

Comments on

EUROPEAN VALUES AND TRENDS IN HOMELESS POLICIES IN EUROPE by Eszter Somogyi and Iván Tosics (Part I) and Joan Smith (Part II). Paper presented at the final conference of CUHP in Brussels 3–4 November 2005

The paper is split in **two very different parts**. The first one, authored and presented by *Esther Somogyi and Ivan Tosics* is an overview over European and EU-related documents, treaties, principles and policies, more than actual values – whatever that means – and a discussion on their direct and indirect consequences for homelessness and housing. The text provides, as far as I can judge, a very good overview on the obstacles and options for a comprehensive European homelessness policy.

Let me start with some reflections on part I, then. It is about efforts to introduce social policies and later on housing policies into the field of responsibility of EU, despite the original principle to leave these issues to the national states. An old saying (actually by Adam Smith) comes to my mind: “whenever capitalists meet, they conspire to form monopolies and control their markets”. In the same way, it seems that whatever principle is laid down by the EU, NGOs and policymakers conspire to circumvent or re-interpret it.

Of special interest is the recent development on policies allowing **state aid to social housing**, where the latter is defined by its aim to “satisfying housing needs which could not be met by the market” (p. 11). The authors claim that in the Netherlands and Sweden the social housing system “was blamed as being overcompensated and thus distorting the market” (p. 12). I do not know about the Dutch situation, but the problem in Sweden is that there is in fact no social housing but only municipal housing companies, often without any ambition to provide housing to people who cannot compete on the private market. On the contrary, many of them explicitly distance themselves from any “social obligation” and might very well refuse housing applicants just because

they are poor, homeless or have a health problem. Hopefully, the Commission's decision will serve as an impetus to re-introduce social objectives for public housing in Sweden.

Another comment to part I relates to the discussion on **using structural funds for renovation or rebuilding of residential estates**. In a way, EU-funding makes up just another level of decision and funding, besides the municipalities and/or the regions and the national states. A problem with funding from a level above the one that is really responsible for a certain kind of provision, is that it will often be in the form of partial funding of time-limited projects. One of the consequences, besides that it is often considered unfair by the losers of the project race, is that there is a possibility to profit on problems. As long as **project funding** is the main source of external financing, there is a potential benefit in keeping level of problems high in certain residential areas in hope for project money. Hence, in Sweden also very wealthy housing companies usually succeed to get project funding for some of their housing stock which is kept deprived. Whenever there is an invitation to apply for project funding, companies, NGOs, authorities – and researchers – conspire to reformulate their interests so that they fit in with the national or European goal.

The Maastricht Treaty is in this paper highlighted only as the opening of a space for reflections on social issues within EU. But the restrictions on the level of budget-deficits for potential members of the Monetary Union also had dramatic consequences on state subventions for housing construction, an indirect effect that probably worsened the development of homelessness in the member countries. Likewise, the emphasis on home-ownership is bound to be a problem from a housing provision perspective, which the authors rightly underline.

The authors conclude (p. 16), **that structural causes of homelessness have gained more focus lately**. However, this simply does not fit with part II of this paper, which deals much more with individual problems than with structural constraints or deficiencies. Neither does this view agree with the authors' own statements on "more comprehensive policies focusing on (1) prevention, (2) early intervention, and (3) complex reintegration programmes" (p. 16-17), or their conclusion that

the “important recognition of the new policy lines were that housing and other social services and often medical services have to be provided for homeless people or people who are at risk of becoming homeless” (p. 17). Integrating social and medical services for the homeless is hardly a way to tackle structural causes but may, as is claimed in part II, rather be a way to institutionally isolate or segregate homeless people from other citizens. On the other hand, if social and medical services in general are insufficient, this is indeed a structural cause of homelessness.

It may be that **“structural” can be understood in different ways.**

With reference to Fitzpatrick et al, the authors count in among the individual causes release from institutions and health problems, family breakdowns and social isolation and problems arising from a lack of education. But there may be reason, first, to add “institutional” causes to the structural and individual ones and, secondly, a discussion is wanted on when and where historical change makes up a structural cause as compared with a frequent individual cause. When neither the housing policy nor the housing market can respond to the fact that families tend to break down, that couples divorce and young people leave home and the fact that mobility and unemployment undermine social networks – is this a structural or an individual factor? And if people become homeless upon leaving institutions or due to mental health problems, is this an individual factor or a problem with the institutions set up to help or provide services for people who are ill or in need for care?

A final comment on part I concerns the possibility to strengthen **the housing rights** on the European level. It appears to me that there are two ways to conceptualise such a right: it can either be an individual right to be enforced against the state, and indirectly against local providers of social housing. And/or it can be an obligation for the state to plan for provision of housing, including production and renovation of existing dwellings, and establishing institutions for allocating housing to those in need. The latter is a natural consequence if housing rights in the first sense is truly respected. On the other hand, if the second kind of rights was maintained, the individual right would be less necessary than it is today. Still it is a mistake to equal housing right with housing access, because if there is a right it is not sufficient to blame its possible violation on the market. This point takes me to part II of the paper.

The second, and longest, part of the paper, *NGO perspectives, ways of working and the European Social Model* by Joan Smith, is completely different from the first part. It is mainly a **compilation of quotations from seminar discussions** between NGOs, municipal and state leaders and the researchers in the team during the research project. I trust that these citations are very well chosen, at least they give a vivid and inspiring image of different views and experiences and the different national contexts involved. There are not many conclusions drawn by the author, though.

