

Demons in the System:

Dostoevsky and the Sociology of Extreme Political Violence

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Nietzsche called Fyodor Dostoevsky “the only psychologist from whom I had anything to learn,” and the 19th-century Russian novelist is justly celebrated for his penetrating insight into the condition of modern humankind. His writings range the modern ethical world, including the diametrically opposed political and religious views his dramatic life encompassed: in his youth he was intimately involved with underground revolutionary politics and Russian “nihilism.” After being sentenced to death for revolutionary activity, his sentence was commuted at the last minute to a prison term in Siberia. Later, his own spiritual crisis and that of his beloved “new Russian man” led him to become passionately religious and politically reactionary, devoted to Tsar and Orthodoxy. His work draws on first-hand experience with an incredible variety of milieus, including political ideologues, violent revolutionaries, and hardened criminals. Dostoevsky is often, and rightly, credited for his depiction of the modern age’s crisis of faith, as well as for his powerful explorations of the psychology of crime and extreme action.

In the rush, however, to recognize Dostoevsky as a master criminal psychologist and proto-existentialist religious philosopher, his penetrating social critique is too often underemphasized. His celebrated psychological portraits are simultaneously social commentaries, reflecting the effects of social and political structures as much as they do each character’s individual history. Even as Dostoevsky’s own idea of Russia’s road to salvation became increasingly reactionary, his insight continued to come not only from his own intellectual and spiritual struggle, but also from the discourse among the many

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psychological, social, and spiritual strands that constitute the fabric of his works. To the end, he remained as much a cultural theorist as a religious philosopher. The student or teacher of sociology can find in Dostoevsky not only a myriad of penetrating insights into individual and social psychology, but also a comprehension of the crucial assumptions that sociological inquiry makes and the fundamental questions it asks.

Demons (or *The Possessed*) is perhaps the author's magnum opus, and it is certainly his most exhaustive treatment of many of his most prominent themes, from the recesses of the human psyche to the liberation of the serfs, and from the mentality of underground revolutionaries to the farcical mannerisms of 19th-century Russian provincial life. It recounts two loosely intertwined stories: one relates the machinations and circumstances leading up to an act of political terrorism, and the other concerns the self-destruction of a young aristocrat whose inner spiritual crisis leaves him with no outlet for his boundless strength. This celebrated formal structure is especially interesting because *Demons* began life as two separate novels, and continues to reflect its origin as a fusion of the two fundamental themes of Dostoevsky's life and work. These two fundamental themes are also those of sociological inquiry. One is the basic needs that drive people's actions in society. The other is the systems that allocate the social goods that fulfill these needs. Sociology knows these dominant themes as agency and structure.²

Dostoevsky also shares with the sociologist important assumptions about these themes. Agents' behavior is driven not only by material economic incentives, but also by various social goods, such as meaning or fulfillment. Social structures, meanwhile, often work like economic systems, outside the realm of individual psychology, to allocate non-material social goods. This paper reads a sociological model out of Dostoevsky's classic novel, showing that his two "faces," and the way in which they come together, reflect the crucial components of a more complete depiction of social mechanisms, which can allow us to model social life, and predict social outcomes.

Beyond merely analyzing structures, we seek to predict social behavior, and to understand how social structures influence it. In *Demons*, Dostoevsky seeks to defend the spirit of his motherland especially against the European nihilism that, in Russia, became associated with anti-Czarist insurgency; he is concerned to understand both the basic

² See the work of, e.g., Jim Coleman's *Foundations of Social Theory* (1990).

conditions that drive individual dissatisfaction, and the group dynamics that allow “demonic” ideologies to become systemically established as social goods, driving individuals to participate even in self-destructive violence. Today, when it is impossible to be unaware of the untold casualties and costs that political terrorism inflicts on our world, this topic may well resonate with us, too.

Despite Dostoevsky’s famous depictions of the shadowy depths of the criminal mind, his treatment of the psychology of extremism is even more concerned with the effects of ideology and social and political reform. His individualism was balanced by a concern for the state of his homeland, and modern Russia’s “spiritual” and political crisis was for him a case study in the mutual influence of these two themes: how changing systems affect the way people fill their social needs, and how these needs generate and shape systems. *Demons* is a novel about the dynamic interaction of agency and structure and its consequences for systemic change.

