

# Designing the Bolshevik “Interior”: *Benjamin, 20th Century Moscow and the Question of Societ Demarcation*

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As one of the pioneering interlocutors with the cityscape, it is hard to find a book today that discusses spatial politics without mentioning Walter Benjamin. He was deeply interested in the situation of 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris: what the external city and the domestic interior said about the cultural and political situation of the time. This work, in *The Arcades Project*, finds its roots in the early cityscape portraits – formulated by Benjamin as “thought-images” (*denkbild*). For Berlin, and for his later works on Paris, Benjamin examined privatization and atomization; for Moscow, he turned to collectivization.<sup>1</sup> This essay will look specifically at “Moscow Diary,” the record of his trip to the Soviet city in 1926–1927. While Benjamin may have left Russia with an interest in what it allowed him to say about Europe,<sup>2</sup> this essay will take the opposite approach, and look at what his understanding of 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe reveals about the Russian notions of the interior and the exterior in the 1920s. Moreover, it will suggest that this complex moment eluded Benjamin’s framework of understanding: he approached the city from the perspective of modernity – a framework that is always challenging – in the Russian context.

While the distinction between private and public life may have emerged alongside the *intérieur* in 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris, the same cannot be so easily said of Moscow. Benjamin’s claim that “Bolshevism has abolished private life” presupposes the existence of a demarcation of the public and private.<sup>3</sup> In truth, no such line existed in the historical Russian context; for the Soviets, the creation of a distinction between the private and public sphere became critical. If the notion of private life is central to the topic of interiority, Western approaches to its study are not so easily translated into the Russian context.<sup>4</sup> Tracing the emergence of the public and private

<sup>1</sup> Peter Schmiedgen. “Interiority, Exteriority and Spatial Politics in Benjamin’s Cityscapes,” in *Walter Benjamin and the Architecture of Modernity*. (Melbourne: Re.Press, 2009), 147.

<sup>2</sup> Graeme Gilloch. “Benjamin’s Moscow, Baudrillard’s America,” in *The Hieroglyphics of Space: Reading and Experiencing the Modern Metropolis*. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 165.

<sup>3</sup> Schmiedgen. “Interiority, Exteriority and Spatial Politics in Benjamin’s Cityscapes,” 152.

<sup>4</sup> Christina Kaiser et al. *Everyday life in early Soviet Russia: Taking the Revolution inside*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 8–9.

life in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Parisian interior may provide insight into Soviet interiority; nevertheless, it does not get at the full picture.

Benjamin situates the emergence of public and private life in 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris in a discussion of the architectural emergence of the interior. With the rise of the masses and the alienation of the individual from the means of production, the domestic interior becomes a place of refuge. In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin articulates this history of the domestic interior:

The residential character of the rooms in the early factories adds this homely touch: that within these spaces one can imagine the factory owner as a quaint figure in a landscape of machines...with the dissociation of the proprietor from the workplace, this characteristic of factory buildings disappears. Capital alienates the employer, too, from his means of production, and the dream of their future greatness is finished. This alienation process culminates in the emergence of the private home.<sup>5</sup>

Benjamin is pointing to the idea that the economic context may create a need for the private interior. While this is certainly true, this process was also supported by the ever-increasing space for the individual in a capitalist economy. Charles Rice suggests that “the interior emerged in a domestic sense as a new *topos* of subjective interiority.”<sup>6</sup> The interior is the space of the subject; it is a place for the individual. The private home at once facilitates a withdrawal from the now unfamiliar city and furthers that desire to move inwards. This helps intensify and reify the distinction between public and private life.

For the Parisian trying to live with the “shocks” of modernity, the private home offers protection against the increasingly unfamiliar, outside world. The bourgeoisie finds compensation in the safety of its own four walls, isolating an increasingly inconsequential private life from the big city.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the emergence of the private sphere is a consequence not simply of changing economic circumstances, but of the rise of the public sphere.<sup>8</sup> Life in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was defined by the increased public sphere of the 18<sup>th</sup> century; the private sphere emerged as the dialectical complement to the public sphere. It was meant to shield the individual from the public, to provide protection; accordingly Benjamin characterizes the 19<sup>th</sup> century

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<sup>5</sup> Walter Benjamin. *The Arcades Project*. (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1999), 226.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Rice. *The Emergence of the Interior: Architecture, Modernity, Domesticity*. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 2.

