Jeremy Morris

Everyday Post-Socialism

Working-Class Communities in the Russian Margins

palgrave
macmillan

Jeremy Morris
University of Birmingham, UK

Cast of Characters

The main informants who feature in this book [all are pseudonyms]:

Galina's Circle

Galina Vilgel'movna: gregarious and imperious blue-collar forewoman, breadwinner and head of household. 55 years old. Works at Polymer, the chief 'inheritor' company in Izluchino. Married to Ivan Ivanych, and mother of two children. Born in neighbouring region but came to Kaluga region in 1980s in search of work.

Ivan Ivanych: excitable yet easy-going retired workman, married to Galina. 55 years old. Had worked as technician at the oil terminal, and machine operator at a mineral-powdering facility, among other enterprises in the town.

Elena: early 20s stay-at-home mum, and daughter of Galina and Ivan. Younger sister to Julia. Used to work at the kindergarten, but since having a baby she has no intention of returning to work anytime soon as she has enough 'home work' doing nails and cutting hair for cash.

Julia: Late 20s, married to Petr. Trains as child psychologist while working in a call centre on the nightshift. Experiences sense of anomie at obtaining white-collar career yet remaining in blue-collar milieu. Caught between narratives of self-improvement and social mobility, and

working-class ethical dispositions which demand of femininity the putting of others before the self.

Petr: Late 20s, married to Julia. Mechanic and machine technician. Served in the Second Chechen War (1999) and has a further technical education. Works as finisher in underground uPVC shop for a while. Then works at broiler plant as technician before moving to Volkswagen in Kaluga. Tries sincerely to become a 'good' worker at the plant, but has reservations about new 'compact' for labour.

Sasha's Circle

'Uncle' Lyova: welder in his 50s. Formerly working for the municipality and now Steelpipe employee. Struggles with feelings of injustice concerning the devaluing of labour in the present and the deindustrializing processes in the town as well as the destruction of socialist infrastructure. Finds solace in alcohol but retains some 'status' as a respected worker.

'Auntie' Masha: Lyova's wife, 60s. Works as a bookkeeper for the local authority in the House of Culture.

Sasha: Skilled forklift driver. Mid-30s. Lyova's eldest son. 'Flits' between formal employment but in the end interprets employment in terms of loss of autonomy. Ends up as a 'gypsy' taxi driver in informal economy.

Vanya: Sasha's brother. Late 20s. Car fanatic and lover of garage socializing. Follows similar route in and out of formal and informal work. Despite having worked in a private security firm in the Region capital and in paint wholesales, he moves to gypsy taxi-driving for its autonomy.

Others

Andrei (nickname: 'Shorty'): Skilled welder in mid-30s who came to the town as a young man. Has a successful career in Steelpipe as a well-respected worker with *avtoritet* (worker prestige). Faces dilemma when his moonlighting plumbing work is a success in informal economy. Andrei's arguments for informality, like those of other informants,

coalesce around a fuzzily articulated but persistent sense of dignity and autonomy in labour.

Felix Grigorievich Saraev: Local business owner (Steelpipe), mid-50s. Runs similar enterprise to Polymer, disaggregated in late 1990s from main Soviet enterprise. Displays paternalistic soviet-era attitudes and care for workers but also a proponent of neoliberal flexible labour. Highly respected locally by workers and others.

Zhenya: Lathe operator (mid-20s) in an informal metal and plastic fabricators shop. Formerly worked in Cement kiln.

Nikita: mid-20s. A cement kiln operator, he had previously worked as an electrician for the municipality for very low wages. Has a stint in the underground factory but later goes back to the Cement. 'He's the kind of person that would have been happier under socialism', said Nikita's father. 'He needs that stronger sense of belonging to a factory to keep him disciplined.'

Polina: mid-20s mall merchandiser selling electronic cigarettes who tries to make a new life in Moscow but faces numerous difficulties and hardships there. Expresses disgust at infantile men in Izluchino. Faces similar 'dilemma' of femininity as her friend Julia.

