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The Ethics of the Willing: An Ethnography of Post-Soviet Neo-Liberalism

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Abstract

This dissertation is an ethnographic exploration of neo-liberal political subjectivity formation in post-Soviet Latvia. While Latvia has been one of the ‘catching-up’ economies of Eastern Europe, striving to approximate metric and symbolic ‘European standards’, I put forward here an investigation of ‘catching-up’ subjectivities as the flipside of this process. This enquiry is based upon a premise that a political system is never sustained only by its institutional structure; it is always also a mode of life, ways of being and knowing, particular systems of intelligibility and ordinary ethics. Therefore this study integrates a Foucauldian approach with insights from anthropological theories of subjectivity and the state, and post-colonial theories to investigate the process of neo-liberal political reforms in post-1991 Latvia as underpinned by shifts in perceptions of self vis-à-vis the state. Enabled by the ethnographic perspective, this research puts these ‘catching-up’ subjectivities to scrutiny rather than taking them for granted.

Locating this investigation in an unemployment office in Riga, I explore individuals’ engagement with notions of ‘work on self’, individual responsibility, and ‘livable’ life in an ethnographically grounded way. The empirical chapters of the dissertation can be read as a map of a quest to give sociological substance to the concept of neo-liberal political subjectivity in conversation with the participant observation and narrative data. I argue that it is not sufficient to posit the Latvian story as a case of top-down subjectification, instituted through the ‘catching-up’ discourse of the post-Soviet governing elites. Exposed to ethnographic scrutiny, the process of neo-liberal political change comes into sharper relief as not simply accepted or resisted by the subjects that it seeks to form. I argue that we need to consider the logic of neo-liberalism in an inverted way and to theorise neo-liberal political subjectivity in affective terms, constituted through geo-politically and historically formed anxieties and intimacies.

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Chapter 1 Introduction: Embodying sovereignty



Figure 1: The Baltic Way, August 23, 1989. Author unknown.

Two million Latvians, Lithuanians, and Estonians joined their hands in the Baltic Way on August 23, 1989. This human chain was a demonstration against Soviet power and a demand for political independence. The ‘singing revolution’ of peaceful uprisings was underway in Latvia. More mass demonstrations took place, culminating in the signing of the Declaration of Independence by the Latvian Supreme Soviet on May 4th 1990. The Soviet Union was unravelling and the coup d’état in Moscow meant that Latvians could establish an independent state *de facto* in August 1991.

These events, known as ‘The Third Awakening’ (*Trešā Atmoda*)¹ in Latvia, are now becoming part of an increasingly distant past. Not only has a generation of people who were born after 1991 grown up, but when I spoke with people who had come of age during the

¹ As the narrative of Latvian history goes, ‘The First Awakening’ had taken place in the second half of the 19th century, as Latvians developed national consciousness. ‘The Second Awakening’ was the time-period directly preceding the establishment of independent statehood in 1918.

Soviet period as part of my doctoral research, events from these tumultuous times were also hardly mentioned.² Other things preoccupied the Latvians in the aftermath of the recent economic crisis. Duly, scholars of post-socialism have also sought to move on: we have gathered in conferences to discuss what comes after post-socialism and what ‘post-post-transition theories’ should look like (Buyandelgeriyn 2008, see also Humphrey 2002a).

Yet, my account must start on the Baltic Way, where I was standing next to my mother, holding hands with a stranger on the other side. We had boarded a free shuttle bus in Smiltene, my hometown in the northern part of Latvia, organised for all those who wanted to participate but did not have a car. The bus had taken us to the vicinity of the Estonian border. As we stood there, a car was passing by slowly and a cameraman was leaning out of the window and filming the live line. My mother stepped back in a timid attempt to avoid getting captured on film, afraid of the consequences if the Communist Party found out she had participated.

Despite the fears that many no doubt felt, our live human chain worked as a powerful plea for freedom, both national and individual. It was a claim to take the power away from the Communist Party, at the top of the Soviet totalitarian regime, and invest it in the national demos.³ Popular sovereignty was demanded through embodying it in a chain of bodies. Human bodies were also put in front of Soviet tanks during the barricades in 1991. Thousands of people surrounded buildings of national importance in the centre of Riga to prevent the Soviet military forces from entering and taking control. When the Latvian Constitution, written in

² I left Latvia to pursue a Masters’ degree at the University of Amsterdam in 2006. In 2010, I started my doctoral research that led to the current thesis.

³ My thinking is helped here by readings of political theology. Claude Lefort analyses the differences between totalitarian and democratic regimes as to do with the location of power. While in a totalitarian system the Party claims the power, in a democracy the seat of power is empty (Lefort 1988). Eric Santner has noted that in democracy, sovereignty is embodied in the people (Santner 2011: 48-51). Santner cites Melzer and Norberg on the changes that the French Revolution brought about: ‘With democracy the concept of the nation replaced the monarch and sovereignty was dispersed from the king’s body to all bodies. Suddenly every body bore political weight’ (ibid: 4).

1922, was renewed in force in 1993, its 2nd article read explicitly that ‘the sovereign power of the State of Latvia is vested in the people of Latvia’.⁴

The years of 1989-1991 marked the onset of broad economic and political reforms. It was a triple transformation, encompassing democratisation, a move to capitalism, and nation-state establishment (Offe 1991). But there was a break and a shift at that point that has been less visible, not lending itself to benchmarks and statistics. Namely, the regaining of independence also signalled *a shift in subjectivities*. I was only six years old at the time and my generation has been expected to be the embodiment of this new, ‘modern’, democratic personhood – if not born into it then certainly grown into it comfortably, naturally. But for my mother and all the other adults who were around me, the regaining of independence marked a breaking point in numerous ways, both subtle and fundamental. The years of 1989-1991 served as a rupture after which Latvians could not be the same in an important sense, even when life, congealed in many of its everyday and institutional forms, continued on as usual.

The Baltic Way and the subsequent moments leading up to full independence in 1991 were a string of ‘events’, in the sense that this term has figured in anthropological literature. Caroline Humphrey defines an event as ‘an extraordinary happening that brings about a rupture of previous knowledge(s)’ (2008: 360). It thus opens up possibilities for ‘a singular human being [to] put him or herself together as a distinctive subject’ (ibid: 358).⁵ Veena Das directs our attention to how people are ‘embedded’ in certain events and how ‘the event attaches itself

⁴ We can read the years 1989-1991 as indicating a shift from one type of sovereignty regime, one type of political theology to a new type of sovereignty regime that presumed not only political sovereignty of the people (democracy) but also moral sovereignty of the individual (liberalism). The political sovereignty of the people was now enshrined in the constitution and brought to life through democratic elections and pluralist party politics. The moral sovereignty of the individual could not be ‘translated’ in such a straightforward manner into an institutional form. It had to do with public sentiments and moral dispositions.

⁵ Humphrey follows here Alan Badiou’s argument on the importance of events for the (self-)making of subjects. Her interest is in how events “create subjects, if only for a time” with “a sharpened and pervading sense of who they are” (2008: 359, 374).

with its tentacles into everyday life and folds itself into the recesses of the ordinary' (2007: 1). Her ethnographic studies of women's experiences of the Partition of India reveal how this event, which involved a lot of violence and suffering, has dislocated and formed subjectivities in the decades to follow. One of the reasons why the break-up of the Soviet Union was welcomed by a significant part of the Latvian population was because it opened up possibilities for new forms of subjectivities. This does not mean, of course, that individual experiences were unequivocally positive, nor that they were the same for all Latvians. However, such a reading of this event makes sense as part of what we could call the Latvian narrative of freedom.

The majority of the individuals who became my research interlocutors over the course of my fieldwork had experienced this rupture. With their ages ranging from 40 to 60 years, these were people who could now speak their minds freely, who could travel, and could own a business but who also, in many cases, had fallen into poverty that simply had not been possible before. Some of them, whom we will get to know more in the following chapters, changed their professions radically, from an auto mechanic to a stock investor, from a chocolate factory worker to an accountant. Educational degrees from the Soviet period were often considered obsolete and therefore, new, post-1991 qualifications became a requirement for many professions. English would replace Russian as the language of status and of opportunity and was suddenly required for even relatively low-skilled jobs. Travelling to exotic southern destinations did not mean going to Crimea or Georgia, like before, but rather to Turkey or the Canary Islands. The sudden plunge into poverty that large parts of the population experienced meant, however, that only very few could afford to go on such trips.⁶ Instead, the West arrived

⁶ While politically the early 1990s was a triumphant period, economically the country fell into crisis. The economic crash that Latvia experienced in the early 1990s was more severe than the Great Depression in the US, comparing the drop in GDP (Rajevska 2004: 2). The GDP decreased by 30% in 1992 alone and in 1996 stood at 51% of its value in 1989 (Dunford 1998). Unemployment had been rising steadily since 1991 and reached 20.5% at its highest point in 1996 (Eglitis and Lace 2009: 336). A large share of the population found themselves in a situation where it was suddenly difficult to cover basic payments like housing and utility and afford healthcare, household goods, or clothes.

to the small towns and villages of Latvia in the form of donated second-hand clothing that was sold by weight. Whilst these are some of the more visible signs of this rupture, there were also many more subtle ways in which people's lives have been reconfigured. The anxieties and hopes inhabiting the present were constituted in that rupture. Today's narratives and practices can be understood, as the following chapters will show, only in the context of this historical break.

The sense of urgency to facilitate this process of reforming subjectivities has been shared also by the governing elites.⁷ What had once been 'the Imaginary West' (Yurchak 2006: 164), an unattainable subject of longing, was now a standard to 'catch up' with, a set of benchmarks monitored by technocrats and reform advisors. But reform targets included not only political and economic structures but also new types of political subjects. State institutions became targeted sites of reforms in all of the above-mentioned areas. Schools now had to prepare democratic citizens, while state bureaucracies had to mould the type of civil servants needed for implementing liberal democratic governance. While the progress of 'catching up' in terms of economy and democratic institutions is rather straightforward and measurable via statistics and indicators, how can we seek an insight into the subjective dimension of this 'catching up' process? How are people affected by it, experience it, and integrate it into attitudes, views, and political dispositions? As I will elaborate below, these attitudinal and behaviour features and the changes over time are essential ingredients of a distinctive political subjectivity that has emerged in Latvia. In this dissertation I will examine the post-Soviet Latvian political reform process through a close analysis of incremental shifts in political subjectivity.

⁷ Studies across the former socialist region have marked similar motivations across policy reform areas, from agriculture to enterprise to education (see e.g. Burawoy and Verdery 1999, Dunn 2004, Larson 2013).

I will situate this analysis in one such reform site – an unemployment office in Riga.⁸ Unemployment offices in Latvia, I will argue, are ‘*a symptomatic space in the craft of governance*’⁹ in a number of ways. This state-funded institution, where individuals turn when they have lost work, is one of the key points of encounter where the imaginations of ‘the state’ and ‘the citizen’ meet. It is one of the myriad of sites where political subjectivities are moulded and reconstituted, both as part of a (state-sponsored) policy project and as work that unemployed participants actively do themselves. The unemployment office is a symptomatic site of governance due to how historically and geopolitically situated discourses of the state and personhood – and relatedly of work, virtue, and welfare – are deeply intertwined. In state socialism, labour had a particularly central role, as workers were supposed to be the revolutionary class and lead the rest of the society into the ‘eternal sunshine’ of communism (Lampland 1995, Bonnell 1997: 20-63).¹⁰ The socialist state provided work, or benefits in case of inability to work, as a right. In neo-liberal capitalism, the unemployed person is a disruptive figure.¹¹ Appearing unproductive and dependent in the eyes of the post-socialist Latvian state, a person out of work contradicts the image of an active, autonomous individual – a model citizen in a neo-liberal democracy. Relying on the state is perceived as a dangerous subject position, threatening the ideals implicated in the freedom narrative.

Welfare system reform has been at the heart of the post-1991 neo-liberalisation process in Latvia. Governing elites have problematized ‘learned helplessness’ as a relic from the Soviet

⁸ I conducted eight months of ethnographic research there in 2011-2012. See methodological clarification below, pp. 35-45.

⁹ I borrow this phrase from Ann Laura Stoler, who describes the colonial archives in Holland as ‘symptomatic sites in the art of governance’, testifying in minute detail to the reach of colonial rule over even most intimate areas of everyday life (2009: 7).

¹⁰ When work is regarded as not merely an economic but primarily a cultural phenomenon, its ‘ideological nature’ becomes readily apparent (Joyce 1987: 1). Studies in social history of work include Sewell (1980), Thompson (1968), and Bauman (2005).

¹¹ I invoke here Michael Herzfeld’s notion of disruptive figures from his discussion of the Maltese community in Greece: ‘They too literally and materially disrupted the image of a harmonious nation’ (2005: 60). We can draw parallels here also with Foucault’s notion of the ‘Dangerous Individual’ (1978).

past standing in the way of the sovereignty claimed on the Baltic Way. The Ministry of Welfare and the State Employment Agency are responsible for designing and implementing a range of policy programmes across these offices that cover the entire country. I centred my fieldwork on one specific policy programme in particular, called ‘Competitiveness-Raising Activities’ (*Konkurētspējas paaugstināšanas pasākumi*). I will approach this programme as one particular ‘genre’ of state practices through which ‘narratives and knowledge of the state’, but also models of ‘modern personhood’, are being ‘circulated’ (Hansen and Stepputat 2001: 8-9). This is one of many so-called ‘active labour market programmes’, implemented over the past few decades to serve as tools for undoing the former Soviet citizens’ perceived dependency on the state.

In the chapters that follow, I will engage on the one hand, with the views of civil servants and outsourced trainers regarding proper expectations from the state and expectations with respect to people out of work. So, I will explore the forms of personhood that this programme and its agents seek to foster. How are new political subjects being created through this particular state programme? On the other hand, I will consider how individuals participating engage with the ideas of the state and the self that this programme seeks to promote and disseminate. Drawing on my observations, as well as on interviews and informal conversations with people following these seminars, I will explore how unemployed individuals in post-Soviet Latvia engage with the questions of post-Soviet personhood and a ‘livable’ life in a post-Soviet reality. In doing so, I will pay particular attention to how the discourses of ‘catching up’ exist in relation to ‘global hierarchies of value’.¹² This thesis aims to show how socialist and totalitarian legacies, nationalist re-framing of the past, and global neo-liberal rationalities intertwine as the ties between the citizens and the state are being

¹² This is a term that Michael Herzfeld uses, as he observes how certain countries ‘[labour] long and hard to achieve “European” status [...] and] define their cultural priorities in relation to “Europe”’ (2005: 43).

invoked, questioned, and denounced in the narratives and interactions of various social actors. By analysing narratives of contemporary Latvians and their imagination of the post-Soviet Latvian state, this dissertation will trace the neo-liberal reconfiguration processes at the level of political subjectivities.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will situate my research among other scholars' work on post-socialist reforms and neo-liberalism, and in addition, I will outline the novel conceptualisation of post-Soviet political subjectivity formation that this dissertation develops. The last part of this introduction will reveal the methodological strategies (both the successful and the failed ones) that informed this research and conclude with an outline of the structure of the dissertation.

Moving beyond the discourse of void

Studies of post-socialist transformations have often been dominated by what I term a discourse of void. Such a framing is inherent in the term 'post-socialism' itself, 'defin[ing] societies by something they are not, instead of what they are' (Kideckel 2002: 115). There are *two sub-genres of this discourse of void*. And both are problematic.

In its first – well-known – incarnation studies of post-socialism offer a *teleological reading* of the East European reform process in which post-socialism is presented as a temporary phase in the transition from state socialism to a Western-style liberal democracy. The 'catching-up' with Europe became, not only a commonplace expression in political rhetoric, but also an object of measurement for scholars analysing the post-socialist transformations. Analyses of post-socialist political reforms have often resembled a benchmarking exercise, measuring indicators like political values or electoral process to

determine a country's proximity to Western standards.¹³ Such accounts of post-socialist political reform speak of low social capital, weak civic associations, the lack of grassroots public participation and a withdrawal from the public sphere (e.g. Benedek 2006, Gaugere and Austers 2005, Hann and Dunn 1996, Howard 2003, Kennedy 2002). Some even concluded that there were, in short, 'lower levels of citizenship' in Eastern Europe, compared to the West (Coffe and Lippe 2010: 480).

As early as 1993, Guillermo O'Donnell warned against analysing these new democracies by 'describing their political and economic misadventures' and by pointing out 'which attributes – representativeness, institutionalisation and the like – these countries do not have' (quoted in Greskovits 1998: 3). While he feared that such an emphasis on absent qualities could hinder a comparative study of the emerging democracies, I would argue that this approach has often precluded us from building a nuanced understanding of the changes that have taken place over the past two decades. Such an approach is steeped in the logic of comparative research on political cultures à la Pye and Verba (1965), dominating not only the analyses of political reform in Eastern Europe but also other 'developing' regions, such as Africa (Mbembe 2001, Chabal and Daloz 2006). Thus, Achille Mbembe writes that 'African politics and economics have been condemned to appear in social theory only as the sign of a lack, while the discourse of political science and development economics has become that of a quest for the causes of that lack' (2001: 8).

Anthropologists of post-socialism have since challenged this 'transitology' approach (Burawoy and Verdery 1999, Hann 2002, Dunn 1999). The 'transition' moralities have themselves been turned into a subject of research (Verdery 1996, Burawoy and Verdery 1999, Berdahl, Bunzl and Lampland 2000, Mandel and Humphrey 2002, Humphrey 2002b, Kennedy

¹³ Even though resorting to terms 'East and 'West' as a shorthand, I am sensitive to the complex historical boundary-work that constitutes them (see e.g. Wolff 1994).

2002). Scholars have studied the state, the markets, and the individual as a moral subject, all framed as agents of change that seek to devise and negotiate new, 'modern', subjectivities. Some have drawn on governmentality studies to trace the process of cultivating Western self-governing responsible subjects (Yurchak 2002). Others have explored how the market shapes subjectivities through changing labour ideologies and practices (Crowley and Ost 2001, Ost 1993, 2006, Kideckel 2002, Dunn 2004). The subjective states of post-socialism have been examined by observing the everyday life and sense-making strategies of ordinary citizens and their own attempts at constituting themselves as moral subjects in new ways (Shevchenko 2009, Zigon 2010, Cohen 2013).

Simplistic visions of pre-1991 and post-1991 periods as representing distinct and juxtaposed social orders have been challenged. Some authors have offered alternative periodisations and have pointed out continuities between state socialist and (neo-)liberal democratic social structures (Haney 2002, Fehervary 2013). Scholars have also challenged this binary vision by documenting that certain qualities and practices nowadays associated with post-1991 neo-liberalism were actually already born in the preceding socialist era (e.g. Shevchenko n.d.). Some have even questioned whether neo-liberal reforms were actually coming from the West and have traced the roots of individualism, transparency or neo-liberal economic theories in the state socialist societies themselves (Bockman and Eyal 2002, Paretskaya 2010). The transitology image of gradually but neatly advancing from one socio-political regime to another has been rightly questioned by such work pointing to the desirability of a more sophisticated approach.

Many analyses that offer ethnographically grounded accounts of post-socialist transformations reject the first – teleological – type of the discourse of void but fall under *the second sub-genre of this discourse*, however. Namely, from an analysis of people's experiences and how they deal with the world in their mundane practices and accounts, the period since

1991 is often interpreted as the shattering of a known reality. For example, Serguei Oushakine (2009) focuses on the profound sense of loss that was caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union and how ordinary Russians have mourned this collapse. He notes that this sense of loss and insecurity was particularly pronounced because no other social structure could readily be constructed and ‘normalised’ to replace the previous one:

‘[T]he disappearance of the Soviet country often implied the obliteration of individual and collective achievements, shared norms of interaction, established bonds of belonging, or familiar daily routines. The abandoning of old institutions and the erasing of the most obvious traces of Communist ideology did not automatically produce an alternative unifying cultural, political, or social framework’ (Oushakine 2009: 1-2).

This quote rightly highlights the radical effects of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Numerous comparable ethnographic accounts present people referring to the post-1991 reality as a ‘total crash’, ‘complete disintegration’ or ‘the end of the world’ in which ‘everything had collapsed’ and ‘there was nothing to do’ (e.g. Ries 1997, Vitebsky 2005, Shevchenko 2009). Turning this narrative into an analytical perspective, Jonathan Friedman has suitably proposed the concept of ‘shocked subjectivities’ to capture the effects of the sudden and radical worsening of living standards and the sense of disempowerment that the post-socialist reality has brought about for many Romanians (Friedman 2007).

Without doubt, such readings resonate with Latvian realities as well. Yet, I suggest a hermeneutic shift from focusing on the post-socialist political reform process as characterised by absences, weaknesses, or losses to an exploration of its ‘positive properties’.¹⁴ The popularity of such ‘trope[s] of loss’ (Oushakine, 2009: 2), I believe, is itself something to be explained and interrogated, rather than used as an explanation or an unquestioned and taken-

¹⁴ I do not mean ‘positive’ here in a normative sense but in terms of the forms of personhood and modes of consciousness that *have* (rather than *have not*) emerged as part of the post-1991 transformations.

for-granted figure of speech by social scientists. Rather than thinking in terms of ‘shocked’ subjectivities, which is an apt but descriptive term still operating within the broader discourse of void and loss, I wish to zoom into the formation of new subject positions as they got constituted and develop. In order to do so, the very descriptor ‘post-socialist’ needs to be approached with caution. It is not sufficient to simply interpret the political practices and discourses of the diverse former Soviet bloc countries that span from Kazakhstan to the Czech Republic to Latvia.¹⁵ Such an interpretation obscures the fact that dispositions and understandings regarding the state, and themselves as political subjects, are not fully and exhaustively determined by past political legacy. Subjectivities are formed in everyday practices, subject to local urgencies and embedded in the local vernacular, rather than being deducible from the past. Furthermore, the former Soviet bloc countries have different pre-socialist political histories and geo-political situations, various relationships with the Soviet Russia, differing ethnic compositions and an imaginary relationship with ‘Europe’, etc. The Baltic States are different from other former state socialist states because they were an integral part of the Soviet Union, unlike Central European states, but also received their independent statehood before the Soviet Union, unlike Central Asian former socialist republics. Former state socialist societies also have very different relationships with their own socialist pasts, ranging from full-blown nostalgia in Russia to commercialised ‘Ostalgie’ in East Germany, or nostalgia as a critique of the post-Socialist present in Hungary (Berdahl 1999, Boym 2001, Boyer 2006, 2010, Nadkarni and Shevchenko 2004, Todorova and Gille 2010, Nadkarni 2010). Accordingly, there is no one ‘post-socialist trauma’ (Sztomka 2004) that can apply as a

¹⁵ Several prominent post-socialist scholars have discussed the durability of the term ‘post-socialist’ and have called for broadening of the perspective. Katherine Verdery (1996) pointed out early on that there was no typical (post-)socialist case, as the countries differ considerably. Caroline Humphrey acknowledges weaknesses of the concept but advocates for its use, as the heritage of socialism continued to be the common reference point across the former Soviet bloc societies (2002a: 12-13). Scholars have also sought to extend the term ‘post-socialist’, and the problematic associated with it, beyond the former Soviet bloc. Perhaps most prominently, Nancy Fraser (1996) applies the notion ‘post-socialist condition’ to the entire global post-1989 world, marking a shift from re-distribution to recognition politics (but see the critique by Gille 2010).

diagnosis across the former state socialist societies.¹⁶

The events of 1989-1991 are commonly referred to in Latvian as ‘the regaining’ or ‘re-establishment of independence’ (*neatkarības atjaunošana*), rather than ‘the collapse of the Soviet Union’ (*Padomju Savienības sabrukums*). The latter term is used mostly when discussing international geopolitics of the time and their consequences. This seemingly minor detail regarding word choice signals where the emphasis falls in the popular imagination. The words ‘regaining of independence’ signal a (re-)start of something valuable, rather than a sudden traumatic end of something as the word ‘collapse’ implies. It was about regaining freedom (this framing will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2). Hannah Arendt in her essay *What is Freedom?* finds an answer to her own question in the words of Shakespeare’s Brutus, ‘That this shall be or we will fall for it’. For her, this quote captures the key element of freedom, namely ‘the freedom to call something into being which did not exist before, which was not given, not even as an object of cognition or imagination, and which therefore, strictly speaking, could not be known’ (1968: 150). The re-establishment of national independence was framed in the popular imagination as bringing about such ‘freedom to call something into being’. This ‘something’ included not only a new system of governance but also new ‘ways of being and knowing’,¹⁷ and new forms of personhood. Many were willing to sacrifice material security for this freedom and the possibilities that it opened up. As a common saying at the time went, ‘even if wearing a poor man’s shoes, we are free’ (*Kaut postalās, bet brīvi*).

Post-Soviet neo-liberalism

My fieldwork took place in the aftermath of the global economic crisis, which had hit Latvia particularly hard and caused a steep increase in the number of unemployed. The real

¹⁶ See e.g. Sztompka on the ‘trauma’ of post-socialism (2004) and Buchowski’s critique (2006).

¹⁷ I borrow this phrasing from Brenda Chalfin (2010: 243).

estate market bubble burst, cheap lending came to a halt, and a major local bank collapsed, only to be bailed out by the government. Latvia opted for harsh austerity policies to cope with the aftereffects of the crisis. By accepting a bail out worth 7.5 billion euro from the European Union and the IMF, the austerity government embarked on a fiscal consolidation path that involved slashing public spending through salary reductions and mass redundancies. The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) dropped by 25% between 2008 and 2010, while unemployment rose to 20.7% at its peak in the 1st quarter of 2010.¹⁸ There were 920,000 workplaces in the Latvian economy before the crisis and this number fell by over 200,000 as a result of the crisis and the ensuing austerity politics (Ošlejs 2012). Emigration accelerated, as many opted to move rather than protest the government's austerity measures.¹⁹ As a popular joke goes, 'the last person leaving, please turn off the lights at the airport!' (*Pēdējais, kas pamet valsti, izslēdz gaismu lidostā!*).²⁰

This was already the second wave of austerity that Latvians had endured since the 1990s. The country had already undertaken a major restructuring and seen an even more massive drop in GDP and in the standard of living in the 1990s, as it had just emerged from the Soviet Union. The socio-economic re-structuring that Latvia and the other two Baltic States embarked upon following 1991 has been widely described in scholarly literature as the most radically neo-liberal in Eastern Europe.²¹ Examining macro-level statistics of marketisation,

¹⁸ Eurostat data cited by the Latvian Ministry of Welfare (2011a).

¹⁹ There have been very few mass protests against the government policies since 1991. In the biggest demonstration to date, about 10,000 people gathered in the Old Riga in January 2009 to protest the government's handling of the economic crisis and the protests turned violent. Demonstrators were smashing the windows of the Parliament building and looting shops in the surrounding area.

²⁰ Hazans (2012) estimates that 230 000 people have emigrated from Latvia between 2000 and 2012. That is about 10% of the population. In 2009-2010 alone, Latvia lost over 4% of its population due to emigration – the highest loss proportionally among the Baltics. See also Hazans (2011) and Sommers and Hudson (2013).

²¹ See e.g. Cerami and Vanhuyse (2009: 8-10), Vanhuyse (2009: 60-61), also Aidukaite (2009), Stenning et al (2010), Woolfson and Juska (2011), Juska and Woolfson (2012), Bohle and Greskovits (2007, 2012), Sommers and Woolfson (2014).

industrial transformation, social inclusion, and macro-economic stability, political scientists Dorothee Bohle and Bela Greskovits classify the former state socialist socio-economic regimes in three groups: embedded neo-liberal (the Visegrad countries), neo-liberal (or ‘disembedded’ – the Baltic States), and neo-corporatist (Slovenia) (2007: 445; 2012). They argue that the Baltic States have undergone the most radical marketisation, as compared to the other East European countries. They have pursued, this argument goes, weak industrial protection policies that have resulted in de-industrialisation and de-skilling and exhibit the worst social exclusion indicators in the region. The term ‘neo-liberal’ is used in this literature to refer to social and economic principles guiding public policy that include the shrinking of the public sector, market pre-eminence, and mass-scale privatisation. Bohle and Greskovits (2007) characterise policy outcomes in Latvia as neo-liberal because of (1) their content (low levels of social spending, low benefits, high inequality resulting) and because (2) these policies were influenced by the Washington Consensus and later international advice from the IMF, the World Bank and the European Commission. Comparing welfare reforms across Central and Eastern Europe, Pieter Vanhuysse has called the Latvian welfare state ‘particularly lean and mean’, when compared to other former socialist countries (2009: 60).²²

Such assessments of neo-liberalisation in the Baltics focus mostly on the *economic* reform aspect and thus fit within a dominant understanding of neo-liberalism as supremacy of market logic and/or as a global elite project.²³ I am, however, primarily interested in the neo-

²² Some scholars use Gosta Esping-Andersen’s classification of welfare models in their analysis of Latvian policies. Aidukaite identifies Latvia as following mainly the ‘liberal’ model, with post-communist characteristics added (2009, 2011). Aidukaite identifies the IMF and the World Bank but also the EU as contributing to neo-liberal restructuring in the Baltics through its technical assistance and the conditions for the bail-out loans (Aidukaite 2009). Alternatively, Bite and Zagorskis characterise the Latvian social policies as conservative, following Esping-Andersen’s classification, due to the fact that social security is employment-based; however, also these authors note ‘neo-liberal tendencies’ (2003: 63).

²³ Perhaps the most prominent example of this framing is David Harvey’s argument in his book *A Brief History of Neo-Liberalism*. In Harvey’s definition, ‘[n]eo-liberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating

liberalisation process, not as an economic reform advanced by global elites, but as a situated *political* reform project at the intersection of various rationalities, old and new, local and global. I regard neo-liberalism as the key to understanding how political subjectivities have been reconfigured in Latvia – though not as an economic doctrine but as a governmentality regime. Following Aihwa Ong, I will approach neo-liberalism in this dissertation as ‘a biopolitical mode of governing that centres on the capacity and potential of individuals and populations as living resources that may be harnessed and managed by governing regimes’ (Ong 2006: 6). This mode of governing seeks to foster individuals who ‘self-manage according to market principles of discipline, efficiency, and competitiveness’ (ibid: 4).²⁴ Specifically, I will frame Latvian neo-liberalisation process in this thesis as, on the one hand, a *state project* informing welfare system restructuring and, on the other hand, a *an ethical regime* that individuals engage with in idiosyncratic ways.

Neo-liberalism as *a state project* has also been recently theorised by Louic Wacquant. Wacquant calls for a framing of this phenomenon that goes beyond both Marxist political economy analyses and governmentality approaches. He calls for ‘a thicker notion that identifies the institutional machinery and symbolic frames through which neo-liberal tenets are being actualised’ (2010: 212-3). Neo-liberalisation should be interpreted as ‘the remaking and

individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices’ (2005: 2). For Harvey, neo-liberalisation is ‘a political project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites’ (2005: 19).

²⁴ In her conceptualisation of neo-liberalism as a mode of governing, Ong draws on Foucault and the Foucauldian school of governmentality (e.g. Barry, Osborne and Rose 1996). Nikolas Rose argues that one of the elements of neo-liberalism is ‘a new specification of the subject of government’, i.e. citizens are imagined ‘as active individuals seeking to “enterprise themselves”, to maximize their quality of life through acts of choice, according their life a meaning and value to the extent that it can be rationalized as the outcome of choices made or choices to be made’ (Rose, N. 1996: 57). Governmentality studies put the emphasis on mundane circulations of power and dispersed technologies of governance that do not necessarily all emanate from the state. While drawing on governmentality studies, I will, as explained in this chapter, maintain my focus on the role of the state in advancing neo-liberal reconfigurations in Latvia.

redployment of the state as the core agency that actively fabricates the subjectivities, social relations and collective representations suited to making the fiction of markets real and consequential’ (Wacquant 2012: 68). It is not only economic deregulation but also, crucially, ‘recomposition’ of welfare structures and a predominance of ‘the cultural trope of individual responsibility’ (2010: 213). Instead of thinking of neo-liberalism as the dominance of the market and retreat of the state, Wacquant’s definition emphasises the changing role of the state and the new elaborate forms that state regulation takes, especially in relation to the groups ‘at the bottom’ of the socio-economic ladder (2010: 214).²⁵

In Wacquant’s reading of neo-liberalism, welfare state reconfigurations, which are at the centre of this dissertation, emerge as a key element of neo-liberal governance. Wacquant has drawn particular attention to what he calls ‘workfare’ and ‘prisonfare’ as strategies deployed by the state to keep the poor and the marginalised under control. Such welfare state reconfigurations are

‘designed to facilitate the expansion and support the intensification of commodification and, in particular, to submit reticent individuals to desocialised wage labour via variants of “workfare” establishing a quasi-contractual relationship between the state and lower-class recipients, treated not as citizens but as clients or subjects (stipulating their behavioural obligations as condition for continued public assistance)’ (ibid: 213).

Drawing on this author’s work, I will analyse the Latvian active labour market programmes as a form of ‘workfare’ – it is a welfare assistance programme that is built upon the logic of commodification, approaching the social assistance as ‘competitiveness-raising’ and linked

²⁵ Wacquant identifies in total ‘four institutional logics’ that underpin neo-liberalism from a sociological point of view: economic deregulation, ‘welfare state devolution, retraction, and recomposition’, ‘an expansive, intrusive, and proactive penal apparatus’, and ‘the cultural trope of individual responsibility’ (2010: 213).

with measures of punishment and withdrawal of welfare support if not participating.²⁶ Such a conceptualisation of welfare reforms is also one of the ways to understand the post-socialist state not as a retreating state (dismantling the socialist welfare structures) – a view that perpetuates the discourse of void – but as a reconfigured state rewiring its biopolitics.

While the role of the state in instituting neo-liberal reconfigurations is vitally important, I believe it is also necessary to recognise the kinds of situated ethics that sustain these reconfigurations. Neo-liberalism as *an ethical regime, or a form of ethics*²⁷, thus guides our attention to the kinds of *technologies of self* that embed and maintain these state-led reconfigurations. Ong argues that ‘neo-liberalism, as an ethos of self-governing, encounters and articulates other ethical regimes in particular contexts. [...] ...questions of status and morality are problematised and resolved in particular milieus shaped by economic rationality, religious norms, and citizenship values’ (2006: 9). Ong therefore writes of neo-liberalism ‘with a small n’ and understands it as ‘mobile calculative techniques of governing’ rather than a coherent logic (2006: 3, 13). In other words, such state projects, as Wacquant describes, take locally specific forms in different contexts.

In a similar vein, I do not approach this study as a rather straightforward study of neo-liberalisation assuming that the same processes are in place and the same principles at stake across the countries facing such global logics. Rather, what matters for understanding the post-

²⁶ For an overview of the historical emergence of workfare programmes in the US and Europe and their contemporary application in Great Britain, Germany, and France, see Ian Greer and Graham Symon (2014). Greer and Symon provide the following definition of this phenomenon: ‘Whether labeled active labour market policies, workfare, welfare-to-work, insertion, or activation, these interventions have a number of features in common. They tighten the link between welfare support and job search, are delivered in part by contracted-out service providers, and are underpinned by financial penalties levied against jobless clients for non-compliance. In the critical literature the term ‘workfare’ has come to denote the policies and discourses aimed at intensifying labour market discipline on workers and job seekers’ (2014: 2). I thank Barbara Samaluk for drawing my attention to this paper.

²⁷ By ‘ethics’, I understand a practice, rather than a set of moral conventions. It is a continuous practice answering the question ‘How ought I to live?’ – a question that already Aristotle identified as central to human existence (see Lambek 2010: 2).

1990 reform process in Latvia, in my view are the local urgencies that made a particular narrative of change emerge and prevail. One that ties neo-liberalisation to local culture and geo-political contexts. The collapse of the Soviet Union and establishment of a liberal democratic political regime was based on a popular movement, framed as re-gaining of national freedom. Therefore this study is specifically concerned with the kinds of understandings of the state and oneself that have made for a particular political ideology, one that draws heavily on the rhetoric of individual responsibility and the reduction of the role of the state, the most meaningful for policy makers and laypeople alike.

Theorising political subjectivity

By choosing to frame this enquiry into neo-liberal political subjectivity formation as a matter of intertwining state rationalities and ethics of the self, I am obviously invoking the Foucauldian idiom. My interest in the ways Latvian subjectivities are being reconfigured as part of the ‘catching up’ process has been informed and honed through Michel Foucault’s writings on governmentality, biopolitics, and the relationship between subject and truth.²⁸ Foucault once identified the following question as specific to modernity: ‘who are we in the present, what is this fragile moment from which we can’t detach our identity and which will carry that identity away with itself?’ (cited in Rabinow 1997: xviii). He argued that it was in the era of Enlightenment that people started posing such questions to themselves – pertaining no longer to metaphysical concerns but rather to their own social order and to the historically specific formation of themselves. I find these questions evocative in relation to my own enquiry here regarding the sense of self that characterises the post-Soviet Latvian subject and the ways in which it is inextricably tied to this particular historical time.

²⁸ Foucault (1980, 1994a, 1994b, 2008).

Foucault believed that answers to these questions resided in the relationship between subject and truth. His forays into ‘the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects’ (1994 [1982]: 326) have shown how our ways of relating to ourselves are culturally and historically specific. His work gives historically grounded insight into the ‘objectivizing of the speaking subject’ in the West through scientific knowledge and through ‘dividing practices’ (categorisations into ‘the mad and the sane, the sick and the healthy, the criminals and the “good boys”’) (ibid). Foucault draws our attention, furthermore, to ‘the way a human being turns him- or herself into a subject’ (ibid: 327). Our subjectivities are formed through the ‘games of truth’ that we play, so the Foucauldian argument goes. A ‘game’ in his analysis stands for ‘an ensemble of rules for the production of the truth’.²⁹ Governing and caring for oneself, for Foucault, is a matter of ‘fit[ting] one’s self out with these truths’.³⁰

When Ann Laura Stoler wrote that the Dutch colonial archives, the subject of her book *Along the Archival Grain*, were ‘a symbolic space in the craft of governance’, she was building on and extending the Foucauldian vocabulary to treat regimes of governmentality as functioning through the inculcation of ‘epistemic habits’ (Stoler 2009: 42-43). As such, they are written, as much as embodied, maintained through legal and policy discourses but equally through common sense. While such epistemic habits are a target of governmental programmes, they are also always ‘steeped in history and historical practices, ways of knowing that are available and “easy to think”, called-upon, temporarily settled dispositions that can be challenged and that change’ (ibid: 39). Stoler frames such an investigation as a study of *political ontology*, defining it as ‘that which is about the *ascribed* being or essence of things, the categories of things that are thought to exist or can exist in any specific domain, and the specific attributes assigned to them’ (ibid: 4).

²⁹ See an interview with Foucault by Fernet-Betancourt et al (1987 [1984]: 127).

³⁰ Ibid: 116.

Such a post-structuralist argument, stressing the role of linguistic and/or cultural configurations, suggests a particular approach to studying subject formation. Working in this vein, scholars have studied how particular types of political subjects are created within power discourses. Examining Latvian political discourse, for example, Latvian-American sociologist Ieva Zake argues that the late 1990's political rhetoric singled out a masculine, nationalist subject as the valuable, empowered subject in the post-1991 state.³¹ While the masculine subject is empowered, women, as well as ethnic minorities (i.e. Russians) are excluded from this empowered definition of agency. Furthermore, politicians present themselves as the males who will maintain order in society, suggesting an authoritarian vision of state-citizen relationship. Sociologist Daina Eglītis shows how media and advertising discourses, both textual and visual, produce Latvians as consumers and as neo-liberal political subjects in charge of their own happiness. Just as they are free to construct their identities as they please by appropriating the symbolic values of material goods, social inequality and increasing stratification are legitimised and rendered 'normal' (2011).³²

Studies of discursive subjectivity construction, however, often do not engage with identities and subjectivities as constructed by the subjects themselves; as effects not only of power-knowledge constellations but as well of individual agency. The discursive approach has been critiqued in social science literature for not giving enough conceptual space to account for individual agency. Anthropologists have found post-structuralist theorisations of subjectivity as

³¹ In Zake's framing, "[p]olitical subjectivity" is an underlying conception about who qualifies as an empowered political subject, what kind of subjects (groups) embody and are entitled to political power, according to whose interests and needs are political goals defined and what features are considered crucial in achieving these aims' (2002: 631). She considers this 'empowered political subjectivity' as constructed by elite political discourses – in particular, 'texts issued by Latvian political parties' before the national election in 1998 (including political speeches, parliamentary debates, and political programmes).

³² Though neither Zake nor Eglitis work explicitly with the Foucauldian theory, their emphasis is nonetheless on the functioning of discourses. Zake frames her analysis in terms of dominant 'intertexts' (2002: 632) while Eglītis speaks of 'hegemonic discourses of class and stratification', as well as 'discourses of taste' and consumption, in the Gramscian sense (2011: 3-5).

‘too crude as tools to understand the delicate work of self-creation’ (Das 2007: 78) and even ‘dehumanising’ (Biehl et al 2007: 13). In a prominent volume on subjectivity, Joao Biehl et al argue that the post-structuralist emphasis on discourses and subjects produced through discursive regimes, ‘too often replaces studies of individual lives, diverse forms of intersubjectivity, and political consciousness and affects with studies of discourses and representations’ (2007: 13). They call for ‘developing more complex theories of the subject that are ethnographically grounded and that contemplate how individual singularity is retained and remade in local interactions’ (ibid: 14).³³

In this dissertation, I will explore political subjectivity as more than a truth effect, more than a discursive construction. While the concept of subjectivity is central to the Foucauldian analysis, it is a view of subjectivity as, ultimately, constituted through discourses, conceived within webs of power-knowledge, administered upon oneself according to an embodied regime of truth.³⁴ Recognising the importance of discourse studies, which have grown out of such post-structuralist framings, my goal is to go beyond the study of discourse and to consider neo-liberal personhood formation not only as a matter of technologies of governance but equally as a question that individuals seek answers to themselves. It is problematic to assume, I believe,

³³ The role of individual agency has been the key target of criticism that anthropologists have directed at the Foucauldian framework. A similar argument is made, e.g., by Begona Aretxaga when she calls for ‘complementing the Foucauldian interest in governmentality and political rationalities with attention to meanings and experiences that individuals have, while not reducing the inquiry to either of the two’ (Aretxaga 1997: 18, see also Navaro Yashin 2012: 22-23). My approach here is also informed by Michel De Certeau’s work on *secondary production of knowledge*. This term refers, for De Certeau, to the everyday practices of individuals of appropriating, adjusting, or rejecting the authoritative discourses. It means analysing the ‘ways of operating’ that ‘form the counterpart (...) of the mute processes that organise the establishment of socioeconomic order’ (De Certeau 1988: xiv).

