

# **Situationist Sociology in Narvskaya Zastava**

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Official history can be juxtaposed to the memory of silent social groups. To the official version of the past, this memory is undesirable and even dangerous. Thus, we would like to add a number of missing elements to the official memory of Petersburg and Leningrad, which we find boring in its organicity (and dangerous in its consequences). More specifically, we would like to give a voice to those who do not usually write articles or memoirs about their view of the city, about their city. In today's spectacular society, it turns out that no-one really wants a history of Narvskaya Zastava and its memory of a proletarian area, of social projects, or of the unsuccessful attempts to build communism and to accommodate the disenfranchised.

The territory behind the Narva Gate represents an embodiment of socialism's homogenizing influence. We can read this space as a system of significance whose meanings are supplied by socialist reconstructions, aesthetically negated by the ideology of young, wild capitalism. This area was meant to typify the victory of the revolution and of social equality, the triumph of the urban way of life over the rural, the supremacy of a worker's neighborhood over the center, and the privilege of worker's avantgarde, the industrial administration and the factories' party elite.

During the first and second Five Year Plans, an attempt was made to break down the boundary between the city center and its outskirts, changing the faces of the sloboda (=settlement outside the official city limits) and the zastava (=outpost), turning them into socialist areas that could compete with the center directly. New industrial complexes were built alongside the old factories of Narvskaya Zastava; a steam of peasant-migrants flooded into the city in order to become factory-workers. The construction of new residential areas and their infrastructure were called upon to create comfortable living-spaces for these workers. One important component of this new infrastructure consisted in "hotbeds of culture", distributed across the entire city, established with the goal of bringing the "cultural revolution" to the population at large, which had been deprived of any possibility for cultural consumption up until that point.

In the framework of the art-project "Dřrive through Narvskaya Zastava", we decided to conduct a sociological survey at several point(s) of the area in order to find how people feel about their neighborhood and which changes they have been able to observe throughout the last decade. In organizing our survey, we did not only follow traditional sociological methods but also allowed ourselves to be inspired by Situationist practices of examining urban space. These practices rest upon the principle of exploring situations by adding new elements and gaining insight into reality by turning it upside down (detournement), which leads to the discovery of symbolic meanings in ordinary everyday life.

We advertised our presence by identifying our stand as a " Mobile Sociological Center " in big letters. Over the period of a few days, we set up this stand at different points in the neighborhood. This extravagant stand attracted the curious and repelled the timid. The environment that gradually grew around us changed from passive to active: eventually, we were joined by people who spent their time in the area, either out of habit or through the nature of their work (newsagents, sunflower-seed-salespeople, pastry-vendors, people waiting for friends or taking walks, idlers and loafers, drinkers, militiamen, and pensioners).

The mobile sociological center was staffed by four girls with questionnaires as well as several cameramen.

Despite the fact that our primary method of collecting data consisted in a questionnaire, this examination differed from our accustomed method in that we were hardly striving to undertake a representative mass survey. While we were happy to listen everyone in full, it was our goal to pull people into our orbit so that they would help us to examine this territory, becoming our guides into the unknown neighborhood, "closed" to us because of our lack of knowledge concerning the area. We needed intuitive psychogeographers, people who traversed these paths on a daily basis, people who were ready to share information on where and how to spend our free time, to relax, to have fun, to meet and hang out with friends. We also wanted to know which places were unpleasant during the daytime and dangerous at night.

The mobile sociological center collected 179 surveys from a non-random group of passers-by that live in Narvskaya Zastava (i.e. residents of the Kirov and Admiralty sections of the city). The results of our survey should that close to 80% of the respondents like to live where they live at present. 60% would not like to move, even if they were offered the possibility of doing so. Consequently, one can assume that they are not indifferent to the state of this territory and are hoping for positive changes to occur in terms of infrastructural development.

Among the positive changes that have taken place during the last years, the survey-results place great emphasis on the improvement of commercial facilities and logistics, as well as the provision of urban amenities (*"It's gotten cleaner, there are less drunks, more order. There are more stores. They've even restored the Narva Gate", "They've paved the backyards", "The backyards are much greener. They've trimmed the poplars. They've also been building playgrounds and fountains", "The Square's been restored"*).

For many people, important milestones of redevelopment include the restoration of the Narva Gate, the superficial transformation of Stachek Square, the appearance of a McDonald's restaurant, as well as the transformation of Kirov Department Store into a mall with unaffordable prices (*"The Kirov Department Store has become a completely different place. The quality of the goods, the interiors, the design have been modernized"*). The survey showed that only a minority of the area's inhabitants actually make use of this mall. No more than 9% of all people surveyed answered that they visit it on a regular basis. 56% make purchases there irregularly, while 34% never go there at all.