<sup>7</sup> David Frisby. “Walter Benjamin’s Arcades Project: A Prehistory of Modernity.” *Tracing Modernity: Manifestations of the Modern in Architecture and the City*. (Taylor & Francis, 2004), 285.

<sup>8</sup> Kaiser, et al. *Everyday life in early Soviet Russia*, 8-9.

bourgeois interior as the “protective etui of the private person.”<sup>9</sup> The public and private spheres emerge as complementary oppositions, both of which are facilitated by the rise of the private individual. As was suggested in Benjamin’s description of the emergence of the domestic interior, the place of dwelling is, for the first time, opposed to the place of work; it constitutes itself as the interior, in opposition to its exterior, the office.<sup>10</sup> The individual sees himself as a private individual in the interior, and as a public individual in the exterior. This understanding of what has been characterized by scholars as the “politics of space” is crucial to the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century development of architecture.

That a person, or a group of people, can be shaped by the city around them has been a point of interest from Napoleon Bonaparte III’s Paris, to Adolf Hitler’s Berlin, and to Joseph Stalin’s Moscow. This principle not only underlies architectural projects, but also acts a complement to ideological ventures. As Bruce O’Neill suggests, these cities were neither static representations of particular ideologies nor neutral mediums upon which politics was conducted. Instead, the city spaces themselves actively contributed to the project of governance.<sup>11</sup> The city becomes a tool of government; it is not simply an image of that autocracy’s power. This concept relies on the notion that a person is reshaped in time and space, defined as an individual through particular “spatialities” of existence.<sup>12</sup> People do not exist outside of space, they are always, necessarily, situated and shaped by where they live. Georges-Eugène Haussmann’s 19<sup>th</sup> century reconstruction of Paris, for example, was developed with this understanding in mind. The reconstruction not only changed the city, but it contributed to a more rigid separation of public and private spheres, and a retreat into the *intérieur*.<sup>13</sup> Space was both the grounds for building and for politics. “Haussmanization” clearly indicated that space allows for the fabrication of political orders, as well as encouraging a sanctioned social order and discouraging alternative social orders.<sup>14</sup> The Bolsheviks adopted the principles of this “politics of space” with great enthusiasm in the Soviet Union during the 1920s.

The formation of communal apartments in the 1920s in Moscow certainly emerged as a result of housing shortages, but to suggest this was the entire story would be grossly reductive. In fact, the connection between the interior and the pri-

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Walter Benjamin. *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*, ed. Michael W. Jennings. (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2006), 38.

<sup>11</sup> Bruce O’Neill. “The Political Agency of Cityscapes: Spatializing Governance in Ceausescu’s Bucharest.” *Journal of Social Archaeology*. 9.92 (2009), 93.

<sup>12</sup> Mike Savage. “Walter Benjamin’s Urban Thought: A Critical Analysis.” *Thinking Space*. (Taylor & Francis, 2000) 8.

<sup>13</sup> David Frisby. *Tracing Modernity: Manifestations of the Modern in Architecture and the City*, 279.

<sup>14</sup> O’Neill. “The Political Agency of Cityscapes,” 98.

vate life of the individual underwrote this new architectural landscape. While Marx and Lenin were convinced that there was no use trying to “transform human nature” and create a Communist “system of morality in private life” until the material conditions of the Communist society were established, the Bolsheviks believed that the Communist mindset must be enforced “in the family, the home, and the inner world of the individual.”<sup>15</sup> The way to accomplish this, was, in part, through built space. They believed that appropriately “Soviet” surroundings could not fail to foster acceptable socialist behaviour.<sup>16</sup> To control the private space of the individual was to control their private life. As Anatoly Lunacharsky argued in 1927, “The so-called sphere of private life cannot slip away from us, because it is precisely here that the final goal of the Revolution is to be reached.”<sup>17</sup> Benjamin’s conviction that “Bolshevism has abolished private life” parallels the Bolshevik belief in the possibility of colonizing private realms of experience.<sup>18</sup> For the Bolsheviks, the way into private life was through private space.

In a purely methodological sense, much of Benjamin’s experience of Moscow was dictated by this spatial understanding of the city. He did not speak Russian, nor did he know many people aside from Asja Lacis and her companions. If Benjamin’s visit to Moscow provided him with an opportunity to examine, in close quarters, the impact of the Soviet system on social and cultural life,<sup>19</sup> it did so primarily in his interactions with the Soviet spaces he inhabited. As Bershtein suggests, when he left his hotel, Benjamin was struck by the lack of private space and people’s physical proximity in Moscow streets. He focused on studying the universe of objects, which he saw as iterating the end of private life.<sup>20</sup> With his observations and the Bolshevik attitude towards space in mind, it is necessary to examine the Bolshevik “living space” to understand the convoluted nature of the interior and exterior.

