

Russia: soviet and post-soviet conceptions of romantic love

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The collapse of the Soviet Union ushered in a revolution of the intimate. this article discussed the trajectories of emotional socialism and emotional capitalism in the post-Soviet context.

In the mid-1990s, I observed Russia's transition to "emotional capitalism" — a value system based on personal autonomy, individual choice and private interests not only in the market, but in the private realm, too. Every morning as I made my way to school, I would linger at the newspaper stand near the metro, where I was entranced by the ever-changing assortment of newspapers and magazines. Glossy covers, one after the other, with pictures of racy women and equally racy cars were forcing the greying *Pravda* into the back row — until it disappeared completely. Whereas the front page of a newspaper previously ordered Soviet citizens to dedicate every minute of their lives to socialist labour on factory floors and fields of collective farms, *Cosmo*, *Vogue* and *GQ* now insisted that men and women alike ought to focus on a new sphere of productivity: their own lives and their own bedrooms.

"Sex or Chocolate: There is time for Everything!" a *Cosmopolitan* cover instructed a nation that had just ceased to measure their lives in five-year plans. Moreover, it claimed that "successful thirty-year old women did not need husbands" and invited the reader to test "how well they know their partner". Once again in the history of the twentieth century, the Russian individual was to be radically "re-forged" (to use a Soviet term), this time from collectivist, fatalist Homo Sovieticus into an emotional capitalist who measures the quality of their marriage on a scale of one to ten, masters the "25 sexual positions everyone can for a fold-up bed" and knows how to "pursuit their emotional needs" in a communal kitchen. A Western lover per excellence, in Russian imagination: *Cosmo* girl. This is the cover of the first Russian issue of the *Cosmopolitan* magazine published in May 1994. Source: [cosmo.ru](#). Matters of the heart suddenly acquired a new vocabulary: where the thousand-page Russian novels said "love", the stars of the new sitcoms said "relationship"; where our folk songs sang of "destiny", *Cosmo* spoke of "decisions"; where our mothers were still saying "fiancée", we were learning to say *boifrend* and *gelfrend*; and where well-bred Russians shrugged shoulders and turned red, *Cosmo* said "sex", "oral sex", "anal sex", "body contact" and "orgasm".

The usual pattern of relationships has been challenged, too. In place of a steady progression of "falling in love", "seeing each other" and "getting married", we are now taught to "stay independent", distinguish between "sex" and "feelings", give the partner a "trial period" and only then "commit". This was a revolution of intimacy. Together with the economic and political regimes of late socialism, another, subtler but equally potent regime had crumbled — the romantic regime, a system of emotional conduct that affects how we speak about how we feel, determine "normal" behaviours, and establish who is eligible for love, and who is not.

To open oDR's series on "Romantic regimes", I spoke to Julia Lerner, a sociologist and professor at Israel's Ben-Gurion University, and a former resident of St Petersburg, who came up with the

concept of “emotional socialism” in her research on emotional language in the mass media.

Julia, how did you come to the topic of “emotional socialism”? Did you yourself experience the clash of “Soviet” or “Russian” ideas about emotions and love with their “western” counterparts?

I left for Israel when I was 18 years old — the very peak of the beginning of romantic relationships, and I, of course, searched for love. I was in love with Israel, its language, and I wanted relationships only with Israelis. But I was completely unprepared for the way first dates are conducted there. For instance, I heard this Hebrew expression *lo matim li* (“this doesn’t suit me”) from a young man. And I just couldn’t understand what it meant, why he was saying this to me and what further development of our relationship it foresaw — would he call me after or not? I understood Hebrew, but this expression was completely alien to me.

What does this *lo matim li* mean? First, it supposes an autonomous Self. And this Self has some kind of emotional needs, a clear idea of what and who is suitable, and who isn’t. This might be banal, but it’s like as if he’s entered the supermarket, and there are different women there, and he’s choosing — but he can’t make up his mind straight away, and so he tries, and after the first or second dates, after sex, he says “No, I don’t want that, but that, yes, perhaps.” And he isn’t thinking about offending me, not at all. But he has his Self, and the Self has needs. He — Igal, Omri, Dudu — knows them and is constantly studying them, and this is why it seems to him that he isn’t humiliating me whatsoever. I just don’t suit him, but he doesn’t say anything about that to me. That is, I’m just absent from this picture.

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But the most important thing after someone says *lo matim li* to you is that you have absolutely nothing to say. The whole romantic scenario of wooing someone just doesn’t work anymore. Because how will you woo them? Change their needs? Change yourself so you suit them?

According to the Russian version of love, you can love someone that doesn’t suit you. And this doesn’t make you “unhealthy”, as it were. It actually emphasises your humanity. But in the western model, if you love something or someone that doesn’t suit you, it means that you’re neurotic.

