

Tova Höjdestrand (2009)

***Needed by Nobody. Homelessness and Humanness in Post-Socialist Russia***

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Tova Höjdestrand, a Swedish anthropologist, presents her PhD research in book format and opens up the world of Russian rough sleepers in St Petersburg for the English-language reader. She has worked extensively in post-Soviet Russia with various marginalised groups but *Needed by Nobody* is an ethnographic account of homeless men and women living and spending their days around railway stations and night shelters in Russia's second largest city.

Although the main fieldwork was carried out in 1999, Höjdestrand was already familiar with the city having volunteered earlier in one of the soup kitchens and visited other organisations, and she returned to the site on a couple of occasions up until 2003. She met with about one hundred people on a more or less regular basis and knew 'something valuable' about some two hundred persons. Of course with some she developed closer relationships, including her main guide from the Moscow station, and we are introduced by name to about two dozen of her informants, whose stories appear throughout the book.

Svetlana Stephenson (2006) has already written about Russian homelessness with 'displacement' and 'waste' being at the core of her book about Moscow's *bomzhi*. However, *Needed by Nobody* is written in a different way: whereas Stephenson used in-depth interviews and covert observation, Höjdestrand challenges what she observed hanging out at the railway station with the way her informants talk about their daily lives.

Højdestrand admits that fieldwork dilemmas could fill a separate volume. Throughout the book she generally keeps behind the scenes, thus avoiding the 'heroism of the author' (Geertz, 1988). She describes the incoherence of her field sites, problems of getting individual interviews and how questions not relating to an immediate context met with 'a mountain of silence towering up before her'. Höjdestrand managed to address some vital questions without forcing the mainstream methodology on her informants. She was not quick to call people her 'friends' and successfully juggled the roles in which the informants cast her, the 'Swedish *korrespondent*', both distancing herself from and engaging in their lives.

The major research issue explored by the author is the theme of 'not neededness'. The key question that emerged from the way Russian homeless people tended to speak about themselves concerned how people manipulate and negotiate their position to retain 'humanness'. *Nikomu ne nuzhen* (needed by nobody) and *chelovek* (human) are words that are both recurrently used by homeless people themselves as well as persistent themes of the book.

The six main chapters cover a range of perspectives on homelessness. Højdestrand begins with structural transition, or the chaos, *bardak*, of the falling Soviet empire (Chapter 1), then analyses the world of economics (Chapter 2), the urban landscape (Chapter 3), the informal social networks and families of homeless people (Chapter 4) and relationships among the homeless people (Chapter 5). The book closes with a chapter on degradation and death (Chapter 6).

As in other countries, in Russia a 'homeless person' (*bomzh*) has both a statutory meaning as well as a very emotionally loaded popular meaning. A (street) homeless person is associated with physical degradation and alcoholism, but also with deterioration of morality, laziness and an unwillingness to work; he or she is a figure that arouses a mixture of disgust and compassion. Legally *bomzh* (which is an acronym for *bez opredelennogo mesta zhitel'stva*, 'without a specific place of residence') is a person lacking compulsory registration at an address (*propiska*). However, in the first chapter, Højdestrand departs from this legal definition and extensively presents and explains the consequences of the Soviet *propiska* system.

In Soviet times, lacking such a registration was in itself a criminal offence. The state's inflated surveillance system resulted in specific geographical segregation restricting registration in some major cities and made *bomzhi* illegal aliens in their own country. Also crucial to the understanding of *propiska* is its connection to the prison system. Persons released from prisons were, and remain, one of the populations most likely to become homeless. Along with persons hospitalised for more than six months, ex-prisoners were (without exception until 1995) not only deprived of the right to their dwelling and *propiska*, but also could be required to settle at least 100 kilometres away from their home city. The systems of *detdomy* (orphanages) and *maloletki* (youth prisons), together with the criminalisation of vagrancy and 'parasitism' further contributed to a vicious cycle of homelessness among certain underprivileged groups. The registration system also had far-reaching implications for migrant workers who were not able to legalise their stay in major cities and who were often housed in substandard *obshchezhitia* (dormitories).

