Russian Cultural Conservatism Critiqued: Translating the Tropes of ‘Gayropa’ and ‘Juvenile Justice’ in Everyday Life

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Russian Cultural Conservatism Critiqued: Translating the Tropes of ‘Gayropa’ and ‘Juvenile Justice’ in Everyday Life

JEREMY MORRIS & MASHA GARIBYAN

Abstract

Framing the ‘conservative turn’ in Russia as a ‘culture war’ casts ordinary Russians as an amorphous reactionary mass, willingly following political entrepreneurs’ cues of intolerance. This essay rejects that interpretation and seeks to restore agency to ordinary Russians. Based on ethnographic encounters discussing homophobia and heteronormative gender and family attitudes, the essay argues that vernacular social conservatism re-appropriates official discourses to express Russians’ feelings towards their own state. Intolerance is less fuelled by elite cues but rather reflects domestic resentment towards, and fear of, the punitive power of the state, along with nostalgia for an idealised version of moral socialisation under socialism.

A CULTURE WAR BETWEEN ‘DEGENERATE’ LIBERAL WESTERN values and a ‘(neo)conservative’ Russia is purportedly being waged (Anderson 2013; Riabov & Riabova 2014; Robinson 2014; Trudolyubov 2014). This perspective groups Russians as an amorphous reactionary mass and represents them as a kind of political sponge, readily absorbing rapid shifts in cues by elites and their agents. In contrast, this essay rejects the application of the notion of culture wars to Russia or the idea of a meaningful ‘conservative turn’ beyond elite discourse. It builds a counter argument from intimate ethnographic encounters to argue that vernacular social conservatism re-appropriates official discourses in ways that say more about Russians’ relationship to their own state rather than their actual attitudes towards ‘the West’. In doing so the essay seeks to restore agency to ordinary Russians, who are too often (implicitly) seen as passive recipients of the state’s official discourses. Everyday talk about homosexuality, family and gender norms are infused by Russians’ interpretation of the political context of their own society, particularly the capacities of the punitive state. Similarly, the social legacy of communism and the shared trauma of postcommunist transition are important and formative. Objections to ‘permissiveness’ are anchored in a search for putatively lost moral values and normative socialisation, epitomised by the concept of moral vospitanie (upbringing).

It is widely argued that a so-called Russian ‘conservative turn’ masks a political expediency by elites seeking to distract people from deteriorating living standards and corruption (Pomeranzev 2016). Others link conservatism to a more enduring sense of
‘civilizational’ difference between Russia and ‘Europe’ (Tsygankov 2007, 2016) and Russian ‘paleoconservatives’ in particular emphasise organic spirituality (Morozov 2015, pp. 113–14). While Eurasianism has gained attention for the continuity of its intellectual tradition in opposition to Western models of development, the ‘culture war’ trope transfers this dilemma to the level of identity politics, pointing to a decisive ‘cultural turn’ in Putin’s rule (Robinson 2014). In doing so, ‘culture war’ presupposes more than just a cynical political elite seeking to exploit an actually-existing conservatism among ordinary Russians (Riabov & Riabova 2014; Robinson 2014, p. 27). As Viatcheslav Morozov memorably puts it: ‘if the subaltern can speak, they definitely do not speak in a sweet voice’ (Morozov 2015, p. 168). Under such a ‘cultural turn’, the ruling elite would successfully align their rhetoric and domestic policy with ‘mass quotidian common sense’ (Hopf 2013), which is supposedly quite conservative. For example, Riabov and Riabova conclude their analysis of the uses of the emblematic term ‘Gayropa’ by assuming that the attitudes of most Russians towards heteronormative sexualities are mapped on to their evaluation of the West as friend or foe (Riabov & Riabova 2014, p. 8). While acknowledging diversity in Russian public opinion, they subscribe to a hypodermic effects model of media communication, where elite-shaped messages are unaltered in their reception by consumers. As Mickiewicz, writing on the USSR, points out, this model has been largely discredited by media communications researchers working on democratic societies and is equally unconvincing in state-controlled media environments (Mickiewicz 1988, pp. 180–82). An uncritical approach to media transmission effects reappears in discussion of conservative political messaging in Russia today: key policy figures and intellectual entrepreneurs, using a compliant media, broadcast the ‘conservative turn’, particularly through the trope of the West as devaluing the traditional gender and sexual order, and the ‘people’ follow.

On the face of it, there is evidence that in promoting conservative views, political actors are in fact aligned with the general tendency. Numerous polls indicate ‘conservative’, or ‘intolerant’ attitudes, particularly towards what are framed as ‘non-traditional’ sexual and gender behaviours and lifestyles (Hobson 2015). Neil Robinson calls this a ‘cultural turn’, which aids the stabilisation of the particular form of patrimonial political coalition in Russia. Using Albert Hirschman’s concept of a ‘rhetoric of reaction’, he argues that this rhetoric stresses civilisational difference as a political resource, and European multiculturalism in particular as a threat (Robinson 2014, pp. 27–31). Here the role of charismatic leader is key in activating, maintaining and leading public opinion. Similarly, Samuel Greene uses the term ‘identitarian turn’ to describe a ‘values agenda’ used to drive a wedge between a liberal opposition and the bulk of Russian citizens (Greene 2017). The agenda ties together appeals to nationalist unity, political sovereignty and cultural normalcy, all of which have some purchase among ordinary citizens but appear in particular to appeal to and reflect a particular type of socio-cultural sense of indignation within conservative intellectual constituencies (Laruelle 2012; Makarychev & Yatsyk 2014, p. 2). Public intellectual discourses of a special national idea and identity find many expressions in popular or ‘lay’ culture, but perhaps more important is the rise of the power of entrepreneurial conservatives, whether with religious credentials or links to political elites.
In 2012–2013 conservative rhetoric found real traction, or elites fully understood the political expediency of giving such forces their head. The 2012 Dima Yakovlev law denying US citizens the right to adopt Russian children was followed by the 2013 law protecting children from ‘information advocating the denial of traditional family values’, in other words, preventing discussion of LGBT issues in classrooms and in the media.1 Both of these legal projects were facilitated by the prominent Duma deputy Yelena Mizulina, chair of the Duma Committee on Family, Women and Children Affairs from 2008 to 2016, and member of the political party A Just Russia (Spravedlivaya Rossiya). For those proposing a coordinated and elite-sponsored conservative turn, Mizulina is an emblematic figure. She has been associated with proposals to restrict the right to abortion and divorce, and with pro-natal policies more generally (Osborn 2011), as well as censorship of television and the internet and the decriminalisation of some forms of domestic violence (Turbin 2017). Mizulina has promoted conspiracy theories about a ‘paedophile lobby’ within Russia opposing her policies (Healy 2017, p. 13).

