

BOOK REVIEW

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Rajagopalan Sudha, *Journeys of Soviet Things: Cold War as Lived Experience in Cuba and India*. New York, New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2023. ISBN 9780367686574

Reviewed by Mallory Cerkleski

Sudha Rajagopalan's *Journeys of Soviet Things: Cold War as Lived Experience in Cuba and India* offers a noteworthy contribution to the field of Cold War studies, particularly in its unique comparative approach to Cuba and India. While existing comparative studies by Joseph Tharamangalam (2010), Luisa Steur (2022), and Saseendran and Martínez Rodríguez (2018) have delved into the contexts of these nations, Rajagopalan's work distinguishes itself by adopting a nuanced lens that intertwines historical, experiential, and material perspectives. This distinction proves pivotal as it challenges the prevailing development-centric views in existing literature that often portray people's lives in the abstract. Instead, Rajagopalan's approach allows us to directly enter people's homes, offering a profound understanding of how geopolitics was experienced through the stories and experiences embedded in everyday objects.

The book is grounded in a theoretical framework that advocates moving beyond conventional textual analyses to explore non-representational forms of geopolitical imaginaries in everyday life. As Rajagopalan argues,

we need to move beyond texts to non-representational and other forms of geopolitical imaginaries in the everyday. We need to look at ways in which subjective experiences, and the discursive power with which we speak of our experiences, is articulated by different actors. (p. 22)

This methodological approach places lived experiences at the forefront, urging a reconsideration of grand historical narratives and an emphasis on personal accounts that often escape state-centric geopolitical accounts.

Rajagopalan further highlights the interpretative nature of memory, asserting that it is not a direct reflection of lived experiences, but a construction shaped by

interviewers' perspectives and memory's inherent selectivity (p. 23). The integration of the body and household into global narratives underscores the interconnectedness of personal experiences with broader geopolitical contexts (p. 25). In exploring subaltern actors in geopolitics, Rajagopalan emphasises the embodied participation of individuals in transnational diplomacy, infusing their lives with geopolitical meaning (p. 25).

The author's exploration of material culture's semiotic value underlines the performative nature of objects, shedding light on how cultural and social values are communicated through exchanges (p. 27). The absence of certain objects becomes performative, signifying shifts in values and tastes (p. 30). Rajagopalan asserts, "it is narrativization of the object that renders evident to others what meaning an object has come to embody" (p. 33), emphasising the conferral of meaning through narratives. Objects, as conduits of powerful human sentiments, become integral to understanding the layered experiences and emotions associated with them (p. 33).

The comparative exploration begins with an in-depth analysis of Soviet–Cuban ties, providing historical context up to the 1990s (p. 43). The narrative delves into the nuances of Cuba's socialist revolution, differentiating it from the Soviet model and revealing tensions within the Cuban government's independent foreign policy (pp. 44, 46, 50). The juxtaposition of memories from challenging periods to the 1980s shapes interlocutors' stories of Soviet objects in Cuba (p. 59). Rajagopalan's examination of Cuba extends to the realm of Soviet appliances, exploring how Cuban interlocutors articulate the meanings of these objects acquired decades ago. The discussion encompasses the 'antes' frame, which is a temporal way people speak of their histories; *antes* meaning before, is how people frame their lives before and after the Revolution, emphasising the material shifts the revolution and subsequently, these objects brought to Cuban lives. The book also then delves into gratitude expressed for Soviet assistance in circumventing the adverse consequences of the US embargo (pp. 66, 75). The exploration of empathy for Soviet choices opens the idea about the socialist versus capitalist way to see items; luxuries versus utility. Lastly, the concept of rejection and disposal enriches our understanding of the multifaceted relationship between Cubans and Soviet material culture; pointing out the idea of the concept of disengagement with objects, and nostalgia instead of outright rejection and disposal (p. 92). The section on Soviet gifts and souvenirs explores the sociality of conviviality in everyday diplomacy. Objects become storytellers, linking people and experiences between countries (p. 119). The discussion extends to the Soviet unravelling, capturing the impact on travel and contacts as the Soviet period drew to a close.

Transitioning to the Indian context, Rajagopalan's examination of India's postcolonial nationalist state sets the stage for understanding the seemingly

natural friendship with the Soviet Union. The chapter on Soviet books explores their ubiquity in India and their role in shaping narratives and experiential worlds. The author then ties these narratives together, emphasising the enduring comradely nature of Soviet goods and their impact on personal journeys, learning, and geopolitical outreach. The book's narrative challenges dominant Cold War perspectives, introducing the concept of hybridity and underscoring the cosmopolitan understanding of the world shaped by diverse influences.

In conclusion, Sudha Rajagopalan's *Journeys of Soviet Things* provides a comprehensive and insightful exploration of the Cold War as a lived experience in Cuba and India. As an oral historian deeply engaged in the study of both nations, I find no critiques but only praise for this groundbreaking work, recognising its crucial role in elevating the field and demanding serious consideration for the voices and experiences of those on the ground. This book fills a significant gap by spotlighting stories that may not always find a place in conventional archives, amplifying the narratives of individuals who aren't typically represented in historical analyses. Rajagopalan's meticulous collection of stories from everyday people enriches our understanding of the geopolitical contexts, moving beyond the perspectives of policymakers and analysts to encompass the lives of those directly affected. The interdisciplinary approach, seamlessly blending critical geopolitics, material culture studies, and sociology of consumption, signifies a remarkable advancement in Cold War scholarship. By emphasising the importance of lived experiences, material culture, and subjective perspectives, the author challenges prevailing narratives and encourages a more inclusive approach to studying historical periods. In essence, this work invites scholars to delve deeper into the intricate interplay of historical, experiential, and material dimensions in geopolitical studies. Sudha Rajagopalan's comparative analysis, particularly in juxtaposing Cuba and India, not only opens new avenues for research but also underscores the significance of considering diverse perspectives to gain a more holistic understanding of the Cold War era.

References

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