Designing the Bolshevik “interior” was a complex process, one defined by both practical and ideological considerations. The policy of “condensation” was adopted in the 1920s to cope with housing shortages: it saw wealthy families sharing their apartments with the poor. These apartments were known as *kommunalka*.<sup>21</sup> This

<sup>15</sup> Orlando Figes. *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin’s Russia*. (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007), 8.

<sup>16</sup> Cynthia Hooper. “Terror of Intimacy: Family Politics in the 1930s Soviet Union.” *Everyday life in early Soviet Russia: taking the Revolution inside*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 64.

<sup>17</sup> Figes. *The Whisperers*, 8.

<sup>18</sup> Kaiser, et al. *Everyday life in early Soviet Russia*, 16.

<sup>19</sup> Graeme Gilloch, “Metropolis” in *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 51.

<sup>20</sup> Evgenii Bershtein. “The Withering of Private Life,” in *Everyday life in early Soviet Russia: taking the Revolution inside*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 220.

<sup>21</sup> Figes. *The Whisperers*, 9.

rise in *kommunalka* was paralleled with that of *doma kommuny*, a type of communal house engineered by radical Soviet architects which saw all the property, including even clothes and underwear, shared by the inhabitants, as well as the sharing of all domestic tasks.<sup>22</sup> While there were certainly differences in the design of *kommunalka* and *doma kommuny*, the underlying principles remained the same: the practical consideration of housing shortages, and the ideological desire to continue eliminating private life. As Orlando Figes argues, the goal of these constructions was to “marshal architecture in a way that induced the individual to move away from private forms of domesticity to a more collective way of life.”<sup>23</sup> The Bolsheviks believed that forcing people to share apartments would make them communist in their basic thinking and behaviour. Private space and property would disappear, and the life of the individual would become immersed in that of the community.<sup>24</sup> The living space of the Soviet citizens was meant to act as a dialectical complement to the Soviet ideology. While the development of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Parisian interior may have paralleled the rise of the individual and an increase in the demarcation of private life and public life, the construction of the Bolshevik interior was intended not only to subvert the demarcation between public and private, but also to subvert individual subjectivity itself.

While it is arguably reductive to examine the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries side by side – across their cultural, political, and economic contexts – the consideration of Moscow beside Paris is helpful in understanding what was so distinctive about the Russian case. It offers a way to see not only what was radically different about Soviet collectivism, but also recall what the Bolsheviks were consciously militating against. While the built space of Paris was certainly that of subjectification,<sup>25</sup> in the case of Moscow, it existed only for the sake of the collective.<sup>26</sup> As Benjamin notes, in Moscow “the bourgeois interior has been transformed into an army camp in which each citizen is entitled by law to only thirteen square metres of living space ... All comfort, stifling cosiness has been eradicated.”<sup>27</sup> There is no consideration of the comforts of living; instead, the emphasis is on Spartan furnishings and the maximization of available space. Unlike the completeness that was an essential feature of the bourgeois interior – in which the walls must be covered with pictures, the sofa with cushions, the cushions with coverlets, the consoles with knickknacks, the windows with stained glass – the rooms in Moscow contained only a few pieces of furniture.<sup>28</sup> The

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>25</sup> Schmiedgen, “Interiority, Exteriority and Spatial Politics in Benjamin’s Cityscapes,” 147.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 148.

<sup>27</sup> Gilloch, “Benjamin’s Moscow, Baudrillard’s America,” 167-8.

<sup>28</sup> Benjamin, “Moscow Diary,” 26.

conspicuous consumption of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is entirely absent in the Soviet interior. Moreover, not only were the rooms sparsely furnished, the furniture in them was often re-imagined. Hooper notes the “soft and spacious ‘bourgeois’ double bed was often replaced with more functional sofas and chairs that folded into single-person cots.”<sup>29</sup> Everything permitted in the Soviet interior had to contribute to a subversion of individualism; it had to speak to the interests of the collective. In the design of rooms, the problem of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had been how, in a given space, to make use of the least amount of material and to pack in the greatest number of people, while isolating them all from one another.<sup>30</sup> In the Soviet case, it was most certainly how to pack the greatest number of people in and *enhance* their collectivity. The general sleeping areas of the *doma kommuny*, in which “everybody would sleep in one big dormitory,”<sup>31</sup> certainly suggest such a consideration. These physical properties of the *doma kommuny* and the *kommunalka* offer sharp contrast to those of the bourgeois interior. These design considerations were meant to change how people lived in the “interior” as well as influenced their role in the public sphere.

