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The Homeless Person a Neo-Liberal Outcaste: Policing the Ever-stricter Insider/outside Divide

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Introduction

If the intention is to understand how homelessness is represented and responded to, experienced and interpreted, formal methods of inquiry are (more or less) readily available. And, if the goal is more limited, for example to review the changing discourse of homelessness, the use of a more informal approach makes good sense.

Pursuing this latter, quite limited aim is the focus of the current essay. Yet, before attempting to do this, it seems right to consider an important prior question, one that needs to be addressed to set the stage for investigating the matter of the shifts that have occurred in the discourse of homelessness: is the *experience* of persons who are homeless in 2007 different to those who were in this situation 25 years ago? Put in a more immediate, a-historical way, the question becomes: "what is it to be homeless?"

One possible response is that — by definition — there is something irreducibly singular and elemental about the experience of homelessness. That is, the essential nature of homelessness makes for such a powerful reality that its essence is stubborn to the circumstances of time and place. Time and place no doubt *nuance* the experience, and the effects, of homelessness yet it is quite arguable that an absence of shelter is impregnable to, and effectively defies, the capacity of any given period to substantially mould, let alone qualitatively transform, what this condition amount to. In so far as one accepts this idea, it follows that a person who was homeless in 1982 has the same experience to someone in 2007 as similarities will far outweigh, will radically transcend, the relevant variations that can be distinguished between these times.

The 'swing' issue here is whether one believes homelessness is now likely to mean something different than it did several decades ago. To some people, and I include myself here, the meaning of a phenomena such as homelessness — how it is personally experienced by its 'participants' and their 'audience', will be constructed in many distinct ways due to the influence of historico-cultural variables. This belief — that the subjective and social experience of homelessness is significantly determined by the characteristics of a given

context — presumes that there is an unavoidable interpenetration between public discourse, an 'input' that is, in part, visible in what is identified as non-contingent, as the received knowledge and accepted common sense in a specific location, and the lived phenomena that persons subjectively experience.

This is not to say that being homeless is capable of an indefinite number of interpretations, that it is 'just one amongst many stories, one that can be re-coded and re-written to amount to any meaning at all.' Certainly, for those that supposedly choose to live outside the city walls — for the *On the Road* life of Jack Kerouac and

the beats, for St Simeon living alone atop his pillar in the desert, in Bruce Chatwin's idealised vision of 'the romantic nomad' — these alternative visions have a positive meaning within a public, albeit alternative, narrative context. This noted, much more generally and as a guiding first principle, it seems far more accurate to expect that being homeless is both a material and a symbolic disaster; that it is akin to the aversive experience of a social ostracism that is compounded by physical malady. To be homeless is, most likely, to be an outcast, to be an unhappy outsider in one's own land. As a material and a symbolic condition, being homeless is to have insult added to injury.



