

## **Post-Soviet *Khoziain*:**

### **Class, self and morality in Russian self-help literature**

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#### **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

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This chapter engages in a cultural reading of class by looking at how contemporary Russian self-help literature represents, explains and legitimises class divisions and distinctions.<sup>2</sup> In dialogue with Bourdieu-inspired feminist theorisation on class (Skeggs 1998, 2004, Reay 1998, 2005, Lawler 1999, 2005), I conceive of class as a complex process of drawing material as well as symbolic boundaries and hierarchies. I suggest that self-help literature opens a particularly illuminating window into investigating cultural articulations of class and the interplay between processes of class- and self-formation. The disintegration of the Soviet Union prompted not only a restructuring of social and economic institutions, but also very importantly, a re-evaluation of the Soviet value system. Self-help literature as part of popular

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<sup>2</sup> This chapter draws upon an on-going research project examining self-help technologies in contemporary Russian and Finnish societies. The project analyses bestselling self-help books published during the 2000s and, drawing upon focus group and one-to-one interviews as well as website discussions, explores how readers engage with this literature and what kind of meanings they attach to it.

media culture offers an important site for such a renegotiation of the conceptions of social justice, morality, personhood and human worth. As symbolic systems of knowledge and evaluation, cultural representations have real effects on the ways in which people can move in social space (Skeggs 2001: 296), and thus constitute an integral part of the politics of class. As Beverley Skeggs argues,

The significance of representation lies in the way in which they (...) produce the normative, how they designate moral value and how those who are positioned by negative and pathological representations are both aware and resistant. A daily class-struggle is waged through challenging the values generated through representations, precisely because representation constitutes what can be known as persons. (Skeggs 2004: 117-118)<sup>3</sup>

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Although extremely popular in today's Russia, popular psychological self-help literature has so far attracted very little academic attention (see, however, Salmenniemi 2010a).<sup>4</sup> By self-help literature I refer to the multifaceted, commercial field of advice books that encourage one to work on one's self.<sup>5</sup> I understand it as a 'technology of the self' (Foucault 1988, 1998), which offers cultural articulations and techniques for individuals to work on their selves –

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<sup>3</sup> Stuart Hall (1980: 63) also makes a similar point by arguing that every struggle between classes is always a struggle between cultural modalities.

<sup>4</sup> Various alternative healing and 'supernatural' services, and a popular psychological radio talk show, have been studied by Lindquist (2001a, 2001b, 2002) and Matza (2009), respectively.

<sup>5</sup> Although popular advice manuals did exist in both Tsarist and Soviet Russia, offering advice on how to manage one's self, human relationships, body and conduct (for more details, see Kelly 2001, Kharkhordin 1999), in contrast to Western societies therapeutic language and techniques occupied a marginal position in Soviet society until perestroika.

their bodies, minds and conduct. Self-help books seek to guide, evaluate and problematise the self and ways of thinking, feeling and acting, and introduce concepts and categories through which they can be made sense of and transformed. In this way they shape the process of subjectivation and wield regulatory power by normalising certain identities, activities and relationships.

The appeal of self-help literature in Russia draws, first, on the lack of sufficient and affordable health services and a tradition of seeking psychological consultation along with a distrust of the official health care system, which encourage people to seek medical and psychological advice from self-help literature. Secondly, self-help literature serves as a cultural resource that can be used to attempt to make sense of the shifting value systems following the rupture of the Soviet ideological framework and to strive to achieve a sense of agency (for more details, see Salmenniemi & Vorona 2011). The structural distrust characteristic of Russian society, coupled with a widespread sense of political powerlessness (Petukhov 2005, Salmenniemi 2008), encourages people to work on what they feel can be influenced and transformed: their own feelings, thoughts and behaviour.

This chapter examines the writings of two Russian bestselling popular psychology self-help authors, Nataliia Pravdina and Valerii Sinelnikov.<sup>6</sup> Obviously the analysis of these texts cannot offer a comprehensive overview of the discourses of class in the self-help genre, but I believe it can provide important insights into those discourses that are widely circulating

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<sup>6</sup> I have included in the analysis four books by Pravdina and three by Sinelnikov (see the bibliography for more details). Pravdina has published more than 20 books, Sinelnikov 10 books.

amongst the reading audience.<sup>7</sup> The chapter begins with an introduction to these authors and the philosophical and cultural starting points of their books. The following sections examine the ideological work these books do in representing, evaluating and legitimising social inequalities, and in constructing ‘ideal selves’ marked by class and gender. The concluding section will situate the self-help genre in the wider context of the politics of class and social justice in contemporary Russia.