If the 19<sup>th</sup> century interior was a refuge designed to encourage the individual to remain inside, the collective housing of Moscow certainly fostered the opposite. Benjamin describes the interior of the bourgeois private home with the metaphor of seclusion in a spider’s web. The implication: “from this cavern, one does not like to stir.”<sup>32</sup> The reverse is found in the *kommunalka*, which is more like a camp than a home. It is not there to be lived in; instead, it is only available for fleeting camping trips between political meetings.<sup>33</sup> While the 19<sup>th</sup> century may have been “addicted to the home,”<sup>34</sup> with its ceaseless casings and plush protections, Soviet officials referred to the home only as “living-space”<sup>35</sup>; it was never intended as anything more. The interior as a place of refuge from the outside world is utterly opposed to the Soviet collective housing project. It encouraged people to go *out* of the “living-space” – both to undermine their individuality, and to encourage their political and economic involvement. As Benjamin notes in “Moscow Diary,” “if people manage to bear rooms which look like infirmaries, it is because their way of life has become so alienated from domestic existence. The place in which they live is the office.”<sup>36</sup> The conditions of the Soviet apartments, which he characterizes as “Spartan proletarian barracks”

<sup>29</sup> Hooper, “Terror of Intimacy,” 64.

<sup>30</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 139.

<sup>31</sup> Figes, *The Whisperers*, 10.

<sup>32</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 216.

<sup>33</sup> Schmiedgen, “Interiority, Exteriority and Spatial Politics in Benjamin’s Cityscapes,” 152.

<sup>34</sup> Frisby, “Walter Benjamin’s Arcades Project,” 285.

<sup>35</sup> Figes, *The Whisperers*, 15.

<sup>36</sup> Benjamin, “Moscow Diary,” 26.

<sup>37</sup> Gilloch, “Myth,” 51.

are tolerable only because the domestic setting no longer forms the dominant locus of activity.”<sup>37</sup> Unlike the Parisian individual in need of protection against the onslaught of modernity, the Russian can bear to exit the *kommunalka* because he is estranged from it by his way of life. If the 19<sup>th</sup> century was engaged in a project of “interiorization,” it would seem Moscow was formulating a world of “exteriorization.”

The clearest example of 19<sup>th</sup> century “interiorization” was, for Benjamin, the arcades. An “interior landscape,”<sup>38</sup> the arcades were the site of the domestic interior moving outside.<sup>39</sup> They did away with exteriors and with the outside world, functioning like “dream worlds.”<sup>40</sup> Like the bourgeois interior, the arcades were meant to offer a way of isolating the individual from the busy city, from the people around him. This push to *interiorize* the exterior – to subdue and domesticate what was other – was one of the driving forces behind the arcades, and was deeply characteristic of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Moscow, by contrast, sought to bring that exterior inside the “living space,” to “exteriorize” the interior. Peter Schmiedgen suggests that what had been a solid boundary between the individual and the threatening urban crowd in the bourgeois interior, is replaced in communal housing with the curtain that only covered the window of the bourgeois interior. It becomes a means to separate oneself in a semi-permanent way from the other campers who share one’s living space.<sup>41</sup> Isolating oneself from others becomes a matter of convenience, rather than an underlying motivation of city construction. The 19<sup>th</sup> century desire to “roof all the streets of Paris with glass” is utterly at odds with the Soviet understanding of the exterior.<sup>42</sup> Creating an interior city emerged out of the desire not only to keep out modern life, but also to place the exterior at the feet of the individual.

For the 19<sup>th</sup> century interior, the home was the place of the individual – more to the point, it was the individual’s home. As César Daly, one of France’s architectural journalists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century insisted, the private residence could no longer be required to display its owner’s ancient noble lineage. Instead, it should express the character and personality of its occupant; it must bear his or her mark. There was no other way to be truly at home.<sup>43</sup> The interior was a tribute to the individual who lived there. It not only protected individual subjectivity, it also acted as a reinforcing monument to it. As Benjamin articulates, “if you enter a bourgeois room of the 1880s, for all the cosiness it radiates, the strongest impression you receive may well

<sup>38</sup> Frisby, “Walter Benjamin’s Arcades Project,” 280.