³⁴ I am aware of the shifts in Foucault’s thinking and what are called the earlier and the later periods in his work, although it is beyond the scope of this thesis to engage with the scope and importance of these shifts in a substantive manner (on analyses of aspects of this shift, see e.g. Collier 2009). It is important to at least note here, however, that when Foucault reformulated his understanding of governmentality from a *triangle of sovereignty-discipline-government* to a coupling of *technologies of governance* and *technologies of self*, he arguably put more emphasis on the freedom of the acting subject to engage in creative ways with the dominant regimes of truth (1994b, 2008). Interestingly, Foucault himself argued, though, that he had not in fact radically changed his perspective on subjectivity formation (see e.g. 1987 [1984]: 122).

that either the political, or the market discourses are necessarily successful at producing the forms of personhood that they seek to construct. One's own relation to oneself is always more, and always more unstable, than the subject positions carved out by the power discourse.³⁵

Anthropological theories of subjectivity and state offer insights that are important to balance an interest in the workings of governmentality with sensitivity to historically and culturally situated forms of individual agency. Sherry Ortner, for example, points to a crucial difference between *subject positions*, constructed discursively, and *subjectivities* as 'complex structures of thought, feeling, and reflection, that make social beings always more than the occupants of particular positions and the holders of particular identities' (2006: 115). She proposes understanding subjectivity as 'a specifically cultural and historical consciousness' (2006: 110), *both* 'the ensemble of modes of perception, affect, thought, desire, and fear that animate acting subjects ... as well [as] the cultural and social formations that shape, organise, and provoke those modes of affect, thought, and so on' (ibid: 107). Ortner's work poses questions about the kinds of consciousness that particular cultural forms produce and argues for giving weight to subjective states and feelings, like pain, fear, or desire (ibid: 116).

Reflecting on Clifford Geertz's analysis of Balinese personhood, Ortner notes a particularly reflexive quality of the individual subject. She writes:

'Cultural forms – discourses, practices – produce a certain kind of cultural mind-set
[...] and at the same time create a set of anxieties about the ability to carry it off. The

³⁵ I draw here on Hansen and Stepputat's claim that, 'If subjected to an ethnographic gaze, a strict Foucauldian view of modern governance as the inexorable global spread and proliferation of certain discursive rationalities and certain technologies tends to crumble. These forms of governmentality do exist and their techniques and rationales do circulate, but they only affect practical policies or administrative practices in slow and often indirect ways: sometimes as justifications for new measures or norms, sometimes simply as a form of "scientific" diagnosis, but always in competition with older practices and other rationalities' (2001: 36-7). As this ethnography will show, there are often overlapping and competing rationalities, operating with differing state ideas and models of selfhood, present in interactions or individual narratives. It is particularly the case in post-socialist societies that new rationalities merge in unexpected ways with co-existing socialist and totalitarian institutional patterns and forms of governance.

subjectivity [in Geertz's analysis of the Balinese people] has a certain cultural shape, but also a way of inhabiting that shape which is reflexive and anxious concerning the possibilities of one's own failures' (2006: 117).

I find this conceptualisation of subjectivity particularly helpful for its ability to draw our attention to the ways in which subject-positions, carved out by regimes of truth, are *inhabited*.³⁶ Thus, this provides a means of maintaining focus on the intersection between technologies of governance and technologies of self (or, in other words, between regimes of truth and ethics of self-work), while employing subtle conceptual tools to explore the gap between the subject positions carved out by power discourses and the ways individuals inhabit these positions. This means studying ways of appropriating and remoulding political identity structures. Political subjectivities are being formed and reconfigured as individuals engage with and interrogate political rationalities, maintaining, re-interpreting, or rejecting the systems of intelligibility and ontologies that they prescribe.

In a related way, Veena Das has pointed to 'the gap between a norm and its actualisation' (2007: 63). In her study of post-Partition India, Das observes that 'the discursive formations through which the nation-state was inaugurated attributed a particular type of subjectivity to women as victims of rape and abduction. Yet women's own formation of their subject positions, though mired in these constructions, was not completely determined by them' (2007: 59). If we recognise, with Das, that 'the formation of the subject [as] a complex agency made up of divided and fractured subject positions' (2007: 77), it becomes harder to think of subjectivity shifts in linear terms as either directed by state power or solely as the outcome of

³⁶ As Ortner has noted, there is a reflexivity to this process of inhabiting cultural forms of personhood: 'Every culture, every subculture, every historical moment, constructs its own forms of agency, its own modes of enacting the process of reflecting on the self and the world and of acting simultaneously within and upon what one finds there' (2006: 57).

individual agency. It becomes rather a matter of exploring the kind of *ordinary ethics*³⁷ that may sustain the radical reconfiguration of the state power that Latvia has experienced over the past two decades.

Building on these mutually complementary vocabularies that I have outlined above, I will read the active labour market programmes as a governmental technology, underpinned by a neo-liberal political rationality that seeks to (in)form the technologies of self that sustain this rationality at the level of everyday conduct. My analysis will also, however, home in on this ‘gap between a norm and its actualisation’ that Das highlights and show how it often becomes problematised. On the one hand, this gap can become a subject of ‘epistemological and political anxiety’,³⁸ as those agents of power who are formally in charge of nurturing new forms of disposition and modes of consciousness are concerned with lingering, ‘out-dated’ subjectivities. On the other hand, shifting the perspective from the rulers to the subjects of governance allows the analysis to expand beyond the epistemic dimension to consider the socio-historically constituted anxieties that shape and describe one’s sense of self. Such a reading directs our attention not only to the ways in which such state-sponsored welfare-workfare programmes seek to constitute individuals as particular types of subjects but also to the kinds of imagination of (state) power that individuals invoke. The following chapters will illuminate the kinds of anxieties and desires that are a key element of the structure of feeling

³⁷ In my use of the term ‘ordinary ethics’ throughout this dissertation, I will draw on Veena Das’ work. For example, she writes about ‘self-creation on the register of the everyday [as] a careful putting together of life – a concrete engagement with the tasks of remaking that is mindful of both terms of the compound expression: everyday and life. It points to the eventfulness of the everyday and the attempt to forge oneself into an ethical subject within this scene of the ordinary’ (2007: 218). As Michael Lambek explains in a recent volume on ordinary ethics, ‘the “ordinary” implies an ethics that is relatively tacit, grounded in agreement rather than rule, in practice rather than knowledge or belief, and happening without calling undo attention to itself’ (Lambek 2010: 2).

³⁸ This is a phrase that Ann Laura Stoler uses in her study of the Dutch colonial archives (2009: 20). She treats the archives as ‘condensed sites’ of such anxieties, characterising the colonial political rationality and referring to the conditions and hierarchies of knowledge.

that underpins post-Soviet subjectivities.³⁹ As we will see, the seminar rooms at the unemployment office are spaces where certain affects and emotions are being summoned whilst others become a matter of governmental intervention. I will consider how the anxieties of those in charge (in this case policy makers, civil servants and trainers) align with the anxieties of their ‘clients’ to produce a context within which certain political rationalities resonate.

To probe the structure of feeling underpinning the post-Soviet Latvian reform process, I also borrow conceptual tools from another study of ‘post’, namely that of post-colonialism. Such a bridging of these two ‘posts’ is helpful here because the anxieties regarding favourable and unfavourable forms of personhood are not idiosyncratic; rather, they are historically and geo-politically constituted – formed in relation to the ‘global hierarchies of value’ that situate the East vis-à-vis the West (Herzfeld 2003, 2005). Sharad Chari and Katherine Verdery (2009) recently made a prominent call for ‘thinking between the two posts’ – post-socialism and post-colonialism. They gave a number of strong reasons for doing so⁴⁰ but I find an aside remark they made especially pertinent. Both post-socialism and post-colonialism as social realities, they write, are joined by a desire to ‘become something other than socialist or other than colonised’ (Chari and Verdery 2009: 11).

³⁹ Sherry Ortner has drawn in particular on Clifford Geertz’s work to explore how the reflexive inhabiting of subject positions is often ridden with anxieties. For Geertz, we learn, ‘anxieties of interpretation and orientation are seen as part of the generic human condition, grounded in the human dependency on symbolic orders to function within the world’ (Ortner 2006: 119). I will use the term ‘structure of feeling’, originally coined by Raymond Williams, in the sense that Ortner considers it as ‘subjectivity’ that is ‘form[ed] and deform[ed] by culture’ (see e.g. Ortner 2006: 120).

⁴⁰ Chari and Verdery identify ‘three areas in which thinking between the posts can be useful for ethnographic and historical analysis of societies in the shadows of empires, whether capitalist or socialist. First, at a general level, the relative specialisations of each offer complementary tools to rethink contemporary imperialism. Second, ... [w]e ask how Cold War representations of space and time have shaped knowledge and practice everywhere. Last, ... [w]e ask how a post-Cold War lens shapes a fresh critique of state racisms...’ (2009: 12).

Analysing post-Soviet Latvia itself as a post-colonial state, American anthropologist Kevin Platt claims that '[i]n sharp distinction from the "classic" postcolonial condition of India or Cote d'Ivoire, the "occupied" territories of Eastern Europe have no difficulty reclaiming their "native" identity and pursuing modernisation on a European model at one and the same time – because these two programmes are viewed as being the same' (2013: 137).⁴¹ Platt assumes here, however, that the return to Europe has been imagined by Latvians as an easy one, as a mission accomplished. It is exactly the problem, as this dissertation will show, that there is a sense of having been tainted, 'invaded by otherness' (Skultans 1998: 126) (see especially Chapter 4). The sense of having been tainted, and being in need of rectifying, is manifested in anxious reform politics at the unemployment office, as the following chapters will show. Where such transformations are conceived of in terms of 'modernisation' and/or 'Westernisation', anxieties of living up to the respective ideals of personhood are, I believe, of similar nature in post-colonial and post-socialist contexts.

Where the imagination of the state plays such a crucial role as it does in the post-socialist Latvian context, Achille Mbembe's words ring true that 'the dominant and the dominated [are inscribed] within the same *episteme*' (2001: 110).⁴² In his studies of the postcolony, Mbembe explores subtle forms of subjection, such as the intimate tyranny in one's relationship with the state. He shows how the 'post-colonial subject' is bound to the state

⁴¹ Platt is but one of a number of scholars who have recently turned to probing parallels between post-socialist and post-colonial contexts (e.g. Verdery 2002, Chioni Moore 2001, Chari and Verdery 2009, Gille 2010). In an edited volume on the Baltic post-colonialism (Kelertas 2006), authors from humanities and cultural studies disciplines argue that the Baltic States present a particularly apt case for exploring parallels between post-socialism and post-colonialism, given that they were occupied by the Soviet Union and lived under conditions of a foreign power for fifty years. The authors in this volume raise issues such as mimicry and effects of subjugation that go beyond economy and politics and reach into the psychological makeup and the cultural structure of the post-1991 Baltic societies (Račevskis 2006) and speak of the effects of the Soviet rule in the Baltics as 'a colonisation of the mind' (Jirgens 2006: 47).

⁴² As Mbembe seeks to conceptualise the relationship between 'the *commandement* and its "targets"' in Cameroon in a way that goes beyond domination-resistance model, he stresses: 'the emphasis should be upon the logic of "conviviality", on the dynamics of domesticity and familiarity, inscribing the dominant and the dominated within the same *episteme*' (2001: 110).

power in a myriad of ways, instead of just supporting or resisting it. An ‘intimate tyranny’ resides in these symbolic ties, linking ‘the rulers with the ruled’ (2001: 128). This dissertation will probe the kinds of intimate ties that bind together the post-Soviet subject with the post-totalitarian state. I will also examine how such bonds are imagined and talked about and how they become the subject of scrutiny and reform.

Ethnography of homecoming

Studying the kinds of intimate tyrannies and anxieties at play in the interactions between the state power and the self can be done particularly well from a perspective edged between two empires.⁴³ That has not only been Latvia’s geopolitical location for centuries but also applies to my own positionality as a researcher located at the edges of both East and West, formed in the meeting points, academic and otherwise, between Western and post-Soviet lifeworlds and discourses and in a constant process of negotiating and reconciling Western academic analyses of post-socialist neo-liberalisation as part of my own mental and embodied experiences of such processes.

When I travelled from London to Riga to undertake my study of the unemployment office⁴⁴ and speak to job seekers, I did not arrive as a stranger, eager to decode another culture.

⁴³ Referencing Chakrabarty, Platt argues that the marginal perspective granted by the Latvian case is one from which it is possible to provincialise Europe but also the master-categories of ‘colonial’ and ‘post-colonial’ themselves (2013: 128).

⁴⁴ I will mostly use the term ‘unemployment centre’ to refer to my fieldwork site, to stay close to the most common way of referring to the branch offices of the State Employment Agency in Latvian, ‘*bezdarbnieki*’ (in translation from Latvian it means literally ‘the unemployed’ in plural). Alternatively, I will use the term ‘job centre’. I will say ‘State Employment Agency’ when referring to the nation-wide institution rather than its specific branch in Riga. I am not using the term ‘welfare office’, common in similar ethnographies (e.g. Auyero 2012 and Dubois 2010), because in Latvia it is the Social Insurance Agency branch offices that handle and discharge social benefits – the usual understanding of the label ‘welfare office’.

Rather, it was an ethnography of a homecoming.⁴⁵ The questions this research poses and the ways in which it seeks for answers have grown out of reflections on my experiences of the Baltic Way and growing up in a society that defines itself through an idiom of change and reform. The research and reflection that this dissertation presents is thus built over a much longer timeframe than the months between September 2011 and April 2012 that I spent doing fieldwork in Riga. This familiarity and being intimately part of the world I study introduced its own challenges. The danger, as Les Back has pointed out, is to assume that, since I am a part of this culture, I already know what is at stake (2007: 159). Back writes that, in a successful case, ‘subjectivity becomes a means to try to shuttle across the boundary between the writer and those about whom s/he is writing. It is ... about ... common likenesses and, by extension, contrasts’ (ibid).

As an ethnography, this research was in fact enabled by this process of shifting back and forth between my own subjectivity and understanding and those of my research interlocutors. To begin with, I soon realised that there were, in fact, more differences between myself and my research interlocutors than our common cultural and national identity had initially led me to perceive. In the context of thousands of Latvians emigrating to find (better paid) jobs in the UK and Ireland, I was seen as one of those who ‘had left’, while they had ‘stayed’. Being of a younger age than most of the people I spoke to, I was representative of ‘the new generation’, who, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, were imagined as ‘untainted’ by the Soviet past. However, I also sought to take part in the everyday activities of my research subjects in order to share their experiences and to bridge these gaps. In so doing, I pursued a number of parallel channels of investigation.

⁴⁵ Many ethnographers have resided in similar spaces split between, or rather encompassing, familiarity and foreignness (e.g. Abu-Lughod 1991). Furthermore, it is one of the defining features of ethnography as a method to be part of the world one studies (Burawoy 2009: xiii).

Throughout the fieldwork months, I regularly took part in seminars organised as part of one specific policy programme to assist the unemployed that reached about a third of all officially registered job seekers in Latvia.⁴⁶ The programme, entitled ‘Competitiveness-Raising Activities’, consisted of one – to – four-day seminars on topics ranging from overcoming psychological barriers in the job-search process to writing business plans.⁴⁷ The seminars were run by psychologists, business coaches, and other outsourced experts. Besides participant observation of the seminars, I also conducted formal as well as informal interviews with people I met at the seminars. To situate welfare reforms historically and politically, I spoke to several former directors and other top-level civil servants of the Employment Agency, former and current policy makers at the Ministry of Welfare, welfare policy analysts, and a former minister of employment affairs. Last but not least, my interviews and observations at the unemployment office were contextualised by following debates in the public sphere (newspapers and TV), by conversing with my friends and acquaintances, but also by walking the streets, observing graffiti, and going to contemporary plays in Riga’s many great theatres.

A major part of the fieldwork consisted of *participant observations* of the ‘competitiveness-raising’ seminars for people out of work. This full participant observation strategy was, in fact, enabled by my research interlocutors. When arranging the formalities of my presence at the unemployment office, civil servants at the headquarters of the State Employment Agency recommended that I did not disclose my identity as a researcher but

⁴⁶ In addition to being participant at the seminars, I also spent two or three four-hour sessions every week during October and November 2011 observing the registration process at the Riga office. In the *waiting* room, sitting next to a registration agent, I observed the interactions around the initial document check and the handing out of queue numbers and listened to how people presented their circumstances and claims. In the *registration* room, my focus was on the scripted encounters between employment agents and their ‘clients’. These observations also gave an insight into the organisation of temporal and spatial practices at the job centre. In addition to my time at the Riga branch office, I occasionally visited the head office of the State Employment Agency where I spoke to staff members and assisted one of the civil servants responsible for the ‘Competitiveness-Raising Activities’ programme nation-wide with conducting the selection process for the trainers annual tender.

⁴⁷ More detailed data on this particular active labour market programme can be found in Chapter 3.

rather attend the ‘competitiveness-raising’ seminars as one of the job seekers. They were concerned that otherwise I would not obtain an accurate, undistorted insight. Appreciative of their advice but not wanting to ethically compromise the research project, I initially asked the seminar hosts for permission to sit quietly at the back of the room. However, when I first met Viktorija, one of the psychologists running the seminars, and approached her with the same request, she said she had no objection as long as I participated in all the activities as an equal member of the group. This meant revealing things about myself and interacting with the other group members in ways that I had not necessarily planned but that ultimately proved important for building a nuanced understanding not only of the policy implementation, but also of the ways this state-sponsored programme was interpreted by the people it targeted.

Participant observations of the seminars constitute a key part of my empirical data.⁴⁸ From October to April, I attended seminars almost every week, many weeks four or five days in a row. Over the course of the fieldwork, I sought to take part in a range of different seminars by different trainers, in order to become familiar with the variety of topics and training approaches they employed. Due to the large number of parallel seminars, however, I had to be selective, favouring the most popular trainings in terms of attendance numbers. Amongst the most widely attended were seminars offering psychological support and advice on starting one’s own business. I gained an overview of those seminars I could not attend by studying the written outlines that trainers had submitted to the head office of the Employment Agency for approval. There were four trainers with whom I developed closest contact as a result of

⁴⁸ I have studied various approach to ethnographic research to see how their authors ensure the rigour of ethnographic observation (Dubois 2010, Duneier and Carter 2001, Emerson et al. 1995, Katz 1997, Pachirat 2009, Wacquant 2003, Whyte 1955). Following interpretive approach to social analysis, validity and reliability of data are ensured not by sampling a representative pool of cases but by speaking from a particular place (Haraway 1991, Cerwonka and Malkki 2007) and layering evidence through thick description (Geertz 1973). My main method was to develop extensive field notes at the end of each day, based on ‘head notes’ or sketches made at suitable moments during the observation and informal conversations. In these field notes, I tried to reconstruct the observed events in a holistic manner and record the richness of the practices and interactions (Emerson et al. 1995).

attending numerous of their seminars and chatting afterwards. When returning to Riga in December 2013 for a stint of follow-up fieldwork, I met up with these four individuals again.

Ethnography is a particularly apt method for combining macro and micro perspectives.⁴⁹ In this ethnographic research, I am building an understanding of shifting political subjectivities through close knowledge of a specific policy programme and specific people and their stories. Yet, this study is not confined to the minutiae of its immediate context but aims to serve as a place from which to examine macro-level phenomena, such as the cultural and historical rooting of neo-liberal political rationalities. The research design of this dissertation encompasses an enquiry into the formation and implementation processes of a distinct political rationality as a micro-level problem, with its feet on the ground, its roots in intimate beliefs and affects. As said at the beginning, the unemployment office is one of a myriad of sites where such state-sponsored transformations have been manifesting themselves. As such, I am interested not only in its idiosyncrasies but also in the ways it represents and situated the anxieties and desires that span the post-Soviet Latvian social reality.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Many scholars have written on the role of ethnographic research in exploring the micro-macro links. As John and Jean Comaroff put it, '[t]he phenomena we observe may be grounded in everyday human activity; yet such activity, even when rural or peripheral, is always involved in the making of wider structures and social movements. Nor ought we to confine ourselves to history's outstations. Even macro-historical processes – the building of states, the making of revolutions, the extension of global capitalism – have their feet on the ground' (1992: 32-3). See also e.g. Burawoy on micro-foundations of macro-processes and vice versa (2009) and Hansen on studying a community as intertwining of local and supralocal structures and phenomena (2001: 13-14).

⁵⁰ This research project can be further defined by situating it vis-à-vis different genres of ethnography. As my interest was both in the encounters between 'the state' and 'the citizens' as well as in individual life experiences and narratives, I did *not* pursue this study as an *institutional ethnography* (e.g. Smith 2005). In the sense that my fieldwork examines several sets of actors (policy makers, bureaucrats/civil servants, ordinary citizens), rather than a single community, it has characteristics of a *relational ethnography* (e.g. Desmond 2014). A similar distinction can be made between an ethnography that focuses on "a bounded set of people" and one that takes *processes* as its major object of interest (Glaeser 2005: 17; Gluckman 1967). Furthermore, this research project has affinities with the recently emerging *political ethnography* genre, given that it investigates 'such "abstractions" as democracy, liberalism, or the state' from the perspective of 'individuals' lived experiences' and perceptions (Schatz 2009: 10, see also Mitchell 1991, De Volo and Schatz 2004, Auyero and Joseph 2007, Wedeen 2008).

My observations at the unemployment office demonstrate how certain political rationalities ‘have their feet on the ground’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992: 33) and how new political ontologies are also being generated at the policy implementation level. I built my analysis not only on the basis of what was said and done in that space but also how it worked through particular affects. The kind of prolonged, mundane presence that ethnography implies allowed me to think about the emotional effects of these state-sponsored spaces. How did it feel to be walking to the building where the unemployment office was located; what happened in the seminar rooms that sometimes made me feel exhausted and heavy while other times energized and inspired? If we consider ‘affect and the body as hermeneutic resources’ (Cerwonka 2007: 33), it becomes part of the investigation to reflect on the emotional effects of the events and interactions that one takes part in, during participant observations. Cerwonka argues that ‘the researcher’s body is a site for analytical insight’ and that ‘affect and the body’ provide ‘a way of tapping into another level of information about the subjects of our research’ (2007: 34, 36).⁵¹ As the empirical chapters will show, using my own affective reactions to reflect on the meanings of certain practices, helped me to re-assess my observations and allowed me to see my informants’ experiences in a more empathetic way.

Life stories and stories about life

Of the many people that I met at the seminars, five individuals became important informants whom I would meet and chat with regularly throughout the fieldwork year. Others agreed to one or two interviews. Overall, I recorded one to five interviews with twenty-four different unemployed people and conducted forty-six recorded interviews in total. Methodologically, I had planned this part of my fieldwork as a combination of narrative

⁵¹ Yael Navaro-Yashin similarly emphasises the analytic insights that our own embodied experience of our fieldwork sites can yield (see e.g. Navaro-Yashin 2012: 132).

interviews (Bauer 1996) and ethnographic interviews (Heyl 2001). Apart from informal interactions with job seekers at the seminars, I planned to approach them with an invitation to share their life story with me. As Michael Taussig states, ‘people delineate their world, including its large as well as its micro-scale politics, in stories and story-like creations’ (1984: 467-97). The life-story method is discussed in sociological literature as a research instrument that allows researchers to elicit a personal account without use of leading or premeditated questions (Bauer 1996, Cortazzi 2001). The researcher’s subjectivity, the proponents of the method suggest, does not interfere with the research subjects’ accounts, as the stories are supposedly independent of the ‘asker’/ ‘listener’. They have their own internal logic, starting at the beginning and ending at the end of the event being narrated. If this event is one’s life, it may be a particularly long story but it similarly carries itself forward, as it were. By being asked to share one’s life story, the individual is in essence invited to piece together the events of her life in such a way as to make a coherent story. As such, they function as key instruments for meaning making, or, as Mark Bevir put it, ‘[n]arratives ... explicate actions in relation to the webs of beliefs of the actors’ (2006: 287).⁵² In asking people to tell me their life story, I was inviting them to engage in a sense-making process. It would be less a reconstruction of the past and more an account of the meanings they assigned to events in their life. The recorded life stories would then give me texts ready-made for sociological analysis. I was interested in the ways people constructed agency in the narrative and what socio-political landscape these individual stories would be embedded within.

People did not lend themselves easily to such pre-planned research, however. Their stories rarely unfolded in a linear manner. Unlike the ‘ethnographic expeditions’ by folkloric researchers who travelled to remote Latvian villages and listened to the life stories of village

⁵² See also Passerini 1987, Bruner 1987, Franzosi 1998.

elders, our conversations took place mostly in cafés and teahouses in the centre of the capital.⁵³ Asking a middle-aged person living in Riga to tell me their life-story was rightly seen as an uncommon request and in a number of cases people recounted some landmark events in their lives in a rather fast-paced, factual manner.⁵⁴ Others were more eager to be helpful and gave diligent accounts of their career progression and what they regarded as key formative experiences. However, getting to know these people and the stories of their lives was something enhanced by later, more casual, conversations. As Veena Das reflects in her book *Life and Words* (2007), our knowledge about our informants' lives is often pieced together from fragments, narrated 'here and there' (Das 2007: 65). Even more, Das argues that it is only possible to derive meaning from their words by placing them in context. As she puts it, '[t]he introduction of the subject as the maker of this speech necessitates an introduction of context, not only linguistic context but also lifeworld as context' (2007: 65). My understanding of my informants' experiences and attitudes is an outcome of our interactions during our one-on-one conversations and during the group interactions at the seminars. These are strings of longer and shorter stories about the past, reflections on the present, and musings about the future.

There are a number of studies of post-socialist societies that have taken narratives as their analytical focus. The authors of these studies emphasise that narratives possess some sort of common 'logic' (Zigon 2010: 239), or share a 'cultural grammar' (Skultans 1998) and

⁵³ The Oral History Project at the University of Latvia has embarked upon a comprehensive collection of life-stories, approaching their analysis mostly from the perspective of folklore and memory studies (see e.g. Bela 2010, Garda-Rozenberga and Zirnīte 2011).

⁵⁴ As the entry point was an institution, it defined the relationships I formed in a particular way. Scholars have noted before that it matters whether an informant is approached at workplace or another institution or in a private setting (Shevchenko 2009). Especially this is the case in Latvia where the private sphere of the home and household is clearly separated from the semi-public workplace or public state institution spheres. Being familiar with Latvian customs and general reservedness with people who are not part of one's closest circle of friends, I did not seek to invite myself to their homes. We sometimes stayed beyond to talk in a seminar room after everybody else had left. Other times, I offered my respondents a cup of coffee or tea at a nearby café but there were times when these meetings took me to an abandoned casino at 11am, a McDonalds restaurant at a gas station, some former workplaces of my informants or, in some cases, their small apartments in the suburbs of the city.

‘durable narrative conventions’ (Ries 1997: 4).⁵⁵ By identifying such structures in people’s stories, they reveal the inter-linkages between individual subject-positions and the socio-political contexts in which they are embedded. However, as my fieldwork highlighted, individual stories were often fragmented and contradictory, much more messy than notions such as ‘logic’ or ‘grammar’ would suggest. Often different positions co-existed in one person’s story, suggesting a seemingly incongruous logic, as when a person would lament the negligent state and then insist on one’s own full responsibility for one’s well-being. Such co-existence of ‘multiple perspectives and voices’ within a person’s narrative has been called in scholarly literature ‘heteroglossia’ (Smith 2004: 254).⁵⁶

Our conversations usually started about the seminars that we had attended together and extended into wherever my interlocutors chose to take them. While I usually had prepared a list of topics before each recorded conversation, I referred to the list only occasionally so as not to break the flow of the conversation. As the timing of the fieldwork coincided with the aftermath of the economic crisis, I was eager to talk about people’s experiences of the crisis and the austerity politics. At the time, demonstrations and even violent protests were inflaming the capitals in Southern Europe. The cuts had been even more drastic in Latvia than in Greece or

⁵⁵ In her well-known book *Russian Talk*, Nancy Ries treats ‘Russian discourses as a crucial field for the production and negotiation of cultural meanings and value, arguing that language is a primary facilitator of both hegemonic authority and resistance to it’ (1997: 19-20). Vieda Skultans’s study (1998), drawing on narratives collected around the time of the Soviet Union’s collapse, shows a narrative structure common to individually unique narratives that she calls ‘a cultural grammar’ characterising the historically specific ways of experiencing and interpreting the social reality and oneself as a political subject. Jarret Zigon’s (2010) analysis of post-Soviet morality focuses on life stories and narratives of five Muscovites, studying ‘the ways in which moral worlds are expressed through narratives of personal experience and articulated belief’ (2010: 19). He argues that accounts of ‘personal experiences’ represent a common ‘narrative logic’, revealing ‘the various ways in which individual persons have had to confront the unique experience of living through an historical moment of radical social and cultural change and, in so doing, remake themselves into new post-Soviet persons’ (ibid: 239). On narrative approaches to a study of post-socialist transformations, see also Leinarte’s work on women’s life-stories in Lithuania (2010).

⁵⁶ Smith draws in her discussion on Michael Bakhtin, who ‘argued that because each individual utterance responds to preceding utterances, speech becomes poly-phonetic. No matter how monological at first glance, each utterance in some ways is a response to what has already been stated, and thus any utterance is filled with other voices or discourses, with the “half-concealed . . . words of others” (Bakhtin 1986:92-93)’ (Smith 2004: 252). I thank Ger Duijzings for bringing Smith’s article to my attention.

Spain. However, many of the people I spoke to appeared quite uninterested to discuss the crisis or the government's handling of it, even though many of them had lost their jobs as a direct outcome of one or the other. Few attempted to place their experiences in the context of the post-socialist transformations more generally.

'The state' figured in our conversations, though in ways that were more ambivalent and disguised, than the kinds of critiques I had first expected to hear. The category of 'the state' both dissolved and reappeared during the fieldwork at different moments. I learned to pay attention to the kinds of 'imaginations of the state' (Hansen and Stepputat 2001: 18) and 'state ideas' (Abrams 1988 [1977]) that were implied in remarks and comments.⁵⁷ As I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 4, there was embarrassment about certain ways of imagining and understanding the state and such anxieties propelled the institution of new state ideas at the 'competitiveness-raising' seminars.

When discussing the reasons for losing one's job, or for the difficulties with finding a new one, many of the people I spoke to emphasised their own responsibility for it or even insisted on the benefits of their situation. It was one of the challenges of the fieldwork, to engage with such viewpoints and look for ways of understanding them, rather than dismiss them as 'false consciousness'. Les Back writes about sociology as 'an art of listening' (2007). Such listening is 'a form of attention to be cultivated' by being interested in the other person's point of view and ready to recognize it as valid and worthy of respect (2014). Over the course of the fieldwork, I learned to pay attention to what my informants found worth expending

⁵⁷ Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat write that the imagination of the state 'as a form of "social fantasy" circulating among citizens and communities' structures everyday experiences and actions of individuals (2001: 18). Similarly, Begona Aretxaga (2003) offers the notion of 'state form', echoing Balibar's 'nation form', to highlight the significance of fantasy in the political: 'the state' is a frame that is always to be filled with meaning, with ideas and ideologies. What ought to be the object of investigation, Aretxaga argues, is the content of this imagination. Other sources in the recently emerging field of anthropology of the state, that espouse similar ideas, include Trouillot (2001), Navaro-Yashin (2002, 2012), Sharma and Gupta (2006), Spenser (2007), Chalfin (2010).

energy on during their difficult situation, extending the conversations beyond work and politics into the domains of mysticism, esoteric literature, and alternative forms of healing and belief.

One of the hardest parts of the fieldwork was finding that an interpretation I had built was in conflict with how my research interlocutors themselves described their situations (I write more on this in Chapters 6 and 7). But perhaps this is exactly the way that ethnographic research can lead to an improved theory. Michael Burawoy insists that the point is not to abandon theory to avoid being wrong but rather to embrace the process of coming equipped with a particular theoretical lens and then finding out where it does not fit.⁵⁸ Burawoy's words strike a chord:

‘Analytical theory enables us to see and thus comprehend the world, but that does not imply automatic confirmation. To the contrary, the world has an obduracy of its own, continually challenging the causal claims and predictions we make as social scientists on the basis of our theories. That is how we develop science, not by being right but by being wrong and obsessing about it.’ (Burawoy 2009: xiv)

Doing ethnographic fieldwork made me face the sense of being wrong nearly every day of the eight-month period. The chapters of this dissertation reveal the exercises in making sense of the accounts and observations I collected during the fieldwork vis-à-vis theories on neo-liberalism and subjectivity. They are a reflection of developing theory through ‘obsessing’ about being wrong, to use Burawoy's words.

⁵⁸ Reconstructing or improving a theory is one of the principles of Burawoy's extended case method. He defines this method though ‘four extensions: the extension of observer into the lives of participants under study, the extension of observations over time and space; the extension from micro-processes to macro-forces; and, finally and most importantly, the extension of theory’ (2009: xv). Burawoy argues: ‘Rather than seek to repress [theoretical preconceptions] as bias, we turn it into a resource for constructing the linkage of micro and macro.’ This is the case because ‘[t]he vitality of a theoretical tradition depends upon continually being put to the test and then meeting it with ingenious strategies of survival’ (2009: 9).

The dissertation outline

Having introduced the questions and concepts guiding this research, I will now finally briefly outline the structure of the dissertation. The rationality of contemporary neo-liberal welfare policies, as well as the ways individuals engage with them, can only be understood by situating them in historical context. In my next chapter, I therefore position the post-1991 socio-economic and political reform designs as policy makers' response to the framing of the socialist past. This past was framed as having bred 'learned helplessness' amongst individuals. I will argue that welfare policies served part of a wider ambition to undo the bonds imagined to be tying the post-Soviet subject closely to the state. Drawing upon my ethnographic observations at Riga's unemployment office, I then demonstrate in Chapter 3 how this preoccupation with 'learned helplessness' as a Soviet heritage is manifested at the policy implementation level. Ethnographic vignettes from the 'competitiveness-raising' seminars give the reader a glimpse into these state-sponsored spaces and the mundane reform tactics that trainers employ there. But this intimate focus also reveals a peculiar paradox at the heart of neo-liberal biopolitics. Alongside the trainers' rhetoric around virtues of entrepreneurship, activity, and speed, the state welfare programmes simultaneously perpetuate passivity and waiting by keeping many vulnerable citizens in a state of limbo. By reflecting on the meanings and symbolisms of 'activity' and 'waiting' in post-Soviet Latvia, I consider the sociological dimensions of this dichotomy.

Continuing the exploration of the imagined ties between the state and the citizen, Chapter 4 highlights how these ties are talked about and experienced by my unemployed informants. With the help of ethnographic data, I explore how anxieties surrounding the risk of being exposed as a Soviet man or woman come to play a role in the 'competitiveness-raising' seminars. With a broader brush, this chapter offers a reflection on the ways in which these anxieties manifest themselves in Latvian culture. Moving between ethnographic observations

and my informants' stories, I discuss the metaphor of 'eurorenovation', the fluid role that the Russian language and Soviet popular culture plays in Latvia, and the functioning of categories like 'abroad' vs. 'here' and 'old' vs. 'new' in the narratives of job seekers and trainers.

Policy implementation is not necessarily a process regulated in a 'top-down' manner, as Chapter 5 attests. Being able to observe the actual day-to-day functioning of one particular active labour market programme afforded me perspective on the plurality of voices that constitute such a space, as well as the contradictions and the paradoxes that characterise this space. The trainers – private entrepreneurs who are hired by the state through annual contracts to teach the unemployed 'competitiveness' – are given a free reign. Drawing on conversations with four trainers, I probe into the ways they have come to construct the neo-liberal scripts of the seminars. Distinctions that the trainers create amongst their audiences are examined here. In particular, I argue that their categorisation of their 'clients' into 'willing' and 'unwilling' subjects can be mapped onto class differences. Those who have not submitted themselves to 'waiting' and who are 'willing to work on themselves' to become more valuable subjects are the precarious post-Soviet middle classes.

The ways in which neo-liberal subjectification has become aligned with a forming of new ways of relating to oneself, others, and the state in a post-socialist, post-totalitarian society are the subject of my sixth chapter. I share with the readers the life story of Īrisa, one of the people with whom I had the longest conversations during my fieldwork year in Riga. Īrisa's enthusiastic embrace of the individualising ethos of the seminars and the 'work on self' comes into sharp relief when considered in the context of her life story. Other informants' voices echo Īrisa's sentiment and show that it is far from unique. I also bring my own voice into dialogue with theirs, exploring through our different understandings how what is commonly interpreted as neo-liberal subjectification becomes an empowering process for the subjects themselves. To pursue this point further, I return to the seminar rooms to broaden the analytical perspective

and observe how the group activities come to be empowering and meaningful. The purpose of Chapter 6 is to demonstrate how these ordinary Latvians engage with questions of making life ‘livable’ and ‘knowing how to live well’.

The conclusions I have reached at the end of this journey are shared in Chapter 7. Returning to the Baltic Way, where I started this account, I reflect on the idea of freedom and the role it has played in the process of reconfiguring political subjectivities in line with neo-liberal scripts. This is a place also to reflect on how my analysis bears on ways of theorising neo-liberalism as a form of biopolitics. I argue that the Latvian experience is one where the neo-liberalisation process has worked in an *inverted* way. It has been sustained by the narrative of freedom, as much as fed by global reform knowledge. Therefore, we need to consider more carefully, when observing the spread of neo-liberal logics across the world, what forms of ordinary ethics underpin and sustain this global process.

Chapter 2 Regimes of labour, regimes of need



Figure 2. 'WHERE IS YOUR RESPONSIBILITY?' Graffiti on the pavement outside the Department of Welfare of the Riga Municipality. Photo by author.

It was March 2012 and the first faint signs of spring were in the air. I had spent a long winter attending the 'competitiveness-raising' seminars at the Riga unemployment office and speaking to people out of work. As my fieldwork was nearing its final months, I was extending my inquiry by interviewing senior policy makers, civil servants, and politicians who had been involved in post-1991 welfare system restructuring. My usual route to the unemployment office was now complemented with strolls through the Old Town, where most of the government ministries were located. On this particular occasion, I was sitting in the large and pleasantly furnished office of a senior civil servant at the Ministry of Welfare. She had been recommended to me as one of the most experienced policy makers in the social security and welfare sector. Having started her career at the Social Provision Ministry during the Soviet period, she then moved to the newly established Ministry of Welfare of the independent Latvia

and has been a part of many reform projects implemented jointly with the World Bank, the European Commission, and numerous Western states to revamp the Latvian welfare system. When I asked how the social assistance system reform was conceived in the early 1990s, her response came in one word. ‘Spring time!’ [*Pavasaris!*] she said with a smile and inhaled the air through her nostrils. The difficult task of completely redesigning legal and policy frameworks for social assistance, employment, and pensions was tackled with great enthusiasm, as this civil servant explained, because it was imagined as awakening from a long socialist winter.

This chapter is based on a premise that an account of contemporary socio-political reality must be an historical one. To understand political subjectivity reconfigurations in today’s Latvia, we must look back first at the state socialism as a political system and a mode of life. This is not only because political consciousness is historically rooted but primarily because today’s political and economic decisions in Latvia are often framed as solutions to diagnoses of ‘illnesses’ contracted in the era before the return to ‘normality’ in 1991. This chapter will situate the neo-liberal reforms of the 1990s and 2000s historically and identify them as attempts to rectify the effects of Soviet biopolitics in Latvia. I will first delineate the bonds that tied the citizen to the state in the Soviet period and then show how these bonds became a target of reform in the post-1991 period. As I will argue in this chapter, we can read the post-Soviet neo-liberalisation process as directed at the reconfiguration of the two pillars of the Soviet biopolitics, namely *labour* and *need*. Therefore, events and interactions at the unemployment office in the winter of 2011, as I will address in the subsequent chapters, can be understood only against the backdrop of the specific post-1991 state project where the nationalist narrative of freedom has aligned with neo-liberal political rationality.

*The Soviet biopolitics of labour and need*⁵⁹

What was celebrated in 1945 as the end of a terrible war in Western Europe and Soviet Russia meant the beginning of an almost 50-year long occupation for Latvia. An independent Latvian state had existed from 1918 until the Soviet army entered its territory in 1940. In 1922, a liberal democratic constitution had been adopted, with respect to minority rights and democratic pluralism governing public life. In 1934, the Prime Minister Kārlis Ulmanis staged a coup and established an authoritarian regime, promoting Latvianness and state-led economy. On June 17th 1940 the Soviet government issued an ultimatum to the Latvian government and its army gathered by the Latvian border. Ulmanis, fearing bloodshed and hoping to negotiate a peaceful solution, announced to the Latvian people on the radio, ‘Stay in your places, I will stay in mine’. Effectively this meant the loss of political independence. By June 17th, 1940 the Soviet tanks were already in Riga; a puppet government was established and new parliamentary elections were organised, though there was only one party – the Communist Party – that was allowed to participate in the elections. Sovietisation of the economy started immediately, with 800 of largest industrial enterprises nationalised within the first month of the Soviet occupation, soon to be followed by all other commercial enterprises, as well as larger houses and apartments and sizable plots of land. The first wave of deportations followed in June 1941. Local political and economic elites, over 14,000 people in total, were sent in cattle wagons to Siberian labour camps. Following Nazi Germany’s attack on the Soviet Union in 1941, German forces entered Latvian territory in mid-1941 and remained until 1945. However, when the Soviet Union and Western Allies defeated Hitler’s forces in 1945, the Soviet reign was re-established in Latvia and was there to stay.

⁵⁹ The historical data on Soviet Latvian economic and political reality in this section are from the following historians’ accounts: Dreifelds (1996), Pabriks and Purs (2001), Purs (2012).

The Soviet state defined its population in terms of two key categories: as a ‘collection of individuals as labour power and subjects of need’ (Collier 2011: 67). The first of these categories, labour power, was initially mobilised through mass collectivisation. To advance the collectivisation process, Stalin ordered the liquidation of farm owners and intelligentsia in Latvia in the 1940s – this was a repeat of the same brutal process that he had already administered elsewhere in the Soviet Union in the 1930s. Deportations of ‘kulaks’ (wealthy peasants) took place in 1949, with approximately 44,000 people sent to Siberia. It amounted to one tenth of the rural population of Latvia. There was resistance directly following the Soviet occupation, as many Latvians took part in guerrilla warfare. However, while these partisan activities somewhat delayed the collectivisation process, they were largely defeated by the mid-1950s. As Pabriks and Purs report, ‘[b]y 1952, 98 per cent of Latvian farmers lived and worked on collective farms’ (2001: 32). Along with the creation of kolkhozs, the Latvian economy was integrated into the Soviet economy through collective planning and rapid industrialisation. While previously the majority of the workforce was employed in agriculture and only a fraction in industry, this proportion was gradually reversed.⁶⁰ Latvia became one of the most industrialised economies in the USSR, with its industrial production in 1970, 4.7 times higher than in 1955. Its per capita income exceeded the Soviet average by 42 per cent and it was seen, along with the other Baltic republics, as ‘our West’ in the rest of the Union.⁶¹

This heavy industrialisation meant there was often a shortage of workers in factories. In the first decade of the Soviet regime in Latvia, 535,000 workers were settled in Latvia from other Soviet republics. As a result, almost half of all the industrial workers were immigrants

⁶⁰ While in 1935, 65 per cent of Latvians worked in agriculture or forestry, this share had dropped to 16 per cent in 1985. Meanwhile, the proportion of Latvia’s inhabitants employed in industry rose from 17 per cent in 1935 to 42 per cent by 1972 (Pabriks and Purs 2001: 37).

