

Automobile Masculinities and Neoliberal Production Regimes Among Russian Blue-Collar Men

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on a social group of young blue-collar men in Russia in a small industrial town. They see each other as ‘confrères’, to use Michael Burawoy’s (1992) classic conceptualization of working-class communist-era sociality. This notion of classed masculine sociality at the nexus of workplace, domestic space and leisure space is relevant in the postsocialist era (Morris 2012). Using long-term ethnographic immersion in the lives of informants, the chapter investigates how seemingly enduring socialist-era working-class masculinity is increasingly inflected by global changes in production and labour: the challenge to traditional Russian factory work by the informal economy and transnational corporations (TNCs). In parallel, it shows how performative masculinity through cultural norms of consumption and do-it-yourself (DIY) (car ownership, mechanical repair and tinkering) is subject to change. At the core of this chapter are portraits of ‘Petr’ and ‘Nikita’—ethnographic composites. It follows them as they move from local factory jobs—via detours in the informal economy—to a

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production line in a TNC automotive factory, and in parallel it traces debates about automobility in this circle of friends.

Car ownership and the DIY skills involved in repairing mechanically simple old Russian cars speak to issues around the display of working-class masculinities. In addition, the chapter explores automobility as emblematic of uneasy social mobility and fraught engagement with new neoliberal regimes of work on the self and flexibility. Choices about what kind of car to own, whether to use credit, whether to buy Russian-built or ‘foreign’, whether to learn from others how to maintain it or pay a stranger—all these forks in the path of becoming automobile are statements of what kind of man a person wants to be. They are similarly subject to interpretation by others in a working-class setting. Conversations and conflicts about automobility come to dramatize aspects of social class mobility, immobility and contrasting performances of masculinity. Automobility marks how particular forms of masculinity intersect with both aspirational fantasies (that largely remain inaccessible) and stubborn retrenchments of more traditional classed identities. These ‘debates’ bespeak an uneasy relationship with the ‘desired’ automobile as status symbol and object of labour in the ‘Western’ factories in which these men work.

WORKING-CLASS MASCULINITY AND THE POSTSOCIALIST NEOLIBERAL ORDER

This section is necessarily only a short summary of a wide-ranging debate. For more extensive treatments, see Ashwin (2000), Vanke (2014) and Walker (2017). After 1989/1991, postsocialism gave rise to a dominant narrative of marketized relations and challenged traditional working-class masculinity across Eastern Europe. ‘Shock’ economic reforms led to long-term and massive declines in the purchasing power of the male blue-collar wage, and a steady deterioration in conditions and social benefits. The latter was significant in underpinning traditional notions of value associated with manual work and masculinity. While female employment was much more the norm in socialist societies than in the West, a single *male* bread-winning wage often provided accelerated access to social housing (also the norm), and subsidized or preferential access to goods and services essential to household reproduction.

It is therefore no surprise that the unprecedented deterioration in the economic positioning of working-class men after communism was

accompanied by an equally unprecedented peacetime demographic crisis as millions of men died early or were debilitated by psychosocial stress (Stuckler et al. 2009). This was not only the result of economic dislocation and dispossession but also due to the social ‘crisis’ in masculinity that pre-dated the end of communism. Authoritarian and ‘patriarchal’ state–citizen relations saw men’s *social* roles severely truncated during and after communism (Ashwin 2000). Men’s ‘coping’ responses to rapid social change post-1991 reinforced a longstanding pathologized view of men as infantile and feminized as a result of the coercion and violence of communist rule. Working-class men’s responses to economic, social and political marginalization led to masculinity becoming associated with deviant behaviour (Ries 1997), and working-class masculinity in particular as subject to association with criminality and extreme lumpenization (Stenning 2005; Walker 2014). Socialist-era worries about masculinity have evolved since to relate to men’s perceived inability to cope with neoliberal roll-back of the state and new labour relations. They continue to be seen as ‘weak: inappropriately feminine, drunk, irresponsible, shiftless’ (Ashwin 2000: 17). The ‘crisis in masculinity’ also concerns the rate of highly self-destructive behaviours (Zdravomyslova and Temkina 2002)—almost a collective form of self-harm that can be interpreted as a response to a real and symbolic loss of roles and status—particularly for working-class men, who Walker (2009) sees as fundamentally ‘devalued’ by the process of socioeconomic transformation.

At the same time, the loss of the ‘patriarchal’ socialist-era state has seen a resurgence in retraditionalizing narratives of gender roles after generations of at least nominally legal equality and a degree of real social and economic mobility for women. This was most notable in the media, but reflected a concerted effort, a compensatory mechanism, of the particular form of neoliberal reform in post-communist societies, which stressed the rediscovery of men’s biologically essentialized masculinity (Zdravomyslova and Temkina 2002) at the same time as asserting familiar traditional masculinity through breadwinning as, if not an achievable norm, an idealized type. This led to Kay (2006), in a landmark study of the crisis of Russian masculinity, to ask whether men could resist the urge to reassert patriarchy.

