





WHY ARE BEGGARS DESPISED?

It is worth saying something about the social position of beggars, for when one has consorted with them, and found that they are ordinary human beings, one cannot help being struck by the curious attitude that society takes towards them. People seem to feel that there is some essential difference between beggars and ordinary "working" men. They are a race apart - outcasts, like criminals and prostitutes. Working men "work," beggars do not "work"; they are parasites, worthless in their very nature. It is taken for granted that a beggar does not "earn" his living, as a bricklayer or a literary critic "earns" his. He is a mere social excrescence, tolerated because we live in a humane age, but essentially despicable.

Yet if one looks closely one sees that there is no essential difference between a beggar's livelihood and that of numberless respectable people. Beggars do not work, it is said; but, then, what is work? A navy works by swinging a pick. An accountant works by adding up figures. A beggar works by standing out of doors in all weathers and getting varicose veins, chronic bronchitis, etc. It is a trade like any other; quite useless, of course - but, then, many reputable trades are quite useless. And as a social type a beggar compares well with scores of others. He is honest compared with the sellers of most patent medicines, high-minded compared with a Sunday newspaper proprietor, amiable compared with a hire-purchase tout - in short, a parasite, but a fairly harmless parasite. He seldom extracts more than a bare living from the community, and, what should justify him according to our ethical ideas, he pays for it over and over in suffering. I do not think there is anything about a beggar that sets him in a different class from other people, or gives most modern men the right to despise him.

Then the question arises, Why are beggars despised? - for they are despised, universally. I believe it is for the simple reason that they fail to earn a decent living. In practice nobody cares whether work is useful or useless, productive or parasitic; the sole thing demanded is that it shall be profitable. In all the modern talk about energy, efficiency, social service and the rest of it, what meaning is there except "Get money, get it legally, and get a lot of it"? Money has become the grand test of virtue. By this test beggars fail, and for this they are despised. If one could earn even ten pounds a week at begging, it would become a respectable profession immediately.

A beggar, looked at realistically, is simply a businessman, getting his living, like other businessmen, in the way that comes to hand. He has not, more than most modern people, sold his honor; he has merely made the mistake of choosing a trade at which it is impossible to grow rich.

(Down and Out in Paris and London, George Orwell, 1933)



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HOW IS HOMELESSNESS?



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

(Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, 1953)

Objects, codes, and poetry to re-imagine homelessness

by Michele Lancione

Let me kick-off with some friendly advice to my beloved readers. Part of this text is written in "academish". Academish is my way of naming the language that academics (people working and doing research in universities) have developed to talk between themselves. It is like your language, only more complicated. It uses more or less the same words, but usually with different meanings. Essentially, it is all an exercise of meaning: most academics build their careers and success associating new meanings to disused words, or inventing brand new ones. The problem with academish is that it often makes simple things difficult. The cool thing is that sometimes, but only sometimes, it makes complex things slightly more accessible. I hope the latter is going to be the case with this text. If it's not, my advice is don't worry and move on. The fault is in the writer's, not the reader's.

Framing homelessness

In the last forty years there has been a proliferation of data and studies on what can be called, in a foucauldian way, the "economy of homelessness" - hence the "knowledge of all the processes related to population in its larger sense" (Foucault, 2000:216-217). Researches have been undertaken on the most disparate topics, ranging from the causes of homelessness, or the gender differences among homeless people, to very specific accounts on housing stock or, for instance, the health and mental conditions of homeless and vagrants individuals. However, despite the variety of topics and contributions, it is possible to recognise a commonality in the approaches adopted in studying homelessness: namely that homeless people are often "framed" *a-priori*, hence prior to the investigation of this or that aspect of their life. This framing takes place at least at two levels. First, homeless people are framed by canonical definitions of who they are: "the poor"; "the drunk"; "the addicts"; "the dispossessed"; and so on. Second, they are framed by means of rigid theoretical frameworks that, although supposedly developed to enhance our understanding of the homeless phenomenon, often lead to classifications, compartmentalisation, reification - in a word, to analytical abstractions. Studying a social phenomenon (like homelessness and vagrancy) on the basis of these framings is problematic for at least three reasons. First, because it does not allow one to take into consideration the nuances of the people. If, for instance, I take-for-granted that homeless people are "the poor", and hence I also take-for-granted the bare notion of poverty, my study (and my ideas) will be shaped by that basic pre-conception. For instance, if I start from a strict economical



understanding of poverty (like many institutions have done for decades) I won't be looking at the emotional dimensions of "the poor", or at their wishes and desires. Despite all my efforts and my ability to mixing approaches, I will never be able to see the nuanced details that exceeds and escape the definition of poverty on which I rely upon. To frame and to define are, hence, interconnected - and not neutral. They are an exercise of power, if you want: I decide what, I define who, and I set apart all the things/events/materials that do not belong to that definition. This is mostly unavoidable - what I can manage is the degree by which I choose to define/frame something or someone. Second, framings are not only problematic because they may obscure important details, but because they stick in the social imagination and they are hard to remove. Vagrancy is connoted in negative terms because of the accumulation of discourses, practices, and symbolic values that have strengthened a particular (stigmatising) definition of this practice.