### **Apostles of a ‘new consciousness’**

Nataliia Pravdina is a feng shui consultant and a prolific author of self-help manuals. According to her website she lived in the US in the 1990s, but moved back to Russia in the 2000s and is currently working as a consultant in both countries ([www.pravdina.ru](http://www.pravdina.ru)). Her texts draw on American New Age self-help discourses with ‘post-feminist’ features.<sup>8</sup> They

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<sup>7</sup> No comprehensive information is available on the circulation of self-help books in Russia. However, the bestseller list published by the journal *Knizhnoe obozrenie* frequently includes self-help titles, which is an indication of the popularity of this genre. For example, Sinelnikov’s books have appeared on this bestseller list (e.g. in 2006 two of his books were regularly listed); his books also advertise on their covers ‘more than 8 million copies sold’. Pravdina’s books also figure on bestseller lists (e.g. in the Internet bookstore *Knizhnaia Orbita* in 2006), and in the bestseller stands in Moscow bookstores (personal observation). According to Boris Dubin (1998), in Russia in the 1990s around 39% of all non-fiction publications in the humanities dealt with ‘occult-esoteric topics’ (quoted in Menzel 2007), a category which frequently includes popular psychological literature. Indeed, by visiting Russian bookstores and Internet bookstores one cannot help but notice the enormous amount of this type of literature on offer.

<sup>8</sup> According to Rosalind Gill (2007), post-feminism is sensibility characterised, amongst other things, by a celebration of femininity, consumerism, an emphasis on ‘natural sexual difference’ and the rhetoric of choice as well as autonomy and sexual freedom. Gill argues that post-feminism has become a pervasive element of Western media culture and that it is closely connected with neoliberal rationality.

circulate the ideas of a ‘prosperity stream’ of New Age thought, focusing on gaining wealth through personal growth (Heelas 1996), and of ‘positive thinking’, the core notion of the American self-help genre (Woodstock 2005). Pravdina’s books are written in an accessible and entertaining style. They seek to construct a dialogical and confidential relationship between the author and the readers, in particular women, to whom the books are more specifically addressed.

Valerii Sinelnikov is a psychologist, medical doctor, psychotherapist and homeopath. Born in Russia, he moved during the Soviet era to Ukraine where he continues to live today. His main sources of inspiration are the ancient Slavic cultural traditions and the mythology of a ‘Slavic-Aryan civilisation’. In this sense his thoughts resonate with Russian neo-paganist thought (Laruelle 2008) and the ideas of an obscure Omsk-based ‘Church of Inglings’ (Aitamurto 2011). His writings position a pre-Christian Slavic way of life – the organisation of society according to the principles of *obshchina* (traditional peasant commune) and kin, and harmony between man and nature – as a model for contemporary society. The ultimate goal of this neo-paganist self-help project is the revival of Slavic nations and a restoration of their superpower status. However, Sinelnikov’s books also draw on the American self-help genre with its positive thinking and New Age tenets, although he, as a rule, does not explicitly acknowledge it. His books have a more didactic tone than Pravdina’s and he clearly positions himself as a moral and scientific authority by referring to himself as a Doctor and Professor, and by stating that his books are based on ‘research’.

Both authors encourage their readers to intensively work on their ways of thinking, feeling and being, in order to achieve a ‘New Consciousness’ (*Novoe Soznanie*) (Pravdina) and to become ‘Masters of one’s life’ (*khoziain zhizni*) (Sinelnikov). Both also put forward ideas

reminiscent of NLP techniques (neuro-linguistic programming), concerned with the link between mental images and behavioural patterns. Spirituality and religion play a key role in their books, which can be located within the framework of 'hybrid spirituality'. This is characterised by a self-constructed, syncretic philosophical worldview encompassing elements from a range of belief systems (Woodstock 2005), such as a variety of Eastern philosophies (concerning e.g. karma, reincarnation, feng shui), Christian faith and ancient Slavic spirituality.

Pravdina's and Sinelnikov's texts can be seen as circulating the centuries-old debate between Westerniser and Slavophile thought. Dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this pervasive discursive formation has centrally underpinned and shaped understandings of national identity in Russia. For Pravdina, the West, and in particular the US, is an object of emulation, an ideal to strive for. She often compares Russia to America and seeks to 'domesticate' American values to the soil of Russia. As she writes, 'this book differs [from American self-help books] in the sense that I have managed to situate the American experience into our national mentality' (Pravdina 2002: 11).

