

## Book Reviews

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**Anya Bernstein, *The Future of Immortality: Remaking Life and Death in Contemporary Russia*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, pp. 296, 2019.**

Anya Bernstein's book is an elegantly written, meticulously detailed monograph that describes perspectives on life, death and the transitional nature of humanity in contemporary Russia. At its heart is a study of individuals and groups of people who seek to extend radically the span of human life, and achieve universal immortality. Bernstein's material is drawn from a study of radically different groups of 'immortalists' active in the mid 2010s. These range from followers of Russian Orthodox philosopher Nikolai Fedorov (1828–1903) – who believed it would one day be possible for people to resurrect their dead ancestors through scientific-cum-technological means – to 'transhumanists' who seek to emplace human brains and minds into artificial bodies. Ethnographically, Bernstein's monograph presents material that is as insightfully observed as it is elegantly described. Descriptions of heterogeneous views on immortality are enriched through being interwoven with a genealogy of immortalist thought traced from the late nineteenth century onwards. Analytically, the book examines the development of Russian futurist ideas, both technical-scientific and religious, in the broader setting of contemporary politics and culture (10). Focusing on what it means to be human in these contexts, Bernstein's approach affords scrutiny of the relationship between ideas of immortality and conceptions of moral progress.

The Introduction, which outlines the book's argument and structure, is followed by four ethnographically rich chapters. Each one presents a particular perspective on life extension and immortality in contemporary Russia. As in Bernstein's earlier monograph (2013) on sovereignty and Buddhism in Russia's far eastern Buryat Republic, the body is interrogated as a key site of anthropological insight.

Chapter One examines 'competing practices of immortality' (39) and views of the human among different groups of immortalists. It begins with a description of the work of KrioRus, an organization that preserves its 'cryo-patients' (recently deceased humans and, in some cases, pets) in liquid nitrogen until they can be restored to life. The author then turns to an account of a project aimed at the creation of artificial bodies (robotic and hologram-based) that could host human consciousness. Bernstein also examines the thought of Fedorov, and his formulation of a 'cult of the ancestors in an Orthodox Christian framework' (63) ultimately aimed at the resurrection of the dead.

Chapter Two accentuates and amplifies Chapter One's concern with the body. It does so in the framework of a sustained comparison between the thought of modern-day followers of Fedorov and of transhumanists. Bernstein traces the influence of Fedorov's writings on two informants raised in the officially atheist Soviet Union, but who later came to adopt the teachings of this philosopher. Their concerns with how bodies can be organically transformed are used to elicit differences between their ontologies and those of transhumanists who valorize 'cyborgs and man-machine merging' (100) as a means to achieve human immortality.

Chapter Three examines 'anti-ageing'. It explores how actors ranging from academics to lobbyists frame ageing as a medicalized and ethicized phenomenon. It begins with an account of university-based studies on ageing, and the hypothetical possibility that this process could be slowed down or even stopped. It then goes on to examine lobbying carried out in the public sphere that attempts to frame medicalized ageing as an issue of major political concern.

Chapter Four explores how emerging technologies are taken up in national contexts. Echoing the content of Chapter One, the ethnographic focus of this chapter is on how the human is emergent from an 'entanglement of brains, machines, and the Internet' (169). In a way that exemplifies this book's concern with tracing the genealogy of ideas and their influence on contemporary social life, this chapter examines how today's speculative neuro-technical research is projected against the backdrop of the Soviet Union's mid-twentieth-century space programme.

The final section of the book reflects on how Bernstein's ethnographic material affords insight onto concepts of 'time, life, and the human' (213).

Bernstein's monograph is well presented and carefully illustrated. It contains graphs displaying quantitative data such as mortality rates in Russia, as well as images ranging from technical diagrams to photographs of the author's informants. To conclude: this is an insightful and remarkably detailed work of scholarship, likely to have a significant appeal to anthropologists working in a variety of fields.

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## References

- Bernstein, A. 2013. *Religious Bodies Politic: Rituals of Sovereignty in Buryat Buddhism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

**Tomas Matza, *Shock Therapy: Psychology, Precarity, and Well-being in Postsocialist Russia*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, pp. 305, 2018.**

Tomas Matza's *Shock Therapy: Psychology, Precarity, and Well-being in Postsocialist Russia* is an intricate exploration of Russia's psychotherapy boom, which coincided with the arrival of capitalism. Tracing this boom led Matza to diverse and far-flung social spaces in St. Petersburg between 2005 and 2013: psychological-education camps, municipal counselling services for children, adult trainings, personal growth seminars, talk radio and psychoneurological outpatient clinics.