I. Agency, Self, and Comparison

Though Dostoevsky’s social critique has been underemphasized, its value is crucially underpinned by his more noted concerns with psychology, philosophy, and self-reflection. Like a sociologist, he ultimately concerns himself with the interaction of structure and agency, but the dichotomy is reflected in *Demons*’ beginning as two separate novels.³ One was to be a “religious” novel of redemption entitled *The Life of a Great Sinner*, the other a “novel-pamphlet” about a grisly political murder.

The self-destructive young aristocrat Nikolai Vselodovitch Stavrogin was to be the central character of the former, and remains the catalyst underlying all the events of *Demons*. Despite Dostoevsky’s liberal intellectual heritage, he moved early beyond the trends of historical materialism, and maintained a lifelong artistic, intellectual, and personal concern with rescuing the self from the abysmal soul of modern humankind. This early conviction persisted through personal spiritual upheavals and the radical revision of his beliefs, as well as his own perpetual poverty from gambling debts. In the final version of *Demons*, redemption is denied to Stavrogin (though his name means

³ See Pevear (1994).

“cross”), but attained in the end by Stepan Trofimovitch Verkhovensky. Stepan Trofimovitch is Stavrogin’s childhood tutor, the father of the murderous revolutionary leader, and the novel’s symbolic representation of the liberal intellectual milieu that Dostoevsky blames for spawning Russian Nihilism. His redemption comes only in eventually rejecting his own liberal ideas in favor of religion:

Far more than his own happiness, it is necessary for a man to know and believe every moment that there is somewhere a perfect and peaceable happiness, for everyone and for everything... The whole law of human existence consists in nothing other than a man’s always being able to bow before the immeasurably great.⁴

The basic human drive for authentic meaning that Dostoevsky posits alongside material needs reflects the importance of the notion of agency. The science of sociology works to explain empirical observations, and finds agency indispensable in explaining what it observes. Thus Georg Simmel can speak of the “fundamental motive...at work [in human life], namely the resistance of the individual to being leveled, swallowed up in the social-technological mechanism,” and Viktor Frankl, a social psychologist studying human motivation, can suggest that “self-transcendence is the essence of human existence.”⁵

Stavrogin’s spiritual crisis is a study in the difficulty of such self-transcendence in the absence of real meaning, where a crumbling, nihilistic social order prevents fulfillment even for a character that Dostoevsky paints as an *übermensch*. Generations have also been fascinated by Kirillov, the only character Stavrogin seems to treat as an equal. Kirillov, whose ideas often read like a parody of Nietzsche, believes that entrapment in the fear of death is the basic human predicament, and has reached the conclusion that dispassionate suicide is the only way to overcome it and “become God.”⁶ His nihilistic rejection of societal values is so extreme that he allows his suicide to be utilized in the machinations of the revolutionary activity, although he neither participates in nor condones it.

These two characters have the most abstract, spiritual, and perhaps “noble” motivations in the novel. Though both inadvertently catalyze the violence, neither is

⁴ 664, Dostoevsky (1994).

⁵ See Simmel (1971), Frankl (2000).

⁶ 615, Dostoevsky (1994).

responsible for it, and both end with suicide, each driven by an existential or spiritual crisis, not by shame or insufficient fortitude. But the profound lack of meaning and faith that causes their demise is the same lack that allows the members of the murderous revolutionary group to be controlled and turned to violence by their leader, as well as allowing the representatives of the older generations to become indulgent of “modern ideas,” infatuated with liberal posturing, and blinded to the threat posed by their nihilistic progeny.

This “spiritual lack” is developed more concretely in recent work on the notion of *significance*. The work of Arie Kruglanski et al (2007) draws on Frankl’s human-motivation theories to explore how the biological need for physical survival is intimately linked to the quest for personal meaning and significance, and how the latter stems from the threat of personal insignificance caused by humans’ awareness of their own mortality. It is ultimately “the nightmare of ending up as a speck of insignificant dust in an uncaring universe” that motivates people to become good members of society by doing well in culturally prescribed ways.⁷ Individuals’ need for socially determined significance indicates the interaction of agency and structure in social life.

Aside from the existential struggles of Stavrogin and Kirillov, the more prosaic aspects of the human need for meaning are also abundantly illustrated in *Demons*, not only in the petty posturing of provincials, but also in the more worldly, but often equally ridiculous, characters of the aging scholar Stepan Trofimovitch Verkhovensky (bumbling father of the nihilistic generation) and his domineering patroness Varvara Petrovna Stavrogina (representative of the old aristocracy). Often, among these characters, Dostoevsky delivers a sort of novel of manners that paints a picture of contemporary provincial life, including a biting critique of people’s constant comparisons of themselves to others—or to the way they perceive others.

