

The Social Question in Russia

From De-Politicization to a Growing Sense of Exploitation

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Despite the dramatic social shock that has traumatized millions of Russians after the fall of the communist system, the social question is, strangely enough, almost absent from public discussions, intellectual debates, and even social movements.¹ Social problems are a topic in everyday conversations; there are not a political issue. It is striking that in a country where social and labor precariousness is so high and where attacks on social security are so harsh, the social question does not exist as articulated or explicit preoccupations or demands. In this paper, I will try to assess the roots of the depoliticization of the social question in post-Soviet Russia and to interrogate whether there are some changes taking place in the ways people experience their precarious social and labor conditions today, almost thirty years after the end of the communist regime.

In order to explore the problem, I will examine the trajectory of the social question issue in post-Soviet Russia from three perspectives: social-economic transformations since the fall of the Soviet regime and the evolution of public discourses on social problems, the subjective and social experience of precariousness and informality, and the place of social grievances in claims addressed to the state. The analysis is based on primary data from field research on labor relations² and social movements³ carried out by the author and colleagues in several regions and organizations from 1995 to 2012, and more recent data come from field research on everyday nationalism in contemporary Russia, conducted in 2016–2017.⁴ The paper will argue that concerns about social rights and social consciousness, after a long period of collapse, tend to develop among large parts of the society, and that they arise from a growing sense of exploitation. The politicization of this social consciousness, however, remains problematic.

MARKET CAPITALISM AND THE “SOVIET-STYLE
NEOLIBERALISM”

The most radical capitalist and neoliberal reforms were made just after the breakdown of the communist regime, leading to social disorientation, impoverishment, and precarization of a large majority of the population. However, that neoliberal course has not changed, even up to today. The only thing that has changed is the rhetorical packaging of the reforms. The ultraliberal tone of the 1990s, when Boris Yeltsin was in power, has been replaced by the populist and patriotic discourse of the Putin’s government.

Ultraliberal Policy of the 1990s and Weak Resistance to It

Ultraliberal reforms were launched in early 1992 with the price liberalization and continued with mass privatization of enterprises, the state withdrawal from economy, and the minimization of its social functions. As a result, the income of the majority of population plummeted. According to Russian government statistics, in 1992 real incomes fell by 43.7 percent compared to 1991, then grew a little, and after the 1998 default, fell again by 42.5 percent compared to 1991. They recovered their pre-reform level only in 2005. Throughout the 1990s, most people depending on wages and social payments were brutally impoverished. They faced the problem of wage and pension reduction, non-payments, or delays in payment. Savings vanished because of ultra-inflation and default. Most of the population was living in poverty, whereas a small, notorious, and hated segment of the population—referred to as the “oligarchs”—was becoming richer and richer. Ben Judah describes it thus: “the ‘wild 1990s’ is a synonym in Russian for a decade that left practically every family with stories of deprivation, unpaid wages, economic humiliation and diminished status.”⁵

The Soviet welfare system guaranteed free medical care, free education, job security, and a stable salary, as well as a pension. Under the Soviet system, social services were mostly provided by enterprises, which took care of their “social sphere” (kindergartens, schools, sports equipment, health and housing services, or gas and water supply). These enterprises got rid of this “social burden” soon after the fall of the wall, leading to a deterioration of the social protection and utilities system. Another feature of the Soviet social welfare system continued to exist: the system of “categorical benefits,” whereby certain categories of the population (such as the disabled, war veterans, and large families) received in-kind benefits (*lgoty*), such as free or subsidized public transportation, discounts on residential utilities, and free medication. Although the system was highly criticized by international financial organizations as inefficient and contrary to market logic, it continued to be developed under Yeltsin’s presidency. Indeed, the system was a popular and cheap way for state authorities to offset hardships.

Except for the system of in-kind benefits, the Soviet welfare system broke down after the 1991–1992 ultraliberal reforms. Most people found themselves deprived of social security and any certainty of what tomorrow would be like. Neither the federal state nor local authorities took on the responsibility of providing social protection. Instead, they delegated social care to each individual and his or her close relatives. As a well-known Russian folk saying goes, “the salvation of those who are drowning is the business of those who are drowning”—meaning that one is expected to save oneself. Meanwhile, most workers, in all types of sectors and types of ownership, continued to rely on the enterprises’ social sphere, going to their workplace even without being paid in order to have at least some protection—or at least the illusion of protection. This explains the low level of unemployment.⁶ The problem in post-Soviet Russia is not unemployment, rather unpaid wages, compulsory leaves, low-wage jobs.

Thus, the first stage in the formation of Russian capitalism (the 1990s) led to a sharp economic downturn, a health crisis, the rise of social inequality, and the impoverishment of the majority of the population. Between 1989 and 1994, life expectancy declined by more than 6.7 years in men (from 64.1 years to 57.4) and 3.4 years in women (from 74.5 years to 71.1), such a gender gap being linked to the stronger stress experienced by men who had lost their role as breadwinners.⁷ After the 1992 economic reforms, official statistics show the poverty rate rising to 33.5 percent and remaining at a high level all through the 1990s. A large percentage of the population lived with incomes not much higher than the official poverty line, while a minority monopolized national wealth. A key feature of Russian poverty—which endures until now—is that it is not limited to specific groups (although the disabled, families with many children, single-parent families, and retirees are among the most vulnerable categories), but also affects a lot of workers, skilled and unskilled.