As well as the *propiska* system this first chapter names other 'structural causes' of homelessness. First, the real estate market, in its infancy in the 1990s, did not have established regulations, being built on trust rather than formal contracts. This meant that a lot of people were cheated and lost their registration – and subse-

quently their homes. Second, there was and is a lack of low-cost or municipal housing, which, along with privatisation of the infamous *kommunalki* (collective dwellings), greatly diminishes the possibility of obtaining cheap accommodation.

The second chapter looks at the world of labour and economy among St Petersburg's 'street regulars'. In public opinion, homelessness is associated with individual laziness. An important distinction is thus made by the street regulars themselves between those who work and those who do not, the former being able to distance themselves from the 'typical *bomzhi*' who are presumed not to want to work and who live *na khaliavu* (at the expense of others). Højdestrand claims that homeless people 'deal with objects and tasks that others do not want' and therefore uses the term 'refuse economy', vitally distinguishing this from an 'illegal economy', since in Russia the economy as a whole is 'much too infused by officially unsanctioned activities'. However, the 'refuse economy' by definition consists of informal practices. The chapter focuses on small-scale 'shady' or 'off the books' activities that street regulars engage in such as stealing, scavenging, odd jobs, prostitution and/or begging.

Street regulars also depend on charity to a certain extent. Shelters and soup kitchens were scarce in St Petersburg in the 1990s, and those that existed were overcrowded, inadequately resourced and plagued with allegedly dishonest staff. But Højdestrand depicts how soup kitchens were much more than just places to get food. They were gathering places that enabled the street regulars to keep up social networks, exchange information and/or swap items. Apart from constantly looking for 'real jobs', where they were especially vulnerable to exploitation, rough sleepers in St Petersburg engaged in other strategies, and Højdestrand describes in detail the development of 'self invented micro-entrepreneurship'. The most profitable opportunities, she writes, were at Moscow railway station, which provided plenty of opportunities to collect deposit bottles and other valuable discarded items, and allowed for self-created jobs such as keeping the tables around grocery kiosks clean. These activities largely depended on good relations with the kiosk proprietor. The rationale here was that the homeless person was relieving someone else, for instance *provodnik* (car caretaker), from tedious tasks such as cleaning railroad wagons. Other jobs included washing cars at traffic lights, loading and unloading trucks and running errands for local store owners, all for small monetary or in-kind payments.

For most station regulars, not all of them homeless, alcohol was both a means and an end of the 'refuse economy'. It involved both work opportunities (collecting bottles, cleaning tables) and also spending and socialising practices such as panhandling from, or sharing drinks with, drunken travellers. Højdestrand not only describes the cheap alcohol substitutes that the *bomzhi* use, but also illustrates how communal drinking creates relationships that imply brotherhood, unity and

community – the crucial informal networking that homeless people depend on. Alcohol also transforms ‘potentially threatening outsiders into perfectly enjoyable human beings’, helps fight boredom and is a prerequisite for hope.

One final aspect of ‘refuse economics’ links this theme to the third chapter on urban space. Höjdestrand points out that slack regulations in the urban space created a wide range of different income strategies; street regulars used the ‘refuse space’, which, unlike ‘prime space’ with formal or informal control, provided possibilities for informal or illicit use.

With regard to urban space, Höjdestrand offers a more dynamic description. In Soviet times, although vagrancy was criminalised, there was plenty of refuse space that persons on the margins of society could utilise for their own purposes. Capitalism, however, allows for less and less refuse space. As a result, ‘undesired’ people are being physically removed from prime space. The same process has been observed in cities worldwide, but what is especially interesting about St Petersburg is that the process is being called ‘europeisation’; the Russian equivalent of gentrification. It was only in the follow-up to her main fieldwork that Höjdestrand saw the actual changes to the Moscow station. The building and its surroundings have been cleaned and renovated. The waiting hall, where one could spend time, including at night, for a symbolic price, had been closed for renovation and the price considerably increased. The transformation has also altered commercial space such as the characteristic kiosks, which have disappeared taking with them the most obvious self-invented micro-entrepreneurship opportunities that some of Höjdestrand’s informants relied upon.

