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Beyond Homelessness Studies

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Introduction

Why do scholars research homelessness? It seems to me that asking such a question for the ten-year anniversary of the *European Journal of Homelessness (EJH)* is not only provocatively interesting, but also needed. I can imagine two possible broad-ranging replies to this query. On the one hand, most researchers do it because they aim for better – i.e., to have a positive impact on the lives of people facing the trauma of continuous displacement. On the other hand, research on homelessness is done mainly because that is what researchers working on homelessness do. That is to say, homelessness is not only what invests people 'out there' – the displaced, the marginalised, the poor – but it is also a form of knowledge populated by knowledgeable people who do what they do (surveys, observations, analysis, talks, papers and 10-year special issues) because that is what is expected from them. Following this line of thought, one could argue that researching homelessness – like any other body of knowledge (Foucault, 1990) – is a performance crafted between the will to act and specific institutional schemata, where the latter arguably have the power to affect the former.

Such tension – between one's own will and one's institutional status – affects anyone doing research on homelessness, both consciously and unconsciously; the tension is there and cannot be avoided. What can be done, however, is to be reflexive and to learn how it works (see, for instance, The SIGJ2 Writing Collective, 2012). How much of what we do is *critical* of what we do? How much of it proposes *radical alternatives to the canons* of research and practice? How much, instead, ends up reproducing the status quo of our – practitioner and researcher alike – professional establishments? These questions are neither new nor simply answered. As the critical turn in disciplines like Human Geography showed, what drives the aim and practice of doing research is never fully questioned, because in questioning it, one must necessarily question the meaning of one's own profession and status. However, such a questioning is key to social science matters. Only in being

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open about the limits of what is done and in being honest about the entrenchment of disciplinary knowledge, can renewed, impact-oriented and theoretically relevant research approaches be brought to the fore.

Questioning the relevance of research about homelessness in Europe is quintessential to avoiding that research becoming just a rolling self-referential exercise. This is even truer in current times, when the ground sustaining the bare idea of 'research on homelessness in Europe' is shifting at all levels: at the supra-national level, due to the growth of nationalism and sectarian identities, but also at the local level, where the complexification of life at the margins in many of our cities increasingly challenges any definition of what counts as homelessness (Amore *et al.*, 2011). So, if Europe disappears – if not yet nominally, then increasingly so factually – and categories become overthrown by the reality of poverty, of migrant and refugee fluxes, and more, what is left of homelessness studies? Is the field stepping up to the challenges of current times or is it, instead, running behind, trying to catch up? Are, in other words, practitioners and scholars, the readers and makers of the EJH, and the many other organisations involved in the extensive network of homelessness-related 'stuff' in Europe doing enough and well enough to rethink the status quo critically and radically?

The straightforward, provocative and partial answer that I would like to give is '*NO*', we are not doing enough (and perhaps 'enough' is not even the right thing to do). I say so not because I believe that the community of homelessness-related activists in Europe is ill-intentioned, lazy or not motivated. Quite the contrary, indeed: motivation for change is there, but the scope of this change is still unclear and the form it should take, undefined. Without assuming any prominence of research over practice, I believe it is fair to say that research is not doing enough to provide if not guidance, at least orientation. This is where I want to address my short commentary: to the need for research to step up to the challenge of the current times; to the need, therefore, for research to be not only practice-oriented in focus (criticising current practices) but to become a driver of new, disruptive modes of being and doing; to the need for research, in a nutshell, to be bold and innovative because this is required by our current condition – by the cuts in welfare provisions (which will translate not only into fewer services, but fewer research opportunities), by the increased precarity of many forms of dwelling (Vasudevan, 2015), by the violence and expansion of continuous forms of displacement (Robinson, 2011; Desmond, 2012), by the fragility of 'innovative' policies (Baker and Evans, 2016), and by the already mentioned changes in who makes up the increasing numbers of disenfranchised urbanites (Darling, 2016).

