

Somatosphere Presents

A Book Forum on

**Tomas Matza's Shock Therapy:
Psychology, Precarity, and Well-Being
in Postsocialist Russia**

[Duke University Press](#), 2018. 305 pages.

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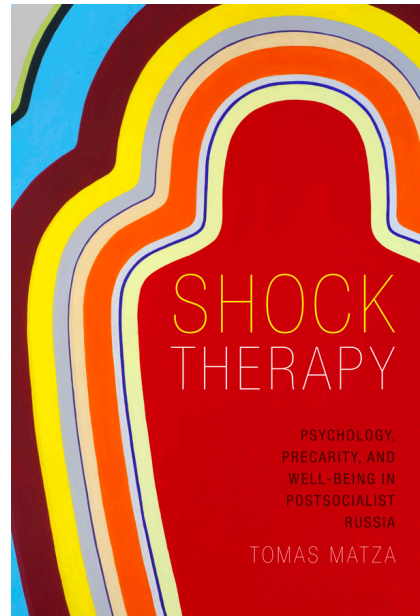
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In [Shock Therapy: Psychology, Precarity, and Well-Being in Postsocialist Russia](#) (Duke University Press, 2018), [Tomas Matza](#) traces the landscape of "psy" disciplines, practices, and institutions across postsocialist St. Petersburg. Writing with a distinctive conceptual subtlety and care, Matza pushes beyond a range of well-established interpretations to examine the multiple ways in which psychotherapy has provided tools for people to understand and transform themselves in postsocialist times, sometimes with deeply complicated political and ethical outcomes. We hope that you enjoy these commentaries!



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Tomas Matza's *Shock Therapy*

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In *Shock Therapy*, Tomas Matza explores the terrain of psychosocial care and the ways in which people forge “psychosociality” in conditions not of their own choosing. Perhaps the most powerful contribution in this rich text is the question of how postsocialist contexts are shaped by the “accumulation of conditionality—*maybe, could, would,*” (p.5). Matza does an excellent job of showing the contours and affective experience of this conditionality as it appears in psychotherapeutically-tinged talk-therapies across a diverse range of settings in Saint Petersburg. *Shock Therapy* is rooted in an extensive ethnography of two organizations—one commercial and one state-run—that offer psychological care to children. Through extensive ethnographic and media analysis, Matza shows that these psy-sciences have emerged as a wayward anchor, rooting their practitioners amidst the shifting conditions of life in Russia since 1991. This process is captured in the ethical challenge of balancing human connections and professional commitments within political and economic constraints. Therapists thus participate in generating inequality at the very sites in which they are most committed to challenging it.

Particularly exciting are the ways that Matza shifts the terrain of biopolitics from the body to “the mind (broadly conceived).” He elaborates the ways that biopolitics-as-talk is a novel formation: a crucial new terrain for modes of governance, even as the finite body becomes an exhausted object of governance. His attention to the way institutional and ethical-medical expertise shape what people see as healthy, pathological, empowering or stigmatizing are excellent examples. Matza articulates the inconsistencies baked into the practice of psy-talk in this postsocialist space through a deep consideration of his own position, acting as an intermediary between political-economic ideologies largely formed in contradistinction across a Russia-west border. This hyper-attention to position allows Matza to see the complexity and incongruence between ethics and politics within the psychotherapeutic turn in Russia. Eschewing an easy strawman of neoliberalism, Matza explores a perpetually unfinalized postsocialism that emerges intersubjectively, even as it is overdetermined by institutional pathways and practices.

In this sense, Matza's text is exemplary of the ways that postsocialist anthropology has defined an analytics of uncertainty. This book, taken in the context of a larger scholarship on postsocialism, raises a critical comparative question: what is it about both the emic and etic analysis of postsocialist Eastern Europe that returns us and our interlocutors time and again to the experience of pain and disappointment? Under what conditions—social, economic, political, semiotic, affective (the list goes on)—do people experience uncertainty as a problem? It is important to think about the ways that inconsistency, contradiction, and even the commensurability-incommensurability nexus are not inherently problematic. They emerge as problems when materialized through political-economic relations and semiotic infrastructures and ideologies through which people name and recognize them as such.

