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How is Homelessness?

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"What do we do now?

Vladimir: While waiting. *Estragon*: While waiting. [Silence] *V*: We could do our exercises. *E*: Our movements. *V*: Our elevations. *E*: Our relaxations. *V*: Our elongations. *E*: Our relaxations. *V*: To warm us up. *E*: To calm us down. *V*: Off we go"

(Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts*, Act 2)

Framing Homelessness

In the last forty years there has been a proliferation of data and studies on what can be called, in a Foucauldian way, the "economy of homelessness" – resulting in the "knowledge of all the processes related to population in its larger sense" (Foucault, 2000, pp.216-217). Research has been undertaken on the most disparate topics, ranging from the causes of homelessness, and gender differences amongst homeless people, to very specific accounts on the housing stock, or, for instance, the health and mental conditions of homeless and vagrant individuals. However, despite the variety of topics and contributions, it is possible to recognise a commonality in the approaches adopted in studying homelessness: Namely that homeless people are often "framed" *a-priori*, hence prior to the investigation of this or that aspect of their life. This framing takes place on at least two levels.

First, homeless people are framed by canonical definitions of who they are; "*the* poor"; "*the* drunk"; "*the* addict"; "*the* dispossessed"; and so on. Second, they are framed by means of rigid theoretical frameworks that, although supposedly developed to enhance our understanding of the homeless phenomenon, often lead to classifications, compartmentalisation, and reification – to analytical abstractions. Studying a social phenomenon (like homelessness and vagrancy) on the basis of these framings is problematic for at least three reasons. First, because it does not allow one to take into consideration the nuances of the people framed in the definition. If, for instance, I take-for-granted that homeless people are "the poor", and

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hence I also take-for-granted the bare notion of *poverty*, my study (and my ideas) will be shaped by that basic pre-conception. If I start from a strict economical understanding of poverty (like many institutions have done for decades) I won't be looking at the emotional dimensions of "the poor", or at their wishes and desires. Despite all my efforts and my ability to mix methodological approaches, I will never be able to see the nuanced details that exceed and escape the definition of poverty that I have relied upon. To frame and to define are, hence, interconnected – and not neutral. They are an exercise of power, if you want: I decide *what*, I define *who,* and I set apart all the things/events/materials that do not belong to that definition. This is mostly unavoidable – what I can manage is the degree by which I choose to define/frame something or someone.

Second, framings are not only problematic because they may obscure important details, but because they stick in the social imaginary and they are hard to remove. *Vagrancy* is connoted in negative terms because of the accumulation of discourses, practices, and symbolic values that have strengthened *a* particular (stigmatising) definition of this practice. Let's open The Oxford Dictionary of English:

Vagrancy |ˈveɪgr(ə)nsi|; noun [mass noun]; the state of living as a vagrant;

Homelessness: *a descent into vagrancy and drug abuse*.

Terms like "descent" and "drug abuse" are not neutral. They codify what vagrancy is under a particularly negative light: You *descent* there (ascent: to heaven; descent: to hell), and the given consequence is that you become a drug abuser. Social "realities", like homelessness and vagrancy, are always defined by means of symbolic values, discourses and practices. But definitions, as a form of discourse, are in turn reinforcing the perception of that social reality. It is like a never-ending, relational, circle where everything you do (and everything you say) has a consequence. To put it simply, definitions and framings are not neutral and the way we talk about something is, in the end, going to affect both the phenomenon and our understanding of it.

Third, these framings are relevant for reasons that encompass academic or social debate; that's because they are translated into the politics enacted to face/combat/arrest/confront the phenomena in question. Urban policies on homelessness and vagrancy are indeed written and enacted on the basis of academic researches and the social imaginary. The consequence is that policies often reflect the limit stated above: Being constructed around frames that reduce, rather than unfold, complexity, they are not usually able to deal with the specificity of each case. And this is the most positive instance – we all know the uncountable occurrences in which policies have been implemented not to face the causes, and the effects, of homelessness, but to eradicate homeless subjects themselves (usually wiping them out of the inner city).