Katya: Late 20s. Had aspired to become a 'manager'. Gained a higher education in Kaluga. Returned to the town as an accountant. Later she would become the deputy director of another significant enterprise in the town and the main breadwinner for the entire family of seven dependents. Stresses how women are forced to become ultra-flexible workers.

Slava: Conveyor worker at Volkswagen and later became foreman. Mid-20s. Extremely circumspect and anxious about being seen to be 'getting ahead' of his friends who had chosen not to work in a foreign car firm. Experiences stress and doubt over his promotion to foreman at Volkswagen.
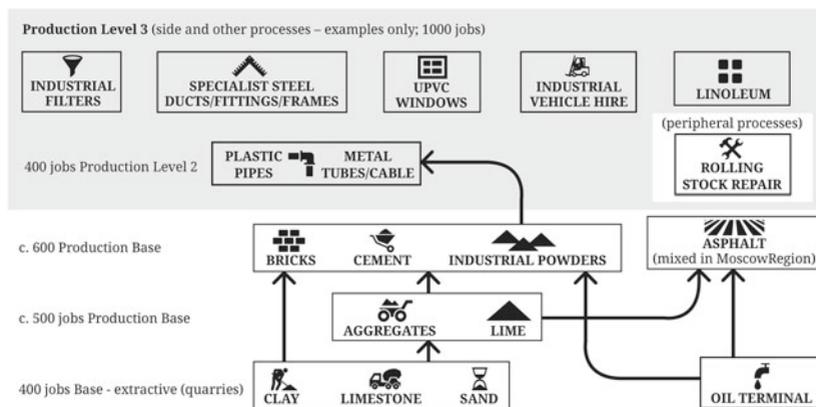
Fig. 1 Schematic of production processes and employment in Izluchino in 2009 (Image courtesy of Jon Whitty)

Preface: The Long Twilight of the Factory Fiefdoms

Enter the Field, Enter the Informants

In the 1990s I would come in the summer to the village across the river from the town of Izluchino. Once a space of humble holiday cottages for the town's blue-collar workers, the village slowly gentrified until Sasha was one of the only factory workers left with property there. We would meet almost every day at Sasha's dacha with his mother, Auntie Masha, his father, Uncle Lyova, and his brother, Vanya. In some respects this book holds up a mirror to Sasha's family and their negotiation of changes in Russia since 1991. I say 'changes', as that word most closely resembles what people here call the end of the USSR and the economic and social transformation afterwards. Few speak of 'collapse', 'transition', or any other description you are likely to read in a book. Most people even avoid speaking of the date, the year, or even the early 1990s altogether. The more talkative speak of what life was like 'before', or 'after Soviet power'. For some in the town of Izluchino who were adults or young adults in 1991, the present is something like a waking dream—maybe not even a particularly bad one, but something other-worldly, nevertheless. Sasha is one person who has the air of someone constantly stumbling through life without quite believing it all to be real. Sometimes he is quite angry, sometimes bemused. Like his younger brother and father he

is always keen to compare the present unfavourably with the past. It is something automatic. The emergence of a hierarchy of memories about the past, which define in part how the present and future are understood, is one of the main themes of Chap. 5, where Sasha's parents' generation is described in detail.

