Blue-collar workers in Russia between precarity and informality.

Notes on the ‘worthless dowry’ of Soviet industrial modernity.

7 June 2014
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Overview of paper

- ethnographic account of blue-collar workers lives based on long-term fieldwork.
- Focus on small ‘single-enterprise’ towns dominated by former Soviet enterprises – ‘monotowns’
Abandoned industrial building on the road into Town
Built in 1974, abandoned in 1994
Written-off Russia – the vast hinterland
My work since 2009 has been to build a rich ethnographic picture of the ‘Izluchino’ Case: The ‘actually-lived’ experience of people in a small ex-monotown 4 hours from Moscow.

Participant observation is ethnography’s core method, encompassing immersion of researcher in the life of the researched and resulting in transcribed and translated interviews, small-scale surveys, visual records, fieldwork diaries and notes. It is difficult to quantify in advance the materials to be collected; researchers build immersive relations in the field, living in with informant households and paying attention to issues of intersectionality.
Initial Research aim: to link worker subjectivities on the job to identities/entitlements outside it.
Approaching ‘class’ in postsocialism

informed by:

- ‘new working class studies’: class
  - grounded in experience of everyday life
  - spatially moving beyond the workplace
  - problematizing static view of ‘identity politics’ and ‘world of work’ (Russo and Linkon, 2005)

- Neoliberal reform and retreat of the social state in Russia lead to – ‘precarious workers’ thesis
Material cultures of the margins

- DIY ‘make-do and mend’ decoration and functional production in the domestic setting.
- What does DIY tell us about the interplay between work and domestic space?
- How is recourse to DIY illustrative of the importance of social networks?
- How does DIY decoration contribute to social capital, ‘beyond coping’??
Hypothesis (ex-post) In spite of the disadvantages of informal work, exit from formal work is sustained by access to an embedded identity as blue-collar workers, and the social networks that support and reinforce such ties and which persist after shared occupational affiliation ends.
‘I’ll go back to taxi-driving. “Stuff the job” - that’s what I said to the supervisor. I was one of the best shift workers there, but they never leave you alone. It’s like they can’t bear to see you not busy, even if you’ve mixed and stacked your batch in half the time it took the other team.’ - Sasha, 35
The fieldsite and ethnography

- A few notes on place and methods
Kaluga region:
- high internal migration from other regions
- 3 hrs by car from Moscow
- Significant investment from car manufacturers and other multinationals; many informants had worked for German, French, Italian and Far Eastern employers
- poor infrastructure outside Moscow-Kiev corridor

The field region
Informants and field methods

- Ethnographic fieldwork looked at blue-collar employees in small former company town in Kaluga region 2009-present
- Semi-structured interviews and participant observation of workers in formal and informal economy
- ‘Participant’ and ‘observation’ are combined in different ways at different times of fieldwork.
Working spaces
Informants and methods

- Fieldwork looked at blue-collar ex-employees and self-employed, informal workers in 2 small towns in Kaluga region
- Semi-structured interviews and participant observation (6 months of fieldwork in 2009-2011, subsequent visits to present – e.g. 5 weeks in summer 2013)
- Ethnographic methods: aiming for depth not breadth in small n. of case histories (18 key informants??)
- As pertains to ethnographic methods, the aim is to provide a credible account of the field, not validity in term of the generalizability/ representativeness of the sample
Burawoy: many analyses of alternative capitalisms ‘exclude subordinate classes, which in effect become the bewildered-silent and silenced-spectators of transformations that engulf them.’ (2001: 1107).

empirical approach interrogates more critically reflexivity and individualisation theses (Atkinson, 2007, 2010)
Informality and Social Networks

- Some summary findings, published in various papers since 2011.
Precarity leads to ‘insurance’ tactics and alternatives to consumption

- People’s involvement in the informal economy helps them develop ‘transferable skills’
- People actively engage in social networking to gain ‘skills’
- Social networking and practical skills give opportunities for ‘make-do and DIY’ tactics

- Fixing cars, plumbing, welding
- Skills barter – welding, carpentry, knitting
- Domestic ‘beautification’, decorative domestic items: fish tanks
Misha, (30, paper-cutter): ‘an ordinary citizen can do many things and so won’t lose out.’

‘I get an inner satisfaction from making it’
Workers rely on others in DIY practices—sourcing materials, skills, recognition of skill.

‘It’s nice that others come to you outside work for help’

‘you can call on someone and ask them how to do something’
Engaging in DIY & beautification practices helps maintain mutual-help ties, ‘just in case’ more serious help is needed.

Network ties are linked to ‘mutual worker recognition’.

The practice is more than ‘practical’ – it is a social ‘good’ in itself embodying ‘satisfaction’ and ‘recognition’.