Homeless People and the City

To sum up, traditionally homelessness and vagrancy have been studied and understood starting from problematic framings and definitions, which have consequences for the way policies are conceived and enacted. But how may it be possible to move forward? If discourses, practices and symbolic values are the agents that make up social research and imaginary, they should most obviously become our starting point. However, changing them is not easy. Take for instance the fact that nowadays, if we want to be politically correct, we use the terminology "waste collector", instead of the more prosaic "rubbish man", to identify someone employed to collect and remove refuse from the street. The change follows an increased attention paid to avoiding detrimental terminologies when it comes to the identifications of particular jobs, or groups of people, in order to reduce the social stigmatisation surrounding them. Having said this, waste collection is still largely seen as low-skilled labour, often regarded as the less appealing job that the market can offer. This is because "waste collector" is not only a term, but it is first and foremost a set of poorly paid practices that involve dealing with rubbish, getting dirty, inhaling terrible smells, and so on, which all have a negative connotations to the vast majority of us. The overall symbolic values attached to waste collection are therefore mostly negative, like with homelessness and vagrancy. It seems, in the end, that we are back to square one. Can we find a way to better understand these phenomena, in order to re-imagine them and the policies attached to them?

A starting point may be stopping to question "what" homelessness, vagrancy, and waste collection are – in a sense, stopping to look for a definition, for an explanation, for a new terminology – and moving toward a different kind of question. Not *what*, but *how*. Instead of re-naming, or better defining, what rubbish men (and women) are, we should look at how they are: How they do what they do; how they speak about what they do; how they think what they think; etc. Looking within their practices, and the relations that they have with their own work, will throw a new light also on what they are. That's because we will be able to see things previously unseen; to let people speak for themselves; and to acknowledge the role of factors like emotions, or the rise of unexpected events, in the daily life of each individual. The same is true with homeless and vagrant people. The thing that strikes me most about canonical approaches to homelessness is their inability to really grasp, and understand, the relationships that take place between homeless people and *the city*. Urban homelessness, as well as vagrancy, is co-constituted with the urban fabric; sidewalks; shelters; soup kitchens; public parks; markets; benches; trains; buses; cafes; pubs; public policies; weather; schedules; dust; rust; syringes; lights; fires; shit; empty boxes; trees; etc. This is so obvious it has almost been forgotten. We are so focused on talking about what homelessness is, and how to "solve" it, that we are missing an understanding of *how* homelessness is. There are, of course,

excellent exceptions and the overall story is much more complex than the one just sketched (see for example, Liebow, 1993; Snow and Anderson, 1993; Veness, 1993; Ruddick, 1996; Desjarlais, 1997; Duneier, 1999; Bonadonna, 2005; Robinson, 2011). However, lots can be said and done in this direction – in the direction of avoiding the framings to get back to the raw core of the matter.

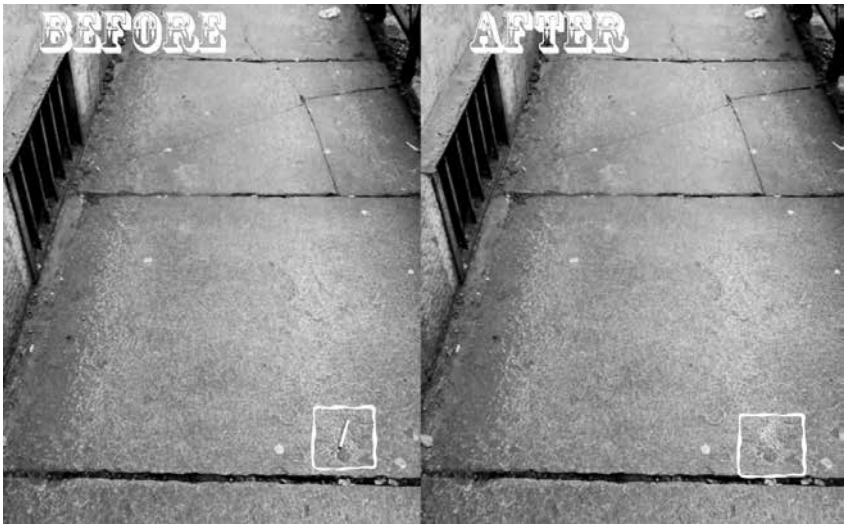
In what follows I want to give three examples taken from ethnographic research I conducted in Turin, Italy (Lancione, 2011). The examples show the importance of *objects*, *codes* and *poetry* in making up *how* homeless people are. Objects make up everyone's lives. They have agencies, in the sense that they have the ability of changing the condition of something; they allow, interrupt, channel, mix, etc. A traffic light allows you to cross, and makes you stop. A coat protects you from the cold. A bench provides you with a place to sit, sleep, and make love. Objects have been mostly forgotten – but they are central (Latour, 2005). The way they are disposed, in a shelter, or a soup kitchen, and their own material quality, contribute towards making a place what it is. Codes are diagrams that govern what you do – not in a strict way, you can escape them and you do create codes too. A law is a basic code. The way you feel that you have to behave, while queuing to access a drop in centre, is a code. The discourse embedded in a service of care (for instance, the religious discourse around "the poor") is another powerful code (Lancione, 2014). They are dispersed in everyday practices, and they are relational (in the sense that they relate with *you*, and *you* relate with them). Poetry is the fluid of life, a fluid of emotions, of unexpected situations, of encounters with the other (*l'autre)*, of power and affects.

