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## WORK “IN THE SHADOW”: EXPERIENCES OF HOMELESSNESS AMONG CASUAL WORKERS IN CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

*Proposed paper deals with experiences of poverty and homelessness among unofficial day-labourers in construction industry in Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine. I look at the structural causes that force people to leave their homes in search of work in large cities and describe these workers' experiences of shadow employment in construction industry, based on the biographical interviews that I carried out with the homeless in Kyiv. I show how these workers distinguish themselves from the homeless who “gave up” (the «bomji») while pointing out that many of the latter had work in the shadow economy as a part of their biographies. I conclude that instead of making arbitrary distinctions between groups with “particular” social problems, one has to consider work in the shadow economy as one aspect of a greater picture. Deproletarianization, unemployment and lack of social security during transition to capitalism are the main causes of poverty, homelessness, alcohol abuse, crime and deviance among casual workers in construction industry, but also elsewhere.*

### 1. Introduction

The homeless constitute one of the most economically marginalized and culturally stigmatised social categories in post-soviet societies. Russian abbreviation “BOMZh” (“bez opredelennogo mesta zhytelstva”, literally meaning “without a permanent place of residence”) has become a more general social label, used to refer to the so-called “underclass” of unemployed middle-aged or elderly single men, with unattractive appearance, lack of social ties, health problems and alcohol / drug addictions. Social researchers in post-communist societies often portray the homeless as deviants: spreading infectious disease, getting involved in criminal or antisocial behaviour (some examples of the latter include digging through garbage or sleeping in the hallways of apartment blocks), and refusing to work or to receive treatment. Press pub-

lications further develop and reproduce such stereotypes, providing striking “life histories” of the homeless people or comments that the housed citizens make about the so-called *bomzhi* [4].

However, despite the fact that many homeless people do fit into such a cultural definition of a *bomzh*, I will argue this label is inadequate in describing the homeless. First of all, it excludes those, who do not have a permanent residence, but who are unlikely to be seen in the streets involved in any “deviant” behaviour. Second of all, it works as a value-judgement, condemning the homeless, and fails to consider that their behaviour may be a logical (or at least an understandable) response to the conditions in which they find themselves. And finally, by conferring “faulty” identities to the homeless, it makes them responsible for their own situation and does not note the “faulty” social structures

that make homelessness possible. Therefore, a problem of structure becomes a problem of culture and no reference is made to why these people are homeless, what turns them to deviance, and more importantly – what positions did these people occupy in society before they became *bomzhi*.

In this paper I will expose the inadequacy of a cultural label *bomzh* by referring to the case of day labourers in construction industry in Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine. I will use extracts from semi-structured in-depth interviews carried out with 60 homeless people in Kyiv (six of whom had experience working in construction industry) during my research in 2003-2004. Finally, I will argue for the need to analyse post-soviet homelessness in the context of wider structural changes taking place during transition to capitalism.

## 2. Background

Proposed paper deals with experiences of poverty and homelessness among unofficial day-labourers in construction industry in Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine. Housing boom in Kyiv in the last decade (taken as a sign of the city’s rapid development) also has its dark side. Far from being a “European” city, Kyiv rather reminds us of Third-world cities, where the sky rocketing costs of housing are unaffordable for the majority of population, and where construction itself depends on an endless army of exploited workers “in the shadow” who come from impoverished regions with high unemployment rates and who, ironically, often end up homeless while constructing housing for the elites.

Construction is one of the most dangerous industries worldwide. It is “considered the single most dangerous trade in the United States, with 1 in 5 workers in high-risk fields like roofing or sheet metal suffering a work related injury or illness each year” [9, 224]. Risk of illness or injury in construction is even higher in developing countries where equipment is often out of date, few safety measures are taken, and where workers agree to greater exploitation, as other job prospects are unavailable. In post-soviet countries, including Ukraine, the risk of injury is supplemented by social insecurity of work in the “shadow economy”. Unregistered day labour allows private employers to avoid taxation (to make greater profits but also to offer somewhat higher wages, pushing aside state employers). Therefore, although work in construction industry in Ukraine is relatively well paid, it lacks many of the social guarantees required by Ukrainian labour code, such as a 40-hour working week, a paid yearly vacation, guaranteed pension after retire-

ment, and social protection in case of illness or work-related injury. Nevertheless, many people agree to work without social guarantees. A common statement among my respondents was that “you don’t feel the risk, but you **do** feel the extra money in your pocket”.