<sup>39</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 406.

<sup>40</sup> Frisby, “Walter Benjamin’s Arcades Project,” 280.

<sup>41</sup> Schmiedgen, “Interiority, Exteriority and Spatial Politics in Benjamin’s Cityscapes,” 152-3.

<sup>42</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 56.

<sup>43</sup> Diana Periton, “The Interior as Aesthetic Refuge,” in *Tracing Modernity: Manifestations of the Modern in Architecture and the City*, (Taylor & Francis, 2004), 138.

<sup>44</sup> Rice, *The Emergence of the Interior*, 29.

be, 'You've got no business here.' And in fact you have no business in that room, for there is no spot on which the owner has not left his mark."<sup>44</sup> The private home is the space of the individual; it is not meant to be accessible to others. Benjamin's consistent emphasis on plush, and its ability to leave traces, is certainly in keeping with this logic. By contrast, the *kommunalka* is very much the home of the collective. If the autonomous capitalist subject is master of the house in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the state, as representative of the collective, is master in Moscow.<sup>45</sup> The *kommunalka* shares no attempt with the bourgeois interior to act as tribute to the individual. It has no furnishings and no art; it is not intended as a home at all. In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin cites Karl Marx in a section that is, somewhat ironically, applicable to the Soviet context. He writes, "Such a dwelling can never feel like home, a place where he might at last exclaim 'Here I am home?' Instead, he finds himself in someone else's home."<sup>46</sup> The *kommunalka* is never intended to be the home of the individual; it is the "living-space" of the collective. It is the "home" of the state.

Benjamin sees plush as marking a twofold consideration: it is not simply a way for the individual to leave traces, but also an antidote to the 19<sup>th</sup> century individual suffering from the disruption of long time (*erfahrung*). As much as the interior attempts to block out the city, it also engages in an attempt to preserve *erfahrung*. As David Frisby argues, "the inner space of the *intérieur* was filled with furniture that retained the character of fortification, embattlement against the outside world and its transitory nature."<sup>47</sup> Charles Rice echoes this claim, maintaining, "the interior's emergence became important in relation to the idea that long experience might somehow be wrested from objects."<sup>48</sup> The interior was meant to preserve a sense of long time in a world devoid of experience and ritual. In their desire to break entirely with the past, the Bolsheviks are clearly disinterested in such a preservationist venture. Nevertheless, the notion of *erfahrung* offers a way into what may be one of the most complex elements at work in an understanding the Soviet meaning of interior and exterior, as well as the deeply convoluted Soviet public and private spheres.

The attempt to change the ideological framework of the Soviet citizen took place, in part, through alterations to the structure of living space. In practice, what this affected was a revolution in their everyday life. This drastic change implies a break with long time, and the creation of new habits. Yet, as Benjamin suggests, "habits are the armature of long experience, whereas they are decomposed by individual experiences."<sup>49</sup> To create new habits is counter to the nature of habits. This paradoxical

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<sup>45</sup> Schmiedgen, "Interiority, Exteriority and Spatial Politics in Benjamin's Cityscapes," 152.

<sup>46</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 223.

<sup>47</sup> Frisby, "Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project," 285.

<sup>48</sup> Rice, *The Emergence of the Interior*, 11.

<sup>49</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 341.

cal situation gets to the heart of what fuels the proliferation of Bolshevik ideology in the “interior.” As Svetlana Boym has argued, the opposition between public and private, so constitutive to subjectivity in the West, may be less relevant for Russian cultural history.<sup>50</sup> While the emergence of the interior paralleled the development of private and public life of the individual in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, “a private sphere was never as fully cultivated in Russia as it was in the West.”<sup>51</sup> Instead, the primary line was drawn between what the Russians termed *byt* and *bytie*: between the material and spiritual existence.<sup>52</sup>

The rejection of the private and public demarcation is a contested issue in Russian scholarship, especially with an eye to the Soviet context. Nevertheless, in *Everyday Life in Early Soviet Russia*, Kaiser, et al. present the convincing argument that, at least in the Russian historical context, the trouble with a public/private distinction emerges as a result of a distinctly non-modern Russian culture.<sup>53</sup> Alongside Benjamin’s understanding of modernity and the interior in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this holds true. Rather than a space of rejuvenation and protection, “private” or personal life was considered by the Russian intelligentsia to be negative, inauthentic, and foreign, something to be overcome.<sup>54</sup> If the Western context saw modernity birthing an increased distinction between public and private spheres, the Russian context was far more concerned with the *byt* versus *bytie* distinction.

