

Homelessness as a process: theoretical approaches and social construction of the question

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The analysis of homelessness may greatly profit by the recent debate on poverty. Even if the theoretical attitudes introduced by recent studies on poverty have had a marked effect on research into homelessness over the last few years, their implications (and the further potential those studies may have for the conceptualization of homelessness and the definition of the theoretical status of the question) have not been fully discussed. This paper will discuss some of these implications starting with what is the central theoretical notion of those introduced by the studies on poverty: the idea of the “process” character of poverty and of the multidimensional nature of the process.

The value of this notion when applied to the study of homelessness may be assessed from two points of view: for the analytical power of the process idea and for the implications of this idea for defining homelessness and the opportunities it offers to the work of classifying and constructing the types of homelessness. From both points of view the process approach may have contradictory consequences: on one side it implies an extension of the question beyond the limits of strict homelessness, with positive consequences on the interpretation (linking homelessness to wider conditions of production of poverty) and on the construction of the problem. On the other side the process idea may support a view of social marginality/exclusion which comes back to the identification of homelessness with those extreme situations which have been at the centre of representations and whose severely limiting policy implications have been stated many times.

1. Issues arising from poverty studies: the advantages of a process approach

The idea that poverty needs to be analysed as a process and as a multidimensional phenomenon, usually underlining the cumulative nature of the process, is a fundamental point of the paradigm of social exclusion (see Mingione 1996, Paugam 1996, Castel 1995, Donzelot 1991).

“Poverty today is better defined as an ongoing process rather than as a fixed state. No definition of social poverty as static can account for the heterogeneous nature of its individual members. Any such definition also avoid the central issue that faces us: the progressive accumulation of difficulties from their origin to their final effects whether we are considering individuals or whole families” [Paugam 1997, 3]. “It is not a question of designating one or various groups characterised by de facto exclusion, but above all of underlining the existence of processes that can lead to these extreme situations” [Paugam 1993, 14].

The idea of the process character of poverty has strongly influenced the research on homelessness. The value of this idea for the analysis of homelessness regards the opportunity to connect homelessness to wider conditions of production of poverty in its various forms. The processes of social vulnerability that have invested the more developed societies in the post-fordist era tell us to see situations of severe poverty and social marginalisation as the result of the broader processes of social fragilisation [Castel 1995]. This means looking at even the extreme cases in terms of wider processes of social vulnerability and reconstructing the processes and chains of factors that led to the condition of social exclusion in which the homeless constitute a paradigm figure.

This provides a basic theoretical reason for broadening the definition. In this perspective understanding “what happens before” in the path to homelessness is of great importance. Furthermore, the attention in terms of defining/classifying factors extends to “what surrounds” the conventional figure of the homeless: which and how many situations that are not part of a literal definition of the homeless are implicitly homeless or at risk of homelessness.

This broadening means increasing the heterogeneity of conditions and figures considered and raises the question of how to connect exclusion with precariousness, the “situation” with the “process” and analyse the factors that precede exclusion itself. For this operation instruments such as risk and social vulnerability [Castel 1995, 13] have been found to be important.

The concept of risk, which has a common root in the notion of social vulnerability, indicates, generally, a phenomenon of intensification of the forms of social hardship and complication of the map of inequalities along a growing range of lines of division. These disparities are increasingly dependent on the interactions of different factors that contribute to the determination of disadvantaged positions. The metaphor of the “risk society” [Beck 1986] underlines the increase in both conditions and occasions of risk and also in the proportion of the population that is exposed to it, showing at the same time the inadequacy of the forms of protection developed by the welfare state in the course of the twentieth century.

Broadening the approach and taking into account the multidimensionality of the process makes it possible to better deal with critical problems in the study of homelessness. It is by introducing these references to the dynamics of poverty that it is possible to understand the processes which allow us to distinguish “normal” from “pathological” homelessness, occasional from recurring or long term homelessness, etc. As a result, it really becomes possible to represent the heterogeneity of the situations of homelessness that is commonly claimed in studies on the subject but easily contradicted by research practices and by generalised definitions of groups which reduce different experiences of homelessness down to “typical” situations [Torri, Tosi 2004]. In Italy for instance in contrast with the accent commonly placed on the heterogeneity of these populations, the images tend to be unified by the persistent reference to the extreme situations, the ‘no abode’, which still overwhelms thinking and social work practices [Tosi 2005].

