

**Jennifer Utrata. *Women Without Men: Single Mothers and Family Change in the New Russia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015. 269 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Paper.**

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As the relationship between the citizen and the state has shifted since the dissolution of the USSR – and, indeed, had fluctuated dramatically during the Soviet period as well – definitions of the citizen, the family, and the mother have also undergone significant and sometimes unpredictable changes. There has been a pronounced trend toward single motherhood in Russia for several decades, reaching a crescendo in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Through extensive research, fieldwork, and interviews, Jennifer Utrata’s exhaustive and detailed portrait of the many personal, interpersonal, social, ideological, and political dynamics of single motherhood explores these post-Soviet fluctuations and their implications for individuals and families in the rapidly evolving landscape of market capitalism and neoliberalism.

Utrata uses the frame of the “matrifocal family” (as opposed to the matriarchal) in order to clarify that while Russian society may look matriarchal, it is actually still staunchly patriarchal. Within this frame, she weaves together many complicated dynamics – the question of what exactly constitutes “single motherhood” when the help of *babushki*, temporary unmarried partnerships, and present but non-participatory husbands blur the lines; the intertwined problems of alcoholism, infidelity, and private violence; and beliefs about marriage, divorce, children, abortion, and single motherhood as they fluctuated from the middle to late-Soviet period and beyond. Although many of these dynamics pre-dated and then survived the dissolution of the USSR, they were transformed and sometimes upended by larger political and social changes. Utrata describes the situation of single mothers in the late-Soviet period as approximately inverse to the situation of single mothers in the New Russia – the former had economic stability and more state support but a low social status and little freedom, while the latter face little stigma and enjoy more freedom and choice, but grapple with economic instability and undependable state support. Single mothers in the New Russia, Utrata writes, are “ubiquitous to the point of near invisibility” (59), and hence are seldom the subject of concerted study; for this reason, her contribution is both unique and timely, as the position of single mothers offers not only a perspective on mothering, but on shifting ideologies of gender, interdependence, and political economy amidst a still-transitioning state and society.

One particularly clear and useful frame that Utrata establishes to guide her research and inquiry is the question of why Russian single mothers are not more focused on their material hardships; they are, she finds, studiously dismissive of the substantial difficulties that arise amidst pervasive economic uncertainty. Pronatalist policies and rhetoric in Russia still present having children as a public duty, but the particular manner in which women go about this is now seen as a private choice; following the rules of the capitalist playbook, this relegates domestic labor to an increasingly devalued position as financial success becomes the standard gauge of doing well. This success, however, is often elusive in a destabilized and competitive economy, and so Russian single mothers adopt what Utrata refers to as “practical realism” – in this, self-reliance becomes a sort of mandated cultural code with which to navigate new neoliberal ideologies, and

the informal rules and nature of this self-reliance are meant to inoculate women against dwelling on their material difficulties. Utrata dissects this practical realism, exploring the factors that may deprioritize these particular hardships in women's own narratives of their lives and the tools with which they forge ahead in a landscape where not only markets, but personal struggles, have been privatized. Positive thinking and unflagging strength, cynicism about both men and the state, active and disciplined ambition, and always keeping one's options open are the four foundations of practical realism, and single mothers discipline themselves and others to adhere to these tenets. In interviews with married mothers, Utrata discovers perhaps another significant reason that single mothers may be dismissive of their material shortfalls: these shortfalls are preferable to unhappy partnerships, and in many cases are easier, practically and emotionally, to navigate.

One great strength of Utrata's book is that she speaks to populations adjacent to single mothers as well, engaging with grandmothers caring for their adult daughters' offspring, married mothers, and fathers. This work embeds her study of single motherhood in a larger landscape of transforming gender ideologies and gender relations. It also reveals that both men and women, regardless of age or marital status, share the belief that men are undependable and that women are almost superhumanly strong. Approaching this study from multiple perspectives not only increases the depth and texture of answers to inquiries, but elicits new questions to be asked.

In concluding her study, Utrata rightly states that this picture of single motherhood in Russia may offer analytical tools that can help to change the perception of single motherhood in the United States, where it is often seen as a marker of failure, writing that the Russian case can show us "how discourses and practices still commonly pathologized and treated as aberrational 'minority' phenomena in the United States are normalized and treated as taken-for-granted aspects of family life in the New Russia" (215). In these limited moments of cross-cultural comparison, however, Utrata's analysis falters, likely due to the fact that such comparisons necessarily call for a large degree of nuance in both contexts, and there is simply not the space here to examine the intricacies of American single motherhood, and particularly African American single motherhood, which Utrata mentions briefly on several occasions. Single motherhood is certainly pathologized in the U.S., but much of this relates to the fact that the pathologizing itself is often used as a tool to reinforce white hegemony by presenting single mothers, poverty, and minority communities as indivisible and at odds with the nuclear family ideal (See Elaine Tyler May's "The Family and the State: A Long-Term Political Relationship" for a quick primer on the roots of this politicization of the nuclear family ideal [*Genre* 38 (2005): 353-369]). In several brief mentions of the American context, Utrata does mention race, but shies away from naming or acknowledging the realities of structural racism that skew American perceptions of single motherhood. Utrata is clearly correct in pointing out the potential for productive comparative analysis, and while her book does not claim to offer an exhaustive comparison, even a cursory mention of these two contexts would benefit from explicit acknowledgement of the realities of structural racism and their effects on the perception of single motherhood in the United States. Utrata's text shines when it focuses tightly on the Russian context and the micropolitics of everyday life; these quick forays outside of that context are the only moments that a nuanced analysis recedes.

As a study of single motherhood and a panorama of family life and gender relations in contemporary Russia, Utrata's study is presently unmatched. The intimacy of the fieldwork and interviews and the sharp critical analysis of research and results come together to create a gripping and layered narrative of personal, social, and political transition, and readers across multiple disciplines will benefit from not only the content, but from Utrata's style and

methodology. This exploration offers important insights for not only Russian cultural studies, but for feminist theory (particularly material feminisms) and the sociology of the family.