The motivations of the characters in *Demons*, from bumbling comedians to savage criminals, point up fundamental aspects of human social life at the same time as they symbolize Russian history and culture. People value social instrumental goods like status, even when they do not correlate to more wealth. But all determinations of status are made precisely by comparing oneself to a reference group of others: one’s status is one’s rank

⁷ See Kruglanski et al. (2007).

in this comparison group.⁸ An individual's status at a given time thus depends on the reference group relative to which it is determined. This is comically represented by Dostoevsky's provincial aristocrats, dotting on their titular superiors while flaunting their nobility among commoners.

The way that status is determined by comparison and reference groups, however, invites consideration of the structures—social as well as economic and political—that determine and distribute these social goods to agents. Understanding these systems is as important for us as it was to Dostoevsky, for status comparisons do not always result in the comically superficial manners of “polite society.” The same needs for meaning, significance, and status that drive the petty intriguing of the average townsfolk in *Demons* are exploited, in other characters, to draw them into political violence.

II. Structure, Group Membership, and Authority

The “novel-pamphlet,” which Dostoevsky ultimately combined with his “religious novel,” was motivated by his desire to tell the story of Sergei Nechaev, a Russian underground conspirator who was found guilty in 1873 of the murder of I.I. Ivanov, a St. Petersburg student who had left Nechaev's group. This took place in a milieu Dostoevsky knew all too well, and he was driven to portray the “demons” infecting Russian society, especially those powerful enough to drive idealistic students to participate in misguided violence. This “anatomy of a murder” contrasts with *Crime and Punishment's* well-known account of the depths of a criminal psyche. In *Demons*, the political murder of Ivan Shatov (based on Ivanov) by Pyotor Stepanovich Verkhovensky (based on Nechaev) and his group is ultimately ascribable to demons in the system, that is, to the corruption of the structures that allocate the meaning and social value upon which humans rely.

Given the atrocities perpetrated by Pyotor and the members of his revolutionary circle, one might be tempted to assume that they are the novel's title characters. In fact, though, translators have disagreed on how to render the Russian title, *Besy*, and the novel has been published in English as *The Possessed*, *The Devils*, and, most recently, *Demons*.

⁸ See Jasso (2002) for a comprehensive survey of comparison theories. A *reference group* is a sociological concept referring to the community group to which an individual or another group is compared, and relative to which the individual is ranked according to some socially-defined good.

The first makes the title refer clearly to human characters, especially the members of the would-be revolutionary society. As recent translators Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky have pointed out, though, the latter, more accurate translation shifts the focus from the possessed to the forces that “possess” them, making the title refer not to the agents, but to the ideas and social currents that influence their behavior.⁹ Pyotor Verhovenksy insidiously devalues agency as he defends the members of his “crew” to Stavrogin: “And why are they fools? They’re not such fools; nowadays nobody’s mind is his own.”¹⁰

The demons of the title are identified in Pevear’s introduction as “ideas, that legion of isms that came to Russian from the West—idealism, rationalism, empiricism, materialism, utilitarianism, positivism, socialism, anarchism, nihilism, and underlying them all, atheism.”¹¹ These demons seem to have infected almost all the characters to some degree, and not only the revolutionaries; still, the political murder that lies at the center of the novel demonstrates a concern not only with the psychology of extreme, violent action, but also with the often-violent effects of sweeping social change. *Demons* depicts a Russia where political and social turmoil have undermined traditional sources of significance and meaning, including those connected with the authority of Tsar, Church, and the old social order. Having failed to replace them, this turmoil leaves people desperate for sources of social value and thus susceptible to demonic influence. This is a concern Dostoevsky shares with policy-makers today, who must try to counteract extremist political violence by understanding how structures and policies drive violent action.

Though no character is immune, the members of Pyotor Stepanovitch’s revolutionary circle are among the most infected. In their need for ideological “faith” and group membership, all prove equally susceptible to his glib assurances and his tactics of control. But group membership comes at a cost: members must sacrifice a portion of selfhood, or agency. The recent work of Kruglanski and his colleagues on significance in extremist groups attempts to explore how terrorists’ various motives—ideological, personal, and social, in the traditional tripartite classification — may functionally relate

⁹ See Pevear (1994).

¹⁰ 417, Dostoevsky (1994).

