CHAPTER 5

The Hidden Homeless – From Bio-Politics to Popular Culture in Contemporary Japanese Society166

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Since its inception, mobile telephony and all it ensues has gained attention due to the massive impact it has had on the organization of daily life as well as on popular and youth cultures. However, the phenomenon is more complex than many perceive. There are other contemporary socio-political issues at stake around the mobile telephone, especially in relevant social formations among younger people in different cultures. This paper focuses on one specific phenomenon in Japanese society which the media have termed the “hidden homeless.” The phenomenon represents an ontological problem in relevant social formations among younger people in the networked system of labour.

Hidden Homeless

Jobless and homeless persons, for various reasons, have to (or, in some cases, have chosen to) live in mostly self-built, mobile shelters made of cardboard boxes and containing only the bare necessities for urban survival. Images of these shelters – surprising in their extremity – have been presented in media around the world. The mobility implied here, the central concern of my discussion, is not only on the level of a kind of bricolage survival in improvised shelters as found in earlier decades and the topic of a famous 1973 novel by Abe Kobo, Hako otoko (The Box Man).167 Today, in order to regain access to jobs or to maintain contact with society, box dwellers have to rely on and strive for access to mobile phones and other contemporary network media. Using the notions of “dividuals” by Deleuze and “dispositive” by Agamben to reflect the “hidden homeless”, this paper attempts to explore the ambivalent space opened up by their encounter with the mobile telephone, and to question what kind of bio-economic and biopolitical effects are resulting from the micro-coordination of society.

166 This is a reworked essay which was published in L.Fitzsimmons and J.A: Lent (eds) Asian Popular Culture in Transition, pp. 97–107, Routledge: London and New York, 2013.
This term, hidden homeless addresses those impoverished members of society who are rendered invisible, a contemporary socio-political problem affecting especially the youth in Japanese society. In March 2007, the issue was even brought before the National Diet Committee. The hidden homeless are, literally, those who cannot be recognized as homeless by their appearance – they are neatly dressed and carry mobile phones, sometimes PCs and portable music devices as well. However, in many cases, they are employed on a day-to-day basis – but cannot earn enough money to pay the rent for a flat on a regular basis. They usually combine different places to stay, such as their friends’ flats, or 24-hour spots such as Internet cafes, McDonald’s restaurants, and saunas. Because of this, they are also called “Net Café Refugees” or “McRefugees.”

The hidden homeless became particularly noticeable after the Japanese government, under the Koizumi/Takenaka Cabinet, diminished the legal regulations for employers in 1999 and permitted production industries to hire short-term temporary workers through mediated agencies in 2003 in order to stimulate the Japanese economy and decrease the official number of jobless. At first, this spectacular strategy seemed to work – on the surface level of statistics. According to Prime Minister Abe Shinzo in his first cabinet, six hundred thousands more people found jobs, and the percentage of jobless dropped to less than four percent. However, the government’s policy was more beneficial to big corporations and companies. It led to full-time employment being transformed to cheaper contract-based work, and even to a large amount of day-to-day employment with no legal insurance for the employed whatsoever. Government data show that the average number of non-permanent workers rose to 17.3 million by March 31, 2007. This was up nineteen percent compared to five years earlier and more than fifty percent compared to a decade before. Nearly a million workers have to live their lives on day-to-day employment.

Inaba Tsuyoshi, a representative of MOYAI Independent Life Support Center, a non-profit organization working to support the homeless, warned about the significant changes among the homeless as early as 2004, when he commented

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168 According to the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, a refugee is “a person who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of their nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.” See also Abe, F., and K. Outsu. “Working Poor, Net Café Refugees and their Invisible Condition.” Yomiuri Shinbun, November 7, 2007.


170 Ibid. 8.