But Sasha is only one informant, and his extended family only the starting point of this ethnography of the small town Izluchino, nestling in the crook of a beautiful river in Kaluga Region, Central European Russia. About 15,000 people live here—almost all in two-and five-storey blocks of flats. Izluchino is an urban space that developed as the result of a 'town-forming enterprise' in the postwar era. A large ministry had extensive raw material needs for its building programme and needed an extractive base. Izluchino is set between a sea of surface quarries mining all kinds of aggregates, particularly for cement and road building. Sometimes this kind of urban space is called a 'monotown', referring to the role of a single enterprise, not only in employment but also in the complex and deeply embedded set of social services and facilities that the 'factory' supported. Izluchino is officially an 'ex-monotown' as it is no longer dominated by a single employer. This book is only partly about the monotown and ex-monotown experience—in some respects no two monotowns are alike (how to compare, for instance, Tolyatti—the Soviet Detroit—with Izluchino?). Discussion about the nature of urban space and Soviet urban planning follows this preface. In any case Izluchino has done well, comparatively speaking. It is positioned near the Moscow–Kiev highway, and Kaluga has received a significant amount of foreign investment in manufacturing. Its Soviet-era enterprise also wasn't entirely typical, occupying a range of industrial and para-industrial niches. Hence, there are a number of successor employers and what I call 'inheritor' firms: from steel and plastic tube fabricators to railway rolling-stock repair firms, purely extractive concerns, refineries of dry industrial products, small-scale manufacturers of plastic products, industrial vehicle maintenance works, cement works, to name but a few.

At first glance, this ethnographic account of small-town life in Russia will be replete with burly, hard-drinking men, old before their time, dispossessed of their working-class inheritance, and railing against the injustices of postsocialist life. Sasha and, in particular, his father do speak

to that stereotype to a degree; Sasha's life and his understanding of his marginalized social and economic positioning in the new Russia take on a kind of guide to the themes and concerns of this book. However, his is but one story. One of the main reasons for writing this book was the desire to provide a holistic portrait of everyday Russia. This would include the story of Sasha—endlessly resourceful, glum and wary, whose personality is dominated by a sense of loss and injustice. But such an ethnographic holism would be careful to also capture the gendered blue-collar experience—hence, the space devoted to women workers and upwardly mobile white-collar employees. Similarly, the generational division between those with adult memory and socialization within Soviet civilization and those without is carefully negotiated. Again, despite the overwhelmingly industrial nature of my field site, an ethnography of this kind would be incomplete without the voices of ancillary, managerial and engineering classes, the latter two comprising a sort of local middle class, as well as the small layer of white-collar professionals. The spatial history of production is also a central component. In the Soviet period, as now, urban space, social life and 'culture' in its widest sense revolved around industrial production and the ever visible social fact of the blue overall and the brick chimney stack. Therefore, I begin this book proper in the following chapter on the town itself and the urban space. A more detailed overview of the chapters can be found at the end of this preface.

This book is therefore not a description of deindustrialization or factory life, nor is it a story of dispossession, pauperization and trauma after the end of the Soviet Union (although all these narratives are both present and problematized). While indeterminacy and insecurity continue to characterize everyday life—the way in which people confront this unpredictability in general constitutes an important part of this study—the making of postsocialist existence, if not 'comfortable', then 'habitable', is key. I offer 'habitability' as an overarching emic category and a useful, 'working' conceptualizing of life beyond the 'crisis' and 'coping' literatures on postsocialism. Habitability can be read as specific to the lives of working-class people in a small industrial town, but it also resonates with more generally widespread understandings that other researchers have recently revealed in Russia and elsewhere. Rebecca Kay (2012: 66) finds that ideas about 'comfort' emerge as part of a response towards ongoing

insecurity among older rural people in Siberia. Jennifer Cash also finds surprising articulations of people 'having enough' in rural Moldova as an important interpretation of the present in relation to the past and the relative meaning of above-subsistence existence (2015). Both insights can be read alongside Izluchino residents' articulations of what makes life habitable.

While as a researcher I have been personally witness to the quiet desperation of many tales of ordinary survival in Russia since 1995, my work has always aimed to apprehend what is 'normal', ordinary or 'everyday' in Russia. In that sense, this book takes its cue from work by Alexei Yurchak, Serguei Oushakine, David Crowley and Susan Reid, Olga Shevchenko and Svetlana Boym on the troublesome meaning of 'everyday life' for middle-class Russians, and translates it into a working-class setting. More than a translation, it requires a transformation of understanding. Modes of being, identity, consumption and sociality available to middle-class metropolitans are not absent but different in the provincial working-class setting. In addition, the research for this book resonates with Joe Moran's comment that the 'quotidian can help to make sense of contemporary political culture, with its particular notions of the relationship between the market, the public sphere and "ordinary people"' (2005: 3). It is also worth mentioning what should already be obvious from this preface: this book does not hide the researcher away from the presentation of lived experience. From the outset I am 'entangled' (Denzin 1997: 246) as person, personality and researcher in the process of fieldwork.