Reading Matza's book, in the context of the comparative perspective of human contradiction, we wonder: why has this social fact been so analytically powerful in postsocialist anthropology? What does it tell us not only about our mode of inquiry in the region where many of us work, but about the wages of contradiction of the subjects and objects of the postsocialist episteme? And how, reflecting on Matza's nuanced, humane and trenchant analysis of social inequality and psychosocial stigma, we might also ask *whose uncertainty* is a problem, and when? And, perhaps most critically for the emergent politics of new publics, new intimacies, and new possibilities that Matza highlights: how might we organize to render uncertainty politically powerful and ethically productive, even at the sites in which it has defined lives in an anxious conditional tense?

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The Precarity of Anticipation

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In *Shock Therapy: Psychology, Precarity, and Well-being in Postsocialist Russia*, Tomas Matza describes a fleeting encounter where he waits for one of his interlocutors whom he mistakes for an American tourist; meanwhile his collaborator assumes Matza, toting a Russian paper, is Russian. In this scene, Matza slows down an everyday encounter, a “commonplace misrecognition,” which effectively captures a seemingly insignificant moment of anticipation. For readers, it provides a clue regarding a significant contribution of his ethnography: the crucial role of anticipation in the “psychotherapeutic turn” in Saint Petersburg, Russia (233). For example, the Psycho-pedagogical Medico-social Center (PPMS), part of a trend towards adopting psychotherapeutic strategies and, more broadly, taking part in the “hypercommercialization of child development,” coaches parents on how to promote “success” towards a “future perfect” (6, 92, 98). The PPMS is part of the Ministry of Education, which was created from the Soviet Academy of Pedagogical Sciences (APN). To Matza, these “regimes of anticipation” distinguished children by both value and developmental difference (99). In turn, he shows us, this psychosocial infrastructure creates a “defensive mode of parenting based on an anxiety-ridden future” where parents must preemptively regulate today in the hope of securing their families’ stronger tomorrow (132). The parents’ coaching both produced and treated anxiety, as each present-day action was framed with not only as increasingly significant for the child’s future potential and identity, but also as tethered to a more collective vision of Russia’s future and success (70, 98, 126).

In the world of psychotherapeutic training and centers Matza shows us, many eyes were cast on the future. Nanny services advertised with “We care about your future!” (91). One private business school advertised that promising young adolescents might become “future bankers, top managers, and bigwigs of show business” (92). At ReGeneration, a private organization offering “self-management” and other psychological training courses, one psychologist explained to Matza that psychological education would be a “necessary technology to succeed in the Russia to come” (105). This kind of “future-oriented anxiety” appears diffuse and comes from informants like Nikolai, who worries about random acts of violence (177). One of Matza’s informants, a psychologist at PPMS, defined anxiety as “directed to the future, a concern that situations are undefined,” thus distinguishing anxiety as a kind of object-less uncertainty (177). Matza makes clear that the temporality and affect are like interlocking gears.

The “ethico-political” care work Matza witnesses and theorizes amounts to what he terms “precarious care,” which is produced in and through these regimes of anticipation (11). Care is uncertain in that it may or may not be commensurable with biopolitical aims of the state, it may or may not alleviate suffering, and it may or may not—or may not fully—create new political subjectivities (132, 137, 238, 27). But what is especially valuable about his conception of precarious care is its temporality: the profound significance of the affective and imagined future self and society. In my own work analyzing how neoliberal economic reform shaped the Italian workplace, I argued that subjects were not “subjects of neoliberalism” but rather “subjects formed in anticipation of neoliberalism,” precisely because economic change worked as a distinct discourse of arrival (Molé 2010). Like neoliberal change in post-Socialist Russia, the arrival of democratic and capitalist change is a political discourse and ontological set of ideas in their own right. Thus, Matza’s interlocutors navigated a set of societal transformations with a meta-discursive awareness, and it may be this awareness that enables and intensifies this affective mode of apprehension and anticipation, or at least might account for the probable emergence of “regimes of anticipation.”

In a broader sense, we know that some forms of psychotherapy, such as psychoanalysis, focus on the past, and root the core of personhood in past trauma and conflict. Certainly, the future orientation does not erase the past, as psychological practices might frame their work as an implicit past corrective, and emerge from a series of historical shifts, “continuities and ruptures” (25, 34). Yet here we find the core temporal modality of Russia’s psychotherapeutic turn to be future-oriented, looking beyond and forward in order to attend to and perform care in the present. Just as Matza pauses the clock on that moment of anticipation before being identified or misidentified, so too does *Shock Therapy* expose the inner mechanisms of Russia’s psychotherapeutic minutes, days, and tomorrows.