2. Issues arising from poverty studies: the problems of a process approach

The implications of a process approach can nevertheless be contradictory, for the reasons advanced by the critics of the “social exclusion” paradigm [Soulet 1999; Castel 1997]. In fact many criticisms are aimed precisely at the process idea cultivated in studies of social exclusion. The strong insistence, in the ideology of research into poverty, on the multidimensional nature of the phenomenon and on the cumulative character of the processes at work may introduce principles of generalisation/standardisation which conflict with the principle of a plurality of paths to and figures in poverty – thus contradicting a basic reason for adopting the process approach, denying the heterogeneity implied by the “broadening”.

This standardisation/homogenisation is largely due to the idea of a natural regressive tendency as characterising the processes of impoverishment in general. More specifically, the process approach is often worked out in such a way to support the opinion that the marginalisation process itself “contains” an intrinsically downwards tendency.

This viewpoint clashes with two obvious empirical facts on which many critics of certain uses of the notion of social exclusion rightfully insist. On the one hand there is the fact that there are relative

deprivations, sectoral poverties and poverties that do not involve problems of marginalisation. Different combinations of poverty and social exclusion are possible and different forms of “integrated poverty” are present in various national and regional realities [Gallie 1999; Negri 1990 and 1995]. On the other hand there is the fact - that has attracted the attention of studies on poverty more recently - that many situations of poverty are temporary, poverty is more frequently a brief experience in life which only involves families for limited periods of time [Alcock 2003; Negri and Saraceno 2003].

This is also true for homelessness, for which heterogeneity is a commonly recognised factor. There are cases for which being homeless is a frequent occurrence - even in the literal sense - without this involving marginalisation. Figures suffering from long-lasting/chronic homelessness and cumulative processes are just one of the possibilities and this type of distinction is commonly used in studies on homelessness. The distinction/opposition between the temporary or occasional homeless and the permanent homeless is a common one among researchers. Many insist on the fact that most of the homeless are not long term homeless [Avramov 1995, 79].

The idea of the cumulative character of the processes of marginalisation is common in the research on homelessness and the intrinsic risks of a certain view of the process and multi-dimensional character of poverty can be clearly seen in it; it is an idea which in this field translates into the notion of a “career of poverty”, commonly adopted in order to dynamically observe the case histories of the homeless [see Pichon 2003].

A career of poverty is defined as a regressive life course in which the original causes of deprivation are followed by behaviour which strengthens those causes. This notion is applied to both the process which leads to the streets and to the “homeless career”, the process which starts from the moment of arrival on the streets.

As concerns the paths that lead the homeless to become such, the predominant opinion considers “ending up on the streets” as the final outcome of a progressive path of deteriorating conditions of individual life, punctuated by points of significant breaks with the past along the different dimensions of the career (family, work, health, etc.). There are differences in the way these breaks are conceptualised. There is basically, however, substantial agreement in considering that those events (breaks with the family, experiences of alcoholism or drug addiction, loss of a job etc.) tend to combine accumulatively giving rise to descending trajectories which lead to the life on the streets [Torri, Tosi 2004].

As concerns the homeless career, this tends to coincide with the passages marked by a deteriorating path and progressive loss of re-insertion capacities which starts from the moment of arrival. “The initial causes of deprivation are followed by behaviour which reinforces those causes and new hardship accumulates to produce a situation of unsustainable social exclusion”. “After a certain length of time spent on the streets, the homeless can no longer count on their previous personal resources and capacities to return to society” [Meo 2000, 170-171].

There may be reasons for the idea of a progressive worsening, at least when applied to homeless careers. Permanence on the streets may be interpreted as the history of “successive losses of resources and capacities” which gradually increase vulnerability and “a career may be interpreted as a process of becoming chronic which feeds on itself and in the course of which the states of hardship in the different dimensions of existence interact and progressively consolidate, lowering the capacity to react and reducing the possibilities of recovery” [idem].

Yet, not only getting out from the street is possible, but homelessness may be temporary, and even long or chronicised homeless careers do not justify that idea of “irrecoverability” which so often (even if not explicitly) goes with the idea of poverty as a regressive process.

More clearly groundless is the idea of a progressive path to marginalisation when it is applied to the whole process of marginalisation. The notion of accumulation does not imply “a linear process that would lead individuals from a situation of vulnerability to one of social disaffiliation”. “The appearing of the first difficulties does not mean for all the individuals that they will enter a cumulative process necessarily leading to more and more serious problems” [Paugam 1993, 164, 168; Saraceno 2003]. The cumulateness is quite simply a description of the process, seen in its most extreme final states and the multiplicity of handicaps is the experience that characterises situations of unmistakable marginalisation.

