourself” constituted conventionally authorized privatization of work time and production resources, but was seen as a realization of the socialist idea of collective ownership. Moreover, workers’ access to factory resources was embedded in an expectation of the respect due to workers.

In the contemporary absence of workers’ access to factory resources, “working for yourself” becomes difficult. This is reflected in the social mood of workers in post-Soviet Russia, who believe that the new owners of factories are disrespectful of their labor and that the modern socioeconomic situation as a whole is characterized by a loss of social justice.

*Authorized translation from Russian by Anna Paretskaya*

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