

Introduction: Gender and Choice After Socialism

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the former socialist countries experienced various degrees of liberalisation and privatisation. This was accompanied by a new ideology that included the notion that the end of socialism would usher in a new era of choice. Indeed, the elimination of restrictions and the expansion of options did mean increased personal and political freedom. On the most basic level, free market reforms allowed more imports from the West, resulting in the range of available consumer products increasing beyond measure. For those who had felt trapped within the confines of the eastern bloc, a more significant change was that borders were opened, providing the chance—and the choice—to travel the world. Many life-constraining legislations were revoked, such as the ban on homosexuality, making it easier for people to make choices about their sexual lives. Changes in housing distribution, and the relaxation of official attitudes towards what constituted a ‘normal’ family, enabled people to choose how they wanted to live and with whom.

At first glance, all of these developments look unambiguously positive. The concept of choice is generally bound up with the concept of individual rights and, as such, is seen as a positive aspect of an open and democratic society. Indisputably, individual rights increased in the post-- Soviet countries. However, in no society is choice ever entirely free; nor is it always in people’s own interests.

Theorising Choice

As far back as Ancient Greece, thinkers have tried to understand the relationships between free will, individual rights and choice. Most notably, Aristotle argued that ‘[t]he origin of action – its efficient, not its final cause – is choice, and that of choice is desire and reasoning with a view to an end. This is why choice cannot exist either without thought or intellect or without a moral state’.¹ However, the Greek word he used— *prohairesis*—is not the unambiguous equivalent of ‘choice’ but has also been translated as decision, commitment, purpose, preferential choice, established preference, pursuit and intention.²

In modern times, choice has been an important and difficult concept for scholars. The political economist and sociologist Max Weber wrote in the early twentieth century that the predictability of consequences made choice rational.³ Jean-Paul Sartre took a step further. He wrote that people are nothing but their actions: we *are* our choices.⁴ Many of Sartre’s sociological contemporaries shared an interest in the question of choice in modern society; however, some, like Zygmunt Bauman, emphasised the inequality of choice—that some can choose more freely than others.⁵

For modernisation theorists, most prominently Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck, the unpredictability of consequences has rendered choice in modern society, in contrast to traditional society, individualised and free. No longer constrained by tradition, choices proliferate. Compelled to live in an ever-changing, flexible world where no ‘default options’ remain, and with access to diverse alternative sources of knowledge, people are now compelled to choose their lifestyles, sexuality and family structure and write their own biographies. Choice is, then, the single most important feature of our age.

In contrast to sociologists of modernisation, cultural sociologists such as Pierre Bourdieu view culture as something that structures and shapes individual choice. Specific cultural socialisation instils certain preferences, values, desires, affinities and tastes in people. As a result, any apparently free choice is driven by some degree of pre-determined dispositions which originate in society, social structure and, in particular, membership of a particular social class. According to this understanding, free choice is almost an illusion. However, this illusion is an important aspect of capitalist ideology: it obscures inequalities and the class-based limitations on choice.

In specific socio-historical contexts, the concept of choice is a socially and culturally constructed phenomenon which is both enabled and con-strained by the context in which it takes place. Drawing on the work of Ori Schwarz, we consider that our supposedly individual choices are highly influenced by the society in which we live and the social class to which we belong.⁶ Culture shapes the relationship

between personal, social and political freedom and personal, social and political choice. *How* people make choices is also influenced by their culture.

The promotion of the ideology of free choice is particularly important in periods of intense socio-economic change. The philosopher Renata Salecl makes the important point that the manipulation of choice in capitalist society works against democracy, arguing that choice 'is the basis ... of any political engagement and of the political process as a whole. However, when choice is glorified as the ultimate tool by which people can shape their private lives, very little is left over for social critique'.⁷ Exploring the problems relating to choice in West Germany in the years following the Second World War, the German sociologist Arnold Gehlen found, half a century before Salecl, that the obligation to choose can be highly problematic, even more so as more choice alternatives do not automatically lead to equal opportunities for making choices.⁸ People responded to this with the feelings of loss and anxiety as well as individual self-blaming for failure.

