

Alexei Yurchak, **Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation**, Princeton University Press, 2006, 352 pp, \$59.50 (hardcover), \$24.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by

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In the post 9/11 world of 'identity politics' and 'war of ideas,' the role of culture in political transformations has gained renewed significance. But attempts at theorizing cultural processes have been entangled in dichotomies of modernity versus traditional identities, structural constraints versus indeterminacy of agency, nation-state versus cultural publics. Yurchak's study on the nature of life in the Soviet system between 1950s and 1980s explores how the internal shifts in discourse and ideology predicated the collapse of the Soviet system. It is a nuanced analytical account of how everyday cultural practices mediate political-historical change. The study rejects dichotomies and binary models of analysis. In its stead, a methodological framework is developed that views structure and agency as mutually constitutive to fully comprehend the complex and intersecting nature of social reality.

Yurchak asks why did the collapse of the Soviet system seem unimaginable and unanticipated and yet unsurprising – almost logical – when it happened. He argues that this paradox was possible because, on one hand, state ideological discourses were formalized, standardized and replicated from one context to another to the extent that it created a sense of a monolithic, strong state. Yet on the other hand, it opened up performative possibilities for citizens to create new meanings and ways of living. Soviet citizens often engaged with, interpreted and created their own reality – sometimes in line with the announced goals of the state, sometimes in spite them, and sometimes relating to them in new, ingenious ways.

The strength of Yurchak's study is in its methodological-analytical grasp of the seemingly contradictory nature of everyday existence. He provides a powerful critique of literal readings of state-socialist discourses and binary models (moral-immoral; censored-uncensored; repressive-resistive) as situated in the Cold War regimes of knowledge that are either outside of, against or in retrospect to Soviet life. Binary models fail to account for the paradoxical mix of alienation and association with the ideals and realities of socialist life. Instead, Yurchak aims to develop "a new language that moves beyond binaries, dichotomies and situated knowledge towards a language of everyday shifts and paradoxes." He crafts an incisive methodological tool combining discourse analysis, linguistic analysis and genealogical analysis. Bakhtin's conceptualization of language and discourse as ongoing and dialogical underpins the theoretical approach.

Yurchak analyzes social change in terms of 'performative shifts' in which the 'performative' dimensions of ritualized speech acts become more important than 'constative' dimensions (utterances that state facts and derive their power from assigned authority of actors). Yurchak argues that between the 1950s and 1980s, the 'performative dimension' was central to how late socialism was organized, operated and represented in Soviet life. The shift toward 'performative utterances' was however made possible by a simultaneous shift toward a standardized Soviet ideological discourse. Yurchak draws upon textual data,

conventions of speech acts and structural-systemic analysis to illustrate how Stalin allowed meta-discourses by making editorial comments from a position outside the party and the state. But the external position vanished with his death, disturbing the organization of the discursive regime. What emerged is a formalized discourse in which the normalized structures of socialist discourse became increasingly frozen and were repeated, intact, from one context to another. Yurchak builds upon Bakhtin's notion of 'authoritative discourse' to describe the standardized Soviet discourse which no longer persuaded at the level of meaning but was the central and dominant discourse around which all other discourses and performative utterances applied, referred, praised, quoted or existed.

Structural conditions and fluidity of agency are not cast in opposition, but – ironically – as mutually constitutive, in Yurchak's methodological framework. 'Performative utterances' of the 'authoritative discourse' contributed to the general perception of the socialist system's immutability while enabling diverse, unpredictable meanings and styles of living to spring up everywhere. The authoritative discourse was accepted precisely because its structural and systemic omnipresence allowed creative everyday practices. The methodological tool developed by Yurchak is therefore able to account for a sociological understanding of the discursive conditions of production and circulation of knowledge while accommodating a semiotic analysis to tease out the new, unanticipated meanings, interests and activities.

Yurchak is able to develop a highly sophisticated analysis that looks at the disjunction between the state's ideological pronouncements and ideological rule. He links it to the central problem of modern political projects – that is, how to achieve liberation of society and individual if it also means submitting the individual and society under state-party control? But the methodological framework is able to bring together different levels of analysis by dissecting the discursive shifts at the institutional and structural level while investigating how Soviet citizens interacted with the ideological discourses – accepting some, partially rejecting others, reinterpreting and so on – through everyday activities, interests and events.

The study focuses on the 'last Soviet generation,' who shared experiences and socio-political consciousness common to a group coming of age in the 70s and 80s. He focuses on young urbanites of the time who were engaged in various cultural activities and ideological institutions to understand the internal discursive shifts in Soviet life. The study draws on both contemporaneous and retrospective accounts, including personal notes, memoirs, letters, interviews, drawings, photographs, jokes, music recordings as well as official publications of speeches, documents, newspaper articles, fiction and films.

While Yurchak's rationale for defining the 'last Soviet generation' as a cohort is persuasive within the scope of contemporaneous accounts of Soviet life, it becomes problematic when one considers how the collapse of the socialist system landed different individuals in differentiated levels of advantage and disadvantage, based on socio-economic and cultural background. It is not entirely clear if, and to what extent, Yurchak accounts how the post-Soviet social conditions may have affected the retrospective narratives. Further, to what extent did the rural youth's lack of participation in ideological discourses affect the legitimacy and meaning of socialist values of equality, community and national development? Did it contribute to the standardization of the state's ideological discourse which became ubiquitous but not meaningful - to both rural and urban populations? This may be considered an external critique to

Yurchak's research scheme but it is, arguably, essential if one is to achieve a fuller understanding of the dynamics of social change.

Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation, however, provides a lucid and incisive methodological framework for scholars examining social and political transformations. The methodological tool, developed in chapter 2, by combining historical-genealogical analysis of discursive shifts with linguistic analysis, is applied in the following chapters. Practices and contexts of 'ideological production' (the writing of speeches, reports, conduct of rituals etcetera) and the local 'ideological producers' (those conducting practices and rituals) are examined in chapter 3, while chapter 4 looks at communities and cultural milieus (of archeologists, mountaineers, scholars, musicians and others) as 'paradigmatic examples' of how the Soviet norm became de-centered and re-interpreted everywhere. Chapter 5 focuses on the local cultural and discursive construction of an 'imaginary west' while chapter 6 draws on personal correspondences between two young men in the late 1970s to show that the meanings and ideals of communism were not necessarily contradictory to the desires of the 'imaginary west' and was rearticulated in one single discourse about a future society. The methodological tool is further put to use, in chapter 7, to analyze the aesthetics of irony and humor of the absurd that emerged in the 70s and 80s as a cultural principle.

Yurchak's study is insightful for graduate students and researchers who are investigating how structural conditions interact with everyday cultural practices to impact social change. His analysis is able to capture the internal discursive shifts, and the complex relationship between cultural practices and political choices, without reducing analysis to binaries and dichotomies. In contemporary world politics, binary frameworks continue to cast 'western' modern values of democracy, rationality and individual liberty against traditional, cultural values of the 'non-west.' At a time when 'clash of civilization' and 'war of ideas' have replaced the Cold War, Yurchak provides an elegant methodological tool to explore the complex, intersecting and often paradoxical nature of social change.