**The begging as a (quasi)occupation in modern Russia»[[1]](#footnote-2)[[2]](#footnote-3)**

*Roman A. Solovyev*

Student of the faculty of economics of NRU HSE

Member of the University research team “Professions in welfare state”

E-mail: [rom.solovev@gmail.com](mailto:rom.solovev@gmail.com)

**Introduction**

Traditionally begging is explored as a socio-economic dysfunction of capitalism that stigmatizes individuals as unnecessary people, whose ‘non-productive’ activity has a negative impact on the economy of cities[[3]](#footnote-4). However, begging is not only a regular consequence of merchant capitalism and escaping the government off certain segments of labour markets[[4]](#footnote-5), but a widespread form of economic and occupational activity with a specific set of rules and behaviour patterns. Begging may be defined in the course of informal labour market; and beggars – as its economic agents with special combination of assets, strategies of earning a rent and even occupational culture. Both domestic and foreign data[[5]](#footnote-6) enable us to confirm that begging is included in the system of labour market and represents an inferior segment of informal economy so it can be analyzed from the view of sociology of professions and labour economics.

Thereby, the research problem is that in Russia, as in the whole world, beggars have become a rather stable social group with own economic and occupational strategies, specific work status and code of behaviour. However, begging as a form of semiprofessional activity, firstly, has ‘parasitic’ nature[[6]](#footnote-7) and, secondly, may be the object of downward occupational mobility for members of other professional groups. All that have an adverse effect on labour potential of the economy. In this regard an empirical analysis of the problem allows us not only to study the phenomenon within the new perspective, connected with the concept of professional groups, but also to suggest some critics about regulation of this activity.

**Data and Methods**

The research is based on the original data collected in the form of in-depth interviews with the use of method of involved observation. The data includes 10 interviews with people (7 men and 3 women whose ages range from 25 to 60) who beg for private profit near churches in Moscow and observation notes that compile the main qualitive analysis. First, most respondents have come either from CIS or from smaller Russian cities, generally from European part of Russia. Primarily, these are those who are poor qualified workers came to Moscow to raise money and were pushed to the edge of society due to job loss. Sociological reasons for the latter were rooted in socialization went through rough social environment – prison, orphanage, or army. Usually it correlated with conflicts with local community – people leave their hometowns because of tense relations with relatives or friends.

Second, most beggars have been living by alms no more than one year, i.e. for these people begging is a relatively new form of activity. Half of the informants sometimes combine begging with other kinds of activity in informal sector, for example, one-off job without any contracts. Earlier most respondents were occupied with manual jobs and unqualified work in farming. Only a few of them were occupied as semi-skilled workers either in manual or non-manual labour. Remarkably, before starting to ask alms they tried to find a job although there were periods in their lives when they even did not try to seek a position despite an ability to do this.

Third, the beggars potentially could or actually do possess not very poor allocation of resources. For instance, none of them does suffer from hunger or lack of clothing, what is taken by most of them from churches, social services, voluntary organizations, etc. Only half of informants have no shelter, while others share flats with other beggars or their relatives – not taking into account the rare cases when some of them even own a property in Moscow or their hometowns. The majority of these people usually have somewhat good health, as the place where they can treat their ailments. Moreover, about the quarter of respondents are social beneficiaries *de jure*. In fact, most of them do not see this assistance due to either the loss of some of the documents or failure to submit the necessary applications. Thus, the case of poor recourses acquired by these people may be an indicator of a certain culture considered a grouping attribute for them.

**Begging as a special status group**

The challenge of studying begging in terms of traditional sociology of professions lies in the lack of classical relationships between professionals who produce goods or services and clients who receive them. Therefore, we face a reasonable question to what extent we could consider begging as an occupation.

We start our analysis with the concept of status groups [Weber, 1978: 302-307] which are created in order to defend their collective values and privileges. In other words, a community of beggars has to possess specific resources which require protection particularly through self-organisation. In a light of this, it is possible to say about beggars as a specific status group which basis lies in the activity which brings income.

The main aim of status communities in this case is to create a monopoly in some sector of an economy which may be connected not only with rendering services but also with the pursuit of activities. For instance, highly-qualified professionals like lawyers or doctors use the system of education and authorization certificates as a barrier to enter their professional field. In turn, people who beg in the streets could use family bonds, ethnicity and other collective forms of closure mainly based on master statuses.

