Homeless people and the city of abstract machines: Assemblage thinking and the performative approach to homelessness

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The paper focuses on one central point of the 'performative' approach to homelessness that is still inadequately explored by the current literature: the conceptualisation of the relational entanglements between homeless people and the city. The argument is that only through a critical attention to these fluid and more-than-human details will we be able to re-imagine a different politics of homelessness. The paper, engaging with the work of Deleuze and Guattari as well as with critical assemblages thinking, proposes two concepts that are considered to be fundamental in this sense. First, assemblage, as a concept able to render the hybrid constituency of the individual within the city; and second, abstract machines, as a way to take into account the fluidity of power in affecting one's own experience of homelessness. The approach proposed in the paper is illustrated through the presentations of original ethnographic material derived from ten months of ethnographic fieldwork in Turin, Italy. The paper concludes by suggesting that the abstract machine of homelessness can be tackled in at least two ways. First, re-working the institutional assemblages of care that produce stigmatising discourses and deep emotional effects. Second, liberating homeless people's capacities and resources, which are currently poorly accounted by canonical literature and policies.

Key words: homelessness, assemblage, abstract machine, Deleuze and Guattari, Italy, Turin

Introduction

The geographical literature on homelessness has traditionally referred to homeless people 'as a homogenous and largely androgynous group' (DeVerteuil *et al*. 2009a, 658). This is the case of the so-called 'punitive framework approach' adopted by scholars like Davis (1992), Mitchell (1997), Smith (1998) and others. Contrasting this established train of thought, scholars have recently begun to pay more attention to the practices, performances and affects involved in homeless people's lives. Such movement can be traced back to the work of geographers like Veness (1993), Ruddick (1996) and Takahashi (1996), and it has recently become more popular thanks to the work of scholars like Cloke *et al*. (2008 2010), Jocoy and Del Casino (2010), Beazley (2002) and DeVerteuil and colleagues (DeVerteuil 2006; DeVerteuil *et al*. 2009b). Central to these works is an understanding of homelessness 'from within', hence an increased attention to homeless

people's 'performativities [that are] bound up in complex ways with the architecture of the city' (Cloke *et al*. 2010, 62). The aim of these works is not to undermine the relevance of neoliberalism in shaping urban policies, which has always been the trope of previous approaches, but to see how we 'can breathe new life into understandings of the homeless city' (Cloke *et al*. 2008, 242) through a major engagement with homeless people's daily practices and emotions (Del Casino and Jocoy 2008).

The purpose of this paper is to provide some theoretical tenets to strengthen this emerging train of thought, in the hope that more scholars will take it seriously, coalesce into it and add criticism to it. The paper focuses on one central point of the 'performative' approach to homelessness that is still inadequately explored by the current literature, namely the conceptualisation of the relational entanglements between homeless people and the city. Such theorisation is needed because performances are not enacted in a vacuum, but within a mechanosphere where

the encounter between homeless people and the city is framed (Amin 2012). Although the literature has investigated some of these framings, lots can still be said both on their more-than-human nature and relational implications, which I consider to be two obligatory passages to imagining a different politics of homelessness. Taking a critical assemblage thinking perspective (Anderson and McFarlane 2011; Farías 2011; Greenhough 2011; McFarlane 2011a 2011b), as well as relying on Deleuzian-Guattarian philosophy, the paper investigates these framings on the basis of two main theoretical concepts. First, *assemblage*, as a concept able to render the hybrid constituency of the individual within the city; and second, *abstract machines*, as a way to take into account the fluidity of power in affecting one's own experience of homelessness. After the presentation of these concepts, I will move to selected field material aimed at illustrating the argument made in this paper. The material emerged during ten months of intensive ethnographic fieldwork I undertook in Turin, Italy, from September 2009 to June 2010, which involved street observations with homeless individuals, participant observations (and volunteering) in a soup kitchen and a shelter, as well as in-depth interviews with homeless people and practitioners, and collection of secondary data (Lancione 2011).