However, instead of revolting and rising up against power holders and oligarchs, people rejected politics and activism and retreated into their private lives and households. There were a couple of reasons for this. First, most of them had to survive, and that meant holding multiple jobs, being involved in subsistence and petty commodity production, and experiencing despair and exhaustion. Second, the dominant neoliberal or consumerist ideology led to self-criticism. Impoverished and precarized people tended to blame themselves, painfully enduring privations and passively hoping for state protection or economic restoration. The “tsunami of third-wave marketization,” as Burawoy calls the Russian transition to the market,⁸ led to the prevalence of commodification, economic decline, impoverishment of the majority, and stigmatization of blue-collar workers, poor people, and others who did not succeed in “adapting” to the market. The market reform of the 1990s thus did not lead to mass mobilization and resistance. Social struggles mostly broke out in a spontaneous and disordered fashion and were not part of

an ongoing mass movement. Industrial disputes occurred, but they were scattered and limited, with a few exceptions, like the miners' strikes and blockades of the Trans-Siberian Railway in May–June 1998, in which a broad range of people participated—not only miners, but also machinists, teachers, and municipal-services workers.

*The Economic Revival of the 2000s and the Development of Grassroots
Social Movements*

The socioeconomic situation started to improve in the 2000s after the 1998 default and devaluation of the ruble. Real wages and pensions recovered, and poverty fell by half.⁹ Many people no longer had suffered from the day-to-day struggle for survival, and they got a firmer foundation under their feet. However, a new stage in neoliberal reforms began in 2004, when the Putin administration aimed at restructuring the social welfare system. The neoliberal logic of these reforms is not as visible as it was during the 1990s, since the rhetoric changed and the “antisocial” reforms were complemented by other “social” ones.

At first, it seems that the government opted for a strict neoliberal course. A flat income taxation (13 percent) was introduced in 2001. The new labor code implemented in 2002 strengthened employers' positions while weakened the employees' ones, especially concerning the possibility for organizing in independent trade unions and for striking. Later in the 2000s, legislation on housing, urban, and ecological issues was reformed, which increased the cost of utilities and housing maintenance due by residents while opening the path to the privatization of communal and housing services and lands. The course chosen by the government, under the influence of the World Bank and World Trade Organization, focused on price deregulation and privatization.

However, people had recovered from the shock of the 1990s, and new antisocial reforms launched by Putin's government gave rise to protest. In 2004, Putin's government attacked the social benefits system and faced the most massive protest movements post-Soviet Russia has known.¹⁰ The mass social movement of winter 2005 was directed against a reform known as the monetization of in-kind benefits (*lgoty*) that threatened the social benefits of a number of specific professional categories, but which, in practice, affected most of the population, particularly retirees, but also school children, students, the disabled, Chernobyl survivors, Great North workers, victims of political repressions, and so on. Protest actions began on a small scale and focused on concrete issues: following altercations on buses and trolleys, retirees objected to having to pay for their tickets. From bus stop to bus stop, indignation spread, as retirees shared their anger in familiar public spaces. The news spread like a wildfire, fanned by feelings of indignation, injustice, and contempt.

The movement quickly gained traction: only a few days after the monetization law went into effect, on January 1, 2005, thousands of people, led by the retirees,

demonstrated in the street to demand the law's repeal. During the month of January, the movement mobilized more than half a million people in 97 towns and 78 regions across the country. In February, national action days were organized to demand that the federal government and Vladimir Putin withdraw the law. The national campaign ultimately achieved a partial repeal of the reform—but that was a rare occurrence in contemporary Russia.

After this concession, the social policy course seems to have been corrected in order to demonstrate the state concern for social care. Federal programs in health, housing, and education were launched with great publicity. Special aid was granted to young families and mothers through the popular “maternity capital” program, which also aimed at demonstrating the state concern for the birthrate. These programs had a brief positive effect, improving access to affordable housing or increasing education and health care workers' wages. However, the economic crisis of 2008–2009 and the recession that began in 2014 have stopped the improvement of families' social situation and living conditions. Currently, the problems of wages arrears, diminution of real wages, and impoverishment have made a dramatic comeback, while social inequality has been reinforced.

Since the 2005 movement against the monetization of social benefits, the most massive mobilization has been a grassroots movement that is scattered, local, and rooted in the daily lives of its participants, and that seeks to address particular but narrow social problems (school or hospital closures, increases in transport or communal charges, problems of urban construction and so forth). These social demands are usually not translated in terms of welfare state or social redistribution.

As a whole, social movements, because of their local and spread-out character, tend to be largely ignored by the media, whatever their ideological orientation, and underestimated or delegitimized by the intellectuals for their egoism or narrow materialism. This is one explanation of why it has been so difficult for a nation-wide social justice movement to develop. Another explanation is the lack of mobilizing structures, the high degree of atomization, and the loss of the sense of social belonging.