Scholarship on the conservative turn uses terms such as a ‘hardening’ of attitudes (Patin 2016). Homophobia in particular can be seen as a core example of this, and a proxy for ‘traditional’ values more generally (Wilkinson 2013, p. 6). Human rights organisations point to increasingly widespread, if sporadic, violence towards openly gay men (a most visible symbol of the enemies of conservatism) (Hobson 2015; Kondakov 2017), including by representatives of the state (OSCE 2017; Amnesty International 2019), which supports a thesis of an ‘intolerant turn’.

In contrast to a broad thesis of a ‘conservative turn’ based on elite–mass alignment of reactionary opinion, our argument rests on the following idea: that Russian public opinion is highly diffuse, especially on matters of ‘cultural values’. Morozov, writing on the ‘myth of reactionary mass consciousness’ views ‘the common sense’ of Russians as ‘not reactionary, but amorphous, multifaceted’ (Morozov 2017). While the rhetoric of political entrepreneurs in Russia clearly has effects (reflected in the short term in survey polls), ordinary people reflect and interpret them in complex, often historically meaningful ways, and the longitudinal expression of, for example, everyday homophobia, is more significant than short-term discourse from above. We base our arguments on ethnographic materials collected on two topics that inductively should have major traction among a purported conservative majority: sexual orientation and heteronormative family/gender roles. While there are deeply ingrained attitudes towards homosexuality and the normative meaning of gender roles within the traditional nuclear family, in talking about, for example, the meanings of ‘lay’ homophobia, or negative attitudes towards children’s rights, other reasonings and meanings are operative and visible. We focus on

homophobia, on the one hand, and the impact of the anti-‘juvenile justice’ movement—a conservative umbrella objection to the erosion of parental authority and the rise of children’s rights—on the other (Sherstneva 2014, p. 203). Because of the use of in-depth interviewing rather than other methods, focused coverage of two related areas is preferred over superficial discussion of wider topics.

Sustained ethnographic engagement is useful in showing how attitudes in reality are contradictory and internally inconsistent. Moreover, while there is widespread exposure to the idea of ‘Western-led permissiveness’ and that this is a threat to the idea of the ‘traditional’, heteronormative, nuclear family, the operationalisation of this idea within already existing ‘conservative’ attitudes is weak. Building on these frankly anodyne conclusions, we propose that, rather than looking at lay attitudes in terms of the ‘culture war’ trope or even ‘conservatism’, scholars should better contextualise them in time, space and in the broad sense of a postsocialist political-economy in which attitudes are formed. To do this we test the words and ideas of our research participants against two useful prismatic conceptions of how the everyday meets and interacts with dominant cultural politics—a politics that attempts to become hegemonic.

‘Structures of feeling’ and ‘cultural intimacy’

In analysing collected materials, two prisms emerge that aid in re-evaluating the so-called ‘conservative turn’. The first prism is Raymond Williams’ ‘structures of feeling’, the main insight of which is that hegemony is cultural, an ‘interlocking’ of politics, the social and culture (Williams 1977, p. 108). However, culture is also the ‘lived subordination’ of particular classes—not a system or structure, but a process; culture is not merely dominated by elite opinion; it has to be continually renewed, recreated, defended and modified, and it is also changed from below (Williams 1977, pp. 110–12). If the true condition of hegemony is effective self-identification of the dominated with the hegemon (Williams 1977, p. 118) then the way tropes such as ‘Gayropa’ are interpreted from below indicate both congruence with, but also digression from the ‘script’ of elite-led public opinion formation. Homophobia is, then, a ‘structure of feeling’ about gender and sexual identities that predates the contemporary political operationalisation of anti-gay, anti-European sentiments. Scholars admit as much when they describe contemporary homophobia in Russia as ‘rooted in culturally-specific expectations’ (Stella 2015, p. 23), or, concerning Russian speakers in Latvia, sexual identity as ‘naturalized … to fix a desired conceptualisation’ (Mole 2011, p. 541). As such, while part of a dominant set of cultural dispositions that characterise homosexuality as deviant, morally reprehensible and socially dangerous, such intolerance also acts as one container of ordinary Russians’ acknowledgement of the arbitrarily punitive and fundamentally violent power of the state. In some senses, homophobia is not so different in this regard from anti-Semitism. It tells us more about what Russians fear about the capacities of their own society for victimisation of particular groups than what they think about homosexuality. Each society has groups, or latent groups upon whom deviance and ‘dirt’ are projected. Furthermore, Russia is not particularly homophobic in a global, or even European context.
The second prism, which also finds its origins in questions about hegemony’s functioning, is Michael Herzfeld’s ‘cultural intimacy’ (Herzfeld 2016). Through ‘cultural intimacy’—evidence of unspoken morally ‘shared spaces’ of the state and ordinary people—Herzfeld highlights how social actors (which encompass everyday encounters as well as people in the public domain) find advantages in ‘using, reformulating, and recasting official idioms in the pursuit of often highly unofficial’ aims (Herzfeld 2016, p. 160). If Williams draws attention to structure, then Herzfeld highlights agency. Locally expressed conservatism as a political vernacular includes engagement with elite discourses. This helps us understand how Russians respond to the putative ‘culture war’. Indeed ‘political vernaculars’ have recently attracted attention in Russian Studies to better answer questions about the legacies of the Soviet period and political consciousness and participation today (Aronoff & Kubik 2013; Greene 2019). Herzfeld is particularly interested in how the ambivalent relationship between Europeanness and ‘other’ cultural identities is consciously manipulated at all social levels by different actors as a form of input-feedback between the powerful and ‘powerless’.

In an orthodox reading, ‘intolerance’ of permissive Western values and a shared irritation with their claim to hegemony as ‘progressive’ serves as the rallying point of Russian cultural intimacy between elites and ordinary people. Indeed, this is the main thrust of Alexander Kiossev’s development of Herzfeld’s term for the referent ‘the Balkans’. The identity of ‘Balkan’ as regressively nationalist (and therefore intolerant) is a form of ‘dark intimacy’ constructed as a mirror-discourse to a European identity (Kiossev 2002, p. 182). In ‘the Balkans’, nationalism compensates for the stigmatising label of the Balkan Other and binds people together. Thus, in the context of any purported return to ‘traditional’ or ‘conservative’ family values, the idea of ‘cultural intimacy’ is pertinent. If ‘structures of feeling’ emphasise how Russian conservative values find resonance among ordinary people, then cultural intimacy indicates the ‘agency’ part of the equation, where more autonomous meanings emerge at the everyday level. The example in this essay is that objections to homosexuality and children’s rights often revolve around claims not to conservatism or hierarchy but to practical shared moral values and the integrity of the family as a moral community where the state is a fickle and potentially malign ‘guarantor’ of rights.