Assemblages, abstract machines and homelessness

Strictly speaking, it makes no real sense to define what an assemblage *is*, since the concept is devoted to an understanding of *becoming* (Deleuze 1994). Assemblage 'operates not as a static term but as a process of putting together, of arranging and organising the compound of analytical encounters and relations' (Dewsbury 2011, 150; see also McFarlane 2011a). Homeless people, like anyone and anything else, are (becoming) assemblages: they are composed of flesh and bones, thoughts and wishes, which relate, change and move. The 'city' is an assemblage too. Both are assemblages that make that mechanosphere (Amin and Thrift 2002) where homeless people and the city encounter, where homelessness becomes a heterogeneous lived experience, and where the subjectivity of each individual is relationally constituted. Assemblage thinking contests the canonical view of homeless people and the city as two discrete, dichotomised, categories. Homeless people are neither only *subjects who perform* the city (as the 'performative' scholarship has shown), nor only *subjected to the policies* of the city (as the 'punitive approach' tells). In this sense the city is not a backdrop for human actions, nor are homeless people just displaced (or 'harassed', Mitchell 1997) by it, but the two continuously entangle with each other, co-constituting and co-affecting. This has two direct

consequences on the way we approach homelessness. First, the 'heterogeneity of the components leading to the production of subjectivity' (Guattari 1995, 4) needs to be taken fully into consideration. The subject is not seen anymore as the 'disengaged first-person-singular self [. . .], self-reliant for her or his judgements on life, the universe and everything' (Pile and Thrift 1995, 14), but as a fluid and heterogeneous assemblage part of the 'wider ecologies of intelligence' of the urban (Thrift 2005, 469). More research focus is therefore needed to understand the composite more-than-human micro-politics of the social field (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 7), where the subjective experience of homelessness unfolds in the conscious and unconscious entanglements of the self and the city (Anderson and Harrison 2010). Second, as I will argue in the concluding section of this paper, it is only through a critical attention to these relational details that we may be able to re-imagine a different politics of homelessness. I am arguing for a politics not necessarily based on a re-discovery of the 'humanity' of homelessness, like the one proposed by some of the 'performative' scholars (Cloke *et al*. 2008, 260), but fostered by the re-assessment of its more-than-human, fluid and relational becoming.

The process of assembling isn't neutral (Allen 2011). In frequenting a soup kitchen or a shelter, a homeless individual will encounter discourses, practices and artefacts that carry particular relational power (Lancione under review-a under review-b). In seeking a job, in walking the street or in lying down in a public park, other powers will affect how the assemblage-self and the assemblage-city co-constitute. These are not, once again, inescapable constraining powers, nor can they be understood looking only at how the 'singular self' deals with them: power is not good or bad, enabling or disabling. What power does is allow a certain assemblage to take *a* content and *an* expression rather than others, and to regulate the articulations between the two. Content and expression are what Deleuze and Guattari called the 'horizontal axis' associated with any assemblage, and could be *very* simplistically understood as its material/practised and immaterial/discursive parts (Massumi 1992, 12). What is particularly relevant for the argument made here is, however, the 'vertical axis' of assemblages. This is an axis composed both by '*territorial sides*, or reterritorialized sides, which stabilize it, and *cutting edges of deterritorialization*, which carry it away' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 88). In this sense, in the process of assembling one always sees a territorialising force and a deterritorialising potential: here is where power comes to play.[1]

The concept of *abstract machines* can help in grasping how assemblages are articulated in terms of their vertical axis (Massumi 1992, 152). In Guattari's own terms, 'when we speak of abstract machines, by

"abstract" we can also understand "extract" in the sense of extracting' (1995, 35), and what is extracted is just one of the infinite forms that an assemblage can take. In other words,

> the abstract machine functions as an 'immanent cause' which explains the mutually supportive interaction between the forms of content and expression in any given assemblage. (Patton 2000, 57)

In his work on Foucault, Deleuze is quite explicit about what an *abstract machine* is:

