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Toward a Semiotic Analysis of "Dwelling Place Paranoids"

Some Cultural Determinants of a Psychopathology

The term "dwelling place paranoids" was recently proposed by the Russian psychiatrist A. Medvedev to denote a special case of paranoid disorders belonging to the group of so-called "involuntary psychoses", that is, psychotic disorders observed in elderly people (Medvedev 1990). The delirious verbal and non-verbal behaviour of such paranoid subjects is related to their dwelling place: they accuse neighbours of systematically stealing and damaging their things, and believe that their neighbours are persecuting them in order to inflict material and moral damage. At the same time, such paranoid people retain good memory function and continue to perform normally all the usual activities of everyday life. Their intellectual abilities are not affected.

Disorders of this sort may have different etiologies, some of them unrelated to schizophrenia. Typically, people who suffer from dwelling-place paranoia, and who receive psychiatric treatment for that disorder, reside almost exclusively in so-called "communal apartments" (CAs). Communal apartments are a type of housing common in large Soviet cities. There, several families live in one big apartment, with each family having its own room, but sharing facilities such as kitchen, toilet, bathroom, telephone, and so on. When clinical phenomena observed in cases of dwelling place paranoids are put into a broader perspective, then one can view systematic patterns between the normal daily activities and attitudes of healthy neighbours, on the one hand, and the content of delirious behaviours, on the other. My observations are based on ethnographic fieldwork that I conducted in big CAs in St. Petersburg in 1997–98, as well as on participant observation for more than three decades (for details, see Utekhin 2001; see also, <http://www.kommunalka.spb.ru>, where a virtual museum of communal apartment is located).

Some readers might remember the following episode from the classic Ernst Lubitsch film *Ninotchka* (1939), in which Greta Garbo plays the role of a Soviet foreign trade employee. After a series of comic adventures, she is returning from Paris to her humble room, which she shares with two neighbours in a densely populated, communal apartment building in Moscow. The term "communal apartment" initially meant simply a state-owned apartment, which operated without a building manager and in which order was maintained by the tenants themselves. In fact, however, this self-organisation turned out to reveal the worse moral qualities of people involved in a struggle for survival in dire circumstances of over-population, and the order usually came from an outside authority such as a housing administration, militia, or People's Court. To represent the voice of authorities, official instructions were issued aimed at the regulating internal order in the apartments. However, people used to add their own handwritten, local instructions, with detailed prescriptions concerning potentially controversial issues that might arise in everyday CA life.

Living together in CAs gave birth to the characteristic features of what we may call traditional "communal" mentality. In the first place, the latter is a particular organisation of privacy: lack of space usually led to a situation in which several people – usually, though not always, belonging to the same family – lived in the same room. In addition to a life in which one is constantly observed by one's family members, CA living also takes place under the watchful eye of neighbours, since all everyday practices, concerns, and events are perceived by other tenants as well, who see, hear, and even smell what all the other tenants do or have. Lack of privacy leads to an oversensitivity to violations of privacy and its symbolic substitutes. A continuous being "on stage", because of sharing the same space, combines in CAs with specific practices of hygiene and privacy, because tenants share the same toilet, bathroom, and kitchen facilities. No one takes personal interest in, nor responsibility for, properly maintaining public spaces. Hence, cleaning and repairs, if performed, follow the principle of minimally sufficient effort.

Due to lack of resources, on the one hand, and to necessary expenses and efforts, on the other, the fair sharing of goods and costs is implied in most CA activities. Queueing is an important dimension of everyday relations among neighbours. It is often institutionalised through written schedules of activities. These schedules are intended to control bathroom usage as well as the order in which apartments are to be cleaned. The sharing of costs and resources is heavily emotionally charged with envy, and people are extremely sensitive to the fairness of the distribution. The idea of "Limited Good" – which represents the notion that all goods come from one source and are therefore subject to strictly controlled distribution – proves useful in conceptualizing some aspects of the mentality

of some CA dwellers (on the concept of Limited Good, see Foster 1972). Such symbolic sharing as *ugoshchenie* (inviting others to taste a meal) and the ritualised "presentation" of new clothes or footwear are intended to prevent eventual consequences of envy, such as theft, damage, or the evil eye.