Another factor that augments insecurity for day labourers in construction industry is high competition, with supply of workers greatly exceeding demand. As a consequence, traditional forms of solidarity that existed among workers with similar qualifications during Soviet times are replaced by competition or even rivalry during transition to capitalism. There is a similar trend in Western societies where Castel [1] notes the failure nation-states to guarantee employment, leaving workers on their own in their efforts to find and maintain a stable job. The end of mass production and differentiation within the working class mean that “the collective identity of manual workers ... is no longer consolidated by status conceptions rooted in factory production and cohesive communal relations” [6, 243] and that the “affluent workers” (Golthorpe) became “increasingly distinct from those members of the working class who were subject to unemployment, casualised work, and who were unable to afford privately owned housing [5, 99].

[There is] a deepening schism between rich and poor, and between those stably employed in the core, skilled sectors of the economy and individuals trapped at the margins of an increasingly insecure, low-skill, service labour market [8].

In construction industry workers are often chosen on a daily basis and construction practically stops in bad weather, therefore casual workers cannot rely on a regular income and often have to live for several weeks without work. Forced temporary unemployment may also be caused by injuries, illnesses or food poisoning (due to low quality of food and alcohol consumed). In such periods they often find themselves isolated and alone in a large city, and turn to homeless shelters and soup kitchens for help in survival.

Although their living arrangements in Kyiv are never stable, in “difficult” periods these men may be literally homeless, sleeping in parks, train stations or homeless shelters. Experiences of temporary homeless in the context of overall insecurity is a part of a “downward spiral” with negative effects on personal appearance and well-being, notes Daly [2, 158]: “There is a continual deterioration in their situation – physical and mental health, stability of friends or family, legal problems, financial and emotional independence, job prospects”.

### 3. “I don’t have a home, but I’m not a bomzh!”

Despite their experiences of homelessness, insecure housing arrangements, break of social ties and stress that often leads to substance abuse, day labourers in construction industry refuse to identify themselves as *bomzhi* and fear the prospects of such degradation of their status:

*Don’t think that I’m some kind of a bomzh here! Yeah, I go to these soup kitchens for bomzhi – I gotta survive somehow! If they feed for free, why not come? But no, I’m not a bomzh, I’m a hard-worker! I work hard day and night, building apartments for you, Kyivites... Yeah, building for you and not having anything myself... I live right there, at the construction site... its cold there, chalk and sand everywhere. Well, but anyway, I still look after myself. I wash myself every day, and shave myself. Look at me – do I stink? Do I have scruffy clothes? Am I drunk? Well, I tell you – if I drank and didn’t look after myself, nobody would hire me to do the work! [3, 18–19]*

If being a *bomzh* means drinking, not looking after oneself and refusing to work – something that a person can be blamed for, a ‘hard-worker’ (on the contrary) is poor through no fault of his own, not because of a failure to adapt but despite all the adaptation efforts. Casual workers in construction industry form an “excess reserve army of labour” for whom “economic advancement translates into a regression of material conditions and a curtailment of life chances” and “survival based on a mix of casual labor, welfare support and illegal activities trumps regular wage labour participation” [8].

Another factor to distinguish day labourers in construction industry from *bomzhi* is the temporal nature of their status as opposed to “chronic homelessness”. Even when a construction worker is going through a difficult period he still believes that things will improve shortly.

*Well, with the bomzhi its hopeless... There’s no way they will ever change their lives. As for us, hard-workers, yes, there are difficult periods, when we sleep in shelters and go to these soup kitchens for bomzhi, but as the saying goes “after rain comes the rainbow” – we know that a good period will follow shortly. There will never be any good periods for the bomzhi, they can’t work, they just gave up.*

However, among the current *bomzhi* (those who “gave up”) many were “hard-workers” at some period of time. Their stories show that the distinguishing line between the two categories is very unstable, and that any small injury, illness or family conflict in a wider context of instability may lead a “hard-worker” to “give up”:

– Could you please tell me how you became homeless?

*– It all started when I lost my job in Bar. There was no work for me, so I decided to come to Kyiv, to work on the construction site. It was... hmm... some three years ago now. So at first I was working, all was fine, I was sending money back home. The only difficult thing was not having a place to sleep. In the summer it was better, we could sleep in tents by the Dnipro river, wash ourselves in the river, wash our clothes there... Well, you know, so that we don’t look like some bomzhi... Because we’re not bomzhi! Remember that! But in the winter we either had to rent an apartment and sleep like ten people in a row on the floor, in sleeping bags. Because you know, say you make 60-70 hryvnias, or 100 if you’re lucky, but that’s not every day, sometimes there’s no work at all... And you know how much these apartments cost – 50 or 100 dollars a night, not hryvnias! And I promised that I’d be sending 50 hryvnias a day to my family, I’m their breadwinner... So sometimes when I didn’t have any money I had to sleep on construction sites, sometimes at the train station. The station... that’s where some street kids beat me up. These bastards! They stole all my money and beat me up so hard that I couldn’t go back to work the following day. And couldn’t go back home either, you know, without the money... its not right... what kind of a man am I? I felt miserable, and you know, at construction you have no friends, just competition... nobody even noticed that I was missing; everybody just wants to work and to make money. I felt miserable... Well, I started drinking, and, well, here I am... So I guess I’m a bomzh now, and it makes feel real bad – that I fell down so low... And so I drink even more, because it’s all so depressing... (Interview with a homeless man, 32 years old, Kyiv)*