As Kaiser, et al. explain, “*byt* denotes the material, repetitive, unchanging, and therefore deeply conservative activities associated with the domestic sphere and the body, in opposition to the progressive, inventive, motional, spiritual, and transcendent activities of *bytie*.”<sup>55</sup> *Byt* is the practice of everyday/material life, whereas *bytie* is the realm of the intellectual/spiritual life. In the 1920s, Bolshevik Marxism found itself caught between Marxist materialism, and the traditional Russian dualism that pitted the devalued material realm of *byt* against the higher spiritual realm of *bytie*.<sup>56</sup> Read alongside the thinking at work in the development of the *kommunalka*, for example, the implications of this paradox become clear. In seeking to use everyday life to make changes to the effectiveness of Soviet ideology, the Bolsheviks were elevating *byt* to the level of *bytie*. In truth, the *novyi byt* campaign aimed not only to modernize and improve the material conditions of everyday life, but to give it transcendent communal or public value.<sup>57</sup> Assigning a rotation of chores in the *domma kommuny*, for example, elevates that *byt* into *bytie*. The belief that “forcing people to share their living space would make them more communistic in their basic thinking and behaviour”<sup>58</sup> maintains the conflation. While Figes certainly argues that “the

<sup>50</sup> Kaiser, et al. *Everyday life in early Soviet Russia*, 9.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Figes, *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin’s Russia*, 179.

battle against ‘philistine *byt*’ was at the heart of the revolutionary urge to establish a more communistic way of life,” he forgets that the underlying argument of the *kom-munalka* depends on the practice of *byt*.<sup>59</sup> As Kaiser, et al. argue, the very concept of making *byt* into something *novyi* – a progressive force for cultural change – defies the cultural logic of *byt*.<sup>60</sup> It is unchanging and continuous, rather than a force for change. Understood through Benjamin’s logic, it is like trying to create a brand new habit that is seamlessly tied to *erfahrung*.

Trying to match up the distinction between *byt* and *bytie* with the Western private and public demarcation is almost impossible. However, this is not to say that the Bolshevik project did not contribute to the formation of such a distinction. In its attempts to change the everyday life of Russians:

the *novyi byt*, and Bolshevik cultural policies more generally, led to a colonization and even intensification of private life. . . . At the same time, a new kind of “public sphere” arose, which purportedly aimed, on the basis of Enlightenment principles, to foster rational debate, but which often tended more to the theology of *bytie*. This was recognized by Benjamin, where he noted that “the tensions of public life – which for the most part are actually of a theological sort – are so great that they block off all private life to an unimaginable degree.”<sup>61</sup>

More simply, Bolshevism helped create the distinction between public and private spheres in the Soviet context. Rather than eradicating any sort of distinction in the minds of Soviets, the Bolsheviks brought such divisions into consciousness.<sup>62</sup> While there was certainly an awareness of Russian subjectivity before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it did not play out on the stage of public and private; instead, it was ruled by the presence of *byt* and *bytie*. In an arena in which *bytie* needed to be controlled, however, it became increasingly helpful to make use of a distinction between private and public.

As the inner thoughts of the citizens were regarded as the purview of the state, private life emerged on the Russian stage as never before. Private life became important precisely because it was deemed to have public significance.<sup>63</sup> That the Bolsheviks “rejected the distinction private and public life” first required the reification of the private in the Soviet context.<sup>64</sup> That the Bolsheviks saw private life as the place where the final goal of the Revolution was to be reached meant it was important only because of its relevance to the public.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>60</sup> Kaiser, et al. *Everyday life in early Soviet Russia*, 10.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>62</sup> Hooper. “Terror of Intimacy,” 66.

<sup>63</sup> Kaiser, et al. *Everyday life in early Soviet Russia*, 9.

<sup>64</sup> Figes, *The Whisperers*, 37.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

Private life was created to be abolished, manufactured to be subsumed into the public (political) sphere. Party unity meant the complete fusion of the individual with the public life of the Party.<sup>66</sup> Ideally, the private and public self were to form a single, integrated whole,<sup>67</sup> which would be further conflated into the collective. The manufactured, enforced quality of this distinction cannot be overstated. It emerged in the Soviet context as a tool of that regime; it used Western ideas to counter Western ideology. Before privacy could be colonized or abolished in Russia, it had to be invented.<sup>68</sup> If private life had been frowned on historically, it became increasingly necessary in the Soviet context. For the Bolsheviks, so they could attempt to abolish it; for the people, so they could avoid arrest.