⁶¹ Riga in particular had become an industrial centre: ‘By the end of the 1970s, 52 per cent of all industrial labour in the republic was employed in Riga industries, which accounted for 52.6 per cent of Latvia’s industrial production’ (Plakans 1995: 165).

from other Soviet republics. In the long term, the effect of this continuous influx was to reduce the majority share of ethnic Latvians in the country from 77% in 1935 to 52% in 1989. Therefore, as part of the ‘national communist’ movement in the 1950s, some high-ranking Party officials in Latvia raised concerns to the top echelons in Moscow that Latvians were becoming a minority in their own land. This movement, seeking to stop the influx of immigrants and to gain more say in the republic’s affairs, was crushed by Khrushchev in 1959.

The industrialisation process was accompanied and bolstered by the ideology of the proletariat rule and sanctity of labour. As the Soviet Constitution declared, ‘Work in the USSR is a matter of duty and honour for each citizen who is able to work, according to the principle: “who does not work, does not eat”’ (cited in Aidukaite 2003: 409). It was out of this context that economic activity and productivity emerged as the key bases for entitlement in the Soviet system. Posters and sculpture had been representing idealised worker figures since the Bolshevik revolution in 1917 (Bonnell 1997: 8). Billboards in town and village centres across the Union displayed photographs of ‘the district’s best workers’ (Yurchak 2006: 54-55). Labour was also ‘the privileged site of socialist transformation’ (Lampland 1995: 1). As a Soviet source announced, ‘in the factory, in the *kollektiv*, each of us becomes a man in the best sense of the word – a Soviet man’ (quoted in Kharkhordin 1999: 86-7). As one of the ‘friendly nations’ constituting the USSR, Latvia was now also incorporated in this ideological apparatus. Thus, a Latvian newspaper read in 1948, ‘Work – the organisational principle of our lives, the creator of our today and our tomorrow. Only through work can we construct values that will enable our country to develop in to an unconquerable socialist fortress’ (quoted in Eglitis 2011: 436).

Along with labour, need was the other key category through which the Soviet state conceived of its population (Collier 2011: 83). A comprehensive range of social security measures were introduced. In Latvia and the other two Baltic states where, prior to the Soviet

system, only limited social security provisions were in place, the Soviet reality meant that gradually ‘social security became universal and available to every worker and employee’ (Aidukaite 2003: 409). Practically, the welfare system was organised by linking mandatory employment to the social security system. Work itself in socialism was ‘constituted as a basic social need; it was both a right and an obligation’ (Haney 2002: 31). There was high job security and officially no unemployment, although low levels of some forms of unemployment did exist (Cook 1993: 26-8).⁶² Trade unions administered social service provision and distribution of benefits. Work was measured in ‘working seniority’ (*stāžs* in Latvian), counting the years of service in the eyes of the state. Because the Party legitimised its monopoly on power through welfare provisions, it also claimed monopoly on, not only fulfilling population’s needs, but also defining them in the first place. In Katherine Verdery’s words, ‘[The Party] acted like a father who gives hand-outs to the children as he sees fit. The Benevolent Father Party educated people to express needs it would then fill, and discouraged them from taking the initiative that would enable them to fill these needs on their own’ (1995: 25). Some scholars have therefore labelled it ‘*authoritarian welfare state*’, as distinct from Western welfare state models.⁶³

The comprehensive welfare provision was an important factor in maintaining the legitimacy of the Soviet regime in the eyes of its population.⁶⁴ As Pabriks and Purs explain,

⁶² As the Soviet economy was commonly shortage-ridden and inefficient, the standard of the social service provision was not very high. Nonetheless, social inequality did decrease in the Soviet Union (Myant and Drahokoupil 2011).

⁶³ Jolanta Aidukaite offers this label as denoting a distinct category in addition to the Western welfare state models identified by Esping-Andersen (Aidukaite 2003: 410). Linda Cook (1993: 81) also invokes the term in her discussion of the Soviet welfare policies.

⁶⁴ As Stephen Collier observes, ‘Apartment blocks, infrastructures, and social services were pillars of the late Soviet regime that George Breslauer (1978) called “welfare state authoritarianism”, to designate a situation in which it was the Soviet system of social welfare, rather than the terror or socialist ideology, that lent durability and legitimacy to a rapidly calcifying authoritarian system’ (Collier 2011: 106). In scholarship on welfare states, this model is called the social contract thesis – namely, that social security was exchanged for political compliance (Cook 1993). This thesis explains the paradox that, on the one hand, the Soviet workers were not allowed to organise themselves independently to defend their rights

‘[o]n the one hand, ordinary Latvians knew that they were not free to express themselves in certain ways, but their daily toil was rewarded with education, health care and entertainment’ (2001: 39-40). Also Dreifelds suggests that the redistributive apparatus was instrumental (in his view intentionally so) to maintain legitimacy of the regime. He argues that ‘[t]o maintain the loyalty of their workers under conditions of tremendous labour deficit they [government institutions] became involved in very extensive side-lines which specialized in building and maintaining apartments, providing scarce retail merchandise, organizing kindergartens, children’s camps, old age homes, garden plots, cottage lots and vacation resorts’ (1996: 111). Indeed, there was very little *overt* resistance to the Soviet regime in Latvia, once the early resistance to collectivisation had been quelled. The authoritarian welfare state system, along with the surveillance apparatus, ensured general compliance with the system up until the mid-1980s.

Totalitarian subjectivities

What were the reasons for this lack of resistance? Does it suggest that the totalitarian project of producing the Soviet man was successful in Latvia? Historian Juris Dreifelds claims that ‘Latvia was an unwilling member of the USSR for almost half a century, but regardless of the undesired nature of this relationship, Latvian society was profoundly affected and moulded by the soviet system’ (1996: 10). However, while such an observation passes for common sense, there is little academic research on the effects of the Soviet regime on Latvian political

but, on the other hand, they ‘seem to have gotten from post-war regimes major policy goods – full and secure employment, rising real incomes, and socialised human services – which have remained inaccessible to the best-organised labour movements in the industrialised world’ (Cook 1993: 1). Other political sociologists have argued that the reasons for workers acquiescence are not to do with their finding the system legitimate but rather fear of oppression (control rather than consent) (Zaslavsky and Walder respectively in Cook 1993: 11).

subjectivities.⁶⁵ To return to the Baltic Way, where I began this dissertation, Lithuanian dance scholar Gediminas Karoblis (2011) has suggested counter-intuitively that this kind of mass performance of aligned bodies was possible because the Soviet totalitarian state had trained its subjects in mass choreography. The Communist Party supported folk dancing in Latvia as a benign form of ethnic nationalism. In 1948, at the start of the Soviet occupation, dance festivals, where thousands of performers from across the country performed together on vast stadiums, were added to the programme of the traditional Latvian song festivals.⁶⁶ This reading of the Baltic Way as a manifestation of democratic will, in a totalitarian form, points to the subtle articulations of embodied totalitarianism.

It has been commonplace in sociological and anthropological literature on socialism to speak of socialist political subjectivity as ‘bipolar’ or ‘split’ (Verdery 1996: 94). One’s ‘true’ self, this argument goes, could only be expressed in private, in conversations around the proverbial kitchen table, while in public, one would always have to wear a mask, pretending to be a loyal subject of the oppressive state. However, such a dichotomous reading of the socialist subjectivity needs to be approached with caution. Alexei Yurchak argues that such binary models of state socialism are inadequate for providing a nuanced understanding of how individuals experienced the Soviet reality. Yurchak claims in his book *Everything Was Forever*

⁶⁵ Sociological research on the socialist period in Latvian history is scarce. During the Soviet period, sociology in Latvia took a mostly applied form, researching such areas as ‘professional aspects of education, cultural issues, and the relationship of production to a specific branch of the economy or even a specific company’ (Tabuns 2010, see also Tisenkopfs 2008). In the post-Soviet period, the socialist years have been of interest to some historians while few sociological or anthropological studies of the period exist. There are some exceptions, like studies of everyday life during the Stalin’s era in Latvia by Brikse et al (2005) and on monumental sculpture and on popular music by Sergey Kruks (2008, 2011). Anthropological and sociological research on state socialism elsewhere in the socialist bloc – Russia (Humphrey 1983, 1998, Yurchak 2006), Romania (Verdery 1996, Burawoy 1985), Hungary (Haney 2002, Lampland 1995) – has shown with fine empirical detail the workings and effects of the ‘actually existing socialism’. However, I engage with this literature with caution, as it needs to be taken into account that the historical conditions were in many respects different in the Baltics.

⁶⁶ Such a view can be further supported by the fact that mass choreography practices were popular already during the Ulmanis’ authoritarian regime in Latvia in 1934-1940 (Hanovs and Tēraudkalns 2012).

until It Was No More (2006), that ordinary people lived as if in parallel to the official ideology. He insists that while Soviet citizens had to reproduce the authoritative discourse and confirm their loyalty to it through performative speech acts, this formal reproduction, simultaneously, allowed and even ‘enabled many new ways of life, meanings, interests, relations, pursuits, and communities to spring up everywhere in late socialism’ (2006: 286). I concur with Yurchak’s point that it is too simplistic to conceive of the socialist political subjectivity as a dichotomous split between, on the one hand, a public self that performed loyalty to an oppressive state and, on the other, a private self that dissented it. One’s relationship with the totalitarian state was necessarily more complex and varied than this binary model suggests.

Similarly, however, it seems somewhat far-fetched to argue, as Yurchak does, that Soviet citizens merely performatively reproduced the authoritative discourse, while maintaining autonomous lives in parallel with the political reality. After all, individuals depended directly on the state for many aspects of their everyday life.⁶⁷ In state socialism, employment, dwelling, and social status all hinged directly or indirectly on the Party’s approval. Any open rejection of the rules of the game could result in sanctions. Vaclav Havel has eloquently discussed the complex motivation for displaying a poster *Workers of the world*

⁶⁷ This dependency on the state was, without doubt, created in different parts of the socialist bloc to differing degrees. Anthropologist Piers Vitebsky has exposed the logic of the Soviet state control through care in his ethnographic study of reindeer herders in the arctic north of Soviet Russia. According to his observations, people in the far-away villages in Siberia that had for centuries been fully self-sufficient were now rendered ‘incapable of living any other way than as dependants of the State’ through Soviet governance and urban planning practices (2005: 252). There were definitely considerable differences between a nomad village in the Far North and a republic like Latvia with large cities and comparatively much more diverse economy. Furthermore, anthropological research has revealed that individualism and entrepreneurship were in fact very familiar notions for many socialist citizens (Lampland 1995: 1-2, Shevchenko (n.d.), Yurchak 2006). As Martha Lampland shows in the case of socialist Hungary, ‘In contrast to the party’s view that all realms of society should be subordinated to socialist ideology, villagers drew a stark distinction between public and private life in speech and in deed’ (1995: 2). Lampland has also provided ethnographic-historic evidence of the ‘striking resemblance’ of socialist economic practices ‘to those of capitalist political economy,’ which led to ‘the strange consequence of commodification under socialism’ (1995: 7).

unite! in the window of one's workplace (1985 [1978]).⁶⁸ Thus, if we regard power as enabling and creating subjectivities, as Foucault insisted, we can recognise that the state socialist form of power interpellated subjects as directly dependent on the state's benevolence. Lynne Haney's study of welfare regimes in Hungary demonstrates how in socialism 'single mothers positioned the state in familial terms ... by treating it as a father figure' and demanded to be 'defended' and 'protected' by it (2002: 82), mirroring the official discourse and thus achieving security and empowerment in their everyday lives. Similarly, Maria Galmarini shows how Soviet citizens who wrote petitions 'for social assistance crafted subject positions that made sense vis-à-vis the [official] taxonomy of help and used labour/contribution and need/suffering as the basis for what could be imagined and argued for (but also questioned) in relation to social justice' (Galmarini 2014). Galmarini argues that 'petitioners largely performed what Pierre Bourdieu has called "the official model of the self"- a model that Soviet "deviant" subjects learned to strategically adopt and manoeuvre, and might have even made their own because it had a real emancipatory appeal for them in terms of human dignity, social integration, and justice' (ibid). This elucidates the notion that all individuals, in any political regime, maintain their agency and are never merely constituted by the power discourse. Yet, in spite of this, significant bonds tied individuals to the socialist state as collectivised labour power and as subjects whose needs were both defined and fulfilled by the state.

For Latvians, this relationship to the Soviet state was further complicated because of their national history. Parts, if not all, of society still recalled the independence years and perceived the Russian government to be an alien, occupying power. Historians Pabriks and Purs argue that 'the lack of democratic political rights and a Soviet nationality policy that discriminated against Latvians meant that a widening gap emerged between a Soviet Latvian's

⁶⁸ The greengrocer, whom Havel takes as an example here, puts this slogan up 'among the onions and carrots' as 'a sign', manifesting less his agreement with the content of the slogan but rather his recognition of the consequences if he does not do so (1985 [1978]).

expectations and the real opportunities available to him or her. In other words, the average inhabitants may have begun to live better, but he or she was alienated from the regime' (2001: 37). Few studies address Latvian Soviet subjectivities specifically, however Vieda Skultans' work provides key insights. Skultans, in her book *The Testimony of Lives* (1998) analyses life-stories that she collected in Latvia in 1992-1993, shortly after the end of Soviet rule in Latvia and the re-establishment of an independent state. Initially interested in the experiences of neurasthenic illnesses in Soviet Latvia, Skultans began interviewing people who identified as suffering from such illnesses. The fieldwork evolved, however, into a collection of life-stories from many others, eager to give their testimony on the Soviet past following many years of silence. Stories of trauma and despair were prevalent, whether of deportations in the 1940s or later persecutions for one's own, or a family member's, dissenting views, toiling for the kolkhoz, or coping with shortages of basic household goods. Skultans emphasises that her informants attributed these hardships and failed dreams to the injustice, irrationality, and often cruelty of the Soviet regime. She notes that 'human intentions' were seen as 'overridden by history' (1998: 121), and concludes that narratives, through locating the causes of suffering and injustice in the political system, displayed 'overt political criticism' (ibid: 18). These political imaginaries often linked one's personal hardships to the destiny of Latvia itself (ibid: 47).

Many expressed a sense of powerlessness, as state institutions claimed control over individual lives through totalitarian forms of governance and surveillance. The totalitarian disallowance of dissent and differing opinions continued in the Soviet Union well after Stalin's death, though in subtler forms (Kharkhordin 1999). Individual biographies were subject to political reformulation. School children learned to write their autobiographies by using vocabulary that was permissible by the state and in alignment with the official version of history (Skultans 1998: 64). The much feared secret police collected biographies and often re-wrote them according to the regime's need. Strikingly, Skultans reports how people '[spoke] of

having a biography or autobiography and distinguish[ed] themselves from others who [did] not have an autobiography' (1998: 65), meaning that a biography was equivalent with a secret police file.⁶⁹ As one of Skultans' informants told her, 'I knew that those to whom I was interesting knew much more about me than I could ever know' (ibid: 65). One's story in the totalitarian system was not one's own. Similarly, Katherine Verdery, in her analysis of state socialism, calls this a "production" system parallel to the system for producing goods – a system producing paper, which contained real and falsified histories of the people over whom the Party rules' (Verdery 1996: 24). While 'the immediate product' of this activity were 'dossiers' or 'files', 'the ultimate product was political subjects and subject dispositions useful to the regime' (ibid).

What kind of a political subjectivity did emerge as part of this two-pronged Soviet biopolitics? Hannah Arendt described the effects of totalitarianism as 'atomisation', however, based on the discussion above, we can glean the outcome of the Soviet authoritarian welfare regime⁷⁰ rather differently and conceive of it as a particular kind of bonding. An intimate, if often violent, bond with the state was rooted in the state's omnipresence through totalitarian surveillance networks and practices, on the one hand, and its paternalistic welfare system, on the other. It was a paternalistic state, as Verdery calls it, a benevolent Father giving out goods as considered appropriate. While many Latvians, especially of the older generation, were preserving the collective memory of occupation and terror imposed, along with forced collectivisation, the Soviet system nonetheless became normalised over time. People grew

⁶⁹ Similarly, Costica Bradatan writes that in state socialism, '[i]t is not you that narrates your own biography, but it is the system' (2005: 274).

⁷⁰ In my use of the term 'welfare regime', I will follow Lynne Haney's understanding of this concept. Haney writes: 'On the one hand, I conceive of welfare regimes as encompassing distinct policy apparatuses – collections of redistributive programmes that shape the structure of social life and give rise to social conception of need. ... On the other hand, I view welfare regimes as embodying networks of welfare agencies – local bodies that shape clients' lives and interpret their needs in direct and immediate ways. ... In my conceptualisation, welfare regimes are historically specific combinations of state policies and institutional practices that together set the terms of state redistribution and interpretation' (2002: 8).

accustomed to full provision by the state: secured jobs, subsidized rents, childcare, healthcare, and education. If power works through forming the self through its desires, as the Foucauldian argument goes, we can see how the Soviet subject was created through this intimate bond that was institutionalised through organising labour and need. Moreover, the total politisation and policing of all spheres of life, even if ever only imaginary, entrenched this bond with the state through discipline⁷¹, self-censorship, and fear. In the poignant words of Bulgarian dissident Zhelyu Zhelev, one could never separate oneself from the state, just like one could never separate oneself from one's mother (Valiavicharska 2012).

Post-Soviet nationalism

With the regaining of independence, history was being written anew. The annexation of Latvia by the Soviet Union in 1940 was exposed publicly as an illegal occupation.⁷² It became one of the main endeavours to establish the truth about deportations, collect and tell memories from prison camps, write new textbooks for school children, publish exile historians' work that had been banned previously. The people, carriers of the cultural memory, were still the same but their memories changed, were re-framed or created anew. Formerly acquiescent citizens now spoke openly about the socialist past as a foreign, imposed regime. Others reinvented their pasts: previous communist party functionaries and KGB agents quickly turned coats, denied any previous allegiance with the Soviet regime and became passionate defenders

⁷¹ Stephen Collier characterises the Soviet government as disciplinary in the Foucauldian sense (2011: 48-9).

⁷² Analysis of historic documents that had previously not been available, such as the Molotov-Ribbentrop protocol signed on August 23rd 1939, served as key evidence (Dreifelds 1996). The Soviet Union had previously denied the existence of such secret protocols (Purs 2012: 50-51). As a result, the legitimacy of the Soviet power quickly waned in the eyes of Latvians.

of the independence idea.⁷³ With the help of this memory work, a new hegemonic reading of the Soviet past was established. It was framed in the public rhetoric as a politically illegitimate and oppressive regime that was also socio-economically irrational and inefficient.⁷⁴

The annihilation of the past has been common across the former state socialist societies (Giordano and Kostova 2002: 77-78). It became commonplace to try to limit oneself off from the past, as ‘no one want[ed] to acknowledge that experience as “one’s own”’⁷⁵ So much so that one would have to wonder, as George Konrad, a novelist, did about socialist Hungary, ‘Were those 40 years nothing but a mistake, a detour, a waste? Didn’t they read or write anything worthwhile in those 40 years? Didn’t they ever find their sweetheart’s gestures endearing? Or have a decent cut of meat, drink tolerably good wines? Didn’t they ever take their children skating or to a ballet class? Or gaze at the stars?’ (cited in Ezergailis 2006: 333). Anthropological accounts of the socialist past have shown how everyday life had, unsurprisingly, indeed retained its ‘normality’, often in the face of the cruelties and absurdities of the political regime (Yurchak 2006, Lampland 1995). What matters is, however, that in many former socialist societies it became almost impossible to admit this.

This annihilation of the past took a particularly ardent form in the Baltic States. This reading should be understood in the light of the fact that, while the Central European socialist countries had their own governments, policies for the Baltics had been written in Moscow.⁷⁶

⁷³ Eyal, Szelenyi and Townsley (1998) have explored how the former socialist *nomenklatura* secured their social positions in the 1990s by quickly pronouncing loyalty to the new political and economic values, while using their social capital to secure their position in society.

⁷⁴ A whole movement of memory studies has developed in Latvian academia since the 1990s (see e.g. Zelče 2009, Kaprāns and Zelče 2010, Kaprāns and Procevska 2013).

⁷⁵ I am quoting here Vytautas Rubavicius speaking about Lithuanians and their Soviet past (2006: 86). He notes with respect to thinking about the soviet past that “All kinds of stories of an early realisation of the situation or of the perception of what Soviet meant are popular now and are often created after the fact. They elevate their authors beyond the bounds of that experience and verify the authenticity of the creation of their current, already Western identity” (ibid).

⁷⁶ Historians have, however, lately disagreed on this point – some say that actually more was determined by local party functionaries than previously thought (Plakans 2011). Now that archives are more

The need to disentangle themselves from the Moscow rule was therefore much more strongly felt in the Baltics than in the Central European countries (Bohle and Greskovits 2012). Thus, as the nationalist popular movement discredited the Soviet past, the post-Soviet future was imagined as necessarily *anything but* like the Soviet past. As one of the protagonists in a post-1991 Latvian novel phrased it, when asked who he was, ‘In any case, certainly not a Soviet man’ (Ezergailis 2006: 337).

Latvia was one of the post-socialist states that embarked upon a path of economic neo-liberalisation, as discussed in Chapter 1. The economic programme of the political party ‘Latvia’s Way’, which won the first elections in 1993, was written in co-operation with economists of Latvian origin from the West, eager to erase all traces of socialist economy. This programme emphasised fast liberalisation through ‘competition, deregulation, market mechanism, openness and free trade’ (Nissinen 1999: 213). Policy scripts were brought in as part of a package of reform measures sponsored by international institutions, in line with a number of other former socialist countries.⁷⁷ Yet, the reading of the neo-liberal reforms in Latvia as a Washington-led project would be incomplete. This global logic certainly provided scripts for policy reforms, and foreign advisers had a central role in post-socialist reform processes. However, the nationalist reframing of the Soviet past and the anxieties of re-establishing themselves and the entire citizenry as ‘modern’ ‘Western’ subjects played an equally important role when Latvian policy makers and politicians signed up for reconfiguring

accessible (though still not fully as a lot in Moscow and a lot burned), actually evidence shows that the local communist party leaders, like Juris Kalnbērziņš, had considerable regulatory power. However, it has been established that policies were made predominantly in Moscow, which was not the case in the Central European socialist bloc countries.

⁷⁷ There were four components of ‘the standard reform package incorporated in the neoliberal “Washington consensus”’: ‘macroeconomic stabilisation, microeconomic liberalisation, restructuring and privatisation, and creation of a market-conforming institutional and legal framework’ (Nissinen 1999: 62). With the help of the IMF, reform packages were designed to address each of these components. Latvia was recognised as one of the ‘exemplary pupils’ in Washington consensus reforms (Dreifelds 1996: 177). Nissinen cites as proof of this acknowledgment the fact that IMF gave Latvia ‘substantial standby credit ... to support the government’s economic programme’ (1999: 62).

the formerly socialist economy and welfare state into a liberal market one. As social and economic policies were conceived as an important target in the Westernisation project and in dismantling the socialist socio-economic heritage, local ‘demand’ was established for radical free market policies. This ‘demand’ matched the ‘supply’ of transition assistance from the foreign advisers such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, and later also the European Union.

Indeed, the early 1990s reforms were framed in the Latvian public sphere, along with the other two Baltic nations, as *a return to ‘normality’* (Eglitis 2002, 2011, Rausing 2004). This reform discourse drew on ‘the juxtaposition of the “normal” with the “abnormal”, which [was] associated with the Soviet experience’ (Eglitis 2011: 424, Gille 2010). This ‘normality’ had two dimensions in its Latvian reading, as Eglitis argues, merging into a distinct policy path that Latvia took after 1991. The first dimension was temporal. As the 1990 declaration had already indicated, the post-Soviet Latvia was seen as a legal and cultural continuation of the 1918-1940 state. The constitution, adopted in 1922, was re-instated, symbolising this legal continuity and the first independent elections of the Parliament were organised as 5th Saeima elections (following the 4th Saeima that worked in 1931-1934). Citizenship laws reflected this vision of restoration, as only those inhabitants who had direct ancestry or had been themselves citizens before the Soviet invasion in 1940, were granted the Latvian citizenship. Others – notably the hundreds of thousands of Soviet-era immigrants, would have to undergo a process of naturalisation, with language and history tests as requirements. The second dimension was a spatial one, as ‘normality’ meant looking Westwards and as such, ‘re-joining Europe’.

Several scholars of East European welfare state reforms have pointed out the political foregrounding of the socio-economic restructuring in Latvia. Nissinen states that ‘neoliberalism triumphed in Eastern Europe, not as an economic science, but as a political ideology’ (1999: 211). She notes, with respect to Latvia in particular, that ‘[i]t appeared self-evident that

independence, democracy, a return to Europe and a market economy belong together automatically, although no logical connection exists between these components' (ibid: 257). Accordingly, '[w]hat was in conformity with the supreme goal of Westernising Latvia was accepted automatically as a part of the "deal"' (1999: 214). Eglitis and Lace propose that 'a more acutely felt need by Latvians to assert independent nationhood by decisively breaking with the institutions and practices of the past' [...] 'may be one causal factor in the Baltic nations' choice of shock therapy over gradual marketization, which was more characteristic of the Visegrad states' (2009: 331). More recently, Bohle and Greskovits (2012) have claimed that the neo-liberal path was possible and locally legitimated in Latvia because of the nationalist project. Eglitis states that in Latvia, 'counter-hegemonic narratives are marginalised by both local and global forces which deny legitimacy to alternatives or critique' (2011: 425). She observes that there is 'a circumscribed legitimate vocabulary with which to speak critically about class' (2010: 2). I would argue that this restricted vocabulary applies, not only to thinking of class, but to economic and political rationalities more broadly. Alternative discourses became illegitimate.

This explains the acquiescence of Latvian society, as the radical restructuring of the 1990s and harsh austerity measures in the 2000s were met without major protests (Greskovits 1998, 2007, Cerami and Vanhuysse 2009, Bohle and Greskovits 2012). In the early 1990s the 'popular attachments to the welfare state' that were strong in many former socialist societies (Cook 2007: 2⁷⁸) were more easily given up in Latvia because of the connection in the popular imagination between social assistance and state socialism. The predominant views in society,

⁷⁸ Evidence from other former Soviet republics highlights clear differences from the Baltics. Based on data from Russia, Hungary, Poland, Kazakhstan and Belarus, Linda Cook has observed that 'At the same time as they faced strong economic and structural pressures to cut back on welfare, post-communist governments confronted potentially high political costs for doing so. Here there were three major problems: populations were state-dependent, popular attachments to the welfare state were strong, and organised stakeholders favoured its maintenance. [...] post-communist populations remained strongly attached to public provisions, sharing a broad sense that the state was responsible for accustomed social services and entitlements' (Cook 2007: 2).

especially in the early years of the transformations, were that individuals had to cope on their own. Evidence of this belief is found in this statement by a Lithuanian social policy expert, typical in terms of the sentiment it reveals:

‘The Soviet system collapsed because the state was overly responsible for everything and for everybody, or at least, the state had portrayed itself in that role. The whole country was reduced to the level of a “kindergarten”. There was the “great guardian”, who took care of everybody: provided jobs for everybody, pensions and saved everybody in every situation. Such a system collapsed and in the minds of the people the system was no longer desirable.’ (cited in Aidukaite 2003: 416)

This same sentiment is expressed in a graffiti I encountered on the pavement outside the Riga Municipality Department of Welfare, pictured at the beginning of this chapter. Graffiti are usually known to subvert and challenge hegemonic ideologies. Yet, in a move of double-subversion, the stencilled words ask pedestrians, ‘Where is your responsibility?’

Public opinion data from the 1990s and 2000s show the ebbs and flows of popular attitudes. In 1993, 65% of Latvians agreed that ‘[i]n a just society, people who are diligent and intelligent have a higher standard of material well-being, while people who are lazy and stupid have a lower standard of material well-being’, favouring it against a statement that ‘[i]n a just society, the well-being of every citizen is more or less the same’ (Aidukaite 2003: 417). Nissinen gives a similar account, stating that ‘[a]n overwhelming majority (85 per cent) held the view that individual achievement should determine how much people are paid; only a tenth (11 per cent) considered that incomes should be made more equal’ (1999: 260). Likewise, ‘[m]ore than two-thirds (69 per cent) of Latvians and over a half (53 per cent) of Russians [living in Latvia] considered capitalism very or somewhat important, while only 7/14 per cent adhered to socialism’ (ibid). However, moving from the 1990s to 2000s, the public mood changed quickly from optimistic to gloomy, as the transformation costs were felt. The support

for the statement that '[i]n a just society, people who are diligent and intelligent have a higher standard of material well-being, while people who are lazy and stupid have a lower standard of material well-being' fell from 65% in 1993 to 44% in 2002, while support for the statement that '[i]n a just society, the well-being of every citizen is more or less the same' increased from 21% to 38% (Aidukaite 2003: 418).

I agree with Daina Eglitis when she warns that there have been a wide range of attitudes in the Latvian society and the homogeneity of opinion towards the West and neo-liberalism should not be overstated (2011). As Eglitis insists, the inequalities are visible to people even when alternatives and critiques are rendered illegitimate by 'powerful global and local currents' (ibid: 431). However, the fear of having Russians control the government has continuously deterred the majority of ethnic Latvians from voting for left-wing parties. Furthermore, as the ethnographic observations will reveal in the following chapters, the grip of Westernisation ideals forged in the late 1980s is also still strong. There was little criticism of the austerity measures and other neo-liberal policies among my unemployed informants.

Reforming labour and need

A number of local and foreign observers have noted that social policies have not been regarded as a priority by the Latvian right-wing governments over the past two decades (Lāce 2012: 105, 112, Rajevska 2009). This interpretation fits with the common reading of neo-liberalism as one of shrinking the role of the state in economy and cutting welfare provisions. Yet, as Stephen Collier reminds, neo-liberalism as a political rationality constantly problematizes government and strives to render it more effective (2011: 1). Rather than rejecting state intervention, neo-liberal reformers have, in most contexts, purposefully 'critiqued and reworked projects of state planning and social welfare' (ibid). Collier observed during his ethnographic work in Russia that frequently post-1991 'reforms did not abandon

existing norms of social welfare’ but rather ‘proposed new formulas for redistribution ... that drew precisely on existing socialist norms for social provisioning’ (ibid: 9). This is a good empirical illustration of how the neo-liberal reforms often mean *re-configuration* of the state systems, as discussed in Chapter 1, rather than simply ‘shrinking’ them. As the key goal of the Latvian policy makers and politicians in the 1990s (and still perhaps even now), more so than most other former socialist societies (for reasons discussed above), was to radically reconfigure the socialist state structures, the appeal of neo-liberal reform scripts was not surprising. Indeed, a closer look at policy documents and legislation in the area of welfare and employment suggests that ‘labour’ and ‘need’ – the two categories that had been at the centre of the Soviet socialist governance – were equally a central concern for the liberal post-1991 state as well. Now, both would have to be reconfigured in order to ‘catch up’ with the West.

The governing elites saw social policy reforms as key to restoring ‘normality’ and once again reconstituting Latvian citizens as ‘proper’ European subjects. The most favoured reform path was the one that least resembled the socialist model. To recall the associations made by the civil servants from the Ministry of Welfare, introduced at the start of this chapter, it felt like ‘Spring time’. The authoritarian welfare state had been replaced with a liberal democratic system and reforms of social assistance, social security, and employment policies were to quickly and radically undo the familial, patronising bond, tying the individual to the state.

In particular, these policy reforms had to address passivity and docility of society. The paternalist bond with the state, perceived as an unfortunate heritage of the Soviet period, was now seen as impeding the kind of economic transformation that Latvia had set out on a path towards. In 1995, a team of local experts published the Human Development Report under the auspices of the United Nations Development Programme, where, in a chapter on the emergence of civil society, they introduced a novel problematisation under the label of ‘learned helplessness’. The report quoted a survey where ‘47% of Latvians and 58% of non-Latvians (in

Latvia) agreed with the statement that the state should be responsible to provide for every household' and continued that '[a] prominent Canadian-Latvian psychologist describes the effects of the Soviet system as a syndrome called "learned helplessness". (...) Naturally enough, if people *do not possess the psychological tools necessary to develop their own lives*, they will not be able to play an active role in society either' (Muižnieks 1995). Learned helplessness is originally a psychological term that denotes a disposition of low self-esteem and lack of trust in one's abilities as a consequence of past experiences of oppressed or failed self-realisation. Applied to the entire society, it gained currency in the expert discourse and political rhetoric as much as it caught on in the popular imagination (e.g. Norgaard et al 2000, Tabuns 2008, Mieriņa 2011).⁷⁹ Sociologists spoke of insufficient sense of individual responsibility and lack of confidence and initiative (Tisenkopfs 2009: 25). This pre-occupation was shared among the wider public as well. An opinion poll found 63% of the respondents believing that 'we [Latvians] often complain without reason' (Rozenvalds 2012), and in another poll it was discovered that too negative an outlook on Latvia's future was seen by the public as the biggest security threat to the country (TVNET 2012).

The psychologist cited in the UNDP report, I believe, was Dr. Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga, an émigré Latvian whose family had fled the Second World War and who had grown up in Canada. After relocating back to Latvia, she was elected the President of Latvia in 1999. Staying true to her psychologist's training, Vīķe-Freiberga often emphasised during her two terms as President that Latvians needed to take responsibility for their own happiness and success. In a famous speech at the National Song and Dance Festival in 2001, addressing an audience of many thousands, Vīķe -Freiberga raised her arms to the sky and urged the people to

⁷⁹ A Latvian sociologist Aivars Tabuns noted in a polemic piece published after the national elections in 2008 that 'sociological surveys convincingly show that such feelings [of learned helplessness] are rather commonplace among Latvians' (Tabuns 2008). Reasoning that 'any healing has to begin with establishing the patient's diagnosis', he offers a 'non-academic classification' of four types of the 'politically helpless'.

repeat together with her: ‘We are strong! We are powerful! We are mighty! We are beautiful! We know what we desire! And we can do what we desire! [And] we [will] do what we desire to do!’ (2001). Her speech was later compared in the press to a mass psycho-hypnotic session, aimed at instilling more confidence and assertiveness, in the ever so docile Latvians. Having spent most of her life in Canada, she was perceived as a Westerner, untainted by the Soviet past, and therefore had the perceived authority to pass judgment and deliver such a message. This rhetoric of empowerment resonated with the crowds as thousands of individuals repeated her words in unison.

At a more mundane level, this desire to undo learned helplessness meant that social welfare policies, including support for the unemployed, were being drafted anew. Whereas previously everybody had been entitled to state support, in the post-1991 Latvia the category of those who were entitled was carefully reconsidered. New taxonomies entered the policy landscape. The category of ‘the needy’ was increasingly defining the policy discourse through co-operation projects with international advisors. With the assistance of the World Bank, ‘strict nation-wide criteria in providing social assistance to needy persons’ were launched in 2000 (Lāce 2012).⁸⁰ In policy discourse, the poverty and precarity of large parts of the population was increasingly conceptualised in individualising terms. Thus, the concept of ‘social exclusion’ entered policy vocabulary in early 2000s through EU accession projects. The Ministry of Welfare commissioned social research to find out which social groups were most at ‘risk of exclusion’.⁸¹ The Employment Agency introduced special assistance programmes for ‘vulnerable groups’, such as young unemployed people with vocational education or long-term unemployed with addiction problems. Training programmes for ‘persons at risk of

⁸⁰ See Haney on a similar process of creating the category of ‘the needy’ in Hungary. Haney situates this category within the liberal welfare system, ‘aimed at the “needy” classes’ and relying on income and means testing (2002: 12, 165-9).

⁸¹ EU has funded research on social exclusion and unemployment (e.g. National programme *Darba Tirgus Pētījumi* [Labour Market Research] by the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology).

unemployment' were being funded by the European Social Fund. Furthermore, the policy discourse shifted from 'social security' (*sociālā drošība*) to 'human securitability' (*drošumspēja*).⁸² The head of the policy planning division under the Prime Minister, who was in charge of drafting the National Development Plan 2014-2020, placed this unwieldy neologism at the heart of the Latvian development model. In a newspaper interview, he praised Latvians for having always displayed their 'peasant's resilience' (*zemnieka sīkstums*) that should help further build this security-ability (Līcītis 2012).

Meanwhile, Latvia, along with the other two Baltic States, has been spending the least proportion of GDP on social protection, compared not only to West European countries but also to the rest of the former socialist states in Europe.⁸³ One of the ways in which the 1989-1991 rupture manifested in many people's lives was through their sudden descent into poverty. The economic restructuring led to the fall of GDP by about a half in the first half of the 1990s. The past two decades have meant living a life of precarity for the majority of society. Though this has rarely been the absolute poverty of a complete lack of food or shelter, it was certainly a significant shift from a secure life to a precarious one. Most typically middle-class, professional jobs pay barely enough to make ends meet, let alone save or invest.

Although standard of life has been slowly improving over the past two decades, the GDP growth has been accompanied by a growing Gini coefficient and the 'deepening' of poverty.⁸⁴ Latvian statistics however cannot easily show this deepening, as there is not an

⁸² Cross-Sectoral Co-Ordination Centre (2012).

⁸³ Social security spending accounted for just 17.8% of GDP in 2010, compared to 29.4% in the EU27 (IR 2012). See also Aidukaite (2011: 213).

⁸⁴ The economic situation has improved over the years as GDP per capita tripled from 4,200 USD in 1999 to 14,700 USD in 2010. However, poverty remained high for more than a decade after the initial transitional difficulties, despite several years of rapid growth. At-risk-of-poverty rate in 2007 was 21%, based on Eurostat data cited in Eglitis and Lace (2009: 333). This discrepancy between GDP growth and lingering poverty is evidenced by a high Gini inequality index, which increased from 31 points in 1996 to 39 in 2005 (Latvian Central Statistics Bureau 2012). In 2011, Gini coefficient had fallen to 35.2 but was still the highest in the European Union (Latvian Ministry of Welfare 2013).

official definition of poverty nor even a statistical measurement of a poverty level (Lāce 2012). The share of the population officially classified as ‘poor’ and therefore entitled to receive the Guaranteed Minimum Income has been fluctuating in the recent year around the 5% mark.⁸⁵ Yet, around 40% of Latvian respondents said in a Eurobarometer survey in 2009 that they did not have enough money to cover monthly expenses for food, rent, and other basic needs (Alberte 2009).⁸⁶ As Eglitis and Lace note, ‘the marginality of poverty on the agenda is highlighted by the fact that Latvia prepared its first “National Action Plan” for the reduction of poverty only in 2004, an action taken in response to European Union accession’ (2009: 332). The Guaranteed Minimal Income was introduced in 2003 ‘as a necessary pre-condition for joining the EU’ (Rajevska 2005: 17). It was targeted at helping the needy, ‘conditional upon cooperation’ (Bite and Zagorskis 2003: 67). The actual amount of the Guaranteed Minimum Income is significantly below the estimated cost of living in the country, thus defying its key purpose.⁸⁷ As part of the Open Co-ordination Method in social policy, civil servants and policy experts have prepared several reports on poverty reduction. However, implementation of these policies has been limited. This is because as the EU shifted its rhetoric from social inclusion to economic growth and employment, the external push eased, and social policies in Latvia again became secondary to economic growth (Lāce 2012: 93).⁸⁸

People out of work are nonetheless a matter of concern in the public rhetoric; a case in point is that mass media have been blaming ‘benefit-receivers’ for abusing the welfare system.

⁸⁵ In 2007, only 4.5% of the population officially qualified for the Guaranteed Minimum Income (Lāce 2012: 139). In 2014, this share has increased to 6% (Paparde 2014).

⁸⁶ The situation became more aggravated again with the recent economic crisis. *Eurostat* estimates that a staggering 19.3% of the population were at risk of poverty in 2011. If combined with the risk of social exclusion, this proportion reached 40% in the same year (Eurostat 2012).

⁸⁷ In 2013, the government stopped co-funding the GMI, shifting the full responsibility to the municipalities. This transfer puts the provision of social assistance at even greater risk.

⁸⁸ The Social Inclusion Policy Coordination Committee, which has members from government ministries, the Parliament, municipalities, employers and NGOs, ‘serves only as an information exchange channel’, without ‘real ability to influence policy planning or policy change’ (Lāce 2012: 111).

Journalists report on observations by social workers and employers that many ‘have lost the work virtue’. During my fieldwork in Riga, anecdotes circulated in the public sphere about people in the countryside ‘not even wanting to plant potatoes anymore’, instead relying on state assistance. In another popular tale, these ‘professional benefit receivers’ would not wash their clothes anymore but instead just await the next parcel of charity second-hand items.⁸⁹ Bite and Zagorskis (2003: 64) point to cultural heritage in attitudes towards ‘deservedness’ in Latvia, given that poverty since the Soviet times has been associated with moral degradation.

This has been the social milieu in which I did my fieldwork. Riga has in fact been the most economically active region in Latvia and unemployment, along with poverty risks, has been lower here than in any other region. Most of my informants were not the long-term unemployed (the longest was three years). Yet, the precariousness of everyday life was very apparent. Only about a third of all registered unemployed at a given time were eligible to receive unemployment benefits. Previous social insurance payments and length of unemployment were decisive factors here. Even for those who received the monthly assistance, payments reduced every three months, until running out completely after a period of nine months in total. The State Employment Agency has a reputation of catering for people with ‘lower skill levels’ and as such, the companies that choose to advertise their positions on the Employment Agency’s website tend to be mostly supermarket chains and other businesses looking for low-skilled, low-paid labour. There were cleaners, grocery store clerks, and salespersons among the people I met and spoke to at the unemployment centre. But I also met people who had recently lost jobs that would pass for secure-middle class professions in the West – school teachers, accountants, university lecturers, engineers, bank clerks. These are the

⁸⁹ Author’s interview with a civil servant at the Employment Agency, 22.11.2011. See also Dzērve (2012).

people that have “shouldered” from below’ the Latvian neo-liberal capitalist transformations (Burawoy in Eglitis and Lace 2009: 330).

Conclusion

This chapter has established two key points. In the Soviet totalitarian welfare state, welfare was not an individual responsibility but rather one of the key links between the individual and the paternalistic state. Coupled with the politisation of all spheres of social life, this political regime created – and was sustained by – political subjectivity, which was constituted through an intimate bond between the state and the individual. Secondly, the nationalist popular movement of the late 1980s and early 1990s (re-)framed the Soviet past as ‘abnormal’ and the post-1991 as the ‘return to normality’ and a return to Europe. This framing had policy consequences: market liberalisation and reconfiguration of social security, imagined as the direct opposite policy path of the state socialism, were pursued by the local political elites, accompanied, at least initially, by a broad consensus among the population. These policies were aimed at reconfiguring, not only the socio-economic system, but equally, the individual’s sense of self vis-à-vis the state. The following chapters will turn to exploring empirically how the dismantling of the Soviet regime of labour and need has been unfolding at the level of political subjectivity.