In the remaining parts of this commentary, I will use the stimulating papers in this special issue of the EJH to sketch a possible direction for the future of homelessness studies and practice in Europe. Such a direction will be – unavoidably for a qualitative, post-structuralist and relatively naïve ethnographer like the author – quite partial and limited. It will also, however, be a starting point, hopefully to generate discussion with, and further provocation from the readers of this journal.

Towards Critical Homelessness Studies?

The *European Journal of Homelessness* is the golden standard for homelessness study and practice in Europe. Through its pages and its conferences, practitioners and scholars meet to showcase, discuss, provoke, criticise and challenge their actions. The breadth and richness of many of the contributions published in this journal are signs of the interest that homelessness gives rise to in the old continent. That same wealth of knowledge is, however, characterised by a number of worrying limitations. In his beautiful, rich and much-needed paper on the trajectory of homelessness studies in the US and Europe, Nicholas Pleace has correctly pointed out that current research faces a number of risks. He identifies two, with which I very much agree: the assumptive, namely the risk of research taking for granted what homelessness is; and the 'cultural gravity', namely the risk of focusing too much on individual experiences of homelessness without linking those back to structural factors and broader contexts. The list could, however, be longer. Although Pleace does not frame it as such, in his contribution he correctly spells out at least one other risk for homelessness research in Europe: the fact that most of it is 'policy-driven', related to the evaluation of this or that programme, often on very small scales and with little interaction with broader debates and agendas.

Beside these, three more challenges can be identified. First, there is the risk of homelessness research being done almost in separation from current debates in the social sciences and humanities. It seems to me that research on homelessness in Europe is still too self-referential and out-of-sync with the latest advancements in social thought and theory, and that, arguably, it is currently not able to contribute to those debates in any meaningful manner (Neale, 1997). Secondly, research on homelessness – as I noted in the introduction – still very much takes a responsive, inert approach rather than a proactive one. Despite the engagement that many scholars have with governments and institutions at a variety of levels, the most common modus operandi is that of the consultancy – responding to a pre-determined need – rather than the co-constitution of ideas, agendas and practices. Thirdly, current research seems to follow a positivist quest for quantitative data that seems to lose track of the limitations of big numbers and quantification, perhaps driven by the request from policy-makers for 'serious' and 'reliable' information.

These six risks compose a spectrum of challenges that, if taken seriously, could provide food for debate and thought for years to come. How can a field of study overcome future risks of it being assumptive, relativist, policy-driven, self-referential, inert and potentially positivist? Fortunately, the contributions in this special issue offer some reflections on most of these concerns. To me, there are three key suggestions that emerge from this special issue, all of which go in the direction of more self-aware and critical homelessness research in Europe.

The first suggestion comes from the detailed contribution of Lars Benjaminsen and Marcus Knutagård, in which they analyse the cases of Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Norway. Their contribution clearly shows two quintessential aspects that a critical approach to homelessness studies in Europe needs to have at its core. First, and unsurprisingly, the fact that context matters, even more so when one wants to critically assess the national policies and approaches of countries that – for some reason or another – are usually conflated as part of the same cultural-political system. What Benjaminsen and Knutagård have done for the Nordic countries could and should be applied to countries of the east and the south of Europe, which are all too often equated in their pitfalls, while their individual specificities are not sufficiently investigated. Secondly, their contribution shows how structural forces and political orientations lead to very different results in homelessness policies and practices, even in those cases where the context outwardly appears to be the same. The risks of assumption and relativism can, as their contribution shows, be averted through specific attention to contextual dynamics and a critical reading of the nitty-gritty of policy will and policy-making.