Sure, that’s how I see it. But the differences are felt even when people come to the conclusion that they “suit” one another. After I got married to an Israeli, we nevertheless perceived what happened between us completely differently. I was still signed up to that model of love where there are certain laws. In the first place, love - either it’s there, or it isn’t. But he was “in a relationship”, which could and had to be “worked on”. It’s interesting that, despite the fact that a Soviet person was meant to work on themselves in different spheres, you still can’t “work on love” in the Russian paradigm. Love is beyond that.

If Anna Karenina did a better job working on her relationships, maybe she wouldn’t have to be so sad.

In general, the therapeutic management of emotions is an illusion. Because, in actual fact, you don’t choose anything. You organise yourself, your behaviour according to a healthy norm. I spent a year in America, and the whole time there I had the sense that everything was designed to cultivate the feeling that you had many choices. So that you would never think that you had no choice. And this is why you would be constantly asked if you wanted a plastic bag or a paper bag — you were supposed to have the feeling that you were choking on this choice.

How free are we in love? We live in this paradigm, we choke on this choice, as you put it — but how real is it?

We're limiting ourselves to romantic love right now, yes? When another, separate person, who suddenly according to fate, or your choice, or because they satisfy your needs becomes something significant for you and you want to be with them, spend time with them, touch them – in this sense?

For me, freedom is not a relevant issue when it comes to this experience. It seems to me that this kind of love, this kind of attachment, it fundamentally denies the possibility of freedom. It proposes dependency instead. Compromise. It's just in the Russian model that the women, as a rule, always compromises, and not the man. But, on the whole, freedom can only exist *from* it, *from* love, but this kind of freedom is charged with unhappiness and emptiness.

What are emotional socialism and emotional capitalism? Do they actually exist?

Let's start with capitalism — it's been studied and described in closer detail. Emotional capitalism is a very general concept that tries to describe the result of the interaction of different economic forces, grand cultural narratives and social institutions. It's a fusion of psychological discipline and its practices, free-market capitalism and the major life scenarios of American culture. Here you have the protestant ethic, and individual autonomy, and the never-ending ideology of choice. This mixture, this is what emotional capitalism is.

Emotional socialism is also a fusion generated by disparate phenomena existing in the same historical time and place. Firstly, this is the economic and value system of socialism — its principles of collective property and service to society. Secondly, it includes the life scenarios of Russian, or rather, Russian-language culture, at the heart of which lie the norms of 19th century literature. Apart from this, Orthodoxy and, of course, everything that Soviet ideology had to see about emotions and your private life.

In this sense, "Russianness" plays a role in emotional socialism, just as "Americanness" does in emotional capitalism. This is why, when I talk about emotional socialism, I don't lose sight of the dominant role of Russian literature and, of course, Russian language itself. That is, you can probably work with the concept of emotional socialism in Cuba and China, but it will be different from the former Soviet Union.

Of course, we should be critical towards the idea of "emotional socialism" as a reality. Any attempt to describe a culture purely in opposition to another is fraught with simplification: we start to see more differences and fewer similarities. When someone or something starts to be perceived as an Other, then that Other very quickly transforms into The Other, the complete opposite. What I mean is that the Russian emotional style, the Russian style of relationships, the Russian model of love begins to be interpreted as the polar opposite to the American, western and so on.

I don't consider Russian or Soviet emotional culture something exotic, something that would be completely alien to the population of France, Britain or America. This is why the concept of "emotional socialism" very strongly simplifies our understanding. All that being said, the idea of emotional socialism seems to me correct and suitable for analysis. In the post-Soviet space, people think and talk about their private lives, emotional experiences differently. And this becomes particularly prominent in Russian-speaking émigré communities where there's the possibility of direct comparison, reflection.

Let's come back to the life scenarios that emotional socialism is built upon. What do they represent? And who are its heroes? What qualities do they have? What trials and tests do

they have to pass through?

Well, for example, I understand that the protagonist of Russian literature suffers, and his suffering is his value. That is, avoiding suffering is not his goal. In modern pop-psychology (don't confuse it with Freud!), there is the idea of avoiding suffering. The Russian narrative doesn't have this, it has pain. Suffering is not seen as a barrier, as something that suggests you're living your life wrong, or doing the wrong thing. A Soviet lady in distress was a lady like any other and had the empathy of women far beyond the USSR. Best proof: an Oscar won by "Moscow doesn't believe in tears" in 1981, arguably, the most famous socialist rom-com. Photo: RIA Novosti'll give you an example. I once carried out some research for Sochnut, the Jewish Agency for Israel, about how they should represent Israel to Russian Jews still in Russia. So that they would understand how good they could have it in Israel. The agency decided to opt for a business strategy, rather than an ideology: Russian Jews most likely have some unsatisfied needs, and Israel should be represented as a product that will satisfy them.

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We did a huge number of focus groups, and I saw something that really surprised me: people spoke about their unsatisfied needs, but changing their place of residence was not, for them, a way of solving them. The majority of them said that to learn how to live with these problems, get used to them, live despite them — this is was a more meaningful, valuable experience. This is their route to success. This doesn't wash over that a million people left, but people who stayed articulate their reasons in these terms.