A few informants had been known to me for a decade prior to the fieldwork for this book. I draw on my long-term relationships with them in trying to understand their present lives. This book is therefore based on extended ethnographic 'life portraits'. But this gives rise to a dilemma: how can I present core elements of a particular life experience without betraying privacy? My answer, in places, is to combine in a single portrait the experience of more than one person—to create composites. Thus the words and experiences of comparable informants are sometimes combined in a single portrait. Partly this is to make the presentation and structure of the book manageable. But more importantly I do this to reduce the risk of what are sometimes extremely painful and personal

experiences being identified with a single real person—especially given that this book will be read at least in part by some informants.

Ethnographic Approaches to Place, Time and the Russian Small Industrial Town

This book is as much about people as theories and ideas; however, the selection and presentation of informants and ethnographic materials at every point illustrates the contested meaning and characterizations of postsocialism. Just as those ideas about the emergence of Russia into the space of the free market, the global economy and the more or less democratic polity of nation states are contested, so are the personalities and personhood of my informants as they grapple with the past and present of their society and the imperatives of household survival, sociality in a small town, kinship relations and labour. Giving informants the space to breathe as complex individuals is instrumental in showing the multifacetedness of postsocialist life without abstracting lived experience to an extent that it loses sight of the everyday. It should be clear by now that this book is not so much about the social 'adaptation' of factory-life and workers, although blue-collar workers (for want of a better term) form the bulk of its informants.[1] While work and work relations form a significant part of this study, the book aims at a holistic approach to understanding lived experience for ordinary Russians in ordinary (and extraordinary) circumstances at the end of the twentieth century and the first decades of the new millennium.

A note about the structure of this book: because of its aim in presenting a 'cultural whole' of a time, place and community (Humphreys and Watson 2009: 41), the reader will not find neatly divided topics

---

[1] 'Blue-collar' as a classificatory device deserves interrogation and historically has made too many assumptions about a cohesive positioning, whether in terms of politics or identity, and can be a misleading binary (Southern 2000; Stenning 2005: 993). Nonetheless, retaining 'blue-collar' as an adjective to describe the shared spatial and visual identification and self-identification of informants is useful given the overwhelming visible fact of the everyday blue-collar worker at work and away from work, strolling in his or her overalls between the industrial zones and other places of leisure and domesticity.

like 'labour relations in the factory after socialism'. For more focussed but consequently rather more fragmentary accounts of the field and specific topics, shorter works by the author can be referred to (Morris 2011, 2012a, b, 2013, 2014a, b). All of these works deal with specific aspects of lived experience in Izluchino, and many of their subjects (labour relations, worker identity, informal economic practices, material cultures, consumption, value and class more generally) are revisited in more depth in this book. In its planning this book has had numerous structures—mainly thematic ones similar to the topics just mentioned. In order to do justice to the depth and breadth of material, in the end I decided to abandon this strictly thematic approach and let informants' experience dictate the structure to a significant degree.

Each chapter is therefore an ethnographic account in its own right discussing the lives of a particularly significant individual, group or family. In each chapter I revisit, through the prism of the lived experience of different informants, many of the important issues and themes of the book and extensively cross-reference between chapters.