A welder instructing an acquaintance on a car after hours at work.
Worker mutual-aid DIY as an extended network of practice

- Giving and receiving help depends on mutual interpellation as ‘deserving peers’, ‘self-sufficient practical persons’
- Social capital is defended and maintained through DIY practices - it’s more than just an epistemic network (know-how)
- Cooperative practices create ‘internal goods’: (mutual) recognition of skill and excellence in DIY and acknowledgement from others of its contribution to household reproduction (in opposition to an ends and means distinction for socially-orientated action)
- Such consumption/production practices are important in understanding identity as embedded in class
Perspectives on ‘Precarious Work’

- A worker without ‘secure standard employment ... access to benefits and entitlements, work security and representation, ... expect[ing] to be employed long-term’ (Kalleberg 2009; Izluchino Case:
  - formal, permanent work seen as precarious by manual industrial workers.
  - Precarity not primarily the result of a lack of income security
  - Instead the focus is on job (as opposed to employment-) insecurity (Guy Standing 2011)
Despite their insecure position, the working poor do make use of identities, and memory to explore alternatives and solutions to the precarity of formal work.
workers seek temporary and permanent exit strategies from precarious employment

They use place- and class-embedded social networks of support: values of ‘reciprocity and fraternity’; Standing argues belong to an occupational community,
The reflexive, ‘self-regulating’ subjects of the post-Fordist workplace

- examinations of risk, work and precarity should take account of enduring class-based identities (Atkinson 2007; Krinsky 2007)

- the working poor in Russia make use of social resources in the form of supportive informal networks in order to exit, or militate against, precarious formal waged employment
Responses to self-regulation at work

- “I can put a matchbox in place with a forklift but I’m not on the board of honour – you have to suck up for that” (Sasha, 35)
- “If you fulfil the quota they still come after you for more” (Basil, 32, lathe operator)
- “piece-work doesn’t exist anymore: it used to be ‘finish it and you can go home’” (Yuri, 45, welder)

- Standard employment is typified by particular emphasis on worker governmentality
- ‘normalisation’ of self-regulating worker subjectivities is resisted through enduring lay moral discourses around work and through access to shared memory of a ‘different’ industrial contract under socialism
The informal PVC workshop: developing an alternative discourse on work

- A site for practicing cultural repertoires of resistance to formal work - shared discursive representation of it, and of the embodiment of possibilities for survival outside it.
opportunities for more mundane maintenance of class-embedded social networks: food and drink. Sociality facilitates connections that provide access to alternative sources of work outside the formal economy.
Other spaces of sociality
Blue-collar social network as a ‘meta-occupational community’?

- Dmitry: ‘It’s not like you’re raw clay, is it? They can’t just keep making you in to whatever they want […] a normal citizen knows how to do many different things and so won’t lose out’

- Viktor: ‘There [at the plant] we had to work more for our money. We couldn’t just work as much as they paid us, it wasn’t enough for them. Now we work just as much as we want. Even if it is for less.’
Under socialism, informal social relations of mutual aid and favours were particularly important in an economy of shortages.

Networks endure and provide access support based on what was often a shared work-based identity.

The existence for many households of an extended, often work-identity-related social network is important for understanding the willingness of those in precarious work to risk further economic precarity outside formal employment.
The particular reliance on horizontal networks in Russia indicates that social capital for workers remains marginal.

But at the same time it indicates the ongoing salience of ‘class’ as an interpretive category in debates around precarity.

If we are to understand precarious worker agency, then we need to look at identity, for it is in shared identities that we discover the reality of social networks and mutual aid.
Explaining informality in terms of ‘corruption’ defined as deviance from a normative Western modernisation path is misplaced. Informality should be viewed as constitutive of both the mechanisms of rule (accounting for its arbitrariness) and the reactions of people to that rule. It creates uncertainty and resistance to uncertainty. Thus, all significant accounts of Russian politics, economics and society – those that reject the transition paradigm – reference informal relations and networks.
Three major competing explanations for the prominence of informality in societies generally

- Modernisation thesis which views undeclared work to be greater in less developed economies,
- Neo-liberal thesis which views undeclared work to be greater in societies with higher taxes, greater public sector corruption and too much state intervention in work and welfare provision
- Structuralist thesis which views undeclared work to be greater in economies with less state intervention in work and welfare.

Alternative hypotheses

- After Nikita Pokrovsky’s view of Russia as a site of ‘extreme testing’ of the limits of neoliberal reform (military metaphor - ‘ispitatelnii polygon’ = firing range) ubiquity of informal economic practices are shaped by a lay understanding of the extreme exploitative relations pertaining in work in the post-socialist period.

- Weakening of social structures (the end of the USSR), the weak resistance from the ‘system’, and elective susceptibility (Избирательная восприимчивость) towards globalising phenomena such as the falling away of cultural traditions, culture as the resulting contemporary global tendencies, virtualisation, the principle of hybridisation, with a short half-life.

- The idea of elective affinities of neoliberalism and Russian society (weak civil society, rapacious, rent-seeking state) is something I’d like to explore in more detail in terms of facilitating informality.

- There’s a need to consider hegemony and agency in Gramscian terms, just as Verdery does with the socialist period (1996, 23). To paraphrase her, the lived experience of people under post-socialism precludes its discourse of irreversibility and superiority from becoming hegemonic - the informants of this research are keenly aware, perhaps more than others in Russian society (in rural or megaurban settings) of the lack of legitimacy of the current social status quo.

- Informality then emerges as bearing witness to both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic tendencies.