My research proves that the road to homelessness may not happen “overnight” but often takes several steps. The first step that leads men to leave their homes is unemployment, lack of opportunities in their places of residence and / or need to support a family. Wacquant [8] describes this trend as “deproletarianization” – denial of access to wage-earning activities with decline of industrial production and uneven economic development. The second step is their immersion in an unstable environment, with high risk of injury, victimization, unofficial casual labour and lack of affordable housing. Next steps may include “survival strategies”, such as alcohol abuse, crime, saving money on housing and sleeping in public places or in cramped conditions, frequenting homeless shelters and soup kitchens. It becomes clear that the primary causes of homelessness are economic, and that people who are already in marginal positions – unskilled workers and the unemployed – are at a much higher risk of becoming *bomzhi*.

#### 4. “That’s the only way one can survive”

Speak [7] notes that for many homeless in developing countries their situation involves a degree of choice. It is especially true for short-term homeless, who may choose homelessness “as a means of improving their more permanent living conditions” and there is “little indication of personal inadequacy or family dysfunction” [7, 469]. My respondents often chose to sleep in parks or shelters to save more money. Many preferred to stay in the city instead of going back home even in difficult periods when they were out of work. They kept looking for employment, in order to justify the sacrifices they made by leaving home. Some turned to panhandling or crime in order to keep the “promise” they made to their families and to send them money regularly:

*Yeah, there were times when I was out of work. It was wintertime, cold and grim... I thought – maybe I should return home? But then I said NO, I came here, I told my family I’ll provide for them, and I have to keep the promise. So I was begging in the underground, like those **bomzhi**, and I... well, don’t tell that to anyone, but I... well, I got into a few shops with friends, and I was stealing wallets from foreigners. But you have to understand – I told my family, I’d be sending them money. They didn’t even know that I was out of work and I didn’t want to tell them, so they thought it was the money I made on the construction site.*

This respondent is a member of the so-called post-soviet “underclass” that consists mainly of young and middle-aged uneducated men coming to large cities from the province in search of work and “adventures”. In mass media these men are associated with aimless “hanging out” in the streets in the evenings, drinking vodka, smoking cheap cigarettes and getting involved in petty crime. The public response to their presence in Kyiv is mostly negative, reflecting concern with the “ghettoization” of the city’s sleeping districts where these casual workers usually stay. Below is a comment of a policeman from an interview about rising crime rates in Dniprovsky sleeping district:

*It’s the problem with all these day labourers who come to work here in construction... mainly from Brovary and other suburbs. They finish their work, their contracts, but **they don’t want to return home**, they start stealing, drinking, beating people up. This is why our city district has the highest crime rate for all of Kyiv. (Hazeta po-ukrajinsky, “Chomu Dniprovskyj rajon najbilsh kryminogennyj?”)*

Similar response to urban crime and to improvement of sleeping districts is found in Western societies. Wacquant notes that it is tempting to view these negative consequences of widening inequali-

ties “as symptoms of moral crisis, pathologies of the working class, or as so many signs of the impending societal breakdown of ‘law and order’” [8]. He analyses the structural changes that produce the “dualization of the metropolis that has consigned large sections of the unskilled labour force to economic redundancy and social marginality”. These changes, according to Wacquant consist of three elements: mass unemployment, relegation of public and private resources in decaying neighbourhoods and heightened stigmatisation of the so-called “underclass”. Although post-communist societies have their own specificity, the problems noted by Wacquant are visible in their own particular forms in Kyiv. There is no racial component, but one may say that the Ukrainian-speakers who come to the capital from rural areas are a discriminated ethnic group. There are no “ghettoes” in large urban centres, but there is an increasing differentiation of the quality of dwellings and of services available in prestigious central districts and “gated communities” as opposed to working-class sleeping districts on the outskirts of the city. There is no visible “policing” of problem areas, but the question of a dangerous underclass is widely discussed in media, academic and everyday discourses. Wacquant’s comment that “the loathsome tale of the ‘underclass’ has provided a low-cost, depoliticised, ready-made discourse with which to account for the relentless rise of violence” [8] applies not only to Western but also to post-communist discourses about the poor and marginalized social categories, such as the casual workers from my example.