From a theoretical and methodological viewpoint the issue questions the status of the notions of phases and cumulative processes. The notion of phases makes it possible to “order” the elements of a process. Thinking in terms of phases performs two opposing functions: on the one hand it distinguishes and on the other it generalises and standardises. To order the elements of a process in this sense may be important from a practical point of view, because it focuses attention on the role that the availability or shortage of certain policies/services plays in determining the passage from one phase to another, and therefore on the nature of the different policies required. On the other hand it risks relying on a specific model, despite declarations to the contrary which almost every researcher feels obliged to make. In many applications the concept of phases supports precisely that notion that marginalisation/exclusion processes intrinsically contain a downwards tendency. Taken by themselves, the elements of which a phase is composed are just a set of circumstances, which do not necessarily mean that a person passes from one to the other. The majority of persons involved do not pass from one phase to the “next”; and from each phase you can pass to any of the others, even “backwards”. However, the ordering of the elements of a process is made starting from the last phase, from the extreme outcomes of the process. It is a path reconstructed backwards: the “outcome” would reflect on the previous history.

Recently, criticisms of the process idea cultivated in studies of social exclusion have come from the “new dynamic approaches” to poverty (which appeared in Europe in the 1990s, above all in the UK and in Germany). Together with the idea that downward drift processes are in some way inherent to the dynamics of poverty in themselves, they criticise the idea that poverty is normally or frequently a stable condition, and when considered as a whole, these criticisms provide important indications for other critical issues in the study of homelessness: the applicability of the notion of “chronic”, the possibility of escape from long-term homelessness etc. [see Pichon 2003].

The new dynamic approaches use time analyses to see paths in/out of poverty, and how long poor people remained poor and which processes determine movements in or out of this condition.

“Poverty is not inevitably a stable condition; on the contrary, it is more frequently a brief experience in life which only involves families for limited periods of time”. “Most people who start on a path into poverty remain in this condition for only a few years, only very few persons will become chronically poor” [Siza 2003, 87]. This redefinition went hand-in-hand with the accent on the relative “diffusion” of poverty, the opinion that these risks also extend to the middle classes.

According to Leisering [2003] this body of research not only goes against static representations of poverty, but also against the assumptions of previous research studies on poverty which included dynamic elements.

“There are two seemingly contrary uses of the dynamic model: one that generates a more optimistic picture by highlighting the chances of the poor to move out of poverty, and another, pessimistic perspective that emphasises processes of cumulative deprivation and decline. The dynamic perspective is not as new as commonly held, but earlier versions tended to expound the pessimistic view”. Although the research on marginalisation focuses on an analysis of poverty careers, “normally these relate to processes of falling into poverty and of reinforcing the condition of poverty. These concepts therefore also relate to the relatively long-lasting conditions of poverty and fixed groups of poor people. There are certainly some ‘dynamic’ assumptions present, but only in the sense of the deterministic meaning of something inevitable”.

All this would express the idea of a “rule” according to which poverty lasts a long time and takes root in the course of time. The theoretical reasons for this “belief” are: the assumption that poverty careers are reinforced cumulatively and that they can therefore only be pushed downwards; and that the poor are hardly ever conceived of as capable of acting autonomously, as active people who can be protagonists in the construction of their own life course [Leisering 2003, 37; also Damon 2002].

Where to locate the homeless in this framework? An initial possibility is to see homelessness as precisely that area of poverty which best represents conditions of long term poverty affected by cumulative processes and in this sense different from the rest (the majority) of the poor.¹

¹ This possibility is suggested, in the new dynamic approaches, when for example they suggest the methodological reasons that lie behind the belief in the “rule” that poverty is long-lasting and takes root in the course of time. “The groups examined in the studies are not representative of the poor as a whole. Marginalised groups such as the street homeless and persons of no fixed abode are only segments of the population in which long-term poverty is more common”. “The places where the biographical studies were performed, hostels for the street homeless and so on, automatically excluded those who had escaped from poverty before then” [Leisering 2003, 36-37].