‘Refuse space’ included the indoor sleeping places that her informants used, such as attics, unused back stairwells (or the top landings of stairwells), basements, broom cupboards (the storage room of a *dvornik*, street cleaner) and the station’s washrooms. Finding and using such spaces also relied on good relations.

The next two chapters focus on relationships. Höjdestrand points out an important division in the lives of Eastern Europeans: the split between the private and public spheres. The private safety net consisting of *svoi*, one’s family and friends, was crucial to survival during the Soviet times. However, the respondents in this study overwhelmingly lacked close family and friends, with family members either dead or unable to help. Apart from some networks that were literally in the process of disappearing, the capacity of ones’ family and friends to provide help has also diminished in the post-Soviet situation. In the popular stereotype, however, it was the *bomzhi* who failed to keep up their relationships with friends and relatives, usually by not fulfilling mutual obligations. Those who migrated or served a sentence had a very small network to begin with, and convicts and former *detdomy* inmates

constitute a large portion of the author's informants. Finally, domestic conflicts, especially in the case of poverty and cramped living situations, emerged frequently as part of their life stories.

The fifth chapter describes relationships among the homeless people. Højdestrand argues that this social world was 'as shallow, unreliable and callous as it was generous, caring and inclusive'. 'Makeshiftness' and the unpredictability of arrangements made most relationships, whether it was sharing a sleeping place or a bottle, short-lived. Friendships were not really possible among *bomzhi*, who were as likely to steal from each other as support each other in need. Relationships with impoverished *domashnie* (persons who had accommodation) were often based on balanced reciprocity, where a place to sleep was exchanged for cash or more frequently for food or drink. Exchanges among station regulars on the other hand could be described as constituting general reciprocity. Sharing occurred without any apparent expectation of an immediate counter-gift; such helpfulness was a source of pride. Højdestrand further explains that in a world of involuntary coexistence (at the station) this mutual help was a way to make relationships tolerable, and transgression of the mutual helpfulness norm meant breaking the relationship altogether.

Chapter 6 comes back to the central question of the book. Here, the theme of retaining humanness is looked at in its most excruciating form: the body and ultimately the end of life. Maintaining one's appearance is an arduous task for rough sleepers, yet caring for personal hygiene shows one's capacity to withstand the destructive impact of homelessness. *Opustit'sia* (letting oneself go) means giving up, passivity and losing self-respect and humanness. Men and women alike lose some battles; their teeth may rot and their faces may be bloated by their alcohol consumption, tuberculosis or lice, but as long as they keep fighting to retain their health they remain human. Adapting to homelessness therefore means not accepting everything that street life brings, but balancing circumstances with self-respect. Looking decent was especially difficult for Højdestrand's female informants, who wanted to look feminine. Yet gender was not really an issue among street regulars as the fact of their homelessness annihilated almost all individual differences. Højdestrand ends this chapter with a powerful image; looking at photographs of unidentified *bomzhi* bodies in the police archive, the total anonymity of death struck her: 'This is the face of homelessness to me'.

In writing about distrust, theft and alcohol binges, Højdestrand faces the danger of reproducing common stereotypes. As Mitchell Duneier warns, 'one should not rely too greatly on ethnography for an enlightened image' (1992, p.142). *Needed by Nobody* does not shatter stereotypes of street homeless people, but neither is Højdestrand quick to generalise or judge. She is not trying to prove anything when she writes about the humanness of the *bomzhi*, and she is not seeking to convince

the reader that they are human. Rather, she is looking for explanations of a world that consists of many different elements and of generic stories being told over and over again; a world where stealing is the companion of generosity, and where the truth is sometimes of no value at all. In her candid treatment of bodily matters she is as straightforward as Patrick Declerck's *Les Naufrages*.

