

Shock Therapy. Psychology, Precarity, and Well-Being in Postsocialist Russia by Tomas Matza. Durham: Duke University Press. 2018. 305pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$99.95, Cloth. \$26.95, Paperback.

Grégoire Hervouet-Zeiber, The Johns Hopkins University

ghervou1@jhu.edu

Shock Therapy is an ethnographic study of the revitalization of psychotherapy in Russia which has taken form “at the intersection of market forces, biopolitics, and the desires of the expert” (198). Anchored in fieldwork undertaken with psychologists, the book describes how psychotherapy circulated in response to the changing political and ethical landscape after the fall of the Soviet Union. Furthermore, from this specific perspective, it offers a rich critical engagement with literature on the relationship between “psy-ences,” governing projects (governmentality) and processes of subject constitution (subjectivation). Its most important insights are that: 1) psychotherapy in post-Soviet Russia reproduces class and gender differences; 2) the biopolitics and the “precarious care” the author describes are engaged in negotiations of (in)commensurability; 3) psychotherapeutic work is political in ways the author elucidates ethnographically.

Chapter 1 offers a historical overview of applied psychology in the Soviet Union and in post-Soviet Russia. The subjective (understood here as a “psychologized interior”), Matza shows, “existed in a tricky relationship to Soviet power” (38), but continued to “haunt” the Soviet psy-ences, reemerging in different forms and at different moments of their history. Consequently, Matza goes on to characterize the late Soviet and post-Soviet periods as that of a “*reactivation* (rather than introduction) of interest in the subjective” in psychology (61-62). Matza orients himself skillfully on this “vexed terrain” (31) offering a classical chronology but avoiding the pitfalls of an authoritative historical narrative. He does so by pinpointing the tensions in this history and by reflecting on his informants’ own historicizations and dismissals of Soviet (even late-Soviet) psychotherapy which come to interrupt Matza’s account. As he puts it, the ethnographic vignettes of his informants’ historical reflections are, “first, (...) opportunities to interrupt historicization in the name of a history of the present, and, second, they are performances in the

present” (64-65). By drawing on the past, Matza’s informants “constitute themselves as post-Soviet actors” and “as agents in the face of Soviet constraint” (65).

The second part of the book is an ethnography of different psychological services for children: ReGeneration, an organization geared towards providing elite children tools for success and a Psycho-pedagogical Medico-social (PPMS) center, a municipal service helping struggling children identified through the school system. Chapter 2 argues that “psychotherapeutic practices were *made commensurable* with the aims of Putin’s political-economic agenda,” including the “biopolitical aims of pronatalism and modernization” (86). The types of discourses circulating at *Planeta Detstva*, “a large expo for family products and services” (87) and documents produced by ReGeneration and PPMS lead Matza to one of the central insights of the book: that one of the main effects of this work of commensuration is that psychotherapy has become engaged in the reproduction of class and gender difference. Whereas ReGeneration’s work produces children with emotions and a deep psychological interior and is focused on creating the conditions for their success, the PPMS center’s work sees children as “a brain with memory problems” (155) and focuses on control and intervention (99).

In the following two chapters, the attentive ethnography of the work of ReGeneration and the PPMS center both confirms and complicates this first evaluation of biopolitical commensurability. Matza goes on to describe the “tensioned relation” (108) between the biopolitical and the ethical. He shows how incommensurabilities also emerge in these sites. Chapter 3 complicates notions of “neoliberal subjectivation” by engaging with ReGeneration’s experts and by taking part in their *zaniatii* (lessons). Rather than simply involved in the production of an elite, of subjects fit for a market democracy, experts understand their work as one of educating and transforming this elite to the benefit of all. In Chapter 4, Matza turns to the strained work of the PPMS center in the context of the structural constraints of Putin’s “modernization.” Working with “those getting left behind Russia’s oil-fueled boom” (141), the psychotherapists are frustrated by bureaucratic exigencies. Notwithstanding all the risks entailed, they improvise care in spaces of “institutional indeterminacy” (156). Negotiating this uneasy relationship between the biopolitical and “precarious care,” psychotherapists in both sites cannot be easily framed as conduits for a “neoliberal governmentality.”

The third part of the book presents the work of psychotherapists as “loosely political.” Focusing on the work of “Verity,” the fifth chapter describes what Matza calls “psychosociality.” The invocation of certain terms, such as *energiia* (energy), *garmoniia* (harmony) and *dusha* (soul), allows for new social forms to take shape. However, this psychosociality is itself precarious as it can be “captured by capital” (186) and is threatened in a context where fear is prevalent. The last chapter focuses on the radio talk-show *For Adults about Adults*, where host Labkovsky, drawing on psychological technologies, namely *samootsenka* (self-esteem), helps his listeners deal with quotidian problems, for example, around property.

Analytically, one of the book’s forces comes from the fact that its engagement with the post-Socialist context and its attention to the practices of “precarious care” enriches and challenges some of the ways the concept of (neoliberal) governmentality has been taken up. Matza pays attention to what he calls the “and yet,” the complexities entailed in life. We are left to wonder, however, what happens when psychological knowledge and practices circulate outside the therapeutic spaces investigated by the author, in schools, in the workplace, in the family, in the apartment building. We get a sense of an answer from the last chapter when listeners resist Labkovsky’s (the talk show host) interpretations. The family also enters the scene at multiple points in the book as a site of tension, but always fleetingly. To use the author’s language, the (in)commensurabilities which probably emerge in this circulation of knowledge should also be investigated. Could we imagine, as a follow-up to this project, a study where the family, for example, is not approached from the point of view of experts, of different organizations, but through an ethnographic attention to the way knowledge and practices are folded into kinship relations? How is psychotherapy itself stretched or permeated by these relationships? What forms of the subject, of care and of precarity would emerge?

Beyond readers interested in psy-ences in the post-Socialist world for whom *Shock Therapy* should become a central reference, this book’s theoretical insights and ethnographic attention will be highly informative to all those interested in the practice of psychotherapy as well as to all interested in neoliberalism and governmentality. Thanks to the clarity of its style and its ability to be rigorous without being obscure and because, through psychotherapy, the book gives an account of how

people have been ethically and politically engaged in the post-Soviet world, I would also recommend this book to all who are interested in post-Soviet Russia.