More than being a specific *thing*, poetry is a way to looking at reality, of being ready to accept what exceeds the ordinary and the established meaning (and course) of things (in other words, it is all about non-representation)(Anderson and Harrison, 2010). In order to understand how homeless and vagrant people are, it is essential to adopt *poiesis* – a free state of mind, ready to grasp the most extravagant capabilities they may express. Objects, codes, and poetry are not separated: They come and go together, assembling and de-assembling with the human subject (Guattari, 1995). The colloquial vignettes reported below, which introduce these non-static concepts (Deleuze, 1994 [1968]), are short and they do not intend to be exhaustive (more can be said, see Lancione, 2013). They provide, however, an initial ground to grasp the political relevance of approaching homelessness from a relational perspective, taking into account human and non-human; diagrams and codes; poetry, capabilities, and the unexpected – as well as possibly many other things that I'm not able (and I don't want) to enumerate/classify/define.

Objects

Turin, a cold rainy afternoon in November 2009

I am walking on a sidewalk with one of the first homeless people that I've met on the streets. The sidewalk is tiny. I'm walking in front of him, without any particular direction to follow. At one point, still walking, nobody around us, I feel him stopping behind me. I stop too, turn in his direction and ask: "So, what's going on?" "Look", he replies. Between us there is just an empty space, a small portion of sidewalk. "What should I see? There is nothing here", I say looking at him and pointing with my hand at the ground. "You are crazy", he answers. Then he bends down, puts something in his pocket, and tells me: "Let's go now". I look again at the ground, seeing the same empty space as before. We keep on walking without a precise destination.



Source: Post-edited author's photo taken in Turin

The city is full of things. They lie in the street, they beep, they go around driven or not driven – who knows. You collect them and you fill your pockets. You drink from them, and sometimes you shit under them. You select in a trashcan those which are good and which are not. You assemble, de-assemble, mostly unconsciously. It just happens. Some of them open doors – the shelter, the train, the soup kitchen's breakfast. Some others close doors; you are still the owner of a car that you don't possess anymore and *boom*, the social worker tells you that you are not allowed to have your monthly subsidy. Things have the power of buying other things; to make you not freeze; to make you sad, happy, stressed, angry. You barter: A pack of

cigarettes for some money, a jacket for a mobile phone, and so on. You always barter. Look at how you are dressed! Things make you. Your worn out jacket, your all-holes skirt. Like as if you are carrying a cross, they stigmatize you.

Codes

Turin, someday, April 2010

I'm a volunteer. I do good stuff for poor people and I mean it, the idea in itself is good. The free distribution of food. I give butter, someone is approaching.

Homeless person: "Don't you have any other butter?"

Me: "No, I'm sorry"

Homeless person: "That one is expired"

Me: "…"

Homeless person: [Looking at the butter] "…"

Me: "Do you still want one?"

Homeless person: [Still looking at the butter] "Yes"

Source: Author's photo taken at the distribution of alimentary packages at the Sant'Antonio da Padova Church in Turin.

(Note that every single package is market with the label "Prodotto CE" – European Community Product – and that the expiry date was removed from each container – the scratches on the packages indicate the points where the indication was stripped away. The butter was expired but distributed anyway, implying a certain charitable discourse very common in approaching the "poor": The poor as dispossessed, and hence willing to accept anything given to him/her (Lancione, 2014)).

The city is full of codes. They are in things, they carry them. They shape space and one's self; they create the foundation for what you think you are and for what people think of you. "Universal social welfarism", the-same-kind-of-help for everybody, it's one kind of code. "Agape", "Caritas", and all the discourses surrounding the way help is given are other kinds of code. They are discourses on you, about you: A code is a device. After a while you learn how to play the game. But the game plays you too. It makes you move from one Church to another. It makes you accept out of date food. It tells you when you have to wake up, where you are supposed to sleep, how and what you are supposed to eat. You would like people to be more careful about what is important to you, but you don't fit, and the discourse doesn't change. What do you do? We need to challenge the codes. When codes are broken, a line of flight opens and you find another way of doing things. Space moulds, time unfolds, and new things happen. But that's not easy. Codes rarely break alone; they need some kind of help. First, we need to reveal them, and then we need to re-imagine them, re-align. You, homeless fellow, taught me this: We need to be somehow poetic.

