



Larisa Deriglazova. A Review of **Jarrett Zigon**.

Making the New Post-Soviet Person: Moral Experience in Contemporary Moscow. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2010, 257 pp.¹

Office Plankton and Social Transformers in the Dantean Hell

The almost twenty-five years of the post-Soviet period have undoubtedly led to the formation of a new, ‘post-Soviet’ personality. This is a live topic for sociologists studying the change in the political and ideological values of Russians, their new social practices, survival strategies and peculiarities of their national self-perception [Gudkov, Dubin, Zorkaya 2008]. The condition of Russian society after the reforms most closely corresponds to the classical sociological theory of *anomie* proposed by Émile Durkheim. The years of crisis in the 1990s were followed by the ‘well-fed’ 2000s with their cult of consumerism and culture of glamour [Rudova 2009; Shor-Chudnovskaya 2009]. The radical breakdown in established social norms, the removal of moral and social stays, the multiplicity of lifestyle and behavioural choices, the absence of any strict regulation of social relationships, the change in the nature of social mobility, social lifts and intentions, the appearance of new social groups — none of these processes is complete. The existing research literature on ‘post-Soviet’ subjects is to a large extent concerned with the sphere of their public existence and political behaviour or else analyses the state of society in general and the position of particular social

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¹ This review has been written as part of the work for the project on ‘Man in a Changing World: Problems of Identity and Social Adaptation in Past and Present’ (Russian Federation government grant No. 14. B25.31.0009).

groups. The topic of personality and the sphere of private or even especially intimate life, formed or substantially transformed after the reforms, is less well represented.

Nevertheless, the topic of morality and moral values in contemporary Russian society is a constant refrain to the social discussions about the content and consequences of the changes, and those 'actors and factors' which have had and still have a decisive effect on the changes in society and social morality. No doubt the radical change in their socio-economic and ideological foundations has had a great effect on society and its moral mainstays, as has the actual process of change, accompanied as it was by real human dramas, personal and social crises and breakdowns. The influence of the West, of the Western lifestyle, and of the culture of consumerism on Russian society and the consequent transformation of social morality is also actively discussed in Russian society both at the level of elites (political and academic) and of society more broadly. Other noteworthy topics — the change in gender roles, the attitude to sex, the transformation of family relationships — have also attracted Russian authors.

This book, by the American anthropologist Jarrett Zigon, is a curious example of a discussion of the topic of the morality of 'post-Soviet' man within the framework of the anthropology of morality, which is as yet under-represented in Russian scholarship. The question of morality and religious awareness is a significant direction in the humanities (religious studies) in America, and in this sense the book bears the evident imprint of the culture of 'morals and ethics' as represented in the everyday public and private life of Americans. The book is remarkable for having been written by an 'outside observer', untrammelled by cultural codes, overt or informal prohibitions, or self-censorship. The book does not claim to answer the question of which was more moral, Soviet or post-Soviet human nature, but is rather concerned with the study of the contradictions, the reasons for moral choice, and the awareness of the consequences of the choice made by the heroes of the book under the pressure of circumstances in a complex period of post-Soviet history. From the very beginning the book echoes Dostoevsky's novels, and this association is reinforced by its cover, which bears a photograph from the 'Russian Destiny' series by the well-known German photographer Gerd Ludwig showing a young woman outside the window of a French designer shop in the newly-built Hotel 'Moskva' on Revolution Square. However, as one reads the book one is more and more reminded of the dialogues and dreams of the heroes of Chernyshevsky's *What is to be Done?* as they look for themselves and for moral props in an imperfect world at a time of social upsets and changes.

The author has defined the genre of his research as anthropology and critical social hermeneutics. Qualitative research methods are used to the maximum, with a minimum of informants and prolonged conversations with them, recorded at the beginning of the first decade of the century, the logic of the questions for discussion imposed by the author, and extensive commentaries and interpretations of what he has heard. The author explains his rejection of a wider representation by his negative experiences in focus groups, where he realised that he would get an idea of the 'power relationships' within the group, but not a discussion of the problems of moral choice with all their contradictions and ambiguities. The author achieved a relationship almost of friendship with those five informants, from an original group of thirty, who showed an interest in prolonged conversations.

Zigon isolates several topics around which the dialogues with his heroes are constructed and which, in his opinion, are key to understanding morality in contemporary Russia: the ideology of consumerism, religion, sex, drugs, changes in gender roles and the position of women. The author explains, or perhaps justifies, his choice in detail, saying that anthropology must aim to understand the behaviour of the individual without leaving the sphere of 'non-individual theoretical construction'. Indeed, the nature of the problems under discussion, which relate to the intimate sphere of human life, does require conversations without the presence of third parties who might exert pressure (deliberate or not) on the expression of opinions and positions. Still, the restriction of the number of informants to five mostly young people is a very narrow choice, where the possibility of erroneous conclusions and generalisations on the basis of unrepresentative sources is very high. The narrowness of the chosen circle of informants is reinforced by the fact that they all live in the capital, which, like other big cities of global significance, has a special pattern of life and thought that is in many respects 'not typical of the national culture'.