The second suggestion concerns a critical approach to data. If, as Pleace reminds us, "gaps in data mean gaps in understanding", the 'porosity' of data itself should never be forgotten. With this term, I mean to highlight the fact that any kind of data is always malleable and prone to instrumentality. This is true both for qualitative data and, despite the general positivist attitude I have mentioned, for quantitative measurements. As Dennis Culhane correctly points out in his contribution, if statistics and fine-grained quantitative data are needed more than ever for better allocation of scarce available resources, those calculations are meaningless – and even *dangerous* – when undertaken a-critically and when sold as 'objective' means to achieving 'better' political ends. At the risk of stating the obvious, there is nothing objective about numbers and there is nothing particularly progressive about 'counting' homeless people without other, more nuanced aspects being taken into consideration, and these can only be grasped through painstaking qualitative engagements. Moreover, as Herault and Johnson in their contribution demonstrate in their analysis of the Australian 'Journeys Home', data is porous also because its effectiveness depends on factors that transcend data itself (like the centrality of policy-makers in the Australian case). The risks of positivism and of being enclosed

in policy-driven research could therefore be challenged by homelessness scholarship that is clear about the limits and scope of its 'science'; the science is there, but in terms of practical knowledge rather than *techné* (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Flyvbjerg *et al.*, 2012).

Last but not least, as an urban ethnographer I can only agree with Pleace when he identifies the need for homelessness scholarship in Europe to engage more (and better) with careful accounts of its people and spaces (ethno-graphy). In that regard, we have arguably a long way to go if we compare our scholarship to the US, but this is a path that, given the aforementioned importance of contextual dynamics and the limits of big data, should be followed as a matter of priority. Good ethnography – namely that which is able to connect local dynamics with broader issues and structures – requires, however, years of effort and engagement. It requires, moreover, an intellectual curiosity and interdisciplinarity that homelessness scholarship in Europe seems to lack. In this regard, the contribution of Vassilis Arapoglou is a welcome attempt to bring the debate on policy mobility, assemblage-of-learning and austerity into the realm of homelessness scholarship. This should be done more and more convincingly in the future to combat the risks of self-referentialism and inertia, as well as to inspire young researchers to go beyond the usual surveys and limited semi-structured interviews, and to engage with in-depth, theoretically-informed and methodologically inspiring fieldwork.

A More Radical Way Forward

The critical approach to homelessness studies arising from the contributions in this special issue would be, to use the terminology from my introduction, 'enough' to spark some fruitful debate and to re-orient research (and perhaps practice) priorities. As Pleace notes in his contribution, this is exactly where the EJH is heading with this special issue and with other related efforts. I also state in the introduction, however, that doing 'enough' may not even be the right thing to do at this point. This is simply because it may be too late for these debates to be meaningful for the here and now. Radical practice and theory-based changes are needed to engage actively with the scale of current challenges in homelessness in Europe.

The change needed is one that can bring homelessness research closer to its people – whether homeless people, practitioners, activists or others – in ways that are relevant for them and the conditions they experience. Arguably, however, such relevance is not automatically achieved when researchers respond to particular demands – the consultancy and policy-driven approach – but it may come through more elaborate and daring agendas. In what follows, I sketch one possibility. To be clear, and at the risk of repeating myself, the aim of this reflection is not to re-invent

the wheel of homelessness studies in Europe, but to make it spin in a different direction: one that will hopefully make it more relevant, more open and better equipped to engage with the challenges of the current times. I will offer hints in three chief areas: epistemology, methodology and theory.

Epistemology of practice and engagement

If one images a spectrum of possibilities, academic work oscillates between pure theoretical speculation on one end and pure applied research on the other. Arguably, however, it is only at the junction of the two ends where meaningful social science can be produced – one able both to elicit new reflections and inspire new practices. To achieve such an end, however, academics need to step out of their comfort zone and actively pursue meaningful lateral relationships with their non-academic partners. This is, once again, different from a simple contractual agreement, where the layperson contracts the expert scholar to deliver the 'truth' about something. As feminist scholarships has pointed out, it is delusional to think that the *researcher* and the *researched* are two separate entities that can be maintained as such via the objective means of *research* (Katz, 1994; Haraway, 1988; Butler, 1999). In reality – as many of us working with practitioners, homeless people and local authorities know – the relationship between 'us' and 'others' is always *constitutive* – that is, it always produces relationships of power, knowledge and meaning, even when we do not acknowledge it as being so. As Rose (1997, p.316) puts it:

> Following Butler, and Gibson-Graham, there is no clear landscape of social positions to be charted by an all-seeing analyst; neither is there a conscious agent, whether researcher or researched, simply waiting to be reflected in a research project. Instead, researcher, researched and research make each other; research and selves are 'interactive texts'.

