

Debra Javeline: Protest and the Politics of Blame: The Russian Response to Unpaid Wages. University of Michigan Press, 2003, xv + 291 pp, £37.50 hardback.

The non-payment of wages has become a global phenomenon in the past decade as insolvent (or unscrupulous) employers have realised that they can default on their obligations with relative impunity. The non-payment of wages has proved to be a potent source of strikes and, more often, social protests, but the vast majority of victims have suffered in silence. The scale of non-payment has been hugely greater in the Former Soviet Union than in the rest of the world, with something like two-thirds of the Russian labour force suffering delays in the payment of their wages, and protest has been, by comparative standards, extensive and sometimes dramatic.

Anybody reading this book in the hope of finding out about the Russian non-payment crisis or protests against non-payment will be sorely disappointed. The book is rather an arid exercise in political science, seeking to support the hypothesis that a precondition for protest is the clear identification of the person or institution that is to be blamed for, or that has the ability to resolve, the grievance. The bulk of the book consists of the analysis of the data of a survey, sponsored by the United States Information Agency, which demonstrates that those who could identify a specific figure of blame were substantially more likely to have participated in strikes and protests. The author explains the supposedly low level of political activism in response to wage arrears by the fact that the majority of those affected do not attribute blame to any specific individual or institution. This inability to attribute blame is in turn explained by the complexity of the issue and the blame-avoidance strategies of the likely culprits.

Identifying blame as a significant factor in collective action is the original contribution of the book, but the analytical problem is the extent to which blame attribution is an independent rather than merely an intervening variable. The data analysis shows that blame attribution is at least to some extent a reciprocal effect of participation in protest, so that those who have protested are more likely to identify a figure of blame. More broadly, as sociologists we would expect blame

attribution to be a result of social influences rather than of the supposed objective complexity of the issue and individual intellectual processes.

The interpretation and analysis of the survey data is conducted within the framework of a rational choice model, according to which an individual engages in an act of protest on the basis of an evaluation of the balance of individual costs and benefits, as a means of pressuring the guilty party to resolve a grievance. It is very doubtful that anybody who has ever participated in, or even observed, a protest action could take such a model seriously, since it completely ignores the cathartic and symbolic significance of protest actions. The most striking feature of the major protest actions against the non-payment of wages in Russia to which this study refers, organised by the trade unions in March 1997 and April 1998, was that the protests did not identify any guilty parties and were not directed against anybody in particular. The anodyne slogan in March 1997 was 'For Work, Pay and Social Guarantees' and in April 1998 was 'For the Full Payment of Wages', although in both cases many individual demonstrators carried placards demanding the President's resignation. No doubt the attribution of blame would have been more focused, and perhaps the turnout greater, if the protest organisers had defined a specific target and had sought to organise effective rather than purely symbolic protests. But that is another, and perhaps more interesting, question.

Simon Clarke

University of Warwick.