Chapter 3 Empowerment in the queue



Figures 3 and 4. ‘Stop whining, start living!’ Photo by author.⁹⁰

In December 2011, the snowy streets of Riga were adorned with posters hailing the passers-by with words ‘Stop whining, start living!’ (*Beidz gausties, sāc dzīvot!* in Latvian) (see Figures 3 and 4 above). The authors of the posters, created as a New Year’s greeting to the public, were two students of a local art college. The cartoonish character depicted on the poster is clutching a pair of skis and sports an image of the morning star on his sweater – a traditional symbol of ‘Latvianness’, thus presumably symbolising the ordinary Latvian citizen. This cheerful, if slightly reprimanding, message was but one instance of the rhetoric of ‘positivism’ that had become increasingly prevalent in the Latvian public sphere. The public television was broadcasting shows bearing titles ‘Latvia can!’, ‘You know. You can. You do’, and ‘Everything is happening’ (*Latvija Var!*, *Zini. Vari. Dari, Viss Notiek*). A song performed by a group of young people who took part in one of the many, massively popular televised singing

⁹⁰ Image courtesy of www.clearchannel.lv.

contests and played on the radio during the winter of 2011-2012, was called ‘Go and fight!’ Matching the title, it featured the rather crude lyrics: ‘You are strong and cunning, push through like a big thorn, believe that everything will happen in life [...] I know you can, don’t be afraid, go and fight!’

This vernacular of positivism and empowerment emerged from a prolonged pre-occupation in the Latvian public domain with the passivity and docility of society, perceived as an unfortunate heritage of the Soviet socialist past. As discussed in Chapter 2, policy makers and experts have been concerned since the early 1990s with the alleged learned helplessness of the average Latvian. Welfare programmes for the unemployed, as I will demonstrate, share this pre-occupation. Indeed, the very motto of the State Employment Agency, featured on all its visual materials, is ‘[I] want. [I] can. [I] do!’ (*Gribu. Varu. Daru!*). In this chapter, I will explore this pre-occupation with learned helplessness and the process of ‘catching up’ with the West through a close study of the active labour market programme called ‘Competitiveness-Raising Activities’. My primary interest here is in investigating how these notions have become implicated in the process of negotiating political ontologies and moulding political subjectivities in post-Soviet neo-liberalism.

Engaging in a close reading of the discursive and temporal practices at the Riga unemployment office, I will argue that neo-liberal biopolitics work through a paradox. Underpinned by Latvia’s developmental vision of ‘catching up with the West’, the welfare programmes seek to produce competitive individuals. Notions of ‘activity’ and ‘waiting’ are being problematized in daily encounters between state representatives and citizens. Yet, the neo-liberalisation of welfare at the same time creates a state of suspended life for many. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork data, in this chapter I will explore the contradictions between the rhetoric of constant activity, individual responsibility and entrepreneurship, on the one hand, and mundane state-produced ‘forms of waiting’ that unemployed people are subject

to, on the other. By doing so, I will seek to throw light on the etatisation of time in post-Soviet neo-liberalism and the political subjectivities that such politics of waiting are producing.

Rhetoric of empowerment



Figure 5. The Riga unemployment office building in the Moscow district, with the Science Academy in the background. Photo by author.

It was an early morning in October 2011 and I was walking through the Central Market to Riga's unemployment office. The market was bustling as always, despite the fact that Latvians were still coping with the aftermath of the economic crisis. Latvia had opted for harsh austerity policies and had accepted a loan from IMF to cope with the recent economic crisis. The GDP had dropped by 25 per cent between 2008 and 2010, while unemployment rose to 20.7 per cent at its peak in the 1st quarter of 2010.⁹¹ The effects of the crisis were visible in the public space: there were less people and cars on the streets and more closed-down shops. Instead, little cafes were popping up one after another in the centre of Riga where people could

⁹¹ Eurostat data cited by the Latvian Ministry of Welfare (2011a).

have a cheap meal, which consisted of a couple of savoury or sweet pastries, rather than having a full lunch or dinner. It had now become fashionable to give hand-made gifts for Christmas and birthdays and talk about the meaning of life not being all about money. Some analysts estimate the number of workplaces in the national economy shrunk from 920,000 to 710,000 as a result of the crisis and the ensuing austerity politics (Ošlejs 2012). Salaries had been slashed for many public sector employees by up to a third. Unemployment in October 2011 stood at 16.2 per cent and there were 43 job seekers per vacancy.

It was possible to still see the medieval church spires in the distance but the marketplace marked a clear divide between the neat and touristy Old Town and *Maskavas forštate* (the Moscow district) where the unemployment office was located. Entering this area, I instinctively moved my bag slightly towards the front of my body and squeezed it more tightly under the elbow – a habit developed since my student days in Riga. The 15th trolleybus line crossing the district had long carried a reputation as the most dangerous in the city, with most crimes (although generally petty ones) taking place on its buses. A bar, one block away from the unemployment office, was called *4 promiles* ('4 permilles'), referring to a lethally dangerous alcohol content in one's blood. There was a sense of deprivation and unease that pervaded the area in which the unemployment office was situated. Some of my informants would later tell me that after their first visit to the unemployment office they wished they would never have to go back.

There was a seminar that morning at 9am that I was planning to attend. The seminar was called 'Overcoming psychological barriers in the job search process' and it was part of the 'Competitiveness-Raising' programme, which the State Employment Agency offered to people out of work. It was a couple of minutes before 9am and people were arriving and seating themselves silently around a large rectangle of tables. The seminars usually started at 9am and lasted until 3pm. As Vija, one of the civil servants in charge of this nation-wide programme,

explained to me, the intended purpose of a 9am start was to force people to get up in the morning, make themselves presentable and to leave the house early. This way, it was hoped, they would not lose motivation or sink into depression whilst without a job. Often the training would end earlier than 3pm because people preferred to skip the lunch break, save money on food and get home sooner. The light and spacious room where the seminar was to take place was located on the 3rd floor of the unemployment office. There was a whiteboard on one of the walls and a big banner propped up in the corner to the left of the board. It exhibited photographs of a large group of attractive, well-dressed people, their figures together forming the shape of Latvia. The slogan of the Agency, 'I know. I can. I do!', was written across the poster at their feet. The only other decorations in the room were several large photographs framed on the walls. They each depicted a single individual engaged in a particular vocation. One was a secretary, sitting by a desk with an oversized phone and a fax machine. Another two depicted a doctor and a marketing specialist. The out-dated electronics, the furnishings and the smiles on the models' faces looked like they were taken in the early 1990's somewhere in Western Europe. Europe was also present in the form of EU flags stuck on the legs of the room's wooden chairs, displaying the logo of the European Regional Development Fund.

Today's seminar would be led by Juris, a middle-aged psychologist who had been working for the Employment Agency since 1996. He was also a career counsellor at the Agency and read lectures in career consulting at a university. After twelve people had arrived and taken their seats in silence, Juris introduced himself, asked the others to do the same, and explained the purpose of the day. While various barriers existed to finding work, he was here to help with overcoming those that 'existed in one's head', he said to the timid audience of mostly women. He stated that he could not help with social barriers, like having to take care for someone at home, or economic barriers, like being unable to afford new shoes to go to a job interview. Clarifications out of the way, he opened with a question, gazing at the women with

his eyes wide open in a slightly exaggerated way: ‘What is a human being made of?’ he asked. Juris spoke in a friendly manner, his narrative was scattered with little jokes, which seemed designed to put people at ease, however the audience were rather solemn and difficult to liven up. A woman, who looked to be in her 40s and had been unemployed for several years, finally uttered shyly, ‘from feelings...’. Another participant suggested ‘emotions’. Not having received the answers he was looking for, Juris went on to present his model, ‘conceived among psychologists, psychiatrists, and clergymen at a conference in St. Petersburg’. Writing on the whiteboard, Juris explained that the human being consisted of ‘flesh, soul, and spirit’. As a psychologist, he noted his particular interest in the soul. The human soul, he would explain, consisted of ‘reason, emotions, and will’. Only if these three were aligned, could action follow. And action was what he believed his audiences needed most. In his seminars, Juris liked to cite a saying, ‘you have to keep moving, in spite of everything!’

The day continued with a discussion of how supply and demand works in the labour market, how to sell one’s skills to a potential employer, and how to re-set one’s goals in life after a job loss. This was one of nearly 5,000 seminars on 43 different topics that took place in Latvia over the course of the year 2011 as part of the ‘Competitiveness-Raising Activities’. Fifty-two thousand unemployed people – approximately every third registered job seeker in the country – had attended at least one seminar. In 2011, when the number of people out of work in the country was fluctuating between 130,000 and 160,000, this was the largest policy programme for the unemployed in terms of participation numbers.⁹² By comparison, other active labour market programmes such as three-month long training courses on skills deemed useful in the labour market (such as computer literacy or English) had involved 26,000 people. An additional 10,000 people had participated in vocational training or a professional re-

⁹² The next most populous form of assistance in 2011 was the so-called ‘work practice programme’, which had involved over 32,000 people in manual labour for one’s local municipality in return for a 100 Lats (approximately 120 GBP) monthly ‘stipend’.

qualification course or had received training placement with an employer. Participants were usually encouraged to sign up for any of the active labour market programmes upon registration but only the seminars were immediately available.⁹³

The Latvian Ministry of Welfare describes the programme of ‘Competitiveness-Raising Activities’ as designed around ‘learning job search skills, [receiving] psychological support, and learning the basic skills and abilities necessary for the labour market’ (2011b: 22). While there were many different topics on offer, the majority of them belonged to two main categories.⁹⁴ The first one targeted ‘social and civic skills’, and was aimed particularly towards raising self-confidence and becoming aware of one’s individuality, as well as on skills of working in times of change, solving conflicts, and interactional skill development.⁹⁵ Apart from the seminar on overcoming psychological barriers, other popular topics, judging by attendance numbers, were ‘Stress and How to Overcome It’, ‘Conflict and Effective Communication’, ‘Raising Self-Confidence’, and ‘Ability to Work in Times of Change’. The second main group of seminars was meant to develop ‘self-initiative and entrepreneurship’ skills. These were designed to develop experience and theoretical knowledge in the basics of starting commercial activities or a business and in the basics of writing a business plan. The most popular topics in 2011 were ‘How to Start a Small Business’, ‘Writing a Business Plan’, ‘Being a Self-Employed Person’, and ‘Accounting Skills for Self-Employed Persons’.

⁹³ No statistics are available as to the demographic composition of the participants. However, judging by my participant observations, the seminars usually had more female participants than male and though all age groups were represented middle-aged people were most commonly in attendance.

⁹⁴ The group seminars were divided in six general categories: apart from the two mentioned, there were also seminars on ‘language skills’, ‘mathematical skills’, ‘learning skills’ and ‘cultural awareness and expression’. Individual consultations with various experts were also available as part of the ‘Competitiveness-Raising’ programme. However, I focus only on the group seminars as it was not possible to observe individual consultations for privacy reasons. The number of people who received individual consultations was also relatively small, compared to those attending the group seminars.

⁹⁵ Here and below, I cite an internal planning document of the Latvian State Employment Agency, outlining the ‘competitiveness-raising’ activities for 2012 (see Latvian State Employment Agency 2012).

Between October 2011 and April 2012, I joined many groups of ten to fifteen people where we would learn how to identify our individual strengths by working with lists of verbs and adjectives, practice ‘positive thinking’, learn how to set goals in life and learn how to communicate effectively with others. The trainers helped people devise psychological coping strategies and tactics for finding new employment and advised them of the social networks that could be mobilised to assist in this process. Bodily techniques, such as breathing to reduce stress, were practiced to help the unemployed cope with their hardships. The entrepreneurship seminars encouraged people to dream big and start their own business. The trainers liked to remind their audiences that they needed to ‘keep moving in spite of everything’ and that ‘nobody would pour it into your mouth’. Others were less euphemistic and declared, ‘stop waiting, nobody’s going to help you!’, even citing NIKE’s slogan in English, ‘Just do it!’ Anete, a psychologist in her late 20s, would summarise her one-day seminar on preparing for a job interview, by proclaiming that what the job seekers needed was ‘R! R!! R!!!’ The ‘R’ stood for *Rīcība*, or ‘Action’. A self-acknowledged enthusiast of neuro-linguistic programming, she dictated to her audience word by word, ‘The – way – I – live – today – is – a – result – of – what – I – did – and – thought – yesterday.’

The seminars functioned as spaces of empowerment not only by virtue of recognising one’s capacities and removing psychological barriers but also through creating an environment, if only briefly, of conviviality and emotional support. For example, Viktorija used to start her seminars by re-arranging the room. As I usually arrived early, I would often give her a hand. If the size of the room allowed, we would push the school desks against the walls, leaving only chairs in the middle of the room. Then we created a circle from the chairs, where Viktorija’s seat was part of the circle rather than a ‘teacher’s desk’ at the front of the room. This ‘circle of sitters’ carries a particular significance in psychological and spiritual environments due to its perceived healing properties (Skultans 2007: 29, Muehlebach 2012: 124). For a four-day

seminar on ‘Communication Skills’, a sense of bonding was forged by establishing rules such as ‘everything that happens in this room, stays in this room’⁹⁶, ‘if somebody needs to leave or cannot come the next day, he should ask the group’s permission’, ‘all decisions regarding the working hours and the breaks are to be made jointly by the group’. Once in the circle, Viktorija invited the sharing of emotions and experiences to the extent that each participant felt comfortable doing so (rather than being expected to respond whenever called out). The groups engaged in various exercises for ‘reacting out’ the negative emotions associated with the job loss and practiced listening to and sharing with one another. My informants spoke of their experiences at Viktorija’s seminars as inspiring and uplifting, describing them as ‘a shot of energy’ or ‘a dose of positivism’. Ārija, a former accountant in her 50s, said, ‘after Viktorija’s seminars, you are practically half a step above the ground, flying.’ Another trainer, Sarmīte, who was a charismatic self-made businesswoman with gestures and a tone of voice resembling that of an evangelical preacher, welcomed the participants of one seminar on writing a business plan with plastic bottles of fresh maple sap – a popular springtime Latvian delicacy. Cramped, shoulder-to-shoulder in a small room, her participants sipped the healthy drink while listening to Sarmīte’s strategies for setting five-year goals in business and other practical tips. Žanete, an unemployed vocational teacher, told me about Sarmīte’s seminar, ‘she steered us all in such a positive way: “You can do it all, you are lucky that you are here! Look, those who are there walking outside, are not as lucky!” [laughing] She really made us think this way and we were really happy people those four days! [...] We became like relatives, kissing goodbyes, promising to meet again!’ Indeed, I also recalled an ‘after-effect’ of Sarmīte’s seminar, as the participants, including myself, emerged from the tiny room with a special spring to our step. For many, the seminars functioned as a state-sponsored space for psychological empowerment.

⁹⁶ My presence in this respect was an exception and it was agreed with the group that I may take notes of the meetings for research purposes.

Waiting

The ‘competitiveness-raising’ seminars rehearsed entrepreneurial citizenship, encouraging people to take action and provide everyday coping strategies and psychological tools for empowerment. Yet, the spatial and temporal order of the welfare programmes stood in stark contrast to the incessant activity that this state-sponsored rhetoric advocated. It was saturated with waiting. The waiting started with the registration process, as individuals usually had to spend several hours until their turn came just for having their personal details entered into the electronic data system. After this formal process was complete, an individual had to wait for about two months for the first meeting with their designated employment agent. Even though these appointments were scheduled for specific times, there were always people lining the walls of the narrow corridors at the unemployment office, sitting idly, and waiting. Some had come late or without an appointment, with the hope that they might get in. Sometimes the schedule was overrun and everyone had to wait. Among the unemployment office staff and ‘clients’ alike, conversations and comments focusing on ‘the line’ were ubiquitous. Distinctions would be commonly made between ‘morning lines’ and ‘afternoon lines’, ‘average lines’, ‘live lines’ and ‘lines by appointment’. A printed A4 note on one of the career councillor’s doors announced: ‘Admittance according to the order of queue!’ (*Pieņem rindas kārtībā*), a phrase that was reminiscent of a Soviet-era polyclinic. Īrisa, a 60-year old woman and frequent participant of the ‘competitiveness-raising’ seminars, complained to me that she saw no point in having to sit around for hours on end in the corridor when the appointment with her employment agent amounted to little more than a couple of clicks through the same electronic database of vacancies on the agent’s computer that Īrisa was already using at home. Yet, if she missed the mandatory appointment without a valid excuse, her ‘status’ (*statuss*) as an unemployed person, could be withdrawn. If this were to happen, the meagre unemployment

benefits and any possibility to take part in other active labour market programmes would be taken away from her.

While the visible idleness around the corridors and waiting rooms stood in ironic contrast to the rhetoric behind the seminar room doors, there were much more important forms of waiting that were entirely invisible. The very implementation of many of the active labour market programmes, offered upon registration, was also structured around waiting. If a person applied for a twelve-week training programme or a nine-month re-qualification course, it was common knowledge that they would have to wait for an indefinite amount of time until their turn came. At the time of my fieldwork, there were approximately 9,000 people ‘in line’ for training in Riga, which was estimated, by employment agents, to amount to a nine-month wait. Several of my informants had been waiting for months and, in some cases, over one year until they could train in computer skills, learn English, or pursue a new vocational education. None of the unemployed people that I spoke to had been able to start right away, as there was always a backlog of thousands of others who were already in line. Ārija, the accountant mentioned above, had decided to start a business as a gardener. This would be a second major requalification in her life, as she used to work at a chocolate factory before training as an accountant. Ārija considered herself exceptionally lucky to have received an opportunity to take the vocational course in gardening six months after applying. In some of the active employment programmes, waiting was a formal criterion for eligibility: one was only allowed to participate after having been unemployed for a certain number of months.⁹⁷ The only assistance that the unemployed people did not have to wait for was the aforementioned ‘competitiveness-raising’ seminars.

⁹⁷ There is a six-month waiting time before becoming eligible for a mobility assistance programme and the public works programme. Furthermore, in early 2011, there were about 1,000 people waiting to attend a several-month long training course on writing a business proposal (author’s interview with a civil servant at the Ministry of Welfare, 06.04.2011).

The importance of these vocational training programmes is brought into sharp relief when considering that the highest proportion of unemployed in Latvia are those with vocational education, obtained mostly during the Soviet period and now perceived to be out-dated by employers (Lipskis 2008). English and computer skills are also now routinely required. The recent economic crisis exacerbated this situation even further. Many former accountants and teachers could not find a new job in their professions due to a sudden fall in demand and needed to re-qualify. When interviewed on public radio, the head of the State Employment Agency attributed the problem with lines to insufficient funding (Paševica 2011). When I asked several retired civil servants about financial constraints in the work of the State Employment Agency, they denied that there had been persistent problems with obtaining sufficient funding. On the contrary, some of these once high-ranking officials noted that there were particularly generous funding opportunities from the European Union, already available during Latvia's accession process. None the less, the evidence suggests that the long queues for vocational training courses have been a persistent phenomenon in Latvia since the 1990's. As a report from 1998 observed, 'although a few unemployed respondents expressed reluctance to embark on learning a new profession in the present economic situation, those who [were] willing reported serious difficulties' (Dudwick et al 1998: 17). The report gave an example of Liepāja, the third largest city in Latvia, where out of 1,000 to 1,500 people who annually applied for training, only a fraction received the opportunity (e.g. in 1997, 347 people participated in various training programmes). The same report noted that those who undertook training had a higher chance of subsequently finding employment (Dudwick et al 1998: 17). In 2000, only 36.6 per cent of the 28,000 unemployed who applied for a re-qualification course across the country gained entrance. The rest had officially remained 'in line.'

Despite the ubiquity of both physical and virtual waiting, any mention of waiting or queues created anxiety among public officials and staff at the unemployment office. A high-

ranking civil servant working at Riga's unemployment centre stumbled over the word 'line' when she explained to me how the active labour market programmes worked. Immediately after mentioning that there was a line for the vocational courses, she corrected herself that it was not actually a line but rather people's names were put 'on a list.' The official went on to say that whenever 'a client' told her that they were 'waiting in line' for a course, she would point out to them that they were not 'in line' and were not 'waiting for anything', they simply had a queue number. Mentioning of lines was often avoided, even at the registration waiting room. A staff member handing out queue numbers for registration used to say in a euphemistic manner: 'You can go walk around for about two [or three] hours', estimating the waiting time for that person whilst avoiding referring to this as 'waiting'.

'Waiting' emerged as a bone of contention in the 'competitiveness-raising' seminars as well. For example, during a seminar on job interviews, a discussion arose regarding different channels to explore when looking for work. Aina, a trainer with a psychology degree, asked the group, 'so what would the Employment Agency be good for?' Silence fell upon the room. 'What do you think?' she insisted. After more silence, Aina gave the answer herself, preceded by a slight reprimand: 'You don't even know! For the courses!' [i.e. the vocational training courses]. She continued, 'people say, "I'm not being offered anything." But let me tell you, don't wait to be offered anything. Go and search yourself, go and apply yourself!' One of the participants, a man in his 20's, who had worked as a builder in Ireland, but returned to be with his young family, perked up, 'but where can I find out? I've been waiting for a month!' Another seminar participant turned to him with reproach: 'A month! Others have been waiting for two years already!' Hearing this dialogue, Aina energetically intervened: 'That is negligence, to be waiting for two years! If this is the case then it's one's own fault. If you just wait and wait and wait and don't ask then this can happen.' Then she admitted, though, that in

fact it may be the case, that one had to wait a year for the most popular courses, like English, Latvian as a second language, or computer skills.

The meanings of waiting and etatisation of time in neo-liberalism

Arjun Appadurai has proposed that capitalism, as much as being a system of institutionalised economic relations, is ‘a collective psycho-moral disposition’ (2011: 519). This means, for Appadurai, that its existence as an economic and cultural system depends on shared ‘bodily disposition[s]’, ‘sensibilit[ies]’, and ‘moral style[s]’ (ibid). In neo-liberal capitalism, the required bodily disposition displays movement and the moral style is expressed through activity and striving. As Boltanski and Chiapello point out in their analysis of contemporary capitalism, ‘to be doing something, to move, to change – this is what enjoys prestige, as against stability, which is often regarded as synonymous to inaction’ (2005: 155; see also Harvey in Verdery 1996: 57). The unemployed person is a disruptive figure in neo-liberal capitalism, with her perceived inactivity endangering the imagined moral style and bodily disposition of the modern citizen. The Latvian state is investing national and EU resources to foster entrepreneurial subjects. Drawing on notions of what is ‘new’, ‘European’, or ‘Western’, the ‘competitiveness-raising’ seminars define and attempt to rehearse ‘ideals of proper modern personhood’ (Hansen 2009: 20). Exercises for unlearning the learned helplessness are routinely carried out. If there are no jobs, then one can start a business or at least use the time, while out of the labour market, to work on oneself. Waiting around is perceived by civil servants and the seminar trainers as synonymous with waiting from the state – a subject position perceived and framed as inadequate in post-socialist Latvia.

This dangerous symbolism of waiting is further exacerbated by its Soviet connotations. Queuing for basic foodstuff and household goods is still ‘the living image of the Soviet way of life’ (Sinyavsky in Pesmen 2000: 30, see also Nikolaev 2000, 2005). Katherine Verdery has

suggested that waiting in lines was among many of the practices that contributed to the ‘etatisation of time’, i.e. the socialist state taking control over people’s time (Verdery 1996). Such ‘seizures of time’, exercised by the socialist state, ‘were basic to producing subjects who would not see themselves as independent agents’ (Verdery 1996: 56).⁹⁸ Waiting is perceived to be at odds with the kind of moral and bodily dispositions that are imagined as ‘modern’ and ‘European’. It is, in other words, read as a symptom of learned helplessness – the post-socialist condition diagnosed by reform experts in the early 1990’s, as discussed above.⁹⁹

There is yet another meaning to the verb *gaidīt* – ‘to wait’ – in Latvian, namely, ‘to expect’. This second meaning was invoked in an exchange between a broad-shouldered, middle-aged man and an employment agent at the registration room. Upon reaching the end of the brief registration process, the man said in an agitated tone that he had been working hard and paying taxes for many years, and now, having lost a job, was expecting some help from the state. The agent did not engage in a conversation with him and continued with the strictly scripted process of entering the man’s personal data into the electronic database. However, after he had left, she remarked loudly to the other colleagues and myself in the room that such a strong man, ‘a man built like an oak-tree’ (*vīrs kā ozols*), should just ‘go out there and work’, instead of waiting for assistance from the state. His claim for social rights was interpreted as passive reliance on the state, instead of taking charge of the situation himself. Demands on the state were delegitimised by the trainers through denouncing them as mere ‘waiting’ and labelling them as ‘out-dated,’ also in the seminars. The trainers often reminded their audiences, ‘don’t wait, nobody is going to hand you anything on a plate nowadays!’ Even when the

⁹⁸ Stephen Hanson has explored more broadly the Soviet state’s efforts at controlling time (1997). Bradatan (2005) writes on the political production of time in socialism and the kinds of effects that it had on individuals. But see e.g. Caldwell (2004: 111-114) on how the Soviet citizens retained control over their time despite these efforts by the state. Even the mundane activity of lining up was frequently infused with individual initiative and calculation.

⁹⁹ Elizabeth Dunn notes similar rhetorical juxtaposition of Soviet passivity and inefficiency with ‘post-Fordist’ efficiency. The docile, passive socialist subject is turned into ‘active, mobile [subject,] endowed with the ability to choose’ (2004: 165).

authors of the New Year poster decided on the words ‘stop whining, start living!’, the implicit message was that one should not expect welfare from the state or society but take charge of one’s own life. In these examples, the word *gaidīt* – ‘to wait/expect’ – is linked in the social imagination to a particular political ontology where the state is ‘a father who gives hand-outs to the children as he sees fit’ (Verdery 1996: 25). The citizens, in this model, *expect* these hand-outs and passively *wait* for them. Thus, the etatisation of time was not only part of the socialist state’s efforts to exercise total control over its citizens but also a feature of the Soviet ‘authoritarian welfare state’ (Cook 1993: 81; Aidukaite 2003: 410). Associations with the Soviet waiting interfere with the efforts of summoning new, decidedly *post-socialist* subjectivities.

Despite the discursive focus on activity and the denouncing of ‘waiting around,’ the interactions with the state perpetuate passivity and waiting. Registering job seekers for training programmes, then failing to allocate sufficient resources to provide the training, means that those who could become more productive participants of the labour market are instead kept in a state of limbo. By relegating individuals to ‘anxious, powerless waiting’, the etatisation of time continues (Bourdieu in Auyero 2012: 26). This etatisation of time is further entrenched by the requirement that the unemployed must wait before becoming eligible to participate in certain programmes, as well as through spacing the appointments with the employment agent between at least two-month periods. This highlights a paradox where, on the one hand, the civil servants and trainers seek to instil an enterprising ethic and on the other, waiting is engrained in the welfare policies and programmes for the unemployed.

This tension between activity and waiting has been noted by Jean-Francois Bayart as a general feature of the globalised world (2007: 267-290). Bayart observes that ‘the study of the techniques of body by which we constitute ourselves as “moral subjects” of globalisation leaves us with a paradox. The latter is deemed to be all acceleration and urgency. None the less,

it inculcates a huge discipline of waiting in us' (Bayart 2007: 267). He argues that 'the essential paradox of globalisation lies in this contradiction between economic and financial openness on the one side and, on the other, the coercive compartmentalisation of the international labour market and the obstacles placed in the way of the circulation of people' (Bayart 2007: 277-8). Bayart speaks of various groups of disadvantaged people – prisoners, labour migrants, asylum seekers, who are all relegated to passive waiting. Auyero also links the ubiquity of powerless waiting among the poor in Argentina as 'an artefact of both state's manipulation and neo-liberal policy' (2012: 155). In these cold, neo-liberal times,¹⁰⁰ one is not supposed to sit around idly and wait. Constant movement and activity is the norm. At the same time, neo-liberal politics across the globe have relegated many to waiting. Movement in the contemporary world is a privilege, disguised as the norm.

In Latvia, this tension has played out in a particularly acute way as the country has been channelling all its policy efforts towards 'catching up' with the West. The state-sponsored practices of responsabilisation, empowerment and waiting need to be seen in the context of a macro-temporality that characterises this particular socio-political moment in Latvia. In her study of Latvian discourses on emigration, Dace Dzenovska identifies it as transition temporality, marked by a lack of 'consciousness of the present' (2012: 170). The past is to be purged, the future is to be reached, and the present is only worthy for being a transition from the former to the latter. As this ethnography of the unemployment office documents, waiting is seen as endangering this process of catching up and arriving at the future, lingering instead in the ideologically worthless present.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ I borrow this phrase from the title of a conference 'Feminism and Intimacy in Cold, Neo-liberal Times' at Goldsmiths, University of London, 21 June 2013.

¹⁰¹ Such a transition temporality is by no means unique to the contemporary neo-liberal Latvia. In state socialism as well the present was ideologically worthless, as the proletariat was called to build a communist future.

Uncanny parallels

This coupling of rhetorical denouncing of waiting as ‘out of place’ and its simultaneous ubiquity, is symptomatic of the breaks and continuities with the Soviet era. The ethnographic observations presented in this chapter bring to light a number of parallels between the Soviet and post-1991 realities. Activity is the key attribute of the model citizen in both social orders. Both Soviet and neo-liberal biopolitics prioritise activity – and resulting productivity – as a criterion of worthiness. Both value speed and acceleration. Just like there were Stakhanovite brigades in state socialism, overfilling targets of production and beating the deadlines, now there is the rush to adapt, to be flexible, to deliver fast, to move where the labour market is growing, to reinvent oneself constantly through life-long learning and flexible, transferrable skills. Parallel to the ideologies of speed and productivity, both regimes also etatise time. Dependency on the state was produced by the Soviet regime in lines for groceries, for an apartment, for a car, in fitting oneself within the ‘taxonomies of help’ of the Soviet welfare state (Galmarini 2014), appropriating the categories for self-identification in the eyes of the state. In post-Soviet neoliberalism, the time of the marginalised groups is etatised through limited accessibility to welfare programmes, making people wait endlessly for the state’s help. The present is ideologically worthless not only in neoliberalism (Dzenovska 2012: 170), but similarly in socialism. Time – just as individual’s movements within the temporal axes – is always ideologically charged.

There are continuities between Soviet and neo-liberal biopolitics also in relying on individuals’ ‘work on self’ to institute the respective political regime. ‘Work on self’ may appear as a key element of the responsabilisation process that Rose and Miller (1992) identified early on as a characteristic of advanced liberalism. Yet, as a number of post-socialist scholars have noted, work on self was a central premise of the Soviet state socialism (Kharkhordin 1999, Zigon 2011, Matza 2012, Salmenniemi and Vorona 2014). Foucault (1984) analysed

Western histories of the care of the self, dating back to the Greco-Roman world. Therefore, rather than thinking of this self-work as a distinctly neo-liberal practice, we should treat it as historically varied ordinary ethics. If a political regime is sustained not only by institutional structures but also by regimes of subjectivity, as I argued in Chapter 1, then we can assume that such work of self-formation sustains any socio-political order.

These overlaps are neatly symbolised by the logo of the State Employment Agency (see Figure 7 on the next page). Considering this visual sign as ‘in itself a figure of speech’ (Mbembe 2001: 142), it invites multiple readings. As a senior civil servant explained to me, the logo represented a handshake between the employer and the employee whom the Employment Agency had helped meet. At the same time, the diagonal positioning of the two hands in the logo, where one comes as if from the bottom and the other one reaches down from the top appears to represent the state’s helping hand reaching out to the citizen. Such a reading is prompted by the common positioning of the state in the popular (and often scholarly) imagination as being ‘above’ society, or ‘on top’ of the social system (Ferguson and Gupta 2002). Indeed, when I would ask about the meaning of the logo in our conversations, civil servants and lay people alike often interpreted it as the state helping the citizen. The official interpretation, published in a handbook on the institution’s ‘visual identity’, hints at both of the above readings. It states:

‘The mission of the State Employment Agency is to form a bridge that joins together the employee and the employer, thus reducing unemployment. That is why our logo represents joining of two hands. It symbolises the key values of the Employment Agency: an invitation of co-operation and understanding, implicitly gives a feeling of support, security, and stability, as well as depicts an idea of purposefulness and development’ (NVA 2005: 3).



Figure 6. ‘Workers, everyone to the elections of Soviets!’ A Soviet propaganda poster by Gustavs Klucis.

Figure 7. Logo of the State Employment Agency.

The positioning of the ‘bottom’ hand in the logo closely resembles a Soviet propaganda poster by Gustavs Klucis where one large hand stretches diagonally upwards, followed by dozens of identical smaller hands (see Figure 6). This photo collage by Klucis is one of the many examples of constructivist oeuvre by this 20th century Latvian artist that were inspired by socialist ideals. It reads: ‘Workers, everyone to the elections of Soviets!’¹⁰² The subject’s hand reaching upwards towards the benevolent and almighty state in Klucis’ poster has now been re-interpreted as the individual’s hand engaging in a business hand-shake. However, the similarities between the two images are uncanny. Likewise, despite a shift from one normativity, to another, certain cultural forms, such as waiting, resemble older forms in ways that are ideologically charged and wrought with anxiety.

Conclusion

Treating welfare programmes for the unemployed as a ‘symptomatic space in the craft of governance’ (Stoler 2009: 7), this chapter has explored how forms of subjectivity become

¹⁰² In an example of travelling symbols, the logo of the EU Employment Service also depicts a hand, this time holding what looks like a EU passport (it was intended ‘to suggest many things – a contract, a passport, Europe itself’ (European Commission 2009: 20)). The hand is re-interpreted here as ‘the transmission of information, co-operation and the need to work hand-in-hand in a spirit of networking and teamwork’ (ibid).

problematized in state rhetoric. Learned helplessness and passivity are being treated in the seminar rooms, while psychological self-help and entrepreneurship are offered by the state as the two key avenues of help. Yet, an ethnographic observation of the everyday implementation of these policy programmes suggests a more complex reality than the neo-liberal rhetoric of individual responsibility discloses. I argue that the developmental vision of catching up with the West seeks to produce competitive individuals (as the title of the policy programme observed openly suggests) but at the same imposes a state of suspended life. The goal of catching up has been used by the governing elites to justify two waves of austerity, producing high unemployment levels as well as socio-economic precariousness and the suffering that accompanies both. The active labour market programmes, such as the ‘competitiveness-raising’ seminars, offer a specific type of assistance, geared towards self-help and psychological empowerment. Some of my informants, buoyed by the positivism of the seminars, would cheerfully tell me that when one loses a job one realises how little is actually needed and how many things in life are for free. Hand-made gifts are indeed more precious than ones bought in a pre-holiday rush. But one can only put life on hold for so long. The development strategy of constantly ‘tightening the belt,’ whilst waiting for a better future has resulted in many Latvians emigrating to countries where the bare minimum of life is attainable. But many of those who stay are living in a state of limbo, either due to a lack of jobs, welfare programmes that perpetuate waiting, or below-subsistence-level wages. In the global order of things, post-socialist states are constantly in ‘the “waiting room of history”: a permanent state of “not now, not yet”’, just like many third-world countries (Chakrabarty cited in Jeffrey 2010: 12). From the margins of Europe, this chapter has sought to throw light on policy programmes and political subjectivities that currently characterise such politics of waiting.

Chapter 4 The tyrannies of intimacy



Figure 8. A seminar room. Photo by author.

‘The state simply is not thinking!’, Silva, a 40-year-old unemployed accountant, kept repeating over her second cup of black coffee. I had met Silva in one of the seminars and we had since been chatting regularly about her experiences at the unemployment office, her attempts to find a job, and her life in general. The state was brought up quite often in utterances such as this, made by my informants at the unemployment office in casual conversations, as well as in public rhetoric. However, what kind of imagination of the state is doing the work here? What kind of political subjectivity is such an utterance sustained by and what does this tell us about post-socialist neo-liberalism? The title of this chapter invokes Achille Mbembe’s claim in his book *On the Post-Colony* (2001) that an intimate tyranny links state power and the post-colonial subject. This chapter will examine imaginations of the state and self, in relation to it, and the kinds of intimacies that are invoked here. Such an intimate bond felt with the state, I will argue, is also a cause of deep embarrassment when exposed because it is perceived by the

subject herself to be at odds with neo-liberal subjectivity. This chapter will probe the anxieties that surface in the narratives of job seekers and state agents and situate them in the context of post-Soviet reform process. As these ethnographic observations will show, it is more than just the anxiety about precarious economic conditions. What is at stake for civil servants and trainers, but as much for the people seeking the state's help, is the ideal of being a 'proper' European, democratic, 'modern' person.

Forms of political intimacy

What did Silva mean when she said that the state was not thinking? Her claim came amidst a fast, meandering narrative recounting her personal hardships along with a broader critique of the state of affairs in Latvia. Having lost her job as an accountant three years ago and unable to find a new position, Silva had decided to enrol on a Master's degree programme at the University of Latvia to become an archivist. Her elderly parents were paying her tuition fees, though she later admitted feeling embarrassed for having to accept financial support from her family at the age of 40. About to graduate two years later, Silva was beginning to realise that the few archives that existed in Latvia were not actually hiring. She could not even find a proper internship placement for the last semester of the programme. Silva related her story to me in frustration, not understanding why she had been admitted on a programme that there was, in reality, no demand for. We had been talking for three hours, I was hungry and tired but she seemed to be gaining energy with every iteration of the disarray that Latvia was in.

Silva's words caught my attention because I had heard them so many times before. '*Valsts nedomā*' / 'the state is not thinking' is one variation in a repertoire of common tropes for addressing the state, both in private conversations and in the public rhetoric. A Latvian respondent living in Ireland declared to researchers inquiring about his motives for leaving, that '[in Latvia, the] government does not think about the people. In Ireland, one can feel that the

government thinks about all people' (Indāns quoted in Eglītis and Lāce 2009: 342). A novel written by a Latvian author who picked mushrooms on an Irish farm along with other Latvian emigrants described her co-workers as people who had felt 'unneeded, left-over' in Latvia (Muktupāvela in *ibid*: 343). In other instances this lack of 'thinking' is framed as 'forgetting'. For example, a city mayor from Latgale, the most deprived region of Latvia, while participating in political debates on the national television, compared people living in Latgale to adolescents left home alone and starting to do 'unsightly things', parents having forgotten about them. He announced that the Latgalians were organising a trip to the President of Latvia to tell him about their abandonment and plead with him to turn the government's attention to them. In an advertisement for quick cash loans, a similar sentiment was exploited to summon potential customers. Large colourful letters shouted from the sides of public transport minibuses zipping through Riga, 'Has the state forgotten about you? We haven't!'

The feeling of not being thought about and of being forgotten created resentment that was particularly acute when losing one's means of livelihood. For example, Aivars, a road engineer, had lost his job in the public sector amidst the economic crisis that saw thousands of state employees being laid off to reduce budgetary expenses. His employment prospects were not looking hopeful as the economy was recovering very slowly. The unemployment benefits would match his salary for the first three months, after this they would reduce gradually, eventually stopping altogether after nine months. He was told at the unemployment office that there was a long waiting list for attending the three-month vocational courses that he had been hoping to enrol on. Aivars felt the precariousness of his situation acutely and was bitter that the taxes he had been diligently paying meant 'nothing' when he lost his job:

'Yes, if there is somebody who has not paid any taxes at all and there are such people among us, he is in the same category as I am. [He is] the 9001st in the queue [for the courses] while I am the 9000th. Well, that's a totally nihilistic attitude from the state

towards the private [individual]... and yet they want that person, having received such an attitude [from the state], to... he is going to be a fool if he keeps paying those taxes to get nothing in return! There is no differentiation in place. And that's why people, in the 1990s had a [good] attitude towards the state, well, at the beginning, when the state was founded, a few thousand went on the demonstrations, they were hoping for something. [They were hoping] for a [positive] attitude from the state and were ready to give a lot themselves, some perhaps even their whole heart and soul. But when you get nihilistic [treatment] once, then twice, and it does not change over the years, then... that love of the state [*valsts mīlestība*] dissipates for many. That's why many are leaving the state [*aizbrauc no valsts*] [i.e. emigrating]!'

We can guess that Aivars is speaking of himself here, experiencing the 'state's attitude' as hurtful, and his love towards the state as unrequited. His intimate feelings of affection have turned into bitterness.

Whilst the oft-expressed bitterness of my informants was understandable given their truly difficult circumstances, the fact that the state was invoked in such familial, intimate terms – 'love', 'forgetting', 'thinking', 'having an attitude' – suggested a particular form of political imagination. Sociologists and anthropologists have studied the state as an idea, a fantasy sustained through the act of imagining (Abrams 1988 [1977], Rose, J. 1996, Hansen and Stepputat 2001, Navaro-Yashin 2002, 2012, Aretxaga 2003, 2005). What was at stake in these "'fantasies" for the state' that my Latvian informants engaged in (Navaro-Yashin 2002: 4)? It is important to note that the query; 'why isn't the state thinking, why does it not care?' was made at the affective register (cf. Aretxaga 2005: 171). This style of language that my informants used and that was common in the Latvian public sphere evoked an *intimate* bond with the state. Can we call it *political intimacy*? What are its terms, what are its histories?

Is it a form of nostalgia for the Soviet ‘authoritarian welfare state’ that insisted on taking care of its people (Aidukaite 2003: 410, see also Cook 1993: 81)? As discussed in Chapter 2, one was tied to the state’s power through the two mundane and essential domains of labour and need. As the state defined the individuals’ needs and then insisted on its monopoly to satisfy them, forms of subjectivity emerged corresponding to this ‘architecture of need’ (Haney 2002). Furthermore, lives were written through surveillance practices, self-censorship, and fear.

Intimate bonds between the Soviet state and the citizen also thrived in specific ‘zones’ or ‘fields of social and political comfort’ (Klumbyte 2011: 659). While the official public sphere was limited to formalised discourses and official rituals, Neringa Klumbyte identifies the Soviet Lithuanian humour and satire journal *Šluota* as one such specific ‘zone’ of ‘shared meanings and values’ where citizens could experience ‘relations of power entailing mutual closeness and belonging’ to the state (2011: 659-663).¹⁰³ *Šluota* was sponsored by the Communist Party but the ‘officially sanctioned laughter was also infused with and mediated by private emotions and values’ (ibid: 659). Its writers engaged in satire that was often directed at those in power, or the system they oversaw. Klumbyte insists that this ‘laughter cannot be easily classified as a performance of resistance or support for the regime’ (ibid: 659). Rather, it created a form of political intimacy between the power and its subjects, a form of ‘co-existence’, ‘togetherness’, and ‘dialogue’ (ibid). In such zones, ‘the distinctions between the state and the citizen, the public and the private, the hegemonic and the sincere, the powerful and powerless lose their analytic relevance’ (ibid).¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Apart from intimate bonds with the state, the state socialist shortage economy created also close networks among citizens (Ledeneva 1998, Dunn 2005).