This first line is useful because it places attention on relations between “normal” process of poverty and the processes of extreme poverty or homelessness: the specificity of the processes of extreme poverty, the possibility that they are of a different nature. This opinion is present, in part, in frameworks which oppose the notions of social exclusion and poverty. “Permanent poverty is the full expression of the outcome of a process of social exclusion, interpreted as a break between an individual and society, a break in the social tie... Occasional poverty is on the other hand and expression of a more general way of living, of widespread precariousness, of the main ways by which individuals are integrated, not specific processes, but a critical concentration, for long or short periods, of processes that are basically common to all individuals. The two trajectories, that of insecurity and that of exclusion, do not tend to intersect... only a small proportion of those in the broader area of occasional poverty will actually suffer the destiny of exclusion” [Siza 2003, 73-74].

Nevertheless the same distinction can also be applied within the area of homelessness: as already mentioned, figures suffering from long-lasting/chronic homelessness and cumulative processes are just one of the possibilities and this type of distinction is commonly used in studies on homelessness. “Homelessness is a situation that can last a variable length of time, with frequent movements in and out” [INSEE 2003]. The distinction between “persistent”, “recurrent” and “temporary” is obviously a classification that can also be applied to the homeless. The insistence on persistent situations and also on the difficulty of escaping from homelessness, assumes an identification of homelessness with extreme/long-term forms.

3. The process approach and deconstruction

This discussion on the prevailing interpretation of poverty and homelessness touches on the core definitions and collective representations of homelessness: those extreme situations (roofless, *senza dimora*, *sans domicile fixe*, etc.) which have been and still are at the centre of representations and which constitute the area of overlap between the different definitions or the area over which there is no disagreement in the appropriateness for identifying the homeless.

These images can be assessed from two points of view. On the one hand they involve narrow definitions, when the intention is to exhaust the field of homelessness with these extreme situations and to limit it to the “literally homeless”. On the other hand, the focus on extreme situations occurs by associating extreme situations from the viewpoint of (lack of) housing accommodation and extreme hardship from a social point of view: situations of serious social marginalisation (isolation, chronic condition, etc.), which are determining in identifying the homeless as “social figures” (rather than housing exclusion) in the representations.

Together with the possible advantages (the invitation to use targeted and selective intervention and to adopt integrated approaches etc.) the focus on extreme situations also has disadvantages and difficulties from the view point of both interpretation (as we have mentioned) and policies. The idea of a cumulative-regressive character to the processes of impoverishment would strengthen this image. The limiting implications have been stated many times (see for instance Somogyi, Tosics2005).

In Italy the construction *senza dimora* (“no abode”) may have a number of consequences: the material and structural factors of the question risk being neglected, the housing component is undervalued and the non extreme, non “pathological” and non chronic components of homelessness are not given the attention they deserve. Moreover the risk of conveying the idea that the field of homelessness can be “cut out” and separated from the broader processes that produce social and housing exclusion is high. Finally the scarce recognition of homelessness and housing exclusion when this does not involve social marginalisation means that the prospects of reinsertion involving strong/multidimensional intervention or intervention with a heavy dosage of social work support tend to be generalised. While homelessness associated with mere poverty/material needs or with sectoral needs are situations which may require only ‘weak’ intervention or material support” [Tosi 2003].

The notion of process deconstructs this image by stating the reasons for “broadening” the notion and process approaches furnish a guide to deconstruction, they indicate how to broaden it.

Generally the definitions and representations put forward as alternatives to the reduction to rooflessness bring two defining axes into play: (a) the axis narrow vs. broad definition and approach; (b) the axis homelessness as a problem of housing vs. homelessness as a “social” problem or a question of social marginalisation.²

The notion of homelessness in the debate on the subject appears as an intrinsically dual notion: reference is made to a housing dimension, the lack of accommodation, and also to a social dimension, the absence of social relations or ties which in turn would reveal situations of social exclusion or marginalisation. We may assume that the polarisation of the two meanings is constitutive of the problem homelessness [Tosi 1999]. And the debate on poverty invites to take seriously in consideration the dualism of the notion homelessness. Multidimensionality indirectly provides arguments in favour of the idea that any approach to homelessness must run the intrinsic dual character - housing and social - of homelessness.

How broad the concept of homelessness should be is a fundamental issue in the debate on homelessness and a particularly controversial issue, especially when definitions and classifications are attempted. Today the need to extend the question beyond the limits of strict homelessness and to larger populations than the (strictly) homeless is claimed by many. The broadening, also extended to borderline, potential situations or risk situations, may be justified for both theoretical reasons and because of recent changes in the composition and profiles of homelessness³. For both these reasons the tendency to extend definitions of homelessness has been fairly common in recent years, a tendency shared above all by the large NGO's and by researchers [Brousse 2004].

