

DONATA PETRUŽYTĖ. *WASTE PICKERS' WAY OF LIFE: CASE STUDY OF THE DUMP OF KARIOTIŠKĖS*. DOCTORAL DISSERTATION. VILNIUS: VILNIUS UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2009

(Donata Petružytė. *Atliekų rinkėjų gyvensena: Kariotiškių sąvartyno atvejo studija*. Daktaro disertacija. Vilnius: Vilniaus universiteto leidykla, 2009)

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Studies of the lifestyle of specific groups in society have become more popular in recent years; in particular socially excluded groups such as the disabled, the homeless, the unemployed, or ethnic or religious minorities. The coexistence of these groups reflects the state and structure of society, and attracts researchers by its “otherness” and subcultural lifestyle features. The dissertation “Waste Pickers’ Way of Life: Case Study of the Dump of Kariotiškės”, defended by Donata Petružytė at Vilnius University at the end 2009, enriches these studies. The author of the study was a trainee at the University of Lapland (Finland) and a doctoral student in the Institute for Social Research at Vilnius University. Her interests cover such subjects as concentration places of territorial social problems and groups belonging to them. In the dissertation she looks at one of these territories – the dump and its community – and presents a very detailed sociocultural and socioeconomic “portrait” of it.

Donata Petružytė’s dissertation focuses on the way of living of waste pickers. By using “way of life” and “mode of life” as synonyms, the author describes them as “the whole of characteristics that are typical for the life activity of an individual or a group aimed at fulfilling the basic needs of a person” (p. 9). This topic is studied by ethnologists and anthropologists as a form of cultural expression which allows us to “look into concrete empirical situation and a way to grasp essences of life and their variety that often disappears when one looks from afar or from above” (p. 9). Both subject and approach – the use of visual ethnography in research on subcultural groups – makes the work unique and the first of its kind in Lithuania.

The author’s interdisciplinary view (including ethnology, anthropology and sociology) can be clearly seen not only at the beginning of work but throughout the thesis. Several issues intertwine within the work. Waste pickers are clearly presented as an autonomic subcultural group, distinguished by its work specifics, and separate from homeless people. At the same time, this group is presented in the context of a post-communist country – Lithuania – comparing it with similar groups existing in other countries. By choosing the group of waste pickers living in one of the biggest and “richest” Lithuanian dumps – Kariotiškės (district of Trakai, 30 km north west from Vilnius) – and presenting in detail their daily subcultural expression (treating waste picking not as acquiring waste, but as acquiring resources) the author “includes” a new group into the map of social groups in Lithuania.

The work consists of three parts. The first reviews studies of waste pickers in Lithuania and elsewhere, discusses the main theoretical characteristics of waste picking as an economic activity, and presents theoretical concepts of work sociology, anthropological waste theory, social geography etc.

Through a short historical review, the role of waste pickers and their place in the societies of Western and developing countries is discussed, and the main aspects of their way of living are defined.

In this part the author also presents the place of waste pickers in the Lithuanian waste management system, covering production and consumption sectors, collection and transportation of waste, and, in the end, disposal. By separating types of waste pickers, and giving definitions of them and their work activities, she allows the reader to see the wider context of the problem. The presentation of historical tendencies of this phenomenon (in Lithuania and the world) reveals its development and perception. By demonstrating the characteristics of the phenomenon, the author is able to identify the most distinctive features of the group, and to construct various models of waste pickers' way of living. Its important aspects include work/earning, features of the group's lifestyle, and the influence of workers who directly communicate with it (e.g. waste buyers, dump workers, etc.)

The second part of the work is dedicated to defining the research methodology and methods. A comprehensive description of the method of visual ethnography and its possible uses in sociological research is presented, through the discussion of certain features of its use in the research process. The courage of the author in choosing this method, which requires considerable efforts and preliminary preparation, allowed her to analyze the phenomenon directly and reveal its expressive dimension. At the same time, the chosen method allowed the author to document a phenomenon which is now passing into history. Extensive field study (2006 – 2008) allowed the author to get to know the group very well, and to reflect on herself as a researcher. In the second part of the work the author, writing about the cyclicity of the research, shares some useful self-reflections: "In the end (of the research – R. I.) we started participating in that about which we were only told at the beginning. <...> We started identifying the inaccurate information provided to us at the beginning" (p. 106). It is gratifying that the research had an expansive stage. That is, the author visited other dumps in Lithuania, communicated with waste pickers and the staff, tractor and waste truck drivers, the inhabitants of surrounding villages and towns, medics and so on.

The third part of the work is devoted to presenting the results of the research carried out, and is illustrated by extensive visual and interview material. At the beginning, the author provides a general presentation of the context of the dump, its evolution since 1987 and, finally, the issues of its closure (the dump was officially closed at the end of the year 2007, work there ended in March 2008).

In the following chapters, the author consistently presents the characteristics specific to the subculture group, social demographic characteristics, and the process of coming to the group. Discussing the specification of the work, the author raises a question which is the most important when talking about this group – picking waste. What is this: a way of living or a way to survive? The group analyzed is not homogeneous, so it is impossible to provide an unambiguous answer. To approach the specifics of the group's work, the author analyses in detail the questions of work/activity, describing the work time of waste pickers, the tools they use, their income, the specifics of the things found – secondary materials, valuable findings (money, jewellery, etc.) versus resources (food products).

Not less interesting and important is the chapter on waste pickers' homes. In this chapter the maps of houses and yards of the subculture are drawn. The long time spent in field work allows the author to discuss in detail waste pickers' dietary habits, hygiene peculiarities, the connotations attached to the usage of intoxicating substances and drugs, and the meaning of holidays and free time.

It is gratifying that the author dared to choose a topic that is often marginalized in the social sciences and humanities. It is not a secret that the researchers of certain excluded groups are thought to be the same as the group they have researched, and cannot avoid a marginal position. It is equally

important that in the course of her field work the author was able to find and recognize the person, to reflect her/his dignity, at the same time keeping the objective position of herself as a researcher. This dissertation provides an opportunity to recognize the “other”, and, getting to know that person, to come closer, to diminish social exclusion and to develop intercultural tolerance.

Even having finished the dissertation its author continues to visit the dump, and there is hope that her work may continue. The visual material gathered during the ethnographic research will soon be shown in the movie “The Field of Magic”, whose filmmaker was helping the author during the fieldwork.