¹⁰⁴ Yurchak argues, similarly, for understanding the Soviet subject beyond the categories of submission or opposition in his analysis of groups of late Soviet artists. They claimed they were living outside politics, neither supporting the Soviet regime nor resisting it. Yurchak claims it was a form of ‘alternative politics’: ‘Instead of challenging the state by occupying an oppositional subject position,

Through the various articulations that this authoritarian welfare state worked, its epistemology, its ‘ways of being and knowing’ (Chalfin 2010: 242), functioned at the level of affect and body, as much as it did at the level of formal and everyday rationalities. Analysing the effects of authoritarian political epistemologies in post-colonial societies, Achille Mbembe has observed the subtle and complex intimate bonds tying together the state and its subjects:

‘at any given moment in the postcolonial historical trajectory, the authoritarian mode can no longer be interpreted strictly in terms of “surveillance,” and “the politics of coercion.” The practices of ordinary people cannot always be read in terms of “opposition to the state,” “deconstructing power,” and “disengagement.” In the postcolony, an intimate tyranny links the rulers with the ruled [...]. If subjection appears more intense than it might be, it is also because the subjects of the *commandement* have internalized the authoritarian epistemology to the point where they reproduce it themselves in all the minor circumstances of daily life, such as social networks, cults and secret societies, culinary practices, leisure activities, modes of consumption, dress styles, rhetorical devices, and the political economy of the body. It is also because, were they to detach themselves from these ludic resources, they would lose the possibility of multiplying their identities.’ (Mbembe 2001: 128)

Mbembe speaks of an intimate tyranny holding together the citizen and the state. He points here to the subtle ways in which individual subjectivities are tied to, or embedded in, the authoritarian power. Another scholar of African politics, Jean-Francois Bayart, similarly remarks on the positive feeling of being a subject, often obscured due to political correctness (2009: xlviii). Both in Mbembe and Bayart’s Africa and in post-Soviet Latvia, it is an

these people carved out a subject position that the state could not recognize in “political” terms and therefore could not easily define, understand, and control. This was a challenge to the state’s sovereign powers of defining and imposing political subjectivities’ (2008: 200).

imagination of the state that is very different from the one present in societies that have lived under a liberal rule for several generations. The state is at the centre of one's everyday reality.

Rather than juxtaposing the Soviet Latvian republic with the post-Soviet Latvian state, as is common in the popular imagination and often also academic discourse, it may be more helpful to think of the centrality of the state as further reinforced by the national independence movement of the late 1980s – early 1990s. To draw again on Katherine Verdery's writing, nationalist political imagination works according to a similar principle as the socialist one. Namely, both operate with a notion of total unity of the people and the state as the ultimate expression of this unity (Verdery 1996). The newly re-established Latvian state became the symbolic expression of the blood ties that were perceived as bonding the nation. Furthermore, the independent state was imagined also, with great hope, as the guarantor of the well-being of the *ethnos*.¹⁰⁵ When the post-Soviet Latvian state is perceived as unable to nurture its *ethnos*, there is a sense of betrayal. Begona Aretxaga notes that there is always such a tension at the centre of the imagination of the state:

'The confluence of violence and paternalism, of force and intimacy, sustains the state as an object of ambivalence, an object of resentment for abandoning its subjects to their own fate and one desired as a subject that can provide for its citizens (Wendy Brown 1995; Ramirez 2001). The state is split into good and bad state, triggering an imaginary of the state in which desire and fear are entangled in a relation of misrecognition from which one cannot be extricated.' (Aretxaga 2005: 268)

Political intimacy, in my framing of it here, refers to the complex bond with the state – a (desired but non-functioning) welfare state and a national state that embodies the *ethnos*.

¹⁰⁵ See Eglitis (2002) on the ways that the Latvian state was constituted in the popular imagination in the 1990s.

When Aivars talked about the love of the state dissipating, he referred back to the early 1990s and the popular demonstrations for independence. It was the nation-state promise that he invoked and that, he felt, had now been betrayed. Echoing a similar sentiment of betrayal, Silva suddenly threw this barrage of questions at me later in our conversation: ‘Latvian people from the US, from abroad, from Latvia donated their silver Lats, gold, everything else [at the beginning of the 1990s]. Where is it all? Where are the paintings? Where is all the silverware? Where is all the money? Thousands! Where is it? [...] Those five Lats [silver] coins, gold, silverware, people donated so much, without any reward, without signatures, without anything! But where is it all now?!’ Silva had a feeling that somehow all that was begun in the 1990s had been squandered. Thus, we see in this trope of the non-thinking state a critique of the weak welfare state but also at the same time an appeal to the nation-state. It is the state as a guarantee of a social order¹⁰⁶ that is being called to account, rather than the image of the former socialist welfare state per se.

Cultural intimacy and the gaze from abroad

To return to my fieldwork site, the unemployment office in Riga was a place where appeals to the state could be heard frequently in mundane encounters between civil servants and citizens. However, these encounters often turned into instances of contestation as certain ways of imagining the state – and oneself in relation to it – were rendered problematic and ‘out of place’ (as exemplified in the episode with the man ‘like an oak-tree’ in Chapter 3). The active labour market programme that I observed, ‘Competitiveness-Raising Activities’, was designed to help re-integrate the unemployed into the labour market. However, as discussed in the previous chapter, it also provided psychological guidance to people who had lost work.

¹⁰⁶ I borrow here Thomas Blom Hansen’s framing of the state as a ‘guarantee of a certain social order, a measure of justice and protection from violence’ (Hansen 2001: 222).

While the state was not often explicitly mentioned during these seminars, the imagination of the state – or oneself as a political subject – was at stake. Stark juxtapositions were drawn between ‘nowadays’ vs. ‘then’ and the new vs. old ‘mentality’ and ‘thinking’. The Soviet socialist ways of thinking were juxtaposed here to post-Soviet, liberal democratic, ‘modern’ ones. In the trainers’ rhetoric, ‘thinking,’ ‘head,’ and ‘mentality’ were all commonly identified as in need of ‘updating’. The following vignette from my field notes illustrates how such comparisons were drawn.

This morning’s workshop was called ‘How to Actively Search for a Job’. The trainer, Aina, whom we met briefly in Chapter 3, was a woman in her late 50s, with a teacher-like demeanour. She had been working for the Employment Agency since the 1990s, initially as a staff member and now as a contractor. On this particular day, Aina had an especially challenging group. Gatis, a young man in his 20s who had returned from Ireland where he had worked as a builder, kept questioning Aina’s points and cracking jokes that made the rest of the group laugh and thus disrupt the otherwise rather serious air that Aina’s seminars usually had. It was after mid-day already, and we had covered job search techniques emphasizing ‘utilizing social networks’ and being otherwise an ‘active’ job seeker. Aina explained, ‘As far as job search is concerned, I can warmly advise you to actively plan this process every week. Make a list of how many places you plan to go to, how many [letters of application] you’ll write.’ Interrupting her, Gatis perked up: ‘I never plan anything, I wake up in the morning, check the Internet, and then check it again during the day and in the evening!’ Aina calmly rejected his approach as unproductive and pointed to the whiteboard where a list of job search methods was still visible from the morning part of the seminar. Gatis scanned it and concluded, ‘I’ve covered all of those. What am I missing? Myself!’ He was referring to one of the items of the list, which identified ‘ourselves’ [*paši*] as an instrument of job search (see Figure 9 on the next page). As Aina had explained, it meant writing unsolicited applications and other forms of taking

initiative. Unwilling to engage any further with Gatis, Aina returned to her point about the usefulness of planning: ‘As soon as we put it on paper, it organises us. It organises us and we can control the situation.’ As if to enforce the veracity of her point, she added, ‘*Abroad, children are already taught how to plan in the first grades*’. The audience was silent and Aina concluded with great import, ‘because, if a person plans, he accomplishes more.’ Whether tired of launching his tirades or indeed consenting – or both – even Gatis accepted Aina’s point in silence with the rest of the group.



Figure 9. A flipchart identifying channels for finding a job (a close-up of the Figure 8 above). The list reads: ‘Internet, acquaintances, newspapers, ourselves, Employment Agency, [unclear], own business, abroad’. Photo by author.

Exemplified in this episode, ‘abroad’ is still a commonplace category in the everyday hierarchies of value in Latvia. The eagerness to modernise and ‘return to Europe’ has been at the heart of post-socialist reform processes across Eastern Europe. These ‘European’ aspirations have long roots. ‘Eastern Europe’ has been historically constituted by a particular Western gaze, framed as not quite European enough and, orientalised as the mysterious, backward territory bordering the wild Russia (see Wolff 1994). In the Soviet times, the

‘Imaginary West’ had a central place in collective consciousness of the Soviet citizens (Yurchak 2006). It was the ‘Other’ to daydream about and with respect to which desires were formed. Thus, it functioned as an important factor for Soviet subjectivities. But after 1991, it was not only the gaze towards the West but the West itself was imagined as gazing at the post-socialist subject. This gaze became institutionalized by the many foreign advisers and monitors who regularly visited Latvia and dispatched reports on progress in various areas of reform. However it was also institutionalised by local upholders of ‘the European way’, such as mass media, politicians, or bureaucrats – whoever felt to be in charge of the civilising mission at a particular moment.¹⁰⁷ ‘Europe’ was equated with ‘normalcy’ and the political and socio-economic reforms were meant to return Latvia, just like the other post-socialist states, to this normalcy (e.g. Rausing 2004, Eglitis 2002). Now this Imaginary West is not (only) something where desirable consumer goods or stylish music comes from, it is also where the moral behaviour of even children is considered superior to adults ‘here’, at home. When Aina said that children ‘abroad’ set goals already in early grades at school, it was this fantasy of the ‘normal’ West that she was invoking. What was being implied in these anecdotes were notions of ‘learned helplessness’ and an excessive reliance on the state, along with alleged inability ‘to plan’, i.e. to take responsibility for one’s life, and this created a feeling of embarrassment that lurked in the room.

When one invoked the Soviet past, it was usually to contrast it to ‘nowadays’. For instance, Juris, the psychologist whom we met in the previous chapter and who led seminars on job search techniques and on ‘Overcoming Psychological Barriers in the Job Search Process’, liked to use an example of a hypothetical drunkard uncle Vanya. In the Soviet kolkhoz the tractor-driver Vanya could fail to show up at work for a week but still keep his job because he

¹⁰⁷ The perceived ‘backwardness’ is most often an object of scorn and moralizing by the media discourses (framing a news piece as ‘only 20% of inhabitants find it important to make monthly savings’ or ‘people still prefer using wells rather than modern water pipes’) and politicians’ discourses (‘we need to be a proper European nation’, ‘people became irresponsible borrowers before the crisis’).

was the only one who could drive the vehicle in that kolkhoz. As Juris explained, in the capitalist labour market, there were many people competing for jobs and one could not rely on being the only option anymore. When making these comparisons, the Soviet was often parodied as grotesque, silly, or outright absurd. Similarly, Viktorija, the other trainer introduced in the previous chapters, explained the necessity for workers to be flexible and to be able to adapt to many different jobs during one's life-time and contrasted this to 'the Soviet factory'. In this stereotypical factory, she told us that pens were produced, which nobody wanted to buy. However, this lack of demand was addressed simply by building more storage as a place to store the unpopular product, rather than improving or abandoning its production. By smirking at this absurd praxis, as Viktorija's audience did, it was made clear to everyone that each one of us in the room was on the right side of the normative distinction being drawn.

At the same time, the trainers, who were usually middle-aged and had themselves grown up in the Soviet Latvia, occasionally invoked this common heritage to 'break the ice'. Thus, Juris, who was ethnic Latvian, frequently used Russian words and expressions during his seminars. He would sometimes tell his audience an entire joke in Russian and then go on to translate it for me (my Russian was mediocre, being of a younger generation and having grown up in an ethnic-Latvian town in the northern part of the country). On numerous occasions I heard him deliver quotes to his audiences from *Kidnapping, Caucasian Style* (*Kavkazskaya plennitsa*) – a Russian comedy of 1960s that was wildly famous across the Soviet Union. Explaining the capitalist economy, he would tie in funny examples on Soviet kolkhozs, shortages, and queues for sausage. Anete, a psychologist in her 30s who liked to use the NIKE slogan mentioned previously, raised the example of Alla Pugacheva to explain what charisma meant (arguably useful to exude at a job interview). Pugacheva, a Russian singer enjoying steady popularity since the 1960s, was a celebrity that everybody in the room knew, rather than Thomas Edison or Henry Ford who had featured in Anete's other inspirational stories. Thus,

such references often seemed to create an environment where people felt comfortable as most of them shared, and could relate to, this cultural knowledge.

These exercises in ‘updating of mentalities’ relied on mobilising another kind of intimacy in interactions between state agents and unemployed citizens than the one that was invoked earlier by Silva or Aivars. *Cultural intimacy* was at work here – a sense of closeness with one’s compatriots predicated upon embarrassment over some features they shared as members of a nation. It is a concept coined by anthropologist Michael Herzfeld. In his study of Greece, Herzfeld points to a range of cultural practices and attitudes ‘that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality, the familiarity with the bases of power that may at one moment assure the disenfranchised a degree of creative irreverence and at the next moment reinforce the effectiveness of intimidation’ (2005: 3). Herzfeld notes how ‘today, in this supposedly post-colonial era, the “idea of the West” continues to occupy a surprisingly durable position at the apex of the cultural hierarchy of value’ (ibid: 66). This normative weight that accompanies cultural intimacy has been further explored by Thomas Blom Hansen in his analysis of an Indian township in South African city of Durban. Hansen identifies ‘two powerful external gazes in which Indianness must be performed’ (2012: 80) – ‘the general so-called mainstream hierarchy of accents, styles of consumption, dress, forms of domesticity, styles of Christianity, and global commercial trends and popular culture’, while ‘[t]he other powerful gaze has historically been that of the Indian elite and middle classes [who] strive to purify Hindu practices and retain Indian vernaculars’ (2012: 81). Hansen argues that, ‘[s]queezed between these powerful gazes, the language and practices of the charou [the working-class Indians living in South Africa] inevitably appear imperfect, if not morally deficient’ (ibid).

The dynamics of cultural intimacy have been discussed in the post-socialist context by Alexander Kiossev (2002). He analysed the south-European/Balkan subjectivities, stressing the

hegemonic ideas of 'Europe' but also how in the 1990s there was a counter-movement against the Westernisation one. Kiossev describes how through a revival of distinctly Balkan styles of music and other forms of popular culture, what was performed was 'the lack of popular will to be Westernlike (a rejection not only of the current political slogan "on the way to Europe", but also of the old Balkan perception of the West as a kind of secular transcendence)' (ibid: 184).

The Balkans examined here by Kiossev appear to be, however, more of an exception rather than the norm. As discussed in Chapter 2, an embracing of 'the West' and an annihilation of the socialist past, due to embarrassment it causes, has been common across the former state socialist societies (Giordano and Kostova 2002: 77-78). This anxiety of Latvians about being tainted by the Soviet/Russian 'Other' has had adverse effects both at the individual as well as the institutional level. Anthropologist Vieda Skultans observed in the 1990s that life stories of people suffering from mental illnesses were told 'as a chronicle of the penetration and ultimate destruction of core Latvian values by Russian habits and traditions. (...) Phrases such as "We've learnt that from them", or "That's been brought over from there" or "That's what we have become" recur both in narratives and in ordinary speech. Identity is perceived as invaded by otherness. The new identity is one of which people are ashamed and which sets them apart' (Skultans 1998: 126). Institutionally, citizenship and language policies have been adopted as a response to this anxiety. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, those inhabitants who could not prove that they were descendants of the Latvian citizens of the independent state of 1918-1940 were denied citizenship. These were mostly ethnic Russians or their descendants, who had immigrated during the Soviet period. They could now acquire citizenship by undergoing a nationalisation process (with history and language tests) but a significant share of people are still 'non-citizens' or 'aliens' as a result of this policy.¹⁰⁸ At the beginning of the 1990s, as

¹⁰⁸ In 1995, about 29% of the population were deemed 'non-citizens'. By 2014, the share of 'non-citizens' has dropped to 13%.

factories were closing down and unemployment levels were soaring, the Employment Law stipulated that only those citizens who spoke the state language (i.e. Latvian) were eligible for the services of the Employment Agency, including unemployment benefits. The institution would not serve those who did not speak Latvian and could not present a Latvian language certificate. This regulation excluded a significant share of the population. As Latvia was increasingly pressed throughout the 1990s by the European institutions to loosen its discriminatory policies towards non-Latvians, this rule was abandoned. Nonetheless, government institutions still monitor language use across a range of areas of social life and, for example, issue administrative protocols to employees of certain professions who cannot demonstrate a sufficient mastery of Latvian language (Dzenovska 2013).¹⁰⁹

The everyday life necessarily messes up these neat divisions that policies and legal documents have sought to create. The Soviet past, and especially the popular culture of that era as well as the knowledge of Russian language itself, serves as both a source of insiderhood and embarrassment. Speaking Russian in public, especially in front of foreigners, is often condemned by ethnic Latvians. However, it is still common practice to switch to Russian if talking to an ethnic Russian in the work place or on the street and tell old anecdotes in Russian. Many watch TV channels broadcast from Moscow, while there is at the same time an increasing worry in the public sphere about the kind of grip that Russia is still exercising over Latvia in this way. The wide range of Russian swearwords that have become part of the local vernacular have only been partially replaced – or rather, perhaps complemented - by English equivalents (Latvian swearwords exist, of course, but often seem to lack the punch). Films and music from the Soviet period are still widely known among Latvians who grew up during that

¹⁰⁹ In 2014, a draft of a preamble to the Latvian Constitution is being considered by the Parliament, seeking to define in legal terms what ‘the Latvian identity’ is and what cultural heritage it relies upon. Christian and Latvian pagan traditions are listed, while the Soviet period is described as an occupation that brought about prosecutions and repressions of Latvians. A philosopher in a recent TV debate denounced this document as a mere product of fear (Tīrons 2014).

time and some of this heritage lives on. When I was visiting my friends in Riga to celebrate New Year's Eve together last year, the TV was playing the Soviet classic *Ironiya sudby, ili S legkim parom!* (*The Irony of Fate, or Enjoy your Banya!*). It is a movie that was traditionally watched on New Year's Eve across the Soviet Union. When the movie would end on one channel, we only had to click briefly through other channels, both Latvian and Russian, to find it playing again. My friends were anticipating the best lines and we were enjoying the funniest parts over and over again, like one of the main characters, Ipolit, taking a shower with his fancy winter coat on, in a frenzy of jealousy.

In Latvian there is an epithet 'Soviet product' (*padomju produkts*).¹¹⁰ The phrase 'Soviet product', when referring to others, is openly dismissive, as it is used, to give an example, to denounce a political opponent as someone who listens to trade unions.¹¹¹ When referred to oneself, usually not publicly, it signals a sense of inadequacy and inability to 'modernize' oneself sufficiently. A university professor criticised recent municipality election results in Riga (where the winning party was run by an ethnic Russian and advocating, if in a populist way, more left-wing policies) as a symptom of the 'disease of Sovietism' (*Sovjetisma slimība*). She identified it as 'low individual responsibility, ignorance or excusing of over-spending by those in power, inefficiency (*nesaimnieciskums*), corruption, low national consciousness, ethnic borderlines and a view of those in power as the masters of all the social benefits' (IR 2013). Similarly, the common Soviet heritage was invoked by the trainers at the seminars, not only for bonding and ease, but also for putting much more starkly into

¹¹⁰ Similarly, in southern Spain one can hear people say 'We are medio moro [half Moorish]' (Maddox cited in Herzfeld 2005), or in Greece – people identifying themselves as 'varvari' (barbarians).

¹¹¹ E.g., 'Ušakovs like a true Soviet product will listen to the request of the trade union and Bemhens will stay in his position. How comical that employees decide on their boss.' ('Ušakovs kā īstens padomju produkts ieklausīsies arodbiedrību lūgumā un Bemhens turpinās strādāt. Cik komiski darbinieki lemj par priekšnieku') (Pulks 2011).

perspective ‘the battle’ the attendees faced. Expecting assistance from the state was interpreted as yet another sign of being a Soviet product.

Eurorenovation

My informants were often ambivalent about the Soviet heritage. Aivars, whom we met earlier in this chapter, expressed it with relation to his own vocation. As a road engineer, he was preoccupied with what he thought was an extremely slow progress on renovations of various infrastructure. Very carefully pronouncing his words, separating them with brief pauses, as if laying out crucial evidence, Aivars explained to me during one of our conversations:

A: All the infrastructures, all that had been created in those USSR times, well... as much as we reject the USSR, actually a lot was built during the Soviet times. In the industry where I work, in the road industry, we are still using the roads that were built during the Soviet times.

L: Yes?

A: Yes. There is hardly anything at all that has been created anew [*no jauna radies ir tik cik melns aiz naga*]. All the roads that have been built [were built] during the Soviet times. During these twenty years [of independence], we have built anew the Saulkrasti roundabout, now we are building a road from... from... to Koknese, Tīnūži to Koknese. But that one too – the existing road is being renovated. [Only] the Saulkrasti roundabout has been built from scratch at a quality level. That’s all. And that is... 100 kilometres. And we inherited 20,000 kilometres. That proportion is enormous.

[...]

The hospitals, the schools, nothing new has been built. Everybody is studying in those same schools. Those same Soviet hospitals. Only now they are renovated, a little bit modernised, some new equipment has been bought. Well, the situation is improving, of course. But the heritage is from those times. We have not created 10% anew. We are still using 90%. So... and from scratch... it's not even fair to ask from those people that they will suddenly...

L: ...be somehow different...

A: ... and will begin everything... that heritage. That whole generation that comes from those times, they are all quite corrupted. Used to taking from the state anything that is not tied [*pieraduši no valsts paņemt to, kas nav piesiets*]. [Aivars clears his throat.] And to create a new... a new life, a new society with such an attitude, well, it is quite difficult.

For Aivars, the slow progress with reconstructing or building anew is linked to the entire post-Soviet transition process. The Soviet roads and the corrupted minds are of the same heritage. Though he notes pragmatically the usefulness of the old infrastructure, his analysis has rueful undertones when he concludes, 'we are in our nappies still. When the Latvian state was founded in the 1990s, nobody had gone to school or anything... they simply took over the [old] model that is... so to say, the one that the USSR had [implemented] and tried to improve it with all sorts of capitalist tendencies (*centās to uzlabot ar kapitālistiskiem visādiem nu tādiem ievirzījumiem*).'⁷ His concern that we are still driving on the same roads and have not built new ones can serve as an allegory for the dual sentiments regarding the post-Soviet self.

Renovation, whether metaphorical or physical, is frequently a matter of concern in post-Soviet Latvia. The head of the State Chancellery, effectively the chief civil servant in the country, announced recently in a polemic article published online:

‘The news that has spread about municipality and state administration acting inefficiently confirms the lack of responsibility against the inhabitants – the state tax payers. One has to draw conclusions about the low level of culture among several institutions and their distorted value system that has been inherited from the Soviet times, namely, that the property of the state does not belong to anyone and at the same time to everybody, that it does not need to be spared and can be handled inefficiently. [...] The current situation suggests that good governance values and principles in the state administration have disappeared and cosmetic changes will not suffice. A capital renovation of values needs to be undertaken in the consciousness of state administration employees (*valsts pārvaldes darbinieku apziņā!*)’ (Dreimane 2013)

As Aivars has suggested, not only the consciousness has needed renovation but also the infrastructure built during the Soviet era. The latter also has moral implications. For instance, household renovations in the 1990s and 2000s had pervasively gained the label of ‘*eiroremonts*’ – a literal translation would be ‘eurorenovation’. This meant that, for those who could afford it, gone were the draughty wooden window frames and patterned wallpapers or coloured ornaments rolled straight onto the walls. Private apartments and public institutions alike were visually and materially updated to resemble what were imagined to be more ‘European’ spaces. Aesthetically, this practice usually meant white plastic window frames, pastel-coloured walls (salmon or mint shades were popular), hanging ceilings, laminate floors, and arched doorways. The rooms where the seminars took place at the Employment Agency and in various other locations were usually done up according to this new standard. Only the sparse furnishings were somewhat at odds with the usually purposefully flashy style of *eiroremonts* – basic light wood desks and chairs, similar to those found in schools, were the only objects to fill the small rooms. The furniture was bought for European money as stickers with the yellow-starred flag on the wooden legs manifested. As for private apartments, there

were many who still could not afford such renovations. Therefore, if somebody had got *eiroremonts* in their apartment, it was said with a sense of pride. In rental listings, an apartment with *eiroremonts* meant higher asking price. Yet, this re-make can rarely be ‘complete’. Most of the renovated apartments are in Soviet-built blocks of flats, so-called *khrushchevkas* (their building started during Nikita Khrushchev’s rule in the 1960s).¹¹² The vital infrastructures, such as the heating and water pipes are still the same old Soviet ones.¹¹³

Going to ‘the real Western countries’

Daina’s story gives an insight into this re-orientation of ‘thinking’ according to new hierarchies of knowledge and value. Daina had been working as a German language teacher at a secondary school for thirteen years. She was made redundant from the school as the number of pupils choosing German as their second foreign language had been decreasing in the recent years. English and Russian were the languages that dominated. Moreover, education was one of the sectors where the government austerity measures meant steepest funding cuts and school managements were desperately looking for ways to save money. To help Daina get a small additional income to supplement the unemployment benefit, however, the school had re-hired her to work for two months as a project co-ordinator for an EU-funded project. When I phoned Daina, she invited me to the school. Located in one of the suburbs of Riga, amidst a monotone scenery of apartment blocs, interspersed with two-storey private houses, the school was an island of activity and buzz. Daina, who moved through the corridors with embodied familiarity, greeting other staff members and children, was clearly distraught at having to leave the place. As we found an empty room and sat down to talk, she described her ordeal:

¹¹² See Shevchenko on the cultural meanings of *khrushchevkas* in Moscow (2009: 199).

¹¹³ Stephen Collier (2011) has explored the post-Soviet life of pipes, built during the state socialist years, from a perspective integrating Actor-Network Theory with Foucauldian analyses.

D: I was actually in shock from the layoff. [...] and my family as well, I am about to get divorced from my husband and as my children went to England until the spring, all that together was a bit too much and so my condition was quite unpleasant. If you have always worked and so on and now for the first time in your life you are in this situation... and so I thought it all over and thought it over and I thought I was not good for anything else at all. You know, do something else. I could not imagine where I could even go. So my nerves were quite worked up, I couldn't sleep or concentrate. And so my family doctor [GP] suggested that I went to a doctor and I went to the doctor and I got prescribed anti-depressants. Anti-depressants... and then I went to *Marta*... Oh, first I went to the trade union, to the council of teachers' trade union and I consulted a lawyer there. And she said that I could in theory ask for some bigger layoff compensation, since my working seniority [*stāžs*] in pedagogy is 16 years, of which 13 years in this school. But I felt I was in such a state that I was not able to demand anything, that I better... well, that I'm simply not able to ask for it. Because that ordeal of being fired and of losing in that battle of competitiveness [*ka tanī konkurences cīņā tu zaudē*], you know, it was so big that I could no more go somewhere asking for something. But it helped me a little bit that I started going around those institutions and overall getting to know my rights. They said I had to go to the Employment Agency, register as unemployed, that for three months I'll get a bigger [benefit], well, they told me the scheme.

L: At the trade union?

D: Yes. The trade... that is the only thing that I have received from the trade union! I am a member of the trade union for all these past years, some 7, 8 years, and... that's all the help that has been received. I have always paid those dues and now for the first time... yes... [...] When this happened to me, nobody in fact defended me, nothing.

[The only help was] when I went to them and received this [lawyer's] consultation and they told me clearly, which also calmed me down, that in the next four years the situation will not be getting better as the number of teachers is constantly being reduced.

Daina invokes her *stāžs* (working seniority, from *stazh* in Russian) and trade union membership as bases for entitlement. *Stāžs* was a key element in one's claims to the state in the Soviet Union. The number of years an individual had worked served as a token of their service to the collective cause and thus as a basis for receiving help when in need (Galmarini 2012: 41). Daina speaks, however, of her exhaustion from pursuing help. Perhaps she recognises that there would not be much she would accomplish in terms of entitlement, apart from the standard unemployment benefit. At the unemployment office, she had been already told that any training in computer literacy or English, the two most commonly requested skills by employers, would not be available until some five months later. The teachers' union was one of the few trade unions to keep functioning in Latvia after the socialist years but it carried little authority. Unions on the whole have become marginal in the post-Soviet period.¹¹⁴

The next time we met, about a month later, Daina had started seeing a psychologist and a life coach at the *Marta Centre*, an NGO with the mission to provide help to women in crisis. The framing of her problems had now changed. Going to a psychologist, let alone a life coach – that was a new experience for Daina. This Western figure of *koučs* (the actual English word that she used with the Latvian ending 's') suggests a superior knowledge of coping with problems. The coach wanted Daina to focus not only on work ('career opportunities'), but to think carefully, as she put it, 'about work, about friends, about men, anything. About interests.

¹¹⁴ While in 1992 there were 625,000 people who were trade union members in Latvia, in 2011 this number stands at 99,000. Of all the people employed, only about 12% are currently members of a trade union. While the teachers' union is one of the largest in the country, the number of its members has fallen from 72,000 people in 1992 to 31,300 people in 2011 (Eurofound 2013). See also Woolfson (2007) and Sommers and Woolfson (2014).

All areas, none is bypassed, all are addressed.’ These areas of private life – her relationships with friends and family and her use of free time – were now to be regarded as key for the overall improvement of her situation. Meeting up with old friends could help with lifting the spirits but also, possibly, finding new job opportunities. When I asked whether Daina thought the coaching advice was worth following, she said,

‘Yes, it makes sense! And she [the coach] says, “Not problems but tasks.” And what I like about this coaching method is that it gives optimism. So it didn’t go well? That’s alright, let’s see what we can actually change. What can be done in this respect – this, that. And if you succeed in doing it, then change happens. It does not happen quickly but it really does happen. So! So I like it, I was very sceptical but [now] I like coaching very much.’

Instead of mobilising the trade union to help to defend her interests (which Daina felt too exhausted to do), she found the sessions with the *koučs* useful because they provided ways to look for solutions to her problems. The anti-depressants prescribed by the psychiatrist were also helping her to keep a level head, Daina admitted.

Daina soon felt frustrated however, that she could not tackle her problems in the upbeat, easy manner that the coach expected. In one of our subsequent meetings, she told me that she had not made any progress on the advice that the coach had given her, such as re-connecting with old friends. Daina reproached herself for it:

‘...inside of me, I have disappointment that I’m not making any progress [*nerisinu to neko uz priekšu*]. ... I’m dissatisfied right now because I’m lagging behind [*man klibo*] with NVA [the Employment Agency], where I want to start the courses, with the friends, with also the actual, yes, job...’

As NGOs have partially replaced trade unions and state welfare structures in terms of providing support, new forms of coping are made available. Daina resents the fact that she will have a tiny retirement pension because she has not been able to afford to pay into the private pension funds promoted by the government, that her salary is 8-10 times smaller than what teachers receive in Norway or Germany, in fact so small that she has not been only to afford to repair her teeth for the past several years. But she also recognises that a language of *stāžs* and trade unions sounds dated in contemporary Latvia, while speaking of coaching and anti-depressants signals a more socially appropriate personhood. She succumbs to the language of coaching and the solace of anti-depressants because other forms of coping are redundant. She accepts it but does not find it easy to live up to or embody the kinds of dispositions towards herself and her life that this psychologising narrative prescribes.

Due to her vocation, Daina is particularly disposed to recognise these ‘new’ ways of being. Teachers are one of the professions that has lived through the post-Soviet transformations while remaining in the state’s employment. So in some ways teachers were spared the adjustments that many others had to make when former workplaces closed or professions became obsolete. Yet at the same time they have been expected to be at the forefront of the democratising process, instilling new values in the post-1991 generations and representing in their own practice the democratic ways (Ozoliņa 2010).¹¹⁵ Daina has been involved in many co-operation projects with schools in other European countries and has enjoyed travelling as part of these EU-funded projects as one of the best things about her work. She compares the schools ‘in the real Western countries,’ as she put it, such as Germany and Norway, which she has recently visited, with her school in Riga. She tells me of practices, such as greater parent involvement, that she has observed there and has tried to introduce in her own

¹¹⁵ On educational reform in Latvia, see Silova (2006). On the transition experiences of teachers in Russia, see Patino (2008). Larson (2013) has written on teaching reforms as part of the democratization process in Slovakia.

school. However, she also notes that while the work is essentially similar irrespective of the country, the payment differs significantly. Daina is thinking of going to Germany for a while, as she speaks the language. She is not sure what work she would do there, but she is looking forward to getting away from her problems, to earn some money and finally get her teeth repaired. The Imaginary West has now become very real. When Daina had the opportunity to go and see for herself (her first trip abroad, to Munich, was in 2002), she experienced first-hand those practices that were considered superior ‘in the real Western countries’. However, she also noted that it was not only (or necessarily) herself that did not fit the new ideals, it was also the socio-economic reality in Latvia that was inadequate to be able to achieve a dignified, ‘Western’ life.

Conclusion

The empirical material presented in this chapter draws attention to that which spills over the frame of the official responsabilisation rhetoric, thus complicating a story of neo-liberalisation told from the perspective of governmentality studies. The narratives and observations in this chapter show that the ideals of modern personhood – or, in Foucauldian terms, subject positions – that are prescribed and carved out by the power discourse are not easily inhabited. ‘Inhabiting’ of subjectivities is a notion that Sherry Ortner (2006) puts forward in her reflection on Clifford Geertz’s writing, as discussed in Chapter 1. Discussing the Balinese ‘stage fright’ that Geertz analysed as a particular form of subjectivity, Ortner notes that ‘[t]he subjectivity in question has a certain cultural shape, but also a *way of inhabiting that shape which is reflexive and anxious* concerning the possibilities of one’s own failures’ (2006: 49, emphasis mine). A model of subjectivity, thus, may be both successfully and unsuccessfully enacted – a point that links Geertz’s analysis to that of Herzfeld and cultural intimacy. This tension is important to investigate because in the case of post-Soviet Latvia political

subjectivity is located in the inter-relation between hegemonic models (such as a ‘European’ or ‘modern’ individual) and embedded, historically rooted forms of ‘*conscience collective*’ (Ortner 2006: 51). As the chapter has shown, this misfit is not only analytical; instead, it is poignantly perceived by those subject to the hegemonic discourse. I have sought to discuss post-Soviet political subjectivity vis-à-vis the European gaze and the anxiety of rectifying the ‘old mentality’ (*vecā mentalitāte*), as the local vernacular has it. The misfit between the perceived ideals of global modern personhood and the post-Soviet individual, when problematized, causes embarrassment.

By examining how the intimate bonds tying individuals to the state are being imagined, questioned, and denounced in state-sponsored narratives and in the popular rhetoric, we can glean an insight also into how a particular kind of post-socialist welfare state is being legitimised. ‘The state’ figures prominently in the social imaginaries, invoking *both* the socialist heritage, with its model of the state as the ‘benevolent Father’ dispensing goods, as well as the nationalist bond with the Latvian state as the highest manifestations of the independence movement ideals. When my Latvian informants lament that the state is not thinking, they are voicing a critique of the social order and an invocation of justice, expressed at the register of political intimacy.

At the same time, this reliance and expectations are framed in popular discourse as Soviet-like and therefore inadequate for the ‘modern’ times. The bond felt with the state – both as a provider of certain rights and securities as well as a symbolic manifestation and embodiment of the *ethnos* – is dismissed as a relic from the past, disallowing socio-political critique. Yet, it is this bond with the state as *both* the highest manifestation of Latvianness and the carer-state that Aivars or Silva, along with other Latvians, are bitter about when they talk about the non-thinking state and their love towards it dissipating.

Chapter 5 Working with the willing ones



Figure 10. The collapsed supermarket *Maxima* in Zolitūde suburb of Riga.¹¹⁶

In November 2013, the roof of a supermarket called *Maxima* collapsed in the Zolitūde suburb of Riga, amidst Soviet-era apartment blocs and more recently built high-rises. Fifty-four people died under the falling slabs of concrete. Police started an investigation and a public debate ensued, firstly about the common practice of choosing low quality building materials to cheapen costs and, secondly about suspicious links between the construction industry and political parties. The opposition party in charge of the Riga municipality accused the austerity government of shrinking the budget of regulatory institutions, while the government argued that it had merely consolidated resources and municipalities were still in charge of controlling

¹¹⁶ Photo courtesy of www.lsm.lv.

construction projects. I met Viktorija at a state-funded rehabilitation centre in the resort town of Jūrmala, half an hour away from Riga by train. A professional psychologist, she was treating the survivors of the collapse there. Introduced in previous chapters, Viktorija is one of the trainers who ran the ‘competitiveness-raising’ seminars for the unemployed and whose seminars I had been attending for several months during my fieldwork. I had arranged an interview with her on a follow-up fieldwork trip in order to talk more about the way she saw her role as a trainer. As I flew into Riga only a few weeks after the Zolitūde tragedy, the mood was gloomy in the city and many of the people I spoke to were introspective, searching for answers to how such a thing could have happened in a supposedly modern European country at peacetime. Viktorija, though surrounded every day by victims of the collapse, seemed much calmer than most others and saw it as a professional challenge to help the victims of a calamity of such scale for the first time in her career. She was eager to tell me a wider lesson that she had drawn from one survivor’s story:

‘Here, I’ll give you one great example, I haven’t told it [to anyone] yet but I plan to remember it for my work with the unemployed, and elsewhere that I work. A very vivid example; it has to do with *Maxima*, with the ones that passed away. A vivid example. And there will be a conclusion that I draw. So, the roof collapses in *Maxima* and there are little stores nearby [within the same shopping centre]. And a sales assistant is standing in one of the small stores and everything has collapsed in front of her. She did not get hurt, her store is fine, but it has all come down in front of the door. There is a small gap, though, at the top of the rubble and the rescue workers are approaching her and now she has to climb out and get out. The rescuers are saying, “Come on now, we’ll give you a hand and pull you out.” But she is standing there and calling her superiors [on the phone], “may I leave the store? [...] everything collapsed, there’s money in the cash register, my coat is here,” she’s saying something like that

[to her manager on the phone]. So what is going on in one's head in the moment when the rescuer is saying, "come, let's get out!" She is still standing there, "wait, I have to finish talking to my manager." She then said that she had crawled on top of the rubble and climbed down and had seen the next little store. Again, a shop assistant is standing there and the rescuers are saying, "come, we'll get you out too!" And she says, "no, go ahead," and keeps talking to her superiors, "may I leave the store?" And when she got out she said that the rescuers had not been able to get [the other woman] out for twenty minutes because, "what to do with the goods, with the cash register, with money, with documents?" Right? I call this a slave's mentality. It's about my life or death but may I leave now? Somebody can tell me whether I can save my life or not. If you tell me no, I will stay there. Right? This self-aware... who are you? Awareness of the self, daring, courage, making a decision. *You* decide how you'll live.'

Later in the interview she went on to specify that Latvians needed to 'abandon the slave mentality, the Soviet mentality, not somebody telling me in what factory I'll work but I'll decide how I'll live'. This contemporary tragedy that appeared to me mainly to do with insufficiently regulated pursuit of profit, was also, in Viktorija's view, yet another manifestation of the lingering paternalist, totalitarian subjectivity.¹¹⁷

Viktorija was one of the most popular trainers at the Riga unemployment office. Several of my informants made sure to attend all the different seminars she ran, including 'Emotional Intelligence', 'Stress Management', 'Communication Skills', and 'How to Actively Look for a Job'. By drawing on Viktorija and other trainers' stories, this chapter will investigate what is meant by this 'awareness of the self' that she insisted on in the quote above. I will explore in this chapter the forming of neo-liberal subjectivities from the perspective of

¹¹⁷ See also Woolfson and Juska on the *Maxima* supermarket collapse as an instance of 'the social costs of the pursuit of profitability over human wellbeing' and of 'regulatory erosion in neo-liberal post-communism' (2014: 149-50).

those who are in charge of this process. I will do so by paying attention both to their stories about themselves as well as about their work with the unemployed – the subjects of their ‘grooming’. The chapter will focus on four trainers in particular, drawing on interviews conducted with them and casual conversations before and after the seminars during the fieldwork in September 2011 – April 2012, as well as interviews conducted during a follow-up fieldwork trip in December 2013.

*The many faces of the state*¹¹⁸

Before I turn to the trainers’ perceptions of their work, a short introduction is necessary into the structural position that they hold within the Latvian welfare system. Viktorija and the other trainers I got to know over the course of my fieldwork were all self-employed and worked on the basis of annual contracts with the State Employment Agency. The Agency issues a procurement call every year and individuals or private firms can compete to gain rights to run seminars on specific topics in specific municipalities across the country. As I witnessed, by assisting Vija, one of civil servants at the head office of the Agency who was in charge of this procurement process, the submissions are checked for relevant professional experience, such as having worked in the field of adult education and having expertise in the particular area that the seminar focuses on (e.g. psychology, accounting, business coaching, or law). Given that the relevant experience criteria are met, the winners of the contracts are determined by the lowest cost per seminar offered. Those trainers who bid the lowest price per hour of their work are awarded the annual contracts.

¹¹⁸ I reference in this subtitle a book by Yael Navaro-Yashin, *Faces of the State* (2002). In a study of the Turkish public sphere and ‘the production of the political’, Navaro-Yashin observes that ‘the state appears in many guises and constantly transfigures itself’ (ibid: 2). She argues that ‘the notion of the public in public life enables us to analyse people and the state, not as an opposition, but as the same domain’ (ibid).

Tamāra was a geography teacher by training and still taught at a secondary school but she also owned a small business and for the past three years had been conducting seminars on writing business proposals. When I called her to ask for a meeting, Tamāra invited me to her business premises, located in a suburb of Riga twenty minutes from the city centre by tram. Five-story blocks of flats and some Soviet-era office and factory buildings were situated on both sides of a straight road stretching as far as eye could see. Tamāra's business was located on the first floor of an apartment block complex. It was quiet as I entered; only some children's voices could be heard occasionally coming from a room full of computers. Tamāra was sitting at a small reception desk near the entrance, wearing a wool sweater. The rooms were not very well heated. Her business consisted of an Internet café, a youth centre, and an adult learning centre all in one. Spaces were also rented out to a seamstress and for the purposes of a solarium. A sauna room was for hire for sauna parties that were popular among Latvians. The variety of what was offered was hugely diverse and signalled Tamāra's ability to adjust to the changing winds of the market and to react to what was currently in demand. She had bought this space ten years ago, from money that she and her husband had made from selling a piece of land. As Tamāra explained, 'we sold some land and needed to invest that money somewhere so that it would make returns. I usually want to see a result and so I went and got a second degree to understand these things more properly.' She received an MBA degree from a private university in Riga.