At the same time, such close interaction often brings about quasi-familial, neighbourly relations that transcend the frontiers of all social groups. Still, because of the social structure of CAs, endless conflicts arise. In CAs, representatives of different social, ethnic and religious groups must cohabitate in the same space, regardless of their differences. They represent the model of a new, quasi-ethnic entity that Soviet propaganda used to vaunt as one of the major achievements of social policy in the USSR: a unified Soviet people. Since the most powerful tool used in creating conflicts is the supposed threat from outsiders, the drive to denounce the latter found fertile soil in CAs.

In the public spaces of the apartment – e.g., kitchen, bathroom, corridor – one's possessions cannot be constantly controlled by the owner. This situation gives rise to a continuous state of alert. This mental state is mainly related to the acute sense of vulnerability of one's private sphere, and not necessarily associated with the material value of one's possessions. Disputes that on the surface seem to be about property sometimes have a covert content related to matters of privacy. For example, one informant tells of the time that he took some matches from a neighbour's box that was on the kitchen table while the neighbour was on summer holiday at his dacha. Upon returning, the neighbour detected the lack of matches, since he had counted them just before leaving home; thus, he was sure that some matches had been stolen. It is worth mentioning that, in the USSR, nothing was cheaper than a box of matches, which cost only one kopeck, the minimal monetary unit. When the guilty party gave his neighbour a new box of matches to compensate for the ones he had "stolen", the neighbour threw the matches out the window, saying "I don't need your fucking matches. What I *do* need is for people to leave my things in peace". We may suppose that to leave the matches on the table was a provocation on the part of their owner, who knew the habits of his neighbours. He knew beforehand that some matches would be missing when he returned. The subject matter of the provocation reveals the true point of the man's concern.

The invasion of a private sphere is often treated as the fouling of a clean state, since unfriendly neighbours are taken to be "dirty", while friendly ones are "clean". Hence, the latter are allowed to use one's matches and basins for laundry and washing. Ideas about clean and dirty are closely related to categories of private and public, one's own and the alien. The public is never completely clean and so requires modification.

The continuous conflicts inside CAs provide fertile soil for a pathology that grows in the form of a so-called "delirium of relationship". Relations between neighbours are reflected in their way of everyday communication. One informant refers to his room as the place where "I greet those whom I wish to greet and when I wish to". The issuance of a greeting, its intonation, gestures, the level of courtesy, double meaning of words – all these channels are usually operative in the public space. Constant interpersonal communication is unavoidable, when so many people are sharing the same, transparent space.

Our speculations departed from a highly thought-provoking observation: the delirium of the pathological subjects is often so systematic and rational, that it is impossible to determine the delirious character of their talk until one has an alternative source of information, be it observation or the opinions of other neighbours. Stealing, spying, persecution, eavesdropping, inspection of one's things in the absence of the owner, intentional damage, and even substitution of food or things – all these behaviours are quite possible and normal in CAs. Probably, only systematic baiting is more typical of delirious narratives than of real life, though it also can be encountered in reality.

We have analysed the main motives behind the behaviour, hallucinations and delirious narratives of pathological subjects. Some pathological behaviours involve the inversion of roles in a "hunted-hunter" way; in this case, subjects start to steal and damage things that belong to their supposed offenders, in order to retaliate and thereby forestall any future offences. Some self-thwarting behaviours have been observed, such that the subject publicly destroyed his own possessions "so as to avoid theft". We have found that the parallels to such behaviours, as well as of the content of delirious ideas and perceptions, are evident enough in normal behaviour. The specific logic of delusion is a systematic transformation of the rationality implied in the practices of everyday life in CAs, as result of severe communication disorder. Figure 1 shows a matrix that partially models categories of CA mentality. These categories underly normal communicative behaviours related to personal possessions. In this domain is where communicative disorders occur, reflecting the inability of pathological subjects to establish normal personal contact with other people; such "normal" contact meaning to make one's point by ways other than accusations or imitations of the imagined transgressions of supposed offenders.