Salecl's and Gehlen's work is concerned with Western capitalist countries in different eras. However, their observations are highly pertinent to the post-Soviet countries, which, after the supposedly classless Soviet Union disintegrated, in the 1990s experienced rapid social and economic changes at least as extreme as those described by Gehlen in post-war Germany and where choice is circumscribed in a variety of ways, both overt and covert. Choice processes in those countries have undergone extremely rapid change since the countries'

In the Soviet era, there was little leeway to choose; that is, choice was heavily restricted. Indeed, in accordance with what scholars of the sociology of modernisation call tradition, it could be said to be somewhat auto-mated. The Soviet period was in many respects akin to what Giddens calls pre-modern tradition: there was a repressive state which controlled its people's right to choose and how to choose.

Gender and Choice in the Post-Socialist Countries

In this book we explore the issues of choice and gender in two post-- socialist Slavic states, Russia and Ukraine. The demise of state socialism has had a profound effect on the choices available to people in these countries. For those who found themselves at the lower end of the new hierarchy during the post-Soviet transformation, the collapse of the old social welfare institutions led to uncertainty, instability and insecurity, if not outright poverty.⁹ The supposedly 'limitless choice' of capitalism has largely been meaningless; indeed, it could be said to have actually been working to silence structural factors and disguise rapidly growing social and economic inequalities. When people are expected to be active choosers and to make reflexive and responsible choices (assess risks, anticipate consequences and prepare themselves for best-case and worst-case scenarios), the lack of valuable achievements in life is routinely interpreted as a result of 'bad choices'.

In the context of post-Soviet transition, people's failure to survive and flourish in the labour market, as well as in their personal lives, has been individualised, with responsibility for failure placed on their own shoulders. The anxiety which resulted from extreme change, with growing disillusionment with the supposed freedoms of capitalism and an increasing awareness, to borrow Salecl's term, of the 'tyranny of choice', has led to a search for new authorities, as we can see today in the rise of populism and authoritarianism all over the region.

Against the background of growing economic inequality, a retreating welfare state and rising conservatism, the 'new' ideal of gender relations is the long familiar bourgeois ideal, with a male breadwinner and a woman retreating into the private domestic sphere. Despite the fact that the practices, norms and values of the Soviet past and the 'working mother' gender contract remain highly influential for the majority of people, the 'housewife' and 'sponsored woman' have achieved cultural hegemony in media discourses and have become markers, in particular, of the new upper class. There is, all the same, more flexibility in gender practices and identities than there was in the past, when traditional understandings of masculinity and femininity, despite the rhetoric of equality, were largely unchallenged on more than a superficial level. Now there is some possibility of interpreting masculinity and femininity in a less rigid way.

Yet there are severe limitations on these possibilities, both in people's personal lives and in the political arena. While the situation is far from identical in Russia and Ukraine, there are similarities. For example, while homosexuality is legal in both states, LGBT citizens are likely to experience negative social attitudes towards them and their lifestyles, and they do not enjoy the same legal protections and state support as heterosexuals. New anti-gay legislation in Russia represses the lifestyle choices of non-heterosexual people. Increased media control and political repression have hindered citizens' right to choose how to express their opinions. This is the case not only in Russia but also in post-Maidan Ukraine. As Volodymyr Chemerys wrote for *Open Democracy Review*, 'something really has happened to us—Ukraine has changed after the last Maidan. From a country that stood out for its level of civic freedoms on the territory of the former USSR, it is transforming into a copy of the Russian Federation in terms of the suppression of those freedoms'.¹⁰

Just as strong as policy-based restrictions and media control are the influences on behaviour stemming from social norms and practices. In Russia, these are certainly reinforced by the Putin regime but are rooted in Soviet and post-Soviet history and society. A similar phenomenon can be observed in other former socialist countries. In Ukraine, for example, people are now able to change their gender—but how they do so is heavily constrained by institutional and medical means.

This Volume and Its Structure

There is a large amount of recent scholarship exploring the political, economic and social transitions in post-Soviet countries and how these have transformed gender relations and gender and sexuality politics. These questions have, however, never been explored through the lens of choice. Similarly, the emergence of new choices and the concept of free choice in the post-Soviet countries have never been explored through the lens of gender and sexuality. We sought to bring these two fields into conversation with each other, focusing specifically on choice as an ideology of neoliberalism and gender as a tool of the class-formation processes in the post-Soviet context. We deal with the following questions: How is choice gendered, and how do choice and gender relate to each other? What is special about choice and gender in post-Soviet societies?