In general, it seems that this part of the paper **emphasises individual problems among homeless people**, or rather, the service-providing NGOs are doing this in the seminars. It is in a way very logical. If you feel that the only thing you can possibly influence is the homeless person, then of course obstacles to change will be located as problems “within” that individual.

I will take an example from Sweden. There, we have a lot of **eviction prevention projects** and recently a government investigation on eviction of families with dependent children was finalised. However, the law that enables evictions regardless of the situation of the tenant is never questioned. Eviction prevention projects usually imply that social workers help landlords collect rent arrears or see to that evicted tenants move out smoothly from the dwellings they lose. They never entail that landlords would not take advantage of the power the law provides them with or suggestions to revise the law. And as the local social authorities always try to save money, the only sensible way to prevent eviction from the social worker’s point of view, is to change the tenant into a better rent-payer – indirectly, the problem is again located within the individual threatened by homelessness.

The **bottleneck** problem recurs in the paper. It is obvious among the women’s refuges in the UK, in the hostels in London and in the shelters in Denmark. Wherever the homeless are provided with institutions and emergency hostels, this problem seems to appear. And the reason is obviously that there is insufficient supply of, or access to, regular, affordable housing. The result is that homelessness policies may be ever

so generous and satisfactory, but as long as they do not provide regular housing, they may certainly mitigate the suffering of being homeless, but they will not end it and maybe not even reduce it.

There are some interesting **discussions on the destruction of the Southern European family system** as a possible cause of increased homelessness, especially among young people (e.g., p. 18). However, one could just as well claim **that it is the welfare system that fails**. It is a common conclusion that families adapt to the welfare system of the time and place where they live. For instance, it seems that the number of children women give birth to is correlated to the options of the family to maintain its living standard and of the mothers to keep their employment after having children. If young people only are eligible to unemployment benefits if they live on their own, they might rather be homeless than be a burden to their parents if they are poor. The same goes for children of parents that loose their housing allowance if they let grown-up sons and daughters remain in their home, even if they cannot contribute to the rent.

There is in the paper a discussion on **the relationship between NGOs and the state**, and here there are reasons for warning. When the relationship is too close and friendly, or the NGOs too dependent on the state, they loose their potential as critics of the state policy and as advocates of the homeless, a role that state employed social workers, at least in Sweden, seem to have abolished. Regarding **the definition of homelessness**, there may be a danger that researchers adapt too much to NGOs and the state's "administrative" definitions and categorisations. Of course one must take advantage of statistics that is already collected for administrative reasons, but theory development and comparative research may benefit from more analytical definitions.

Another point concerns street homelessness and the prevailing tendencies in the work with rough-sleepers. Maybe there is a general tendency in the West, at least to **act against visible homelessness**, which may disturb the image of the cities. The motives and reasons for outreach work may very well be ambiguous among policy makers, who both want to help the most destitute and make the city more attractive. The fact that the latter goal is important is indicated by the fact that such

outreach work with street homelessness is sometimes carried out by the police. However, their main goal is to keep order and control or combat crime, not to provide housing or care. This is one feature of what is sometimes called the **criminalisation of homelessness**, but I would suggest that another aspect of this tendency is the eviction, which is the result of a court verdict that somebody does not deserve the dwelling.

The relationship between “**emergency**” and being worst off is the topic of an interesting discussion in the paper. Emergency is associated with hurry, but a homeless person may be sleeping rough for years, says one seminar participant. Again a remark from Sweden: in the winter, it has proven many times to be an emergency situation to sleep rough even if you have done it for years. Homeless people still freeze to death every year.

Section 7 is about the NGO experience of **new homeless groups, namely, young people, women and immigrants**. More than ten years ago, Danish sociologist Margaretha Järvinen wrote a book on the New homeless (the very same groups) but also deconstructed the conception. For instance, she showed that the claim that homeless shelter residents were becoming younger had old traditions and partly stemmed from the fact that *new* shelter residents in general are younger than the average ones, who have been homeless for some years already. It is also customary to describe the homeless population as more troublesome and problem-ridden than before. The growing number of women, on the other hand, may have something to do with having included women’s refuges in the homelessness counts.

A good point was made by Antonio Tosi (p. 16-17), when he concluded one of the seminars with the reflection that “multi-problem” indicates immense problems, although it may only be interrelated problems like having no home and no work, or no dwelling and no family, where one deficit may be explained by the other.

When researchers, NGOs and state representatives meet because they all work with homelessness in order to discuss homelessness, homeless people are of course their focal point and common denominator. Naturally, when issues like social isolation, unemployment, and drug

addiction are highlighted, they are conceptualised as aspects of exactly homelessness. But of course, as is also underlined in the paper, most addicted people, unemployed etc. have somewhere to live. That is, **the danger with expanding the focus to other problems when homelessness is the point of departure** is that other problems will appear to be connected to, maybe even seen as causes of homelessness. The same things happen when projects for the homeless aim at developing their resources, hobbies etc. There is a risk that homeless people are unnecessarily segregated. Ironically, projects aiming at integrating homeless people with “ordinary” people may have the same implication, namely, that homeless people are “different”. This is how constructions are made. Therefore, there is an obvious risk that the more agencies are involved, the more elaborated the idea of the homeless individual – and the less weight will be given to structural factors.