For Sinelnikov, the West is a more ambivalent entity. His books are a curious mixture of ardent critique of Western capitalism in a Slavophile tone and an idealisation of an entrepreneurial, self-reliant subject. On the one hand, he interprets the West, and America as its primary signifier, as a source of moral degradation that has been poisoning the morally superior and pure Russian/Slavic terrain since the 1990s. Western popular culture and its 'perverted' conceptions of gender relations and sexuality, and the Western models of democracy and capitalism, are portrayed as damaging to Slavic nations. Sinelnikov presents a variety of conspiracy theories on how the US has consciously and systematically sought to

humiliate and destroy the Slavs by importing its corrupting norms and values.<sup>9</sup> He suggests that each nation should draw only on its own history and traditions in developing its society and way of life. However, on the other hand, having described this disruptive effect of foreign models, Sinelnikov draws on ideas from Eastern philosophies and the American self-help genre in his writings, without in any way commenting on this obvious contradiction.

Pravdina's and Sinelnikov's books share an ontological stand, familiar from much of American positive thinking and New Age self-help (Woodstock 2005, Ehrenreich 2009), that social reality is a direct effect of our words, feelings and thoughts without any corporeal or structural constraints. Sinelnikov calls this a 'law of reflection' (*zakon otrazheniia*), implying that the 'outer world' is a reflection of the 'inner world' of the psyche and self. Both authors suggest that by transforming one's self – mental images, ways of thinking, feeling and speaking – one transforms reality. However, they also stress it is not enough merely to change mental images and linguistic expressions: one must also *believe* in these new images and expressions and their effects.

For both authors the idea of a 'Universe' (*Vselennaia*), a metaphysical Higher Power, is central, as well as the idea that all material and spiritual entities have a specific energy of their own. Here the principle of magnetism and the 'law of attraction' are crucial: similar things attract each other (*podobnoe privlekaet podobnoe*). Positive thoughts and words function as magnets or invitations, which, according to the laws of the Universe, draw happiness, success and wealth to one's life. Both authors make sense of the mind by employing the metaphor of 'programming' (*programmirovanie*), familiar from the NLP and

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<sup>9</sup> In this sense his writings echo the narratives of 'Russian tragedy' mapped by Oushakine (2009) in his ethnography on tropes of loss and trauma in post-Soviet Russia (see also Mäkinen in this volume).

positive thinking. By programming one's mind into a positive mode, all problems can be solved and happiness can be achieved.

### **The psychology of class**

The key concepts in both authors' texts are 'choice' (*vybor*) and 'responsibility' (*otvetstvennost'*), which are also part and parcel of Western therapeutic culture and neoliberal rationality (Rose 1998). The books contend that we are all free to make choices, from which it logically follows that we ourselves choose to be happy or unhappy: 'All you have to do is to choose success for yourself!' (Pravdina 2002: 67). The books encourage people to acknowledge that one is solely responsible for one's life and problems. This discourse of responsibility and free choice can be interpreted as a counter-discourse of the pervasive discursive formation, which conceives of the Russian/Soviet people and history as trapped in the grip of paternalism. This formation has been influential in Russians' self-definitions and scholarly analyses alike (see e.g. Rancour-Laferriere 1995), and has tended to present the Russian/Soviet people as essentially prone to eternal suffering, lacking initiative and responsibility, and longing for a strong leader.<sup>10</sup> The insistence on choice and responsibility in these self-help books also distinguishes them from the Soviet advice genre, in which the Party and Marxist-Leninist philosophy functioned as an unquestionable source of authority and truth. Sinelnikov and Pravdina, although seeking to convince their readers of their models and methods, encourage them to draw their own conclusions and ultimately choose if they wish to follow the proposed advice.

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<sup>10</sup> In his *Slave Soul of Russia*, Rancour-Laferriere (1995: 7, 35) describes Russians as having a 'genius for masochism' and as defeating, injuring and humiliating themselves unduly. See also Engelstein's (1998) critical review of the book.



The self-help authors explain social problems and disadvantage, and success and wealth, by psychologising them. Sinelnikov, for example, contends that lack of money stems merely from a person's subconscious rejection of money. He makes a link between a 'healthy self' and wealth, by proposing that 'the amount of money [you have] is directly proportional to how much you respect yourself' (Sinelnikov 2007b: 41). According to him, the *only* difference between the rich and the poor is the difference in their mental images. The poor have destructive images in their subconscious and are trapped in the old model of consciousness marked by a 'victim-tyrant' dynamic, while the rich have creative images and have become masters (*khoziain*) of their lives (I will discuss this concept of *khoziain* in more detail in the next section). Pravdina also understands wealth as an effect of a 'healthy self' mastering the art of positive thinking. She illustrates this with a story of how she once travelled in a taxi, which passed luxurious yachts. When she admired these yachts aloud (and thus 'mentally invited' such a yacht to herself), the driver 'emphatically denounced their owners because of their wealth' and 'whined about a hapless government'. As Pravdina then states, 'I haven't yet encountered a better example of how a person literally pushes away money and success' (Pravdina 2006: 89-90).

