

Capital & Class Forum: Celebrating Simon Clarke's life and work

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Sociology, Labour and Transition in Post-Soviet Russia: a view from within

Abstract:

For almost 20 years, since the early 1990s, Professor Simon Clarke led multiple international research projects in Russia, China and Vietnam studying labour relations, enterprise restructuring and household economics under post-socialist transition. Breaking out of post-socialist scholarship's narrow confines, both social and ideological, he led an exploration of the void opened by FSU disintegration reconnecting with those who brought the brunt of it. Equally unique among western scholars was his promotion of a vast network of FSU researchers and activists, later formalised in the Institute for Comparative Research in Labour Relations (ISITO). Here, for the first time, some of its leading scholars reflect on his legacy, methods, and ever-lasting contribution to the advancement of sociology and social activism in Russia. Their accounts convey the radically alternative character of the overall project, returning both achievements and limitations. The emerging picture confirms the indeterminacy and complexity of Clarke's original findings: no linear development from 'subsumption of labour under capital' to 'familiar patterns of class conflict' has occurred. Instead, growing labour protests follow labour degradation and restructuring, a strong state becoming the arbiter in the stand-off between neoliberalism and workers' resistance.

Introduction

In the early 1990s Simon Clarke acted as catalyst for Russian and other post-socialist researchers to constitute an international network studying the transformation of social relations in the FSU and post-socialist Asia. He first came to Moscow in 1990 to lecture young sociologists from Russian regions. Through teaching and subsequent interactions, he apparently understood two things: post-soviet society was too complex to fit into western-derived neat models; that here there was no shortage of experienced sociologists who could handle both theory and fieldwork. It will be hard to say whether he planned this outright, but he managed to gather a collective of researchers from different regions to investigate the new social reality which escaped the comprehension of both foreigners and those inhabiting it. The first projects were focused on independent trade unions and the restructuring of labour relations in Russian enterprises. The establishment of ISITO in the mid-1990s saw the research scope

expanded to other FSU republics and later China and Vietnam. In the late 1990s, research themes also grew, including labour markets, households, family and gender issues. The next two sections respectively reflect on ISITO research methodology and findings, their legacies and limitations. Conclusions delineate their significance to contemporary Russian reality.

Clarke's alternative methodology

ISITO research employed a qualitative methodology, based primarily on multiple case studies representing the first systematic application of this method in Russia (Kozina, 1995). Its choice rested on the assumption that it is best to judge real practices and their change by directly observing interactions between workers, trade unions and employers at enterprise or organization level. These units, understood as holistic formations, are ideally suited for case study research.

For most Russian sociologists like us research in enterprises was not unfamiliar: 'factory sociology' was one of the few subjects accepted under 'developed socialism'. However, ideological control and the very nature of the subject made for obvious limitations. Above all ruled the assumption that soviet society could be studied as an undifferentiated population. Thanks to Clarke's projects, Russian researchers first turned to the social problems associated with changes in property relations and the new roles of state, employers, trade unions, and workers as in 'classical' industrial relations. This required, first, mastering IR theory but also developing original ideas suited to the Russian context, second, learning qualitative methodology from scratch. For Russian sociologists, educated in the positivist tradition, this meant a difficult transition from the language of variables to one of interpretations of subjective meanings. Essentially, this was a new way of seeing that gives access to other dimensions of the social spectrum. An additional complication was that, when beginning to apply these new approaches, we were more concerned with conveying observations about a fast-changing world than with developing adequate explanations. Building our own methodology, accounting for the interdependence between macro- and micro-analysis and allowing for large-scale studies took place gradually. Research seminars held every six months played a crucial role to this end. The main and most difficult question was how diverse fieldwork material collected by any available means could be used for theoretical analysis. Simon's approach was that interviewees' responses required interpretation rather than classification, seeking commonality among varying narratives, then, each case's accounts were shared and checked against others using triangulation to validate findings.

An important part of such research consisted in participant observation of labour conflicts, particularly strikes (Kozina 2009). Simon was also an excellent field researcher and, following him, we learned how to conduct in-depth interviews and direct observation, to be more critical about information, to use all available sources. An underground strike, for example, looks differently when an insider observes the bundle of manager-workers tensions and difficult interactions among strikers themselves. Only this way, we realised the complexities of organising strike actions (Bizyukov 1996). So, it emerged that sometimes there was no industrial dispute but mere conflict between union leaders and factory directors, that such leaders used the workers' collective to recklessly pursue their personal ambitions (Borisov and Kozina 1998). Conversely, attention to all available details allowed to see emerging connections between workers' committees and civil society, and the new possibilities for workers' activists elected as representatives of local and regional bodies to promote the interests of workers and develop labour subjectivity. What proved a disappointing prospect when they integrated into the political system while workers' grass-root organisations dissolved (Bizyukov 2021).

Research into Russia's social transformation

In the early-1990s neoliberalism dominated not just politics but social research. A naïve myth prevailed that the triumph of market and democracy were measure of social progress. In Russia transition to 'market democracy' acquired a particularly harsh character. Neoliberal reformers acted without concerns for social and economic consequences. The main goal was primarily preventing communist restoration as Chubais, key reformer and oligarch, later admitted. To this end, 'shock privatization' transferred economic power to a new bourgeoisie with catastrophic results.