One of the few nation-wide organizational structures is the trade unions, but they are not very powerful in mobilizing. In practice, relations between rank-and-file workers and the management in factories are strongly unbalanced, because of the weakness of the trade union movement. The movement remains dominated by former official Soviet unions, renamed the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia (FNPR), and this group collaborates with management in most cases. The alternative or free trade unions more frequently focus on the defense of labor rights and confrontations with employers, but they face difficulties gaining recognition and support among workers.¹¹ This situation explains the high level of distrust toward trade unions in general.

Up to now, the labor movement remained one of the weakest social forces. There was a small wave of strikes in 2007–2008, especially in profitable and

foreign-owned enterprises, with workers confronting managers with demands for higher pay and better working conditions. Then the global economic downturn in 2009–2010 led to a wave of spontaneous street protests that were focused on individual crises (for example, fighting the threat of an enterprising closing entirely or conducting mass lay-offs). The crisis of the Russian economy, which began at the end of 2014, has generated a new wave of labor protests in manufacturing industries and in the public sector. However, these protests are scattered and poorly organized, and they have not led to any movement for the improvement of the workers' condition as a whole.

Local protests usually do not address the social question as such. The national protest most widely covered in the media, the 2011–2012 movement “For Fair Elections,” did not raise the social question. As some commentators have pointed out,¹² the protest was over moral issues, as illustrated by the most popular slogan: “against the party of crooks and thieves.” Still there are some exceptions, mostly in movements emerging from local grassroots initiatives located far from the wealthier centers, and especially in labor conflicts, such as the month-long strike at a Ford plant (Vsevolozhsk, in the St. Petersburg region) in 2007 or the wave of protests for the survival of industrial “monotowns” (towns that were built around a single local industry) all around the country in 2009. In some cases, timid voices can be heard that raise the issue of social justice; however, they do not demand expressively a new social policy. In most cases, social inequalities, dispossession, and impoverishment are experienced as social ills that are beyond the reach of grassroots local activists. They fight against unpaid wages, the increase of the housing utilities' prices, the closure of factories, or against the local government. They do not fight for social justice or welfare entitlements as such.

The Displaying of the Social Question in the Public Sphere

The evolution of social policy is reflected in the way influential political actors have displayed or silenced the social question over time during the post-Soviet period. In the dominant discourse of the 1990s, the social question was not a matter of concern. In the mass media, people who needed social protection were portrayed as old, reactionary, or incompetent people who failed in adapting to the market and deserved their miserable existence. The tone of “democratic” media was particularly disrespectful and ironic while reporting protest actions for the payment of wages: protesters were depicted as lazy or reactionary, fools or extremists. Older people and blue-collar workers were among the most stigmatized. The former for their nostalgia for the Soviet Union (“A new misfortune fell down on Russia: fools show the way”).¹³ The latter for their laziness (“They work only three days per week, but they are still discontent and participate in protest actions”).¹⁴ Government officials and liberal intellectuals actively participated in the stigmatization of those who needed or demanded social security from the state. They were “losers” by their own fault, because they lacked the personal qualities needed in the modern, democratic market era.¹⁵

Thus, the market capitalism ideology predominated in the 1990s in the public discourse in the media, intellectual circles, and institutional politics. State intervention in the economy was considered as bad for economic growth. Social welfare was a sign of state paternalism and demands for social rights a sign of the infantilism of people unable to take care of themselves. Social inequality was good, and equality associated with the Soviet *uravnilovka*, “equalization.” Because of the rejection of state-imposed communist ideology, critic of capitalism was taboo and class language rejected, even by the workers themselves.

In Putin’s Russia, this rhetoric has radically changed, while the neoliberal politics has remained the same. Especially after the massive protests against the monetization of social benefits in 2005, the Putin administration accentuated the discourse of government concern for the people and the rejection of the neoliberal reforms of the 1990s. Thus, one can argue that under Putin a “Soviet-style neoliberalism” has developed¹⁶ that is a neoliberal politics coupled with populist and nationalist values and the ostensible opposition to the 1990s-era economic reforms that were so traumatizing to most of the population. The rhetoric is appealing, since it was accompanied by economic growth and concrete demonstrative measures, such as the war on oligarchs controlling Russia’s exporting companies in the sectors of oil, gas, and metals (the most famous case being the one that led to Michail Khodorkosvky’s imprisonment) and the strengthening of the state authority. In his populist rhetoric, Vladimir Putin turns back to the “hard-working” and “conscientious” “ordinary folk,” and primarily speaks to “ordinary citizens” and “people who work” and “love Russia.”¹⁷