In Sinelnikov's books, the understanding of social (in)equality also stems from the idea of karma and the concomitant system of ranks (*soslovie*) drawing on a 'traditional Slavic-Aryan model of society' (Sinelnikov 2010: 88-89). In this view, every individual has a specific destiny in life determined by nature, which also defines his/her position in the *soslovie* system. This system consists of four ranks: executors (workers, officials); bosses (*khoziaeva*: entrepreneurs, middle management); a governing rank (politicians, judges, military leaders etc.); and a spiritual rank of the intelligentsia (doctors, lawyers, psychologists etc.), responsible for 'the nation's strategies of development' (Sinelnikov 2010: 99). Every rank is

to perform its specific function for the common good of the society. Although one is born with certain aptitudes to a particular rank, one can move upwards by working on one's self. Eventually rank is thus a matter of choice: it is up to oneself whether one chooses to move upwards by striving for a higher consciousness.

In Sinelnikov's texts those who are poor and suffering are assigned a specific function. They are to facilitate the spiritual growth of those better-off by reminding them about the need to work on their selves in order to avoid poverty. According to Sinelnikov, the Universe is essentially fair and those who suffer, suffer for a reason: their negative, destructive selves have brought about all their misery. However, contrary to Pravdina's texts, which do not discuss social solidarity or encourage helping those less well off, Sinelnikov's books encourage charity. They offer ethical guidelines for coming to terms with new social inequalities, for example by advising how to help beggars (e.g. to give them food rather than money, to never feel pity for them, and so on).

Because these self-help books see negative thoughts and words as 'magically contagious', bringing about what they name, they explicitly discourage a discussion of social problems and inequalities. Pravdina, for example, advises her readers to

Never encourage discussion about unpleasant issues. Refuse all attempts to draw yourself into a discussion about inflation, expensive prices, corruption of the powers-that-be, the breaking and entering of homes, and so on. (Pravdina 2007b: 134)

Sinel'nikov also advises avoiding such common complaints as 'oligarchs, thieves, swindlers, and non-Russians (*inorodtsy*) have grabbed the power of the state. It does not depend on us. The world is just built that way' (Sinel'nikov 2007a: 187). His texts seek to instil a sense of agency in readers by claiming, in a similar way to much of American self-help literature (Dolby 2005: 100), that one can transform the world by transforming one's self (see also Matza 2009). I suggest that with this individual-centred transformation project his texts seek to grapple with the sense of political disenfranchisement that characterises post-Soviet societies.

These self-help books thus conceive of class positions as an effect of psychic processes. Poverty and disadvantage are understood as individual 'failures' caused by an undeveloped, pathological self. Because an articulation of social inequalities is seen as 'negative thinking', the books effectively discourage social criticism and foreclose any possibility of voicing moral anger and a sense of injustice. And indeed, there is no need for such criticism, since inequality is not perceived as originating from socio-structural relations of power, but rather from the psychological realm. What is needed instead is *self-criticism*. In this way the psychological repertoire masks the structural constraints within which 'choices' are made and 'responsibility' is taken. It does not address how power relations embedded in political decision-making processes and cultural articulations create unequal positions structured by gender, class, ethnicity, and so on. This psychological repertoire serves as a powerful discourse that legitimises and normalises social inequalities by naturalising them, portraying them as 'logical' effects of psychic processes.

This psychologisation of social inequalities is not, however, anything particularly Russian, but can be seen as part of neoliberal rationality. As Walkerdine (2003) has suggested, over

the past decades psychology has largely replaced the earlier grammar of exploitation in class relations. Johnson and Lawler (2005: 2) have also argued that ‘in contemporary society class has ‘gravitated to the self’ so that ‘the social-structural dimensions of class inequality are now understood as being embedded *only* in the subjectivities of social actors’ (see also Hey 2003: 321).

This psychological repertoire in self-help literature also represents a certain continuity vis-à-vis the Soviet era. In Soviet society, social problems often also were explained by individual pathologies (White 1999, Stephenson 2000) that stemmed from the ideological constraints on systemic criticism, as Marxism-Leninism was regarded as an infallible system of knowledge. Furthermore, the salience of the psychological repertoire also manifested itself in the goal of creating an entirely new type of person, the ‘New Soviet Man’. The communist project sought to engender ‘a strong, free and conscious creature, totally emancipated from the servile capitalist psyche’ (Halfin 2000: 1). Self-improvement was a crucial element in the making of this New Man (see Hellbeck 2001, 2006), and individual self-training practices (*samovospitanie*) played a key role in this endeavour (for more details, see Kharkhordin 1999). The social and the psychological were intimately interconnected in the Soviet conception of the self. Consciousness was a key ideological concept and its cultivation an important ethical and political duty of the communist subject. Consciousness was understood as fundamentally socially-oriented and rational, marked by willpower and self-mastery (Hellbeck 2006).