In this volume we examine how the new choices which became available to people after the collapse of socialism have influenced gender identities and gender relations in the region, understanding choice as part of the ideology of capitalism and the driving force of class-formation processes in former socialist countries. We analyse the origins and development of life choices in their historic, social and economic contexts. We ask how new choices have influenced gender identities and gender relations, how different groups with specific gendered characteristics perceive these choices and deal with them and how neoliberal interpretations of choice have become an integral feature of post-Soviet societies.

As is the case throughout the world, people's socio-economic positions determine to a large extent the choices available to them. What is specific about the post-socialist space is that many people have undergone profound changes in material wellbeing and social class within just one generation, with their positions in the social and socio-economic hierarchies undergoing sharp upward or downward mobility.

Many of the contributors explore the relationship between state, individual, gender and choice. We critically examine the impact of the neoliberal ideology of free choice from a variety of perspectives. These range from state policies addressing the apparent demographic crisis in Russia and government practices concerning transgender people to social processes like the individualisation of aspects of life, social class, ageing and demilitarisation.

The volume consists of three sections. The chapters in Section 1 analyse external constraints to choices in the form of laws, state policies, state structures, the geopolitical agenda, homophobia and gender norms.

Ira Roldugina's chapter explores the roots of homophobia in Russia and explains how this infiltrated state structures, public consciousness and academic scholarship. Based on extensive archival research, including FSB files, the chapter reflects on the choices made by Russian and Western scholars working

on the under-researched history of Russian sexuality. While scholarship on post-socialist non-heterosexuals is growing, very little work has been done on homosexuality in the Soviet period, despite the fact that plentiful archival material is available. This, Roldugina argues, is due to suppression of the subject both by the Russian academic community and by civil society. She links the repressed memory of Soviet homosexuality both with the Stalinist gender policies of the 1930s and the ambiguous and inconsistent processes of democratisation which took place in Russia in the 1990s.

Nadzeya Husakouskaya's chapter deals with the transgender phenomenon in contemporary Ukraine, showing how medical and state institutions work to normalise transgender citizens' bodies and standardise their identities and self-expression. Husakouskaya explains how Ukrainian law views transgender people as a problem to be governed and regulated. She demonstrates that when the majority of Ukrainians declared their desire for greater European integration, Ukrainian transgender (as well as LGB) activism was intensified by the promise and possibility of 'a European future'. Ukrainian NGOs working to protect LGBT rights aligned their work with Western donors' expectations and thus functioned as a guide for Western discourse on human rights and sexual diversity. This might ultimately result in a backlash against both the transgender community and LGBT activism.

In the chapter '[From the Maidan to the Donbas: The Limitations on Choice for Women in Ukraine](#)', Olesya Khromeychuk explores the working of gender norms in Ukraine in relation to women's participation both in the Maidan protests and the military conflict in Donbas. In both cases their contribution was encouraged and welcomed but was restricted to certain roles. In the military conflict, the limitations on women's involvement were based not only on the patriarchal perception of gender roles but also on legal restrictions on the positions open to them in the Ukrainian army. The chapter explores why women chose to participate in the military conflict in the first place, what roles they chose to take from the limited range available to them and how they challenged the restrictions imposed on them.

Section 2 is concerned largely with internal constraints on choice and the ways in which choice is to a large extent pre-determined by culture. While the authors may not directly refer to dispositional sociological theories inspired by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, all of them are to some extent compatible with the Bourdieusian approach, which strives to uncover cultural influences behind apparently individual choices. The chapters make it clear that while individuals seemingly have a growing number of options, the culture in which they live influences their choices by imposing its norms and expectations. Supposedly free choice, then, is to some extent an illusion—which, furthermore, legitimises inequalities.

Anna Shadrina's chapter looks at how older, unmarried Russian women account for their relationship status. While ageist attitudes, gender norms and men's premature mortality in Russia delimit the women's actual capacity to choose whether to be single, culture offers them discursive tools to frame their singlehood as choice and so avoid disempowerment. In a culture where women's 'late singlehood' is represented, as Shadrina puts it, 'as an inevitable move towards isolation, ageing and dying alone', the metaphor of individual choice becomes a vital resource for agency and self-respect.

Elisabeth Schimpfössl explores how choice plays out among upper-class femininities and masculinities in Russia. The chapter tries to make sense of the complexities of gendered identities among rich Russians, including gay masculinities, and asks to what extent the gender norms prevalent in Russia have affected the wealthy differently to the large majority of Russians. It also examines the ways and the life situations in which their choices are restricted.