Works Cited

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[Noelle Molé Liston](#) is a Senior Language Lecturer in the Expository Writing Program at New York University. She holds a doctorate in cultural anthropology from Rutgers University. Liston’s first book, [Labor Disorders in Neoliberal Italy](#), received the Society for the Anthropology of Work Book Award in 2013. She has received the Teaching Excellence Award at NYU and the 2011 Quin Morton ’36 Teaching Award from Princeton University. She is completing her second book, *The Truth Society: Science and the Pseudo in Italy*.

Comments on Tomas Matza's *Shock Therapy*

DOUGLAS ROGERS

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Of the many vivid and beautifully recounted scenes in *Shock Therapy*, one made an immediate and lasting impression on me. Matza has found himself at a group training session that features “body-oriented therapy,” sitting across from his friend Vera. Their joint task—silent, eyes closed, only hands touching—is to make “hand sculptures” that illustrate emotions proffered by their instructor Olya: gratitude, jealousy, woe, and others. Their sculptures, some effortless and others fumbling, elicit commentary and probing questions from Olya and, later, reflection, doubt, and puzzlement in Matza (and presumably in Vera as well). For Matza, as author, this scene illustrates the “epistemic murk” of the clinical encounter, showing how the intimacy and indeterminacy of therapeutic interventions are fruitful ethnographic sites to explore the uneasy and generative relationships between care and biopolitics in contemporary Russia.

The first reason I was drawn to this scene is that it is a key point at which Matza elaborates his use of the concepts of commensurability and incommensurability. In the clinical encounter, Matza argues, there is space—often affective and sometimes dangerous—for therapists to shrink or expand the distance between care and biopolitics. By placing his analytical emphasis on commensurability and incommensurability, Matza offers readers some fascinating paths out of his own ethnographic locations and into other domains of post-Soviet life, where questions of what lines up with what, and what can be transformed into what, have been so often at stake. I think immediately of questions of exchange, from the demonetization and barter of the 1990s to the circulation of oil wealth in the aughts to the still more recent Russian fascination with alternative and cryptocurrencies. Questions of political life open up here as well, beginning but, I think, not ending with Matza’s Part III, “In Search of the Political.” Matza is persuasive in these chapters about the ways in which the psychotherapeutic turn created important new psychosocial idioms and imaginations of politics. But his research to date enables him only to provide concluding pointers as to how these idioms and languages were—or were not—brought into commensurability with other idioms and languages beyond the clinical encounter and the mass publics of call-in shows. This is, of course, an old and vexing question, in Russia and elsewhere. Matza’s clear and careful analysis and concluding pointers have given the rest of us a new route by which to take it up.

The second reason that Matza's "body-oriented therapy" scene jumped out at me is that it runs so intriguingly parallel to many of the moments described and theorized in Alaina Lemon's [Technologies for Intuition: Cold War Circles and Telepathic Rays](#) (California, 2018). For Lemon, a central setting in which bodies and minds attempt to make "contact" are not therapy sessions but theater school activities, including those in which student actors go through partnered and group activities aimed training them to, among other things, harness psychic energies and inhabit emotions. A key example in Lemon's introduction, for instance, and one that occupies a structurally similar point in her book to Matza's hand sculptures in *Shock Therapy*, focuses on a student's attempt to intuit that the rest of the class has agreed (in his absence) to think silently about closing a small window in the room. Less important than whether the attempt succeeds, as in Matza's training, is the commentary of the theater class instructor. To be sure, there are differences between Matza's focus on psychology and Lemon's on psychics, and between the clinic and the stage, but I wonder: What is it about the decade in which these two talented fieldworkers researched and wrote these terrific books that led them to find such similar interpersonal mind-body encounters in Russia so illustrative, so generative?