The analysis of this contemporary Russian self-help literature highlights how this genre articulates with certain Soviet understandings and techniques of the self. Similarly as in the Soviet discourse, the self in Pravdina’s and Sinelnikov’s books appears as a malleable

material that can be shaped and transformed for various ideological purposes. Both contemporary self-help and the Soviet discourses also ascribe to language – new ways of thinking and talking – a central role in transforming the self and the social world (cf. Potrata 2004: 369). Echoing the Marxist stand, which ‘prophesied a radical reform of the human soul’ (Halpin 2000: 6) as the key to profound social change, Sinelnikov’s books also emphasise the need to work on the self in order to bring about the Slavic revival. Furthermore, the ideas of relentless work on the self and of a self-monitoring and introspective subject, which are at the heart of much of the globally circulating self-help genre, are also something that Soviet subjectivising technologies sought to cultivate (Hellbeck 2006, Kharkhordin 1999), albeit within a different ideological framework. However, unlike in the Soviet Union, where the state was the primary source of subjectivising technologies, in today’s Russia these technologies have proliferated, emanating from a range of spheres and constituting a burgeoning business of ‘management of life’.

### **Classed selves: How to become a *khoziain***

Self-help literature is a subject-making technology: by identifying problematic qualities and patterns of thinking, and by offering advice on how to change them, the books produce interpretations about ‘ideal’ selves. Sinelnikov’s and Pravdina’s writings construct a normative model of self culturally coded as masculine: it is a *khoziain*, a master of one’s life. Both authors employ this Russian notion, historically grounded in the world of the peasant household and feudal estate (Watts 2002: 62), to denote a subject characterised by entrepreneurship (both authors see private business as the ideal form of employment), self-reliance, self-sufficiency, self-control, independence (both mental and economic) and the ability to take full responsibility for oneself. The Russian word *khoziain* has a range of

meanings, all referring to a masculinely marked power position: a ‘head of household and family’, ‘husband’, ‘master’, ‘boss’, ‘proprietor’ and a person who is in a position to ‘act independently in a given situation, to govern (*rasporiazhat’sia*) and make his own decisions’ (Tolkovyĭ slovar’ Ozhegova; see also Watts 2002: 62).<sup>11</sup> This ideal *khoziain* resonates well with neoliberal rationality conceptualising people as entrepreneurs of their own lives (Rose 1998: 33).

For Sinelnikov, the historical model for *khoziain* is the pre-revolutionary feudal lord (*pomeshchik*). The salience of the model of *khoziain* in his writings manifests itself in the ‘Code of a Master of Life’ (*Kodeks khoziaina zhizni*), a programme printed at the end of all his books, summarising the main features of the *khoziain* and the techniques of how to become one. It also functions as a platform for a network of organisations called ‘Clubs of Doctor Sinelnikov’s friends’ that seek to popularise Sinelnikov’s ideas across the post-Soviet space. This code ends with a slogan adapted from the Communist Manifesto: ‘Masters of life, unite!’

Pravdina, writing primarily to a female audience, positions this masculine model of *khoziain* as a cultural norm into which women are encouraged to incorporate themselves.<sup>12</sup> Thus she positions women as the primary audience in need of advice, as those who particularly must work on their selves. Pravdina’s books introduce an individualist self-made (wo)man

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<sup>11</sup> A feminine variant of the word is *khoziaika*, and it is primarily connected with the private sphere of home and kitchen, denoting a housewife, homemaker and hostess.

<sup>12</sup> She occasionally also uses the feminine term *khoziaika*, but the cultural characteristics of this subject are the same as those of the *khoziain*.

ideology, in which success and happiness depend only on one's own efforts.<sup>13</sup> Individualism, however, emerges as a gendered disposition. On the one hand, the heterosexual relationship is portrayed as fundamental to women's lives, and women are warned about becoming too independent – 'It's not healthy' (Pravdina 2006: 82). On the other hand, women's independence and self-reliance are encouraged and dependency is pathologised by claiming that it is 'an abnormal and unnatural phenomenon ... For every man a woman dependent on him is a real ordeal' (Pravdina 2007b: 71-72). Dependency is described as an individual 'choice' and 'incapacity', not influenced by gendered power relations, such as endemic socio-economic inequalities between women and men in Russia.<sup>14</sup> This self-made (wo)man is essentially a class project. Pravdina's books promote as a normative model a career-oriented couple engaged in a lucrative profession or business that outsources housework to domestic servants (cf. Rotkirch et al. in this volume).