For working-class men in the present, all these factors remain pertinent, but increasingly dominant is their growing awareness of the socioeconomic and symbolic subaltern positioning of workers since the end of communism (if not before; cf. Burawoy 1992). The transition from communism to a form of neocapitalism (Kideckel 2008) can be read as a multigenerational experience of trauma, albeit in a different form to deindustrializing

working-class communities in the global north (e.g. Walkerdine 2010; Morris 2016). In Russia, working-class male dispossession was not so much characterized by ‘widespread unemployment [. . . as] impoverishment of prospects for those employed in the industrial and agricultural sectors, in which poverty wages, unsafe working conditions and extended periods of unpaid leave continue to be the norm for many’ (Walker 2009: 532; see also Yaroshenko et al. 2006).

Working-class men have found themselves in an unparalleled position of subalternity in such societies (Kideckel 2002). They are faced with an ‘illusory corporatism’ (Ost 2000): state and employer relations are exclusionary and seek to impose a strong form of neoliberal labour disciplining and dispossession. Elites and the emergent middle classes alike see workers as little more than politically quiescent, ‘Mechanical Turk’ operators of moribund Soviet plant in dying factories of industrial hinterlands far from Moscow. Workers experience the sharp end of welfare-state residualization. They are victims of widespread patronizing attitudes (particularly in the media): they should gratefully remake their socialist-era selves into more productive and pliant postsocialist workers. Biographical analysis of workers (including those featured in this chapter) and their interpretations of bodily practices, risk and wellbeing, underline their awareness of their replaceability and marginality (Vanke 2014; Morris 2016). At the same time they display a clear articulation of how both traditional factory work and more neoliberal production regimes of monitoring and (self)-disciplining offer ‘poor work’ and bad jobs (see Walker 2009; Morris 2012, respectively).

AUTOMOBILE WORKING-CLASS MASCULINITIES

Private car ownership and use as representing differentiated performances of masculinity has long been a staple of youth studies. However, the majority of research has focused on the automotive articulations of gender in terms of subcultures; cars express a form of refracted hegemonic masculinity, particularly among the dominated faction of working-class male youth in the West (e.g. Bengry-Howell and Griffin 2007; Lumsden 2010). Often examining street-racing, cruising and car modification, research on automobility is associated with delinquency and deviance, which is less representative of a non-Western experience. In addition, there are few intersecting treatments

of automobility and masculinity in non-Western contexts (e.g. van Eeden 2012; Grace 2013). With a few exceptions (e.g. Notar 2012; Trumper and Tomic 2009), class does not feature as a unit of analysis. Moreover, the sociocultural significance of automobilities retains a similarly Western-centric perspective that does not do justice to the plural experience of private car use (let alone ownership) under globalization. By contrast, in two recent treatments of automobility in Russia, globally universal aspects of the performance of masculinity through automobility are highlighted (symbolizing individualized, masculine sexual dominance), but so too are locally contrastive meanings—collective affordances extending to the realms of shared car ownership and homosocial tinkering in garages (Kononenko 2011). Similarly, a classed perspective finds car ownership less to do with conspicuous consumption, but as a store of value (*ibid.*), and, in the creation of ‘carholds’, automobility, and mobility itself, as a household rather than individual achievement (Broz and Habeck 2015). This paints a very different picture of automobilities’ implications for masculinity.

As well as acknowledging alternative understandings of automobilities outside the core global north, the meaning of cars for men in Russia requires a historical contextualization in the light of the socialist experience of consumption and ownership. Car ownership in socialist societies became increasingly important for defining self and class. Even as cars increased in quality and accessibility, they remained objects of ‘relative scarcity’ and were invested with particular symbolic value ‘because of the lengths to which aspirant and real owners would go to obtain and maintain them’ (Siegelbaum 2011: 2). More than any other consumer object, the car came to represent the particular forms of socialist consumption (Siegelbaum 2008). Scarce yet desirable, practical and useful yet difficult to maintain, cars retain the aura of objects of desire that require reserves of patience and the cunning use of networks to obtain and keep them. There is a long history of unspoken and guilty desire associated with foreign cars in Russia (Siegelbaum 2011: 4), which continues in the present. In addition, there is the continuing association of high-status vehicles with the ‘ruling’ class and those that have seemingly undeservedly gained access to material riches (*ibid.*, 5). Car ownership of any kind remains a political and class-ridden issue as much as a gendered one.

AUTOMOBILITY AS THE NEXUS OF THE NEOLIBERAL HAILING OF RUSSIAN SUBALTERN MASCULINITY

This ethnographic section is divided into three parts. First, I contextualize working-class masculine sociality as embedded in automobility by examining its placeness—the garage spaces as male refuges from both ‘feminized’ domestic space and the increasingly harsh neoliberalized workspace. Second, the discussion of garage space serves as a way to introduce ‘Nikita’, an ethnographic composite representing one model of Russian working-class masculinity. Reluctant to remake his working personhood in the image of the flexible neoliberal subject, he remains in the town’s moribund Soviet-style factories, eking out a living—in the cement factory and in informal (underground) labour making plastic window frames, and, later, in unregistered gypsy-cab driving. For him, cars are not just a practical necessity and desired in and of themselves; they are emblematic of his rejection of new production regimes (often found in foreign transnational contexts). He buys a ‘banger’ and spends much time maintaining it with support from others who share his self-positioning: the car comes first, work, second. In addition, his automobility is grounded in non-utility, exuberance even. In contrast, ‘Petr’, as owner and car user, is supremely practical, instrumentalist and more individualistic. Not only does he carefully mould himself to the rigorous demands of the German car plant where he works on the assembly conveyor, his embodiment of neoliberal flexibility and economic calculation extends to car ownership—it cocreates or ‘assembles’ a new form of working-class personhood as machinically subjectivated (Lazzarato 2014: 9–10).