The closing of many of the area's factories was also considered as a positive development. Contrary to our expectations, both surveys and interviews only rarely express any kind of regret at the closing of factory or the laying-off of workers (*"This used to be a worker's neighborhood, but now the factories have been shut down. But this also means that the air is cleaner"; "The Red Triangle [=one of the area's main factories] has been shut down, and since then, there's less dirt"*).

The many responses to the question "What bothers you in everyday life?" can be crystallized to three eyesores: alcoholism, pollution and everyday problems, among which the problems of living in communal apartments takes first place. Among the negative changes that have taken place during the last year, many people complained that there is not enough municipal transportation, too many private cars, which drive around without any restraint, as well as the increase in amusement halls and shops where alcohol is sold.

Another obvious eyesore consists in the large amount of dangerous buildings, decrepit, empty apartment houses, uncleared remains of collapsed buildings, unfinished construction sites, and half-finished renovations. Some of the interviewees noted the hostile and inattentive attitudes of people toward one another, as well as the fact that the urban milieu had become hostile and alien to them. These kind of observations are especially characteristic of people above the age of 46. (*"Lots of people curse on the streets. Smokers burn you with their cigarettes. There are less and less familiar stores. The all-night liquor stores play their music at a deafening volume. The larger squares have been filled with new buildings. Car-drivers have very little discipline. It's impossible to cross the street, because the traffic lights don't work."*)

The inhabitants of Narvskaya Zastava perceive the neighborhood as place that can only appeal to those who live there and are already accustomed to its environment. The population seems to believe that there are very few objects that might be interesting as places to show to visitors. The area's famous constructivist architecture was only mentioned in one response, which was filled out by an art-historian. A few respondents answered that foreigners would find nearly everything in the neighborhood interesting, albeit from an ethnographic point of view.

Notwithstanding their affection for the neighborhood, its inhabitants seem to agree that it has a reputation of being one of the city's more dangerous and less pleasant places (*"The Kirov section is considered one of the most criminal of all. The militia doesn't do much of anything..."*). In our questionnaire, we asked which places were considered to be dangerous at night. These proved to be parks, backyards, gateways, Shkapin Street and Rosenshtein Street and many others – "bandit streets", any place where "houses are back to back and where there's little light", "next to the stalls where people drink and gather", next to bars and other places that serve alcohol, in stairwells, empty lots, out-of-the-way places, and quiet streets. Danger emanates from "hoodlums, drunks, sailors", bums, junkies, "drunk or stoned teenagers". One young man formulated his feelings as follows: "At night, my entire life becomes the life of my back." Others told us that "lots of terrible things happen, especially at night in the Ekaterinhof Park", where "drunk teenagers get their asses kicked". Some young people answered shyly that "it isn't really dangerous for the locals, but as for outsiders...it is."

A large portion of the surveyed population feels that Narvskaya Zastava remains a "working-class neighborhood", despite the fact that some of the factories have been closed. There is also an awareness the growth of unemployment over the last few years. Some of the respondents spoke of a large number of idler and loafers, some of which fill the ranks of the bums and alcoholics.

One thing that stands out is the harsh and unfriendly attitude - tinged by contempt and repulsion - toward fellow citizens who find themselves at the bottom of society or in situations of social vulnerability and crisis, such as drug-addicts, homeless, illegal migrants or "Southerners". Many people used the word *ubrat'* (=get rid of) when speaking of these people in the interviews, as if they were referring to inanimate objects (*"They turn off the hot water for a month at a time. It's time to get ride of the bums and drunks."*).

The most contradictory of all antagonistic images consists of the figure of the "Southerner", who "plays the master" of the neighborhood. A significant increase in "persons of Caucasian nationality" is one of the most significant changes that the neighborhood's population has observed since the beginning of the Perestroika, since the area used to be far more homogeneous in its social composition. (*"The number of bums has grown, just like the*

*number of merchants from Southern countries. You can't walk or drive without stumbling across them. There are ten times more darkies than there used to be in 1986.";* "Bad municipal transport, lots of Uzbeks and Azerbaijanis without any registration."). The presence of "Southerners" is talked about as a nuisance of everyday life and as a source of danger. There are several explanations for this hostility (or fear).

First of all, there is a widespread opinion that "Southerners" use bribes to take up apartments and rooms that might serve as housing for people who currently live in communal apartments. (*"The workers from the 'Vereteno' factory used to live here. But now, there are all these non-Russians. In our house, there are six family registered. They come to the administrator of the building and pay money. The whole place is populated by Azerbaijanis. On Rosenshtein Street , they've set up house and just live there.";* "I'm afraid to live in my own apartment. A family of five with a dog moved in from Dushanbe ; they were all crammed into a room with 14 square meters"; "Our apartment is ruled by the Southerners").