Clake went against the tide offering an approach focused on the subjectivity of the working masses. Empirical studies across Russian regions focused on household survival strategies and workers' resistance. This research convincingly showed how reform were failing their declared objectives. We could almost call it a sociology of absurdity: reformers rushed to the goal only to find that it looked nothing like they planned or promised. Yet, the current 'neo-etacritic' regime is no departure from early reforms but its logical outcome.

Our empirical research unveiled striking paradoxes: plentiful western consultants backed a surprisingly simple transition model: closing unprofitable enterprises without concerns for negative social or economic externalities. This was the case with privatising the coal industry. Siberian and Artic region's monotowns, after pit closures, were left with huge wages arrears

and unemployment. Social disasters following chaotic economic reforms totally discredited market and democracy engendering mass longing for a 'strong hand' to restore order. These expectations ushered Putin's triumphal rise to power.

The coal industry, home of the pugnacious Miners' Independent Union (NPG) also offers a clear example of 'false class consciousness'. Neoliberal reforms undermined the very existence of the mining industry, yet union leaders became political allies of the neoliberal authorities, embracing their doctrine, anti-communist priorities and blindly supporting market reforms. The NPG regularly organized strikes to demand wage arrears' payment and their allies in the Kremlin complied just as regularly. A system developed where strikes became the *conditio-sine-qua-non* for wage payments. Meanwhile industry executives employed NPG as lobbyist to extract government grants until full privatisation made the system obsolete (Ilyin 1998). Looking back, we can say that the first truly antagonistic trade union, for many reasons, was integrated into the socio-political system formed in the 1990s.

Clarke's research across sectors and regions also looked at traditional Soviet trade unions historically tasked with labour mobilization and maintaining social peace. The 1990s is a brief period when they directly opposed government's liberal reforms (Ashwin and Kozina 2020). However, these organizations successfully survived market reforms by suppressing attempts to lead the trade union movement along the path of independence from management and capital and by reproducing their traditional functions as enterprise welfare departments and local authorities' political partners. In the 1990s, the rhetoric of social partnership between business, government and trade unions appeared. Long-term observation of related events in key industrial regions pointed to the hollow nature of this institution. Trade unions played the formal role of marginal participant in discussions, making no significant contribution to the economic and political situation (Petrova, 2001). Thus, the former Soviet trade unions, Lenin's 'transmission belt from the party to the masses', successfully survived Transition's cataclysms and became an important element of the 'neo-etacracy', a system of total state control over all spheres of social life, formed in twenty-first-century Russia.

In the mid-1990s, Clarke initiated a large-scale quantitative study on Russian households' adaptation strategies. Here too findings challenged reforms' declared objective of transition to 'civilised society'. Economic chaos engendered autarchic strategies, like reliance on private allotments, drifting towards natural economy rather than highly socialised activities. Another widespread strategy involved fleeing waged employment for "shuttle" trade, whereas skilled workers/professionals became small-scale traders smuggling goods from abroad or delivering them in small batches from other cities (Ilyina and Ilyin 2000).

In perspective, research conducted by Simon Clarke and his large collective of Russian and international sociologists stands out on two accounts. First, it offers a grand portrait of FSU social transformation from below. This is a fundamental contribution to the history of social change in the whole post-socialist field. Second, these 20/30-years-old findings do not simply illuminate the past but provide essential keys to understanding Russia's present. As such they still await a contemporary re-assessment.

Conclusions

Simon Clarke's activity in Russia is marked by four major achievements. First, he offered 'alternative' methods which continue to be developed. Second, there is the network research organisation, a flexible structure capable of quickly developing research. Third, there are the very research findings unwrapping the new and extremely complex reality of the 1990s and 2000s. Last, there are the several dozen researchers who thanks to their ISITO experience now pursue research at HE institutions across the country. Notably, there are independent projects like the Monitoring of Labour Protest (2023) which has recoded and analysed data about industrial disputes and the labour movement since 2008, in Russia and later across the FSU.

What connects these achievements is Simon's epistemological stance, the embodiment of a 'passion for the Real' doggedly pursuing the truth about social domination and emancipation struggles (Morrison and Sacchetto 2018). In Russia, then, too many westerners hardly reached further than a cold beer and a hot shower, as he humorously put it; an attitude reflecting a generalised 'epistemological hypochondria' (Armstrong 2017). Consistently, his theorising remained cautious. He dismissed the 'inflexible mould' of 'state capitalism' remaining open about the direction of class struggle in post-socialism (Buckley 1995). In his last monograph he argued for both capitalist restoration's reality and its difficulties. The conclusions singled out the Ford factory's textbook case of worker-management conflict as evidence that 'capitalism in Russia is not so different from capitalism everywhere else'; yet its exceptionalism stood for 'the incomplete subsumption of labour under capital' (Clarke 2007: 242). Does the dissolution of that factory and its militant potential proves him wrong? A comprehensive answer clearly exceeds the confines of the paper. However, it is worth noting that further research attests to continued workplace resistance and growing class conflicts against predatory but lacklustre capital (Bizyukov 2021; Croucher, Morrison and Rizov 2022). Transition's latest dramatic turn, as elsewhere, may owe more to the reality of flesh-and-blood resistance than to notional empty hearses, like post-socialist informality, legacies or Russian people's exceptional proclivity to submit to all-enveloping politics.

Simon Clarke, his works and achievements are now inscribed in the history of Russian sociology. More importantly, his colleagues and alumni do not just preserve his legacy but continue developing his vision and alternative approach.

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