The prevalent way of broadening the approach is in the direction housing, the extension has been made most often in the sense of including the various situations of housing hardship or marginal housing in homelessness or connecting them with it. The issue of broadening the approach has thus become wound up with that of the dualism of the notion of homelessness. There is a certain

² Here we do not take into consideration the axis individual vs. structural. More clearly referring to an ideological alternative, this axis has been dominant in shaping the major ideological perspectives, and the history of the social construction of homelessness has been mainly “the struggle between the proponents of [these] two major ideological perspectives - defining homelessness as a structural problem requiring broad welfare measures as against the state minimalist definition in which homelessness is principally defined as the result of individual fecklessness and irresponsibility - to impose their particular definitions of homelessness” [Jacobs, Kemeny, Manzi 1999, 11). While it is still central in the construction of policies, the axis individual vs. structural has lost part of its importance in determining research strategies.

³ In Italy these changes in the profiles of homelessness have challenged the practices and organisation of services for the homeless and are going perhaps to modify the dominant images, and the bases for the social construction of homelessness in the country. The figure of the no abode which has been at the centre of the debate and policies over the years, is still dominant today. Nevertheless this view has started to lose its credibility in recent years and signs of a possible change and broadening of perceptions and definitions are starting to be seen. One first move in this direction came from the increase in the numbers of homeless immigrants and of immigrants among the homeless, and of immigrants using services for the no abode. Homeless immigrants provide a clear example of a type of homeless that contradicts the prevailing construction of the phenomenon centred on the figure of the no abode. In most cases homelessness among immigrants, often of the “street” variety, results from difficulties arising from being without documents, from difficulty in gaining access to housing markets and from insecure employment. There is a high probability of immigrants suffering housing exclusion without serious elements of marginalisation occurring and an even higher probability of them suffering housing exclusion without those features of personality de-structuring that characterises many no abode. They are simply poor people without a home. For them the lack of housing may be nothing more than a stage on the road to integration in a new society [Tosi 2005].

After this, the perception of an increase in the processes of impoverishment connected with an increase in the material, economic component of poverty risk contributed to the change in the images: a fact that focuses attention on the involvement of “normal” groups in the population in processes of extreme poverty and on paths to impoverishment which pass through “normality”. At a certain point it was realised that these new processes also regard homeless populations. One important consequence was the fading of the ‘rhetoric of the absence of ties’ as an identifying trait of a person on the streets. “There is an increase in those with a ‘normal past’ behind them. In past decades we knew a person of no abode ... who presented a biography marked very strongly by marginalisation and exclusion (absent families, institutionalisation, prison, mental hospital, etc). This figure, which is certainly still present, is no longer prevalent. We observe people on the street marked by profoundly different biographies, who do not have a past history of marginalisation and exclusion, but of a normal life” [Bergamaschi 2004].

identification between the two defining axes: the narrow definitions generally give precedence to the “social” meaning, while the broader definitions more often give priority to the housing dimension.

In reality, even if they may be associated, it is best to maintain the two distinct axes. If it is recognised that the polarisation of meanings is intrinsic to the homelessness issue, it must be assumed that the broadening can (must?) be developed in either direction. Both housing and poverty are legitimate basis for research strategies. But any strategy should comply with the requisites proposed by the poverty paradigm. In any case understanding how the two dimensions, housing and poverty/vulnerability, interrelate should be recognised as a critical point.

In fact, the new debate on poverty provides a number of arguments in favour of an extensive approach to homelessness and at the same time it provides arguments to challenge the option in favour of the extension along the housing axis. The debate also points to the advantages of broadened approaches which take account of the social dimensions of homelessness, according to the methods of analysing poverty, and from the viewpoint of the strategies of analysis, a “social” approach may represent an alternative to the housing approach. The need to manage the dualism implicit in the notion of homelessness nevertheless remains in both cases.

The criteria which goes in the direction of the poverty/social exclusion axis, seems obvious if the point of departure from which the extension of the definition begins, the roofless, is considered. They are to a large extent figures of social exclusion. Broadening the definition in this direction consists of taking into consideration the processes that generate homelessness or which result in histories of homelessness. The procedure is in a certain sense the opposite of that used in the classifications mentioned above which assume that “a good definition should focus on the phenomenon of homelessness but avoid any reference to the reasons for it” [BAWO, cited by Brousse 2004, 41]. The extension in this direction includes everything that is able to explain poverty. Housing factors become one of the possible explanatory dimensions together with others indicated in studies on poverty. And understanding how the two dimensions, housing and poverty/vulnerability, interrelate becomes a critical point.