Following this line of thought, it becomes clear that the way we approach the *constitutive* act of research – i.e., how we go about our epistemology – is quite significant in affecting the meaning and form that our research will take. This could be empowering, horizontal, crafted out of meaningful relationships with our partners; or it could be insignificant – unable to leave any sign of its relevance besides adding another line to one's publications list. To re-orient homelessness scholarship in Europe toward the first kind of epistemology means to reflect on how we go about doing what we do. It means, in other words, asking ourselves the question with which I started this article: *Why do we do what we do*? But not only that: it also means acting on that question and its answers, since simple reflexivity won't go too far in changing established practice.

One way to go about such active reflection would be to embrace a more activist-oriented approach to research. Such an approach would be oriented both to the production of grounded social theory and to instigating progressive change. Following a recent contribution by Derickson and Routledge (2015, p.6), one could define research-activism as a political ethos guiding ideas and practices that are concerned with an "attempt to find, generate, and resource potential rather than only provide intellectual critique" as well as "to contribute to practices that are aimed at social transformation rather than merely the production of knowledge or the solving of local problems". Research-activism is not, in this sense, a set of methodologies but an inclination, an epistemology, toward the field and its participants (researchers and researched alike).

The literature provides plenty of examples related to an activist-oriented approach, including Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Mason, 2015) and Solidarity Action Research (SAR) (The Autonomous Geographies Collective, 2010), as well as certain expressions of auto-ethnography from 'below' (Reed-Danahay, 1997). These are all activist-oriented approaches, with both limits and opportunities (Pain and Francis, 2003). What unites these approaches is quite simple and it is, once again, more about orientation and sensibility than anything else. As Kindon (2016, p.352) puts it in her basic introduction to Participatory Action Research, research-activism is a matter of 'attitudes': from the patronising and compliant "Work with me, I know how to help" to the facilitative, based around an ethos of co-learning, "What does this mean for you? How might we do research together? How can I support you to change your situation?". Besides the labour needed to actively produce constitutive relationships with our non-academic partners – which requires specific effort from our side to dismantle established modus operandi – research-activism requires open practices of co-working and co-reflection. The researcher moves from being the expert to being a pro-active member of a wider community of change:

> These methods and techniques emphasize shared learning (researcher and researched group), shared knowledge, and flexible yet structured collaborative analysis […]. They embody the process of transformative reflexivity in which both researcher and researched group reflect on their (mis)understandings and negotiate the meanings of information generated together (Kindon, 2016, p.355).

Methodologies of creativeness

In a recent article (Lancione, 2016b), I argue that in order to move towards meaningful constitutive relationships, academics need to 'translate' their research practices and make those open to the 'other'. Such 'translation' is not a one-way process, in which the researcher-translator does all the work (again, in patronising ways); rather, it is a dialogical performance rooted in the ethos of participatory research. In short, translating is a signpost for all those activities needed to make

research relevant for the people we work with in the here and now. To me, this means both to involve the researched in the makings of the research and, perhaps most importantly, to make the products of research such that they can be used, exploited and turned into relevant artefacts. Translation is relevant for homelessness research in Europe because it can orient scholars to experimentation with new methodologies of engagement and diffusion, bringing them a step closer to the ethos sketched in the previous section.