This is another specific element of emotional socialism, which is a place for things like fate, destiny, circumstances. There's a certain set-up of forces or some kind of route that you follow, and you need to follow it, not resist it. To adapt, not change.

In western literature, Homo Sovieticus or Soviet man is often described precisely in these terms — as someone who is subjugated to circumstances, who doesn't have what is called "agency", that is, self-definition, freedom of will, the freedom to take action. Personally, it seems to me that this reading is rather simplified and incorrect, and so I'd like to ask you: where does emotional freedom, the emotional will of a person raised on emotional socialism lie?

Most likely, it's in the freedom to fall head over heels in love, in the freedom to love madly. Why was there such a cult of love in Soviet literature, cinema? After all, it was completely legitimate to make films about "mad love", betrayal, leaving your family.

It was, it seems, a special kind of niche: to lose your head, the freedom of emotional self-expression. But not with the aim of "self-realisation", for example, but an end in itself. Here, economic prosperity and happiness do not follow from big authentic feelings. And nothing good, as a rule, comes of them. Perhaps, it's like the exercise yard in prison. A system that always holds you in place very firmly, but, to exist, has to create some spaces where its guard drops.

So it's like Mikhail Bakhtin's ["carnival"](#), the authorised chaos in a world of total control. Russia's freedom to lose your head has a dark side, too: domestic violence, abandoned children, alcoholism, the highest number of divorces per capita in a developed country. Is "losing your head" really freedom or a just lack of responsibility?

This is a normative question. It suggests that we look at "Russian" and "American" love

judgmentally. I try not to suppose that Russian love is madness and irresponsibility, and American is responsible regulation that minimises harm to oneself and those around you, or, indeed, the other way round — that Russian love is true and deep, and American is like a programme for robots. Although in all my personal experience, I feel ambivalence, my own conscience and language are psychologised and, perhaps, through my fantasy about Russian emotions I am trying to resist their complete colonisation.

How are life scenarios changing in post-Soviet culture? Where do people get their ideas of how to express their emotions, how to live with them?

There's been a discursive shift. It's become unclear where we find meaning, where these meanings are produced. I think that, for a huge number of people, blogs and Facebook - this is all that they read. And social media are incredibly normative. It's completely clear that the place of classic literature as a source of life scenarios and, in particular, emotional life, has been seriously reduced.

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The main life scenario today is self-realisation, personal growth. Curiously, people find this scenario largely through self-help technologies and media, and not through professional psychology. Russia has a therapy culture, just not a culture of turning to therapists for help.

The idea of freedom from love as freedom from dependency, which is promoted in self-help literature, is also very popular. But it often takes very radical forms, such as neuro-linguistic programming (NLP). How do you explain this?

This is usually connected with a situation where a break with the past is being sold well. Some researchers write that you have to understand Soviet civilisation not through the command economy, but the building of a new type of personality, individual. The Soviet individual was made with an axe, and what you just described [self-help culture] is an attempt to slaughter this personality type with a weapon that is just as blunt, together with its emotional socialism, and create a new one in its place. And that's in a situation where, when we analyse what's happening in Russia's media discourse, in popular culture, we see a lot of Soviet material there.

The format of communicating ideas is absolutely Soviet. The emphasis and aim (to destroy the old or foreign) is absolutely the same. I was just thinking that, if we're going to talk about emotional socialism and emotional capitalism, then we're currently living in the times of the emotional ["New Economic Policy"](#) (NEP) — i.e. a time of permitted experimentation and acquisition after upheaval. In 1925, Nikolai Bukharin came to the workers and peasants and announced: "Get rich!" And this is precisely what post-Soviet self-help does. It comes to people and says: Onward, take control of your life, you don't owe anyone anything! Don't give up your seat to old ladies on the metro. Only get married to an alpha male who brings in 100,000 roubles a month. What do you think?

That's an interesting thought. But at the same time, I think you and I have fallen into a certain trap of this omnipotent emotional capitalism. We've taken the bait, and used its baseline economic metaphor. Take me, for instance, I recently went to a professional coach, who explained to me how to grow in my profession. And she asked me: "How do you fill up your emotional bank? Let's take a look at what investments you have, what outgoings?" And I told her that I don't want to use those kinds of concepts. I don't see my soul and my life as a bank.

I am not sure that this is necessary or the correct way to write about the emotional lives of people

and their concerns in terms of property, capitalism and socialism. There's something wrong about this, in accepting this structure of thought as a baseline.

Let's round up. what's the main difference between "Russian" and "western" love?

In the Russian model, if you don't fall head over heels, then you aren't really in love, and this kind of love won't bring you happiness. And in the American model, if you lose your head, then it's first and foremost a sign that something's wrong with you. To be happy in love there, you need to show — yourself and your partner — that "I can live without you".

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