Let's open The Oxford Dictionary of English:

vagrancy | ve gr()nsi

noun [mass noun]

the state of living as a vagrant; homelessness: a descent into vagrancy and drug abuse.

Terms like "descent" and "drug abuse" are not neutral. They codify what vagrancy is under a particularly negative light: you descent there (ascent: to heaven; descent: to hell), and the given consequence is that you become a drug abuser. Social "realities", like homelessness and vagrancy, are always defined by means of symbolic values, discourses and practices. But definitions, as a form of discourse, are in turn going to reinforce the perception of that social reality. It is like a never-ending, relational circle where everything you do (and everything you say) has a consequence. To put it simply: definitions and framings aren't neutral and the way we talk about something is, in the end, going to affect both the phenomenon and our understanding of it. Third, these framings are relevant for reasons that encompass academic or social debate: that's because they are translated into the politics enacted to face/combat/arrest/confront the phenomena in question. Urban policies on homelessness and vagrancy are indeed written and enacted on the basis of academic researches and the social imagination. The consequence is that policies often reflect the limit stated above: being constructed around frames that reduce, rather than unfold, complexity, they are not usually able to deal with the specificity of each case. And this is the most positive instance - we all know the uncountable occurrences in which policies have been implemented not to face the causes, and the effects, of homelessness, but to eradicate homeless subjects themselves (usually wiping them out of the inner city).

How is homelessness?

The bottom line of all this academish waffling is simple: traditionally, homelessness and vagrancy have been studied and understood starting from problematic framings and definitions. Despite this generalisation, it is fair to say that canonical understanding of these phenomena had profound repercussion on the way things have been understood, on the knowledge produced, and on the politics enacted on their basis. But how may it be possible to move forward? If discourses, practices and symbolic values are the agents that make up social research and imaginary, they should most obviously become our starting point. However, changing them is not easy. Take for instance the fact that nowadays, if we want to be politically correct, we use the terminology "waste collector", instead of the more prosaic "rubbish man", to identify someone employed to collect and remove refuse from the street. The change follows an increased attention paid to avoiding detrimental terminologies when it comes to the identifications of particular jobs, or group of people, in order to reduce the social stigmatisation surrounding them. Having said this, waste collection is still largely seen as poor-skilled labour, often regarded as the least appealing job that the market can offer. This is because "waste collector" is not only a term, but it is first and foremost a set of poorly paid practices that involve dealing with rubbish, getting dirty, inhaling terrible smells, and so on, which all have a negative connotation to the vast majority of us. The overall symbolic values attached to waste collection are therefore mostly negative, like with homelessness and vagrancy. It seems, in the

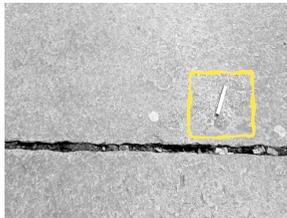
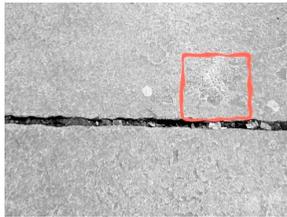


end, that we are back to square one. Can we find a way to better understand these phenomena, in order to re-imagine them and the policies attached to them? A starting point may be stopping to question "what" homelessness, vagrancy, and waste collection are - in a sense, stopping to look for a definition, for an explanation, for a new terminology - and moving toward a different kind of question. Not what, but how. Instead of re-naming, or better defining, what rubbish men (and women) are, we should look at how they are: how they do what they do; how they speak about what they do; how they think what they think etc. Looking within their practices, and the relations that they have with their own work, will throw a new light also on what they are. That's because we will be able to see things previously unseen; to let people speak for themselves; and to acknowledge the role of factors like emotions, or the rise of unexpected events, in the daily life of each individual. The same is with homeless and vagrant people.

The thing that strikes me most about canonical approaches to homelessness is their inability to really grasp, and understand, the relationships that take place between homeless people and the city. Urban homelessness, as well as vagrancy, is co-constituted with the urban fabric - sidewalks, shelters, soup kitchens, public parks, markets, benches, trains, buses, cafes, pubs, public policies, weather, schedules, dust, rust, syringes, lights, fires, shit, empty boxes, trees, etc. The thing is so obvious to become almost forgotten. We are too focused on talking about what homelessness is, and how to "solve" it, that we are missing an understanding of how homelessness is. There are, of course, excellent exceptions and the overall story is much more complex than the one just sketched (Bonadonna, 2005; Desjarlais, 1997; Duneier, 1999; Liebow, 1993; Robinson, 2011; Ruddick, 1996; Snow and Anderson, 1993; Vennes, 1993). However, lots can be said and done in this direction - in the direction of avoiding the framings to get back to raw core of the matter.