Writing research papers could be a form of translation, in the sense that their aim is to communicate and engage with broader audiences about a specific set of concerns. However, they only very rarely become translations in the engaging and horizontal sense I have outlined above. Most of the time they are, instead, exclusionary and discourage diffusion because of their academic language and the absurdly high prices of many academic publications. If some characteristics of the EJH mark it as very different to the norm (open-source; clear link with various audiences), the translations I am trying to evoke require perhaps further and even more radical modes of engagement. How can we *really* make our research and its outcomes more open and intelligible?

In my academic work, I argue that the reply to these questions can only be found by bypassing academic practice itself. One way of doing this is through creative methods, namely modes of engagement combining academic, artistic and other non-institutionalised practices. If creative tools have long been used as a means both to collect and analyse field data (Behar and Gordon, 1996), it is only more recently that scholars have been employing them to engage research participants to co-produce and present their findings within and outside academia. A recent example is Marston and De Leeuw's (2013) collection of works, which shows how it is possible to re-invent qualitative findings in various artistic fashions: from fiction-writing and graphic illustration, to performances, music and installations.

However, these kinds of practices are far from being legitimised. There is a long record of scholars who have tried to cross established boundaries to then be accused of naivety, a lack of objectivity and (quite paradoxically) of turning "away from commitments to engaging ordinary people and offering them voice" (Crang, 2005, p.231). The main issue seems to be that academics have not made enough effort to speak other languages, to cross boundaries and to act in new terrains. This is particularly true when it comes to research on 'vulnerable' groups, such as homeless or displaced people. As Cloke *et al.* (2000, p.147) point out, "[r]esearch and writings on 'others' have been produced by, written for and consumed [mainly] by academics".

Creative methodologies can play an important role both in the production and diffusion of knowledge specific to 'vulnerable' people and communities, and in giving 'something back' to them and a wider public. They can comprise the doing

and sharing of narrative writings (Christensen, 2012); ethnographic novels such as the one I wrote to translate my fieldwork with homeless people in Turin, 'Il numero 1' (Lancione, 2016b); participatory video-making and documentaries (Sandercock and Attili, 2012; Governa and Puttilli, 2016); participatory mapping and more. The process through which these forms of engagement can be achieved is what I have referred to as translation; it is the creative process through which new, empowering meaning is created.

To be clear, creative translations are not easy and they always involve both collaboration and conflict. *Per se*, translations are not 'good'; their meaning depends on *how* – through which ethos – they are carried out. If they are grounded in a research-activist framework, translations define something very specific and powerful – the re-assembling of research in contextually relevant ways, where the 'relevant ways' are defined by the researcher and the people being studied. Translation takes place when researcher, researched and artefacts perform and constitute a productive "coming and going in a borderland zone between different modes of action" (Routledge, 1996, p.406), a zone where the researcher is moved by an ethical and political commitment to bridge the gap with the 'other' – to understand their demands and at least partially contribute to their achievement. Homelessness research in Europe could only benefit from playing with creative modes of engagement, not least because of the sheer complexity of the current scenario, which is difficult to grasp by the old methods alone.

Post-categorical theory

In a meeting with practitioners and academics that are members of the network Housing First Italia (as I was myself), I mentioned to a colleague that one could write a novel about the efforts required to introduce new policy in such a fragmented context as Italy. By that, as I explained to her, I meant a novel based on long-term ethnographic research, grounded in analysed events, to be done alongside academic papers in order to engage a wider audience and increase impact (as I did with my ethnographic fiction about homelessness). Her dismissive reply is representative of many I have received – *only* from academics – since I wrote 'Il numero 1': "That would be an easy thing to do". Other colleagues have told me that fiction writing is not 'objective' or 'serious', or that it can't be considered part of 'our job' – all claims that had already been dismissed thirty years ago (see Clifford and Marcus, 1986).[1]

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[1] For more information on my ethnographic novel, see Lancione, 2016a. For more information about the Housing First Italia network, please refer to Consoli *et al.*, 2016 and, on homelessness in Italy more generally, please refer to the brilliant work of Prof. Santinello and his team of community psychologists in Padova, Italy (Santinello and Gaboardi, 2015).