¹¹ xvii, Pevear (1994).

to each other. It offers an approach to understanding the social value members receive by defining their identities through group membership (including obedience to its leader, Pyotor Stepanovitch). Significance is here envisioned as something that is lost, and must be regained, when an individual undergoes a security-undermining trauma such as losing a family-member to violence, or experiences feelings of relative deprivation or frustrated expectations in situations of political, social, or economic inequality. Individuals may seek to regain significance by contributing to some communally (that is, structurally) defined *collective good*.¹² Thus the authority of a community's leadership lies precisely in its ability to define collective goods.

The motley crew of characters that begins as Stepan Trofimovitch's circle and eventually becomes Pyotor Stepanovitch's circle of revolutionaries offers a sometimes-comical, sometimes-sinister portrait of the agent's need to define an identity through group membership, even at a significant cost to the agent's autonomy. Before Pyotor's arrival, "what we had was only the most innocent, nice, perfectly Russian, jolly liberal chatter,"¹³ but already each of the characters among this motley crew is marked by a seeming lack of fulfillment or deficiency of social value. Pyotor Stepanovitch Verkhovensky himself, who finally murders Shatov with his own hands, has been abandoned and subsequently dispossessed by his father Stepan Trofimovitch, quasi-intellectual lapdog of the old aristocracy. This overtly symbolizes Dostoevsky's conviction that the generation of liberal idealist "Westerners" spawned the nihilistic generation of Necahaev. Similar frustrations drive the others to group membership, finally putting them under the influence of Pyotor Stepanovich's machinations. This theme contrasts especially with Shatov's and Kirillov's diametrically opposite existential struggles with the agency-focused problems of faith and belief, but the less "noble" needs motivating the members of the circle are equally non-economic.

The group is bound by its members' need for group membership, and Pyotor Stepanovich is so confident in the strength of this social arrangement that he feels no need to hide it from his cronies:

¹² See Kruglanski et al. (2007).

¹³ 33, Dostoevsky (1994).

...so the main thing still depends on you yourselves and on your full conviction, which I hope will grow firm in you by tomorrow. And that, incidentally, is precisely why you united together into a separate organization of the free assembly of the like-minded, so as in the common cause to share your energy among you at a given moment and, if need be, to watch over and observe each other. Each of you owes a higher accounting.¹⁴

The characters in the group are “like-minded” not in their convictions, but only in their need for significance through group membership. The atheistic, impish Liputin gossips about the higher ranks that won’t receive him into their houses, while Shigalyov’s obsessive anarchic social theorizing parodies an egalitarianism that would bring everything to the lowest common denominator. The Jew Lyamshin is an eternal outsider, while Tolkachenko and Erkel are in the grip of youthful idealism and in thrall to Pyotor Stepanovich. Finally, the earnest Virginsky, who declares, “I will never, never, abandon these bright hopes,” is a cuckolded, hen-pecked autodidact: “no wonder,” says the narrator, “the poor ‘family man’ needed our company to ease his heart.”¹⁵ These pitiable would-be revolutionaries represent a range of frustrated expectations, and of ongoing searches for meaning or significance. And this significance is defined socially—it depends on structure.¹⁶

Dostoevsky’s “religious” novel interrogated the values that incentivize agents, while the “novel-pamphlet” was concerned with how extreme ideologies and violence are linked to structural changes associated with the demons of social and political upheaval—much as we too might be in these days of constant ideological violence.

III. Group Leadership and Extreme Action

When a central state’s economy and government are destabilized, its ability to define the common good is undermined, and the diminished power of the centralized mechanism for establishing and allocating social goods opens the way for the emergence of others, including the more extreme. These other structures can include anything from community-aid organizations to religious sects to violent extremist organizations (many infamous Middle Eastern organizations, for instance, are all three). In a Russia pervaded by nihilism, Dostoevsky’s characters turn to “false” sources of social and spiritual value,

¹⁴ 607, Dostoevsky (1994).

¹⁵ 31-33, Dostoevsky (1994).

¹⁶ For a more developed analysis see Meyersson Milgrom 2009

whether by joining Pyotor Stepanovitch's "fivesome" or simply being blinded by liberal ideologies, philosophies, and "isms"—the "demons" Dostoevsky wanted exorcised from the Russian spirit in which he came to believe fervently.