Lynne Attwood and Olga Isupova explore the reasons women give for choosing whether or not to have children, against the background of the 'demographic crisis' in Russia. Analysing discussions between women on various Internet sites on the subject of childbirth and, more broadly, the meaning of the family in contemporary Russia, they argue that although it is easier for women to make choices about this aspect of their lives than it was in the more prescriptive Soviet era, there are still social pressures, old and new, which influence their choices; these include the legacy of Soviet notions of compulsory motherhood, as well as post-Soviet demands that women now commit themselves to intensive motherhood. They make it clear that the possibility for choice in relation to motherhood has

both increased and decreased in the 2000s. Their ‘netnographic’ study raises another important dimension for the sociology of choice: the role of Internet communities in shaping people’s choices.

The chapters in Section 3 are roughly in line with the sociology of modernisation’s approach to choice (Giddens and Beck). They are focused on the analysis of how people approach their choices by means of individual deliberations. Research participants are presented as reflexive choosers who carefully manage their self-representations and calculate the consequences of their choices.

Anna Temkina and Elena Zdravomyslova explore practices of choice in reproductive healthcare as a mechanism of class construction in contemporary Russia. They do this by analysing in-depth interviews with women in St. Petersburg who purchased private maternity services. The chapter reflects some of the insights of the sociology of modernisation, which analyses the transformation of intimacy in the late modern era and argues that the life of the modern self became a strategic project. It argues, in the authors’ words, that for contemporary middle-class women in Russia, ‘the “responsible” motherhood project starts before the birth of the child, and involves intensive pregnancy planning, attention to healthcare, and special effort in the organisation of childbirth’. Temkina and Zdravomyslova focus on culturally specific techniques of the choices their interviewees made—they use specific algorithms to search for information about maternity services, ask for advice from experts and former patients, invest their resources in getting personalised recommendations and consider the pros and cons of all aspects of the available services. For women with resources, the motherhood-planning project, the rejection of state-funded services and the discursive practice of differentiating themselves from women who do not invest in their motherhood project work as mechanisms for obtaining and sustaining their social position.

Marina Yusupova explores changing attitudes in Russia towards army service. On a constitutional level, male citizens in Russia have no choice as to whether to serve. However, capitalism and the severe under-funding of the Russian army have unwittingly granted this choice to privileged and educated groups. The interviews Yusupova has conducted with Russian men suggest that the discursive framing of this choice is simultaneously influenced by capitalist rationality and Soviet militarist ideology, which creates unique tensions between the ideology of militarism and notions of masculinity. However, despite strong antimilitarist sentiments and the harsh critique of the contemporary Russian army, only a small number of the research participants in Yusupova’s study expressed consistent antimilitary sentiments or considered military service to be unnecessary and pointless. Military and militarism remain a crucial symbolic terrain on which masculinity is contested and achieved, even for those who chose to evade the draft. The chapter shows that culture equips us with normative prescriptions for self-representation, and that at times individuals choose to follow such prescriptions even when it contradicts their own life projects and lived experiences.

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Notes

- 1.\ Quoted in John Peter Anton, George L. Kostas and Anthony Preus, *Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy IV: Aristotle’s Ethics*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1971, p. 149.
- 2.\ Emily Hauptman, *Putting Choice before Democracy: A Critique of rational choice theory*, Albany: SUNY 1996, p. 37.
- 3.\ Max Weber, *Economy and Society. An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, translation of 4th German ed. of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, Berkeley: University of California, 1978[1922].
- 4.\ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Defence of Existentialism*, 1946 lecture, published in 1956.
- 5.\ Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalisation: The Human Consequences*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998, p. 86.

- 6.\ Ori Schwarz, 'Cultures of choice: towards a sociology of choice as a cultural phenomenon', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 2017. See also Renata Salecl, *Choice*, London: Profile Books, 2010, p. 13.
- 7.\ Salecl 2010, p. 13.
- 8.\ Arnold Gehlen, *Studien zur Anthropologie und Soziologie*, Neuwied-- Berlin: Luchterhand, 1963.
- 9.\ Natalia E. Tikhonova and Svetlana V. Mareeva, 'Poverty in Contemporary Russian Society: Formation of a New Periphery', *Russian Politics*, vol 1, no 2, 2016, pp. 159–83.
- 10.\ Volodymyr Chemerys, ODR 26 October 2016, <https://www.opendem-ocracy.net/od-russia/volodymyr-chemerys/totalitarian-tendencies-in-postmaidan-ukraine>, accessed 4 November 2017.