Chapter Outlines

In a wide-ranging Introduction I review most of the main themes of the book. I do this by anchoring each theme to a particularly important informant and a particular space. The title 'The worthless dowry of Soviet industrial modernity' makes clear the focus on placeness but also communicates the problem of thinking of industrial spaces and blue-collar work solely in terms of decay and marginality. Not everything is as it seems—while the disused industrial spaces bespeak a hollowing out of the proud production heritage of the town, I question a narrow interpretation of the end of the Soviet period as unequivocal decline, psychosocial trauma and economic precarity.

Chapter 2 presents Sasha: a job-hopping, 'churning' worker who has rarely stayed at a job for more than a year at a time. Sasha struggles to remake his former Soviet worker identity into a postsocialist, flexible and responsive blue-collar worker, whether in the ex-Soviet factories or in the German and Japanese car production lines. Through Sasha's case

study, the chapter discusses the huge labour churn in enterprises, the reality of autonomy and labour discipline at the shop-floor level in the Soviet and postsocialist periods and the question of whether such people form a 'precarious' class in the making or whether their lifeworlds better reflect a rejection of formal work. Despite their 'retreat' into precarious informal work, they retain access and 'membership' of a wide network of blue-collar acquaintances. This offers significant social, moral and indirect material support. 'Habitability' is dependent upon maintaining these ties. Formal work may be left behind, but not the sense of what it means to be a blue-collar worker.

Chapter 3 continues to follow Sasha and his brother as they seek an uneasy sense of habitability in the cracks between formal work and the myriad murky opportunities in the underground economy—as taxi drivers and cash-in-hand manual workers. Informality as a 'normal' response to uncertainty and contingency is explored here. Manual work in informality builds not only a personhood based on self-reliance but also trust in socially equal others. Masculine spaces of leisure, sociality and work are explored where working-class 'authentic' manhood can be rehearsed and even experimented with. In addition, displays of working-class skill and ingenuity 'for their own sake' are explored in terms of MacIntyre's definition of 'practice' and 'internal good'. DIY practices, even for Sasha, sustain workers in terms of allowing a propertizing (in Skeggs' sense) of their sense of personhood and class. These are both practical and ethical dispositions that also lead to a rejection of a simple narrative of 'adaptation' and the remoulding of the working self as 'entrepreneurial'.

Chapter 4 turns to 'women's work': blue collar, white collar, literal and figurative. We explore Galina's life: how she understands her positioning as a foreman in one of the main Soviet-era enterprises. For her, habitability is about maintaining a link between work and care, even if there is little to care about in the actual production at the company. Where the enterprise has abandoned its role as caregiver to its workers and town, Galina tries to make her workspace a place of care for co-workers, self-esteem, and a source of complex affective attachment and identity production. Three stories of more or less successful 'remaking' of working-class women into white-collar selves are also told. Successful femininity in these cases revolves around an impossible ultra-flexibility

in role playing. Women occupy the sharp end of neoliberal production-scapes as accountants and HR workers, yet are 'trapped' by strongly normative ethical obligations of care for others.

Chapter 5 explores the contrast between the 'socialist-era social contract' and the present as perceived by older people in their fifties and sixties. While the withdrawal of the state as welfare guarantor is a treachery no longer worthy of much comment among working people, the feeling of loss in terms of the jobs, status and belonging that the main enterprise provided is a pain that does not fade with time. While benefiting materially during the socialist period and maintaining economic assets such as housing and land outside the town, their story dramatizes the abrupt and woeful rupture in the relationship between society and labour—in particular, its most 'ordinary' members. The meaning of 'habitability' is expanded on by comparing it to characterizations of postsocialist life as 'endurance'. The experience of trauma and the 'pathological' responses to it (alcohol use) dramatize uncertainties as constitutive of everyday experience. The meaning of habitability for these workers remains a fraught question.