FIELDSITE DESCRIPTION AND METHODS

This chapter comprises materials collected during long-term ethnographic fieldwork with blue-collar workers in Izluchino, a small industrial town near the city of Kaluga, to the south west of Moscow, which is the site of a new TNC’s car plant. About 15,000 people live in Izluchino, an urban space that developed as the result of a ‘town-forming enterprise’ in the postwar era.¹ Local manufacturing includes aggregate extraction and processing (into bricks, lime and powders, and other construction materials), and steel and plastic fabrication (including tubing and cables for the domestic plumbing market and extractive gas industry), all of which date from the Soviet period. Many of those laid off in the 1990s post-communist economic crises never

returned to blue-collar work—they either died off in the massive demographic collapse, survived on meagre pensions or disappeared into the informal economy—typically driving unregistered cabs, working on construction sites in Moscow or engaging in petty trades. Nonetheless, since 2010, some younger workers (aged 25–35) have started to commute from this town to the automotive plant and two other TNCs based in Kaluga.

Materials (recorded and unrecorded interviews, participant and non-participant observations) for this research were gathered in 2009–2014 in over a year’s worth of intermittent fieldwork. Both participant observation and semistructured interviews were conducted in a variety of settings. Long-term interactions with 50 informants form the bulk of materials, with a group of eight men being the focus here: key informants include union activists, ‘ordinary’ assembly workers and ex-workers from the car plants. In addition to anonymizing workers’ names and jobs, various minor details pertaining to the identity of the settlement have been obscured or changed.

The Freedom, Not of the Road, but of the Garage: Spaces of Masculine Working-Class Sociality

Despite the specifically postsocialist meanings of mobility detailed above, automobility and masculinity are no doubt as closely linked symbolically in Russia as in any other postindustrial society. And this is perhaps even more the case for working-class men as for others as a result of the historical scarcity and unfulfillable desire associated with ownership. Now most blue-collar workers can realistically aim for ownership of a basic Soviet-era AvtoVAZ Lada model (a low-tech vehicle based on the 1960s Fiat 124 and produced in large numbers until the early 2010s), or buy a ‘Western-style’ car on rather crippling credit terms. Technical skills in DIY maintenance have long been desiderata for long-term ownership for three reasons: (1) very poor road maintenance and severe climatic conditions; (2) poor automobile network infrastructure generally—a preponderance of low-grade roads and poor distribution of vehicle maintenance businesses; and (3) the simple construction of most Russian cars. ‘Tinkering’ in garage blocks with acquaintances also has a long history and is a significant part of working-class homosociality, among young and old alike (Morris 2016).

Whether for commuting to better blue-collar jobs in the regional capital Kaluga (an hour away by car, served by only one slow public bus per hour), or more locally allowing informal work as an unregistered taxi driver,

transport for moonlighting jobs in trades and construction, or just a marker of appropriate adult and breadwinning masculinity, the car is seen as a symbolic and practical necessity for most men in the aggregate-extracting, cement-mixing town of Izluchino.² As most people own Ladas, with ownership comes the necessity of skills and a sufficient social network of other workers to make repairs without resorting to paying a workshop. While in the summer men group together and repair cars in the open squares surrounded by crumbling block housing, most have access through relatives, friends or confrères to a brick garage space on the edge of town.

The garage in Izluchino is built by its owner (also requiring ‘membership’ of a mutual aid network) side by side with similar constructions forming long rows of often spacious workshops-cum-garages. There are two 5 hectare garage territories in the town at either end. Like the use of ‘sheds’ in anglophone culture, the garage is a masculine reserve devoted to practical activity, often for its own sake; the car may never get completely ‘fixed’, but a lot of talk and drinking ensure that homosocial ties are cemented and broadened. While anglophone culture promotes the individualistic notion of the lone tinkerer (Cavanagh et al. 2014), in Russia, garage use is predicated on men coming together to reinforce bonds of competent masculinity, and the garage can be a cosy shared space, whether used as a bar or a mechanic’s shop. Some have glass-brick windows and heating; all have electricity and ventilation pipes sticking out of their roofs. Opposite Petr’s garage another owner has added not only a summer ‘terrace’ of sorts (a room made from steel sheeting and polycarbide glass) but also a pigeon coop to the roof.