Thus, many impoverished and stigmatized people during the 1990s had their self-esteem restored thanks to the change in official public discourse. It is not surprising, then, that many of them support Putin, at least passively. Indeed, the liberal and democratic opposition, for its part, continues to use the rhetoric of the 1990s. Moscow intelligentsia considers “mass post-Soviet people,” especially poor people from the regions, as “paternalistically minded,” authoritarian, and interested more in materialistic stuff than in democracy and cultural or ethical values.¹⁸ However, if welfare claims in post-Soviet society were long delegitimized as sign of the old-fashioned Soviet “paternalism,” recent studies indicate the development of a social consciousness. More people, especially from the lower classes, are beginning to raise the issue of socioeconomic injustice and to claim for more social guarantees and redistribution. This change goes along with the change in public discourse, the growing level of socioeconomic inequality, and the return of socioeconomic hardships. As paradoxical as it may seem, the Kremlin’s nationalistic and populist discourse offers new clues to perceive social cleavages and to identify with the ones who are exploited and despoiled by the economic and political elites. To a certain extent, the rising popularity of the opposition leader Alexei Navalny and the mass participation in the all-Russian protest days against corruption that he initiated in March and June 2017 provide evidence that concerns for social problems and inequality are developing. Interviews conducted by sociologists during these

mobilizations (including by myself and colleagues from the Laboratory of Public Sociology)¹⁹ demonstrate the strength of social and economic motives. Interviews and videos from demonstrations in regional towns show that people took to the streets not so much to protest corruption or support Navalny, but rather to voice their discontent with the state of public services, health care, public education, culture, or roads. They were pushed to protest by their dissatisfaction with wide social inequalities between the small group of the rich at the top and the poor majority, between the prosperous central cities and the neglected and remote regional towns.

Capitalism Pervading Informal Coping Practices

The social question was difficult to embrace in Russia because of its informal character, which rendered invisible social insecurity, precariousness, uncertainty, and isolation, these being characteristic features of neoliberal capitalism.²⁰ There were no available and trustable statistics on informal practices for the 1990s, because the Russian State Statistical Agency (Rosstat) did not gather information on it at that time. Informality was considered a side effect of the transition toward capitalism—and it was expected to soon disappear. The most representative sociological survey, the Russian Longitudinal Monitoring Survey of the Higher School of Economics (RLMS-HSE), started to measure informality in the early 2000s and relies on the respondents' willingness to admit their participation in informal activities. Using different data sources (the Rosstat statistics as well as the RLMS-HSE data), Gimpelson and Kapelyushnikov estimate the informal-sector employment within the range of 20 percent to 30 percent in the 2000s.²¹ Vinogradova, Kozina, and Cook make similar estimation, but add non-standard work arrangements that encompass more than 40 percent of the enterprises.²² However, not all forms of non-standard work arrangements are informal and not all of them are experienced by the workers as precarious.

Formal and informal practices are intertwined,²³ and this does not facilitate the evaluation of informality. Most frequently, informal activities develop inside formal economic organizations and in response to the formal order. The most widespread such practice was the second, informal job that workers, formally employed by registered enterprises, were performing during the 1990s because of the nonpayment or underpayment of their wages. Another illustration can be the informal work that most workers have to perform in order to do their work—for instance many workers must repair the machines they work on before using them—because of the disorganization of the labor process in the 1990s, and, later, because of the increasingly high and practically unfulfillable formal targets required by the management in the 2000s.

The social question was difficult to grasp for ordinary people because of the overwhelming informality surrounding it. Precariousness, for instance, tended to be just coping practices of ingenious people who tried to take care of themselves by

themselves. Social public services were provided without clear rules and visibility. In-kind benefits, for example, were provided covertly and consisted of things like free access to public transport or minimal healthcare, the providers of which were not refunded by the state budget. Access to public services of better quality could be gained through the payment of small bribes or an informal social network. The state encouraged the development of these informal tactics of coping for providing social care.

This is changing now, with the new capitalistic logic that the government has been pushing in the social sphere and public sector since the second part of the 2000s. A new trend toward formalization tried to make the public sector—particularly healthcare, education, and housing—conform to the capitalistic logic. This worsened social, educational, and medical care available to the poor, disabled, seriously ill, or rural people. Neoliberal reforms of the 2000s led to the retrenchment of the state from social welfare, to the institutionalization (formalization) of a reduced state commitment to the provision of social care, and to the introduction of neo-managerial principles in the public services sector. In turn, this led to the exclusion of large categories of social services from state budget funding and to stronger control over workers in the fields of health, social services, and education. Being underdeveloped and under growing state control, nongovernmental voluntary or philanthropist organizations cannot effectively supplement state social welfare. Private profit-based services are not affordable for the majority. Thus, in interviews about everyday life, many people complain about the degradation of the health care, education, housing, and transport system.²⁴ This is certainly one of the explanations for why more people are beginning to address the social question now, at least in terms of blaming socioeconomic inequality and the state's inaction on promoting social equity and social welfare guarantees.

THE EXPERIENCE OF PRECARIOUSNESS: FROM DESUBJECTIVATION TO THE GROWING SENSE OF EXPLOITATION

In this section, I shall trace the everyday experiences of precariousness and informality and show how desubjectivation dynamics (the loss of some sense of the self and agency) tend to be overcome in recent time.