#### 5. Analysis

In post-soviet societies there is a tendency to draw a clear dividing line between the *bomzhi* and the “normal” or “ordinary” citizens. However, as Foucault has shown in his research of prisons, mental homes and sexuality, social life is much more complex, with different shades of grey rather than “black” and “white”. The so-called *bomzhi* as extreme cases of homelessness should be looked at only in comparison to other social categories and to wider social processes. Day labourers in construction industry are at the margin between the *bomzhi* and “ordinary” citizens, and their stories help us to understand both truths: that of the *bomzhi*, who “gave up” after a long period of insecurity, and that of the “ordinary” people, who create a negative cultural label of a *bomzhi* in order to be able to construct their identity in a positive way as “hard workers” or those who are “struggling”, “looking after themselves”, “respectable”, “caring for their families” – who are **not** like *bomzhi*. Homelessness is seen as a complete **absence** – not

only of a permanent residence, but also of social ties, of “work ethic”, respect for social norms, and individual responsibility. Such an attitude goes in line with conservative explanations of homeless people as “different” from the “normal” majority, and parallels Bahr’s classical 1970s study on disaffiliation. On the contrary, the existence of casual workers and other marginal groups challenges the binary opposition, reveals the contradictions between ideology and real life and points to structural rather than individual causes of homelessness.

It was also interesting to find the lack of understanding and compassion towards less-fortunate fellow citizens. Poor people who live in Kyiv’s sleeping districts feel anger towards the day labourers, saying, “they just come here for easy money, because they don’t want to work hard back home”. Day labourers in construction often criticize the programmes for the homeless, by saying that “*bomzhi* can’t be helped anyways” or “why not spend this money to help us, and others like us, who are still struggling to get their lives together”. Social workers in homeless shelters, on the contrary, believe that day labourers are not really “in need”, because of their relatively high daily incomes.

“Social workers in the shelter have already gained experience – *now they accept only those who are in a really difficult situation. Earlier, construction workers used to live here, in whole brigades. During the day they were making a hundred [hryvnia]. They wanted to save money on accommodation, that’s why they were coming to*

*sleep here” (from an interview with the director of the Kyiv homeless shelter)*

I believe that such lack of sympathy comes from unawareness of the structural nature of the problem, where different “vulnerable” groups (poor Kyiv residents, day labourers, *bomzhi*, social workers) all suffer from economic transformations, insufficient levels of social protection, widening inequalities and low living standards. Society fails to notice, that day labourers are “in risk of homelessness”, that many of them “give up” and become *bomzhi*, and that all would benefit from more equal development, greater job security and affordable housing. Fewer people would have to come to Kyiv in search of work, fewer of those who do come would have to “choose” homelessness as a survival strategy, and fewer of them would end up as chronic homeless.

## 6. Conclusions

It is important to look at day labourers in construction industry in the context of post-soviet homelessness, because it shows us some of the structural causes of homelessness (unequal economic development among regions and along the urban-rural axis, high unemployment rates, exploitation and lack of social security in the “shadow economy”, lack of affordable housing for workers). Their case also shows that there is a lack of a clear dividing line between the homeless and the housed in post-soviet Ukraine, and that many day labourers who do not fit into the cultural label *bomzhi* are nevertheless experiencing homelessness.

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Рябчук А.

## РОБОТА «В ТІНІ»: ДОСВІД БЕЗДОМНОСТІ СЕРЕД НЕОФІЦІЙНО ЗАЙНЯТИХ РОБІТНИКІВ У БУДІВЕЛЬНОМУ СЕКТОРІ

У даній статті розглянуто досвід бідності й бездомності серед неофіційно зайнятих робітників у будівельному секторі. На основі інтерв’ю, проведених із бездомними Києва, я розглядаю структурні процеси, які змушують людей покидати домівки в пошуках роботи у великих містах, а також їхній досвід тіньової роботи на будівництві. Ці робітники відокремлюють себе від бездомних, які «здалися» (так званих «бомжів»), хоча багато нинішніх «бомжів» мали у своїх біографіях досвід роботи в тіньовій економіці. Тому роботу в тіньовій економіці слід розглядати в ширшому контексті депролетаризації, безробіття й відсутності соціального захисту за переходу до капіталізму. Саме ці структурні фактори спричиняють бідність, бездомність, алкоголізм, злочинність і девіацію як серед неофіційно зайнятих робітників у будівельному секторі, так і в інших сферах.