What is a garage for? Ironically, even in the winter, it is rare to find them occupied by a car. The garage context serves as a perfect private society in microcosm for men to debate differences in attitudes towards cars, which themselves have increasingly become linked to changing ideas about time value and adaptability to ‘new’ production contexts requiring ‘self’ discipline (e.g. conveyor work at the TNCs). In addition, there is the ever-present symbolization in car ownership of more and less worthy forms of masculinity, and the dilemma of foregoing consumption in the present for the sake of ownership of ‘better’ forms of vehicle transport in the future. This is best illustrated by two positions in the social circle of informants. The first position is represented by Nikita: men who avoid having to ‘adapt’ to neoliberal production regimes. Nikita purchases an unreliable, rusty, if racy, Moskvitch ‘banger’, necessitating long periods of maintenance and mutual aid, and which cannot reliably be used for commuting, but which is ‘fun’

and a source of socialization. The second group is represented by Petr. This group sees Nikita's frequent change of car ownership as part of his inability to remain in permanent employment. For Petr's group, the physical mobility of ownership links to 'mobility' more widely, valued positively (e.g. willingness to adapt to the Western demands of the TNC production lines). In contrast, Nikita's mobility is seen as negative: he is called a 'flyer'—a person who can't knuckle down and be a 'new' working-class man.

One day, when Petr has gone to Kaluga to work his conveyor shift, his mother, Masha, talks about the garage spaces of her children and husband. Kideckel (2004) characterizes the use of space in the yards outside housing blocks in Romania as 'bench work', where sociality, drinking and 'tinkering' coalesce in space. Masha describes the 'garage work' of the men in the family in a similar way:

For some wives it is a problem—if the blokes leave for the garage that's it. You don't know when you'll see them again. But on the other hand it is a blessing and you can get some peace. When Lyova [her husband] goes on a bender (*zapoi*), he doesn't go to his own garage as it is too far away. It's good that he can go to the garage nearby as I know he'll be safe and even in the winter he won't freeze to death there.

Narratives about garage 'work' continue a couple of weeks later in a far more salubrious garage space owned by Zhenya, a young lathe operator in an informal metal and plastic fabricating shop. Nikita, then a 24-year-old cement kiln operative, had been asked by Zhenya to help him change the beam axle on a car he was working on. Nikita used to work with Zhenya in the cement works, but the latter had quit about six months earlier and gone to work 'underground', in the informal economy. The car doesn't belong to Zhenya but to a 'client', an old school friend. The vehicular object of envy in question is a 1980s Moskvitch Sviatogor, a copy of a 1970s Chrysler with a powerful Renault-made injection engine, more comfortable to drive than most Russian cars, and with sporty looks and performance. Later Nikita will buy this car. There isn't a monetary agreement involved in this work: Zhenya has the skills and space to work on the car, as well as a wide enough social network to be able to call on Nikita and others for help at short notice. Nikita is keen to work on the car. Not only will he get to learn a new skill but he will be introduced to Sergei, Zhenya's 'boss' and the foreman. It is through participation in 'tinkering' that Nikita is able to leave the cement works and get informal employment, working for Sergei with Zhenya, thus

‘avoiding’ having to go to the TNC conveyor plant in Kaluga with his friend Petr.

This garage is clean and spacious, it has two old sofas and a plastic table, as well as an old computer and a speaker system through which the latest pop hits blare out, accompanied by music videos. Zhenya has even salvaged a metal shop display rack for flavoured powdered milk that now serves as storage for CDs. They hold forth about ‘garage work’, picking up the theme where Masha left off:

It’s only for some wives that the garage is a problem—the guys don’t have to make an excuse; they just say ‘I’m in the garage’, that’s all. [...] Also it’s a place where you can find your ‘theme’, not just about cars, but motorbikes, pigeons even. And the guys can discuss it for hours. (Zhenya, 25-years old)

It’s not about getting away from women, from the flat. No, why do you say that? How many hours have we spent hanging around here? Here in our company we’ve spent so much time here that we call the garage not just a garage but a café-club garage. ‘Cos you can have a beer here. Or some vodka [...] You can watch a film, have a tinker with the car and everything else. So it is a café-club garage. We phone up Zhenya and say—come on, open up the café-club ... There’s only one table for the clientele though—a ‘night café-club’ ... so this is where we live. (Sergei, 31)

While for Kideckel, benches and bars comprise the gendered separation of space in Romania, they also indicate the semipublic affirmation of places of subaltern solidarity (2004). These are almost entirely absent in Izluchino. If men drink in public they are harassed by residents and police alike. Women at least are able to continue ‘bench work’ in the beautifully kept front gardens of the town, amply provided with wooden benches. But masculine sociality—always closely linked with drinking alcohol—remains pathologized. Thus the garage looms large, occupying an important real and symbolic space in the lives of men. At the same time it bears witness to the relative subalternization of blue-collar masculine sociality as such, or what Walker (2017) sees as its real and ‘symbolic’ impoverishment.

