

TV THERAPY WITHOUT PSYCHOLOGY: ADAPTING THE SELF IN POST-SOVIET MEDIA.

Summary

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The article studies the constitution of a new emotional style in contemporary Russia. This style is new insofar as it is constituted within the post-Soviet ideological and economic, symbolic and discursive transformation, and also because it is accompanied by the introduction of the psychological culture of late capitalism (both professional and popular), which was not part of cultural knowledge and common sense in the socialist cultural universe. This new style manifests itself in new practices being proposed as means of organizing and managing the private sphere, intimate and emotional personal lives, and career building. These practices include various types of (psycho-)therapy, coaching and counseling, self-esteem improvement training, and forums for empowerment. It also manifests itself in the publication of translated and original self-help literature, as well as in the field of online dating, and of course also in psychology talk shows on TV. Following the scholarly literature that criticizes similar forms in late capitalist popular culture in the West, I conceptualize these phenomena as a new “therapeutic culture” in the post-Soviet cultural field.

The critical literature on “emotional capitalism” has indicated a close connection between modern rationality, the capitalist economy, and the psychological ways in which people manage emotions. At the heart of emotional capitalism stands a model of the “therapeutic self”—a product of the alliance between psychological discourse and the institutions of capitalism. This is a self oriented toward the present, toward instrumental functioning, toward coping. It is a self that makes a rational calculation of cost and benefit, articulated in the concepts of “self-realization,” and assured of the possibility of “life without suffering”—an option offered to it by the modern therapeutic narrative. This model of the self is constituted and maintained by cultural technologies, especially those of mass culture, and the electronic media.

The critics of emotional capitalism consider the Western “therapeutic self” to be part of the package deal of capitalism and the cultural program of modernity that promotes rationality, individual autonomy, and the alleviation of human suffering. The dominant and unshakable status of this model of the individual and her emotions within the bounds of Western modernism, or modernity itself, and in quasi-European societies is therefore taken for granted. However, I question whether this is the case for Russian/Soviet culture in the past and in the present. Comparing the

Russian therapeutic culture with the quasi-Western Israeli as well as with the American global hegemonic therapeutic cultures, I point to the particular conditions in which “therapeutic culture” is being adapted in contemporary Russia. Its modes of acceptance, I argue, create a non-linear mode of translation and reinterpretation of therapeutic culture in contemporary Russia. First, therapeutic discourse in Russia faces strong competition from alternative local ways of self-management, such as the new religiosity, healing, and the categories of emotional socialism. Moreover, its meaning is not fixed; in particular, it is not determined by exported and imported discourses and cultural technologies. The therapeutic content of these forms may morph, lose its meaning, and also be replaced by other contents.

Among the particular condition of adaptation of the therapeutic culture, the article addresses an alternative tradition of subjectivity in the Russian/Soviet cultural universe that lacks basic therapeutic elements. The fact that the very concept of the self is absent from Russian discourse indicates that the Russian/Soviet way of articulating the individual is different. This discursive gap of course does not imply that people have no subjective experience, but it does imply that there are different models for articulating this experience. And indeed, the absence of the concept of self has to do with a different model of subjectivity that can be found in Russia, and with its key concepts: *soznanie*, *lichnost'*, *dusha*, and *kharakter* (consciousness, personhood, soul, and character/personality). All these concepts differ from the model of the therapeutic self. Responding to the same program of modernity that emerged in the 18th–20th centuries in the West, Russian and later Soviet literary, scientific, ideological and economic discourse engaged in a different trajectory of constituting the self and his/her emotional life. Although psychoanalysis went through a very enthusiastic early phase in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century, psychoanalysis and post-Freudian psychology in Russia never became a basis for culture formation and for social and interpersonal relations, and the Soviet psychological tradition never adopted its psychotherapeutic practices. In the absence of both the institutions of capitalism and the practices of post-Freudian therapy, Russian/Soviet culture lacks a “therapeutic self.” It is a core element that serves as the anchor for therapy, for the constitution of biographical narratives, for articulation of interpersonal relations, career, and social and personal success and failure. I demonstrate the absence of that type of self from personal narratives through an analysis of biographical interviews with students and academic informants.

Another important aspect of the contemporary Russian state of adaptation of the self resides in the post-Soviet discursive condition, which is characterized by a shift in the authoritative discourses of articulation of individual and private life. I argue that the new categories of Self, Individual, and Personality (as well as other categories of social knowledge) are being formed against the background of a discursive shift in the predominant sites of social knowledge production. This shift stems from the post-Soviet ideological-political transformation that creates a discursive gap, vacuum, or deficit in the symbolic “language of description” or in the articulation of social experience. The authoritative role of Soviet ideological discourse and scientific communism has been largely demolished, and Russian literary discourse

has lost its powerful authoritative role. One of the major candidates to fill that gap is the popular globalized Western media culture of late capitalism with its popular psychology. In other words, until recently, Russian literature and Communist ideology served as major sites for the production and articulation of the subject. Today, therapy is introducing itself as a competitive authoritative and effective site of self-constitution.

However, the absence of basic elements of capitalist emotional culture and the presence of alternative Russian/Soviet modes of subjectivity and of what I call “emotional socialism” make it intriguing to ask how the local culture of subjectivity is adapting this pop-psychological pop-cultural repertoire. Employing methods from the anthropology of knowledge, I map various sites of constitution of the new emotional style—from post-Soviet academic discourse through cultural production in the media to personal biographical narratives. The empirical gaze in this article focuses on some examples of translation of the therapeutic forms in television. The manifestations of this newly introduced therapeutic culture are particularly evident in the media, where off-the-shelf forms of Western global broadcasting are imitated, seemingly in a one-to-one fashion.

A close cultural analysis of the discursive landscape reveals that the adaptation of therapeutic culture in Russia does not appear to be a straightforward linear transformation, where one emotional style replaces another. Rather, it exposes the simultaneous coexistence in the present of different competing models, which differ both in their etymology and in their archeology. The newly introduced powerful therapeutic discourse is evidently present in post-Soviet media, but it also faces serious competition from its local alternatives and the cultural categories of emotional socialism. These categories once constituted a model of subjectivity no less powerful and pseudo-universal than their capitalist contemporaries.

Echoing the view of the prominent scholar of culture Svetlana Boym, who considers that “the Russian soul needs no ‘private life,’ that it is a psyche without psychology,” the article claims that therapeutic culture develops in post-Soviet Russia today before or without psychology, and above all it is not a product or function of psychological knowledge. Hence, the analysis proposed here suggests an empirical perspective that undermines the conception of therapeutic psychological culture as a universal package deal of modernity, capitalism, and psychology. In this sense the Russian version of therapeutic culture upsets what might appear to be the almost complete project of the intellectual critique of Western psychology. We can envision, for instance, a further mobilization of therapeutic culture in Russia through the enlistment of psychology in the service of the fatherland (e.g. of the new Russian family and the morality of a new Russian citizen). It is also possible that in the field in which therapeutic culture is being translated, we will see how the new forms are devoured by the old models and by existing narratives, moving from the private to the public, from the kitchen into the TV show.