Such a reductionist understanding of what an academic can or cannot do is precisely what I am trying to challenge and, I believe, is precisely what a renewed homelessness scholarship in Europe should firmly reject. As intellectuals, we are all called on to contribute to society in relevant and practical ways, which means that, alongside academic publications, we are also called on to experiment with new forms of knowledge-production and diffusion. If our societies and cities change, as they do, it would be foolish to remain anchored to reductionist notions of what is possible and what is not possible within the realm of our jobs.

Reductionism, however, does not apply only to methodology but also affects theory. As I have mentioned, commenting on Pleace's and Arapoglou's papers, homelessness studies are currently too bounded and auto-referential. The reason one should reach for more is simple: contamination and assemblage have always been the bread and butter of any serious intellectual project. But how can one make homelessness studies more open to external theories and influences? How could a journal called the 'European Journal of *Homelessness*' aspire to speak to people other than homelessness scholars and practitioners? Before concluding, I launch my final two provocations in this sense.

First, we should confront the problem of 'defining' homelessness in the opposite way to what has been done thus far. If homelessness is increasingly harder to define, then we should simply stop defining it. Homelessness should just become synonymous with 'continuous displacement' or a form of it (perhaps in the way Pleace (1998) suggested for 'social exclusion'). In other words, from a bounded taxonomy that defines specific groups, we should move to an open definition focused on processes of experiences, processes of subject formation, and politics (Lancione, 2016a; 2013). The main task would then become to describe those processes in, again, meaningful phronetic ways rather than seeking professional justification and respectability in categorical thinking. To be clearer: if I take myself as example, I would not define myself as a homelessness scholar but as an intellectual interested in matters of continuous displacement – matters that encompass processes that, at the moment, are forcibly enclosed (if accounted for at all) in various 'typologies' of homelessness. The mere fact that policies need (for now) those typologies to work should not stop us from rejecting them and, in doing so, starting to re-invent how policy deals with the social issues we are interested in.

Secondly, and even more pragmatically, the EJH could lead to a renewed wave of homelessness scholarship in Europe by, for instance, openly seeking contributions that do not necessarily fit within the canonical remit of the Journal; engaging more with disciplines that have vibrant intellectual communities (such as Anthropology, Geography and Sociology); organising a broad-ranging, cutting-edge and inter-disciplinary conference on continuous displacement, whether about eviction, rough

sleeping, homelessness at home, refugee 'crises' etc.; and by encouraging the submission of creative pieces from the arts and humanities and beyond – to name just a few. Most importantly, to rethink the ways in which theory is done within the study of homelessness, the EHJ should continue to be a place where debates take place, where alternative views are welcomed and where experimentation is encouraged. The Journal, and its current Editor, have clearly allowed this to happen in the past ten years; if Europe were to lead a change in homelessness research in the future, that would also be thanks to the work done thus far in these pages.

Openings

Arguing that we need to go 'beyond homelessness studies' is a call to revitalise the current state of homelessness studies in Europe and possibly elsewhere. The 'beyond' in this sense is not dismissive of what has been done thus far, but a call to make it more current and relevant for our cities and their most disenfranchised populations. The EJH provide the space to continue working on this because of the network they provide and because – as Pleace reminds us – of the advancements made through the ten years of this journal. In this commentary, I have sketched two possible ways to continue and enhance this work. The first is already taking place; it is about making the study of homelessness more self-critical, more reflexive and open to cross-contamination with other disciplines. The second way is harder and more challenging, since it requires deeper changes at the epistemological, methodological and theoretical level – but it is also perhaps more rewarding and meaningful. What unites the two ways is a need for experimentation, criss-crossing and impact in the here and now. In the end, going 'beyond' the study of homelessness is not about 'a' practice or 'a' change, but about exiting the comfort zone of what we do and moving towards, as they boldly used to write and practice some years ago, "un atteggiamento radicalmente critico" – a radically critical attitude (Basaglia, 1968, p.8).

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