Chapter 6 follows workers who at first appear to broadly accept the neoliberal challenge of working on themselves to become flexible subjects of Russia's harsh neocapitalist order. These are mainly younger workers employed by the new multinational companies such as Samsung and Volkswagen. The transition from Soviet-type enterprise, management and labour habitus are tracked. Car ownership serves as a metaphor of the degree to which workers internalize or resist governmentality: the imperative to change themselves. While there are stories of upward social mobility to status approximating an aristocracy of 'respectable' labour, there is also a persistent narrative of stress, illness and discontent among those trying to 'make it' on the new production lines. Once again, the high labour 'churn' in these globalized spaces of labour tells a different story from the official narratives of modernization and better pay and conditions.

Chapter 7 turns the ethnographic gaze back on the researcher, interrogating the methods and materials used in the production of the ethnographic writing in this book. It reflects on the characteristics of researcher and background that make the research carried out more or less effective,

biased or slanted in a particular direction. In particular, the intersection of class, culture, gender and personality are explored by comparing the insider/outsider status of the researcher with some of the marginalized informants of the research. This discussion is contextualized in cognate debates in postcolonial studies.

The concluding chapter offers a final set of ethnographic snapshots of the lives explored in the book. Fragility and loss are at the heart of the experience of industrial urbanity in Russia. But the ethos of people in Izluchino is the propertizing of social life in spite of insecurity. Habitability emerges in the small acts of relatedness, practices and classed being. The local and micro-level responses to social and economic change in Izluchino are somewhere between the definitions of 'domestications' and 'unmakings' of class that have been used to characterize the everyday responses to postsocialist change. The degree to which they can be called accommodations is problematic. Instead, the search for habitability entails a hotchpotch of practices made 'on the fly', but which are informed by long-standing class-based values and allegiances.

References

Cash, J. (2015). Between starvation and security: Poverty and food in rural Moldova. In I. Harboe Knudsen & M. Demant Frederiksen (Eds.), *Exploring the 'grey zones'. Government, conflict and insecurity in Eastern Europe* (pp. 117–138). London/New York: Anthem Press.

Denzin, N. (1997). *Interpretive ethnography: Ethnographic practices for the 21st century*. Thousand Oaks/London/New Delhi: Sage.

Humphreys, M., & Watson, T. J. (2009). Ethnographic practices: From "writing-up ethnographic research" to "writing ethnography". In S. Ybema, D. Yanow, H. Wels, & F. Kamsteeg (Eds.), *Organizational ethnography: Studying the complexities of everyday organizational life* (pp. 40–55). London: Sage.

Kay, R. 2012. 'Managing everyday (in)securities: Normative values, emotional security and symbolic recognition in the lives of Russian rural elders', *Journal of Rural Studies* 28: 63–71.

Moran, J. (2005). *Reading the everyday*. London/New York: Routledge.

Morris, J. (2011). Socially embedded workers at the nexus of diverse work in Russia: An ethnography of blue-collar informalization. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy, 31*(11–12), 619–631.

Morris, J. (2012a). Unruly entrepreneurs: Russian worker responses to insecure formal employment. *Global Labour Journal, 3*(2), 217–236.

Morris, J. (2012b). Beyond coping? Alternatives to consumption within Russian worker networks. *Ethnography, 14*(1), 85–103.

Morris, J. (2013). Actually-existing Internet use in the Russian margins: Net utopianism in the shadow of the 'silent majorities'. *Region, 2*(2), 181–200.

Morris, J. (2014a). Moonlighting strangers met on the way: The nexus of informality and blue-collar sociality in Russia. In J. Morris & A. Polese (Eds.), *The informal post-socialist economy: Embedded practices and livelihoods* (pp. 51–66). London/New York: Routledge.

Morris, J. (2014b). The warm home of cacti and other Soviet memories: Russian workers reflect on the socialist period. *Central Europe, 12*(1), 16–31.

Southern, J. (2000). Blue collar, white collar: Deconstructing classification. In J. K. Gibson-Graham, S. A. Resnick, & R. D. Wolff (Eds.), *Class and its others* (pp. 191–224). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Stenning, A. (2005). Where is the post-socialist working class? Working-class lives in the spaces of post-socialism. *Sociology, 39*(5), 983–999.