The rest of this essay is structured as follows. First, there is a short section on ethnographic methods detailing the field and generation of research materials. Two ethnographic sections follow, the first on everyday homophobia and how it relates to elite-led discourse. The second relates to ‘juvenile justice’—a framing of children’s rights as a Western imposition with conspiratorial intent to undermine patriarchal authority within the traditional and, crucially, heteronormative family. The anti-‘JJ’ movement is not just about the patriarchal family but encodes particular meanings about the state, gender-identity and sexuality. We discuss ethnographic findings with reference to structures of feeling and cultural intimacy. Then we offer conclusions: that homophobia and traditional attitudes to the family, if they reveal anything, tell us about the ambivalence in people’s evaluation of their own state (rather than the West), particularly in terms of its capacity to inculcate, nourish, favour or punish social behaviours, whether in the sphere of sexuality or child-rearing. In place of shadowing an elite rhetoric of ‘culture war’ with the big ‘other’, the West, the examples of ‘social conservatism’ in this
essay are structured by a domestic politics of emotion ‘fuelled by insecurity, doubt, indignation and resentment’ (Skeggs 1997, p. 162).

Methods and field site

This essay is based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork conducted in a district of Kaluga region in European Russia (Morris 2016, pp. 215–31). Since 2009, sustained relationships have been cultivated with a wide and diverse set of research participants. Many people from two industrial towns own village properties where they interact with outsiders (mainly Muscovites and people from the regional capital Kaluga). While the field is socio-economically blue-collar and ‘rust-belt’, we spoke to people across the income, education and class spectrum. This is an important point to make when dealing with values that many mistakenly think of as inversely proportional to educational level, namely, intolerance.

The interview materials cited below were collected in mid-2018, but some materials pertaining to ‘juvenile justice’ date back to 2015–2016 and 2009–2010. For the most recent period of collection, a field researcher assisted in the interviews and transcribed them. Many conversations took place in country cottages, a typically accessible setting during the summer. Here, we talked with higher earners and more ‘cosmopolitan’ interlocutors. For the purposes of this essay, two composite family groups of research participants—Ilya’s working-class family and Galina’s technical lower-middle-class one—are presented as representative of wider trends in the materials collected. Thus, for example, interview materials with numerous participants are presented through the ‘composite’ portraits of Ilya and Galina below. While both are pseudonymous real participants, their words are supplemented by those of others in similar generational, gender and class positions. Composites are a useful technique and tool for compressing diverse yet sample-saturated materials. They also present a solution to ethical issues when representing sensitive materials that require the disguising of participants’ identity (Humphreys & Watson 2009; Morris 2016, p. 225).

To many social researchers, the previous two paragraphs might read as dryly disconnected from the real human concerns of ethnographic research. In reality, doing ethnographic research, particularly participant observation, requires emotional commitments of empathy and loyalty to the field and the people in it. The research for this essay is no different. Therefore, the following ethnography is presented in the same informal, personal and sometimes intimate form in which it was conducted. The facts of the first author’s personal circumstances—being the father of boys, non-Russian, and living in Scandinavia—aided the probing of the topics of sexuality and child-rearing rather than negatively affecting the ‘objectivity’ of the research. For such qualitative methods, ‘objectivity’ is not a meaningful or realisable aim.

2The field researcher (Masha Garibyan) conducted some interviews alone or took the lead in conducting joint interviews, arranging interviews with new and existing participants, and reviewing and coding interviews with the author. In approximately 70% of the interviews the research assistant (RA) took the lead. The research participants were familiar with the RA via previous research conducted by the authors. Some conversations were initiated by the respondents themselves, who were very interested in what was happening in the ‘West’.
‘Gayropa’ as a term had little purchase with most people we talked to, although they willingly, sometimes enthusiastically, discussed issues of sexuality with us.3 They had heard the term, but did not use it. “‘Gayropa’? What does that mean?” said Ilya. ‘I mean homosexuals’, Jeremy replied. ‘Oh pederasts? You mean, pidory?’ said Ilya, with interest. Before proceeding, we need to unpack the ‘lay’ term for ‘gay’ (pidor), which is both ordinary and offensive, uncouth and yet unremarkable, depending on one’s company and socio-linguistic self-awareness.4

This was not the first time we had mentioned our interest in topics of sexuality and the ‘traditional family’ to our friend Ilya, a good natured if rather melancholy single man of 30. This conversation took place in his native village in July 2018. Ilya had been unemployed for about a year and was getting by using his car as an informal taxi. Often though, there were few daytime, weekday customers, and he came to water his mother’s little plot in the village from the town where he lived. We started eating fish with beer. A wasp was bothering Ilya: ‘Fuck, pidory have flown in’. ‘So, about “pidory”’, Jeremy said. ‘What do you understand about Gayropa?’ Ilya continued, at first rejecting from discussion what appeared to him a technical piece of jargon he had heard somewhere but which remained obscure:

[Ilya] I recall last time we spoke we talked about how pidory are people with a non-traditional sexual orientation, but now what you want to understand is that pidors are not ‘gays’, but it is a character trait … To be a pidor is to be incorrigible [zachonchennyi]. Your ‘gays’ is something else, fashion maybe.

[JM] And how do you feel about real homosexuals?

[Ilya] Oh, immediately, tratra tra [imitates sound of machine gun firing]. But in the West, it’s all normal, right? They go on parades, smile? … They are everywhere. So many have appeared; there never used to be any.

3People were motivated to discuss homosexuality with the researchers because one of us was a ‘foreigner’. This applies equally to the discussion about ‘juvenile justice’. Indeed, this interest among research participants partly prompted this project. However, rather than conclude that this increased interest was evidence of Gayropa’s salience among ordinary people, we argue that media narratives merely served to sensitise ordinary people to issues in the manner of a ‘structure of feeling’, as discussed later.

4Pidor literally translates as ‘pedo’. In Russian it also preserves a deliberate mispronunciation of the original ‘pederast’, presumably because of the distance from ordinary speech of the foreign medical/historical term, and its taboo history as a subject of general discourse. It indicates the (un)easy association between forms of sexual deviance as well as a sense of unmasculine contempt, perhaps better approximating the use in English of the term ‘motherfucker’ or ‘bastard’, terms which in English have no implications of effeminacy. As with North American English uses of the word ‘faggot’, but perhaps even more readily, usage may easily slide between literal and figurative use (‘repellent male’, ‘useless person’). The degree to which this has developed in the last few decades in Russia can be illustrated by the extent to which, even in public discourse, those using the word can be observed to say ‘pidor, in a good sense’, meaning ‘gay’, and ‘pidor, in a bad sense’, meaning ‘motherfucker’. See for example ‘Ukrainskaya elita — “pidory” ili “der’mo”’ Mnienie izvestnogo analitika, Polit.ru, 24 January 2005, available at: https://polit.ru/news/2005/01/24/pidary/, accessed 11 November 2020. Additionally, similar to the usage of the term ‘faggot’, the pejorative gendering implications of the term pidor may be more important than as implications of homosexuality (Pascoe 2007).
[JM] Probably before you just couldn’t see them, they kept themselves to themselves. Does it bother you? It makes no difference to me. They’re not going to bother you.