Much of Orlando Figes' book, *The Whisperers*, deals with the question of Soviet subjectivity. It asks how much private life or identity was possible in the Soviet Union. While there is no question that people internalized many Soviet values, this is not to say that the Bolsheviks succeeded in their attempts to create and destroy the private sphere. Figes suggests many people "led a double life, retreating to a private world ('internal emigration') where they secretly held on to their old beliefs, perhaps concealing them from their own children, who were brought up in a Soviet way."<sup>69</sup> People learned to wear a mask and act the role of loyal Soviet citizens, even if they lived by other principles in the privacy of their own homes.<sup>70</sup> The conflation of the private and public spheres into public space – what has been seen thus far as the movement of the exterior inwards – only succeeded in *developing* the private sphere. Perhaps most unexpectedly, in the years after Benjamin's visit to Moscow, the private sphere began to be increasing useful for the Soviets, especially for the work of the NKVD.

Although the *kommunalkas* of the 1920s were meant to address the housing crisis and strike a blow against private life, by the 1930s they increasingly became a means of extending the state's powers of surveillance into the private spaces of the family home.<sup>71</sup> The logic of the Terror – if there was one to be had – relied upon the notion that people were different in public and in private life. This utterly contradicted the ideals professed by the Bolsheviks of the 1920s. It implied that an individual was far more likely to reveal his or her "true" self in the private sphere than in the public sphere: as such, private life became a crucial testing ground for political beliefs.<sup>72</sup> The private interviews and webs of connections for which the NKVD were

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<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>67</sup> Hooper, "Terror of Intimacy," 76.

<sup>68</sup> Kaiser, et al. *Everyday life in early Soviet Russia*, 10.

<sup>69</sup> Figes, *The Whisperers*, 53-4.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 37-8.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>72</sup> Hooper. "Terror of Intimacy," 65.

notorious all depended on the notion that those closest to a person knew them best. It reified the notion of a separation between private and public life. Moreover, while it may be that the Soviet interiors more closely resembled bourgeois exteriors, the Soviet increasingly “interiorized” the Party. Not only was the Party meant to enter into the private lives of citizens, but the Party *itself* was understood through the rhetoric of the interior. It was often thought in familial terms, described by one journalist as “an incestuous family, a web of long friendships and enduring hatreds, shared love affairs.”<sup>73</sup> This web was meant to extend its reach over the whole of Moscow, to envelop the city. If the 19<sup>th</sup> century desire to “roof all the streets of Paris with glass”<sup>74</sup> applied to the exterior of Paris, it may also be applied to Party’s goals for the private lives of Soviet citizens. They sought to bring the private sphere into the Party; the political sphere was couched in the language of the intimate interior, rather than the public exterior. The Party “exteriorized” the domestic and then proceeded to “interiorize” the political. Over the course of the 1930s, the Soviets looked more and more towards interiorizing, though in a fundamentally different way from the 19<sup>th</sup> century Parisian interior.

With this in mind, it may be helpful to return, more directly, to “Moscow Diary.” It is apt that Benjamin regards it as a trip that crystallizes his thinking about the rest of Europe. He writes, “However little one might still know of Russia, one learns to observe and judge Europe with a conscious awareness of what is taking place in Russia.”<sup>75</sup> In truth, it had very little to do with the actual situation in Russia. This is not due to a lack of observation, but rather what is understood – especially alongside the understanding of *byt* and *bytie* – to be incommensurable frames of reference. Asja Lacis points out, rather bluntly, that Benjamin knew nothing about Russia. His response: “obviously I could not argue with this.”<sup>76</sup> He lacks the ability to see the demarcations present in the Russian context because he is coming at them from a thoroughly Western set of references. Crang, et al. point out that Benjamin wrote about urban life from a Parisian context.<sup>77</sup> He is writing about Russia to better understand Europe. That he could state private life had been abolished speaks to this point. The historical and cultural content of Moscow in 1927 was far more complex than Benjamin seems to realize. As Kaiser, et al. summarize:

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<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>74</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 56.

<sup>75</sup> Benjamin, “Moscow Diary,” 114.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>77</sup> Mike Crang and Nigel Thrift, *Thinking Space* (Taylor & Francis: 2000), 3.