Closure[[7]](#footnote-8) [Weber, 1978: 43-46] is a term which describes relations determined by property allocation and class situation i.e. a place of an individual in the system of social division of labor. Thus, every class situation corresponds to a specific type of closure. In this regard, begging may be considered, on the one hand, as a result of monopolies of other types of occupations, and, on the other hand, - as a monopoly itself.

**Collective form of closure**

According to the research results, beggars live as a part of a certain community that is highly common for a street-level economy. As it was mentioned before, they mainly use collective forms of closure like family or friend bonds, religion and ethnicity, while individual forms are just not available for them, because begging is not related to some formal institutions:

*…We always drive drunkers as well as gypsies out from a parvis, because there were cases when gypsies really pull parish’s money out* (respondent 7)

*…I come to a parvis by two o’clock, but until that time local male beggars don’t allow us to stay here* (respondent 6)

It is indicative that the mechanism of collective closure in our case is similar to “real” occupations – closure is established only within *working space*. It was observed that for all respondents a parvis serves only as an economic territory they use to generate income. They have different means to organize their workspace: it may be a begging bowl or a piece of cardboard with aid request. This helps to mark a territory, usually very small, which becomes a temporary property of a beggar. Collective closure enables beggars to expand their working space due to human resources of a community. For example, it was established that a parvis of some churches may be controlled by a small group of people who are in a family relationships or just know each other very well.

Collective closure also makes an impact on the process of socialization within a community. Usually it is rather hard for a new entry without sufficient experience to succeed in begging because of asymmetry of information in the field. This resource including knowledge about profitable places, time or local infrastructure is considered extremely valuable and allocated inequally between different communities. Therefore, collective closure is used also as a way to protect useful information which could increase performance from aliens.

**Steps of a “career ladder”**

Consideration of individual factors influencing the choice of people to start begging assumes that in some periods individuals could act relatively independently. If we select strategic actions from all individual ones, we could get a “career ladder” of a beggar. In regard to such marginal activities like begging Chicago’s phenomenologic sociological school developed a theory of consequent deviant career [Becker, 1963; Skipper and McCaghy, 1970; Sutherland, 1937], which aim in our case lies in defining “career steps” leading an individual to inferior monopoly – begging.

According to the research results, alcohol abuse and intention to idleness may be considered as the first step of a deviant career. The tragedy of this step is that these behavior patterns are usually learned in the process of primary socialization. More than a half or respondents claim have confessed that alcohol is the main reason which pushed them into the street:

…*Started to drink and then everything went wrong* (respondent 4)

…*Began to drink and took the wrong turn* (respondent 3)

*Perception of begging as a possible alternative* to make money makes up the next step of the “career ladder”. Rarely an individual comes to a parvis to beg in a short run. This stage is usually introduced by a street-life experience or an interaction with social services. It is also important to add that in some sense a parvis is a historical place for asking alms [Kudryavzeva, 2001], which legitimizes the right of a person to beg. In addition, almsmen could receive aid not only from parish but also from churches itself. It may be food, clothes or sometimes even a paid job. As for a daily income from begging, it is quite instable and varies from 100 rubles (3 $) in weekdays to 20 000 rubles (600 $) in orthodox holidays like Easter or Christmas. Besides, the working day of beggars is rather short, about 4-5 hours a day. Thereby, understanding of a possibility to make ease money and also to receive support from church workers makes begging quite attractive in sight of people in a marginal position:

*…I’ve been staying here for about ten days, earlier I begged near the railway station because there you can receive food from church volunteers. But one woman I’m acquainted with advised to come here to earn more money.* (respondent 6)

*… Roughly, once, on holidays I begged 20 thousand rubles (600 $) per day, while on weekdays the maximum was about 15 thousands (450 $).* (respondent 8)

*…Once, on weekdays, it was about 14 thousand rubles (425 $). But on religious holidays like Easter or Christmas I can earn even 15-20 thousand rubles (450 – 600 $) per day.* (respondent 9)

Another factor which determines begging as an individual choice is *solidarity with local community*. When a person enters this sphere, he or she becomes involved in the process of resocialization. An individual forms a new self-image and receives necessary information about values of a community, existing rules for “the game” and sanctions for its violation. As a result, old bonds are replaced by new stronger relations with street people, old values are destructed and a person begins to feel that there is no road back. Often an individual recognizes it when he or she tries to return to “normal” existence but suddenly understands that earlier accustomed way of life is not appropriate any longer.

