

Sveltiana Stephenson (2006)

Crossing the Line: Vagrancy, Homelessness and Social Displacement in Russia.

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Sveltiana Stephenson has written a book that provides a fascinating insight into homelessness in modern Russia.

Strictly speaking the research element in the book is rather narrowly drawn. The homeless people are pretty much exclusively street homeless people, and the (ethnographic) research was drawn from some 113 interviews conducted in Moscow in the mid-1990s.

From this research we gain an insight into the pathways into homelessness for this generation, the ‘careers’ of homeless people, and also of their lives – the way in which they relate to mainstream society as well as to one another. The choices that homeless people face are exceptionally unappealing, for example having to balance the ‘episodic utilitarian benefits’ of interacting with other homeless people against ‘joining other homeless people means further deterioration of one’s position’ (p. 3). It is a world where ‘micro-hierarchies’ operate – where the difference between being a vagrant and a *bomzhi* (a pejorative though seemingly universally applied term for homeless people) hangs on the notion that vagrants have chosen their lifestyle to free themselves from society and with this comes a romantic notion of roaming.

One interviewee explains that being a *bomzhi* or a vagrant is ‘almost the same thing’ – depending on ‘how your head works.’ The same interviewee stresses the importance of holding on to your papers. This turns out to be a recurrent theme of the book. Historically, movement within Russia was restricted and this was not only one of many injustices that the revolutionaries failed to overturn, but rather they built up a whole social and economic system around it and enforced it with the enhanced power of the state.

While housing was declared to be a social right in the Soviet Union, it was far from unconditional – and so not a right at all. The welfare system in the Soviet Union revolved around the workplace with enterprises being both responsible for and the key to many social services including housing. More so than any western ‘regime’ – social demo-

cratic, corporatist or liberal – welfare in the Soviet Union was so intimately linked to employment that the two became one and the same, the worker locked in almost total dependence on the employer, which of course meant the state.

The penalties of falling out of the system were severe, and this is where many of the homeless people came from. Since those who did not work were dubbed ‘parasites’ in official parlance, they were unlikely to receive much sympathy from anyone. Denying the existence of unemployment did not alter its fact – something that academics who devote much time dwelling over ‘narratives’ and deconstructing ‘meanings’ might do well to reflect on.

Getting back into the system was extremely problematic. Anyone who did what a famously heartless British politician suggested unemployed people should do, and get on their bicycles in order to find work, would find themselves facing another barrier – and one not just arising from the sheer vastness of the country. Movement was tightly controlled, and without the right papers there could be no job, no home and the possibility of trouble from the police.

While the discussions about the extent to which homelessness is caused by structural or individual factors, and indeed the extent to which it is a choice, will be familiar to western readers, it is worth reflecting not only on the peculiar cruelty of the Soviet system but also the unimaginable disruptions (or ‘historical traumas’ as Stephenson calls them) that have been visited on the citizens of Soviet Union – revolution, civil war, industrialisation and collectivisation, starvation, the ‘terror’, the Second World War and eventually economic and political collapse and the arrival of another system frequently characterised as ‘wild-west’ capitalism. The latter has of course brought its own wave of homelessness, with more political and economic upheaval, and the dismantling of the welfare system based around state enterprises. Depressingly, the book closes with the author’s return to Moscow in 2005 where she finds ‘[d]ozens of emaciated, dirty, ill, tired, people... trying to get into the centre [for homeless people]’. Throughout the book Hobbes’ vision of mankind condemned to a ‘nasty, brutish and short’ life seems especially apposite.

The book has a slightly odd structure in that much of the contextual information concerning the Soviet and post-Soviet system is presented in Part II, when this would have provided a useful context to the chapters on homelessness. But this is a short book, and the order is far from a fundamental flaw. A much greater problem arises from the periodic suggestion that what has been uncovered on the streets of Moscow supports various propositions of a number of sociologists, notably Bourdieu. Bourdieu’s writing is neither concise nor clear, but possesses a superficial plausibility born of vacuity, and it is invoked to explain the behaviour of vagrants and *bomzhi*, thus: ‘the purely social and quasi-magical process of socialisation... produces quite real effects, durably inscribed in the body and belief.’ Stephenson

goes on to make the inherently heroic claim that that it is not the 'qualities' of homeless people that define them apart from mainstream society, but 'the space that homeless people occupy beyond the boundary of society that decides the differences between the *placed* and *displaced*.' (emphasis added) Meanwhile, lurking in a footnote on the same page we learn the rather more illuminating fact that between one and three per cent of homeless clients at Médecins sans Frontières' Moscow office suffer from identifiable mental health problems.

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