Desubjectivation

Precariousness was maybe nowhere so widespread and all-pervading as it was in the 1990s in Russia. Blue-collar and industrial workers were among the first victims of the new labor regime, because of deindustrialization, the loss of the previous symbolic significance of the mythicized Soviet proletariat, and the weak mobilizing potential of their organizations. In the 1990s, they lost two-thirds of their average real wages; most of their social benefits and protections, including

guaranteed employment; as well as their social image as the leading class of Soviet society. However, workers stood by relatively passively in the face of such a loss. Quiescence resulted from their—successful or unsuccessful—adaptation to the social transformations that were taking place. Given the degree and scale of these transformations, adaptation often meant complete human flexibility, the ability to bend and distort oneself without breaking. Some people did break (the men's life expectancy fell dramatically during the 1990s). Others did not break but lost their sense of self in the course of constantly adapting to changing conditions. Most of them lost points of reference and their orientation in life; they had trouble identifying themselves and the society they lived in. The field studies I conducted in the 1990s among industrial workers led me to describe their life's precarization as a process of *desubjectivation*.²⁵ Many talked about themselves in derogatory terms: "a small screw in the soulless machine," "nothing," "unneeded people," "cattle," or "slaves." My conclusions are supported by the ethnographic study conducted by Sarah Ashwin who explained workers' "endless patience" by alienation, atomization, and workers' reliance on individual survival strategies.²⁶

Although more affected by it, industrial workers were not the only ones to be shaken by precarization, which pervaded all spheres of human living and took a thousand faces. The predominant feature of precariousness was and remains informality, that is to say, the bypassing of the law and the formal (established and collectively recognized) rules.

Informality: From Destabilization to Inhabiting

Although some scholars at the time argued that informality was a legacy of the Soviet system that would disappear as soon as market capitalism developed, informality has not decreased over time. In fact, it has sharply increased in times of crisis. Thus, the socioeconomic crisis that began in 2014 because of inflation, the collapse of the ruble, decreasing oil prices, and Western sanctions has led to a decline in economic growth and income levels, a rise in unemployment, and an increase in poverty. The extent of informality and precariousness has increased, as testified by the rise of nonpayment or delayed payment of wages, flextime, "voluntary" dismissals, and so forth.

The 1990s were the triumph of informality, since all formally existing institutions and laws fell apart or split in the face of the new conditions of life that they could no longer constrain or sustain in any way. The only rule was to survive, to cope, or to make it work, by any means necessary. Informal practices at the workplace embraced all aspects of the labor regime.²⁷ Payments varied according to the situation, as well as interpersonal relations. There were widespread wage arrears, nonpayment, or unofficial payments (so-called envelope wages). The amount and mode of calculation of wages were unclear and flexible, as the employers had the ability to increase or decrease wages by modifying the amount of workers'

monthly bonus, which often constituted a large part of their wages. Hiring and firing were discretionary and depended on informal arrangements. Although legislation was and remains rather stringent concerning workers' dismissals, it was (and continues not to be) not a problem to get rid of anyone—the only condition was to obtain the formal agreement of the worker himself or herself. The labor organization was chaotic and changing, because of the deterioration of equipment, irregular provision of raw materials and tools, incoherence of the production policy, and arbitrary in human resources management. The tasks workers had to fulfill might change daily and went far beyond their formal labor requirements. Compulsory overtime was widespread. Workstations and tasks were often distributed according to interpersonal relationships between the worker and the supervisor. Rights and obligations at work changed according to individuals' interpretation of them—from relaxation of discipline (a supervisor might look the other way regarding small pilferages or smoking or drinking at the workplace in exchange for some services or because of a particular worker's indispensableness) to the strengthening of discipline, in case of interpersonal hostility or disloyalty. Interpersonal relationships also played a major role in the informalization of work. It could take the form of informal arrangements or bargaining, informal networks of coping inside and outside the enterprise, patron-client relations, or parallel business networks within the enterprise. The work schedule could be ultra-flexible—from absenteeism, tardiness, or leaving early to unpaid overtime or compulsory shortening of the workweek with wage cuts or even forced furloughs.

Sometimes these practices could provide self-confidence and reasons to be proud of oneself. Sometimes they attenuated social insecurity by giving workers ways of coping with material difficulties. In most cases, however, the personal and social cost of these practices was quite high. Negative consequences on the character and solidity of relationships included the uncertainty of what the next day would bring and the impossibility of long-term commitments, the implosion of the workers' collective, the lack of trust and solidarity, the withdrawal into oneself, and the impossibility to rely on anything but one's own ability, cleverness, and inventiveness. Informality as an everyday life experience meant destabilization and devaluation of labor.

A trend toward more formalization unfolded during the 2000s thanks to the economic and social improvements, but informal practices never disappeared, and they made a massive comeback with the 2014 crisis. However, changes have happened in the ways workers experience informality and precariousness. Instead of suffering or bending, some of them have begun to deal with precariousness and informality in other ways. Although it may look like resilience or the process of never-ending individual adaptation to hardships, it is rather a striving to get some satisfaction or enjoyment from life. Striving to make one's life livable and even comfortable instead of binding oneself to the neoliberal demands of individual

adaptation or market achievement. This can be grasped as a process of “inhabiting”—what Morris, studying working-class people in a Russian monotown, calls “the striving for mundane comfort and ordinariness.”²⁸ *Inhabiting* means living one’s life despite insecurity and uncertainty; it means finding it normal, ordinary, even good. *Inhabiting* is “making habitable the inhospitable and insecure space of lived experience.”²⁹ This is one of the new trends countering the dynamics of desubjectivation prevailing in the 1990s, since inhabiting one’s everyday life, including its precarious characters, provides some grounds for gaining self-confidence and opening to others and the larger world.