[Ilya] I’ve heard that they come through and immediately they’re up for fucking, almost in passing, like. In Russia it’s different—immediately against the wall and ‘bang, bang’. Jeremy, you’re not right here. In Russia it’s a man and a woman, they live together. But if it’s man and man then it’s complete trash [polnyi shvakh]. Woman and woman exists, but it’s done in secret. Now though, homos get married—someone was telling me about it—even Russians…. It does exist, even in our town. I’ve heard about guys kissing in the entry-ways [v pod’ezdakh]. But without a woman, beautiful kids, what is a man? … It’s not that there aren’t homos here, it’s just that in the West they walk freely, raise flags—it’s fashionable. Here they are afraid. Just try to raise a flag to show you’re a pidor and they’ll stamp on you and crush you. And even the cops won’t say a word and they’ll be no consequences. Honestly, I do believe that this fucking mess came from the West, from English-language countries…. Before that there were pidory only in prison, or they put them in the loony-bin…. Well actually there was this [attempt to have public gay parades] before, in the 1980s or something in Russia, and in those days, you know, they didn’t say anything, but now they understand that this fucking mess is growing. They tried it in Moscow, but the police broke it up immediately and Volodya Putin said, ‘It’s a Russian country, we have boys marrying girls, giving birth to kiddies and we can’t have all this shit’. Go and Google it yourself, in our country we don’t support homos.

While Ilya’s speech was somewhat performative, his narrative here was largely in earnest, not least because of his concern for what he saw as dangerous ignorance and naivety, given that Jeremy was the father of two small boys playing somewhere out of sight in the village. Ilya mapped Putin onto his own normative conception of heterosexuality as wholesomely Russian. At the same time, while connecting homosexuality to the unwholesome influence of the West, he uncovered contradictions that only weakly resonated with Gayropa. They indicated everyday (non-politicised) homophobia, historicised knowledge of sexuality discourses in the USSR and modern Russia, but also ‘progressive’ and liberal attitudes, including libertarian strands of reasoning. The first category—fear of the threatening (to masculinity, to personal safety, to order) homosexual—is found in all our interviews. If anything, Ilya was restrained in comparison to other male interlocutors: some middle-class men we talked to used more extreme violent language and imagery. The second category too, is straightforward: the idea of an ‘etymological’ link between deviant sexuality and systems of incarceration in the USSR. Collective punishment, the penal system and ‘homosexual rape’ have a long-standing semantic connection (Kharkhordin 1999, pp. 307–12).5

The third category is a fuzzy and hedged articulation of sexuality as an ‘incorrigible’ fact of identity. This is interesting given that a core idea of the dangers of permissiveness is that homosexuality arises from environment—in the ‘culture war’ framing—due to the unwelcome influence of the West. Later there was a casual admission that, in fact, Ilya did know that gays were around him and were not a new, externally imposed

5The conflation of homosexual identity with prison sexual relations and army hazing (‘dedovshchina’) is a major cause of negative attitudes towards homosexuality and the accompanying view of homosexuality as coercive or externally imposed in Russia.
phenomenon. Indeed, exploring further the idea of gays as a new form of pollution, Ilya and other interlocutors mapped this idea onto that of a general breakdown in order and the loss of old certainties. What interested him more than the category of people being ‘disciplined’ was the swift punishment by the state of those who stepped out of line. The evocation of firing squads and clandestine meetings was also noteworthy. Furthermore, the idea of state disciplining was never proposed enthusiastically by Ilya or others; rather, family upbringing (vospitanie) with a strong normative role model was key. Vospitanie links permissiveness, sexuality and child-rearing; the last is explored in the second ethnographic section. Finally, when pressed further, the majority of interviewees moderated their extreme positions when questions about sexual behaviour were couched in terms of the right to private life—a point also made by Kon (2003).6

'Moral upbringing’ socially frames (non)permissiveness

The Russian term vospitanie is more than its literal translation of ‘upbringing’. The collocative significance of ‘cultural upbringing’ (kulturnoe vospitanie) is a legacy of Soviet concerns about the moral and social education of youth and their vulnerability to pernicious influences (Muckle 1988; Sirotin 2009; Krupets et al. 2017). The meaning of shared ‘culture’ and norms overlaps with moral education. Importantly, successful vospitanie involves a continual process of external observation and intervention to ensure moral conduct (Kharkhordin 1999, p. 61). This produces a ‘morally educated’ person who, in the Soviet version, would always know how to act in the spirit of the aims of the state. The right training could produce not only a collectivised citizen, but also collectivised body practices and a collectivised personality (Oushakine 2004). That the ideological teleology of vospitanie was subject to challenge after 1991 is illustrated by the proliferation of narratives of ‘degradation’, ‘immorality’ that circulate in the perestroika period and afterwards (Shevchenko 2009, p. 35). As Shevchenko argues, everyday articulations of ‘moral decline’ of ‘postsocialist disorder’ were a particularly prominent feature. In the early 2000s the media took up the term ‘the wild nineties’ [likhie dyavnosti] with connotation of both

6Official, legal and ideological homophobia as a political tool has a long history in Russia (Healy 2017). While there is general fear and disgust of homosexuality, overall attitudes towards ‘non-normative’ identities and lifestyles are improving (Kabrykant & Magun 2014) and it is important to look through short-term fluctuations. More recently, scholars have pointed out that Russia is at the ‘medium-high’ end of traditional-normative values in comparison to other European countries (Fabrykant & Magun 2018, p. 82). They base this evaluation on the work of Viktoriia Sakevich (2014), who analysed Pew Research Center data on ‘moral’ values. When findings are broken down, Russia differs little from Western European countries on issues such as extra-marital and premarital sex, divorce, abortion and contraception. In some cases—for example relating to extra-marital sex and abortion—Russia is more ‘liberal’ than both some Northern European, North American, and some Southern or Eastern European countries. Homosexuality is the outlier, with Russia more similar to Asian and African countries. However, we should again exercise caution because so much depends on how questions are phrased. If we return to the important question of nature/nurture and homosexuality, Russians do not look so much like outliers. A recent UK poll, for example, records 34% of respondents as believing that gays are not born, but made, with much internal variation in the sample (YouGov 2017). As recently as 1998, a majority (62%) of British people thought homosexuality was ‘wrong’ (Clements & Field 2014). One could even argue that based on attitudes towards adoption of children by homosexuals, British and Russian people are quite similar when it comes to the question of equal rights: British people are strongly against gay men adopting (Clements & Field 2014).
freedom and disorder (Orlova 2019). More recently, ‘wild’ (also translated as ‘unbridled’) is framed in exclusively negative terms among elite-aligned media (Sharafutdinova 2019). A search using the term ‘moral degradation’ among Russian-language social science periodicals reveals widespread uncritical ‘declinism’ in assessments of Russian society (for example see Yurevich 2009). It is little surprise then that we find a perceived loss and reinforced need for a meaningfully orientating process of socialising the young.