Poetry

It could be anywhere, anyhow, now

He brings me to the train station. We are in front of a traffic light now. He smells; I do too. "It's green" I say, "let's cross".

"Nope", he replies. "Red is better".

The cars stop, and he starts to beg.

Source: Author's photo representing Turin's main train station.

The city is filled by poetry. Sometimes it's good, most of the time it's cold, harsh, and vicious. But you already know what I'm talking about. Because you live on the street. You merge with it. Poetry is what you don't expect. It is the unknown that emerges, on a daily basis. It's the thing that lets you down when you are almost there. It's the thing that boosts you up when you are fucking done. It's speed and it's asleep. It's a joke, it's light, it's the manhole where the white rabbit is fighting with rats (and you, among the latter). And the amazing thing is that you learn how to deal with it. That you, maybe unconsciously, know all about poetry. You know how to turn it to your advantage – not always, but most of time, yes-you-do. How to smile in order to get alms: That's a poetry-code-expressed through a smile, a coin, a label stating, "I am hungry". How to remember the entire bus schedules you need to remember in order to get to the shelter in time. How to play, how to speak, how to know when it's time to shut up and run away. You know how to get cheap alcohol, you organise for it. You receive a coat and you sell it on the black market. You move and hide, and then come up with the brilliant idea that makes you passing the night. Poetry is there, in the objects and the codes, and in being so entangled with them you learn how to deal with it. Poetry is bad, poetry is death. It is not the posh, bright, naive thing people think about. But it's also hope, it's how you cope with things and how you reveal capabilities, in doing so, that nobody has noticed.

Openings

The reader may say to me: "Objects, codes, poetry – it's a lot of babble! But how am I supposed to *use* this?" Well… you are not – or not strictly. Talking about objects, codes, and poetry, is not a way of creating another *theory* of homelessness, but a way of better tracing the numerous components that make up how homelessness is. The aim is not to explain – to present one explanation, one model, one logical path to follow – but to trace bits and pieces, and then eventually (and provisionally) try to sew them together (Mol and Law, 1994). The outcome is not and cannot be, once again, *the* solution, or *the* perfect policy. Rather, the outcome is a set of propositions that can inspire both different ways of understanding homelessness and vagrancy and less normative policies to deal with them. As a way of concluding, and opening them up to your reflections, I'll highlight three of them.

First, we need to re-write the discourse surrounding homeless and vagrant people. The exercise, for the reasons stated above, cannot be only terminological. In order words "it is crucial to construct habits of seeing and being that restore an oppositional value system affirming that one can live a life of dignity and integrity in the midst of poverty" (Hooks, 1994: 170). Talking and listening with a very open mind to homeless and vagrant people could be the first thing worth doing. Much can be learned if we will let them talk about their life, through grassroots initiatives or public debate initiated/hosted by local communities and councils.

Second, we need a politics of re-framing the service, germinating from and extending the previous point. To begin with, we need to state the obvious: The quality of the contexts in which homeless people have their relational encounters matter. This quality, however, should be measured not from pre-assumed discursive frameworks but from what we could call the *politics-of-experience*. And the politics-of-experiencing homelessness derives from homeless people encounters with the things and the codes at play in shelters, soup kitchens, drop-in centres and so on. The agency of objects needs to be taken fully into consideration; from the kind of food that gets distributed (which may make people feel abnormal and dissociated); to the way counselling services are provided (are they redundant and, therefore, stressful?); to the settings where services take place (are they respectful of difference, in terms of culture, religion, and personal views?); and so on. The micro-politics of the encounters between homeless people and the services is the arena of challenge (Amin, 2012). Services providers should be open to new, eclectic, ideas. A contamination is necessary: They need to open their doors to external parties, which may help in re-envisioning services from the standpoints enumerated in this text and beyond.

Third, the main challenge that homelessness theory and practice will have to face in the future is how to liberate the capacities and resources that homeless and vagrant people *do* posses. If one observes their life at the street level these capacities become clear; they organise themselves (cognitive abilities); produce artefacts and play (artistic abilities); make jokes and keep on living with very few means, and through deep suffering (coping abilities). They, most of all, are able to turn the street into different sets of opportunities that, although mostly in the informal economy, need to be fully acknowledged. Liberation starts from those things, from the design of low-level and bottom-up policies able to grasp the specificities of each individual. I don't know if homelessness can be ended. What I know is that it could be turned around: Understanding it better will illuminate policies that we still need to imagine, pathways that we could learn to walk differently.

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