4. *Social constructions*

These problems cannot be addressed without giving proper recognition to the constructed nature of these categories. Whether the importance of this nature is recognised or not has decisive consequences for the work of definition and classification and for constructing the types of homelessness in which - often with a large scale comparative perspective - a large number of researchers have been involved in these years.

The at times naive character and old fashioned positivist style of many of these attempts is striking. The choice of different approaches is one of research strategies which is only partly justifiable on “objective” grounds. Even more clearly, there are no “objective” reasons and of course no empirical grounds for the use of one definition rather than another: it is rather a question of seeing the implications and the assumptions, the advantages and disadvantages - at the level of interpretation and that of policy construction, of one definition or the other. The diffusion of images which appear non-credible on the level of empirical verification can only be explained by the practical functions of the oppositions identified - to be appraised with reference to the political and public communication processes. The oppositions between narrow and broad definitions, between social and housing, between individual and structural make sense within this game of constructions.⁴

⁴ “The constructivist perspective on the study of social problems [...] treats the dominant definitions of what constitutes a social problem as contested and unstable. [...] Homelessness is a classic example of how the struggle by different vested interests to impose a particular definition of homeless on the policy agenda is critical to the way in which homelessness is treated as a social problem”. “In the constructivist perspective, social problems are seen as being formed by the power of identifiable groups in society to define a certain issue as ‘problem’ that need tackling in a particular kind of way” [Jacobs, Kemeny, Manzi 1999, 11, 13].

The advantages of working on the constructed character of the problem have been stated constantly during the course of the debate on the homeless. It has often been observed that the reference to a common condition of housing, the lack of a home, is not enough to produce a solid concept and runs the risk of unifying heterogeneous problems and situations without due cause. On the other hand the field of homelessness would not exist without this reference and if the figures of social exclusion were thought of without the “home” dimension actually being important in the construction of the problem. This characterisation invites us to consider the problem as one of social construction. The same indication is given by the dualism of the notion: all considerations that are oriented on just one dimension run the risk of being reductive, even if they are possible for specific operations. It is interesting, however, to understand what the implications of choosing one dimension over another are in terms of the treatment of the problem and of the construction of policies. Just as the broadening of the definitions discussed in this paper is a subject that has a completely different effect if questions are asked about the practical implications of adopting narrow as opposed to broad definitions.

Current definitions and images reflect collective attitudes, the organisation of policies and types of welfare regime. The constructions are country specific and reflect these different ingredients, as well as and more than differences in the “reality” of homelessness in different countries.

If a constructivist viewpoint is not adopted it becomes difficult to understand how the same definition can be considered “too restrictive” by some and “too broad” by others (the Eurostat definition: Brousse 2004), and how the same situations can be considered homelessness by some, risk situations by others and yet again “situations that have nothing to do with homelessness” by others, and so on. Certainly there are differences in interpretation behind this: but the socially constructed character is evident if we consider how these differences correlate with national situations and with administrative and professional roles. There is various evidence for this which involves the breadth, the axis and whether or not recourse is made to the notion of risk.

Taking a few sentences at random from the Insee report [Brousse 2004]:

Where social housing is better developed, the definitions of homelessness seem to be broader... housing policy develops its own sphere of action through the definition of the homeless population (21).

In countries where the solution on offer is temporary accommodation rather than housing (France, Italy, Spain, etc.), people at risk of are not longer at risk when temporary accommodation has been offered to them [...]. Until they leave the marital home, women who are the victims of domestic violence are at risk of becoming homeless, but as soon as they have a place in a refuge, they are deemed to be temporary or permanent residents and not homeless” (40).

In the countries where the definition of homelessness is based on criteria associated with housing conditions, policy regarding the homeless is aimed less at providing immediate help and more at facilitating long-term access to accommodation [...][Where the homeless are dealt with by the Ministry of social Affairs [...] the definitions used are generally fairly narrow and imprecise. At best, the homeless are a special category of beneficiaries of social welfare (17-18).

Government administrations and small NGOs both make a distinction between asylum-seekers and the homeless, even though from the point of view of difficulties with access to housing, one may feel they are in similar situations. Public administrations and NGOs also share common ground in their tendency not to consider as homeless those for whom they do not meet to take responsibility, because they will be accommodated either informally by their families or friends etc. [...] or formally by institutions such as prisons or refugee centres (40)

[In the UK] those local authorities whose responsibility is to provide accommodation for the homeless adopt very restrictive definitions in order to minimise the scale of the problem they face. On the other hand, associations that are not under an obligation to house the homeless can allow themselves to use a broader definition (41).