Those most acutely experiencing subordination—those of Ilya’s class—are thus, predictably, more likely to object to homosexuality, as for them it is emblematic of failed socialisation. That they themselves might secretly fear that, despite the correct socialisation, they too are members of a ‘failed’ group in society—a lumpen proletariat—may only intensify their homophobia. Thus homophobia, for many men, is a ‘structure of feeling’—with much deeper roots than the Gayropa trope—in which cultural hegemony is tempered by the lived subordination of class and is dynamic and liable to change from below, as Williams predicts. Ilya’s reflections show that the subject of actually-existing gay people is not so taboo any longer, that there is ‘demand’ for ‘safe’ talk about sexuality and even that gays might well be ‘born’ and not ‘made’.

The nostalgia for correct vospitanie can be seen as part of a ‘retreat’ to a form of lay reasoning that makes use of ‘traditionalism’ as well as negatively referencing some aspects of ‘Western permissiveness’ in elite discourse. The idea of a ‘retreat’ links to analyses more generally of the ‘turn’ to traditional values, such as that by Ukhova (2018), as an expression of social distress. This aspect was readily present in talk with Ilya and other interlocutors, who moved readily from discussing violence against and repression of gays to that against other ‘blame’ groups, such as Central Asians. They were also quick to link subjugation and the punitive state to their own positioning. As socio-economic ‘losers’ of the postcommunist transition, they did not disaggregate intolerance from ‘distress’.

Following Ukhova (2018), it is worth breaking down ‘social distress’ into two subcategories as indicated by interview materials. These are, first, a socio-economic dislocation and sense of injustice, particularly for working-class men; second, a Janus-faced political expression that has on one side a desire for punitively enforced order where there is perceived moral and social ‘disorder’; and, on the other side, a fear of arbitrary ‘justice’ dealt by the state and practical knowledge of its great capacity for indiscriminate collective punishment. Additionally, there is a Weberian elective affinity, or connective resonance between state-led conservative narratives of ‘protection’ from the West and lay values around a loss of guiding moral vospitanie in social order more generally. Crucially, however, this is an affinity rather than a causal link. This affinity, together with symptoms of social stress, make everyday homophobia into a structure of feeling only tangentially related to hegemonic discourses of Western permissiveness. On the contrary, people are more likely to find their own state to be at the very least lacking in the capacity to provide moral socialisation or the conditions to allow social reproduction to take place for the heteronormative family.7

7Stenning et al. (2010, p. 59) highlight how ‘household social reproduction’ in postsocialist spaces is about more than how families sustain themselves economically. Social and emotional values as well as networks are important. In other words, the way a state enables or impedes people’s thriving and flourishing are key categories of reflection for our interlocutors.
By foregrounding a more class-based analysis, we do not wish to ignore the mountain of scholarship on sexuality and gender, particularly masculinity, in Russia. Gayropa/’JJ’ does in part reflect long-standing domestic concerns about gender politics, for example, the interplay between the threats of fragile masculinity, demographic crisis and the sexual emancipation of women, which have been particularly noticeable since the late Soviet era (Zdravomyslova & Temkina 2002). Zdravomyslova and Temkina remind us that gender-inflected intervention, including discrimination, is nothing new. They remark that fears for the normative gender order were such that in the 1990s state strategies emerged to protect men (via state schemes, for example, services to deal with drug and alcohol addiction) as well as the ‘family-private’ solution of women taking the lead in socialising (noting the discrete nature of each strand) men away from degeneration (Zdravomyslova & Temkina 2002, p. 438). In the light of this, it is striking how easily the purported ‘culture war’ tropes map more readily on to a reading of a frustrated masculine revival rather than a conservative turn in relation to an external ‘other’ cultural referent. A continuity between Soviet, transitional and contemporary (elite-led) conservatism is persuasive: ‘Transformational reforms in Russia began to be viewed as a chance of asserting some kind of real masculinity…. The liberal critics who created the ideology of perestroika assumed that the new order would provide an opportunity to develop hegemonic patriarchal masculinity’ (Zdravomyslova & Temkina 2002, p. 450).

Regarding Gayropa, Ilya’s talk reflected official discourse on sexuality but also ‘expropriated’ it for local purposes, albeit to a limited degree. To be Russian is to be masculine and therefore intolerant of homosexuals and to avoid the folly of the West. But most of all, to be straight (and have a wife and kids) is a quality of Russianness, and perhaps something to cling on to in these difficult times. Alexander Kiossev (2002, p. 184) calls vernacular discourses a ‘redeployment’ of official narrative: a ‘mirror-discourse’ to a European identity (of tolerance) but locally salient. This maps onto the political vernacular of ‘common sense/direct knowledge’ (Aronoff & Kubik 2013, p. 244), according to which, for many working-class men, social reproduction is a hard-fought and distressing struggle. The ‘impossibility of earning a living’ is something Ilya and others continuously returned to, as if the link to intolerance were self-evident. Ironically, in these meandering, repetitive litanies, gays were hardly the main target; rather, metropolitan elites, Jews and foreigners (who are blamed for the current economically unjust era) were the focus. Ilya, without showing any overt approval, recognised the punitive and arbitrarily violent nature of the state and understood that therefore some forms of social life were ‘of course’ only possible clandestinely, that order was at risk, and that a ‘normal’ life was precarious. Given such ‘distress’, again, the importance of upbringing is emphasised, as if it were the only agency left to a person, hence the imperative to defend a heteronormative patriarchal nuclear family—ironically, one very difficult to achieve for many of our divorced, estranged and precariously employed male interlocutors.

What of other responses towards the meaning of ‘Gayropa’? Ilya occupied a middle ground between visceral intolerance and tolerance. Certainly, there were people in our fieldwork with more exposure to the print and online media, and with higher educational qualifications who were more ready to make the link between homosexuality and a Western-led cultural war on Russia. By the same token, there were a few people without
higher education who expressed pronounced tolerant, even permissive views on sexuality, such as Zhenya, a male factory worker, 36 years old: ‘They can do what they want. I don’t want to see them kissing. I can’t look at that. But they should have the rights that others do. To get legally connected, not in a church, but why not?’.