This culturally masculine-marked model of self, centring on the denial and pathologisation of relationality and interdependency, can be interpreted as stemming from the re-evaluation of the Soviet gender order. The discourse of the 'crisis of masculinity', which first appeared

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<sup>13</sup> A recurrent narrative in her books is 'from rags to riches', which epitomises the American dream. However, similar narratives of upward mobility were also widespread in the Soviet Union. The central legitimising principle of the Soviet system was the social promotion of workers and peasants into high social positions. A good example of this is the movie *Moscow doesn't believe in tears*, in which a single mother, through education and hard work, makes her way from factory floor to the industrial elite. However, unlike the American dream emphasising the individual's own efforts, the 'Soviet dream' emphasised the individual's labour as part of the collective, duty towards the common good, and the commitment of the state to reward and promote its 'best people'.

<sup>14</sup> For example, the differences in salaries between female- and male-dominated sectors have been increasing. Women also tend to earn on average 63-65% of men's monthly wages and occupy lower positions in the occupational hierarchy (Ashwin 2006a: 14, 2006b: 50).

during late socialism and became more pronounced during the post-Soviet era expressed a concern over the ‘demasculinisation’ of men, that is, their becoming feeble, passive, and not able to be active agents in their lives. This has been interpreted to have been caused by Soviet gender politics and the cultural ideal of the ‘strong Soviet woman’ (Zdravomyslova and Temkina 2002; see also Lapidus 1978). The propagation of the *khoziain* in self-help literature could be read as an attempt to reassert the model of masculinity marked by power, strength and self-mastery, which Soviet gender politics allegedly distorted.

In a similar vein as Pravdina, Sinelnikov pathologises dependency. He questions the legitimacy of the social welfare system by regarding social benefits not as a social right but as a form of enslavement and harmful state dependency that prevents one from becoming a *khoziain*. He illustrates this argument with the story of one of his patients, a disabled woman. In therapy she became aware of her subconscious need to cling to her disability out of fear of losing her sole income, disability benefits. Upon this realisation, she began studying for a profession in order to better support herself, and as a result her health improved significantly. Disability is constructed in this narrative as a choice and a self-constructed incapacity. Sinelnikov’s books offer countless similar stories that all convey the same message: all problems are effects of destructive models in the subconscious that can be solved by reprogramming one’s mind.

In Pravdina’s writings self-fashioning is portrayed as a project of pleasure without any wider societal or political goals. The self is described as a free-floating subject, whose only meaningful ‘collectivity’ is a heterosexual relationship. In contrast to this, Sinelnikov’s ideal *khoziain* is not an individualist, but someone always organically embedded in a number of collectivities – kin, family, Motherland (*Rodina*), the Slavic nation (*narod*) and nature. This



stems from the communal philosophical view in which the individual gains significance only in relation to collectivity. In contrast, being a *khoziain* is for Sinelnikov about *autonomy*, about not being materially or mentally dependant on anything or anyone (hence also the emphasis on entrepreneurship), yet at the same time being an inseparable part of larger collectivities.

Sinelnikov's texts normalise entrepreneurship by drawing on Robert Kiyosaki's distinction between 'passive' and 'active' forms of income. Passive forms, including paid work, imply dependency, while active forms, including entrepreneurial activities and investments, imply independence and the position of a *khoziain*. According to Sinelnikov, the middle class and the poor, relying on passive forms of income, have 'voluntarily become slaves'. They tend to 'curse their fate, the government, whomever', when the reason for their lack of money is 'very simple: the psychology of a victim and consumer' (Sinelnikov 2007b: 157).

Sinelnikov's books also present a specific strategy of enrichment for women: marriage with a wealthy man (a strategy not suggested for men). This stems from his conception of gender relations in which a man is 'by nature' a breadwinner and responsible for protecting the family and the Motherland, while a woman is 'naturally' inclined to motherhood and domesticity. According to Sinelnikov, the Universe has 'a woman's nature' (*zhenskaia priroda*), which means that enrichment is easier and more 'natural' for women than for men. This attaches a specifically strong stigma to poor women and naturalises gender inequalities by overlooking their socio-structural basis.