Those specialising in the area of housing use broader categories (41). Organisations supporting the homeless tended to favour broader definitions, while government administrations and statisticians, particularly in the countries of Southern and Eastern Europe recommend more restrictive definitions (42).

The definitions/constructions also imply solutions, methods of intervention and policies. Not only do they have interpretative implications and raise different theoretical problems, as we have seen, they also indicate policy fields: place the problem in the housing field and seek solutions in terms of housing policies or place it in the field of the fight against poverty; recommend multidimensional and

“integrated” intervention or sectoral intervention, etc. - as is obvious these are alternatives that do not make sense if it is intended that they can be generalised.

While the implications of narrow definitions have been fully and clearly stated in the debate [see Tosi 2003], less attention has been paid to the difficulties of adopting broader definitions/conceptualisations and the limitations of some practices involving broader definitions.

As we have seen, the focus on extreme situations (as represented by such categories as the roofless, the ‘no abode’, etc.) raises questions of adequacy from both an empirical viewpoint and that of choice of policy: it includes assumptions of specific effectiveness (for specific targets), inappropriate generalisations (“integrated” approaches for all), a preference for “special housing” and temporary solutions, etc. A combination which is even less acceptable considering the changes in progress, as has been said, in the composition of homeless populations.

The same type of problems are found in reciprocal form, however, in the case of approaches that are broadened and/or centred on the housing dimension. To take up another well known (and obvious) point in the discussion, it is for example clearly absurd to centre intervention for the “no abode” on the housing dimension if this term is used to refer to the conventional figures at the centre of collective representations.

If the viewpoint of the “housing question” is assumed – giving a house to all – the problem is immediately encountered of what it means to meet the housing needs of many persons who constitute the hard inner core of homelessness: the roofless etc. It would seem reasonable then, remaining within categories that are policy relevant, to maintain a distinction often proposed (particularly by those that criticise definitions focused on housing conditions): “the term ‘homeless’ does not simply describe a relationship with housing but a whole range of social problems... it also concerns the break of social ties, isolation and dependence on social services to keep oneself in housing and make a home. Two different groups: those whose problems could be solved if housing was provided for them, and those whose rehousing would not necessarily be the most effective solution” [quoted in Brousse 2004, 34].⁵

⁵ Of course, it is clearly legitimate to work, with a broadened or “extensive” perspective, along either one or the other of the axes – housing or “social”. The problems again concern the way of making the two axes interact when broadening the field. The problem is evident when it is a question of “identifying” the homeless and constructing systems for classifying the homeless. Whatever the definition adopted, the reasons for dualism have an effect on classification.

It can be seen from the problems arising with classification systems constructed with a focus on housing conditions, which are the most commonly used with broad definitions (for instance the classifications proposed by Cnis, Eurostat, Insee, Feantsa). In this case classification is made on the basis of accommodation categories, to some extent embodying social variables into the accommodation categories adopted. In this classification the (strictly) homeless become a type of housing accommodation, located along a continuum of types of accommodation which extends from the strictly homeless to varying degrees of housing exclusion and marginal housing. In this case it is usually assumed, even if it is not conceptually necessary, that there is a continuity between homelessness, housing exclusion, bad housing and housing needs etc.; and – similar to what we have seen for poverty analysis - the notion of risk or similar notions are employed to connect the different “circles”.

The reasons for the inclusion of bad/marginal housing in a homelessness classification scheme are seldom discussed. That the situations are different and that extension of the definition in this direction may be a problem is perhaps indicated by the fact that the definition of the field is of the “additive” type: “homelessness and housing exclusion” (Feantsa), “homelessness and housing deprivation” (Insee).

The justifications most commonly given for these types of broadening use the relations of continuity between the different situations and suggest an interest which lies within a housing treatment of the question, the classification operation being performed in the housing policy area (the classification “is based neither on the causes of deprivation of housing, nor on a description of the behaviour of the homeless, but instead on the criteria usually used to describe housing conditions” [Brousse 2004, 46]). “There is not a homeless/non homeless dichotomy, but a continuum of housing needs” [Williams, quoted in Brousse 2004]. “This definition has the advantage of integrating easily with standard housing classifications, thereby facilitating cross-cutting comparisons between similar situations using one or other of the criteria”. “The advantage of a classification of this kind is that it highlights the boundaries between housing deprivation and very similar housing situations” [Brousse 2004, 46]. “It was decided to develop a set of classifications that described the full range of housing situations, from the most conventional and most stable, to the least secure and least habitable” (p. 2). “Besides reasons such as avoiding stigmatisation and creation of a ‘statistical ghetto’, this has several advantages, in particular it enables to observe and analyse the moves between ‘housing’ and ‘non housing’ and to analyse the housing supply accessible to disadvantaged people” [Clanché 2000].