*… I know everyone, all people here are my close friends: they can always get me out of a trouble. It doesn’t matter that they are bumbs, the main thing is that they are good souls*. (respondent 5)

*…Look, you see that jakey-bums are really good people. They are not just sweepings: you can meet buff-coats as well as academicians among them.* (respondent 4)

The next step is *individual intragroup deviation*, which may be considered as a specific analogue of professional autonomy. In this stage a beggar becomes enough experienced to act more independently from a community in order to create a rent, i.e. make high profits through the deployment in the social or environmental landscape. In case of begging, inragroup deviation is determined by two main factors – *personal capital* and *street knowledge*.

The first term means health or just ability to defend oneself. This resource is very valuable because working capacity and competitiveness in such marginal sectors as begging are always determined by physical and mental endurance. For instance, one respondent confessed that often his force is an only factor which helps him not to become a victim of gangs or different hooligans:

*… Lately I quarreled with three rabbles. I only downed them but then I felt pitty for that guys and decided not to beat them.* (respondent 2)

The second term includes information about profitable places, time a beggar has to come to a parvis, and local infrastructure. Experienced almsman always knows where to get free food, clothes and night’s lodging. Street knowledge also comprises experience of interaction with marginal, criminal and supervisory structures which determine both “professional autonomy” of a beggar and safety. It is necessary to mention that street knowledge does not exist without a community because the main informational source for a beggar lies in local social environment, especially if he or she does not have other resources for intragroup deviation.

Individual itragroup deviation may be described in three divisions: economic independence, individual strategy and operational freedom. High level of economic independence means a real opportunity to «run own business”, independently determine and allocate sources of incomes and expenses and have an individual responsibility for cost outlays. As the research has shown, about one half of respondents have a low level of economic freedom, because they usually have to pay a ‘tax for the place” (money for local gangs or unprincipled local police officers) or suffer from racketeering. In contrast, other informant say that they did not face such problems because they know how escape them using their experience and community bonds.

Strategic component of “professional autonomy” is connected with an ability of a person to set goals and choose means toward it independently. Church parvis enables individuals to exploit the well-known archetype of “church beggar” which institutionalizes their activity. Following the main strategy almsmen also could use other ways to increase an income, for example, beg in profitable places and time, or use a dog as a mean of people attraction.

Operational freedom of beggars is mainly determined by common rules of behavior in public places. In other words, if a beggar does not shatter the calm being drunk or offending passerby, it is possible for him to get out of the rain. In this regard the only problem for beggars is “customer expectations”. The main difficulty is not get to know what passerby want to see but to follow these expectations.

According to the research findings, it is often very hard for a beggar to use “professional autonomy” because of the lack of self-organization. The majority of almsmen prefer to be a part of a community and follow its rules than to work independently and be fully responsible for their actions. This situation is very similar to one which exists in a formal labor market when low-status workers exchange their freedom for stability of external control established within collective closure.

**Conclusion**

Both collective forms of closure and possibilities of making deviant career within begging allow us to consider this activity as a particular“occupational surrogate”. It means that begging belongs to a more general societal system and functionally connects to its elements. For example, there are adjacent occupations that coexist with begging and functionally become asocial source of newcomers for it – casual workers. Begging pulls in workers from adjacent jobs like loaders, street sellers, cleaners, etc. that totally embrace about 15% of working population accounting one of the numerous occupation in Russia. It turns to be an important issue as the national Government in fact does not regulate the given segment. Moreover, it tends to prohibit this activity. In fact, social policy in begging should be structural and protective in favour of domestic labour occupied with low-skilled jobs as they pop up in edge of society partially due to push-effects of labour market oversaturated by unskilled migrants invaded Moscow during last years.

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6. Here the word “parasitic” is used as not connected with rendering services and mutually-beneficial exchange. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. The development of neo-Weberian ideas of ‘class closure’ and of exclusion and usurpation is associated with the work of Parkin, 1979 and Murphy, 1988. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)