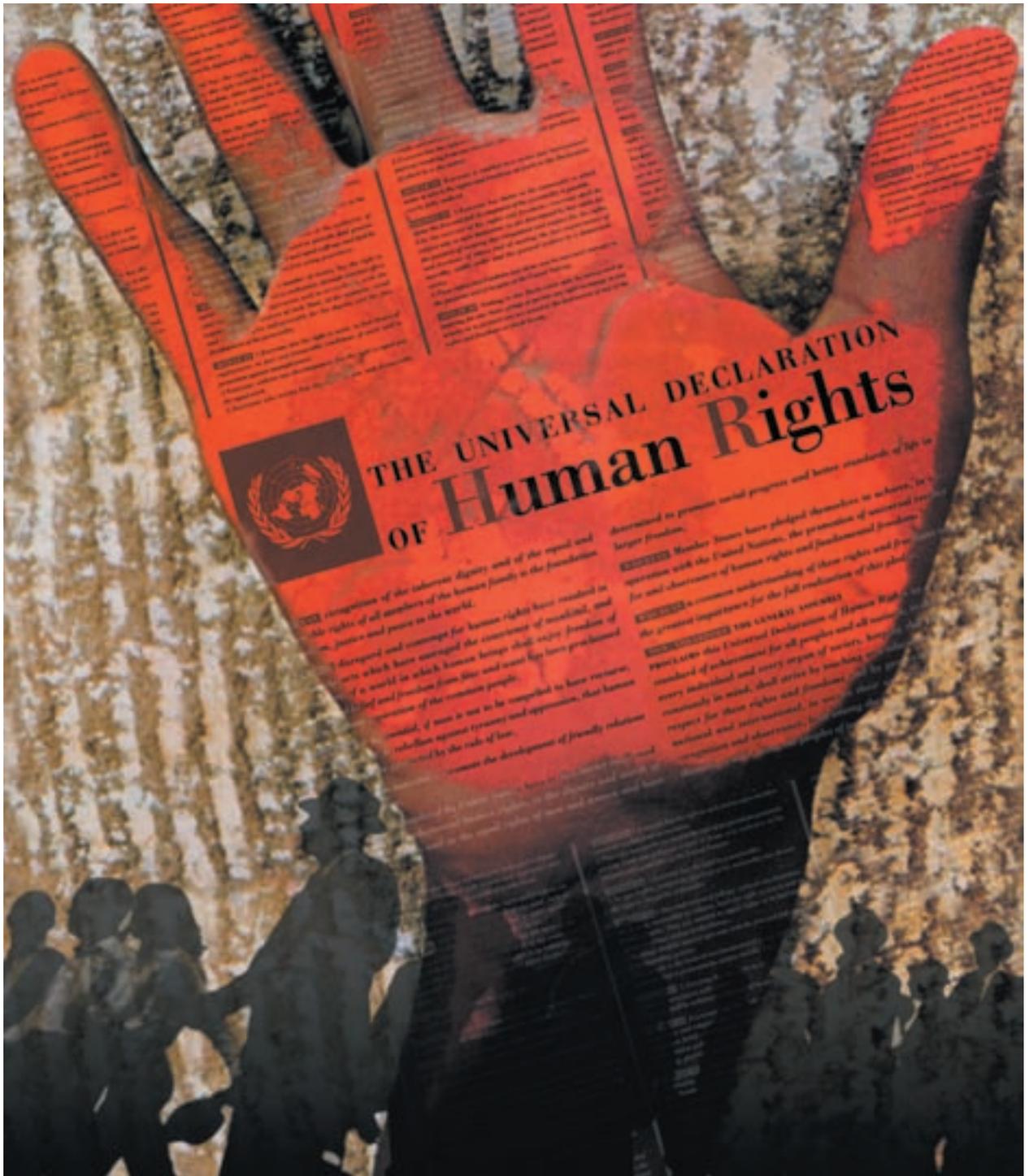
Understood in this way, homelessness is similar to the limbo-like condition of statelessness which characterises the position of the international refugee. They are outsiders, unwanted exiles who do not belong. (Think about the implicit name-calling that goes with the statement: *we shall decide who comes here and under what conditions*). The social outcast is a refugee in their own land. In this sense, homelessness is not just about having, or not having, a roof over one's head. It is not just about housing, shelter or accommodation, or the lack of it. Rather, homelessness is closely allied to those transformative social processes that result in the production of groups that that have been radically other-ed; that individuals, or groups of individuals, can be shunned, can be turned away and endowed with

otherness, therefore involves the workings of deep, often unseen, group dynamics.

That one, or some, are excluded — such as those who have been deliberately locked outside the city walls, or made the pariahs of the nomad herd — is surely a perversion of the essential groupness of humankind: the presence of a quality of belonging is surely a cornerstone of our human identities as complex interdependencies characterise a central common nature. Yet, as much as this is true, and as much as the exclusion of people is violent and uncivilised, examples of social exclusion are so frequent, are so perennial, that this phenomena has to be acknowledged as a consistent practice, albeit one that is not evenly encountered in its frequency or form.

That is, in any social context there always seem to be a 'chosen few' that are scapegoated and expunged. Moreover, those who remain insiders and who 'do' the excluding, often exhibit an atavistic, although often disavowed, violence, an Old Testament-style vengeance, that they direct towards those on the outer; here, those on the outer are transformed from being simply different to being threats, potential dangers or even dangerous enemies. It seems there will always be some who are put in the stocks and pelted with refuse, caste down as sinners, castigated as indigent and unworthy, harried as outlaws, derided as mad — put on the shame file.

If homelessness in this sense is in some way synonymous with exclusion or expulsion, then it is not surprising that the



excluded and the expelled will be held to be responsible for their condition. This turn is decisive as it necessitates that those who are willfully deviant, in this case those that are homeless, deserve their just deserts, their metaphorical and actual punishments.

It is exactly here that a conjunction between the concept of agency and the question of culpability occurs — as it has in all societies, albeit in different forms over thousands of years. We do not currently put people in the stocks or expel them from the travelling herd; rather, we do the same thing in less obvious ways and a close reading of social policy texts in the past twenty or so years clearly describes a pattern of moral scapegoating as the espoused justification for social exclusion. This ancient pattern is now played-out in the dynamics of “blaming the victim” and reaches its apotheosis in the embrace by the political and cultural right of notions of the essential difference between the deserving and the undeserving poor, a distinction that finds its programmatic, nay enlightened, expression in the current policies of mutual obligation.

The meaning of homelessness in the modern “neo-liberal” context is best understood as both personal and social market failure. In the political economy of homelessness, social failure is market failure and failure in the market is due to personal failures. Under mutual obligation the individual must “take responsibility” for their personal and social failure.

Even when arguing that homelessness is essentially a lived experience, and that this singular fact means that a given individual's experience is irreducible to that of any other person's experience, ‘homelessness’ also remains a relatively stable, inter-subjectively reliable category that can be, and is, used to distinguish a ‘class’ of people. With respect to this latter sense, *Parity* has in several editions, focused on the commonalities and the evolutions of how homelessness has been publicly represented. So, if our T1–T2 period is 1987–2007, is it possible to identify shifts in the larger tides of ideology and culture that provide key themes in the conceptual context within which homelessness is now currently interpreted?