Application of the method presents problem as soon as the classification is extended beyond strictly homeless conditions and notions of risk are brought into play with the idea of continuity between homelessness and housing poverty. Either resorting to “social” elements renders spurious or at least attenuate the rigour of keeping to a housing criteria or the classification

Thinking in terms of constructions reduces the significance of many attempts at classification, and makes them relative. It therefore also raises question marks over the “objective” reasons for undertaking (costly) attempts at classification, when they are not adequately located within the game of the social construction of the issue of homelessness. Passing from a factual to a constructivist vision in any case shifts the location of the verification and the assessment of the reliability of the operation on another plane. Shifting attention from the objective reasons for definitions and classifications to the policy strategies and policy implications of the various definitions and classifications changes the nature of the operation. For example, as is well known, “extending” the definitions plays the role of giving visibility to categories with the aim of including them in the problem that public policies will have to address. (The case of advocacy definitions is the clearest example, and the “invention” of homelessness itself can be interpreted in this sense: “The category ‘homeless’ makes the phenomenon visible, and constructs it as a problem that can be resolved by public intervention”: Burt, cited in Brousse 2004, 39). In this case affirming continuity or contiguousness between homelessness and bad/marginal housing in a classification scheme forms part of a rhetoric of communication rather than an argument based on the logic behind systematic definitions/classifications.

Advocacy definitions [are], designed to highlight population categories in need, particularly those in inadequate accommodation of whom little is known by government administrations, such as those living with members of their family or living in caravans or substandard accommodation (Brousse 2004, 41).

Existing (hidden) homelessness should be visible to policy makers. [...] beyond rough sleepers, [we need] to include insecure accommodation etc. [Edgar, Meert, Doherty 2004].

To classify, define and establish borderlines is useful work if it is in the game of constructions. No definition/classification may be shared on the basis of some “objective” basis, that is of the “reality” of the homeless condition. Although different national views reflect the specificity of homelessness and poverty in the various different contexts, they reflect differences between the policy framework, and the specificity of the (consolidated or possible) forms of treatment of the question much more. In the end to think in terms of constructions calls into question the current practices adopted to define/classify homelessness and perhaps the ambitions behind the grand comparative (cross-national) designs. The question points to comparability issues: the assumption of equivalence between categories adopted in different contexts (when it is re-defined within a specific national context, the “same” category changes its meaning), raises serious questions over the comparative styles adopted etc.⁶

establishes links between housing and social problems which result to be questionable: for example when specific groups are indicated: immigrants, travellers...; or when the conditions of suffering evoked take account of social relationships such as “living under threat of violence from family”. As has been observed, “being threatened by domestic violence” may increase the probability of becoming homeless, but domestic violence is not a housing variable” [Marpsat 2005].

The point is that it is not possible to say whether a situation is at risk from the housing dimensions alone. Some situations of inadequate or insecure housing may not constitute, as such, a risk of homelessness: no more than does general poverty, regardless of the type of accommodation, while others (for instance, illegal building in Italy) may be more than a risk. If it is then considered that some “situations or characteristics could be identified as linked to a higher probability of homelessness”, it seems clear that the factors that determine risk must be sought in the interaction between various factors (identifiable at micro or structural level) that constitute the processes/risk of exclusion. Briefly, if the extension is along the housing axis of the definition of homelessness, it is difficult to establish under what circumstances there is greater risk of homelessness.

⁶ The comparative style in most attempts at cross-cultural typologies may be related to the theoretical-methodological framework supplied by the positivist tradition. The models for this scientific approach were those of the generalizing social sciences, in Durkheim’s sense, founded on the assumption of universal models of causation (Pickvance 1986). They generated their own comparative method (opposite, for instance, to the “individualizing” approach of the weberian tradition). In urban sociology, between the 1950s and 1960s, comparative research was adopted for pinpointing the regularities and the similarities between the various contexts/urbanization processes (Sjoberg 1960: “social science in general, and sociology in particular, to fulfil the requirements of a science, must seek to isolate the common elements in societies and cultures”).

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