Second of all, the "Southerners" are aggressive (*"The presence of the darkies bothers everybody. I was mugged three times in the last six years"; "It's dangerous to go wherever those unregistered Azeris live, Promyshlennaya Street , for an example"*).

Third of all, migrants from the Southern republics are considered to be a "mafia", well-organized and business-like, which has allowed them to take control of the local service industry (*"Look at who's the boss of the cafüs! All the Russians do is look at the bottom of the bottle!"; "On the market, everything is under Azeri control, they don't allow local producers to sell anything there"*).

Some of the neighborhood's inhabitants do not like the outer appearance and the behavior of newcomers, which they feel are different from the habits of the local population (*"They built an athletic field. But the field is exploited by the darkies, mostly. Tadzhiks, Uzbeks, Kazakhs, whatever. They live in clans. And our kids have no place to go"; "They have their own traditions"; "You can't even go for a walk; there are all these non-Russians"*).

Only one informant made a humanistic statement, noting that the Azerbaijanis and some of the neighborhood's inhabitants shared common problems, namely a poorly organized everyday life and poverty. He also told us that conflicts do not arise as long as there are common problems: *"I live in the dormitory of the 'Vereteno' factory . No conflicts with the Azerbaijanis so far. Everyone survives here. The dormitory brings people closer together than any communal apartment. The kids all play together."*

One seriously drunk lady we questioned near the metro told us that in her opinion, people who found themselves in difficult situations in Narvskaya Zastava didn't feel all too bad, pointing toward empathy and the readiness to help others (*"In Narvskaya Zastava, normal people will understand you. As for Nevsky Prospect, I can't stand it. But here, people will even give you a piece of bread, if you need it. They'll always pity other people in the end"*).

Neither surveys nor interviews make any significant mention of businessmen or entrepreneurs. In contrast to the bureaucrats, the abstract images of businessmen are generally seen in a positive light (*"An entrepreneur bought part of the garden and cleaned it up a little"*). Most of the informants displayed positive or neutral attitudes to the introduction of the market-economy or to advertising, for an example. One point of criticism is that most of the advertising does not cater to the local population (*"Advertising should only be in*

*Russian"; "There isn't enough needed advertising; we need advertising that shows us how to find that places that people are looking for").*

One of the neighborhood's characteristics is that the attributes of the new reality are felt less here than the ruined Soviet legacy. There have been few tangible changes. People whose lives are subject to complete decline wait for help from the city council or the municipal administration, but in fact, have given up all hope. As one of the inhabitants of the area between Shkapin Street and Rosenshtein Street put it: *"It even said so in the newspaper: "Rosenshtein Street is Petersburg's black hole. The ceiling collapsed in one apartment. We try to put up a fight. But no-one wants our neighborhood anyway. After all, this is back country. This isn't the neighborhood of the Admiralty but the village of Petushki . That's really strange. This is the city center. But at the same time, it just plain old Petushki."*

The French Situationists of the 1950s criticized modern capitalism and its consumerist society for attempting to embody capitalism through images, stamping it onto urban space while homogenizing it, opening the same kinds of shops in different neighborhoods, "grooming" the city in order to hide its flaws and its secrets. The population of Narvskaya Zastava has not yet encountered capitalism in full; they are still waiting for "necessary" advertising and for the openings of caf s or stores that already have franchises elsewhere. On the whole, the influence of capitalism still remains largely insignificant, although the neighborhood's population is waiting for its advent impatiently. Spectacular society without consumer society appears as a sneer or a smirk of the haves against the have-nots. People are ready for the triumph of capitalism, having armed themselves with extremely liberal consciousness, with the lack of empathy for their neighbors (bums, alcoholics, junkies and Southerners), wishing to edge out anyone who finds him-herself in a difficult existential situation; they are ready to build a capitalist paradise on their own territory.

*So what did we gain by examining the neighborhood of Narvskaya Zastava, a place that has survived the transformation of the Soviet urban utopia to a trivial place of bazaar capitalism as a typical post-Soviet experience? Narvskaya Zastava is valuable in that it remains a potential place of passive resistance, in which the human being has not yet become a glossy consumer of market products, services, and beautiful bells and whistles, but still remains in a space of interaction, tension and conflict.*

### **Chto delat/What is to be done?**

**Chto delat/What is to be done?** was founded in early 2003 in Petersburg by a workgroup of artists, critics, philosophers, and writers from Petersburg, Moscow, and Nizhny Novgorod with the goal of merging political theory, art, and activism.

**Chto delat** sees itself as a self-organizing platform for cultural workers intent on politicizing their "knowledge production" through reflections and redefinitions of an engaged autonomy for cultural practice today.

### **Chto delat/What is to be done?**

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