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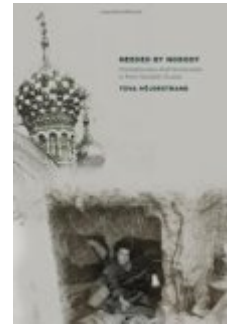


Tova Höjdestrand. *Needed by Nobody: Homelessness and Humanness in Post-Socialist Russia*. Culture and Society after Socialism Series. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009. ix + 231 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-4701-3; \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8014-7593-1.

Reviewed by Ayse Akalin

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## Makeshift Identities: Homelessness in Post-Socialist Russia

In *Needed by Nobody*, Tova Höjdestrand takes a close look at the predicament of homelessness in post-Soviet Russia. She conducted her research in St. Petersburg at the end of the 1990s. The timing of her research was critical as it allowed her to look inside the post-socialist transformation, when the last remains of the Soviet system were being replaced permanently by the new capitalist mode. As the new system took over, it suffused all aspects of life, including the life worlds of the homeless. The timing is therefore one of the biggest assets of the study as it illustrates how marginalized bodies acquire different meanings in socialist and capitalist systems.

Højdestrand begins her study by reminding the reader that homelessness in Russia has emerged out of different dynamics than in the West. In the West, the major causes for this plight have been increased housing costs and cuts in public expenditure. In the West, Höjdestrand observes, generally the homeless are excluded from society, although they do receive some compensation through state welfare programs or charity organizations. Homelessness in the West means an exclusion by the society but not by the system. In Russia, the reverse is true: homelessness is a result of exclusion by the system but not by the society. Homelessness prior to the 1990s was a direct consequence of the administrative structure of Soviet social planning, which required everyone to be registered at a permanent address. Such registration, in Russian called *propiska* (from the verb *propisat*, “to register”), was obligatory and determined the basis for all

other entitlements within the system. If for any reason a person lost his or her *propiska*, the interlinked structure of the Soviet system would usually cause a domino effect, leading them to lose their work permits, medical care, and pensions, thus their other entitlements to most civil rights and social benefits, eventually causing them to be convicted as social outcasts. In Russian, this basic form of exclusion by the state is conveyed by the term *bomzh*. It is only when *bomzh* becomes *bomzh-bum* that the same bodies are subjected to a multileveled social exclusion, as it is conveyed in the Western understanding of homelessness. Höjdestrand states that in 1999, when she conducted the main part of her research, an estimated three million Russian citizens, about 2 percent of the population, lacked a *propiska*. The price of being “territorial misfits” for the *bomzh* was manifest discrimination and exploitation (p. 6).

In chapter 1, Höjdestrand lays out the history of the political system that stands underneath homelessness in Russia. The foundations of *propiska* go back to the internal passport system introduced by Peter the Great. The aim was to separate the urban and rural populations that were deemed incompatible. Following the revolution, the need emerged for a new form of population registration system to administer the new massive social transformations that then led to the introduction of the *propiska* system in 1932 in the Stalinist era. The main goal was to ensure that the labor populations would be fixed to where they would be most useful. The systematic criminaliza-

tion of the absence of a propiska came in 1960 with Paragraph 198 of the Criminal Code. With this new system, propiska was valid only within an *oblast*—a unit comparable to a large county—which meant that leaving one’s region for more than three days without reporting the journey to authorities was prohibited. In practice, this meant that anyone who was forced to leave his or her residence for longer than six months, for any reason, was prone to losing their propiska, since Article 60 of the Housing Code required them to be evicted. Until 1995, there was no exception for involuntary absences in Article 60, which as a result meant that anyone who was hospitalized for a long time, including mental patients, political dissidents, petty criminals, and peasant immigrants (since the Soviet system was specifically concerned about protecting strategic cities and regions)—in other words, anyone who carried undesirable elements—was likely to lose their housing entitlements, thus their propiska, and start on the course of becoming a bomzh.

In 1991, when it became legal to privatize municipal housing except for a small reserve of flats for the less privileged, everyone in St. Petersburg was entitled to sell their flats in the open market. Residents were now also responsible for a certain amount of maintenance of the apartments, which overall made privatization unattractive, therefore slowing it down by 1994. In the two parallel housing systems, municipal housing was still regulated by the registration norm while in the newly privatized flats, anyone could be registered. This shift turned the obligation to register in an apartment into a valuable commodity. Höjdestrand notes that in the post-socialist period, the difference between privatization of industry and privatization of the housing stock was that in the case of the latter the market became available to the gangsters at the grassroots rather than the oligarchs. The narrative presented in the media at that time regarding bomzh depicted them as old, ill, and often alcoholics who were threatened by criminal gangs to make them give up their flats. Höjdestrand however reminds us that the reality was more complicated, and was closely bound with the dynamics of the transition. In many cases, there was involvement of some moneylenders who duped creditors into granting their places as collateral. In the absence of a reliable circle of “one’s own” people, as many were recently divorced or bereaved, or getting sound bank loans, having to do business with these moneylenders was the only possible option. Such fraud became less common by the end of 1990s, partly due to legislation in 1999 that required deregistration and subsequent registration to take place at the same time during a residence exchange.