While Tamāra spoke of how much she liked running the seminars (she spoke endearingly of *kursiņi* – 'courses' in diminutive), she complained about 'lack of stability'. Since the contract to teach particular courses was only signed with the Employment Agency for a year, she needed to participate in a new procurement call annually and afterwards just hope that she would get lucky again. Tamāra also lamented having to offer the lowest possible price to stand any chance of winning. Just like many other trainers, she usually applied to run

seminars, not only in Riga, but also in nearby towns. However, although this meant that there was the potential for more hours of work, it was often barely profitable to go outside of Riga once travel expenses had been taken into consideration. Furthermore, it was sometimes difficult to gather enough people for a full group in rural locations. Tamāra recounted an instance when a seminar was planned but she only received the call a couple of days in advance to say that it was cancelled because of the lack of participants. This, of course, meant that she would not be paid.

As Tamāra's story illustrates, the trainers shared many similarities with the rest of the precarious labour force in neo-liberal Latvia. The Employment Agency did not hire them as members of staff with permanent contracts but instead outsourced the provision of the seminars. They had to offer their knowledge on the market, lowering the price as much as possible to stand a chance of winning. This meant that, not only were their contracts temporary, but also the remuneration for the seminars was usually not sufficient to make a living.¹¹⁹ As Tamāra's story indicates, the trainers were juggling a number of jobs to make ends meet. Thus, Viktorija also worked as a psychologist at a private school and at a state-funded rehabilitation centre. Juris was a career counsellor, a lecturer at a university and occasionally a pastor at a Baptist congregation. Sarmīte owned two small businesses and worked as a trainer for several other institutions and projects. Moving from workplace to workplace, the trainers were themselves prime examples of mobile and flexible neo-liberal subjects. They were containers of mobile knowledge, moving from room to room for a day at a time, setting up to teach in a range of locations. As the Riga unemployment office did not have enough space to accommodate all the training sessions, rooms were also rented in the nearby Latvian Science Academy and on the third floor of a courtyard building in the city centre that doubled as a

¹¹⁹ The contract was signed to teach particular topics (areas where the trainer could claim expertise in) so the actual hours to teach varied from person to person. All of the trainers I spoke to, however, had additional sources of income.

driving school the rest of the time. The trainers sought to re-create these random locations as reformative learning spaces that suited their particular goals. For instance, Viktorija created a circle out of the chairs pushing the old heavy desks back against the walls in a room on the 8th floor of the Science Academy, while Sarmīte brought fresh maple sap into the driving school room to inject some energy within the small, non-descript space where business ideas were being dreamt up. To save money and not to have to walk around looking for somewhere to eat lunch, the trainers usually brought their own food with them. Once, Juris kindly offered me chicory coffee from his thermos during a break. It turned out to be his last year working with job seekers, after sixteen years of co-operation with the Employment Agency, although he had been highly regarded by many of my informants as a psychologist, he found out that he had not been awarded a new contract.

While still part of the flexible, precarious labour force, seminar trainers were granted an important role within the Latvian welfare system. As discussed earlier, the ‘competitiveness-raising’ seminars were part of the active labour market programmes, aimed at shifting the emphasis from welfare as provision of benefits to a workfare system looking to ‘activate’ the unemployed. The ‘Competitiveness-Raising Activities’ programme was one of the largest programmes in terms of participation numbers that the Ministry of Welfare offered to job seekers in Latvia. The experts that such a system needed were less like social workers and more like ‘agents of change’ or ‘change managers’. As key players in a neo-liberal system of governing from distance (Rose, N. 1996), these trainers were supposed to serve as experts in disseminating dispositions and knowledge that would render individuals more fit and ready for the modern economy. I will address the merits of the governmentality literature perspective on ‘trainers as experts’ later in the chapter. For now, it is worthwhile to point out that the trainers did indeed have considerable powers granted by the state. The topics of the seminars to be run each year were decided in co-operation between the Ministry of Welfare and the State

Employment Agency. The actual content of the seminars, however, was up to the trainers themselves. They had to include an outline of their proposal seminars along with their application. However, Vija, the civil servant in charge of the procurement process, did not pay much attention to these outlines at all, as she was leafing through the application files. Submission of the written programmes was necessary in order to qualify in the procurement call but they were not scrutinised or made to align with some central logic by the civil servants overseeing the programme. The experts could decide themselves what they would teach on topics like ‘How to Actively Find a Job’ or ‘How to Adapt to Working in Times of Change’, to name two common ones. As I learned, throughout my ethnographic fieldwork, these trainer-experts shared lessons in the seminars that they had themselves drawn from the years of post-socialist transformations, as much as they applied their professional knowledge in psychology or business management. Through introducing the trainers’ stories, these lessons that have come to form the backbone of the ‘competitiveness-raising’ seminars will be revealed in the next section.

Dreaming of a Ford

Sarmīte taught courses entitled ‘How to Write a Business Plan’, ‘Accounting for Self-Employed Persons’, and ‘Household Budgeting’. Her seminars were so popular that there were often not enough seats to accommodate everybody. Apart from her work with the unemployed, Sarmīte also worked as a trainer for a state-owned bank giving seed capital to young entrepreneurs. She also mentored former job seekers who had turned to private business, and additionally had two businesses of her own. Sarmīte said that her friends, who worked as teachers or had other public sector jobs, did not understand her because she never had time for coffee and idle chatting. We barely managed to arrange a meeting during my follow-up fieldwork trip due to how busy she was. Eventually we met at 9am at the Central Train Station,

where Sarmīte had just arrived from the town near to Riga where she lived. After our breakfast meeting over coffee and freshly baked pastries at a café inside the train station, she had a full day of individual mentoring sessions ahead of her. ‘Mentor’ was one of the words that featured a lot in her vocabulary, both during our interview as well as in her seminars that I attended. Other words she liked were ‘dreaming’, ‘planning’, ‘writing projects’, ‘having a goal’, and ‘having faith’. Her vocabulary reflected her life experience: she had become involved in various civil society initiatives that became popular and received large amounts of foreign funding in the 1990s’ Latvia. The Soros Foundation and other supporters of the nascent civil society in the newly hatched post-Soviet Latvia had enabled her to make her own dreams come true. She gave me a very concrete example in a confident tone, suggesting contentment with herself and her life:

S: When I was little, in the Soviet times, I had a dream to buy a silver-colour Ford.

L: Ford, the car...?

S: I created my own non-governmental organisation and of course I also earned some [money] and the first thing I bought for my organisation was a silver-colour Ford. And my parents cried when they saw it, when I drove in with a silver-colour Ford. Because I had known since my childhood that I would have one.

Just after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Sarmīte had lost a job at a school in Latgale, the eastern part of Latvia where she grew up. Observing that many others were losing employment in her town, including hundreds of factory workers, she decided to open a legal consultation bureau, offering free advice to the unemployed. She acquired funding from the Soros Foundation:

‘When I decided that I’d open that legal bureau, nobody believed in me. Except for my mentor, my mentor believed in me. She said, “Sarmīte, it will happen.” And my husband didn’t even believe, he said, “stop talking nonsense, where are you going to

get ten thousand dollars!” To buy computers in those times... I thought, it’s a TV and then there is a box that comes with it. [But] if you believe and if you visualise it all and think about it, it comes.’

Sarmīte has founded and managed a number of NGOs since the early 1990s and calls this experience ‘the best training’: ‘Thanks to my [NGO] *Meridians Plus*, which I lead up to this day, I understood what was business and I started creating projects.’ She saw the NGO world as an opportunity: ‘I began to understand that I could make all sorts of things happen through non-governmental organisations’ [*Es sāku saprast, ka caur nevalstiskām organizācijām es varu visādas lietas izbīdīt*]. And she had faith:

‘Faith is terribly important. [*Šausmīgi svarīga ir ticība*] Right now people don’t have faith. I say it in my lectures that you have to believe. Have to believe in something. If you don’t believe in anything well then you might as well leave it all. If you don’t believe you’ll be the best teacher in that London University, there’s no point in writing that dissertation. You have to believe. I had faith that we’d have a prosperous life; we’d have a good life. And we were ready to work for it days and nights and ask for nothing in return.’

Many of the initiatives that Sarmīte got involved in were opportunities that she seized very deliberately. For instance, she once wrote a text-book for primary school children on the basics of market economy. When she mentioned it, I asked her how she came to do that. It turned out that Sarmīte and her colleagues from the Primary School Teachers’ Association, one of the NGOs she used to be part of, had been sitting in their office and Sarmīte had said, “‘girls, I’ll open *Diena* [the main daily newspaper at the time] and we’ll have something to do!” And we did! We wrote a book on money economy’. Four teachers with different specialisations, none in economics, decided to participate in a procurement call to write the book because they were looking for an opportunity to earn some money. Sarmīte had achieved a lot simply by

embracing her courage and her entrepreneurial drive, but also propelled by the need to make ends meet.

Sarmīte's story reveals how the civil society building in Latvia has been closely linked to developing entrepreneurial spirit. As her case testifies, the lines between third-sector initiatives and business initiatives are often blurred. Many in Eastern Europe have approached the third sector initiatives in quite an instrumental fashion, performing democracy and human rights initiatives through short-term projects in order to obtain foreign funding.¹²⁰ Her journey through the civil society development initiatives is also symbolic of the shifting emphasis from the state to citizen initiatives. This civil society activism was encouraged to create a sphere of action outside and beyond the state that would act in areas such as human rights or social assistance provision. Sarmīte has embraced this new power discourse and appropriated the forms of knowledge and action that have been framed as superior in post-Soviet society and therefore also financially rewarded.

This links to a broader point that the trainers had all managed to embrace the opportunities that the post-1991 transition process afforded. As they are not the new wealthy elite, the trainers are not the typical 'transition winners' – the white middle-aged males with cultural capital (particular education and skills) – that Eyal et al talked about in their seminal book *Making Capitalism without Capitalists* (1998). Yet, when Juris, Sarmīte and Viktorija started their working life in the late 1980s-early 1990s, they made use of the opportunities of the transition by launching private businesses or third sector projects supported by international organisations. They learned the rules of the new logic of success. Rather than teaching an officially approved syllabus on the 'competitiveness-raising' seminars, they shared their own

¹²⁰ On civil society building in post-socialist societies, see Hann and Dunn (1996) and Hemment (2004, 2007), Kaldor (2003), Greenberg (2010), Wedel (1998). On the reification of the category of 'civil society', see Navaro-Yashin (2002: 117-154).

lessons of ‘catching up’. When I asked Sarmīte how she saw her role as a trainer, her answer was brief:

‘I don’t recall if it was 2005 or 2006, I started participating in the NVA [State Employment Agency] procurement calls related to training the unemployed. I teach the unemployed from my own experience: how to write projects [to apply for grants], how to start a business. I have two businesses running at the moment, they are small but they are running. I don’t know, I don’t have anything more to say.’

Similarly, when Viktorija was explaining to me how one of the messages she tried to get across to her audiences was that it was important to be flexible and adjust to circumstances, rather than lamenting a bygone stability, she told me of her own experiences in the 1990s. She had had to quickly adjust to the changing economy just to make ends meet. Her grown-up life started just when the Soviet Latvia came to an end. Right after completing nursing training in 1988, she got married and her three children were born. She says she understood that ‘there would be no money in medicine’, but she needed money. Her husband did not have a job at the time, her children had to be fed, she had to act. So Viktorija started baking cakes in her own kitchen and bringing them to sell at a shop-café that a friend of hers had recently opened in the small town where they lived. For a year Viktorija got up every morning to bake two cakes even though she had never liked being in the kitchen. The 4 Lats (approximately 5 GBP) that this brought in every day was enough to provide breakfast, lunch and dinner for five people. Then Viktorija and a couple of her friends living in the town came up with a business idea. They ‘sniffed in the air’, as Viktorija put it, that a beauty parlour may be a good chance to make some money, they decided to take a risk and took out a loan to open one. The business turned out to be very successful. In a country where summers are brief while standards of feminine beauty are very exacting, especially with the arrival of women’s magazines in the 1990s and embracing of new, post-Soviet, ideals of femininity, a solarium was a great business to launch.

Viktorija had clients travelling from far-away towns. Several years later, after her part-time studies in psychology, she started working as a counsellor at a local school and eventually gave up the business. For a month, she even tried her luck in the USA, working as a cleaner in Chicago. Realising that her life was back in Latvia and the bit of extra money she could earn from cleaning did not make up for what she had lost, Viktorija returned to Latvia and went back to work at school. A few years later, though, the requirement to have a psychologist at every school was lifted and Viktorija lost her job. She moved to Riga and started working for the State Employment Agency as a trainer.

Viktorija's own experience has been one of always adapting to the circumstances and going with the flow and this is the experience that she is bringing to her audiences. Even now, she said to me confidently, she may be a psychologist today but could open a farm and grow potatoes tomorrow, if needs be. Living was like surfing, Viktorija said. She associated desire for stability and security with a Soviet way of thinking, speaking ironically of a brick house with a brick fence, a job in the factory and a wreath paid by the state on one's grave. The only stability one can have in life nowadays is to stand firmly on the metaphorical surfboard and go with the waves.

The figure of an expert that Nikolas Rose investigates as part of his Foucauldian analysis of advanced liberal governmentality is relevant here, in so far as, the trainers are not directly employed by the state and represent specific, professional knowledge that has been deemed instrumental for governing (Rose and Miller 1992, Rose, N. 1996). Rose argues that advanced liberal strategies of government 'are rationalities animated by the desire to "govern at a distance"' and experts play a key part in such a governmental order (1996: 43). One of the implications of governing at a distance that this area of research reveals, is that governing becomes de-politicised. The reason for this is that it is supposedly neutral, objective knowledge that experts represent and abide by, obscuring the fact that knowledge is produced within

hierarchies of power and seemingly technical policy decisions are ultimately political decisions, inextricable from broader power relations embedding any one area of intervention (Ferguson 1990, Murray Li 2007). Tomas Matza has observed from the governmentality studies perspective how psychologists have become one such group of experts in post-socialist Russia (2012).

However, the concept of governing from a distance implies that some kind of a unified rationality is at work, usually imagined and institutionalised as a scientific field of knowledge (e.g. psychology or economics). Yet, in the case of the trainers working for the State Employment Agency, we cannot speak of such a unified political rationality or even a coherent domain of expertise. As Juris, who had been running these seminars since the inception of the programme in the early 1990s, recalled, a group of psychologists had been trying to establish a unified curriculum at the start of the programme so that all the trainers working on the programme would cover the same content. However, this initiative had quickly dissipated, as the Employment Agency had not granted much support to sustain it. The programme was reformed a number of times, engaging not only psychologists but also economists, business coaches, lawyers, and other specialists to teach a broad range of seminars. As the ethnography revealed, they were furthermore drawing, not only on their various professional qualifications, but as much on their personal experiences. The trainers regarded themselves, and approached their role, as entirely independent from their peers or the state. As Viktorija exclaimed in protest when I suggested that in a sense she was a state agent, ‘they would fire me if they knew what I was saying [in the seminar room]!’

Some more recent work that has explored the role of experts provides a useful insight here. In a study of independent contractors who implement welfare and employment policies in Germany, Kenneth McGill finds them adjusting and re-formatting the state policies to their own understanding. Thus, they alter the ethos of these rationales in a way that ‘does not align

easily with the liberal hegemony' any longer (2013: 66). Dominic Boyer has called for a shift in analysis of experts 'not solely as rational(ist) creatures of expertise but rather as desiring, relating, doubting, anxious, contentious, affective – in other words as human subjects' (cited in Matza 2012: 808). Studying neo-liberal sovereignty reconfigurations in Ghana, Brenda Chalfin argues similarly that those who are in charge of implementing a political rationality are always more than merely its translators for everyday use; instead, they re-interpret and re-make the content of such rationalities according to their own subjectivities and understandings (Chalfin 2010: 195).¹²¹ Characterised by social proximity, 'state authorities and the private users of its services share, not only the same locations, but also the same normative arena, the same education and the same type of activities' (ibid: 44).

So, on the one hand, even if they did not regard themselves as state agents, the trainers were part of instituting the 'liberal welfare regime' (Haney 2002). They promoted neo-liberal morals by arguing for reduced expectations of help from the state and the importance of taking responsibility (Zigon 2010, 2011). On the other hand, they were not working from a neo-liberal script. They would mobilise various fields of knowledge (such as economics, business administration, psychology, civil society building, or pseudo-scientific approaches like neuro-linguistic programming) but they engaged with them in a selective, eclectic manner. Furthermore, coming from the same social milieu as their audiences, they were familiar with the same worries and desires and shared the same narrative of freedom. Like the people in the seminars, they had had to devise coping strategies and ways of adapting to life in a new moral and political order. Instead of a script, what the trainers had, was their structural position of providing assistance and advice, their skills as teachers, preachers, and therapists, and their personal lessons to share.

¹²¹ Chalfin writes that the official, just like the client, 'occupies a spectrum of subject positions and a spectrum of agencies' (2010: 195). She draws on Michael Herzfeld's thesis that the divide between bureaucratic actors and those they act upon is always shadowy.

Empowerment through conviviality

To understand how this neo-liberal subjectification process works, it is important to recognise the kinds of effects that these seminars had on people. I will explore this more from the perspective of the unemployed in the following chapter but it is worth looking at it from the trainers' perspective too. The trainers saw it as one of their roles to create a space for sharing and conviviality. For example, Juris marks a shift from an overly collectivistic social order to an overly individualistic one, and sees the seminars as a possible space for 'living among people':

'We as a society are trying to jump over some massive ditch. But we can't do it quicker than it's possible. That involuntary collectivism [of the Soviet social order] is comfortable, it leads to comfort, but it is unnatural. Because an individual's natural desire is to live among people but stay himself. [But] there are no people really there among whom to live but remain oneself [when one is unemployed]. The social hanging out [*burziņš*] is missing. The winners are those who have choirs, dance groups, [political] parties, or churches to socialise in.'

The comparison that he draws emphasises the importance he attributes to this psychotherapeutic element of the seminars. Similarly, Viktorija pointed out that the seminars were a valuable space for sharing with others and learning from others. Viktorija particularly encouraged sharing of emotions regarding job losses. When I asked her about her role as a trainer, she said, 'where are you going to get to talk to strangers, there are no... I have my relatives, my neighbours, but when you sit down for real and think and draw conclusions... So my contribution is to start this process through a sort of forced gathering to enable people to gain from one another.'

Tamāra saw it as one of her roles to connect people, to create a space where they could socialise and develop contacts. She always gathered the participants' email addresses and photocopied the participants' list and distributed it to the whole group so that they had one another's emails. As she described it:

'Now I've realised what they like, namely to listen to one another. That's why they also like that I scan and send them these sheets [with a list of participant names and contact details], so they can... Say, there is an accountant in the group, somebody else knows another field; IT, making homepages or something. This way they start communicating amongst themselves. Especially the three-day groups. That's such a good thing! [...] They help one another.'

After the session, she not only sent the course materials electronically to the group but also invited the attendees to be her friends on the social networking site *Draugiem.lv* (a Latvian site similar to *Facebook*). This way, Tamāra also gained an additional audience for her business hub advertisements that she posted regularly on the website. Likewise, Sarmīte stayed in touch with many of her seminars' participants, several of whom she kept mentoring on their private business ideas. Sarmīte's 'trainees' had even formed a 'social club', as she put it – an informal network of people she had met through the seminars and who had met each other there. She told me enthusiastically, in our last meeting, that the week before Christmas Sarmīte's 'club' had organised a get-together with snacks and drinks. However, the contacts were not just business related. In one of Sarmīte's seminars I attended, Lilija, one of the participants, invited others to the sauna at her house, in exchange for a small cash contribution. Sarmīte was one of those who took up the offer a couple of weeks later. Lilija, in turn, was happy to make friends with Sarmīte in order to 'pick her brain' about how to get some more money out of the Employment Agency through participating in other active labour market programmes. Sarmīte

was particularly keen to help other women, as she felt it part of her mission to empower women to take on business, entrepreneurship, to ‘take care of themselves’, as she put it.

Dividing lines

While I recognised that the trainers were often empathising with the job seekers, I also saw them draw normative distinctions between different types of people in their audiences. One morning I arrived at the unemployment office to meet Aina and ask whether I could participate in her seminar. The civil servants co-ordinating the seminars had told her about my research but we had not yet met. They had encouraged me to come and introduce myself. Aina’s immediate reaction was that my presence was not a good idea. A doctoral student from London may appear intimidating to the other people in the group, she said. However, then Aina asked me to wait and went to check out the room. When she came back, she announced that the people gathered for that day’s training looked quite ‘normal’ so it was alright for me to ‘sit in’. What were the signs that she had read in that space, enabling her to pass such a judgment? More importantly, what exactly was the distinction that was being drawn here?

Viktorija also once made a similar distinction between ‘normal’ groups and ones that I should not attend. In her experience, if a group consisted mostly of job seekers who had voluntarily selected to attend the particular seminar, it was going to be a good session. If there were mostly people who had been ‘signed up’ for a seminar by their employment agent, it spelled trouble.¹²² Visually the ‘obligatory’ seminars often gathered people staring silently into the desks in front of them, hands clasped, shoulders slouching down. There was a sense of

¹²² During the initial registration, the employment agents usually offered the unemployed to participate in various kinds of active labour market programmes (as outlined in Chapter 3). If a person did not express a wish to partake in any of the programmes, the agent would routinely sign the person up for one or more ‘competitiveness-raising’ seminars. Thus, even though it read in their ‘Individual Job Search Plan’ that they had ‘expressed a wish’ to attend the programme, it was in fact mandatory. As mentioned above, if a person failed to show up for a seminar they were registered for, they risked losing the unemployment benefit.

heaviness entering a room full of people like that. One morning I witnessed Aina throw a man out who appeared drunk. Another morning, a civil servant who had just checked a seminar room commented to me that it was only 9am in the morning but the room was already ‘smelly’, implying alcohol. After one particular day, where most of the participants had been signed up by the employment agents and had showed resistance to Aina’s efforts to engage them in various exercises, she announced to me in frustration that many people were lazy and were being treated too well by the state. If it were up to her, she would give them some bread and a glass of milk per day and make them do hard physical labour. She then referred to her experience while spending some time in the USA where her son lived. Just like the unemployed in Latvia, the African Americans there were given unnecessary privileges, according to Aina. She used the word ‘nēģeri’ (‘niggers’), which in Latvian was still a commonly used term for black people, especially among middle-aged and older generations. What the term expressed was a sense of non-respectability.

Without me prompting, the trainers reflected on the different types of people they worked with. Thus, Viktorija made a distinction between those who ‘wanted something’ and those who ‘didn’t want anything’, or, in other words, those who were ‘ready to work on themselves’ and those who were not. Viktorija linked this to urban-rural differences. In Riga, she explained, the majority came to her seminars because they already knew of her and were certain that ‘it was going to be good’. Whereas in rural areas the audiences were more difficult to work with:

V: Twenty-five kilometres [outside Riga] there is already a difference in people’s thinking, perception [*Cilvēku domāšanā, uztverē jau ir atšķirība*].

L: In what sense?

V: Ehm... There are ones like that in Riga too but... In Riga overall a person applies to these events because he [thinks], “there’s something I need, there’s something I want.”

And he comes and we work for real. [*“Man kaut ko vajag, kaut ko es gribu.” Un viņš nāk un mēs reāli strādājam.*] And as soon as you are twenty kilometres outside Riga, there is only a small percentage, maybe around ten per cent, of those who say “so, I’m coming here and looking for an opportunity. Maybe here, maybe there.” And he comes, so to speak, with open arms because he is ready. So [most people] in Riga and ten per cent here [in Jūrmala] [come to the seminars] with [a disposition that says] “I’m ready, I’m ready to give it a go. And perhaps... perhaps I’ll take away one per cent from this meeting.” Ninety per cent [attendees] outside Riga have their, well, their arms and legs crossed, [as if saying] “The stupid state.” With bitterness [*“Stulbā valsts”. Aizvainojumā*]. “I’ve been wronged, I hate everything, so therefore – how can I *not* do something, how can I get away from this training. How can I *not* come here, how can I come for less [time] to just get [my] attendance marked.” And, yes, and unfortunately how to get more benefits.

During our conversation, Viktorija was explaining further how she perceived differences among the people with whom she worked. She contrasted her work at the unemployment office in Riga to working for the social assistance service in a number of rural municipalities (social assistance is the responsibility of local governments, while assistance for the unemployed is the responsibility of the national government). To continue the conversation from where we left it:

L: How do you see your task – to help them?

V: [Do you mean those] outside [of Riga]? The rest of them?

L: Yes, so for example those unwilling ones, yes.

V: Well we can philosophise a lot about it but overall it’s tough. I’ve been working for a couple of years now in the social [assistance] service in one local municipality in the wider Riga region. It’s a project like that, I go twice a month where they are really quite... so it’s also group work, sort of unemployed but...

L: They are probably long-term [unemployed]...

V: Yes, they are long-term on benefits, they live in the middle of the woods, in shacks somewhere.

L: But then the Riga social service gathers them...

V: The social service pulls them out and tries to.... Well, what? Now right after *Maxima* I'm thinking, I keep thinking how to work with them. I'm trying all sorts of approaches, what to do with them. I'm thinking after *Maxima*, "here is a good reason." I'm telling them now, "here, see what happened. How do we assess our life up to now, how to perhaps move ahead..." and... well what I wanted... I forgot your question now but what I want to say is that with them... that we get to the point that they are sitting there, one, two, three, some eight of them in total, and some three of them say openly, "no, no, no." And at the end I ask, so he doesn't see the past, he doesn't see the future, what does he want, he doesn't know what he wants. "But do you want to live?" And he says – no. And I – "so what do you want then?" He says – "I have my mummy in the graveyard." This is a man in his 50s. "I have my brother next to her, it's so good there, I have a spot left for me there, I'm waiting for that." And on the one hand, why couldn't a person choose? He has decided, his mother, he's lived all the time with his mother, hasn't worked, [has relied on] mother's pension. Mother has died, right, and why couldn't he have the rights. He says, "I don't need anything. Nothing at all. I'd be happy if I can depart today." The mother is near, right. And another one sitting right there – he says, "I don't want to! Why do you think I want to live?!" He says, "I'm surprised myself that I'm still here today. This [group therapy] is offered to me, I come here and sit here but I don't need anything." And they said they didn't need anything, "I don't need anything, the only thing I'm waiting for is that one day I won't wake up anymore and I'll be next to my mother." And here all these [social assistance] systems, "let's think, let's do something, how to inspire them more!" But the individual.... so

let's not put ourselves in God's place! He has come to this earth; he has lived his life somehow according to his consciousness. The consciousness, right, his consciousness is that he [thinks], "I don't need anything more from this world." So why should we try, right? And... I see many like that. [...]

L: So there's nothing you can...

V: Nothing!

L: Because something has led him at some moment to this, no...?

V: Well yes yes, he has the right to choose. To live or not to live. What rights do I have to tell him that, "No, no, go on, keep on living, life is really cool!" He says, "Well, no, it's not cool." And that's his experience. [...] At the end of the day, if that's his level of consciousness, to sit under a fir-tree and drink and hope that he'll die, why should I save him? I don't know whether this is useful for you or not, whether you'll agree, but we live several lives. Go ahead and leave. You'll come back again with a new experience and you won't be sitting under a fir-tree any more.

When I gently suggested that there had been something in a person's life that had led them to such a destitute state, I was challenging her from the typically sociological perspective as to the various social factors that may have led these people to seeking refuge in alcohol and losing hope and desire to live. But Viktorija saw it as a matter of choice and the 'level' of development that we were each at. She could not 'inspire' these men and women and there was nothing else she felt she could do for them.

The 'unwilling' ones were quickly identified and labelled by other trainers as well. Anete, the psychologist who practiced neuro-linguistic programming and liked to cite NIKE's slogan *Just Do It*, addressed this distinction in one of her seminars directly. 'Raise your hands, those who genuinely want to be here!' she asked her audience. This confrontation had been prompted by a young man with a reddish, bulging face who asked her, before the seminar had

even began, whether he could leave after one hour. He mentioned a doctor's appointment as the reason. Anete seemed incredulous about the story, however, and the man's red blotchy face suggested possible alcohol problems. Retorting that he was welcome to do as he pleased, she asked people to raise their hands first if they were genuinely interested in learning about job search techniques. Then, the people who had been sent by their employment agents were asked to identify themselves. These were the people who had not come truly voluntarily. Roughly half of the group of about twenty-five people lifted their hands each time. Anete then asked all those who 'had been sent' to sign the attendance sheet and leave so that she could work just with the people who were motivated to do so. By allowing them to sign the attendance sheet, she chose not to penalise the 'unwilling' ones, as their absence, evidenced by a lack of signature of the attendees' list, could result in the withdrawal of the status of an unemployed person and therefore the loss of unemployment benefits. So while the employment agents insisted on their attendance, Anete 'weeded out' the 'willing' from the 'unwilling' ones.

Not all the trainers had given up on the less entrepreneurial and responsabilised of their clients. Sarmīte, for example, saw it as her task to encourage and enable people to 'get to the next level,' as she called it. Sarmīte did not associate the passivity with Soviet times but regarded it instead as an eternally existing system. 'May I draw something?' Sarmīte asked whilst already sliding my notebook over the small table towards herself. She started sketching concentric circles in the middle of the page. The smallest circles in the middle represented 'the wise men' and 'the businessmen'. The larger circles were the self-employed and individual entrepreneurs, then the workers and finally *bomži*¹²³, the homeless ones or those who had nothing. It was the 'natural' order, according to Sarmīte, existing already for hundreds of years. Workers do not have to think, they work eight hours and are free afterwards. They receive social benefits but overall they are the least protected during crises. The businessmen, on the

¹²³ *Bomž* in Russian stands for a person of no fixed abode.

contrary, Sarmīte explained, ‘say that they don’t need social assistance. Because they are themselves their own social guarantor. Themselves. They know how to economise their money, they know how to deal with it, they employ others, and they get more time for themselves.’ The task for ‘the worker’ was to try and become a businessman; otherwise he always risked becoming one of *bomži*. Taking us both as examples, Sarmīte said:

S: My task as a teacher is to show these workers an opportunity to move to the next level. My task as a woman is to show how women... See, you now get your doctorate, you are a worker, wonderful, but keep thinking what to do next. How will I create my own business. Don’t stay here. Because at this level it is easy to become this [*she points to the outer circle of bomži*]. In England, in the West it’s full of these ones. The socially protected. [...] But the people need to be told how to secure their back [*radīt aizmuguri*]. That is the economic development. [...] People need to start their own businesses.

L: So that’s the main goal...

S: Well that has been given to me from God, that’s why I was kicked out of school and told that I couldn’t be a teacher at that stage.

Sarmīte also used the label ‘willing’, just like Viktorija did. As she was telling me that her audiences kept growing in size after the recent economic crisis, Sarmīte observed:

S: They are willing [*viņi grib*]. That period, thank God, [has ended], we have climbed out of the comfort zone. Many, including those who have declared bankruptcy, are starting to think what to do. [...]

L: So do you think that the crisis was in this sense a positive event?

S: It is positive. The crisis is...the word crisis has two meanings from the Chinese. [...] One of the translations is – changes in life, and that’s positive.

Sarmīte and Viktorija were certain that there were those who waited for (and expected) a comfortable life (or sometimes comfort in death) and those who took charge of their own happiness, even if that meant sacrificing immediate comfort. As we parted, Sarmīte wished me to ‘move to the next level’.

The belief that the unemployment office was *not* a place for those individuals who looked for state’s assistance was also perceptible among the civil servants I interacted with. The employment agents whom I observed registering new job seekers would differentiate between ‘clients’ who were the ‘real’ unemployed and those who were not ‘real’. A ‘real’ unemployed was somebody who had come to register, not in order to become eligible for benefits, but who genuinely wanted to find a job *and* was willing to work *on oneself* to become more employable. When a person enquired about the unemployment benefit during the registration process, I heard the employment agents on a number of occasions interrupt them to say that ‘this was not the place to get any benefits’.¹²⁴ They were accurate in the sense that the State Employment Agency did not directly handle the payment of benefits. A person had to register as unemployed at the Employment Agency and, on the basis of this registration, could apply for the unemployment benefits from the State Social Security Agency [*Valsts Sociālās Apdrošināšanas Aģentūra*] or other types of limited financial assistance from the local municipality. The State Employment Agency positions itself as the institution where an individual is assisted with finding a job through individual consultations with an employment agent and through taking part in various active labour market programmes (such as the ‘competitiveness-raising’ seminars). Thus, the institutional structure of welfare provision suggests that a similar distinction between the ‘willing’ and the ‘unwilling’ ones operates at the

¹²⁴ The registration agents seemed to be sympathetic to some of their clients, perhaps those deemed ‘real’, to whom they volunteered to explain at the end of the registration process where to request the benefits. One of the women working at the registration even had small pieces of paper prepared with the address of the nearest office of the State Social Security Agency that she handed to some of the unemployed.

level of political rationality. Welfare assistance is being separated from economy. The unemployment office is designed institutionally as a place, not for receiving benefits, but for working on oneself and thus becoming an active, responsible subject.

Stigma and aspiration

As Lynne Haney demonstrates in her analysis of Hungary, the shift towards a liberal welfare regime has brought about stigmatisation of welfare clients (2002: 201-204). She observes that '[c]aseworkers became border guards: they policed the boundaries of inclusion/exclusion to determine who was in need. [...] whereas welfare workers in the previous system bifurcated clients into "good" and "bad" mothers, the mythologies that arose in the liberal regime encompassed the entire client population. And, in the liberal state, inclusion in the welfare apparatus implies a process of othering unparalleled in the previous regimes' (2002: 205). Haney links this stigmatisation to a welfare regime that includes people on the basis of what they lack rather than what they contribute (ibid: 246). The unemployed in Latvia are reduced to precariousness, as benefits are limited and only accessible to a minority of the unemployed and additionally there are few active labour market programmes accessible that tangibly increase their competitiveness in the labour market. The waiting times for vocational training programmes, as discussed in Chapter 3, are very long. The unemployed are being 'othered' by the very limited social assistance spending that the Latvian state affords.

The data from my ethnography also suggest, however, that not all the 'clients' were subject to such stigmatisation. The neo-liberal welfare regime in Latvia operates upon a distinction between two different types of the unemployed – on the one hand, those who were perceived as passively 'waiting', as 'not wanting to work on themselves', and, on the other

hand, the ‘willing’ ones.¹²⁵ The former were stigmatised in similar ways as Haney observes in Hungary. They were suspected of abusing the state, while their attitudes and their bodies were pathologised (as when a registration agent held a tissue discretely in her palm before opening the door handle that had been touched by the clients or when a civil servant loudly remarked about the smell in a seminar room). Those who were not embracing the aspirational ethic were deemed unworthy of attention or impossible to help. They were ‘weeded out’ unceremoniously by either inscribing them in racial terms as inferior (comparing them to ‘niggers’) or dismissing their hardships as free choices.¹²⁶ The symbolic violence of such acts of re-inscription was not recognised by the trainers. The distinctions between two types of people in the audience served the function of allowing the trainers to demarcate a distinct normativity and to project it onto the reality.

At the same time, the trainers embraced those who were ready to work on themselves as equals and shared their own strategies of surviving and thriving. The distinction that the trainers are drawing evokes a morally desirable type of personhood contrasted with a morally undesirable one. Drawing on their own experience of coping and adapting to a new order, of achieving their goals when the rules of the game change, the trainers seek to instil a certain ethic of living also in their audiences. When Viktorija speaks of a person who comes ‘with open arms’ and is ‘ready’, this readiness has to do with ‘willingness to work on oneself’, to use a phrase common amongst the trainers and the unemployed alike. In other words, this ideal

¹²⁵ Haney notes that the Hungarian liberal welfare regime functions upon a different kind of differentiation. While individuals who were deemed ‘needy’ on the basis of their income level were included and recognised as legitimate ‘clients’, others were excluded because they were not seen as ‘needy’ enough. These were often ‘lower- or working-class women who had suffered severe material losses since the 1980s’ but, ‘[u]nable to demonstrate material need, these women were pushed to the other side of the welfare divide; their problems were deemed too trivial to warrant caseworker attention’ (2002: 209-211).

¹²⁶ This stigmatisation was recognised also by the unemployed themselves. In one seminar, Viktorija asked the group members how they were feeling about coming to the unemployment office. They spoke of the building as having a bad aura, feeling dark and depressing. The fact that there was no toilet paper in the toilets was a sign of the material deprivation of the Employment Agency, and the state more generally, but it was also perceived by some of my informants as a sign of disrespect.

post-socialist subject is willing to try ‘to catch up’, just like the entire Latvian society is being summoned to catch up by the government. This ‘ideal’ person is juxtaposed with those who are ‘just waiting’ under the fir-tree, waiting to die, waiting on the state, or for a comfortable life. Whether one embraces the ‘catching-up’ subjectivity or the ‘waiting’, both are perceived to be a matter of choice, following the liberal premise.

It is possible to map this categorisation onto class distinctions. The model of personhood the trainers are trying to foster, I argue, is one that has a particular appeal for *the post-socialist aspiring middle classes*. Accountants, bank-clerks, teachers, small business owners were the professions most often represented in the audiences of those seminars that were formed of genuine volunteers rather than people signed up by their employment agents. There were also blue-collar workers, like shop assistants, though they were a minority in the most popular seminars, such as ‘Communication Skills’ led by Viktorija or ‘How to Write a Business Plan’ by Sarmīte. The seminars were recognised by several of my informants as something that was commonplace in the corporate sector and usually cost a lot of money. Even though at first these individuals, who often had higher education and had held professional positions, thought that the unemployment office had nothing for them, they were surprised to discover seminars by professional psychologists and business coaches that addressed exactly the kinds of concerns and anxieties they had.

The ‘catching-up subjectivity’ is the embodiment of middle-class respectability with a post-socialist twist. Latvians have experienced a shift from the Soviet Union, where class had officially ceased to exist, to a neo-liberal democracy where a large middle class is seen as the path to political stability and economic growth. Yet, ‘middle-class’ is something that in Western European terms still hardly exists.¹²⁷ The peculiarity of post-Soviet societies is that

¹²⁷ Scant data and analyses are available on the nascent Latvian middle class. According to the official statistics for 2009 (provided in Krastiņš 2011), 57.6% of the Latvian households had an income of up to 200 Lats per person (approx. 220 GBP). At the time, 200 LVL was also the minimum wage in the

many people who formerly occupied secure middle-class positions fell into poverty when the radical market reforms were started in the 1990s. People employed in traditionally middle-class jobs, such as teachers, doctors, but often also accountants and small business owners, have barely been able to make ends meet.¹²⁸ In terms of cultural and social capital, many more are middle-class than in terms of their economic capital, material security and ability to consume. These are people who are in the middle, without being middle class – poor but still struggling, not marginal yet precarious. The job seekers whom the trainers identified as the willing ones are not necessarily middle class in terms of their economic capital and financial stability but certainly in terms of their symbolic identifications, professional qualifications, and aspirations.

The realities and imaginaries of class divisions have particular histories in post-socialist societies. With regard to post-socialist Russia, Olga Shevchenko notes how ‘referents, such as those pertaining to class, citizenship, and profession, [have been] in a perpetual state of flux’ over the past two decades (2009: 90). Neo-liberalisation has impoverished and disempowered the working classes (Stenning et al 2010: 229), but the middle classes as well have lost economic capital and their standing in society as a consequence of the post-socialist

country, while the official ‘survival minimum’ was 167 LVL. So more than half of the inhabitants live on a sum just barely over the ‘survival minimum’. Further 35.9% earned 200-500 LVL per person, while only 6.5% had an income of 500 LVL or above per person (respectively 220-550 GBP and 550 GBP above). Using a statistical model for measuring stratification, Krastiņš (2011) argues that there is considerable polarisation of income observable in Latvia. The share of people living on tiny income is well above what the statistical model predicted, while also the share of extremely wealthy people is above the forecast. The size of the shadow economy, however, is considerable, therefore these official data need to be treated with some caution. Significant number of people officially earn a minimum wage, while receiving extra payment ‘in an envelope’, i.e. without paying tax for it.

¹²⁸ On income inequality and poverty, see Eglītis and Lace 2009 and the Human Development Report 2012/2013 (Bela 2013). Eglītis and Lāce point to ‘the broad strata of poor and economically marginal in Latvia’ (ibid: 334). They note that ‘[b]y [one] measure, ‘Latvia’s poverty level (using 2006 data) reaches over 30 per cent’ (ibid: 332). They note that the ‘middle to upper-income groups’ are primarily people who ‘came of age in the period of transformation and those who had some form of transferable social capital from the Soviet period’ (2009: 333).

transformations.¹²⁹ Class identity in post-socialist capitalist societies is often linked to consumption. Thus, Jennifer Patico, in an important analysis of post-Soviet middle classes, explores ‘how moral and material conceptions of value converged and diverged in teachers’ aspirations to “culturedness”, “middle-classness”, and “civilisation”, ideals they shared with so many *other consumers* in the world but which also carried specifically Soviet/post-Soviet inflections’ (2008: 20, emphasis mine). She argues that the teachers in post-Soviet St. Petersburg yearn to be able to consume just like Westerners. On the basis of my ethnography, I argue however, that class distinctions link to ideas of personhood and to Europeanness not only as ability to consume but also as a sense of propriety and self-worth. Here, Michele Rivkin-Fish’s research provides some relevant insights. She explores the development of class subjectivities in post-socialism through the perspective of the former ‘intelligentsia’ or the ‘aspiring middle class’ (2009). Rivkin-Fish defines the aspiring middle class as ‘people who usually ha[ve] higher education and professional positions’ but have been ‘struggling with poverty’ since the collapse of the Soviet Union, which brought about a drop in salaries and proliferation of precarious forms of labour. In post-Soviet Russia, this notion ‘bring[s] together traits traditionally associated with the intelligentsia [such as high cultural capital] and claims to material privilege’ (ibid: 81). As Rivkin-Fish aptly points out, the ‘middle class’ is an ‘imagined communit[y]’ ‘evoking the fantasized Western subject with whom many Russians associated the Western standard of living’ (ibid). Accordingly, moral distinctions are being mapped onto these class distinctions (ibid: 80).

The ‘work on self’ has been linked to class formation in recent research on post-socialist subjectivities. For example, Tomas Matza’s ethnographic research focuses on Russian youth whose wealthy parents pay psychologists to train their offspring in self-management and

¹²⁹ On class and post-socialist transitions, see Buchowski (2008), Crowley and Ost (2001), Eyal, Szelenyi and Townsley (1998), Kalb (2009), Kalb and Halmai (2011), Keskula (2012), Kideckel (2002), Patico (2008), Rivkin-Fish (2009), Salmenniemi (2012).

other psychological techniques to become more competitive and successful neo-liberal subjects. Matza observes that ‘self-work [...] is a means of sorting value and of ascribing and managing social difference and futures’ (2012: 804).¹³⁰ Here, such knowledge and techniques of the flexible self are a privilege available to the upper classes. At the other end of the socio-economic ladder, Jarrett Zigon has conducted an ethnography of a church-sponsored rehabilitation programme for drug addicts. Zigon argues that the goal of the self-work that this programme prescribes is for the former drug users ‘to become productive members of the new post-Soviet working class’ (ibid). Reaching a broader conclusion about the function of such self-work practices, Zigon states:

‘the very process of coming to live a normal life in either an industrial or post-industrial consumer-driven society is a disciplinary process of ethically making oneself into a new kind of person. This has been particularly the case in post-socialist Eastern Europe, where both local and global investors, entrepreneurs, and business managers have considered the creation of a new class of self-regulating, responsible, and disciplined workers to be essential for a successful transition to a market-based economy’ (2011: 203).