Informality Pervaded by Power Relations and Formal Control

The importance of informal networks (reflected by the Russian term *blat*) has been pointed out by many students of the Russian transition.³⁰ Informal networks are the relatives, friends, and acquaintances one turns to (instead of formal institutions) in order to get help, borrow money, find a job, and so forth. However, informal networks have changed since the 1990s; they now form a more symbiotic relation with formal institutions and rules. Most people continue to rely to a significant degree on informal practices and relationships in everyday life, while dealing also with the state institutions and private agents.³¹ The strengthening of the state and market capitalism has led to a new imbalance between informal and formal relationships in favor of the latter. Horizontal relations based on kinship or friendship have weakened, to the advantage of hierarchical power relations. In other words, informal networks have been perverted by formal power relations and social inequality. It has become more difficult for poor or subordinate people to rely on informal help from relatives or friends.³² Because of the strengthening of the market logic and the orientation toward profits, unpaid social care and simply helping others tends to lose any attraction for people who must focus on building a successful career or who are struggling to comply with new and constraining formal requirements in their jobs (for example, teachers or health care personal). Russian gender studies gives some empirical evidence of marketization’s destructive influence on social care and social or kinship relationships.³³

Since the 2000s, a new process of formalization has developed that has not led to the disappearance of the informality but is aimed at controlling it. The process of formalization has taken place because of four circumstances: the pressure of international financial institutions for new reforms, Putin’s stated policy of reestablishing the “rule of law,” the policy of increasing state control, and the need to sustain predatory capitalism. Pressures toward formalization have strengthened since Russia entered a new economic crisis in 2014, aiming at redirecting money flows toward the state budget and economic and political elites. In a wide range of sectors (such as labor, taxes, housing, and the social sphere), legislation, codes, and regulations have been modified in order to better fit the reality of informality and to control the use people from below could make of it. Informal practices

and rules are still part of the labor experience, because they are often necessary in order to fulfill formal requirements and bureaucratic control procedures. However, they have become more risky. If needed (in cases of disloyalty, budget cuts, changes in leadership, political or administrative pressures), the set of formal rules and regulations can be implemented, and those workers who have resorted to informal practices can be punished. Informality has become a more precarious line of behavior, at least for the subordinates. Instead of being one of the means accessible to them for coping with precariousness, informality became one of the means available to the dominants for controlling, bending, and punishing, thus accentuating precarization. The formal order is indeed becoming so constraining that it is hard to comply with its requirements without informal arrangements, but that makes it easy to fall into the trap of the formal control. Thus, the oppressive side of informality becomes more graspable.

Gaining the Sense of Exploitation

An important point to add about informality is that it implies some kind of work—unstable, precarious, or flexible—but still work. Most of the practices mentioned above include physical, social, emotional, or cognitive work. This means a life invaded by work that is not recognized as such and thus not paid, and work that is performed without any labor or social guarantees. Moreover, this work is often not recognized and not experienced as such even by the performers. They therefore engage in a kind of self-exploitation and cannot demand any formal recognition or retribution for that work.

However, this is changing. Surveys confirm a growing sense of social cleavage and inequality,³⁴ findings also made in our ongoing research on everyday nationalism in Russia.³⁵ In-depth interviews with people about their everyday lives show a high proportion of them blaming the rising social inequality. One of the most widespread views from below on the Kremlin nationalist project is social critical. The critique is addressed to the patriotic state propaganda and to the unpatriotic behavior of the economic and political elites. The critique is social in its contents, people denouncing the antisocial aspects of the policy, especially compared with the official discourse of government concern for the people. In interviews, many people address claims on the state for welfare protection. They demand recognition for those who really work for the good of the country, and they blame the theft of the state by oligarchic elites who have stolen the wealth of the nation and continue to steal money from the people through taxes, low wages, and the rising cost of public services and utilities. Below are some typical quotations to provide some empirical evidence.

A pensioner, male, St. Petersburg, May 2016: “I cannot figure out how is it possible that people live so poor in such a rich country.”

A cook, female, St. Petersburg, April 2017: “What kind of patriotism is it to force people to work for peanuts?”

A young high-skilled blue-collar worker, St. Petersburg, Jan. 2017: “I love my job—I really enjoy it. And I want to earn money from it. However, it turns out to be without any value. Human labor is not valued anymore. . . . Those fat assholes—sorry—who sit in their chairs in the Duma don’t do anything and earn half a million, [and they] are considered far more useful. . . . And what about the pensioners? They have worked all their lives for the good of the country! And they still have to work in order to survive, instead of traveling and enjoying life, like foreign pensioners. It’s a shame! . . . And the regions, all these little towns where people live without jobs and money. Why did all factories close?”

A businesswoman, Astrakhan, June 2016: “What is the Crimea for? I don’t need it! Increase wages and give our children good education! No! They don’t give us anything, only take everything from us!”

A blue-collar worker repairing the roof of an apartment building, Astrakhan, June 2016: “Nothing will never change in Russia in our lives. What can change? Everything has been seized. It’s business; it is profitable for them—do you understand?—it’s profitable to take everything from the workers, to pay them so little. . . . They say, ‘love the motherland and be hungry.’”