Both Pravdina and Sinelnikov construct their ideal subjects in relation to the Soviet past and its value system. 'Sovietness' emerges as an important yet ambivalent class marker. On the

one hand, it implies a form of ‘mental pathology’: lack of individual responsibility, self-denial, slavery and dependence. As Pravdina writes:

Unfortunately almost all of us were raised in a way that we got used to subject our wishes to the collective, family, and so on. As a result, we have what we have: dissatisfaction, irritation, which develops into misfortune and illness in our bodies. (Pravdina 2002: 35)

Sinelnikov’s books criticise Soviet gender politics as destructive. They also suggest that both the Soviet state and Christianity have instilled in Russians a harmful relationship to money:

In the years of developed socialism, the Soviet state drummed into us a negative, disdainful attitude towards the rich and money. In almost all fairytales the rich are bad and the poor are good. An American capitalist was the number one enemy, and a poor, unfortunate Ethiopian was the faithful friend. Christianity also takes a negative attitude to money and material good. (Sinel’nikov 2007b: 47)

According to Sinelnikov, conflict exists between the new and old values in people’s subconscious. Money has become a central element of life in post-socialist societies, but the old negative ideas concerning it die hard. He describes how he trained his parents, representing the Soviet generation, to change their ideas concerning money, and his father sighed: ‘For seventy years we were taught that money comes with hard work... We were raised as slaves!’ (2007b: 64). Sinelnikov closely links the spiritual and the material: one should pursue both spiritual growth and material wealth in order to achieve harmony in life.

On the other hand, elements of the ideology of *kul'turnost'* familiar from the Soviet era also function as a positive reference point in outlining the ideal classed self. Sinelnikov and Pravdina call for a 'cultured' manner of speaking and disapprove of popular TV shows. Pravdina encourages her readers to dwell on the fine arts and classical literature, while Sinelnikov embraces such virtues as moral purity, self-sacrifice and altruism as key features of the *khoziain*, familiar from Soviet morality.

### **Constructing class through consumption**

Consumption is an issue to which Pravdina's and Sinelnikovs' books take strikingly different views. Sinelnikov's texts express a hostile stance towards consumerism and see it as a form of mental slavery. They encourage asceticism, spiritual development and an ecological way of life. Pravdina's texts, in contrast, celebrate materialistic values and consumerism. Lavish consumption and lifestyle are portrayed as pivotal elements of self-transformation and self-realization:

Try to wear genuine fur and you will immediately feel how you don't want to hasten, jostle, pick a fight in a [public] transportation line, gossip with your neighbour. You will immediately feel comfort and be confident about yourself and your allure. (Pravdina 2007b: 26)

The self emerges here as a commodity or a property that needs to be constantly worked upon, groomed and improved so that its value will not decrease. The books suggest that appearance reflects the state of the 'inner self': an upper-class habitus and lifestyle signify a healthy psyche (see also Rytönen and Pietilä in this volume). The body is read as the truth about the

person: bodily dispositions – well-groomed appearance, clean hands, proud posture, and elegant clothes – reflect the ‘healthy’ mental dispositions of responsibility, self-respect, and self-confidence. The body thus becomes a key marker of class, a site through and in which class is inscribed, and also a measure of the self (Skeggs 2004). As Pravdina (2007b: 42-43) states, if you respect yourself, you take care of your body and appearance. Appearance is also an important form of capital, which can be traded in marriages and job markets, in particular for women (see also Ratilainen in this volume).

This upper-class lifestyle is legitimised in the books by portraying it as accessible to everyone through the practice of self-transformation. Everyone can ‘make it’ if one only thinks positively and follows the advice offered in the books. An interesting element in Pravdina’s texts is, however, the limited scope of symbols with which consumption practices and the lifestyle of the rich are characterised. The books emphasise that everything must be ‘luxurious’ (*roskosh’*) and ‘expensive’, but rarely identify any specific features (brands, for example), and when they do, they are the most obvious ones (for example, Mercedes Benz).

The analysed self-help texts of Pravdina and Sinelnikov, by celebrating and idealising the lifestyle of the rich as potentially available to everyone and portraying wealth as an effect of a healthy self, seek to assert the legitimacy and moral worth of wealth and success in Russia. Such a need for repeated assertion reveals the uneasiness with which social differentiation is experienced in contemporary Russia. This uneasiness is likely to stem from at least two sources. First, in Russian culture, and in particular among the intelligentsia, there exists a long tradition of contempt and suspicion of money and trade. The Soviet state further cultivated this cultural pattern by portraying money and trade as degrading and immoral

(Kelly and Volkov 1998: 291). Wealth was ideologically condemned and the ‘empty materialism’ of the West heavily criticised.