Slipping into unemployment puts one at risk of losing a stable identity, including class identity, as in flux as it may be in post-socialist societies. The ‘competitiveness-raising’ seminars offer an opportunity to hold onto an image of oneself as the ‘right’ kind of person, which in this particular socio-historical juncture means an enterprising, active, responsibilised individual. When the trainers were juxtaposing those waiting with those willing, they were only partly labelling existing class differences (given how blurred the class distinctions are in post-

¹³⁰ Matza’s full argument reads that ‘self-work is entangled with, and yet not reducible to, post-Soviet class formation. It is a means of sorting value and of ascribing and managing social difference and futures, but also of healing and care’ (2012: 804).

socialist Latvia). Rather, class here is an *effect* of particular dispositions towards the social reality, the state, and oneself.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored neo-liberal personhood formation from the perspective of the trainers working with job seekers within the framework of the ‘Competitiveness-Raising’ programme. Rather than following any policy guidelines, the trainers draw freely from their professional knowledge but also from their personal experiences to help their audiences aspire. The trainers distinguish between ‘willing’ and ‘unwilling’ subjects to highlight the vital importance of an urge to ‘work on oneself’ in order to become a more mobile, active, entrepreneurial citizen. If we recall the anthropological argument that state agents are usually of the same socialisation as ordinary citizens (Chalfin 2010), it becomes possible to appreciate that they were voicing fears and anxieties, ideals and norms that resonated among many Latvians. The trainers’ life experiences were not dissimilar to those of many of my other informants. Coming from the same social milieu as many in their audiences, the trainers share the same anxieties and concerns surrounding the issues of reconstituting themselves as new types of persons in the post-Soviet neo-liberal order. Hired by the State Employment Agency, they have found themselves in the structural position where they not only address these anxieties but in fact turn them into a normative, disciplining narrative.

Chapter 6 On livable life



Figure 11. The cover of Valeriy Sinelnikov's book *Vaccination against Stress, or the Psycho-Energetic Aikido*, one of the self-help books studied by my informants. Photo by author.

One of my most vivid memories from the fieldwork in Riga is a sense of tension between my informants' accounts and my own reading of their experiences at the unemployment centre. I regarded the 'Competitiveness-Raising' programme as a neo-liberal governmental technology seeking to produce responsibilised subjects. In this framing, the seminars were part of an attempt to transfer responsibilities, formerly belonging to the state,

onto individuals, while convincing them in the process that this was the ‘natural’ order. Yet, I increasingly felt that such a reading did not help me understand the appeal of the individualising framing espoused by the seminars for the unemployed. This tension was particularly acute when participating in the seminars. I found interacting with Viktorija, Juris, or Sarmīte, and with the people attending the seminars, often inspiring and uplifting, just like the participants themselves did. As discussed in Chapter 1, analysing the researcher’s subjective experiences and their affective reactions to events that take place during the course of their fieldwork can help build a more nuanced interpretation (Cerwonka and Malkki 2007, Back 2007). Had my research consisted only of interviews, my initial reading would have been harder to destabilise. I would also have been more critical of the trainers; more sceptical about their claims of empowerment and more focused on the stigma associated with the labels they used for their seminar attendees, such as ‘unwilling’ or ‘in waiting’. The perspective lent by ethnographic fieldwork sensitised me to the various effects that the seminars had on people, including myself.

In this chapter, I will seek for clues regarding the appeal of the neo-liberal discourse by listening more carefully to what my informants told me. In the first part of the chapter, I will engage with the life story of Īrisa and consider the seminars and other self-help practices as rehearsing new ways of relating to oneself and to one’s life. In the second part, the narratives of several other informants will be studied in a similar light. The third part of the chapter will analyse ethnographic material from one particular seminar to reflect on the importance of speaking and listening for the post-Soviet subject. The fourth, concluding part will engage with the issues surrounding making a life out of a precarious social reality.

Īrisa

I met Īrisa at a seminar on ‘Communication Skills’. She was taking careful notes throughout the four days in a neat notebook that said ‘*Kursi*’ [Courses] on the cover, written by hand. Īrisa later told me that she would take this notebook along to all the seminars and that afterwards she would share the ideas noted down, with her peers at the senior women’s club she ran. Īrisa was in her early 60s. She had copper-colour hair, always beautifully coiffed, and she liked wearing bright-coloured, feminine blouses and delicate scarves. Īrisa had once worked on Soviet trading ships as a crew member and had seen foreign lands and eaten foreign delicacies that most other Soviet citizens could only dream of. After getting married and having children, she settled at a public utility company in Riga and became a hot water meter inspector, carrying on with the job when the company was privatised in the 1990s and then moving to another private housing corporation. Apart from her early sea-faring years, Īrisa’s life has not been an easy one. Early on, her husband developed an illness, which meant that she had to take on most responsibility for providing for the family. This became especially difficult in the 1990s, with the arrival of a market economy in Latvia. To improve her income over the past two decades, Īrisa had worked a second shift as a cleaner at a local music school, sold food supplements for a direct marketing firm and made a short-lived attempt at running her own small business offering healthy lifestyle classes. Her life’s motto is, ‘you’ve just got to keep digging!’ (*Vajag tik rakt!*), a line from a song from the 1980s performed by famous actor and satirist Edgars Liepiņš.

When she was made redundant in 2007, Īrisa was out of work for the first time in her life. After finding a job as a housekeeper at a kindergarten, she had become unemployed again when I met her in 2011. Īrisa said she had ‘discovered psychology’ after being encouraged by her employment agent to have an individual consultation with a psychologist at the Riga job centre. This was right after she had lost her job of many years at the housing corporation and,

according to her own account, was in a state of shock: 'I immediately started crying as I entered, saying that it had never happened to me before that I'd be out of work and I couldn't imagine how I would be able to handle it and so forth...' She paused briefly and offered a retrospective assessment of herself with a hint of mockery in her voice, '...like a Soviet woman'. The consultation helped her to recover, Īrisa told me, and see that losing a job was 'well, a fall, but there was a chance to stand up again'.

Right after this consultation, Īrisa signed up for several 'competitiveness-raising' seminars that her agent had offered. A two-day class on fairy-tale therapy left a particular impression on her: 'It's as if my eyes finally opened!' She related to me the reason for this over one of our many cups of coffee in a simple café in the Riga's buzzing central train station. The key idea communicated at the fairy-tale therapy class was that one's favourite childhood story had a special bearing over one's dispositions and behaviour later in life. As Īrisa explained, 'through drawing these parallels, it turns out that a person's entire life is like an extension, continuation, or reflection, of this fairy-tale character. Completely unconsciously.' Īrisa's favourite fairy-tale from the years of her childhood in the post-war Latvia had been about a little girl and the Twelve Months. This is how she told it to me:

'The evil step-mother sends the little girl to pick snowdrops in January. She goes to the forest, sees a little flickering fire, goes towards it and finds twelve men sitting there. The eldest, with a beard, is December. And January is the youngest, and March, and May. So each man is a month and they are dressed accordingly, and they are sitting around a fire. It is Christmas, [or] New Year, it's the end of the year. The month of December is reflecting on how the year has passed. And [the girl] arrives, crying that her stepmother has sent her out looking for snowdrops but where to get them now! [Snowdrops usually crop up around March in Latvia as the first sign of spring.] Impasse, that's it, all over, where to get them now! The stepmother had said, "Don't

come home without the snowdrops, or else angry dogs will attack you!” And so the girl thought she would go to the forest and freeze to death and not be nuisance to her stepmother anymore. And now she meets these twelve months and they feel sorry for her as she reveals her misfortunes to them. And each month gives her a gift. She receives something from each month, covering the entire year. She goes home with snowdrops and other gifts. The step-mother [asks]: “Oh, where did you get all that?” – “In the forest.” And she ushers her other daughters out, “go, go!” But they don’t find anything, of course, because nobody gives them anything. They return freezing, sick, exhausted, one of them has even been killed by the wolves. So, not everybody can go into the forest... But this is my fairy-tale, I find something beautiful for myself in each month of the year. Also in December, going into a cold forest, you are nevertheless going to find that little fire, if only you look for it. I won’t stand by a tree and cry, “Ah, what to do now!” You’ve got to keep digging, like Liepiņš said.’

The idea that successes and failures in life were somehow encoded in one’s psychological make-up appealed to Īrisa. She said:

‘This fairy-tale therapy for me, I guess it was the first... it somehow shifted my thinking for some 180 degrees, towards the human being, and I wanted to start studying him. ... And so all of a sudden I understood that it is so valuable for everybody to find this out for themselves, because for me, when I started looking at what I saw as misfortunes at that moment [and that] I would be crying about, I started looking at them a bit differently! Well, I won’t say that it happened to me immediately because I was going more and more to other, other psychologists and other... well, it was called differently, but there were different psychologists, different approaches. Putting it all together I also understood that sometimes those things that we perceived as misfortunes, that it was maybe not a misfortune after all, maybe just the opposite,

that it was a new page in your life and you had a chance to read this page differently, maybe write it differently, if we turned over a completely new, blank page. Write it differently, behave differently, look at things that are happening around us differently. Well... so, hats off to the psychology courses!’

Writing one's own destiny

Īrisa's life story gives some more clues as to why she found this new-gained ability to read and write certain pages of her life in a different way particularly empowering. In the early 1980s, soon after she had married her husband, a terrible accident happened that made her experience first-hand the brutality of the totalitarian regime. Her husband occupied a high position at an organisation responsible for public infrastructure in Riga. One night, the supply system broke down and there were great material losses as a result of this failure. Her husband, as the man formally responsible, was taken into custody by the Soviet militsiya, ‘until all the circumstances are found out’. According to Īrisa, he was being blamed for the accident even though it was a faulty mechanism in the equipment that had caused it. They kept him imprisoned in the investigative isolator for five days and nights. Īrisa's husband was eventually released and never formally charged or convicted, but subsequently, following the traumatic experiences he underwent while locked up (which Īrisa did not want to recount in detail), he developed a form of schizophrenia that he had been suffering from ever since. As Īrisa said, ‘it felt as if my beautiful married life, full of love, collapsed in a single day. [...] I could turn away and leave but where was the guarantee that I would not have met an even worse man in my life. He was no drunk, no fighter, nothing [like that]. I wouldn't have married him if he had been otherwise. He was very good!’ Afterwards, whenever a tense or difficult situation arose, Īrisa's husband would react by irrational, excessive laughter. When other people would say that he seemed ‘funny’, Īrisa responded that he was ‘simply happy’. While married, she had to provide

for the family and navigate all the twists and turns that life brought about mostly on her own. Īrisa did not engage in an outright critique of the Soviet totalitarian regime during our conversations; she only remarked quietly after telling me about her husband, ‘that machinery grinds up the human being, grinds up people’s destinies.’

Anthropologist Vieda Skultans (1998) has written of the sense of powerlessness created by the various forms of suffering, ranging from mild and mundane to sudden and violent, inflicted by the Soviet totalitarian power. Victims of prosecutions lost a sense of their life as their own – instead, they felt as if it was being written for them. Yet, the 1990s, which for many came as a chance for retribution and justice, were not experienced by Īrisa in the same way. While many Latvians had participated in nationalist demonstrations and were welcoming the renewed statehood as personal liberation, Īrisa had been more preoccupied with everyday responsibilities and chores. She had to school and take care of her adolescent children, while her husband was spending a lot of time in hospitals. The early 1990s meant even more hard work than before to enable her to provide for her family. She took on a late-night cleaning job at the music school that her children attended. Her son and daughter would often help her finish the cleaning of the classrooms after their evening classes. In the Soviet times, Īrisa reminisced, she had been attending the family club at the local culture house. Children would be kept busy by professional staff and parents could engage in various educational or leisure activities together. They would go on trips together around Latvia. Then she remembers suddenly noticing that it was not affordable anymore, people had to pay for using the culture house for the meetings and it cost too much to rent the bus for the trips around the country. Īrisa recalls how she and the other parents were ‘dismayed’ by this turn of events (*sašutuši*).

It was not national independence that brought a sense of liberation to Īrisa but rather the psychological discourse that she learned through the unemployment office seminars and

additionally her own studies of neuro-linguistic programming and Gestalt therapy, among other things. Returning to her experience of the fairy-tale therapy, Īrisa's reflections on being able to release the grip of 'misfortune' and turn a new page in her life suggest the welcoming of a renewed sense of ownership of her destiny. Considering her life as a reflection of the behaviour-pattern of the little girl in the fairy tale, Īrisa is re-interpreting her life as her own, even if unconscious, making. We can see how this narrative has an appeal for the post-Soviet individual who has lived with a sense of her life as always at the mercy of a political regime. This psychologising discourse enables Īrisa to relate differently and, importantly, in a more fulfilling way to herself and her lifeworld.

Catching-up subjectivities

When Īrisa describes above how she initially reacted to losing a job, she remarks on herself talking 'like a Soviet woman'. Here, Īrisa uses a very similar phrase to the character in a novel by Latvian writer Gundega Repše that I briefly referenced in Chapter 2. The novel '*Ēnu apokrifis*' (*The Apocrypha of Shadows*), set in 1990s Latvia, explores the effects of the post-Soviet transformations in the everyday lives of several ordinary people. One of the central characters, Rauls, is asked by his wife during an argument, 'who are you?!' – 'in any case, certainly not a Soviet man,' Rauls responds (cited in Ezergailis 2006: 337). I find his response extremely evocative. What defines Rauls's identity is the negation of the Soviet in himself. He has yet to formulate – and form – who he is now, living in *post*-Soviet Latvia.

Alongside the political and the socio-economic reform, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the re-establishment of national independence also brought about a 'subjectivity reform', even if never officially pronounced. As I sketched out in Chapters 1 and 2, the economic and political reforms were framed in the policy and popular discourses as 'catching up' with Europe. Latvia became one of the 'catching-up' economies in the EU discourse, its

progress measured statistically in comparison to other former socialist bloc countries. However, it was not, of course, only about a new economic system; for Latvians, 1991 was about regaining freedom. Yet, becoming free meant not only regaining a sovereign right to self-governance as a nation, but also ‘modernising’ and ‘democratising’ themselves as citizens of a European liberal democracy. Policy makers and foreign experts spoke of ‘learned helplessness’ and other Soviet diseases that needed to be cured in order to fulfil this freedom, but many would also suddenly experience themselves in very intimate ways as *no more Soviet*, as Repše put it in her novel. We therefore can think not only of ‘catching-up’ economies but also of ‘*catching-up*’ *subjectivities* – the kinds of forms of selfhood that have been at stake in the post-Soviet transformations of the past two decades. But what exactly does one become, and how is this achieved, when one is ‘certainly not a Soviet man’ anymore?

When Īrisa lightly mocks herself for having reacted like a Soviet woman, she seems to be reflecting on the experience of having to reassess her life and her own acts according to a different scale or perspective. Losing a job was, for her, a breaking point when one system of intelligibility, one way of relating to this world seemed to become obsolete. While in Repše’s novel the hero uses the generic term ‘*cilvēks*’ (translated in English as ‘a human being’ or ‘a man’), Īrisa refers to her former self as a ‘Soviet woman’ (*padomju sieviete*). In addition to the inappropriateness and outdated-ness of such subjectivity, it also presumes an out-dated model of femininity. A stereotypical Soviet woman was the woman worker, toiling alongside men in the factory.¹³¹ With the fall of Soviet socialism, Latvian women, like elsewhere in Eastern Europe, embraced more traditional gender roles whereby staying at home and taking care of the children was now perceived as progressive. Additionally, the traditional Soviet woman was imagined as a woman who did not pay much attention to her appearance while the modern

¹³¹ Victoria Bonnell, in her analysis of Soviet propaganda posters, observes how the woman worker was depicted with similar symbolic attributes as the male worker, while at the same time always being shown as a subordinate, a helper rather than a peer (1997: 74-79).

post-Soviet woman would prefer to highlight her femininity, not only in her career choices, but also in her visual self-presentation. Īrisa's distancing from her former self who was still talking like a Soviet woman signals her sense of urgency to craft new ways of being.

The visual self-presentation had always been important for Īrisa and she did not find much in need of improvement there. When she had attended a seminar on 'personal image' at the unemployment office during her first stint of unemployment, she told me there had been nothing new for her there:

'At my age, it was all already well-known for me there. I have been sufficiently educating myself and have myself worked as a distributor of various beauty products and have been to courses of various levels, so... I have also trained as a seamstress and in artistic needlework, so I didn't gain anything in that course. But at least I listened to it all and took pleasure in the fact that I already knew all that.'

The psychological seminars, like the fairy-tale therapy, however, had captivated her. Inspired, she started working on herself, as she put it. One of the 'different approaches' that Īrisa explored was called neuro-linguistic programming (NLP). This pseudo-scientific school of thought, popular in Latvia since the 1990s, insists that one can achieve whatever one desires through self-programming. As Īrisa put it, 'everything is possible.' She had attended a training course of several months entitled 'Active Dreaming'. There, she had learnt how to draft five-year plans outlining everything she wanted to become and to achieve. With the help of NLP, Īrisa devised new ways of relating to money and wealth (attracting it by different methods rather than suspecting it) and to her own needs (negotiating a room of her own in her family apartment).

Thoughts like wild horses

The theme of searching for new ways of relating to oneself and one's life experiences was present across my other informants' stories as well. The loss of a job lent more urgency to these quests. Aivars' narrative was one of those I had been grappling with most. Aivars, the road engineer whom we met in Chapter 4, had lost his public sector job during the recent wave of austerity. During our first interview, he only wanted to talk about the state of affairs in Latvia. Aivars lamented the non-thinking state and compared Latvia to Denmark, praising the Danish system of communes where the members of a commune were protected in the case of losing their means of livelihood. His narrative countered the dominant logic of individualisation and responsabilisation.

We met again a couple of weeks later. I had said I wanted to hear more about his own story – his past, his plans for the future. Aivars came prepared. As we sat down at a table in a deserted casino restaurant at some point between breakfast and lunch (Aivars said he had picked the place because it was easy to park there), he pulled out a book from his black leather pouch. The book was called *Vaccination against Stress, or the Psycho-Energetic Aikido* and was written by a Russian psychologist and homeopath, Valeriy Sinelnikov (see Figure 11 at the beginning of this chapter). Sinelnikov had gained widespread popularity in many former Soviet countries with his self-help books and trainings. Aivars had become acquainted with Sinelnikov's writing while staying in hospital with a badly strained leg muscle. Apart from Sinelnikov's works, Aivars had also been reading and re-reading *The Secret*, a book on the power of positive thinking. *The Secret* had gained global popularity in recent years and had been in the top-ten charts of several Latvian bookstores in 2009 and 2010. A middle-aged man with masculine build, an engineer's degree, and a solemn manner of speech, Aivars did not strike me as the prime target audience of esoteric literature. Furthermore, our first extended conversation had led me to believe that Aivars was one of the few people I had spoken to who

had not bought into the responsabilisation rhetoric. Yet, it was clear that he had invested considerable amount of his free time in studying self-help literature and found it very meaningful.

By his own admittance, Aivars was at a turning point in his life. Over the past several months, he had been intensely studying the book and his narrative was scattered with references to it. He compared his thoughts to ‘wild horses, running in all directions’ and pondered that ‘to get things in order in the material world, you need to be a shepherd of your thoughts. Through the thoughts, everything else gets orderly. Lately I have clearly understood that the world, the way it forms around me and those people that enter my life, all depends directly on me.’ It was the studies of Sinelnikov’s books that had led to him realise that ‘everybody has it within themselves to live their life fully, benevolently, harmoniously, in material well-being, in emotional well-being. Only we don’t make use of it. Hardly anybody makes full use of everything that they have been endowed with.’

Aivars said he was trying to get away from blaming the state for his problems: ‘negative thoughts grow where there is the right soil for them. If a person is upset, angry, bitter, sullen, then that’s where the bad thoughts spring up about the state being bad, the society not delivering in this respect or that... all the time it’s somebody’s fault.’ He had come to believe, after reading and reflecting for several months, that his successes and failures in life had originated from his thinking:

A: I created it myself. I was in a psychological state that... that was not good for me. And then there must have been some subtle hints, not a harsh cut immediately that you have to jump on one leg for two months. But I had missed those [subtle hints]. Actually... only after it had happened did I start looking into it more deeply.

L: To think about it all...?

A: To think more. It was painful! And then for some two months, well, I went to work as well but I was quite paralysed, walking around [was difficult], I wasn't running around anywhere. And there was a lot of spare time all of a sudden, which meant that I needed it. Just like... well, that was the beginning of it all and now the loss of the job as well... [Pause] Well... it says it really well here [in the book] that both material well-being and losing it, it all depends on one's thoughts. If the person is afraid, let's say, to lose the job, he starts having money difficulties, he becomes more fearful and unsettled. And that's what he then gets.

The claims that one was the sole master of one's life and self-examination was the first step towards success in life, made by the trainers at the unemployment office seminars, were ardently echoed by Aivars. He added: 'it is daily work. Because it's quite... I'm re-arranging my entire value system right now. It is about making quite a big inventory.'

Working on one's own self is a theme that was also present in Einars' story. Einars was another engineer by education but his life had taken a number of adventurous turns. Despite his high level of education, he had worked as an auto mechanic in the 1980s because one could make more money that way than working at a factory. He took advantage of the opportunities in the 1990s, starting a currency exchange business with a friend, and was amongst the founders of one of the first stock-trading institutions in Latvia. Currently, he owned a business in the health-care sector but was having difficulties keeping it afloat and as such had registered as a job seeker at the unemployment office. He explained to me that his main reason for registering was the chance to attend the 'competitiveness-raising' seminars. During one of our chats, Einars said in a slightly hushed voice, as if to let me in on something that not many people knew, that similar trainings cost a lot of money to attend by yourself and that private companies paid big sums to provide such workshops to their employees.

Einars was impressed by the seminar for building communication skills: a course run by

Viktorija. Emphasising that he could rely only on himself, he was eager to devote his time, during this low period in his business activities to these amateur studies of practical psychology. In fact, according to him, psychology was a necessary science to master in order to succeed in life. The seminars gave him insight into argumentation tactics, the art of rhetoric, and the science of reading people. However, it was more than being just about success. Einars once explained to me a theory he liked to believe in: in his view, souls circulate around the planet earth and regularly choose which new-born to inhabit. It is the soul's mission to constantly improve itself and that is what a human being must strive to do throughout his lifetime.

Even some of my interlocutors who were not especially interested in practical psychology and self-help literature often insisted on the individualising rhetoric. One of them was a 50-year old former vocational teacher named Žanete, who had to leave her workplace of 23 years because the school was being closed as part of the vocational education restructuring. She had worked temporarily at another school but there had not been enough classes to teach and she was let go of two years later. Divorced, with a teenage son and a daughter at university, Žanete was in desperate need of a job. Yet, she was at an age where getting a job was difficult, even in a growing economy. Inspired by Sarmīte's rhetoric on running a business, she was now considering starting a small business from her bedroom to craft souvenirs for tourists. Žanete recalled that it had been a 'total shock' and she had had 'a horrible feeling' when told of the school closure. She said she loved being a teacher and found it hard to imagine how to live without her job. However, at the same time Žanete repeatedly insisted that losing her job had been the right thing to have happened:

'I turn 50 this year. I guess life has really given me a chance to look around, to stop. Because all these years I have been working non-stop, I had no time to pause. And now I have stopped, I have been given an opportunity to look at everything and decide what I

want and what I do not want. [...] Because I had indeed been working in the same field and it got a bit old, I thought I already knew so much, it got old somehow. All the time sewing, sewing, yes, that's the way... some kind of exhaustion. Working as a teacher always two shifts so that there would be money for the family, that's why I perhaps got tired of it a little bit. [...] Perhaps this time has really been given to me in order to change something.'

As this excerpt demonstrates, Žanete makes sense of her job loss chiefly in relation to her need to re-evaluate the course her life is taking. She speaks of life giving her an opportunity.

Significant parallels can be drawn between the narratives of my informants and those interviewed by anthropologist Vieda Skultans approximately twenty years earlier. As introduced in Chapter 2, Skultans's book *The Testimony of Lives* (1998) analyses life-stories collected in Latvia from 1992 to 1993. In many of the stories, experiences of hardships and traumas during the Soviet years were being recounted. Skultans found that her informants attributed these hardships and failed dreams to the injustice, irrationality, and often cruelty of the Soviet regime. She noted that '[t]he repercussions of world events on individual lives played a large part in personal narratives' (1998: 15), as 'human intentions' were seen as 'overridden by history' (ibid: 121). Through locating the causes of suffering and injustice in the political system, narratives displayed an 'overt political criticism' (ibid: 18).

One of the narrative strategies these Latvians employed to make sense of their suffering centred on the notion of destiny. The difficulties that one had to overcome made more sense when imagining them as part of the destiny of Latvia itself. As Skultans put it: '[m]emories of individual suffering derive meaning from their positioning within national history' (1998: 47).¹³² This is not to say that everybody in the early 1990s had their life story

¹³² Similarly, in David Mandel's book *Rabotyagi* (1994), a collection of life-stories of former Soviet workers in Russia, starts with a life-story of Petr, whose father had been a prosecuted political activist

embedded in the narrative of the nation. Rather, in those cases where one's sense of agency was reduced because the forces of history were seen as casting aside one's hopes and plans, it helped for the sense-making process to tie one's fate to that of the entire oppressed nation.¹³³

As these narratives from the early 1990s attest, many of Skultans' informants constructed their subjectivity in opposition to the Soviet regime. On the one hand, there was the (Soviet) state that was experienced as oppressive, irrational and unjust. Individual agency was imagined as regulated, conditioned, or curtailed by such factors as 'the government', 'the party', or 'the system'. On the other hand, there was the oppressed (Latvian) nation, the fate of which was imagined to be unfolding and this grander narrative was giving greater meaning to individual suffering. This socially contextualised interpretation of one's successes and failures in life provided a purpose, or at least a justification for one's hardships. Attributing suffering to causes outside of the individual was a strategy for maintaining a coherent, positive sense of individuality in the face of a regime that was seen as thwarting individual agency.

In stark contrast to Skultans' data from the early 1990s, the narratives I collected evidence a more 'bare' socio-political 'landscape' within which one's story is grounded. The significant feature that could be heard in the Latvian stories analysed by Skultans in the 1990s – reading one's hardships against the backdrop of the socio-political macro-structure – was often absent from my informants' narratives. The radical socio-economic restructuring of the early 1990s as well as the recent economic crisis were largely absent from the narratives, despite the fact that for some of my informants it had been the reason for losing their job and, for all of them, was making it very difficult for them to find a new one. Most significantly, these personal hardships and difficulties were, in most cases, not linked by the narrators to the

and who himself had devoted his life to exposing cruelties of the Soviet regime. The first words of his narrative are: 'In a way, the story of my family is interwoven with the history of this country' (Mandel 1994: 16).

¹³³ Benedict Anderson has spoken in a similar vein of 'the magic of nationalism to turn chance into destiny' (quoted in Cerwonka 2004: 27).

shifting socio-economic and political terrain but instead to the personal inadequacies and idiosyncrasies of their life.

The narratives did not unfold according to a pre-determined scenario, as they did with the help of the notion of ‘destiny’ in life-stories analysed by Skultans. Therefore, a more individual labour of sense-making was needed to endow with reason the fast-changing circumstances of one’s life. Many narratives exhibited lengthy discussions of how to improve oneself mentally, learning to manage one’s thoughts and to gain fulfilment internally, rather than expect it from ‘life’, attributing causes to extra-terrestrial forces like star alignments or energies in the space. I learned during my fieldwork about an eclectic array of sub-disciplines of self-help psychology and esoteric and religious schools. They span from Adolph Adler’s theory of life styles and Viktor Frankl’s tips for survival in the holocaust to esoteric teachings, such as that of Ernst Muldashev, a healer from Bashkortostan, neuro-linguistic programming, lithotherapy or healing with stones, Valeriy Sinelnikov and psycho-energetic aikido, the law of attraction and movie *The Secret*, Hinduism and Buddhism, not to mention all types of fortune tellers and astrologists. When people recounted their experiences of navigating the arduous and uncertain social terrain of post-socialist Latvia, the conversations most often steered towards these topics.

Such shifts that can be observed in the ‘forms of self-telling’ (Bruner 1987: 16) illuminate the reconfigurations of political subjectivities that accompany and underlie Latvia’s political and economic neo-liberalisation process. The ‘fragmentation of shared cultural plots and symbols’, noted by Skultans during her later fieldwork in Latvia in 2001 (2004: 340), has been accompanied by pluralistic, eclectic, individual quests for alternative meaning systems and increased redefinition of political and socio-economic issues such as psychological and/or mystical ones. Life in the Soviet system could be made sense of by invoking the injustices and the political repressions and often irrational economic policies of the Soviet government and

thus allowed individuals to account for events in their lives in a way that did not diminish themselves in their own eyes and in the eyes of the listener of the story. One's life in the contemporary social order appears harder to account for in terms of its socio-economic and political underpinnings. Individual suffering has ceased to be linked to that of the entire nation and instead has been 'privatized' (Skultans 2004: 338). Nowadays, when one needs similar 'narrative assistance', one has to look elsewhere. 'The political' does not feature as overtly in the narratives as it did twenty years ago as documented by Skultans' study.

Crash survivors

When considered within this context of widespread engagement with the ethics of 'making a life', the 'competitiveness-raising' seminars can be understood in a new light. In this part of the chapter, I will reflect in particular on a four-day training course on communication skills that was organised by Viktorija. I had met Īrisa and Einars for the first time at this particular seminar. By shifting the attention away from my informants' narratives and their individual efforts of learning to make a life and instead refocusing it on the kinds of interactive practices that they were engaging in, I seek to show that the seminars expanded on the kinds of ethical quests that were present in other areas of my informants' lives. Additionally, I seek to highlight that it was not always a purely individualistic process but could equally be a relational one. Such an examination gives an insight into the reasons for the appeal of these active labour market programmes, not negating their disciplinary nature but giving a more nuanced understanding of these spaces.

The only furniture in the small room was the whiteboard on one of the walls, a simple light-coloured wooden desk, and some twenty black chairs lining the walls. People were trickling in one by one, hanging their winter coats on a couple of hooks next to the door. There were fourteen participants, including myself. All age groups were represented, while women

outnumber men by eleven to three. Judging by the way they carried themselves and how they were dressed, the people gathered there appeared to me as more middle-class than at the seminars on labour rights or preparing for job interviews, where most people had been sent by their employment agents against their will. The people here had chosen to attend the training voluntarily. When Viktorija asked the participants to introduce themselves and say why they had come, the women said for the most part that they wanted to learn something new and to know how to ‘communicate freely’ with others. Several women mentioned that they were currently attending a number of courses and noted their interest in psychology. One of the men said that Latvians needed to be more aggressive in communication, in order to succeed in business.

Viktorija always made a point of running her seminars in a particularly open, democratic manner. At the start of the session, she introduced the usual rules, namely, that the group would be working together for the four days and that if anybody had to miss a day, they would need to ask for the group’s approval. Also, she explained that people were free to take part in group activities to the extent that they ‘felt comfortable to’. The first exercise, after the introductions, was to learn all the names of the participants. Each person had to firstly repeat the names of the people before him or her and then say their own name. The last person in the circle had to repeat the names of everybody in the room. As the exercise was completed, Viktorija explained that people liked being addressed by their first name. Ina, a woman in her late 20s, responded enthusiastically that she had read this in a book by Dale Carnegie. After each person had repeated everybody else’s names, Viktorija gave the next task to the group. She said they had to imagine that they were survivors of a plane crash and had landed on a deserted island. Then Viktorija asked them to write down the following list of things: a 20-litre water barrel, blankets, compass, canned food, matches, a small dog, a map, crackers, first-aid kit, a knife, a battery, a gun. It was only possible to take five of these items with them. Firstly,

each participant had to make his or her own selection of five. Then, the group had to agree on the five items they were taking. Armands, the man who had commented on Latvians' need for aggressiveness, took the lead and announced that the group should vote on each of the items and the votes should be counted to see which items were the most popular. The voting took place smoothly but a discussion ensued when two people were insisting on taking the little dog along. However, the voting principle was being enforced, as everybody was following Armands's lead. The defenders of the dog were in the minority so the dog was left behind. The last disagreement was on choosing between the canned food, blankets, or the gun. A number of repeated rounds of voting were carried out until a final decision was reached.

Once the decision had been made, Viktorija asked people to share their observations about how they went about the task. A couple of them suggested that perhaps there had not been enough discussion and everything was decided too quickly with the voting and without debate. Viktorija agreed: 'you vote and vote, but where are the arguments?!' Armands, who had been the main instigator of mechanical voting, remained silent. Ina, the younger woman, disagreed, however, suggesting that if the list had been left open for discussion, there would have been only 'a lot of shouting'. In her view, there was no point in debating with such a big group and voting was sufficient. Another discussion ensued about the little dog. Ingars and Krista were disappointed that the dog had been left behind. Ingars argued, visibly agitated, that one lost one's humanity by sacrificing the dog. Krista agreed. I expressed my agreement now as well, even though I had not said anything during the voting. Viktorija explained that such a situation can be played out in a job interview. One's true self would come out and reveal whether one is more of a leader type or a passive implementer, whether one has argumentation skills or is left unheard. The dog, according to her, indicated the necessary distinction between the social and the business worlds and was in fact the main catalyst of this exercise, apart from testing communication skills. If one took the dog, one showed one's unsuitability for the

‘business world’. ‘Those are social workers’, Viktorija asserted about the people unable to abandon the dog. As a business leader, she explained, such a person would not be effective, as they would not be able to make tough decisions like sacking people. It would be a different matter if one were to suggest that the dog needed to be taken as a resource – either to kill and eat him or to use him as a hunter of birds. That would be a person who thinks like a leader, Viktorija declared.

She teased the man who insisted on taking the dog and turned it against him: ‘what did *you do* to convince them?’, she asked. ‘Why did not they listen to you? What could you have done to convince them to get your point across?’ Ingars, a middle-aged man with a short, bristly grey beard and gentle blue eyes, seemed to be missing Viktorija’s point that his argumentation was not strong enough. Rather, he was suggesting that his and the group’s values were simply different. Ingars spoke about ‘human values’ and ‘compassion’, while Viktorija focused on ‘business world’ and ‘ability to make strategic decisions’.

The little dog was mentioned throughout the course of the seminar. The next morning, as Viktorija asked the participants to reflect on the previous day, Ingars said he still could not get over the fact that others would not take the dog. Others also mentioned the dog debate as the most memorable from the day before. On the second day, there was a different exercise. In pairs, with our backs turned to one another, we were asked to talk about something, and when one person had said something, the other was supposed to reply, ‘it looks to me like you feel [an emotion] about this’ (sad, happy, excited, angry, etc.). I was in a pair with Ingars. We talked about how it felt being away from home, living abroad. One of Ingars’ children was working abroad and so he wanted to know how I felt about being away from home. When we had completed the exercise, Viktorija asked each pair to share their experiences and observations. When Ārija’s turn came, she said she had been telling her partner about losing her job. Ārija used to be a bookkeeper for many years but now, having lost the job, she was

considering becoming a gardener. She said that, as she was speaking, she noticed herself getting emotional. Being fired had made her feel ‘like that little doggy, being left behind’. ‘We had become like a family,’ she told the group about her former workplace. The metaphor of the dog offered Ārija a way of connecting with her own feelings, while also invoking the lingering sense of tension from Day 1 between the market rationality and ‘human-ness’.

Speaking and listening

Making the participants imagine that they had suffered a plane crash and now had to devise a survival strategy can be seen as a metaphor for their real-life situations in that moment. Having lost one’s means of livelihood and finding oneself in trying circumstances, how does one cope? Rather than facing it alone, the exercise put people in this situation together, thus resembling the seminar setup. It was posed as a question of survival. However, the discussions afterwards touched upon some fundamental issues evoked earlier by my informants’ stories, that centred around learning how to live in this particular moment in history. The exercise prompted a number of fundamental questions, such as; how to live together in a market democracy; how to reconcile one’s views of what is morally right with the values operating in the (labour) market; how to speak in order to be heard; and how to listen in order to understand? These were meaningful questions that were rarely brought up, given the frenetic pace of life in neo-liberal capitalist society. This four-day training seminar seemed to operate with a time that was slower, more paced, than the time usually afforded by the market reality.

Post-Soviet, neo-liberal Latvia has limited spaces for public sociality beyond one’s family, one’s close circle of friends and one’s work colleagues, as already identified by Juris and Viktorija in Chapter 5. There are moments of public togetherness – national celebrations such as the Song and Dance Festivals, hockey matches, or the Independence Day fireworks. These are events when the people as a whole are meant to ‘come together’ and re-vive the

sense of unity and common destiny. That is the kind of common sociality that was summoned by the former President when she raised her arms to the sky in front of the Song and Dance Festival audience and asked them to repeat with her, ‘we are strong, [...] we are beautiful!’ (see Chapter 2). National unity is constantly being appealed to in the public sphere, by politicians and intellectuals, as under threat and in need of protection and fostering. But these mass spectacles summon the political subject as one of the nation, either by being silent or singing. There is no space for speaking there. Furthermore, post-socialist societies, including Latvia, also exhibit low levels of trust. Among Latvians, 56.1% in 2009 said that they did not trust their fellow citizens. The neo-liberal spirit is such that one feels one can only rely on oneself.¹³⁴

A form of warm sociality, which was unexpected by the participants, developed quickly during the seminar; as several of them reported to me afterwards, it came as a surprising revelation to be able to engage in this way with strangers. Serving as a further testimony to this, Einars told me during one of our subsequent meetings that the group had wanted to continue meeting and working together on two Saturdays per month. They were trying to convince Viktorija to run these sessions for a payment of 3 Lats per person (approx. 4 GBP). Einars was inviting me to join as well. However, Viktorija felt too busy to commit, so the idea did not materialise. As described in Chapter 5, however, Sarmīte’s audiences did manage to organise subsequent get-togethers that Sarmīte herself also took part in.

This speaking – and being listened to – is meaningful in a number of ways. In neo-liberalism just like in Soviet socialism, being unemployed carries with it a stigma of the unproductive, inactive subject. Many of my informants spoke of the dread of ‘sitting at home’ and having nowhere to go. The very fact that they had to get up in the morning and go somewhere, as civil servant Vija noted, was crucial for preserving the image of a respectable,

¹³⁴ Stafecka (2009: 42). In the Human Development Report 2012/2013, this trust in others is estimated at 4.1 in a scale of 1-10, compared to 5.1 in EU-27 (Bela 2013: 10, see also Upleja 2014). According to a recent survey, 48% of the population believe that they can only rely on themselves (DNB 2011).

aspiring self. In meetings like these, those who had been temporarily marginalised through their loss of a productive status in society, get a chance to feel included. Furthermore, the seminar exercises, like those discussed above, were not solipsistic, autonomous practices of self-making. Viktorija put conscious emphasis on encouraging group interaction. Through interactions with the trainer and with other participants, this space offered sociality and recognition. Listening to one's partner and summarising what they had said and how they felt, worked as a powerful tool for sharing anxieties, fears, despair, but also hope, in the context of having to carve out a new space for oneself in an often hostile reality. Similarly, in other Viktorija's seminars I had observed, she often asked people at the beginning, 'how does it feel to be unemployed?' She invited them to share what their goals in life were, what jobs they wanted, and where they wanted to travel to if they could. If we understand language as a form of living in the face of mere survival, language as a vitality¹³⁵, then these spaces, sponsored by the Employment Agency and created by the trainers, offered a space for such vitality. It was this opportunity to speak and to be listened to, that offered a shift from feeling marginalised and deviant to feeling recognised.

Equally the seminars are a place to practice how to speak in a neo-liberal capitalist society, in order to secure employment and thus a means of livelihood. Viktorija, but also Juris and the other trainers, often advised their groups as to what to say and what not to say when looking for a job. Viktorija warned that, if the crush survivors' game was part of a job interview process, it was best not to save the little dog. Wanting to take the dog along signalled a 'dangerous pattern of thought', as she put it. Ingars, however, refused to agree with Viktorija's logic, that one had to recognise what values and what types of behaviour belonged

¹³⁵ I thank Ruth Sheldon for bringing this notion from Wittgenstein's work to my attention.

to what part of the reality. Thus, this exercise also helped people explore and critique the values that they perceived to be underlying the contemporary socio-economic order in Latvia.¹³⁶

The significance attached to ‘expressing oneself’ and ‘communicating effectively’ needs to be placed also within the context of post-totalitarianism. One’s story in Soviet totalitarianism was often not one’s own. As discussed in Chapter 2, people’s biographies were habitually written for them by the secret police, to be held in surveillance files. Īrisa’s husband could not speak to the power and, as a result, silenced himself into mad laughter. For many others, self-censure was a way of making a life in the totalitarian system. National independence came with a renewed importance of speech (Skultans 1998). This concerns not only freedom of speech as a human right (though that too) but also more mundane interactions. It now became important to learn how to speak and listen to others after having grown up in a society where it was safer not to speak one’s mind (Jaanus 2006).¹³⁷ The exercises, which involved sharing emotions and listening to one another, gain particular relevance in this context. In the example above, the plane crash exercise became an opportunity to reflect on, amongst other things, how to communicate in a liberal democracy. Was voting the best way forward? What about a debate? Viktorija’s insistence on having to argue one’s point and not stay silent echoed a broader concern in Latvian society about what it meant to be living in this

¹³⁶ In another seminar, Viktorija advised the audience not to speak of one’s needs with a potential employer. To the entertainment of her audience, she enacted a hypothetical job interview where the candidate was listing the number of children she needed to feed with a pleading expression. She was offering here the kind of a narrative performance that state socialist citizens had learnt to stage in interactions with the state (Haney 2002, Galmarini 2014). Her little performance served to point out the uselessness of such a narrative today.

