

BOOK REVIEW

Social Sciences, Contemporary Russia, and Other

The Urban Life of Workers in Post-Soviet Russia: Engaging in Everyday Struggle by Alexandrina Vanke. Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 2024. 256 pp. £85.00. ISBN 978-1-5261-6763-7

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This is an important book for multiple reasons. It provides a rare glimpse into the social life of an increasingly secretive yet politically relevant country; it makes a theoretical and empirical contribution to sociological explorations of working-class lived experience, consciousness raising, and actual struggles outside workplaces; and its use of fieldwork demonstrates the continued vitality of qualitative social research in Russia.

Through a multidimensional analysis of “workers’ urban life and everyday struggles”, Alexandrina Vanke aims to counter dismissive attitudes toward subordinate groups by showing how they resist a hostile neoliberal world in multiple creative ways. Rejecting notions of “Russian workers’ patience” based on narrow understandings of class conflict in terms of industrial conflict, the author provides examples of creative resistance inspired by a practical consciousness embedded in class-based imaginaries that reveal their awareness of a deeply divided and unequal social structure. Such consciousness translates into everyday resistance, including communal maintenance and beautification of shared spaces and alternative economic activities.

The book consists of three sections. The first provides a background of theory and of the country, and the subsequent two cover class imaginaries and struggles. Part II contains empirical chapters featuring case studies of two Moscow and Yekaterinburg industrial neighborhoods, while Part III examines research on trade-union activism and street protests, as well as examples of everyday resistance.

Key concepts framing the data include “structure of feelings,” everyday struggles, and spatial gender habitus. The former encompasses sensory experiences, spatial imaginaries, and practical activities informed by cultural values. Altogether they inform the local atmosphere and allow local communities to reimagine the past and present of their locale. Here Vanke applies Tim Strangleman’s notion of “industrial residual structure,” reflecting moral attachment to an industrial past by de-industrialized working-class communities, to Soviet-era legacy feelings opposed to emerging aspirations and opportunities created by neoliberal restructuring. Conceptualizing class conflict in terms of “everyday struggles” recognizes the role that subordinated group’s sociocultural experiences and small-scale acts of resistance play in raising class consciousness. Bourdieusian *Habitus* is also reconceptualized as “gendered sense of place” to investigate feelings of socio-spatial divisions and dispositions governing practical activities. The author argues that the Russian working class has been able to retain a distinctive cultural outlook and local identity informed by collective feelings of

solidarity and self-worth, and they have been able to resist the sort of social transformation being led by a “neoliberal neo-authoritarian regime” that marginalizes them. Conversely, consciousness appears intersectionally fractured along gender, age, and ethno-national lines, highlighting the rise of nationalist and xenophobic attitudes.

Neighborhood case studies feature drawings and photography, part of a Soviet avantgarde-inspired ethnography seeking to document the working-class reality. Respondents’ drawings of local landmarks and social structures prove powerful tools to investigate their sense-making. These sections deliver a fine-grained account of worker imaginaries and reveal a nuanced yet contradictory picture of emerging consciousness. Industrial feelings associated with Soviet-era labor still inspire appreciation for collective solidarity, socialist welfare, and stability. Emerging feelings betray awareness of loss of status and material deprivation. Most problematic is the moral signifier of migrant labor. For some respondents, their moral worth lies in work discipline. However, competing strategies of moral one-upmanship foster negative categorizations that reinforce inequality. Lay perceptions of inequality in society show an internalization of deep social rifts between wealthy minorities and ordinary people, as well as their “ironic” challenging through moral questioning of wealthy lifestyles and open subversion by activists’ political consciousness. The emergence of the latter opens Part III’s discussion of “Ways of Struggle.” The author here accepts that worker protests were escalating up to 2022. Interviews with activists from the militant Automotive Workers Union show how political consciousness emerges from industrial conflict and how state and employer repression objectively limits this avenue. Examples of street protests’ manipulation by government-affiliated parties reinforce the argument. Creative forms of resistance are conclusively presented as more promising alternatives.

For all its theoretical sophistication and wealth of original fieldwork data, the argument suffers from key limitations. Criticism of Simon Clarke’s extensive research on Russian unions, enterprise restructuring, and class relations---oddly based on early 1993 references---appears to dismiss too quickly scholarship on social relations in production which could complement the understanding of class consciousness and resistance developed here. The country background, reducing restoration of capitalism to deteriorating welfare and repression by a neoliberal autocracy, could greatly benefit from it. Equally, Bourdieusian mystification, which Michael Burawoy champions over *Habitus*, might prove a more convincing tool at explaining workers’ embrace of ethnonationalism. More generally, it is not clear whether the author’s notion of “struggle without class” is a more sophisticated tool, akin to Manfred Elfstrom and Sarosh Kuruvilla’s “class conflict without class organization,” for challenging institutionalist Western models, or whether it is merely a return to simpler non-relational notions of class stratification that has been updated with celebratory accounts of informality and survival strategies. Such limitations, however, are less shortcomings of the author’s scholarship than reflections of the fragmentation of debates and data scarcity generated by institutional barriers in the West and political ones in the East. This book represents a welcome invitation to overcome those obstacles.