Contrast this with Denis, a 50-year-old sales representative of an international industrial firm, who was comfortably off and well-travelled, with a postgraduate education: ‘These are not people, but scum who prey on the young and impressionable. They seduce youth—they are just opportunists. It’s a measure of the degradation of Europe that they are allowed to openly recruit through those parades’. This was echoed by Irina, a retired middle-class woman: ‘It’s really dangerous, all these parades. These are spoiled people [isporchennye] who make use of vulnerable young people who want to experiment. But it’s not a real identity. And then it is too late for those youth—they can’t be normal again and have children’. Denis elsewhere reflected on youth problems closer to home: his own child had experienced both substance abuse and mental illness. In more reflective talk, he emphasised the lack of non-punitive state support for youth. His sense of injustice was not related to economic issues but the state’s capacity for pastoral care and to provide opportunities for youth to flourish. Even for this successful executive, the idea of successful social reproduction was expressed with bitterness and cynicism. It is tempting to link his personal family life experience to his attitudes of intolerance.

Victor, a blue-collar worker, turned entrepreneur in his late 40s, was less interested in sexual orientation, but found it hard to reconcile a recent news story about a Western family that decided not to reveal the gender of a new baby to avoid gender bias. The story of a young boy who decided to dress as a girl was another cause for a heated debate: ‘ Seriously? How could a small child even come up with the idea? Clearly, it’s the adults’ fault for suggesting to him that one could choose his gender, rather than allowing him to grow up naturally—as a male’. As with Denis, Victor’s personal family situation should not be disaggregated from his commentary. Initially Victor had wanted his son to follow in his footsteps and set up a business. Now that his own business was failing, he had sent his son off to retrain on the railways. Elsewhere his talk concerned his own mistaken assumptions about the merits of the son following the father. In the same interview session, he later discussed the importance of youth ‘finding their own way, in this difficult and changing world’. He emphasised a moral upbringing (his son was, thanks to this, resilient enough to adapt to change), but also recognised the structural constraints of society (particularly corruption and cronyism) that made social reproduction so difficult and was fearful for the future.

Perhaps the most common theme in our interlocutors’ references to ‘Gayropa’ was the idea of a semi-official imposition of artificial identity choices on youth. The idea of untoward influence by shady exploitative older people was repeatedly expressed in the talk of interlocutors. However, this was linked to a more complex objection based on a psycho-social conception of the individual: that non-normative sexuality emerges where there is a lack of moral fibre. Although beyond the frame of reference for this paper, we encountered analogous ideas in the construction of race: non-whites as lacking morals. Morality was mapped on to a more sociologised lack within the everyday idea of homosexuality: a lack of ‘cultural upbringing’.
The idea of state and society as playing an active role in the correct inculcation of values (including sexual mores) is a longstanding and widely shared expectation in Russia. This makes it easy for discourses of Gayropa to insert a wedge and widen purchase in the already significant space of normative upbringing. Ironically, *vospitanie* here can be seen as a more societally moulded idea of ‘maturation’ but one that falls squarely within a European enlightenment tradition. It is merely the more collectivist corollary of the more individualistic/personalistic self-cultivation expressed by the term *bildung*. In this view, normalising non-fixed sexuality draws children into making choices they would not otherwise make.

Finally, it is worth emphasising how intolerant views are strongly mapped on to lack of personal experience of ‘others’. Encouragingly, people’s beliefs often change when confronted with reality. A middle-age woman who worked for a foreign language school commented on how, many years ago, she had shared her boyfriend’s views that gay men had something wrong with them, but then had completely changed her views after working with several openly gay men and women (all foreign) at the school. This made her realise how conservative her boyfriend was and led to the breakup of their relationship. Similarly, the husband of a friend of this interlocutor was very prejudiced against black people and had thought of them as inferior and dirty, until he was forced to offer lodgings to a young black teacher (again, the context was an English language school in Moscow where foreigners were given accommodation with host families), which had completely changed his view. Even if homophobic and other intolerant attitudes are deep ‘structures of feeling’, lived experiences moderate and change them, if only over the long term. Indeed, this is one of the main sociological insights based on Williams’ idea of cultural hegemony—that cultural hegemony is tempered by lived experience and is processual and liable to change from below.

**Traditional family roles and ‘juvenile justice’**

From our interviews and discussions about what homosexuals and homosexuality lack, it is clear that one of the main concerns was over the preservation of heteronormative gender roles, most particularly within the ideal of the nuclear family. This entails a look at relations between genders, normative expectations of ‘husband’, ‘mother’, and other caring or familial roles understood normatively, and the rights and relative subordination of ‘juveniles’ within the family and society. The last issue, referred to as ‘juvenile justice’, is a contentious topic that meshed easily with Gayropa for some research participants, who criticised the permissiveness of putatively ‘Western’ child-rearing norms and linked them to social degeneration. However, in all of the gender and family talk, the underlying topic was their own state’s lack of effective biopolitics. While we agree with scholars who argue that Putin’s third term has seen a ‘biopolitical turn… as exemplified by the application of a number of regulatory mechanisms for disciplining and constraining human bodies’ (Makarychev & Medvedev 2015, p. 45), our interlocutors bemoan what they perceive as an absence of both a constraining, and nurturing state in their communities’ lives.

Often in the same conversations, research participants would cover sexuality, gender and family. As can be seen in conversations with Ilya, this elision was unprompted. It was
striking that he made frequent reference to the potential loss of what he saw as an idyllic traditional nuclear family, under threat from homosexuality. His talk of ‘beautiful’ children and the loss of innocence was revealing. The spectre of loss, but also corruption of innocence frequently arose in talk. The discourse of Victor, a well-off salesman, is very similar: ‘Biological difference is set. You can’t choose to be a boy or a girl. If at ten he can define whether he’s a young lady [baryshnia] or a man; well, how can that be? And more importantly what for? I can’t understand that’.

The idea of the unpredictable dangers of giving minors ‘too much’ autonomy, predisposing them to the ‘malign influence’ of bad adult actors, is neatly expressed in the term ‘juvenile justice’ or ‘JJ’, a signifier that has more potential purchase than Gayropa. A retired nurse, Galina had encountered a number of websites devoted to the topic and talked to us about them at length. Internet resources and networks are important for anti-JJ mobilisation (Sherstneva 2014, p. 199). A review of these reveals a common narrative, that in Germany and Scandinavia, ‘JJ’ policies have led to the legal empowerment of children and that this is dangerous. Along with strict laws against reasonable parental corporal punishment, these states are said to be manipulating children into denouncing their own parents. The children are then institutionalised, destroying the authority of parents and familial bonds. ‘JJ’ is a rhetorical trope illustrative of a wider narrative of the defence of traditional family values. Tova Höjdestrand has written extensively on this topic, arguing that grassroots mobilisation and popular resistance to children’s rights are an articulation of state distrust (Höjdestrand 2017).