However, the very marginality of the garage space makes for a vibrant sense of the possibilities of masculine sociality. The police rarely if ever patrol such places. Similarly, the kind of modifications to buildings outlined above would not be tolerated in the housing blocks. This gives the practices and activities of the garage spaces a feeling of lacking inhibition, if not

‘freedom’. Often, even late at night, Zhenya would crank up the volume of the CD player and light a barbeque. On the other side of town in a different garage, Nikita and a group of younger workers he barely knows would make repairs to his Moskvitch until the small hours, making a racket as they attended to a faulty clutch. Certainly the very relegation to the garage of so many practices related to the performance of masculinity-in-common by blue-collar men inflects such activities with an intensity of feeling, of belonging and of delight among the participants. Even mundane everyday activities take on a festive, cheery character. Symbolically it is a masculine domain where working-class ‘authenticity’ can be performed and even experimented with.

The second time I visit Zhenya he is working, again, ‘informally’ with some friends on another car. This time he is drinking alcohol-free beer. In response to my visible shock he says: ‘I don’t feel like drinking at the moment ... What are you looking at? It’s my garage; I can do what I want!’ With the private and marginalized nature of these male spaces comes a meagre sense of freedom from conventionality, even while strong markers of normative blue-collar masculinity are continually replayed and performed, such as the necessity of displaying ‘practical’ and resourceful skill in mechanics or DIY work. The garage provides an example of the fraught search for ‘propertizing’ of marginal spaces in a way that allows the maintenance and expansion of the horizontal social network of workers (Morris 2016).³ They can encounter others here and build weak and strong ties of confraternity. This was particularly true of the younger Nikita: once he had bought the Moskvitch he would strike up conversations with other owners and he obtained a particular form of local class-related ‘prestige’ (ibid.).

Workhorse Cars Reflecting Their Owners’ Calculating Values

‘She’s my friend, but she’s a workhorse; she’s no beauty, unlike the Skodas we assemble! But that’s the way I like her.’ Petr, a slim, careful man in his late 20s strokes the bonnet of his Lada Samara sedan as he says these words. The car is the new model—one of the first Russian cars built to Western standards of design, safety and reliability. Petr has taken out a bank loan to buy it—bigger than the average local mortgage and crippling to his disposable income for the next two years. We have just inspected some road damage to the chassis and front wing that occurred while Petr had been driving home from his new job at the TNC car factory, an hour away along

treacherous roads. There he works on the conveyor, assembling shiny German cars he is unlikely to ever be able to afford to buy himself. Nikita had shaken his head in disbelief when he'd learned that his childhood friend Petr had 'taken the bait'. In Nikita's view, the back-breaking conditions and harsh labour discipline in the plant were hardly worth the marginally better pay—better off to stay in the cement works; better the devil you know, or do a bit of lucrative work in the informal underground economy, with no tax, no commitment and no permanent boss. And, after all, now Petr would have to commute in his Lada and driving would no longer be for pleasure.

Petr had organized a recovery truck to get towed home. He remarks:

Only 2000 roubles for the recovery [\$30 at the time]. Really that's quite cheap. The first one I phoned wanted five thousand. That's when I realized I was out of my depth and needed help so I called Nikita [...] But now I get a decent wage I can afford little misfortunes like that. Not like Nikita and his rust bucket Moskvitch. His 'Qashqai' breaks down all the time. It's a real lemon that he was tricked over. But because of that he knows all the recovery truckers around here.

Petr's talk reveals his interpretation of his 'new life' since joining the car plant in 2011, two years after I first met him. Now he is 'earning', as he puts it, as opposed to drawing a 'survival' wage in the cement works. But this is a matter of debate. Nonetheless, he has been able to build a small buffer of savings for life's 'misfortunes'. Petr is money-minded in a responsible way. He worked hard to pay off a small mortgage on his one-room flat and always tries to buy 'the best' for his young child, born in 2012. Recently he bought the Lada Samara to commute by car instead of taking the (free) works bus—a careful calculation discussed below.

Petr's critical attitude towards friends like Nikita, who maintain rust-bucket 'bangers', is reflected in his ironic mention of Nikita's car as a 'Qashqai'—actually the aforementioned Moskvitch. British-built Nissan Qashqai SUVs are heavily advertised on television in Russia as a status car, indicative of the achievement of social mobility into the (lower) ranks of the new middle class. Petr's ironic joke is a claim to his retaining 'in' status in the group of friends despite simultaneously aspiring to a high status by virtue of his joining the German plant and buying a Samara Lada. Informants use such language play to articulate genuine desires for the material trappings and status associated with ownership of a 'Western' car, as well as a simultaneous suspicion of the motives of an individual with such aspirations

(more liable to ‘get above his station’—somehow less manly: the Qashqai has a reputation as a ‘woman’s’ car).