What is also curious is the choice of informants, who, in the author's opinion, are more closely connected with the problems of morality in their professional and private life: 'an active Russian Orthodox Christian believer, a practising artist, or a teacher.' However, this gradation is provisional and on close reading does not stand up to serious criticism. The author declares his method to be biographical, or the recounting of his heroes' 'life histories' based on semi-structured interviews from ninety minutes to two hours in length (pp. 41–2). In fact, however, the author lives 'included' alongside his heroes for almost five years, during which they meet from time to time for extensive conversations. Hours spent walking about Moscow, meetings at the informants' homes or in Moscow cafés,

and the discussion of very important aspects of life help the heroes of the book, and its author, to articulate their own moral position or changes to it.

Zigon has defined his method of studying post-Soviet subjects in polemics with authors in Russia and abroad. He disputes Serguei Oushakine's thesis of the post-Soviet condition as aphasia or an inability to find new meanings and truths and a return to 'second-hand' Soviet symbols and forms, which for Oushakine is a blind alley or a form of new seclusion [Oushakine 2009]. Zigon also rejects the widespread view of Russians through the prism of the persistent clichés — 'Russian *dusha* [soul]', 'suffering' and 'collectivism' — which can often be encountered in the works of Western anthropologists. He suggests that the main element in the transformation of the morality of post-Soviet subjects is globalisation, which has opened Russia up to ideas, images, practices and knowledge from outside. This openness has created the opportunity for Russians to see and 'try out' those socio-cultural and economic ways of life that are becoming the landmarks for the country's future. As he writes, the post-Soviet period may be described as life inside 'a triangulation between the past, the future and the Other'. This 'Other', moreover, may at the same time be considered a *possible* and a *desirable* model for the future (p. 5). An acquaintance with the 'other' as a possible 'future' is due to mass tourism, consumerism and the global mass media.

The new signposts have given rise to the possibility, or illusion, of choice, and led to what the author calls 'an epistemological and moral gap' in Russian society. This gap is clearly evident in the public space and in the inner process of self-definition and the critical evaluation of the moral bases of the post-Soviet personality. Examples of polarised life scenarios are, in the author's opinion, the young professionals and nationalists of various degrees. New Russian yuppies who are successfully achieving the transition to the 'capitalist way of life' are set against unsuccessful Russians, young and old, who find a justification for their position in nationalism, condemning the post-Soviet changes as anti-Russian and amoral. Zigon suggests that various 'mixtures' of these two opposing positions reflect the mood of millions of Russians and explain the success of Putin and United Russia as 'a unique hybridisation between the transformational ethic of the first group and the nationalist spirit of the second' (pp. 6–7).

Zigon offers his own theory for understanding 'post-Soviet' people, which in his view allows us to overcome the conceptual and methodological vagueness of the philosophical and anthropological approach to the study of morality (pp. 21–2). Zigon's theory of *moral breakdown* is literally one of 'erosion of morality' or 'the

decline of moral values', but it is really about the critical moments of human life, when they interpret social morality critically and must make their own moral choices. In his article on post-Soviet social forms [Menshikov 2013: 110], A. S. Menshikov calls Zigon's theory the theory of moral choice, which precisely conveys the contents of his method. Zigon supposes that his approach is a successful compromise between Pierre Bourdieu's understanding of morality as 'embodied habitus', with its accent on the unconsciousness and vagueness of socio-economic factors, and Michel Foucault's concept of 'problematization', according to which a person makes a conscious choice by making sense of a situation in obedience to ethics. Zigon believes that an analysis of critical situations in people's lives allows us to understand the transformation of the personality when this latter makes sense of itself and of social norms. These moments 'create a new location of personality' in respect of the existing social morality by means of an ethical choice (pp. 26–9). It is precisely the moment of 'erosion of morality' or 'moral breakdowns' that allows the usually accepted and socially conditioned ethical standards to be 'problematized' and a personal outlook and position to be formed at the moment of moral choice.

The composition of the book takes the form of an exposition of the method, a demonstration of its working exemplified by the five individual histories, and the author's concluding deliberations. The first chapter, which is the longest, presents the author's reasons for choosing his topic, his means of studying it, and his place and methodology within the conceptual landscape of modern research into humanity and morality. The first chapter also introduces us to the characters in the book: Olya, Larisa, Dima, Anna and Aleksandra Vladimirovna. The second to seventh chapters are written in the form of dialogues between author and informant, and the eighth sums up the author's ideas about morality and moral choice in modern Russia. Each chapter has sub-headings forming the interior thematic skeleton of the book: sources of morality (personal ethical choice, family, religion), the erosion of morality in today's Russia, inner dissolution, lies and compromises, ethical dilemmas and the search for ethical foundations.

The book is certainly worthy of notice as an interesting and detailed reconstruction of the life of modern Muscovites, mostly young, and it presents some recognisable types of the 'new post-Soviet person' very well. The first type, which Zigon calls 'Russian Neoliberal true careerists', have a flexible understanding of morality and accept lying for the sake of career progression, success at work, easing social interaction, etc. (pp. 90–1). This type of 'New Russian' has become known in Russia by the somewhat contemptuous name of 'office plankton'.