No policy questions or recommendations are addressed in the book and in this sense *Needed by Nobody* is an example of 'classical' ethnography. Unfortunately, however, there is a lapse of ten years between the main fieldwork and this publication, and it remains a pity that this longer time frame was not used to provide a more thoroughly updated picture of the situation. The world of Moscow station in St Petersburg as described in the book is long gone, but questions remain unanswered. What happened to those people whose livelihood depended on the refuse space around and within the station? In the epilogue of the concluding chapter Højdestrand writes that she has lost track of most of people she worked with in 1999, and we are left with a couple of follow-up stories. But what about other homeless people in today's St Petersburg?

The description of the *propiska* legal framework in the first chapter is particularly confusing as it is often not clear which era the author is referring to; *propiska* was abolished in post-Soviet Russia but there is still a registration system (unofficially also called *propiska*) and not indicating a place of residence in one's internal passport is considered an administrative offence. It is the Soviet system that Højdestrand outlines in the first chapter, such that the legal situation during the fieldwork and afterwards is a little unclear; for instance writing about former convicts, she says that 'most formal ordinances' concerning the criminalisation of vagrancy 'were abolished' during her fieldwork.

Højdestrand mentions only briefly that the more recent attempts to prevent homelessness are mostly due to economical capital rather than administrative obedience. In privatised communal dwellings where registration according to sanitary norms does not apply, *propiska* became a commodity and internal migration (and immigration from neighbouring countries) largely takes place outside the registration system. On the other hand some constraints of the former system remain, for instance in the private rental market landlords are likely not to register tenants, not only because this allows them to avoid taxation, but also because they fear that they may otherwise never be able to evict the tenant. The introduction of this 'structural' and legal framework makes the reader immediately wonder how the *propiska* system functions now. Has the real estate market in Russia grown to be more reliable? How did the privatisation of housing stock and housing policy in Russia evolve? What effect did it have on homelessness?

*Needed by Nobody* is a well-written text; the language is vivid, but at the same time detailed and precise. Højdestrand neatly balances the use of Russian words in the English text, a daunting task. The book is careful not to enforce English translations that obscure actual meaning, and the author retains the uniqueness of the language used by her informants.

I read *Needed by Nobody* as a book on homelessness as well as on a time of transition and on the condition of Russian society as a whole. After all, Højdestrand shows how the station regulars shared the economic, social and discursive space with the rest of society, how they engaged in the same survival strategies, depended on good relations and were as likely as anyone else to be disoriented and confused by the new order.

The world of Højdestrand's informants was one of unpredictability, mistrust and constant 'makeshiftness', as she calls it. Just like the literal waste they were dealing with (making a living out of discarded objects in rejected spaces, performing unwanted tasks), they were being cast out of society and were referred to as 'human waste', 'leftovers', and 'dirt'. They were obliged to negotiate their 'neededness', social belonging and pertinence to the human race. *Bomzhi* used different criteria to assess their 'humanness'. Their criteria were not based on social background or on skills that were of little use in their situation, on good health, which they lacked, or on feminine or masculine performance, but on something almost out of grasp, a sense that Højdestrand has captured admirably in the book.

This 'humanness' was encapsulated, in my opinion, in a unique combination of perseverance and resignation in the way that *bomzhi* treated 'this life' and talked about themselves. The Russian soul, *dusha*, appears several times in the book and in people's stories along with the concepts of 'humanness' and 'neededness'. It is the depth of the concept of *dusha* – which embraces the metaphysical part of existence referred to by *bomzhi* when talking about 'this life' – that enabled them to prove their 'humanness' and 'belonging'. Russian *dusha* is 'a concept widely shared by Americans and Western Europeans' (Pesmen, 2000, p.4) and this ethnography is therefore about 'humanness' on a global level, and not only that of Russian rough sleepers.