Galina had digested the aims of the organised civic movement in Russia against children’s rights through internet fora. In particular, she had assimilated the link between permissiveness and the collapse of traditional family authority but had not linked this to a Western attempt to undermine Russian culture. She saw it as a domestic Russian appropriation of Western mores, imputing it to bad local actors. Nor had she (or any other interlocutors) absorbed the religious message of this rhetoric, that Orthodox morality was the guarantor of appropriate family hierarchies and relations. Similar to Ilya’s expression of homophobia, Galina’s expression of traditional family hierarchy will be explored in depth in contrast to semi-officialised articulations of ‘JJ’.

Galina was in her late 60s and married to a railway engineer. She had two children and three grandchildren, one of whom was raised mainly by her and her husband. Since Jeremy had known her, Galina had been housebound due to a disability. As a result of her social and physical isolation, she made full use of the internet and was very eager to talk about the world beyond her four walls. She often invited Jeremy and his children over and made a big fuss of them. Consequently, conversation often turned to the topic of child-rearing. Having often talked about ‘JJ’ before, in May 2018 we asked Galina to summarise her views, which she gave as follows:

It’s just that after 1998, there was an all-union [Galina confuses the structure of the UN with the former USSR] convention on human rights, including children’s rights. And JJ appeared in Russia. … I was walking on Karpov Street and saw a sign, ‘Juvenile Justice’ and asked what it meant, and they told me, it’s so that if something happens to a child they should go not to an adult organisation but deal with it here. There was a programme called ‘Childhood 2030’ and it was all laid out by year. In St Petersburg the Social Institute wrote a huge article, I can show
you, all the references point to it. Perhaps I wouldn’t have paid much attention if not for the fact that videos started to appear of children being taken away from their parents in Finland, in Denmark, Russian children in particular, in England, Norway, just for being smacked. In Russia they immediately started working on a law—if you smack a child once, you get two years in jail. They collected a million signatures and there were even protests against it. The upbringing of children is not only a matter of verbal chastising, but sometimes one can smack a child depending on circumstances. I can’t remember her name, but a woman protested, saying, ‘What are you doing—so if a blood relative smacks they get two years, but if it’s a stranger it’s only an administrative infraction?’

Galina continued giving very detailed, if sometimes confused, accounts that tallied with the various websites she visited. Her grandchild, Masha, aged 15 interjected: ‘But how does this get defined as either criminal or administrative? It depends surely on the circumstances. Like yesterday I saw a little girl step out into the road in front of me and of course her mother smacked her. What else could she do?’ One of Galina’s sons who was present during some conversations supported his mother: ‘You just have to use the belt sometimes. My dad used it on me when I deserved it. He didn’t want to but in extremis’. Occasionally Galina’s family would recommend similar corporal punishment for behaviour by the researcher’s children. Others interviewed—in particular, women working in care sectors—would single out what they perceived as overly ‘free’ behaviour [vol’nye] by children as illustrating a European upbringing, specifically linking vospitanie to the non-Russian milieu of these children. Unlike Galina, they readily linked permissiveness to Europeanness. However, like her, they more keenly took up the topic of the sinister aims of their own state. We return to Galina, who expressed this in representative fashion:

For a long time, it’s been the case that in schools and kindergartens nurses and child-rearers [vospitateli] have to react promptly to any bruises on the children. If there are any, they immediately phone the social protection agency who come and deal with it. There was a case near Tula last year where a child had a bruise from playing with her brother and the mother had to go to court to reinstate her parental rights. It’s so terrible. I’ll give you the link to the case. Then, after the lake tragedy, they removed Pavel Astakhov from the role of Presidential Defender of Children’s Human Rights and put in his place Kuznetsova, the wife of a priest and mother of five children, but that’s no good in a role that requires so much travel—who is bringing up her children now? And what does a religious person know of the complexities of today’s youth? ... You know everyone’s disappointed with decisions like that by Putin [the appointment of Kuznetsova], like with the pension fund thing [the raising of pension ages from 2019]. I’m in favour of women in politics but not at the expense of family. Children’s rights begin at home! It was all so much easier when the system was that the grandmother could live with you and look after the children while you worked. Yes, while on the one hand they say that this JJ comes from the West, as a condition of getting access to some currency funds. On the other hand, [Aleksei] Naval’nyi is right that maybe Putin is just representing somebody’s interests—I mean Naval’nyi has shown this and now everyone can see how he’s protecting particular interests—those of the oligarchs. In Soviet times there were no human rights but there

were other values—peace and harmony, toleration. But after the USSR, new organisations arose that were not subordinate to anyone.

At this point in the interview, the granddaughter Masha precociously opined that to take away a child from its family should require a qualified commission and legal process. This returned Galina to the topic of supervisory control: ‘JJ is not subordinate to anyone. It’s not a conspiracy, it’s that there are petty provocateurs. People in hospitals or education who will use the opportunity of JJ to improve their own situation’.

Galina’s interpretation is worth cross-referencing with Tova Höjdestrand’s research on the anti-JJ movement, which focuses on the agenda of civic organisations. Höjdestrand traces the origins of organised conservative religious opposition to the implementation in Russia of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child after 2000 (2017, p. 45). In particular, she highlights the articulation of a ‘civic’ opposition to the imposition of a Eurocentric model of child–parent relations and the privileged role of the state as arbiter of such relations. This is revealed in open reference to ‘foreign NGO agendas’, as well as the use of the term ‘sovereign’, which is used in a negative sense to illustrate cultural imperialism in opposition to a native “antiliberalism”, patriotism and a religious worldview’ (Höjdestrand 2017, p. 33). Conspiracy theories, which link domestic state administrators to supranational agencies in exploiting children in the name of child protection, are increasingly common themes on social media. Here there is a confusing collision between the ‘anti-state’ aspects of ‘JJ’ and the elite-led utilisation of Western-led conspiracies and ‘fifth columns’. For example, the Duma deputy Mizulina has flirted with the ultimate conspiracy reading: child rights as the Trojan horse of homosexuality and paedophilia (Höjdestrand 2017, p. 47).