The members of Pyotor Stepanovich's revolutionary circle are not these demons; they are rather the possessed, each infested by a recognizable one of the "isms" listed above. This group represents more than a collection of studies in motivation, also readily symbolizing the panorama of novel social and ideological structures competing for ascendancy in late 19th-century Russia, as the serfs were being freed, the old aristocracy was breaking down, and the Continental influence was permeating traditional culture. This group of characters stands for a whole field of identity- and ideology- defining groups, standing at various distances from the mainstream, all competing to provide members with significance. Pyotor Stepanovich dominates this group, not in spite his being the most extreme, but precisely *because* of it.

Groups necessarily compete to gain adherents, and must offer benefits in exchange for the cost of membership. When the traditional state and value systems are perceived as weak and corrupt, extremist alternatives become more viable—the opportunity cost to extremism declines, extreme ideologies become more attractive, and extreme actions have increased power to grant significance through their value as signal commitments to a group.¹⁷

Pyotor Stepanovich realizes this, and it is the basis of his control over the group. His extreme revolutionary program far exceeds the capabilities of his group, and sounds like a caricature when vapidly recited by one of his cronies. Yet, it is hardly an exaggeration compared with the modern realities of extremism:

[The group] has as its task, by a systematic denunciatory propaganda, ceaselessly to undermine the importance of the local powers, to produce bewilderment in communities, to engender cynicism and scandal, complete disbelief in anything whatsoever, a yearning for the better, and finally, acting by fires as the popular method par excellence, to plunge the country, at the prescribed moment, if need be, even into despair.¹⁸

Such extreme collective goods can serve as control mechanisms that operate very much like demons, indeed, allowing the leadership to deindividuate members using its authority

¹⁷ See Ianconne (1992).

¹⁸ 547, Dostoevsky (1994).

to constantly redefine the collective good. Internalized cultures and socialized members are a success for the leadership, but also a threat to them, for a member capable of acting independently, even in the leader's interest, will have increased "self weight," diminishing the leader's control.¹⁹ When Pyotor Stepanovich accuses two of his cronies of political arson, they defend their commitment to the common cause: "'Isn't this your program? What, then, can you accuse us of?' 'Of self-will!' Pyotor Stepanovich shouted furiously."²⁰

Community members are forced to give up some selfhood in order to gain significance, perhaps making them more ready to commit to extreme demands by the leadership. By the time Liputin, for example, has an ideological disagreement with Pyotor Stepanovich, he suddenly finds his self-weight gone: "It flashed like lightning through Liputin's mind: 'I'll turn and go back; if I don't turn now, I'll never go back.' He thought thus for exactly ten steps..."²¹ Similarly, leadership can establish "points of no return," strategically making members commit to actions and invest in skills that make a return to an alternative, "normal" life impossible. This, of course, is precisely Pyotor Stepanovitch's tactic in forcing his circle into complicity in Shatov's murder: "they're all bound by yesterday now. None of them will betray us. Who would face obvious ruin, unless he's lost his mind?"²²

Pyotor's atrocities include not only killing Shatov, but also responsibility for the suicide, death, or social downfall of most of the other characters. Pathological or "evil" though his actions may seem, they in fact portray the strategies and tactics typical of extremist organizations that recruit and operate successfully. Even Pyotor Stepanovitch is not himself a demonic agent, but rather one of the possessed, embodying the ability of a pernicious structural cycle to "infect" agency.

IV. Concluding Remarks

In *Demons*, Dostoevsky examines the individual's quest for meaning in the context of sweeping social change, and he characterizes the politics, society, and ideologies of his

¹⁹ See, e.g., Friedkin (2004).

²⁰ 548, Dostoevsky (1994).

²¹ 555, Dostoevsky (1994).

²² 626, Dostoevsky (1994).

time in terms of a cold-blooded murder. He blames structural demons for corrupting human agents, without exonerating agents from guilt for being vessels for the demons.

Dostoevsky's prognosis for exorcising these demons may be unhelpful from a scientific or policy perspective: near the end of his life, he concluded that Orthodoxy and true faith were the only redemption from the sometimes-pernicious interaction of structure and agency that we call systems. Still, reading such a keen observer of individuals and society is still instructive, a century and a half later, to the student or teacher of social thought. Even Dostoevsky's own intimate concern with the internal psychology of extreme action did not diminish the comprehensiveness of his view, for he immersed himself in the inner world of agency without ever losing sight of its mutual influence with social structures, remembering that human nature doesn't dictate these structure any more than the structures dictate it. The value lies at the nexus of these concepts: we can draw a meaningful picture of society, and meaningfully predict systemic outcomes, by looking to the *interaction* of structure and agency—and reading Dostoevsky can help us remember this.

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