The Intensification of the Expectation of Self-Reliance

It is relatively easy to nominate several key changes that have occurred to the larger political fabric over the last several decades. Since the demise of the Soviet empire, there has been no counterpoint to the dominion of ‘market forces’; however raggedly the actual reality of communism may have been between 1917 and (say) 1989, its living presence held in place an alternative philosophy, a critical mirror, to that of a private, competitive mode of social living. And, as this real living example collapsed, it became the accepted orthodoxy that this demise meant there can be no *real* alternative to unbridled, triumphant capitalism. Without

the symbolic check and balance that a perceived alternative provides, without the well-spring that might nourish the dream of co-operation, there has been a steepening sense that each of us, each ordinary citizen, must be self-reliant (Brett and Moran, 2006). Effectively, it has come to be seen as common sense that ‘I only have myself to blame’ if ‘I am not making the most of my life’, if ‘I am not managing’, and so forth.

At its very core this logic represents the process of individualisation, a process that Zygmunt Bauman, Ulrich Beck and many other sociologists have examined. According to Beck, the process of individualisation has been underway for hundreds of years yet, over the last few decades, it has accelerated qualitatively (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). In the last decades, Beck argues that it has intensified to the point that it is now has a runaway momentum: each of us now expect ourselves, as we are expected by our peers and the relevant authorities, to take responsibility for every aspect of our lives. Individualisation has become, to misuse Frederic Jameson's mighty phrase, the cultural logic of capitalism (Jameson, 1991).

So, what has this got to do with homelessness? The notion of individualisation is relevant as it is directly aligned with the intensifyingly ascendant position that is being accorded to the principle of self-reliance and personal autonomy. As is clear in the welfare-to-work debate, the valorisation of self-reliance now configures the schema within which homelessness is constructed and interpreted. Like its sibling ‘unemployment’, homelessness is understood to be correlated with the ‘attribute’ of autonomy. As the famous conservative thinker William F. Buckley (in)famously observed: “There is an inverse relationship between reliance on the state and self-reliance.”

Those that are homeless, it follows to those of a neo-liberal bent, suffer from a failure of self-governance. Not for these is it sensible to see the larger view: that rents are increasing markedly, especially in the better serviced and located suburbs; that housing affordability has never been worse; that the semi, and un-skilled are increasingly worse off in the current labour market. For those who place self-reliance as their god-head, market disciplines are required to assimilate those that are, more or less, willful failures. As McCulloch (2006; 9) noted: “The paranoia best suited to the progress of neo-liberalism discovers the evil it has imputed to the ‘other’ and feels itself required, reluctantly but resolutely, to act out that which it has imputed.”

Conclusion

In so far as self-reliance is assumed to be the sine qua non which enabling human specimens to flourish, those that have responsibility for the laboratory will prescribe this condition. Those that are ‘dependent’, those that lack the skills to be actively self-governing, all who are outsiders, these will need to be brought into the tent: there is no space for diversity, no suite of possible

accommodations, there is only the one logic and it recognises only one choice — you choose to be with, or against, us.

From this position it appears that those who do not conform are, by definition, either crazy or willfully difficult — which is no difference at all as each of these groups is beyond the reach of logic. Thus, a benevolent coercion is not only justified, it is necessary. We *all* have to live in a globalised, competitive world — this is our collective mutual obligation: get with the team; work, consume, economically participate.

That this is a regime of convergence, one that exhibits an “urgency for sameness” (to re-purpose an old phrase of the narrative therapist Michael White) seems highly regrettable. And, to the degree that the cult of self-reliance has become ubiquitous, to the extent that we all accept this as ‘the way it is’, this logic will infiltrate the way homelessness is understood and experienced by the public, by politicians and policy makers and, last but not least, by those that are homeless themselves.

This is not to imply that people who are homeless are incapable of critical reflection or have their inner lives passively sculpted by the passing tides of popular opinion. On the contrary, the dynamics of identity and consciousness are often non-linear, especially for those on the outside looking in. For example, to some who are homeless the street might be a lesser evil, and quite possibly a lesser danger, than the alternative an ‘insider’ assumes is the obviously more sensible option. Yet, to say this is to raise a difficult point in the current ideological climate, one that might be read simplistically as if such a practice represents a kind of ideal, freely choosing process of decision making. This is not the case as to acknowledge that there is a degree of agency and reflectiveness in the decision processes of people who are homeless is not the same as positing that these people choose to be homeless in any meaningful way.

To confer a bogus condition of free-choice upon what is already a circumstance that possesses a primary negative significance, one that involves pragmatically physical as well as deeply symbolic dimensions, is to make the already difficult all the more problematic. Adding a weight of moralistic blame — the ‘they brought this on themselves’ kind of accusation — will only tend to add acid to an already heady mix of stigma and practical suffering. No one would want to do this unless, of course, one was a cheer-leader for, or was trying to surf the waves of, nasty populism. ■

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