¹³⁷ Maire Jaanus points to the significance of ‘Silence and Speech; Truth and Lies’ for the post-Soviet person in her discussion of Estonia (2006: 311). As Jaanus puts it, ‘As long as I think, ergo use language, I am a subject, a speaking being’ (2006: 315).

new order. Discussion was now a value, a new skill to master for people who had grown up in the Soviet system.¹³⁸

It is in this sense that a particular kind of speaking is also normative. When Ingars expressed disappointment at the group's unwillingness to rescue the dog, Viktorija challenged his ability to reason with others. 'But what did you do to convince them,' she asked him. The clash of values that Ingars sensed could have been avoided, according to Viktorija, had he been more skilled at expressing his point of view. It was not through some shared values but through persuasion, debate, effective communication that this could and should be done in contemporary society. This normativity of speech became evident also in Viktorija's interaction with another participant. Since the beginning of the seminar, Meldra had been withdrawn and had hardly said a word. During a break on the second day, as some of the group members had left the small room, Viktorija suddenly looked at Meldra and asked how she was feeling. Meldra, a woman in her 40s, with glasses and long wavy hair, responded timidly that she was feeling fine. Then Viktorija suggested that Meldra was not participating enough in the group work and that she would need to speak more. Meldra replied quietly, but equally rather assertively, that she did not feel like speaking more. Viktorija ventured on to say that it probably did not feel very good just staying silent. The woman disagreed, re-affirming that she felt fine. This obviously annoyed Viktorija and she lashed out, looking the other woman straight into her eyes, 'you said at the beginning that you wanted to learn how to communicate! Well, if you don't speak, how do you think you'll learn?!' Visibly upset, Viktorija turned her head towards the single window. I had never seen her react in such a manner, on the verge of hostility. While she assured participants at the beginning of every seminar that they were free

¹³⁸ Schoolchildren had to learn how to think critically, argue and debate. Teachers, most of whom were Soviet-educated, were retrained by the Open Foundation and other foreign and local organisations how to foster discussions and pluralism of opinions in the classroom (Ozoliņa 2010). Similarly, Jonathan Larson notes how critical thinking and arguing have been associated in post-socialist Slovakia with development of liberal democracy (2013).

to speak and share only as much as they felt comfortable to, Meldra's firm reluctance to engage revealed the normativity behind the work on oneself practiced in the seminar. This willingness to work on oneself, as analysed in the previous chapter, was also how the trainers categorised their audiences. Expressing oneself, sharing, talking was an essential part of this work. In such moments, the disciplining nature of this active labour market programme became apparent.

The seminars are a neo-liberal space, created for responsabilisation while older forms of welfare support are withdrawn. Nonetheless it is also a space where people find time to listen to one another and engage at a different register than the commodified reality of most other public spaces allows. It offers an opportunity to both study and critique the status quo. As Les Back has noted, '[l]istening is active, a form of attention to be cultivated. [...] This active listening creates another set of social relations and ultimately a new kind of society, if only temporarily' (2014). If not always a fully dialogical space, it provides an opportunity for the unemployed participants to interact at a different pace and find a sense of well-being, even if a fleeting one, in a precarious situation.

Knowing how to live [well]

The practices my informants engaged in during the seminars, such as the one described above, as well as the self-help studies that many told me about, aim at reconfiguring one's way of relating to oneself and the social reality. Latvian media expert Anda Rožukalne, in her analysis of the magazine market, suggests that 'attention to analysis of socio-political problems is increasingly reoriented towards "knowing how to live [well]", "enjoying life", "loving oneself", "quality leisure", "getting in touch with oneself", "having new experiences", etc.' (cited in Eglitis 2011: 438). Sociologist Daina Eglitis reads this as a sign of increasing consumerism and neo-liberalisation and interprets this 'dominance of a vocabulary of taste and lifestyle ... as a hegemonic discourse, fostering the misrecognition and legitimation of post-

communist stratification' (2011: 441). While some consume the good life, others are relegated to not living but merely surviving, this argument goes (Eglitis 2011, Eglitis and Lace 2009).¹³⁹ I recognise that the media construct and sell identities as a commodity. Yet, what if we take this question seriously for a moment, 'How to live [well]'. This question is an important one and it is so in ways that exceed consumerist desires of possessing material goods. Furthermore, the parentheses around 'well' appear to be added in translation – is it really about 'knowing how to live' rather than 'knowing how to live [well]'? The former version makes it an even more existential question. Even people with the least means and opportunities, aspire to live rather than just to survive.

In her analysis of emigration and the 'emptying out' of the Latvian countryside, anthropologist Dace Dzenovska writes about a 'livable life' (*dzīvojama dzīve*), borrowing the term from Judith Butler (2012: 75).¹⁴⁰ She emphasises that a good, or livable, life does not only depend on the size of one's wages. Rather, an individual needs to be 'recognised' in relationships with others and with power. Dzenovska argues that 'life may become less livable if an individual is not being recognised as a subject according to those parameters that form his/her own self-perception and agency' (ibid). According to Dzenovska, neo-liberalism and nationalism – two dominant rationalities in contemporary Latvia – do not make life livable for large parts of the population. The seminars and other self-help practices highlight how those

¹³⁹ There are numerous studies of post-socialism that focus on coping and surviving. The increasing inequality and precariousness that the neo-liberal reforms brought about across large parts of the region justifies such a focus of interpretation (see e.g. Stenning et al 2010, Bridger and Pine 1998, Eglitis and Lace 2009). Eglitis and Lace focus on Latvian poor, or what they call the underclass created by the capitalist reforms and shrinking welfare policies. Drawing on Zygmunt Bauman's work on modernity's human waste, they show with the help of detailed statistics how large parts of society are marginalised and have no space, no home in the post-Soviet Latvian version of modernity. My point is, however, to emphasize the aspiration that exists beyond survival.

¹⁴⁰ As she wrote her book in Latvian, Dzenovska chose to use the term 'livable life' (*dzīvojama dzīve*) because, according to her, 'good life' (*laba dzīve*) is associated in the local vernacular with materially secure life. In her reading, livable life is a broader concept and draws attention to what makes it such (or not). As explained above, however, I do not side with the view that 'good life' is understood by people through the consumerist lens.

mostly in the middle of the spectrum of class division find a space of recognition. Thus, it is a question of making a life in an economically precarious reality and a social order, where previous ways of being and knowing, have not only been devalued in the public discourse but have also become untenable.

The importance of ‘knowing how to live’ despite the precariousness of one’s conditions was highlighted to me during an exchange with Vija, a civil servant in charge of the ‘competitiveness-raising’ seminars whom we have already met in previous chapters. She shared a small office with a junior colleague in the main building of the State Employment Agency, located in ‘the quiet centre’ of Riga. While the room, for the most part, had a sober character, with folders and piles of paper doubling as the only decoration on the functional light-wood furniture, Vija had adorned the wall next to her desk with countless little colourful stickers and pins. Behind the computer desktop, a thin green potted plant was stretching upwards and a wooden toy mouse sat on the edge of the pot, holding a small paper scroll. In her 50s, Vija had written a Masters’ thesis to obtain the qualification of a career consultant a couple of years ago. When she mentioned this in our first meeting, I asked Vija whether I could read her work. The thesis examined the ‘Competitiveness-Raising’ programme for job seekers, combining psychological, sociological and management theories of career development and competitiveness. The final sentence of the last chapter, analysing the impact of the ‘Competitiveness-Raising’ programme, cited Alfred Adler, an Austrian psychotherapist and founder of a school of ‘individual psychology’. It read, ‘our life is successful to the extent that our lifestyle has been successfully chosen’ (*Mūsu dzīve ir tieši tik veiksmīga, cik veiksmīgi izvēlēts ir mūsu dzīves stils*). During one of our subsequent meetings, I asked Vija what meaning this quote had for her. Without hesitation, she offered her own life as an example. The way she approached work, other people, the way she engaged in social activities and formed relationships in her family was the way she had *chosen* to do it, Vija told me. ‘We always have

a choice,' she explained. One can just 'complain' but what would be the point? Whilst talking, Vija turned to her computer and looked up a document. It was a power-point presentation, one of those uplifting and funny compilations of images and snippets of text that would be casually circulated over e-mail among colleagues and friends. With close-ups of colourful flowers, other-worldly ocean plants, and cute animals in the background, there was a story unfolding slide after slide about Džerijs (the Anglo-Saxon name 'Jerry' in Latvian transliteration), a restaurant manager who 'was the kind of guy you loved to hate. He was always in a good mood and always had something positive to say':

'When asked how he is doing he always responds "could not be better!!!" Many waiters left their jobs when Džerijs was leaving the restaurant so that they could move to another restaurant together with him. WHY??? Because Džerijs was a "natural motivation" [*sic*]. If an employee had problems, he always helped them not to despair but to see the positive side in each situation. Seeing these miracles, I told him:

"Nobody can be so good for a long time! How do you do that???"

He responded, "Waking up every morning, I think to myself that I have 2 options:

1. I can be in a good mood;
2. I can be in a bad mood!

I always choose to be in the good one! Whenever something bad happens, I choose whether to be a victim or to learn something from it so that it does not happen again. I always choose to learn!!! When somebody comes to complain to me, I can accept their complaints or instead I can better highlight to them the positive things in life! I prefer to remind people of the nice things in life!

"But it is not always that easy!!!" I objected.

“Yes it is! Life itself is an opportunity! If I consider it more generally, there are 2 options in every situation!” said Džerijs.

* You choose how to react in a situation;

* You choose how you will treat others;

* You choose your own mood.

It is your choice how you will live your life!!!’¹⁴¹

The story continued with Džerijs getting shot during a restaurant robbery, being operated on, and having a quick recovery because he ‘chose’ life over death while lying in the operating room. It read a bit like a modern-day *Candide*, celebrating the best of all possible worlds, except without the sarcastic undertones. As Vija clicked through the slides, I was hesitant for a moment how to react. I had been hearing so much from my informants about their self-help strategies of pursuing wellbeing and, at the time, they all struck me as not much more than a form of false consciousness. I was finding it frustrating that, instead of critiquing the welfare policies that provided such meagre support, they were chastising themselves for not governing their thoughts well enough. Yet, I had rarely openly contested their narratives, following a methodological strategy of mostly just listening and nodding encouragingly. This time, though, as I gradually felt closer and more at ease with Vija, I ventured a small challenge. Echoing the anonymous narrator of the story, I suggested that sometimes there would be difficulties that could not be simply wished away with the power of positive thinking. Vija smiled at me ruefully, as if to say that I had entirely failed to see the point, and replied ‘but you’ve got to live somehow’ (*Bet kaut kā taču ir jādžīvo*). The quote on the importance of ‘lifestyle’ that Vija had

¹⁴¹ This story was written by Francie Baltazar-Schwartz and is published in English under the title ‘Attitude is Everything’ in the self-help book *Chicken Soup for the Soul at Work* (1996: 211-213). It can be found on many websites dedicated to positive thinking and motivation. The text in the Latvian power-point version is slightly modified, compared to the original in the *Chicken Soup*..., so I am offering here my translation (back) from Latvian to English.

selected for closing her dissertation, and her subsequent interpretation of it, points to an understanding of the term ‘lifestyle’ that goes beyond consumerism. What is at stake is a good, or at least a livable, life.

Conclusion

When a political system collapses, what happens to its systems of intelligibility and its modes of life? How does an individual start living in a new way, as she is now expected to? This chapter offers a perspective from which to address such questions, which are central to this thesis as a whole. Drawing on observations as well as interviews and informal conversations with the people I met at these seminars, I have sought to understand how individuals in post-Soviet Latvia, especially when finding themselves in the precarious situation of being unemployed, engage with questions surrounding post-Soviet personhood and a livable life in contemporary Latvia. In this chapter, I suspend for a moment the critique of these neo-liberal welfare/workfare policies and try to listen closely to what my informants were telling me about the seminars, as well as their own engagements with various self-help discourses. By listening to Īrisa and my other informants, I could slowly get closer and recognise how they engaged with the neo-liberal rhetoric of individual responsibility in order to develop a different relationship with themselves and their lives. Attentive listening (Back 2007) provided an opportunity for recognition not only among the participants during the group self-help practices but also between my informants and me, as a researcher.

As this vignette and other ethnographic observations show, the participants of the ‘Competitiveness-Raising’ programme occasionally came to use this space, with the encouragement of the trainers, as a space for speaking and listening, formulating and sharing their emotions, engaging with others. It was individualising and de-politicising but at the same time it was a meaningful form of political selfhood that was practiced here – a free subject

coming to terms with him/herself. In Latvia, with its 'catching up' development agenda and its austerity politics, where there seemed to be few opportunities for being heard, suddenly here was a space for speaking and listening. The seminars also served as spaces of countering the rushed, individualistic reality outside the seminar doors. There was space for letting out emotions and for reflection and time to talk and share experiences. These 'competitiveness-raising' seminars functioned as unlikely, surprising spaces of empowerment and support. In these respects, the groups had similar characteristics to the 'consciousness-raising groups' that were formed in the 1970s as part of the feminist movement (Seidler 1994). At the same time, if paradoxically, this space was carved out by the decree of the neo-liberal state itself.

It would be a limited reading to see the psychological seminars and other self-help practices merely as ideological instruments of neo-liberal subjectification. The hushed confrontations, like that between Viktorija and Meldra, reveal the trainers' anxieties regarding how to discipline their audiences in ways that are perceived to be productive and fitting with the imagined hegemonic social order. But a discourse is only successful if it resonates. There are different effects produced by these labelling and differentiation practices. In important ways the self-help practices, including the seminars, do help people affirm a sense of self when they have lost work, which is often a key source of identity (Seidler 1994: 173). Furthermore, both the trainers and the unemployed are looking to come to terms with a kind of self that is both required and enabled in order to live well in a post-Soviet neo-liberal democracy. It is about redefining oneself when in important ways one could no longer be what one was before and could no longer live in a way one had lived before. It is within this context and through these processes that we find, not only neo-liberal subjectification, but also empowerment at work.

Chapter 7 Conclusions: Freedom as liberation and entrapment



Figure 12. The Freedom Monument in Riga (*Brīvības piemineklis*).¹⁴²

In October 2011, commuters stuck in Riga's Monday morning traffic caught an unusual sight; the very tip of the Freedom Monument was floating in the Daugava River. The female figure of Liberty was barely above water, her hands holding the famous three stars precariously above her head, as if guarding them in solemn despair. The monument usually

¹⁴² Photo: ScAvenger. This image is used in accordance to the licence *Creative Commons Attribution ShareAlike License v. 2.5* (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.5/>).

stood in a square in the city centre, surrounded by linden-trees and enclosed by Riga's late 19th-century boulevards. It was erected in 1935 and funded by donations from thousands of citizens. The three stars represent the three regions of Latvia. During the Soviet years, the Communist Party had forbidden people to place flowers in front of the monument or show any other sign of recognition of its meaning. And now here it was, sinking. The improbability of the sight was warranted. A group of artists had made a mock image and floated it along the river in an effort to draw attention, according to their own statement, to the increasing number of suicides in Latvia (Apollo 2011). This was 2011; the economic crisis and resulting austerity measures were reaping their effects. Even if the experts were insisting that the economy was starting to recover, ordinary people were still battling a sense of sinking.



Figure 13. The sinking 'Freedom Monument'. Photo: Ieva Čīka.



Figure 14. A close-up of the sinking ‘Freedom Monument’. Photo: Ieva Čīka.

However, the image tells a larger story. It is symbolic that the artists chose to deliver their message by ‘sinking’ the Freedom Monument. It echoes what one of my informants Silva said, in Chapter 4, that all the material wealth and symbolic value, invested in the process towards liberal democracy, has been lost. The sinking Freedom Monument divulges a strong sense of bond with the state, as the sinking of its image is chosen as the most dramatic act of rebellion. It expresses disillusionment, regret, and anger that the ideals of independence have been squandered. It also signals a feeling of insecurity and anxiety, common across the narratives of the trainers and the job seekers. Even more broadly, this act calls attention to a double movement: on the one hand holding the sovereignty in highest regard, whilst on the other hand feeling short-changed.

I began my research with a question about political change. How can we understand the post-socialist reform process beyond ‘catching-up’ metrics, democratisation indices, and development benchmarks? How can we think about the political regime that has emerged out of the ruins of state socialism? Situating the inquiry at the Riga unemployment office, I argue in this dissertation that geopolitically and historically formed anxieties to reconstitute oneself

as a modern subject have become aligned with neo-liberal political rationalities. The result is the reconfiguration of the post-socialist welfare state and the institutionalising of new forms of subjectivity. In this concluding chapter, I will first summarise my argument about neo-liberalism as encompassing both governmental techniques and ordinary ethics. Subsequently, I will reflect on the limitations of a critical theory of neo-liberalism, and discuss how my methodological approach enabled the conceptualisation I am putting forward here. Thoughts on the role of the idea of freedom in the neo-liberal Latvia will come at the very end.

Studying the lives of the expelled

The life of precariousness that my unemployed informants are living, just like many others in the former socialist world and elsewhere, is shaped by neo-liberal biopolitics. As explained in Chapter 1 (pp. 23-26), for me ‘biopolitics’ refers to a mode of governance that mobilises state resources and forms of (ordinary) ethics to manage ‘the capacity and potential of individuals and the populations as living resources’ (Ong 2006: 6). A whole range of scholars have argued that neo-liberal capitalism in the contemporary world produces its own ‘wasted lives’ (especially Bauman 2004: 5, 12-3). Operating upon the logic of exception, neo-liberal governmental techniques create ‘graduated citizenship’ where some are valued whilst others are relegated to the margins (Ong 2006: 78-9). Chari and Verdery note that the unemployed, or ‘redundant labour’, are the ‘biopolitical debris of capitalism, colonialism, and nationalism’ (2009: 28). Saskia Sassen speaks of expulsion of large groups of people across the world. In a recent public lecture, she argued that ‘expulsion’ was a more apt term than the more common ‘exclusion’ because the latter term refers to what happens within a system, whereas the former term refers to pushing people beyond the edges of that system (Sassen 2014). These are the people in the US whose homes have been dispossessed and who now live in tent camps, as well as those people flocking to global cities after having been dispossessed of their land by

global corporations. These are also people who formally count as employed but actually have precarious jobs, part-time or short-term, often making below the minimum wage. They are 'out' of the picture, rendered invisible even in terms of analysis, Sassen argues. This 'savage sorting' between 'ins' and 'outs' is an effect of the reduced strength of social democracy and the increasing dominance of global neo-liberalism - a new logic of state-aided and technology-aided corporate profit seeking (ibid). Are similar phenomena traceable in Latvian development and how are they evidenced in welfare policies?

Riga is not a global city but the global logic of expulsion equally governs its everyday. It is a space that exists vis-à-vis London and Dublin, as thousands of precarious labourers flow from East to West, while expertise and investment capital flows the other way. But also at home, precarity and expulsion are produced through austerity policies, high inequality, and a social support system that promotes the punitive workfare approach. Considering the effects of the neo-liberal reconfigurations of the past two decades, the jarring metaphors of 'debris' and 'wasted lives' do ring painfully true. I find these metaphors powerful to invoke as a critique of the post-Soviet Latvian governing elites that appear chronically unable to assume responsibility for social justice and welfare of the society at large. Instead, the governments have been trying to 'catch up' with the West, whatever the cost. The IMF reform packages of the 1990s, the EU accession programme, the *acquis communautaire* of the 1990s and early 2000s, and the austerity programme that followed the economic crisis of 2008-2009 have all been justified by the necessity to ensure an enduring 'return to Europe'.

Yet, whilst this is part of the story that the dissertation tells, it became increasingly clear that such an account of neo-liberalisation is limited. It is dissatisfying on two counts. Firstly, the image of thousands of people being cast 'out' and living 'wasted lives', as offered by Bauman, Sassen and other intellectuals on the left, serves as a powerful critique of global neo-liberal biopolitics but it assumes these politics sweep eastwards and southwards and top to

bottom. These analyses explore neo-liberalisation as a global process, and justifiably so. However, they do little to help us understand how this process works ‘on the ground’, both at the level of individual lives and policy implementation. Secondly, I believe that sociology as an ethical practice can and should pay close attention to the victims of expulsion. They may be rendered invisible but even those with ‘wasted lives’ keep on living. The task is to find terms and tools of thinking that allow us to see those who often remain obscure. I will return to this second point later in this chapter, where I discuss the methodological and ethical questions brought up by the research. Here I would like to expand on the first point.

In order to conceptualise the neo-liberalisation process sociologically, this thesis studies political regime change as a reform of political subjectivity. This also enabled me to conceptualise the post-socialist reform process as a positive phenomenon, not in a normative but rather in a hermeneutic sense, i.e. how it can be understood in terms of what it produces and how it functions, rather than through the usual metaphors of ‘loss’ and ‘collapse’, common to the post-socialist discourse of void.¹⁴³ While the concept of political subjectivity has been at the centre of this research project, the definition of the term was kept open throughout the research process. What seemed at first to be a frustrating gap in the literature – that a unified conceptualisation of political subjectivity does not exist — grew into a productive tension between a number of theoretical approaches. And what was initially a research student’s need to provide a definition for one of the concepts used in this study became an endeavour at the heart of this research: to think of personhood formation as a key element of political system change.

The ethnographic chapters of this dissertation (Chapters 3-6) can be read as a map of this endeavour, capturing these subjectivity shifts from different angles. Locating the analysis at the Riga unemployment centre, Chapter 3 explored the governmental techniques that the

¹⁴³ On the discourse of void, see Chapter 1, especially pp. 15-20.

Latvian state deployed to produce neo-liberal subjectivities. The ‘work on self’ in the ‘competitiveness-raising’ seminars targeted the imagined bond tying the post-socialist subject to the state and sought to institute an updated vocabulary of individual responsibility. Having examined this particular workfare programme first hand, I have expanded the analysis of neo-liberal biopolitics by arguing that it *functions upon a paradoxical combination of movement and stillness*, speed and waiting. This contemporary mode of governing not only seeks to construct entrepreneurial, self-managing, and efficient subjects but also incapacitates and restricts those who depend on the state’s help. As I showed in this chapter, on the one hand, the highly attended ‘competitiveness-raising’ seminars demand activity and entrepreneurship, whilst on the other hand, simultaneously, thousands of marginalised citizens are kept in a limbo and have to wait. Many of them spend their time ‘on a list’ and ‘waiting for courses’, whilst nevertheless being admonished on a regular basis for lacking drive and a sense of responsibility. The austerity measures that followed the economic crisis in 2008, together with the high unemployment levels and scant welfare, exacerbated this situation.

The subsequent chapters, four through six, explore the argument that neo-liberal scripts are taken up because they respond to anxieties and desires of individuals. In Chapter 4, I show why this political rationality was resonating with many of my informants, even when its flipside was precariousness and waiting. The chapter argues that different kinds of intimacy tie individuals together with the state and one another as its subjects. The centrality of ‘the state’ in popular political imagination is rooted in the Soviet authoritarian welfare regime and enforced through the image of the independent state as a protector of the Latvian *ethnos*. These ties are an object of embarrassment, when looking at oneself through the eyes of the imaginary West. It is actually these forms of embarrassment that propel the work of re-constituting the self. Shifting my perspective to the trainers running the ‘competitiveness-raising’ seminars, Chapter 5 examined the trainers’ accounts of their work and their lives. In it, I argue that this

subjectivity formation is effective because the trainers come from the same milieu and share the same anxieties and desires as many of their trainees. Categorising people out of work into ‘willing’ vs. ‘unwilling’ subjects, the trainers summon the views and ideals of the post-Soviet aspiring middle-classes who lack economic capital but strive for a respectability they associate with Western selfhood. Finally, Chapter 6 engaged in a sociological analysis that suspended and bracketed the critique of neo-liberal subjectification for a moment and tried to *re-listen* to what my informants were saying. I learned to treat the commonly invoked phrases ‘working on oneself’ and ‘knowing how to live well’ as more than mere forms of Althusserian interpellation. Through an analysis of the seminars at the unemployment office and engagement with other self-help discourses, as forms of ordinary ethics, we can understand how the neo-liberal individualising narrative resonates in the social milieu of these trainers and their audiences.

Affective and inverted neo-liberalism

On the basis of these ethnographic investigations, I argue that neo-liberal political subjectivity is constituted, not only through governmental techniques exercised by the state and other agencies, but equally through geo-politically and historically formed anxieties and intimacies at the level of political subjects and political subjectivity. It is not sufficient to posit the Latvian radical neo-liberalisation process as a story of *top-down* subjectification, instituted through the ‘catching-up’ discourse of the post-Soviet governing elites. Rather, this ethnography demonstrates how ingrained anxieties and urgencies have enabled the neo-liberalisation process. It is an effect, as much of state-led neo-liberalisation as of post-Soviet nationalist anxiety about a non-Soviet self, that has fuelled this self-making and re-making at the personal and policy level. The neo-liberal responsabilisation ethos fits with the anxiety shared by many Latvians to be new kinds of persons.

I have built here on Sherry Ortner's argument that anxiety is a key condition of subjectivity. Furthermore, I have brought together Ortner's perspective with Michael Herzfeld's work on cultural intimacy to show the *political* implications of anxious subjectivities. There is unease amongst trainers, civil servants, and job seekers that centres around imagining the state as a caretaker – a subject-position associated with state socialism, rather than with welfare state in its post-war European form. Furthermore, there is an urgency to reconstitute oneself as a proper 'European', 'modern', 'democratic' person. Rather than treating them as idiosyncratic, it is important to recognise the collective and geo-politically formed nature of these affective states. They are constituted through global hierarchies of value, within which labels such as 'East' and 'West' function. Cultural intimacy binds together post-Soviet Latvians who see themselves through the gaze of the West. This post-Soviet cultural intimacy has been instrumental in the rooting of neo-liberal rationalities in Latvia.

The 'competitiveness-raising' seminars work as affective, intimate spaces where such anxieties are voiced and worked upon collectively. The people with whom I attended the seminars helped me understand how they were engaging with the neo-liberal narrative. The neo-liberal script resonated because it helped to re-imagine oneself as an agent, in charge of one's own destiny. These seminars worked not only as strategic tools for the government to create a flexible labour force, 'a Trojan horse bearing the techniques of rule constitutive of an elite liberal subject of, and for, government' (Matza 2012: 805¹⁴⁴) but also spaces of public sociality, renewed self-evaluation, and development of self. Thus, it was a neo-liberal space in terms of how it was set up by the state, which funded and implemented this type of workfare

¹⁴⁴ While speaking of 'psychological education' in post-Soviet Russia as a Trojan horse of neo-liberal governmentality, Tomas Matza pays attention at the same time to the psychologists' claims 'on their own terms' and suggests 'that governmentality studies ought to push beyond formulations of "neo-liberal subjectivation" and confront more squarely the worlds of actors operating within the constraints of the global economy' (2012: 805). He argues that history of self-work in Soviet Russia needs to be taken into account in interpreting contemporary psychotherapeutic and self-help practices and 'it becomes inadequate to describe [psychotherapists' discourses of pathologising the Soviet mentality] as "neoliberal". Such statements have their own genealogies' (ibid: 814).

programmes. However, it was also a neo-liberal space by the doing of those – both the trainers and the audiences – who ‘inhabited’ it.

This thesis therefore challenges a common sociological critique of post-socialist reforms and its accompanying theory of neo-liberalism. For example, in a typically critical account of post-socialism, American anthropologist Elizabeth Dunn discusses the formation of neo-liberal personhood in a Polish baby-food factory alongside a dissemination of Western managerial techniques. She observes that ‘[t]hrough management and marketing techniques, companies [...] attempted to constitute employees and customers as autonomous, choice-making subjects who could audit themselves and then act upon their constituent parts. It did so to sell more products, to change the labour market it had to deal with, and to extract value from labourers more efficiently. Disciplining economic actors through new managerial technologies is part of an attempt to produce a new form of person and a new mode of subjection’ (2004: 164-5). She explains, ‘[t]hose who have access to technologies of audit, accounting, TQM, statistical process control, factor analysis, and niche marketing – and the power to make other people “choose” to enact them – *can make others into particular kinds of people* and assign value to different kinds of workers, their labour, and the products they make. Those who dictate the use of these techniques constitute others – or require them to constitute themselves – as “privatised individuals;” that is, subjects easily treated as objects, subjects with divisible qualities that can be “worked on”, and subjects who, through the relentless process of self-audit, treat themselves as objects to be worked on’ (ibid: 170, emphasis mine).

There is a linearity with which such subject-formation is described in critiques of this kind. Analysing the formation of entrepreneurial, neo-liberal subjects as a market ploy assumes a top-down process and the only kind of agency that this account allows for is one of resistance. Such an interpretation follows a narrow representation of the powerful vs. the oppressed and is not sufficiently nuanced in terms of the theory of subjectivity that it relies

upon. Competitive and flexible workers need to be produced for the labour market – flexible workers who have the right skills to present themselves well, to communicate effectively, to work with a PC and to speak good English. These are also the neo-liberal subjects who plan their weeks, view being fired as a natural part of the (economic) life cycle and as a chance to reinvent themselves. They treat their wellbeing as their responsibility, rather than that of the state. However, after exploring individual life trajectories and life stories, such as that of Īrisa in Chapter 6, it becomes harder to argue that she has little say over ‘what kind of person to become’.

Rather than understanding neo-liberalism as ‘a transnational political project aiming to remake the nexus of market, state, and citizenship *from above*’ (Wacquant 2010: 213, emphasis mine), it is important to understand the ordinary ethics and structures of feeling that underpin the proliferation of neo-liberal rationalities in different contexts. Such a conceptualisation allows expanding existing theories of neo-liberalisation and of the *flow* of governmental rationalities and technologies more generally. Aihwa Ong’s work has been helpful in demonstrating that, rather than ‘a tidal wave of market-driven phenomena that sweeps from dominant countries to smaller ones, we could more fruitfully break neo-liberalism down into various technologies’ (2006: 12). One neo-liberal technology that Ong speaks of is creation of zones of exception, but also inclusion. This occurs as graduated forms of sovereignty and citizenship are formed through privileging certain groups of citizens (the mobile and skilled ones), while disempowering others, like migrant workers. Studying reconfigurations of sovereignty and citizenship in Asia, Ong remarks that ‘citizenship elements such as entitlements and benefits are increasingly associated with neo-liberal criteria, so that mobile individuals who possess human capital or expertise are highly valued and can exercise citizenship-like claims in diverse locations. Meanwhile, citizens who are judged not to have

such tradable competence or potential become devalued and thus vulnerable to exclusionary practices' (ibid: 7).

However, Ong's focus is still mostly on how neo-liberal rationality flowing to localities is either embraced or perceived with ambivalence or scepticism. She recognises that 'neo-liberalism, as an ethos of self-governing, encounters and articulates other ethical regimes in particular contexts' and '[n]eo-liberal forms articulating East Asian milieus are often in tension with local cultural sensibilities and national identity' (2006: 9-12). My research shows, however, that neo-liberal subjectivities can be in fact enabled by historically and culturally rooted values and work as ordinary ethics. While this dissertation shows how the 'willing' subjects are sorted out from the 'unwilling' ones in a similar vein at the unemployment office, my findings have expanded this theory by arguing that such symbolic hierarchies are created and maintained through *active engagement* of the subjects of these governance techniques themselves. The boundaries between the included and the excluded are constituted not only via politico-economic rationalities but also through culturally and geo-politically constituted perceptions of self vis-à-vis the state. Being active, mobile, and entrepreneurial is a desirable form of personhood because it affords value to the post-socialist subject. The rhetoric of self-reliance and individual responsibility resonates because it gives a sense of (Western) middle-class respectability.

My ethnography shows that those who were most committed to working on themselves, and whom the trainers thus identified as their main target audience, were the people aspiring to some sort of middle-class respectability. Given the symbolic links between middle class and Western standards and ways of life (which had a strong appeal among post-Soviet Latvians, as explored in the empirical chapters), such aspiration was deeply meaningful for those involved. As the trainers categorise the job seekers into 'willing' vs. 'unwilling' subjects, they mete out distinctions that members of their target population are eager to uphold.

Formed vis-à-vis the imagination of the West, these aspiring middle classes embrace the catching up developmental vision of the government and are its main implementers. This work on the self was propelled by the fact that even the ‘willing’ ones were always at risk of being exposed as ‘Soviet products’, merely ‘waiting’, and therefore as undeserving of respect and a place in the ‘catching-up’ society. Those that are not ‘willing’ to subscribe to this order and to work on themselves are dismissed and left behind as surplus to neo-liberal capitalism.

When exposed to ethnographic scrutiny, the process of neo-liberal political change comes into sharper relief in this way as not simply accepted or resisted by the subjects that it seeks to form. Nor am I simply restating the argument that individuals adapt and modify the power discourse (an argument made by Michel De Certeau (1988) to which I subscribe). On the basis of the observation that a particular political rationality takes hold because it corresponds to affective dispositions, I propose that we need to consider the logic of neo-liberalism in an *inverted* way. While it is a trans-national political project as it were ‘from above’, it also works as ordinary ethics and a form of making life livable. Neo-liberal biopolitics function as much through historically and culturally sited aspirations and practices of self, as through state action and other governmental technologies of subjectification.

Rethinking critical social theory

My empirical analysis leads me to conclude that there are clear limitations to a critical sociology of neo-liberalism. Such critical theorising ends up depicting individuals as passive victims of global neo-liberal hegemony. However, it does not help us understand why people actively engage with ideas of responsabilisation and of governing their thoughts ‘like wild horses’, to use the poetic words of one of my informants. When Chari and Verdery speak of the unemployed as the ‘biopolitical debris of capitalism, colonialism, and nationalism’, they express hope that these realities can become ‘sites of struggle’ and ‘scattered counter-

hegemonies' (2009: 28). What my fieldwork reveals is the power of the neo-liberal rationality when intertwined with grassroots narratives of freedom. Rather than forming sites of struggle or counter-hegemonies, the unemployed re-inscribed themselves more firmly within the neo-liberal state project by immersing themselves in the work on self. This is not encouraging for those left-leaning intellectuals who long for democratic socialism but it does give us a better understanding of how neo-liberal biopolitics function on the ground. Harvey may be right to view neo-liberalism as 'a global process of elite class (re)constitution' (Chari and Verdery 2009: 15), but, as my ethnography demonstrates, it is also a mode of being that post-Soviet subjects engage with in their efforts to 'catch up'.

Donna Haraway's critique of radical social constructionism in *Situated Knowledges* (1988) gains new resonance here. As Haraway argues, 'it is not enough to show radical historical contingency and modes of construction for everything' (1988: 579). Haraway warns us against a hyper-rational theory that unmasks everything as a social construction and precludes us from recognising what people live by. Such a theory is stifling: 'we end up with a kind of epistemological electroshock therapy, which far from ushering us into the high stakes tables of the game of contesting public truths, lays us out on the table with self-induced multiple personality disorder' (ibid: 578). Instead, she argues, we need 'a better account of the world' (ibid). A historically and ethnographically grounded enquiry that affords value to the meanings that individuals assign to their actions is one way to form a better, or at least, more nuanced account.

Ultimately, 'the issue is ethics and politics perhaps more than epistemology', Haraway insists (ibid: 579). I find this point pertinent to the conclusions I am drawing here. When the epistemological question is in focus, our attention is drawn to how knowledge, and self-knowledge, is constructed. Such a focus would lead us to conclude that neo-liberal political rationality is disseminated through workfare programmes like the one investigated in this

dissertation. However, what does this kind of a constructivist reading of neo-liberalism allow us understand? An interpretation that positions the social reality to be a power-laden construction would not enable us to understand why the trainers and their audiences engage in these ordinary ethics. Yes, it is a hegemonic rationality, but how and why does it work (i.e. the question of ethics) and what consequences does it produce (the question of politics)? Chapters 4, 5 and 6, have examined this question of ethics, investigating why this neo-liberal discourse resonates and how it enables one to address the concerns about making a life in the face of precarious socio-economic reality.

The ethics of ethnographic method

My choice of method has played a central part in developing this argument. Ethnography as a method pushes a sociologist to recognise the ambivalence of moral categories, the uncertainty of subject-positions, and the unevenness of a story. It enabled me to recognise the seminars both as a space for neo-liberal subjectification as well as for conviviality, speaking and listening, sharing, and connecting with others. Such recognition is possible because ethnographic research is an immersive practice, extended over a relatively long period of time (Burawoy 2009). However, it is also so because of the way that the researcher's own subjectivity becomes a means of understanding. Ethnography enables recognition of ambivalence because it consists not only of intellectual and discursive involvement but equally as an affective and bodily experience (Cerwonka and Malkki 2007). During my fieldwork at the unemployment office, I found it difficult to reconcile my analytical reading of the seminars with the emotional experience I shared with the other participants. Analytically, I regarded this policy as a cynical government initiative that insists on individual responsibility in a situation of stagnating economy, high unemployment, and over forty job seekers for every vacancy. Emotionally, there were seminars, such as those run by Viktorija,

Sarmīte and Juris, that worked as a genuine space of self-examination as well as meaningful interaction with fellow citizens. Keeping attention on both of these insights helped me develop a more nuanced understanding about how neoliberal subject-formation works, whilst also recognising the complexity and moral ambiguity of this process.

Returning to the point raised at the beginning of this concluding chapter, I believe sociology as an ethical practice, requires the pursuit of theoretical as well as methodological tools to listen to those who have been cast ‘out’ and rendered ‘invisible’. This is a slightly different argument than giving ‘voice’ to the disempowered. Les Back writes that, ‘[i]f sociological literature is to have a future it must hold to the project of listening and speaking to people who live the consequence of the globalised world with respect and humility while maintaining critical judgement’ (2007: 163). He insists that such listening is not straightforward; it is an art to be learnt. Indeed, as it became clear throughout the research process, such a skill of listening needs to be developed over time. Initially, I thought of the unemployment office as one of the sites of governmentality where political subjects were being produced. The ethnographic method, however, enabled me to revisit this conceptualisation at a fundamental level. I did not merely complement this totalising lens with the meanings that individuals themselves ascribed to these discourses and practices but in fact came to reassess its validity.

The digital recording of the conversations allowed me to go beyond the already written up analyses and return to an actual conversation. It allowed me listen with a different frame of mind. However, it took a gradual *re*-listening to hear more accurately and sensitively what my informants had said. When dissatisfied with one interpretation of their words, it meant trying to form another, one that seemed to capture their experiences and attitudes more truthfully. Whilst I thought of anxious subjectivities and uncertainties of neo-liberal ethics, the

research process prompted me to reflect upon the anxious uncertainties of sociological analysis. Listening and re-listening has been a key tool of the research process.

Freedom

An interpretation common among post-socialist scholars is that, while the 1980s-1990s promised empowerment, the reforms actually wrought more exploitation. Dunn concludes her study of the Polish case by arguing that ‘[the first post-socialist reformers] promised that the post-socialist transformation would bring both national sovereignty (i.e., freedom from economic and political policy dictated by the Soviet Union) and individual freedom. But both of these “freedoms” have turned out to be a part of social and economic regulation’ (2004: 166). As a result, ‘[b]ecoming “free” has thus made people less free than ever before or - freedom being hard to quantify – differently unfree. Economic regulation, private property, and the constitution of the person as an individual are inextricably linked in both ideology and practice, which leaves people with little choice as to the kinds of *persons* they will become’ (ibid: 67).

Indeed, we could interpret the seminars I observed as yet another space akin to Dunn’s factory, this time not run by a private company but by the government itself. Such a reading fits with the broader argument that ‘neo-liberal theory and rhetoric (particularly the political rhetoric concerning liberty and freedom) has [...] all along primarily functioned as a mask for practices that are all about the maintenance, reconstitution, and restoration of elite class power’ (Harvey 2005: 188). But while Dunn assesses the condition of the Polish factory workers as being ‘less free than ever before’, or at least ‘differently unfree’, it is unlikely that her Polish informants themselves would agree with such an assessment. Similarly, whilst it would be straightforward to suggest that the unemployed Latvians, who embraced the opportunity to work on themselves as responsible subjects, were in fact victims of a hegemonic discourse, it

would not be a reading that they themselves would subscribe to. The idea, that it is one's own responsibility to make one's life, carries strong resonance in a post-totalitarian society. Should we discount their quest for being in charge of their own destinies as flawed? Can a sociologist or an anthropologist know better how free these people 'really' are? Ultimately, can one person tell about another person's experience of freedom? My answer to all of these questions, formed through reflecting on the fieldwork experiences and my Latvian informants' narratives, is that no, we cannot.

As Veena Das has said, we have to recognise the questions as our own and not as simply emerging from the research or some pre-conceived theories (2007: 2). I started this project with a hunch, grown out of previous research and reflection, that something important about the post-socialist political reform process remained unsaid. It was a gnawing feeling that the account of post-socialist Latvian reforms, as neo-liberal subjectification, was not quite the story that many Latvians would subscribe to. Whilst, for Russia, – the dominant nation in the Soviet Union – the post-Soviet period is defined by the feeling of a loss of empire, Latvian sentiments have been framed through a sense of a birth of something new, in Hannah Arendt's terms. How can one write about this gain when the post-socialist story has either been told by sociologists and anthropologists as a story about losing the socialist welfare state, or becoming colonised again (this time by neo-liberal capitalism), or being dispossessed by those very heroes who led the singing revolutions? Furthermore, how does one write about this gain and this becoming when the above is also true – when there has been dispossession and loss of ideals? Listening to these anxious narratives and writing out the ambivalent practices is one way to engage with this tension. Though it cannot be resolved, it can be written about. The story is about the hardships that the economic reforms and the shrinking welfare state have brought about but it is also about freedom. The story is about governmental rationalities being formed increasingly according to neo-liberal logic and about policy makers tapping into the

globally circulating ideology of individualism and the small state. But it is also a story about individuals reinventing themselves, being anxious to be more than ‘Soviet men’, ‘Soviet products’.

It is fitting to return here to the question of embodying sovereignty, raised at the beginning of this dissertation. The logic of neo-liberalism has *made sense* for post-Soviet Latvians because it has *aligned with the narrative of freedom, embodied on the Baltic Way and on the barricades*, and the subsequent anxiety to reinvent themselves as ‘non-Soviet men and women’. This quest for individual responsibility and doing away with the state has been part of the post-Soviet structure of feeling, not merely a neo-liberal plot to entrap more cheap labour in the global production process. As Vic Seidler points out, analysing the political reform processes in the 1990s’ re-unified Europe, ‘...if the language of democracy was to be made into a reality, people had to learn to take more control of the conditions of their lives’ (1994: 190). The neo-liberal state project has resonated with the day-to-day efforts to embody moral sovereignty - the project of liberal democracy. The roads of treading freedom have been defined by a neo-liberal logic but the neo-liberal state project would not have succeeded to the extent that it did, had this moral sovereignty project not been unfolding as the flipside of the subjectivity shifts.

This is a story, then, about the power of the idea of freedom. Isaiah Berlin built his philosophy of liberalism upon ‘his fascination with ideas and his sense that they had the power to enslave men, no less than nature or institutions’ (Ignatieff 2000: 292). Berlin, himself born in Riga and carrying memories of the Bolshevik prosecutions in Petrograd, forever recognised the terror of totalitarian power. Arendt, another thinker of freedom, argued that freedom for a human being is the possibility of something new. Through every action, a free individual can call into being something that was not before, she tells us (1968: 150). But life in freedom is therefore always uncertain. It becomes a question. The idea of freedom, as the sinking Freedom

Monument testifies, has a powerful appeal that can indeed both empower and enslave. For post-Soviet Latvians, it embodies a tension between a sense of dignity and self-worth that can only be afforded through individual agency, and a dignified life in a just society that can only be secured by the state as the political agent fostering social justice and equality.

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