Rather than viewing the psychotherapeutic turn as a symptom of governmentality, Matza situates psychotherapy as a medium through which people came to terms with the experience of the ending of one way of living and the beginning of another, attending to ambivalences and contradictions as people navigate emergent political subjectivities. Matza avoids such a functionalist approach by historically situating the 'boom' as neither 'imported' nor as direct carry-over from Perestroika-era liberalization of the 'psy-ences'. The first post-introduction chapter is devoted to the genealogy of applied psychology, tracing Soviet psychiatry's early biological-materialist model through the Stalinization and subsequent de-Stalinization of psychology (mid 1950s–1970). Late-Soviet liberalization witnessed differentiated, democratized education reform focusing on child individuality. The shift to attend to individual difference eventually empowered psychologists to produce such difference. *How* they do so in marketized St. Petersburg occurs in fascinatingly divergent ways, and Matza's methodological approach to compare municipally- and commercially-offered therapy becomes a robust theoretical strength of his ethnography; a focus on a state-owned centre illuminates how scant resources, federal policy requirements, inspections and over-burdened psychologists sometimes led to (what Matza describes as) pre-mature pathologization. On the other hand, a focus on commercial therapeutic spaces available to children from affluent families sheds light on the 'marketization' of upbringing' (6) and the related emphasis on cultivating a sense of freedom, self-management and responsibility in the next generation of Russia's leaders.

Matza coins two new analytic terms upon which he builds throughout the book. The first is 'psychosociality', described as 'the use of psychology as a social resource' (232) and drawing on Ticktin's 'biosociality'. Psychosocial intimacy was an exciting, novel way of relating to one another as it 'created the possibility for other, more open and informal kinds of social relations' (280). The expansive potential of psychosociality is well illustrated as psychotherapists recruit languages for modelling social life; terms such as energy (*energiia*), harmony (*garmoniia*) and soul (*dusha*) are used to articulate the affective relation between self and other, and that which is shared between and among bodies. Chapter 6 on talk-show therapy points to postsocialist public intimacy as a space of multifarious and contested political subjectivities as callers challenge the host Labkovsky's 'psychotherapeutically-mediated liberalism', the idea that listeners as autonomous subjects should look within to better their lives, cultivating self-esteem and self-possession as they 'get used to'

capitalism (202–203). Dissenting callers draw attention to the limits of this advice: Kira highlighted that one problem with the ‘order and regulate oneself’ political stance was that you cannot control someone else’s lack of self-control; Dasha asked how self-work would help her not notice the abuse of homeless animals and witnessing cruelty towards them (217–220).

Matza’s second term and the book’s ‘organizing concept’, precarious care, clears even more analytic space, gaining momentum and complexity as the book progresses. Care in *Shock Therapy* is precarious in two senses: first, care can be beneficial or harmful to the recipient, in line with recent scholarship illustrating how the biopolitical logics of care can be deeply intertwined with dispossession of recipients of that care. Second and relatedly, precarious care as politico-ethical practice can either align with or diverge from biopolitical and other hegemonic norms and institutionalized practices. As Matza moves through different care-providing spaces, he illuminates the commitments, desires and relations to power entailed in providing care, highlighting the fluid and complex conditions under which it is given. That providing ‘good’ care can be precarious not only for recipients but also for practitioners is well illustrated in the case of Zoya, a psychologist who charted legally- and ethically-indeterminate waters by providing care to her child-patient outside of that which was designated by the state-provided social service programme for which she worked. ‘I don’t regret it’, Zoya relayed to Matza. ‘Of course it gave me tremendous gratification [to know] that I could be of “real” help’ (160).

As a vote of confidence for the enduring applicability of the category ‘post-socialist’, this book will appeal to scholars who take up this term (or otherwise might be compelled to do so), as well as those exploring the relation between political economy and social practices more widely. While this book will be relevant to those interested in care and/or mental ill health in medical anthropology, medical humanities and allied social and medical sciences more generally, scholars focusing on care as it relates to ethical and biopolitical concerns will particularly appreciate the analytic attention to these aspects.

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