

The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies

Numéro Issue 2 (2005)

Reflections on Policing in Post-Communist Europe

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Ekaterina Efimova, Sovremennaia tiur'ma : byt, traditsii, fol'klor [Contemporary prison: ways of life, traditions, folklore], Moscow : OGI, 2004 & Russian Criminal Tatoo Encyclopedia, Steidl / Fuel 2003.

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Electronic reference

Youri Vavokhine, « Ekaterina Efimova, Sovremennaia tiur'ma : byt, traditsii, fol'klor [Contemporary prison: ways of life, traditions, folklore], Moscow : OGI, 2004 & Russian Criminal Tatoo Encyclopedia, Steidl / Fuel 2003. », *The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies* [Online], Issue 2 | 2005, Online since 15 avril 2005. URL : <http://www.pipss.org/index287.html>

DOL : en cours d'attribution

Éditeur : Centre d'études et de recherche sur les sociétés et les institutions post-soviétiques (CERSIPS)

<http://www.pipss.org>

<http://www.revues.org>

Document accessible en ligne à l'adresse suivante : <http://www.pipss.org/index287.html>

Document généré automatiquement le 30 décembre 2009.

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- 1 The first study focuses mainly on the inmates and their sub-culture rather than on the russian-soviet penal institution itself and provides a close examination of different aspects of social action and social control problems within the prison universe. The issues of power, domination and struggle are apprehended in a very serious and explicit way, and that is how the author diverges from the approach proper to the Russian folklorists. Even if this study doesn't pretend to a rigorous use of sociological or politological concepts, as for instance the concept of public space (formal or informal), it could be an interesting reading for anyone wishing to apprehend how in very concrete situations subjects can inverse negative and stigmatizing perceptions of themselves which are imposed upon them by a repressive institution, and develop from it positive collective identities. Without referring to any concepts of E. Goffman or of H.S. Becker, the author examines how a society of inmates manages to ensure its cohesion thanks to a sort of symbolic fight, war of perceptions and signs which the members of this prison society lead against the institution.
- 2 The singularity of this research is to emphasize a specific object for the purpose of decoding the semantic system of inmate society, namely the most ordinary, the most routine behavior of the prisoners (bytovoe povedenie). These behaviors, which are supposed to carryout some symbolic functionalities, could participate in a metaphoric struggle against the institution and would also tend to define the place of each individual in the social structure, even maybe this social structure itself. For instance, probably because food was used during the soviet period as a submission instrument, the prison society had worked out a precise regulation of inmates' behavior and attitudes including smallest gestures in relation to this object.
- 3 The food distributed by the administration is perceived as enemy's feeding ; so, for some prisoners, it is bon ton to refuse it totally (and ritually) or, for others, to consume it while hurling insults at it (p.68). For every inmate aspiring to be recognized by the community as having at least a minimal degree of "dignity" (p.83) the canteen must be assessed as a clearly negative place. As for the criminals ("toughs", blatnye) who pretend for a maximum of "dignity", the usual norm is a sort of food asceticism together with an apology of hunger and bad-fed body (while the unequally redistributed by the institution abundance is apprehended as a submission technique aiming to pervert inmate solidarity). Thus, general starvation would represent a form of communication which symbolically could even better unite prisoners than a shared in common meal. Regarding others elements such as tee, alcohol and tobacco, which are situated at the edges of official spaces, their consumption is reduced to specific forms and implies some communitarian codes that are centered on the idea of general and joint resistance to the shortage (cf. p.64 : "obchtchak"). Any individual attitude or gesture are banned from the consumption rituals. This kind of attitudes, gestures and models of behavior would operate as symbols of independence and resistance relative to the administration and even as insubordination symbols.
- 4 The situation is the same for many other objects like money or private property, interchange, work, speech – they tend to be limited in their presence, put in quarantine, regulated in their

use, escorted by a pack of complex metaphoric constructions aiming to deprive these objects of any faculty for perverting the three key concepts of the inmate semantic system : “solidarity”, “equality” (within one category) and “dignity”. Each inmate has unequal access to these key values as it largely depends on the facility of each prisoner for using behavior codes together with symbolic efficiency. All these results in a prison society structured in several superposed categories.

5 However, even if Efimova manages to show very well an inmate society which defend itself and is able to attack, the struggle instruments and the discourse strategies used by the institution are not analysed. Thus, the author fails to explain to which extent combative skills of the inmate semantic system are connected to the detention conditions, administration techniques and custodian’s subculture.

6 Finally, another object seems also to be left aside, namely the semantics of the virility. Even if this object is mentioned more than once in the analytical parts of the study and to a greater extent leaks out from the speech of the inmates, their humor, their stories and tattoos, largely represented in Efimova’s book. Indeed, the system of binary oppositions, which emphasizes the concepts of “solidarity”, “equality” and “dignity”, is saturated with virile connotations, allusions to manliness as a basic value, synonym of insubordination, resistance, power; while the lack of the “dignity” is associated with derogatory perceptions of femininity; hence the symbolic content of some informal sanctions like “abasement” (opuskanie).

7 Such structure-forming role of various virility conceptions valid in the russian-soviet prisons also clearly appears in another work which is often referred at by Efimova – Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopedia by D. Baldaev*. It deals broadly with sexist tattoos. Thus one can find there caricature pictures of soviet leaders (including Lenin and Stalin) stressing the cruelty and power, sexually represented, of these characters, pictured with horns and huge phallus. As for individuals that are considered as exposed to this power like, for instance, inmates involved in denunciation or other forms of cooperation with the administration, they are often associated to a humiliating feminine image. As for individuals able to set a rude opposition against the institution, like criminals (blatnye), they are attached to tattoos underscoring some conception of virile dignity.

8 *Cf. Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopedia, Steidl / Fuel 2003: German reedition of BALDAEV, D.S., *Tatuirovki zakluchennykh iz lichnogo sobraniia veterana MVD SSR*, Baldaeva, D.S. (Tattoos of inmates copied and collected by a veteran of the MVD of the USSR, Baldaev D.S. between 1948 et 2000. Personal collection of the author), Saint-Petersbourg : Limbous-press, 2001.

To quote this document

Electronic reference

Youri Vavokhine, « Ekaterina Efimova, Sovremennaia tiur'ma : byt, traditsii, fol'klor [Contemporary prison: ways of life, traditions, folklore], Moscow : OGI, 2004 & Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopedia, Steidl / Fuel 2003. », *The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies* [Online], Issue 2 | 2005, Online since 15 avril 2005. URL : <http://www.pipss.org/index287.html>

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