Secondly, wealth and success need to be specifically legitimised, because in popular discourse wealth still tends to invoke associations with criminality and the questionable privatisation process of the 1990s. Pravdina in particular repeatedly assures her readers that wealthy people have gained their luxurious lifestyle by hard work and thus deserve it.<sup>15</sup> As she states, ‘Wealth is no longer regarded as a synonym of ‘sinful money’ and has become a sign of how much a person has worked in order to achieve material well-being’ (Pravdina 2007b: 16). Interestingly enough, although Pravdina wishes to disassociate herself from everything Soviet, her books elevate ‘hard work’ to nearly a sacred position, as did the Soviet state. However, whereas in the Soviet Union work was to be performed for the ‘common good’, in Pravdina’s books work is for personal success and well-being:

Remember that time when work for the benefit of society was regarded as a citizen’s highest achievement, selfless (*beskorystnyi*) and most exhausting [work], in the name of the idea. We know where that ideology took us. (Pravdina 2007b: 15)

Pravdina notes approvingly how in America, unlike in Russia, influential people are treated with respect, and states: ‘I hope that also in our society people gradually learn to see in successful people not only shortcomings (...) but also dignity (*dostoinstvo*)’ (ibid.: 16).

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<sup>15</sup> Litovskaia and Shaburova (2010) also make a similar observation in their analysis of business magazines in Russia.

## Conclusion

The explosive growth of income disparities and the concomitant social differentiation have been amongst the most palpable and significant consequences of Russia's social transformation. This differentiation has been acutely and painfully felt particularly at the level of everyday life. It has disrupted the sense of human worth, redefined conceptions of morality and social justice, and created gaping chasms between people who not so long ago shared the same social milieu and ideological universe. Self-help literature comments on and legitimises these ambivalent effects of capitalist transition in Russia. The representations offered by this literary genre both reflect and produce understandings of social inequality and their causes, and create cultural guidelines for evaluating moral claims, interests and needs.

The analysed self-help texts, by promoting positive thinking, wealth and entrepreneurship, challenge an important symbolic structure in Russian culture, namely, suffering as an integral part of selfhood. In Russian cultural history, suffering, poverty and hardship rather than success have been associated with spiritual rewards (Ries 1997, Rivkin-Fish 2009, Pesmen 2000). Suffering frequently has been sacralised and seen as a source of moral authority (Ries 1997: 126, 160). By linking together spiritual growth and wealth, the analysed self-help books merge two semantic fields that traditionally have been understood as antithetical to one another. They destabilise the pervasive cultural conception of the superiority of the spiritual life over the material, *bytie* over *byt*. Furthermore, by condemning complaining and voicing problems and disadvantages, the books also challenge the Russian cultural practice of 'lament'. Lamenting as a 'popular national pastime' (Pesmen 2000) has been interpreted as forging an emotionally significant inter-subjective tie and a sense of belonging to a community of shared suffering (Ries 1997).

The texts also do important ideological work by making sense of and legitimising social inequalities with a psychological repertoire. With its emphasis on self-reliance and autonomy, this repertoire resonates with the acute sense of political disenfranchisement that exists amongst the Russian population today. Russians tend to view their ability to influence political outcomes as negligible; they strive to achieve autonomy from a failing and unreliable state, and prefer to rely on themselves and their close ones (see Shevchenko 2008, Petukhov 2005, Salmenniemi 2008).

Economic capital and cultural capital emerge as central parameters of class in the self-help books. The books put forth a culturally masculine ideal subject: the entrepreneurial *khoziain*. While the New Soviet man was to be ‘a strong, free and conscious creature, totally emancipated from the servile capitalist psyche’ (Halfin 2000: 1), contemporary self-help manuals suggest that the post-Soviet *khoziain* should be an independent, self-reliant and wealthy creature, totally emancipated from ‘the servile communist psyche’. In this they echo the discourse of the ‘Soviet mentality’, which has been an important conceptual framework for making sense of the Soviet era in the post-Soviet public sphere (see e.g. Phillips 2008, Salmenniemi 2008, 2010b, Rivkin-Fish 2004). In this discourse Sovietness is associated with a pathological self marked by dependency, paternalism, and in particular, lack of responsibility. Research on international democracy promotion programmes in the post-Soviet space has also documented similar interpretations of the Soviet period (see e.g. Hemment 2004, Phillips 2008). The neoliberal value set embedded in many Russian democracy promotion programmes and social policy reforms (Cook 2007), coupled with the discrediting of the socialist ideology, have promoted an ethos of self-help and have stigmatised and delegitimised claims concerning state responsibility, social rights and entitlement as outdated ‘Soviet mentality’ and ‘nostalgia’. It seems that responsibility has

become a dominant moral virtue and a key class-making discourse in Russia (and beyond), proposing an individual-centred cure to a range of problems originating from socio-structural relationships of power.

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