

Book Review: Shock Therapy: Psychology, Precarity, and Well-Being in Postsocialist Russia by Thomas Matza

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Matza, Thomas, *Shock Therapy: Psychology, Precarity, and Well-Being in Postsocialist Russia*. Duke University Press, 2018, 328 pages, \$27.95

In *Shock Therapy*, Thomas Matza details an ethnographic perspective on the dynamic role of psychotherapy in modern Russia focusing on the post-Soviet period up through Putin's administration. Matza conducted extensive fieldwork from 2005-2006 and several follow-up visits between 2007-2013. He spent much of his time in St. Petersburg, Russia's second largest city. Matza selected the provocative title of his book in order to signify the startling and disrupting political and societal challenges in Russia. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, citizens were dealing with the elimination of government subsidies and reductions in state provided services, and a subsequent increase in unemployment and poverty rates. *Shock Therapy's* three primary themes are commensurability, precarious care, and neoliberal capitalism.

Matza's central argument is that psychotherapy served as both a tool and symptom of the fledgling democracy or neoliberal government in modern Russia. Matza's historical review includes details on eminent Russian scientists (Luria, Pavlov, Vygotsky) and he connects their work to the educational and political climate of their times. He also highlights contributions of prominent western psychotherapists, including Freud's psychoanalytic perspective and Roger's more optimistic humanistic perspective. In the 1990s, when the government faded into the background, life for most people became unpredictable and unfamiliar. Psychotherapy provided guidance, inspiration, and encouragement. This version of psychology included a focus on self-esteem, intrinsic motivation, and personal fulfillment. Psychology helped provide order in the chaos. Intriguingly, Matza notes how psychotherapy also served a more nefarious role for citizens falling through the cracks or experiencing personal or familial challenges (e.g., poverty,

alcoholism, etc.). For those encountering obstacles or complications, psychotherapists were in control over the subject's success or failure. Matza documents psychology's contradictory functions in this post-Soviet Russia for two distinct populations, those who accumulated wealth and power and those that did not.

Matza accounts for this duality involving psychology (self-actualization or dysfunction) with the first of three recurring themes, commensurability or incommensurability. This concept accounts for the contrasting aspects of theoretical perspectives, therapeutic techniques, and the conflicting motivations of psychotherapists providing services (e.g., teaching a "success mindset" vs. pathologizing social suffering). Matza also utilizes commensurability to highlight a dramatic shift in the political and social environments in post-Soviet Russia. The public's reliance on government services and subsidies transformed to a time of personal responsibility and capitalism. Finally, commensurability helps Matza organize his experiences with therapists working with the two distinct populations. Newly rich families wanted educational programming for their offspring while average citizens struggled with psychological issues and parental abandonment, addiction, and poverty.

Matza participated in training programs for wealthy teens and adults who wanted an edge on their competitors, including helping build self-esteem and confidence. Alternatively, he also attended staff meetings at state institutions. These later therapists were handling challenging cases involving poor families. Matza's second theme, precarious care, was linked to this second population. Precarious care clarifies the tenuous situations of these clients and their therapists. The working poor clients lead precarious lives, including absent fathers and extreme neglect. The practitioners' precariousness manifests itself in many ways. One example involves the general lack of financial support for minimal services, meanwhile staff struggle to satisfy government

regulations requiring a record of their time in order to get greater efficiency and accountability. Practitioners are regularly reprimanded for spending too much time on specific cases, and they are expected to attend regular staff meetings. Psychotherapists in the state-run institutions are under pressure from all sides.

The third recurring theme in *Shock Therapy* involves neoliberal capitalism and the accompanying economic reforms. Matza suggests Russians were experiencing this transformation “as the ending a way of life,” (p. 4) leaving many with anxiety and a search for meaning. The newfound individualism and personal responsibility put all social classes in an unfamiliar environment. Matza proposes this pervasive anxiety provided fertile ground for psychotherapeutic intervention, including private fee-based services or government run clinics. If the clients were wealthy, the psychotherapeutic services provide a way to enhance self-esteem and self-regulation. Conversely, for the working poor dealing with precarious life circumstance, psychotherapy involves fixing a problem or addressing a psychopathology.

Psychological theories are products of cultural and historical trends. Explanations for development, normality, and psychopathology change over time. Examples include the diagnoses of disorders and requisite symptoms (i.e., the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, DSM V) and measurement or testing of fundamental traits like intelligence. Stephen Gould’s *Mismeasure of Man* thoroughly documents the history of majority bias involving IQ tests in government or educational settings. Matza’s text provides another perspective on the malleability of psychological theory and therapeutic options in modern Russia.

One drawback of the book is Matza’s repetitive references to philosophical and anthropological sources. He links his analysis of modern Russia to published work in other academic disciplines. These recurring citations detract from an otherwise timely text with

sociopolitical insight and pertinent personal stories from citizens and psychotherapists. While academics will appreciate the scholarly references, the average reader might be overwhelmed or worse, simply lose interest. These copious citations may unintentionally shrink his target audience.

Overall, *Shock Therapy* cogently connects psychotherapy to life in Russia over the last three decades. Matza provides a closing update based on a 2012 visit and suggests that Putin's third term indicates a continuing role for institutional psychotherapeutic care. The government is becoming increasingly controlling, emphasizing traditional values evidenced in conservative laws impacting free speech and media (e.g., "On the Protection of Children from Information harmful to their health and Development"). Russia appears to be backsliding to a more autocratic position, something Matza labeled a state due to "neoliberalism without liberals" (page 235).

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