By contrast, Nikita’s history of car ownership and approach to mobility is strikingly different from Petr’s. For a short time Nikita had owned a Korean-built SUV but had soon sold it on, partly because of the cost of upkeep but also because of the social opprobrium from family, friends and confrères. As his father had said, shaking his head, ‘a foreign car like that is a cap that doesn’t fit him. Why is he trying to be something that he isn’t?’ The Korean SUV seemed perfect at first. I travelled with Nikita as he used it for all kinds of practical purposes. Like ownership of any car, the SUV was inseparable from Nikita’s self-interpretation and interpretation by others as a breadwinner and as a suitable masculine working-class self-resourcing person. This was the ‘prestige’ enjoyed by his father and others in the old days of the USSR when to work at the factory meant you were building socialism for the whole country and looking after your family and doing okay for yourself—you were valued. But now ownership was also a resource that could be leveraged—practical transport—you could make money as an informal delivery or taxi driver. However, quickly it became evident that, unlike Petr’s cautious and parsimonious perspective on car ownership, Nikita’s car marked him out as a miscalculating risk-taker—like a gambler who does not know when to quit, or an impulsive drinker who lacks self-control. After a series of costly repairs, Nikita sold the car on for a loss. This confirmed his father’s prior comment: a ‘cap that doesn’t fit him’.

For those around him, Nikita’s ‘extravagant’, abortive ownership of the SUV mirrored his lack of self-discipline when it came to staying the course in formal work. ‘He’s fine until the first misfortune and then it seems like he can never get over it,’ said one person. ‘His work history is like his car history—he is enthusiastic until it “breaks” and then he gives up and gets another one.’ A friend commented:

Instead of dealing with the conflict he’ll leave. Like with his car. In seven years he’s changed his car many times. You need to look after it. Just like with work. It’s hard and you need to sort out the faults, and instead of changing himself he tries to change his environment.

There are clear parallels here to global processes of self-transformation and improvement as central elements of normative masculinity, now intensified in the contexts of neoliberal production regimes such as that of the

TNC (Walkerdine 2003, in Griffin 2011: 255). By 2014 these criticisms seemed vindicated in the minds of some of Nikita's friends and relatives when he seemed to have completely given up on formal work for informal taxi-driving, but now in a humble and rusty 1990s Lada. However, as indicated above, among those young men in the garage scene, Nikita maintains his masculine working-class status, prestige even. He does not experience the same 'burden' as Petr in 'consuming himself into being' through automobility (Croghan et al. 2006, in Griffin 2011: 255); the question of 'lack' versus 'possession' of appropriately valued working-class youth masculinity is problematized (cf. Griffin 2011: 255). Both men are subordinated but try to claim domination in relation to other men (cf. Coles 2009)—one in 'laddish' resistance, the other in conforming to a plasticized, remade version of the 'good worker provider'. As Walker (2017) notes in a similar context, the resistance of men such as Nikita to neoliberalized versions of working-class masculinity are 'increasingly difficult to uphold [...] as opportunities to dissociate oneself from the mainstream become limited'.

Around the same time as Nikita is leaving dreams of his SUV ownership behind, Petr, his girlfriend, Katya, and I discuss car ownership. Petr had said that to have a car was 'advantageous' or even 'profitable'. What had he meant by this? Katya takes up the theme:

It shows you are more than just another bloke with no prospects around here. Sure it is just transportation, like Petr said, but it shows your own advantage too among others. He's not a man without a car now. When cars really appeared ten years ago I remember how it started to be that cars became associated with higher paid men.

[Petr cut in quickly:]

But that's not really the case now. You don't *have* to have a lot of money to keep up a car if you are willing to learn, use the internet, ask people how to fix it. Look at your car [indicating me]—you took the carburettor apart didn't you? Lada's don't have them anymore and people are losing this skill. Also, there is the flexibility in terms of time, even with a cheap car. Sure I will spend time learning how to keep it up, but that's an investment. And then I can choose to go by works bus or my own transport. It is much more convenient by car. It is a lot easier to get there by car than on the bus—I can leave home later. [...] And] I can save by investing in my own transport.

Here, themes of parsimony, calculation, as well as work- and personhood-related flexibility, are reflected in the meanings of car ownership.

Later, Nikita, Petr and confrères are celebrating the purchase of Nikita's Moskvich banger with a party. If Petr's choices about car ownership mark him as a 'careful', future-orientated worker, willing to defer gratification, Nikita presents quite the opposite, at least in Petr's eyes. We talk at the party about Nikita's first 'outing'—cruising for 50 kilometres or so at night in the Moskvich along rural backroads:

Me: Nikita, you need to be lighter on the gas pedal or the radiator will boil over again.

Nikita: I can't help it. I love her, you know. I'm just so smitten.

Petr: You can't love your car. You'll find out later why. Only now do I understand with time that I am allowed to love my car. You already allowed others to drive her, so she isn't your love. It's like a prostitute. On the other hand if you don't let us, we won't be able to judge her. A woman with experience, you could say.
[*everyone laughs*]

Nikita: I am the second or third owner of my love and that's it. [*all laugh*]

Petr: What are you saying? I am just kidding, I want you to be glad . . . but you haven't understood us . . . We are happy you bought the car, but you are not paying attention to the right thing. I am glad you got a car after all, but you haven't yet really understood what it means to be an owner.