An illustration can be provided by aspects of "virtual thefts", when the behaviour of normal subjects resembles that of pathological paranoid behaviours. Here is a very symptomatic story. A woman bought new shoes for her teenaged daughter. It was an important event, because shoes made of good leather are expensive. They were carefully selected, and then presented to friendly families. Some days later, the shoes disappeared from the girl's room; another pair of shoes left in

	Openly performed	Secretly performed	
Involving no property move	1: Boasting	2: Modesty, drive to conceal	
Property move, real or symbolic, involved	3: Sharing (real or symbolic)	4: Theft, pilferage	
2, 3 – not evaluated negatively			1, 4 – evaluated negatively

Fig. 1. Matrix of categories related to personal possessions.

their place – similar, but used. The woman was angry and desperate. She accused of theft a young man who lived at the opposite end of the apartment and did not belong to her friendly circle. The man had a somewhat marginal status already, because of the many visitors he had almost every day, and because of his drinking and not having a steady job. Nevertheless, the woman understood that it would be highly improbable that this fellow, who had never before been accused of theft or of other dishonest acts, would have stolen the shoes for himself by means of a substitution (*podmena*: the kind of accident that often happens with foodstuffs left lying about openly in the kitchen). Thus, she said that the thief was one or some of the girls who had attended a party in this man's room. The woman explained that, even if it was not an intentional theft, it could be the result of a mistake: a drunk girl might have entered the room, in complete darkness, and put the shoes. At any rate, there was a victim, and there was a transgression. The woman was not daunted by the evident weakness in her story: the supposedly drunk girl would have had to cross the entire apartment building, with her own used shoes in hand, and so on. In addition, the shoes were of a slightly different size. In spite of these contradictions, the woman told this version of her story to the policeman that was called to the apartment. The young man denied the accusations as being absurd, but the neighbours, however, were inclined to find them to be well-grounded.

By evening of the same day, the guilty person was found out. It was a school-boy, a close friend of the younger son of the woman. The boys played together with an electronic game until late in the evening, and when the angry parents of the visitor demanded that he come home immediately, the absent-minded player put on the first shoes that he found at the door. Thus, the entire story of a theft turned out to be a mistake. Still, it revealed usually tacit attitudes and presuppositions.

In the public space of CAs, incidents often occur for which no witness can be found. Each neighbour reconstructs the situation according to his own presuppositions. What happens is that the situation to be reconstructed does not exist

apart from some interpretation in this or that way. Hence, it becomes impossible to find a rational, objective ground for making deductions in "objective reality", since several different rationalities can be applied to interpreting the situation. It is not similar to the case when the reality is known by the psychiatrist, who is observing how that reality is distorted by delirium.

In sum, our inquiry leads us to believe that the long experience of living in CAs and, more generally, taking part in practices of the collective everyday life of Soviet type not only creates favourable ground for the development of certain personality traits, but also can be regarded as one of the etiological – not just pathogenetic – factors contributing to the formation of "dwelling place paranoids".

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Preface

Some time ago the International Semiotics Institute (ISI) at Imatra launched its first research project under the auspices of the European Union. The project lasted two years, 1999–2000, and the congresses involved consisted of about twenty scholars from Finland, as well as some from Estonia and Bulgaria. For the project, a theme was chosen that was at the same time theoretically challenging, of current interest, and meant to stimulate various points of view: *Understanding, Misunderstanding and Self-Understanding*. A presentiment of this theme had first appeared in Finnish semiotics as early as in 1983, at the Second Annual Meeting of the Semiotic Society of Finland, held at the University of Jyväskylä. This was the legendary second and last visit to Finland by A. J. Greimas. Moreover, another remarkable semiotician and linguist lectured at that meeting: Professor Walburga v. Raffler-Engel from Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. The title of her speech was “Crosscultural Misunderstandings”. Somehow these words remained in our memory, only to well up from the unconscious fifteen years later as a proper subject for ISI researchers.

At the first meeting of the project scholars, we agreed that everyone would write two essays. One was to be theoretical, aimed at an international audience, and elucidating the role of understanding in contemporary semiotics. The second essay was to be an empirical application of the theory to the geographical area of Finland, Carelia, and neighbouring countries. As a theoretical introduction, I wrote a general essay on cases of understanding and misunderstanding. My aim was to show how symptoms of a return to phenomenology and hermeneutics had become highly visible in recent years within the world of European semiotics. Of course, semiotics on this continent has never distanced itself very far from other paradigms of research. In my own work, I had been elaborating a new theory called “Existential Semiotics”, which departed from the more traditional, struc-