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

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



Objects

Turin, a cold rainy afternoon in November 2009

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

The city is full of things. They lay in the street, they beep, they go around driven or not driven - who knows. You collect them and you fill your pockets. You drink, and sometimes you shit under them. You select in a trashcan which are good and which not. You assemble, de-assemble, mostly unconsciously. It just happens. Some of them open doors - the shelter, the train, the Vincenziani's breakfast. Some others close doors: you are still the owner of a car that you don't possess anymore and boom, the social worker tells you that you are not allowed to have your monthly subsidy. Things have the power of buying other things; to prevent you freezing; to make you sad, happy, stressed, angry. You barter: a pack of cigarettes for some money, a jacket for a mobile phone, and so on. You always barter.

Codes

Turin, someday, April 2010

I'm a volunteer. I do good stuff for poor people and I mean it, the idea in itself is good. Free distribution of food. I give butter, someone is approaching. Homeless person: "Don't you have any other butter?" Me: "No, I'm sorry" Homeless person: "That one is expired" Me: "...". Homeless person: [Looking at the butter] "...". Me: "Do you still want one?" Homeless person: [Keeping on looking at the butter] "Yes"

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

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



Poetry

It could be anywhere, anyhow, now.
 He brings me to the train station. We are in front of a traffic light now.
 He smells, I do too. "It's green" I say, "let's cross".
 "Nope", he replies. "Red is better".
 The cars stop, and he starts to beg.
 The city is filled by poetry. Sometimes it's good, most of the time it's cold, harsh, and vicious. But you already know what I'm talking about. Because you live on the street, you merge with it. Poetry is what you don't expect. It is the unknown that emerges, on a daily basis. It's the thing that lets you down when you are almost there. It's the thing that boosts you up when you are fucking done. It's speed and it's asleep. It's a joke, it's light, it's the manhole where the white rabbit is fighting with rats. And the amazing thing is... that you learn how to deal with it. That you, maybe unconsciously, know all about poetry. You know how to turn it at your advantage - not always, but most of time, yes-you-do. How to smile in order to get alms: that's a poetry-code-expressed through a smile, a coin, a label stating, "I am hungry". How to remember the entire bus schedule in order to get in time at the shelter. How to play, how to speak, how to know when it's the time to shut up and run away. You know how to get cheap alcohol, you organise for it. You receive a coat and you sell it at the black market. You move and hide, and then come up with an idea of how to pass the night. Poetry is there, in the objects and the codes, and in being so entangled with them you learn how to deal with it. Poetry is bad, poetry is death. It is not the posh, bright, naive thing people think about. But it's also hope, it's how you cope with things and how you reveal capabilities, in doing so, that nobody has noticed.

Openings

You might tell me: "Objects, codes, poetry - How am I supposed to use this?"
 Well, ... you are not - or not strictly. Talking about objects, codes, and poetry, is not a way of creating another theory of homelessness, but a way of better tracing the numerous components that make up how homelessness is. The aim is not to explain - one explanation, one model, one logical path to follow - but to trace bits and pieces, and then eventually (and provisionally) try to sew them together (Law and Mol, 1994). The outcome is not and cannot be, once again, the solution, or the perfect policy. Rather, the outcome is a set of propositions that can inspire both different ways of understanding homelessness and vagrancy and less normative policies to deal with them. As a way of concluding this, and opening it up to your reflections, I'll highlight three of them. First, we need to re-write the discourse surrounding homeless and vagrant people. The exercises, for the reasons stated above, cannot be only terminological. In other words, "it is crucial to construct habits of seeing and being that restore an oppositional value system affirming that one can live a life of dignity and integrity in the midst of poverty" (Hooks, 1994:170). Talking and listening with a very open mind to homeless and vagrant people could be the first thing worth doing. Lots can be learnt if we let them talk about their life, through grassroots initiative like this journal or public debate initiated/ hosted by local communities and councils. Second, we need a politics of re-framing the service, germinating from and extending the previous point. To begin with, we need to state the obvious: the quality of the contexts in which homeless people have their relational encounters matter. This quality, however, should be measured not from pre-assumed discursive frameworks but from what we could call the politics-of-experience. And the politics-of-experiencing homelessness derives from homeless people encounter with the things and the codes at play in shelters, soup kitchens, drop-in centres and so on. The agency of objects need to be taken fully into consideration: from the kind of food that gets distributed (which may make people feel abnormal and dissociated), to the way counselling services are provided (are they redundant and, therefore, stressful?), to the settings where social services take place (are they respectful of difference, in terms of culture, religion, and personal views?), and so on. The micro-politics of the encounter between homeless people and social services is the arena of challenge (Amin, 2012). Social services providers should be open to new, eclectic, ideas. A contamination is necessary: they need to open their doors to external parties, which may help in re-envisioning services from the standpoints enumerated in this



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

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Short bio

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