

## Benjamin Goldschmidt

**Eugene Raikhel. *Governing Habits: Treating Alcoholism in the Post-Soviet Clinic*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016. 248 pp. ISBN 978-1-5017-0312-6.**

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Patterns of alcohol consumption and alcoholism treatment in post-Soviet countries in the critical years after the collapse of the Soviet Union have generated heightened interest in Western medical literature. During the 1990s a team of British and Russian addiction researchers conducted studies on the topic (Fleming, Meyroyan, and Klimova 1994; Fleming 1996; Fleming, Bradbeer, and Green 2001), reflected also in the present study, and the issue continues to be discussed both within and outside Russia (Zaridze et al. 2014; Penina 2018; Tuchina et al. 2018). Whereas these studies treat alcoholism mostly under the auspices of epidemiology or public health, Eugene Raikhel's interest and research design are clearly anthropological. In this regard, his study is more in the vein of Michele Rivkin-Fish (2003, 2005, 2017), Tomas Matza (2012, 2018), or Michelle Parsons (2014).

On his first visit to a municipal narcological clinic in Saint Petersburg, Raikhel is puzzled by the sight of an illuminated sign reading "Quiet! Hypnosis in Progress" (p. 2). Immediately, one thinks of a magician sitting behind a crystal ball and casting spells on his patient. The stark contrast in which this vision stands against the gloomy post-Soviet clinic is at once amusing and intriguing. It marks the abyss separating the researcher taking his first steps into Russian psychiatric clinic from the realities he finds in the field.

The book that Raikhel published in 2016 is itself, at first glance, rather startling. As the subtitle promises an inquiry into "Treating Alcoholism in the Post-Soviet Clinic," we might expect to learn about a set of institutions and their development over time. Instead, the research takes place exclusively in 2004 and there is no account whatsoever of subsequent developments. The same is true for the book's geographical focus: one city, Saint Petersburg, and nowhere else. Representativeness is clearly not an aim of this study, at least in any statistically significant terms. And yet this book is a must for anyone interested in contemporary addiction treatment in Russia and also for anyone trying to understand the state of the Russian psyche in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.

Conceptually, Raikhel follows a five-step trajectory based on his fieldwork in Saint Petersburg, augmented by secondary literature. He starts out by describing the most mainstream forms of treatment and moves subsequently towards the margins of therapeutic practice. In the context of 2004 Russia, this means a shift of focus from a Pavlovian, suggestion-based clinic to identity-based approaches in the vein of Al-

coholics Anonymous (AA). Inserted is a chapter (chapter 4) retracing the foundations of Russian psychological thought that lead to a clinical practice that, in its most prevalent form, differs significantly from its Western counterpart.

The alienation experienced by the ethnographer during his first encounters with the milieu of Russian mainstream narcology leads him to do a great deal of secondary research, the fruit of which is an excellent synopsis of the role of alcohol in Russian history, the development of Russian psychiatry, and eventually the emergence of narcology as a new medical discipline at the intersection of psychiatry and law enforcement in the 1970s (pp. 55–76). Emblematic of this new hybrid discipline were the so-called therapeutic-labor “prophylactories” (*lechebno-trudovye profilaktorii*), basically forced-labor camps for alcoholics or anyone labeled alcoholic by the respective governmental institutions, whether criminal or not (pp. 65–67). Raikhel highlights the particular institutional location of narcology, with the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) both having stakes in the exercise of therapeutic practice. Given the fact that for extended periods, both in tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union, alcohol sales were one of the main sources of state income, the criminalization of alcohol abuse entailed in making it a police affair looks rather cynical. Rendering the position of the state in this regard, Raikhel quotes Joseph Stalin saying that selling vodka makes Russia independent from foreign capital and thus furthers the cause of the workers and peasants (p. 58).

When entering a private narcological clinic, the next station on his trajectory through Saint Petersburg’s therapeutic milieus, Raikhel leaves behind history and focuses on the present-day “therapeutic market,” the economic and political setting in which private and state-run—and even non-profit—institutions compete for their share. One of the findings in this chapter is that there are no clear-cut differences between institutions according to their formal sector, particularly because state-funded hospitals also offer commercial services or run commercial units. Especially for the segment of the clientele for whom confidentiality is crucial, private clinics are popular as they promise to apply stricter privacy policies. By widening the perspective to the social and cultural context in which narcology works, Raikhel at once relativizes and attenuates much of what was detailed in the historical sections of the book.

Raikhel’s study is not only a paradigmatic application of qualitative research methods but also a masterpiece of ethnographic writing. Nowhere is its thrilling narrative more to the forefront than in the passages describing a raid by a band of masked men on the private clinic, right at the time when the author was conducting interviews with doctors. Raikhel renders the excited atmosphere in the clinic in vivid terms and lets the reader participate in the dramatics of the event. At the same time, he does not give this occurrence more weight than is necessary in order to understand the fierce economic struggle and political risks that come with running a private clinic in the conditions of 2004 Russia. Even though Raikhel’s is not a study using participant observation, the episode also illustrates to what extent the researcher in a qualitative setting is personally involved.