Petr goes on to explain more clearly that ownership of the car entails responsibilities and planning, as well as 'enjoyment'. Behind the male banter comparing ownership and use to promiscuity and cuckolding lies a rather hard criticism by Petr of Nikita: he isn't yet 'man' enough for ownership of such a 'demanding' mistress; after all, on his first outing with me, the radiator had boiled over, provoking further sexually metaphoric joking at his expense. Petr, now speaking less harshly, but perhaps even more pointedly criticizing Nikita's profligacy and lack of circumspection, describes how since Nikita lives with his parents it is less unfortunate that he had been 'tricked' into buying a 'lemon' [*razvaliukha*]¹—a car with many ongoing

and difficult-to-fix faults. It is easy to be spontaneous and give in to one's desires when one is backed up by the bank of mum and dad:

Petr: Spontaneity is always tempered by the brain. You see a car you like, check it out, talk to the owner, come back, talk to your friends—your *friends*; and then you don't make an offer, you ask how much they want. I can't believe you did this without thinking and planning. Don't you admit that in reality you won't really get behind the wheel for three months until you can get your full licence and fix the chassis?

Nikita: Yes, I know. [sheepish and suddenly sobering up]

Petr: But I know you will [drive it illegally] and that will fucking be it when the cops take it away.

Nikita: I can admit more. Maybe I won't even ever drive it. I might not pass the medical.

Petr: Don't give me that crap. You only won't pass it if you don't really want to. A 'father' [of the car] cannot think of his health. He just needs to have the desire and will to do something. Look at Zhenya: he didn't cheat or pay a bribe, even though they wanted him too. He passed his test through hard work and application.

Sure enough, within six months, after finding the repairs too costly to make and despite passing his test, Nikita sold the car on as scrap. This 'waste' of precious resources reinforced the view of Petr that Nikita was unwilling to 'adapt' to economic necessity—to become a new kind of breadwinner in a new kind of working-class reality. Whereas for Nikita, the more instrumental attitude of Petr to cars marked him out in a negative way as part of the 'new' aspirational group of workers who did not value ownership for its own sake.

Nikita: Ok, the lad will have a flat in Kaluga. And a discount or credit on a fancy foreign-style car that will fall apart on our roads. So fucking what? To break his back for the 'new deal' at the plant that they only won after the strikes? Physically that job, despite the shiny foreign plant and showers and clean overalls, is no different from my old one at the Cement. And we have showers too you know.

DISCUSSION

The Russian case shows the need to acknowledge both the constrictions of working-class masculinity after the socialist project—its doubly subaltern positioning—and also the anchoring and solidaristic communities of the former second world that remain; automobile working-class masculinity is a site for the production of ‘small agency’ in the face of the onslaught of neoliberal processes of self-making.

Two visions of vehicular performative masculinity emerge within the social group, the first of which, represented by Petr, is broadly understood as accepting of the neoliberal challenge of working on themselves to become flexible subjects of Russia’s harsh neocapitalist order (cf. Kideckel 2008; Morris 2012). His story represents the transition from work in a Soviet-type labour habitus to ‘making the grade’ in TNC production regimes. Petr’s ‘new’ working-class masculinity is entrepreneurial, striving and progressive. Aspiring to ownership of a Western car goes hand in hand with (and is the reward for) becoming a flexible neoliberal subject, taking on consumer credit, yet also delaying gratification. These dispositions are symbolized by the purchase of a ‘new’ or, more likely, ‘nearly new’ foreign car, often on credit. Yet such cars are associated too with risk, fear and uncertainty; less used for leisure, they are objects of reverence and nurture in a guarded garage block, where men pay ritual homage in cleaning and maintaining them. As Nikita notes, the car drives the man, whereas it should be the other way around.

The second group examined here are those who choose to remain in lower-paid traditional industrial employment or even semilegal informal work, represented by ‘Nikita’. They are wary of the new neoliberal order, seeing it as restrictive of autonomy and presenting an unequal compact. To them the ‘contract’ offered by new work and new cars is ‘unmasculine’—automobility is about the use of cars in the ‘now’ for pleasure regardless of the ‘risk’ of damage. The ‘risk’ to them is ownership on credit of a ‘delicate’ foreign car. Thus they interpret the care for cars by the first group as unbecoming. They compare this kind of car ownership to new production regimes, involving loss of autonomy and control over life (the car controls the owner). They emphasize a more traditional performative masculinity linked to ‘banger’ car culture that revolves around self-reliance, DIY skills and the car as a source of eternally tinkering homosociality. For those who ‘give in’ to calculated self-moulding according to neocapital’s requirements,

the social affordances—the garage, the key spaces and making of automobile masculinity—are lost.

Thus each group's competing versions of subordinate masculinity are linked with either adapting masculine personhood to neoliberalism or not. A particularly classed performance of gender comes to dramatize the response of persons to changes in production regimes and the advent of the neoliberal order more generally. The significance of this case study lies in the need to acknowledge localized yet globally inflected subaltern masculinities and how they intersect with similarly non-Western working-class responses to both neoliberalism and automobile versions of global modernity.

Contemporary Marxian-inspired critiques of neoliberalism often suffer from the separation of the actually existing production-scapes of neoliberalism outside the West, the expansion of the global working class, indeed, the continued salience of working-class identity, and the production of subjectivities generally. Lazzarato (2014: 13) has recently argued that 'machinic enslavement dismantles the individuated subject, consciousness, and representations, acting on both the pre-individual and supra-individual levels'. He is referring less to traditional models of working-class alienation from labour and more to the postmodern condition, where the person cannot escape incorporation into the (increasingly digitalized) quantification and measurement of self. Nonetheless, the arrival of TNCs in Russia presents a significant example of the renewed confrontation of labour and capital, this time in the former-second world, and with it, it offers the opportunity to witness at least one version of the globalization of working-class struggle.