<sup>78</sup> Kaiser, et al., *Everyday life in early Soviet Russia*, 163.

Benjamin's assumption that private life in the Western sense was even there to be abolished, and that Bolshevik ideology was solely responsible, is more open to question. For the lack of a positive concept of privacy and private life was not exclusively a Bolshevik accomplishment, but rather, a feature of Russian social life; many of the phenomena that Benjamin describes in Moscow, such as the chaos of tram car passengers or the Soviet citizen's casual relation to concepts of time, describe Russian rather than Soviet traits.<sup>78</sup>

It would seem that he is suffering from a conflation both of Russian into Soviet, and of Western into Russian. The two cultural contexts are historically and culturally incommensurable. The Bolsheviks militated against the European distinction between public and private spheres to effect a break with the past. It was meant to separate the regime from the "philistine *byt*," to help engineer the Soviet Union. Moreover, the notion of private life outside of a spatial relation is wholly absent from Benjamin's understanding of Moscow: that there is no longer "the possibility of retreat from the public sphere into personal solitude" is taken to reinforce the thesis that there is no private life.<sup>79</sup> There is no place for any concept like Figs' "internal emigration." While Benjamin's image of the city may have been one of careful observation, it lacked an understanding of the historical context that led to it. As a series of "thought-images," these historical considerations are arguably irrelevant. Considering the portrait that "Moscow Diary" paints, however, especially in its (mis)understanding of private life, it may be that the historical context is necessary.

While space and cityscape can certainly stand as mere images of the regime in power, space also helps to reinforce the goals of the regime. It would seem that "what is true of the image of the city and its inhabitants is also applicable to its mentality."<sup>80</sup> Just as the arcades were a "miniature of Paris in the 19<sup>th</sup> century,"<sup>81</sup> so too was the *kommunalka*, a "microcosm of the Communist society."<sup>82</sup> These miniatures are not simply representations, but active agents in the cityscape. As O'Neill suggests, "governance and spatiality exist dialectically, structuring and reinforcing one another."<sup>83</sup> Like the interiors and then the "Haussmannization" of the 19<sup>th</sup> century reinforced the attitudes of the master of the capitalist society (the individual), the *kommunalka* reinforced the Soviet project. In the act of organizing space, "it ceases to be a natural entity and becomes a politicized entity through which society acts."<sup>84</sup>

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In the bourgeois interior, capitalism produces spaces of capital. In Moscow, auto-

<sup>79</sup> Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis*, 51.

<sup>80</sup> Benjamin, "Moscow Diary," 114.

<sup>81</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 31.

<sup>82</sup> Figs, *The Whisperers*, 179.

<sup>83</sup> O'Neill, "The Political Agency of Cityscapes," 92.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

cratic governments produce autocratic spaces.<sup>85</sup> While the cityscapes reflect their engineers, it is not simply that cityscapes emerge as an image of the regimes that build them; rather, they act as necessary components in the projects of “conspirators” in that regime. Interior space or exterior space, when it is organized by the regime, becomes political space.

Although Benjamin’s attempts to portray Moscow were subordinated to his desire to understand Europe through Russia, this course of inquiry was not unfruitful. Moreover, the reverse application of 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris to Moscow in the 1920s sheds a great deal of light on the peculiarities of the Soviet context. Rather than cocooning the individual in the protective interiority of the home, the Bolsheviks engineered communal housing projects meant to enforce a communal mindset. They removed any traces of the interior that complemented bourgeois subjectivity, creating an interior that was thoroughly other than individual, one that was “exteriorized.” While Benjamin saw this as the “withering away of private life,”<sup>86</sup> the situation was far more complex than his city-gazing revealed. Not only was private/public distinction created by the Bolsheviks so that it could be abolished, but also the increased surveillance of the Terror only served to further reinforce the need for private life, both for the citizens and for the Party. In truth, if the language of exterior can be applied to the Bolshevik “interior” of the *kommunalka*, the rhetoric of “interior” was clearly chosen by the Party to describe the political sphere. Although the discrimination Benjamin makes between private and public life may be useful in the Western context, such a distinction falls short of clarifying the ever-elusive Russian case. The parallel demarcations between interior/exterior, public/private, and domestic/political certainly make sense in 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris, but the radically different Russian approach – not only to built space but also to modernity itself – limits their effectiveness in accurately capturing the Soviet context of 20<sup>th</sup> century Moscow.

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<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>86</sup> Benjamin, “Moscow Diary,” 85.

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