Close to this type is the ‘young disillusioned’ person who went through the most acute crises, together with his or her parents, during childhood and adolescence, and whose signposts in life and moral compass were determined by this. These young Russians’ main feature is their utter distrust of all the social institutions in the country, and their idea of Russia itself as the poetic image of Dante’s Hell — *lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch’entrate*. For this reason the logical way out of such a life is for these people to orient themselves on Western countries as a way of escaping the ‘hopeless hell’ of repetition (p. 172).

The ‘anti-system’ person, completely lacking in any moral position, is a completely different type, constantly searching and verifying the meaning of his or her own life without prohibitions or signposts prescribed by society or social institutions (pp. 163–4). The main distinguishing feature of such people is their effort not to be part of ‘the system’, never mind what system — the Soviet or post-Soviet structured social space, social morality, the Orthodox Church or the community of devotees of Krishna. These people test themselves and others, creating and overcoming various ‘temptations’ or ‘challenges’. Their main principle in life is the lack of any principles imposed from outside, and to follow the logic of a ‘comfortable choice’ of ‘pleasant challenges’ (p. 146). Zigon provides many examples of his hero’s ‘comfortable choices’, one of which I should like to mention here. The young man is hiding in a shop from an aggressive group of youths who have attacked him on account of his looking Caucasian. However, he does not call the police to the aid of another passer-by whom he has seen falling foul of the same group.

There is another recognisable type that I would call the ‘modified Soviet person’, who has been able to pass from the principles of the ‘moral codex of the builder of communism’ to an over-articulated Orthodoxy which has in some peculiar fashion transformed itself out of an interest in yoga and an enthusiasm for various spiritual practices. The result is the formation of a personality with a strong moralising imperative, a tendency to instruct other people and strongly expressed self-control. The central element of the personality remains essentially unchanged — to be an active transformer of society ‘for the betterment of the world in which she lives’, but now on the basis of her own conceptions of Orthodox morality (p. 210).

In conclusion Zigon identifies three unifying features or means of forming a moral sense in each of his five heroes, which he presents as the ‘range of possibilities’ in conditions of changing ‘socio-historic-cultural’ frameworks and the opening up of the country to outside influences. *Obshchenie* is presented as ‘utilizing a recognisable cultural script to articulate’ their own moral position and the choice that the book’s heroes make. The second unifying feature is the ‘idea

of moral development and ethical work on the self.' And, finally, all the heroes of the book know 'the kind of person they hoped they could be' from a moral point of view. One can agree with the author's final words that the moral portraits presented 'should be read as articulations of how morality and ethics are ways in which these individuals express their hopes and struggles in being and becoming a certain kind of person in the unique historical moment of post-Soviet Russia' (pp. 239–49).

If the book is to be evaluated in terms of the novelty and originality of the material and method that it presents, one might say the following. Zigon's book may be recommended as an interesting attempt to understand, primarily, the first post-Soviet generation of people in their thirties, who have had practically no experience of 'conscious' life in the Soviet Union. In this sense, the book is about 'New Russians'. There is no doubt that the book is written with great sympathy and respect for its heroes. Despite the moralising passages which are inevitable in this sort of research, the book presents us with some very recognisable images of our fellow-countrymen. I found the topic of evaluating the level of violence in society interesting. Some of the book's heroes suggest that modern Russia is moving in the direction of 'a decrease in violence and an increase in stability' (p. 129), which is understood as an absence of social compulsion towards the individual. Other heroes have more everyday criteria for determining the level of violence, which in their opinion has not changed since Soviet days, just as morality itself has not changed (pp. 170–9).

However, the greater part of the book will hardly be a revelation for Russian readers. The themes chosen for discussion are any case part of social discourse, not so much, admittedly, thanks to academic studies as to the 'reality' and 'talk' shows broadcast in enormous quantities on television, and to discussions on social networks. Some of the author's conversations with his heroes naggingly remind us of the dialogues on popular 'shows', particularly those which are accompanied by the author's moralising conclusions and generalisations.

In my view the author's theory and method have only a partial claim to originality. Despite his polemic with the methodology of Émile Durkheim, Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault at the beginning of the book, Jarrett Zigon's approach is founded on a synthetic use of various elements from these very theories intended to explain the state of society and the life of the individual at a period of crises and large-scale changes. Zigon's method also reminds one of the psychoanalysis that is so popular in the United States, and the author himself admits that the long conversations that he has had with his heroes have had a substantial effect on his own moral choice.

Nevertheless the book is curious precisely as a documentary witness to the life of five Muscovites and it will undoubtedly interest anyone who prefers micro-history to the analysis of the macro-level. Zigon's discussion of how modern Russian society, open to the world, is living inside the triangle of 'the past, the future and the Other', and can make a conscious choice in favour of 'a possible or desired other future', also deserves attention.

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Translated by Ralph Cleminson