After having outlined what could be called the orthodoxy of narcological clinic, regardless of whether practiced in private or state-funded institutions, Raikhel gives a summary analysis of the underlying assumptions on the etiology of substance dependence in the Russian clinical context. In a brilliant example of historical ontology, a term he borrows from the philosopher Ian Hacking, Raikhel sums up his argument with the slogan “prostheses for the will” (p. 110). The analogy between the mental and the somatic contained in this concept is not accidental. Retracing the origins of contemporary Russian psychological thought, Raikhel finds that, in an attempt to refute bourgeois psychology, understood as Freudian, Soviet medical theorists of the 1930s adapted conditioned-reflex theory, developed 20 years earlier by Ivan Pavlov in his famous experiments with animals, and applied it to the human body. The outcome of this theoretical work was an understanding of the human organism that postulated a functional analogy between the body and the soul. Hypnosis, as mentioned in the introduction to Raikhel’s work, was part of an array of suggestion-based treatments designed to condition a patient’s physiological reflexes by means of clinical interventions that could take on quite dramatic forms. Building upon the conditioned-reflex theory, one widespread therapy would, for instance, consist of injecting the patients with apomorphine, a substance that provokes vomiting, and then prompt them to drink alcohol in order to condition a physiological aversion to the substance. As one of Raikhel’s respondents described the treatment, “he drinks a glass of cognac and they give him apomorphine and he vomits into a tub. Thirty to forty people would gather in a room and they all puked” (p. 114).

In the following two chapters, the researcher leaves the path of mainstream narcology and enters into the therapeutic subculture of Alcoholics Anonymous. He becomes involved with an AA community in Saint Petersburg that has a history of prominent members or associated persons among the city’s intelligentsia and artist circles, including Dmitrii Shagin, a central figure in the underground Mit’ki art group (p. 163). He first assesses the epistemological differences between AA’s twelve-step program and orthodox Russian psychiatry and finds that the differences are indeed profound. Whereas traditional therapies see the individual as unable to use his will in order to fight the disease and return to “normal” life and, therefore, provide him with the famous “prostheses,” AA requires addicts to undergo an actual conversion by embracing their addiction as their new identity. Returning to the “normal” is not an option in this perspective.

Next, Raikhel highlights the reception of AA in Russia since its beginnings in the late 1980s. Here, as in the previous chapters, he proves to be a skillful ethnographer in that he reflects on and makes evident his own cultural and political premises, while not diminishing by one iota the accuracy and clarity of his views. He finds that the “illness sodality,” as he calls it, of AA has been and still is perceived in Russia as an American cultural import and thus has a range of influential detractors. What has been criticized among other things are the roots of the twelve-step methodology in American Protestant thought; some domestic commentators even went as far as denouncing AA as a “Trojan horse” for Protestantism. Elaborating on this cultural-religious critique, Raikhel comes to ambiguous results. On one hand, the rootedness of

AA in Protestant spirituality has equally been noticed by American scholars, but rarely becomes the object of any public attention, let alone critique in North America. Hence, its perception as a “cultural import” in the Russian context might be surprising for Westerners, but is not without foundation. On the other hand, Raikhel observes an adoption of identity-based methods, similar to those of AA, by individual healers and the Russian Orthodox Church that both place it in a domestic, Orthodox spiritual context.

Even more stunning than this “entrance through the back door” is what he discovers in the next chapter. While exploring the ramifications of twelve-step therapeutic applications in Saint Petersburg, he enters a well-known and feared institution, the Psychiatric Hospital of a Special Type under Intensive Surveillance, a place notorious for having housed some of the city’s more famous dissidents in Soviet times. In this institution the punitive character of much of Soviet psychiatry was at its most concrete. All the more peculiar, then, that one of the hospital’s wards has been transformed by the director into a laboratory for twelve-step treatment to great success, inspired by his acquaintance with this method in a partnering US institution.

Two things make this a remarkable study. First, Raikhel is transparent when reflecting on the interactions between his individual subjectivity and the object of his study. He diligently traces the ways in which the objects of the observed world enter his consciousness, evoke a reaction, and are analyzed on the bases of his premises. These premises are consistently made explicit, giving way to reflections on and questioning of the researcher’s cultural and intellectual background. Even to someone totally unfamiliar with the material context this book reads as an example of accurate and theoretically sound qualitative research.

Second, Raikhel’s language is at once rich, powerful, and concise. The book is a real page-turner, towering above the average scientific treatise even in cultural anthropology. This might not be worth mentioning, be it for the importance of the author’s writing in a qualitative research setting. Subjectivity, and the reflection on it, being a permanent companion on the research path, the author’s ability to cast his impressions into words is a crucial ingredient of his craft. With methodological rigor Raikhel draws the “big picture” of Russian addiction medicine in its social, economic, and political contexts. Thanks to his narrative skills, the clinic itself becomes an icon of the state of the Russian psyche at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

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