“Do-it-yourself” practices in the biographical narratives of soviet scientists: in search of an interpretation.

Olena O. Babkina

European University at St. Petersburg, Department of Cultural Anthropology

In my brief report I would like to address an issue of the constructing of the image of soviet past in oral biographical interview by means of revealing the "do-it-yourself" practices inter alia as a typical way of soviet scientist’s work in late 1960-1970’s. My informants are the first generation of academicians of Donetsk region. As I have found out that they focused on the necessity of making some kinds of equipment themselves. It appears to me to be a necessary part of narratives, and I tried to investigate the crucial ideas that "do-it-yourself" practices highlighted.

Fistly, the idea of an scientist, an intellectual who got used to the manual work was remarked by dint of drawing attention to this practices. The intelligentsia in the USSR had an ambivalent position – it claimed to be useful in terms of economy and general progress, but simultaneously it was considered as something alien for the hegemonic working class. So, the biographical narratives reflect the need of justifying the status of intellectual by his symbolic attribution to those who dealt with manual operations in their every-day life.

Secondly, the emphasis on "do-it-yourself" practices could be interpret as an inclination to appropriate some scientific and symbolic liberty from the state. The scientists claimed to have more freedom when they produce some equipment without addressing official ways, thus the scientists became more free in their study – or otherwise it must have been coordinated by administrators. So, it concerns conflict between administrators and researchers in the soviet society which was discussing by Literaturnaya gazeta that time. Moreover, the “do-it-yourself” practices provided to scientists an opportunity to make some device to hear the forbidden in the USSR radio stations, what I meant saying “symbolic liberty”.

Do-It-Yourself! Subversive Practices and Informal Knowledge
Annual Conference of the Leibniz Graduate School “History, Knowledge, Media in East Central Europe”, 18-20 November 2015, The Herder Institute for Historical Research on East Central Europe – Institute of the Leibniz Association, Gisonenweg 5-7, 35037 Marburg, Vortragssaal und Becker-Villa
Organizers: Sarah Czerney, Jan Surman, Eszter Gantner