A collective interview in a courtyard in Astrakhan, June 2016 (all working-class women between the ages of thirty and sixty).

— “[Putin] lifts the country up? Not our country, maybe Syria or Crimea.”

— “You know, I don’t think he lifts our country up, nor Crimea and Syria.”

— “Yes, he lifts up the well-offs.”

— “All the money is offshore. . . . Nothing remains in Russia.”

— “Yes, he works for the rich.”

— “Banks also do well—our welfare funds go to the banks.”

— “What did Putin do for the pensioners? What? Nothing! Nothing! Only empty words.”

— “They live very well, and we struggle to survive.”

From the analysis of recent data on everyday life experience, I draw the conclusion that a growing sense of exploitation is developing, through which people raise the social question, demanding social protection and decent wages for working people who work for the welfare of the nation far more than the exploiting oligarchic elites controlling the government. A clear social cleavage appears in conversations that separates those who work in earnest for the good of the country, who do something useful or productive (or have done, if speaking of pensioners), and those who only talk or live at the expense of the genuine workers.

CONCLUSION

Striking social changes are unfolding now in Russia, in a direction opposite to the atomization, alienation, and desubjectivation dynamics that developed in

the 1990s among people impoverished and precaritized by the liberal capitalist restructuring. Thirty years after the breakdown of the communist regime, a social sense of exploitation is emerging through which the social question is being raised. This means that the social question is not so much claims on the state for social care as it is the social critique of the state belonging to the oligarchs and of the political and economic elites exploiting working people.

This trend is especially widespread among the lower classes, although it's not restricted to them. The awakening of a sense of exploitation is linked to the stabilization of life experience many people experienced in the 2000s, as well as to the process of inhabiting one's social and material environment that gives some of them rootedness in their quotidian life experience and allows them to grasp the rising social inequality and exploitation. This process is fueled by the feelings of outrage that arise from the contradiction between the patriotic state propaganda and their everyday life experience. The main issue at stake is the assertion of the commonwealth, which has to belong to those who deserve it by their work or their real acts for the good of the country. This is a social critical version of nationalism. The problem is that this standpoint does not lead to mobilization, except maybe through the Navalny anti-corruption campaign. In most cases, social criticism and the sense of exploitation are accompanied by a strong sense of powerlessness: people do not have any confidence in their ability to change things and to force the economic and political elites to stop exploiting people.

In the end, I would interpret the changes occurring now in Russian society as a revival of a certain class-based perception of social inequality relying on an unexpressed, and maybe unconscious, Marxist frame for grasping the social reality around them. I am encouraged to make such an assertion by my empirical findings and by recent ethnographic studies that also stress "vernacular Marxism"³⁶ as a strong framework for the understanding of everyday Russian world. Maybe it is time for scientists to come back to Marxism as a theory useful for grasping the deep structural constraining process of social changes, as well as the way people, more or less consciously or actively, arrange with them.

NOTES

1. Another version of this paper was already published: K. Clément, "Social mobilizations and the question of social justice in contemporary Russia." *Globalizations* (Special Issue ed. by A. Gunvald Nilsen and K. Von Hold, "Rising Powers—People Rising: Neoliberalization And Its Discontents In The BRICS Countries") (2018). 1–15.

2. On labor relations, see Karine Clément, *Les ouvriers russes dans la tourmente du marché* (Paris: Syllepse, 1999); Karine Clément (K. Kleman), "Formal'nye i neformal'nye pravila: kakov optimum?" [Formal and informal rules: what balance?], in *Stanovlenie trudovykh otnošenij v postsovetskoj Rossii*, ed. Vladimir Yadov, Joan De Bardeleben, and Svetlana Klimova, 135–92 (Moscow: Akademičeskij Proekt, 2004); Karine Clément (Kleman), "Fleksibil'nost' po-rossijski': očerk o novykh formah truda i

podčineniá v sfere uslug” [Russian flexibility: essay on new forms of labor and submission in the sphere of services], in *Sociologičeskij Žurnal* 4 (2007).

3. On social movements, see Karine Clément, “Unlikely Mobilisations: How Ordinary Russian People Become Involved in Collective Action,” *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology* 2 (2015); Karine Clément, Andrey Demidov, and Olga Myriasova, *Ot obyvatel'ej k aktivistam: zaroždašiesá social'nye dviženíá v nyněšnej Rossii* [From ordinary people to activists: Emerging social movements in contemporary Russia] (Moscow: Tri kvadrata, 2010).

4. “Everyday Nationalism,” research under the author’s supervision. Part of the project “Living Together: Issues of Diversity and Unity in the Modern Russia; Historical Legacy, Modern State and Society” (2016–2017), supported by the grant of the Foundation for Support of Liberal Education.

5. Ben Judah, *Fragile Empire: How Russia fell In and Out of Love with Vladimir Putin* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 13.

6. The unemployment rate (by ILO definition) has never been very high in Russia (it was only 3.7 percent of the active population in 1996, rose to 13 percent in 1999, and then decreased slowly). The unemployment rate was 5.8 percent at the beginning of 2016.