Drawing on the work by Tatiana Vorozheikina (2008), Höjdestrand suggests the importance of the context of distrust in the state and formalised structures to the anti-JJ movement. The interpretation of an attack on the role of the parent in favour of the state provides fertile ground in particular for the anti-liberal agenda of conservative morality organisations (Höjdestrand 2017, p. 42). While Galina and other interlocutors certainly regarded ‘European’ child-rearing as inferior due to the loss of traditional family hierarchy and its attendant discipline, what these ‘lay’ or vernacular discourses on the vulnerability of the Russian child have in common with organised forms of conservative morality is distrust of the Russian state’s capacities and motivations. The West here is overshadowed, merely the origin of ideas. The right kind of morally framed vospitanie, once again appears. Just as the organised opposition to ‘JJ’ rests on the interpretation of children as vulnerable—‘malleable and dependent’ (Höjdestrand 2017, p. 48)—so too does the lay version agonise over the loss of a guiding role for the parent, particularly the father. Natalia Sherstneva argues that anti-JJ activism is directed against the ‘authoritarian centralised system’ of institutional family policy and social services, rather than just signalling conservative politics (Sherstneva 2014, p. 199).

Concurrent to the above conversations, people we spoke to repeatedly stressed the necessary dominance of a father figure as a solution to problems of vospitanie. As Galina’s son Zhenya succinctly put it, continuing his theme of ‘spare the rod and spoil the child’:
In the army the boy will get more than a smack round the face. It’s better if it comes first from the father, from within the family, for a good reason and only in extremis. This teaches that there has to be moral reason for punishment. You did something bad and accept the moral consequences—the belt. Otherwise the boy will remain infantile, not able to feel the limits. If you leave it to the army or after, it will be too late, and the consequences will be worse. You don’t want the army or the police in a country like this teaching your kid lessons in how to behave [uroki vospitaniya] because that punishment will often be mindless [bessmyslenno], as so many things are in Russia [u nas].

This narrative strongly suggests not only a lay conservatism and recourse to traditional masculine-enforced order as a reaction at the micro-level to wider societal disruption, as suggested by Daria Ukhova (2018), but that encased within that ‘lay conservatism’ is a fear and mistrust of the punitive and vindictive, if not corrupt, state. The state today is understood as an inadequate or even dangerous model of vospitanie, underlined by a projection on to the past of more ethically meaningful possibilities of education, real or imagined. Therefore, reinforcing hierarchy in the name of moral growth at the level of the family is a ‘rational’ response.

Conclusion

The degree to which we can impute a conservatism to many Russians is not in the operation of a hegemonic discourse about the permissive decadence of West, but in a ‘structure of feeling’ that has more complicated roots, causes and expressions. The idea of a need for moral vospitanie as structuring feelings of fear and intolerance is fruitful in historicising Russia’s history of homophobia. Such anxieties are equally likely to result from feelings of inadequacy relating to one’s own class or gendered social positioning. These intimate reflections on one’s failure or potential failure can be acute in Russian society, characterised as it is by high levels of visible inequality, corruption and risk as well as very normatively gendered notions of success and failure. Moreover, given the ongoing sense of dislocation and socio-economic vulnerability of large groups of citizens, frustrations and fears relating to social reproduction loom large. The latter is increasingly delegated to the heteronormative family, epitomised by politicians’ phrases such as ‘no one asked you to have children’ (Olga Glatskikh, Ural official, whose words were widely reported). Despite rhetoric that purports to support social reproduction with piecemeal measures such as subsidised mortgages for families and maternity capital grants, people are able to reflect critically on the increasing retreat of the social state since the end of communism, whether the loss of benefits like universal childcare or the more recent changes in pension age. If anything, the mobility of people’s reflections—moving from homophobia to reflections on the paucity of opportunity or the hazardous social environment faced by their own offspring—illustrates how the ‘conservative turn’ in elite discourse can have counterintuitive effects. At the same time, structures of feeling relate to practical consciousness (Williams 1977, p. 211) and should not be seen as dependent on or solely derived from elite discourses that produce hegemonic culture. In place of shadowing an elite rhetoric of a ‘culture war’ with the ‘big other’ of the West, the examples of ‘social conservatism’ in this essay are structured by an emotional politics ‘fuelled by insecurity, doubt, indignation and resentment’ (Skeggs 1997, p. 162).
In turn, researchers interested in the relations between political rhetoric and lay opinion should attune themselves to the difference between the political and the social as defined by Chantal Mouffe (2005). Homosexuality has long been a social taboo, but it only became a political issue, one contested in the public sphere, when it became politically useful for the elite. The acts of ‘hegemonic institutions’ should be carefully prised away from the realm of ‘sedimented practices’. Even though they are mutually constitutive, any articulation of one through the other requires contextual reference to an unstable ‘frontier’ between them (Mouffe 2005, pp. 17–8). This closely relates to Herzfeld’s critique of cultural hegemony: that a simple model of elites ideologically ‘hailing’ ordinary people ignores how even seemingly shared ‘cultural’ values give rise to counter-hegemonic meaning.

Viatcheslav Morozov views Russians as ‘colonised natives’ caught between liberal universalism, as represented by the West, and domestic authoritarianism (Morozov 2015, p. 163). They are subalterns who cannot speak, lacking any salvageable ‘representational device’ from within hegemonic discourses. Thus, Morozov argues that Russian conservatism deliberately silences Russian people while pretending to give them a voice. While agreeing with this characterisation, we would underline the persistent narrative in the material of ‘moral upbringing’ that emerges as the ‘unforeseen’ cultural patina, or even affective structuring, of intolerance. While finding the origin of this ‘upbringing’ in the legacies of collective socialisation of the Soviet period, as a ‘signifier’ it tries to break free of this, notably in the lack of what one would expect of conservatism—an appeal to a disciplining big ‘other’, that is, the state. As we have seen, echoing Ukhova (2018), distrust of the state as a guarantor of order is important, but so too is the realisation of its inability to serve as a model for moral order in society or to meaningfully support social reproduction. Indeed, conservative rhetoric often rankles because its words are empty: a hypocritical emphasis on the value of the heteronormative nuclear family while structurally nothing is done to sustain it.

After nearly three decades of the imposition of the notion of moral value as residing in the ability to develop neoliberal personhoods (Makovicky 2014), a push back by vernacular expressions of conservative political cues is unsurprising. Instead of valuing the individual based on criteria such as flexibility to the needs of the market and a narrowing conception of state needs and obligations, the ‘unforeseen’ vernacular might express different priorities. While subject to restorative ‘structural nostalgia’ (Herzfeld 2016, p. 159), people’s ideas of a socially re-embedded individual—in community, family and society (school, work)—illustrate more than just social distress, as proposed by Ukhova. They are a plea for social reconstruction in the face of a postsocialist trauma that has lasted 30 years. While the state stresses the danger of the dissolute West and social degeneration, ordinary people look around and answer, ‘Yes, we see degeneration close to home. Do something about it’. Conservatism becomes a ‘social strategy’ of the distressed (Herzfeld 2016, p. 165) and expresses a locally meaningful response to political messaging from above (Greene 2019, p. 198). This is not the same as a genuine ‘culture war’, nor is it a sign of a general intolerance that is any greater than in other societies.
References