In this chapter's case study, the machinic assemblage of male, worker and automobility is enslaving but nonetheless dynamic and not uncontested. It recombines new subjectivation (not subjectification—see below) in neoliberal work, as worker, as man, and in relation to that arch-symbol of the machine–human interface, the car. Such dynamism is inevitable as the 'production of subjectivity constitutes the most fundamental of capitalist concerns' (Lazzarato 2014: 14). While major aspects of the entwining of neoliberal self-moulding and claims to approved, if subordinate, masculinity are visible in Petr's story, Nikita's performance of gender and class is interpretively problematic. The deindustrializing community of masculine practice that he inhabits is a fraught place; traditional values of what it meant to be a Soviet-era working-class man remain important but are everywhere under threat. The garage is a refuge, but it is immobile and a compressed,

marginalized space of ‘small agency’ (Honkasalo 2009; Morris 2016) and meagre solidarity in the face of a hostile neoliberalizing society.

The social self-organization of working-class men through the shared experience of automobility and the continuing class salience of the compressed social space of the small industrial town sees subaltern masculinity reconstituted as a meta-occupational community of confrères. Just as they are hailed by the neoliberal reconception of the labouring subject, the spaces of masculine automobility also produce alternative responses. Here, retreating into garage spaces, men articulate and perform practices of homosociality and car-dom that articulate, if not enact, alternative forms of personhood to those offered by the TNC. Nikita’s case illustrates Lazzarato’s argument about the need to link the ‘subjective economy with political economy’ (2014: 8) and highlights the potential weakness of capitalism in the production of (masculine, working-class) subjectivity—even as this production of subjectivity is proposed by thinkers as diverse as Foucault and Guattari as the ‘sole contemporary political questions’ and source of capitalism’s power (Lazzarato 2014: 14).

Lazzarato calls for a new cartography of the production of subjectivity, particularly in relation to production-scapes of neoliberalism and what he terms as the ‘machinic enslavement’ of the global assemblage of the self. Elizabeth Dunn argues that these assemblages are part of ‘making legible’ production processes in Eastern Europe as they take on Latourian ‘immutable mobile’ forms inflected by socialist-era contexts of personhood (Dunn 2005; Ong and Collier 2005: 11). This shows the need to take account of agency despite what Lazzarato sees as a process in which the subject is overwhelmed by their structural positioning. In a sense, Lazzarato’s position can be seen as a digital-age continuation of the Althusserian arguments by Willis (2003) on interpellated ‘lads culture’: where subordinate masculinities simultaneously contest and perpetuate the reproduction of capitalist relations as young men learn ‘their place’. However, Lazzarato’s approach is noteworthy as it is more subject focused. ‘Subjectivation refers to the *state of being* a certain collection of identities whereas enslavement refers to the immanent *process of becoming*’ (Slothuus 2014: 82). Given the focus on processes, it may be less appropriate in these contexts to think of hegemonic or dominant forms of masculinity that are ‘competing’ (Clarke and Roberts 2014: 5) for attention. Instead, a plural or unfocalized sense of masculinity may be more appropriate for men in a subaltern position—they have a Hobson’s ‘choice’ as to how to respond to neoliberalism, but it is still a choice that includes rejecting ‘enterprenurial subjectivation’ (Slothuus

2014: 79). Russian men's automobility and 'garage culture' is witness to working-class masculinity as *process*: renegotiated, refracted in a particular way both in relation to and in contrast to Western models. Many Russian men are subject to symbolic violence and unable to 'propertize' working-class masculine identity (cf. Griffin 2011: 255; Skeggs 2004). But this study would also suggest that Skeggs' search for autonomist working-class values is not in vain (2011); automobile worker-masculinity is a project of personhood inexorably bound to, yet revealing the limits of, projects of neoliberal globalization (Connell and Wood 2005).

NOTES

1. Izluchino is a pseudonym. It is not officially a town but an 'urban settlement' (*poselek gorodskogo tipa*), reflecting its connection to rapid industrialization after World War II. Locally, the town is emblematic of a process that occurred throughout the Soviet Union—the proliferation of small and medium-sized towns. By the end of the Soviet period nearly 30 % of Russia's population lived in industrial cities with less than 100,000 inhabitants (Collier 2011: 111).
2. The town, like all informants, is a composite of several industrial spaces in the Kaluga region and is similarly anonymized.
3. I adopt the term 'propertizing' from Skeggs, who uses it to propose the potentiality of autonomist working-class values among women in the UK (1997: 32). Skeggs' more recent work attempts to deal with the difficulty of applying Bourdieusian 'capitals' analysis in contexts where subjects' claim to personhood are delegitimized by virtue of a lack of access to 'dominant symbolic circuits' (2011: 503).

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