[Douglas Rogers](#) is Professor of Anthropology and Faculty Director of the Program in Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies at Yale University. His research and teaching interests in political and economic anthropology; natural resources (especially oil) and energy; corporations; the anthropology of religion and ethics; historical anthropology; and socialist societies and their postsocialist trajectories. His archival and ethnographic research in Russia has led to two award-winning books: [The Old Faith and the Russian Land: A Historical Ethnography of Ethics in the Urals](#) (Cornell, 2009) and [The Depths of Russia: Oil, Power, and Culture After Socialism](#) (Cornell, 2015). Rogers is currently working on two projects. The first, *Eating Oil: Energy and Life in and after the Cold War*, is about the history and present-day reverberations of petroleum science in the Soviet Union, the United States, and Europe. The second is a study of the history, theory, and practice of the Russian and Soviet corporation.

The Politics of Psychosociality

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Shock Therapy is a remarkable ethnography that effectively weaves together new psychological practices, concerns about well-being, shifting modes of power, and the remaking of the self and sociality in postsocialist Russia at a time marked by profound changes, precarity, and social anxiety. Beautifully crafted and written, it brings the readers into vivid and intimate ethnographic settings while offering numerous careful yet provocative insights into the therapeutic turn and its broader sociopolitical ramifications within a transforming society.

Given my own keen interest in almost a parallel universe of the popular psy industry and practices in postsocialist China, I have had some long conversations with Matza over the years about our research. Sometimes, our dialogues make me feel as if I am looking at two mirroring worlds with striking familiarities between Russians and Chinese citizens in the search for success, happiness, connection, and techniques of managing distresses. Yet, as I dive into the ethnographic materials more deeply, subtle differences begin to emerge. Although there are so many aspects of *Shock Therapy* I find intriguing and want to engage, in this short piece I limit my commentary to one salient issue only--what Matza terms "psychosociality."

When we think about psychotherapy and counseling, we usually relate it to a private phenomenon based on one-on-one talk therapy (in some cases significant other or family members included). But what is most interesting and distinct about the use of psychotherapy in Russia and China today is not individual talk therapy or the clinical setting dedicated to treating mental illness. As Matza demonstrates, the attraction and power of talk therapy is often derived from a new kind of sociality that allows an alternative form of association to take place. Through collective therapy or training sessions, an intimate yet public form of sociality is created among participants, which he refers to "a form of association and solidarity that took shape in, around, and through psychotherapeutic groups" (2018: 173). Matza argues that this imagined public intimacy, which is rare in everyday life, becomes a cherished ground for people to explore personal problems, social anxiety, and even political traumas. In this vein, the social and the self, the political and the personal are intricately linked together and enable each other. He further shows that the emergence of psychosociality is particularly significant against the backdrop of a society with increasingly fear, anxiety, isolation, and social breakdown under Putin's rule. I believe that Matza's detailed analysis of how and why

psychosociality arises is one of the most valuable and original contribution of this book. Here I would like to echo and reflect on his account based on my fieldwork experience.

As I write this commentary, I am finishing my own book on the rise of psychotherapy in post-reform China. Like Matza, I find a new kind of sociality formed in therapeutic settings extremely telling about what is going on in society at large. Most Chinese who are drawn to the new psy field do not become therapists or clients in individual treatment, rather they flock to group training workshops (*peixun*) ranging from twenty to forty participants. Some of them have already passed the national counseling certification exam but want to hone their skills, while others just want to learn psychological techniques to improve themselves and their social relationships. Instead of viewing *peixun* spaces through a binary lens, they see them as simultaneously personal and social, safe and exploratory. While a great deal of energy is devoted to self-development and self-actualization, it is conducted in a supportive group setting with intimate strangers who share their private feelings and experiences.

While the yearning for new connections through therapeutic intervention is diagnostic of the troubled condition facing many in Russia and China, we must not overlook the limits of this psychosociality. First, it tends to be ephemeral as participants come and go without the capacity to forge a long-lasting social nexus. How can such fleeting support and intimacy they experience be sustained or reproduced in social life is a question worth contemplating? Second, without diminishing the salience of the work by such groups, I cannot help but ask myself: can this form of sociality and feeling being supportive and connected (temporarily) have the subversive potential to challenge the existing sociopolitical order and address pressing existential problems? Or does it end up serving as a coping mechanism to accommodate insurmountable obstacles in the system? Of course, there are no simple answers to these questions, but it is imperative to attend to both the power and limit of psychotherapeutic interventions as they create and enable new things while silencing and evading other issues.

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