7. Sarah Ashwin and Tatyana Lytkina, “Men in Crisis in Russia: The Role of Domestic Marginalization,” *Gender and Society* 18, no. 2 (2004): 189–206.

8. Michael Burawoy, “Ethnographic Fallacies: Reflections on Labour Studies in the Era of Market Fundamentalism,” *Work, Employment and Society* 27 (2013): 532.

9. Anders Åslund and Andrew Kuchins, *The Russia Balance Sheet* (Washington, DC: Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2009).

10. For more on this, see Karine Clément, “Civic Mobilization in Russia: Protest and Daily Life,” *Books and Ideas* (2013). www.booksandideas.net/Civic-Mobilization-in-Russia.html.

11. Sarah Ashwin and Simon Clarke, *Russian Trade Unions and Industrial Relations in Transition* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Graeme Robertson, *The Politics of Protest in Hybrid Regimes: Managing Dissent in Post-Communist Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

12. Lev Gudkov, “Social’nyj kapital i ideologičeskije orientacii” [Social capital and ideological orientation], *Pro et Contra* 16 (2012); Alexandre Bikbov, “The Methodology of Studying ‘Spontaneous’ Street Activism (Russian Protest and Street Camps, December 2011–July 2012),” *Laboratorium* 2 (2012).

13. From the “democratic” newspaper *Segonya*, *March* 3, 1997; caption under a picture of an aggressive toothless babushka in a protest demonstration.

14. Television channel ORT, *Vremya*, April 8, 1998, on Voronezh aircraft plant’s workers who suffered from administrative reduction of their work week and received only two-thirds of their already miserable salary.

15. Elena Danilova, “Neoliberal Hegemony and Narratives of ‘Losers’ and ‘Winners’ in Post-Socialist Transformations,” *Journal of Narrative Theory* 44 (2014).

16. Julie Hemment, “Soviet-Style Neoliberalism? Nashi, Youth Voluntarism, and the Restructuring of Social Welfare in Russia,” *Problems of Post-Communism* 56 (2009).

17. Quotations from Putin’s speech at the rally held on February 23, 2012 at Luzhniki in Moscow against the “For honest elections” movement

18. Gudkov, “Social’nyj kapital.”

19. The Laboratory of Public Sociology can be found at www.facebook.com/PublicSociologyLaboratory.

20. Richard Sennet, *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998); Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999); Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011); Jan Breman and Marcel van der Linden, “Informalizing the Economy: The Return of the Social Question at a Global Level,” *Development and Change* 45 (2014).

21. Vladimir Gimpelson and Rostislav Kapeliushnikov, *Between Light and Shadow: Informality in the Russian Labour Market* (Bonn: Institute for the Study of Labor, 2014), <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2462711>.

22. Elena Vinogradova, Irina Kozina, and Linda Cook, "Labor Relations in Russia: Moving to a 'Market Social Contract?'" *Problems of Post-Communism* 62 (2015): 193–203.
23. Jeremy Morris and Abel Polese, *The Informal Post-Socialist Economy: Embedded Practices and Livelihoods* (London: Routledge, 2014); Alena V. Ledeneva, *Can Russia Modernize? Sistema, Power Networks and Informal Governance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
24. Research on Everyday Nationalism (2016–2017) under the author's supervision.
25. Clément, *Les ouvriers russes dans la tourmente du marché*.
26. Sarah Ashwin, "Endless Patience: Explaining Soviet and Post-Soviet Social Stability," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 31 (1998).
27. Clément, "Formal'nye i neformal'nye pravila: kakov optimum?"
28. Jeremy Morris, *Everyday Post-Socialism: Working-Class Communities in the Russian Margins* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 8.
29. *Ibid.*, 236.
30. Alena V. Ledeneva, *Russia's Economy of Favours: Blat, Networking and Informal Exchange* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Richard Rose, "Uses of Social Capital in Russia: Modern, Pre-Modern, and Anti-Modern," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 16 (2000): 33–57; Snezhina Michailova and Verner Worm, "Personal Networking in Russia and China: Blat and Guanxi," *European Management Journal* 21 (2003).
31. Morris and Polese, *The Informal Post-Socialist Economy*.
32. ISRAN, *Bednost' i neravenstva*, 48.
33. Svetlana Yaroshenko, "'Ženskaâ rabota' i ličnoe blagopolučiie: tehnologii isklûčeniâ v post-sovetskoj Rossii" ["Women's work' and personal well-being: technology of exclusion in post-Soviet Russia], *Ėkonomičeskaâ sociologiâ* 14 (2013).
34. Levada Centre, *Points of Disagreement in the Society* [Press release in Russian] (2016); Svetlana Mareeva and Natalya Tikhonova, "Public Perceptions of Poverty and Social Inequality in Russia" [in Russian]. IS RAN (Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences), *Mir Rossii* 25, no. 2 (2016): 37–67.
35. The fieldwork consists of twelve observations of everyday interactions and 220 in-depth interviews on their everyday life experience with people from six regions with different social and professional profiles.
36. Anna Kruglova, "Social Theory and Everyday Marxists: Russian Perspectives on Epistemology and Ethics," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 59, no. 4 (2017).