In chapter 2, Höjdestrand explains how, despite the common assumption that bomzh are a group of people who do not want to work, they are in fact engaged in what she calls a “refuse economy”: that is, a series of informal practices by which the bomzh make their livelihood. As Höjdestrand persistently underlines, the basic mechanism that configured the situation of the bomzh was a catch-22 of the system that was still in effect in 1999, encapsulated by the expression “no propiska no job—no job no propiska” (*propiski net, raboty net—raboty net, propiski net*). In other words, the bomzh were unable to have a proper job even if they chose to work. Even when a person decided to reenter the system, the absence of the necessary documents made them a nonperson who could not be employed. Consequently, the bomzh had no choice but to either accept whatever they were offered or create their own opportunities to the extent that they could. What was different in this new period was that the absence of a propiska could be negotiated with personal contacts. In any case, contrary to common belief, many bomzh did work, though not in jobs considered as “real” by many. While many of them tried their chances in the relatively established work market of construction; or in semi-established positions like cleaning hospitals, working as *dvornik* (a street cleaner and janitor responsible for a few apartments); or sorting out rotten fruit, most eventually slid off to anything that paid. They often were employed for temporary periods without being paid at the end, or were encouraged by bureaucrats or policemen to steal as the only way of supporting themselves. In the refuse economy, for example, there was also room for what Höjdestrand calls “self invented micro entrepreneurship” that included collecting deposit bottles that were left in return for keeping tables clean for kiosks and cafes at the station, or hanging out in parks and washing cars (p. 66).

In the following chapters, Höjdestrand looks at homelessness from different angles. She examines the impact of spatial transformation and urban regeneration in St. Petersburg on homelessness (chapter 3); the roles that social relations played in the lives of the bomzh (chapter 4); the affective relations they developed with one another (chapter 5); and the terminal story of exclusion from a moral community (chapter 6). In the conclusion, Höjdestrand lays out her concerns for the future of the homeless in Russia. In the West, societal exclusion of the homeless is at least to some degree contained by their inclusion in the state system through welfare provisions. In Russia, however, the social and economic transformation has led to a new kind of societal exclusion with no

signs of even a makeshift inclusion by the system.

In telling the story of the homeless in Russia, one relationship that Höjdestrand tries to establish is between the abject state of homelessness and *dusha* (soul), that is, the intangible definition of humanness as imagined in Russian cosmology. Höjdestrand describes the complex connotation of *dusha* for the Russian subjectivity at the beginning of the book and then juxtaposes it with the state of homelessness at the end to describe in a thoughtful manner what homelessness means in the Russian context. While *dusha* elevates human properties, such as irrationality, paradox, intuition, unpredictability, and even elements of anarchy, the contingency of the everyday life for the homeless is not too remote. In Russia, homelessness does not stand at opposite corners from humanness, and yet displacement and external contingencies embedded in homelessness make minimum accountability necessary to sustain a social relationship that is difficult to achieve. When the stigma of *bomzh* is attached to this, the thin line between continuing with life and letting oneself go becomes solely dependent on the volition of the self.

Regarding methodology, Höjdestrand worked with three nongovernmental organizations in different capacities that gave her access to different soup kitchens and shelters. Her most important field site, which she visited about four times per week, was Moscow Station in St. Petersburg, where a long outdoor yard was the regular locus of 100 to 150 homeless people. Höjdestrand states

that throughout her fieldwork, she had some kind of contact with about 200 homeless persons, about 40 percent of whom were women. About 100 of them she met on a regular basis. Höjdestrand mentions some of these people only to illuminate a single incident. Others, however, come up frequently throughout the book and pieces of their life stories become epitomes of the themes that she identifies to illustrate homelessness. Among these are the former pianist Irina; an Armenian by the name of Papik and his son; and Vova, who self-appointedly became Höjdestrand's guide and primary informant. Vova's sporadic appearances in the book suffuse the text with a sense much like what was conveyed in *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment* (2005), a book set in Brazil told by Joao Biehl through the story of one person, Catina.

Højdestrand's book is lucidly written, descriptive without being overwhelmingly detailed, and informative without being overly dramatic. She does not theorize the material extensively, although her study could have benefited from more engagement with Agambian literature on bare life. Nonetheless, by the book's conclusion, Höjdestrand captures what she aims for initially, which is to lay out the complexities of homelessness and to convey the efforts of the homeless to sustain a relationship with humanness to the extent possible. It is a recommended work for all interested in the human consequences of population management and the post-Soviet transformation, and others who are interested in keeping a comparative perspective on homelessness and those tracing the human consequences of the neoliberal age.

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