> The diagram or abstract machine is the map of relations between forces, a map of destiny, or intensity, which proceeds by primary non-localizable relations and at every moment passes through every point. (Deleuze 1988, 36)

It is a diagrammatic cause, a relational power, without clear design, form or function in nature (Dillon and Lobo-Guerrero 2008), but capable of organising things: 'It is a machine that is almost blind and mute, even though it makes others see and speak' (Deleuze 1988, 34). In this sense, abstract machines are 'always singular keys that open or close an assemblage' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 368). They close it, because they tend to territorialise the assemblage in a certain way; but they can open it too, re-framing that assemblage in different ways. Abstract machines are however not equal to Foucault's diagram because they are 'necessarily "much more" than language' and discourse (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 141). They are a composite map: a map of different forces that for Deleuze are at the same time 'realized, integrated and distinguished in its effect' (1988, 37). In other words, abstract machines (like the capitalistic one) are realised through certain assemblages (e.g. in a factory line), integrated in them (e.g. in the practices and mode of production and consumption), but also distinguished by them (e.g. 'Capitalism', as a general machine detached from that particular factory or practice). Like assemblages, abstract machines are a Deleuzian concept (see conclusions): they can't be still photographed, but they can help in identifying the patterns of power that regulate the movement of assembling/de-assembling of homeless people and the city.

In what follows I identified three abstract machines that are importantly present in the life of homeless people in Turin. Since abstract machines are unformed in matters and nonformal in functions (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 562), the power that they express does not guarantee the same outcome. Sometimes they produce territorialisations, other times they spin assemblages toward a line-of-flight. Looking at them provides insights that can be useful to foster a different politics of homelessness.

The abstract machine of love

Turin is considered the 'City of Social Saints' because of the high number of Catholic figures who have established their activities and institutions to tackle poverty there (Governa and Lancione 2010). In this context, the Catholic notion of the 'Love for the poor' ('Amore per il povero') is a fundamental abstract machine to take into consideration. As I argued elsewhere (Lancione under review-b), the 'Love for the poor' in the Catholic Church is based around the idea that in loving his/her (poor) neighbour one will reach the love of God (and eternal life). This idea arguably lies at the heart of most Catholic social interventionism (Allahyari 2000; Duncan 2008). *Love*, in this context, it is more than *care*: Catholic 'Love for the poor' is the machine that diagrams specific assemblages of care. This analytical distinction helps in questioning both the machine (with its discourses, theologies and traditions) and the associated practices (made of gestures, artefacts and further discourses). *Love*, in other words, cannot be uncritically seen as 'unconditional' (as some 'performative' scholars do; Cloke *et al*. 2010, 99). *Love* is always a *condition*: it is the condition through which *a* particular form and *a* particular content of *care* are abstracted and turned into sets of territorialised assemblages (which relationally affect subjective experiences of homelessness).

The 'Love for the poor' is an abstract machine that designs quite a complex map of assemblages in Turin: all the soup kitchens, clothing distribution points and food distribution in the city are managed by Catholic Faith-Based Organisations (FBOs), as well as a discrete number of shelters and medical centres. These services are given for free to everybody in need, equally designed for anyone, because they represent God's love (which is by definition infinite and the same for everybody). Starting from this premise, when homeless people entangle with these services the abstract machine of the 'Love for the poor' territorialises that encounter in problematic ways. The reason does not lie in a manipulative (or punitive) intention by the FBOs, but in the way the relation is diagrammed/framed. The vignette in Plate 1 shows an example related to the distribution of food. On that occasion I was volunteering and distributing out-of-date butter. The butter was given away because the encounter between the assemblage-Church and the assemblage-homeless was abstracted from the contextualised interaction between the volunteer and the homeless person, to be diagrammed under the spell of the 'Love for the poor'. The interaction 'volunteer/homeless person' is characterised by the personal differences of each subject, and by the deep emotional features of giving/accepting free food. But the abstract machines know nothing of all this: the butter (like many other things) was given despite the

Plate 1   Butter given at the distribution of alimentary packages (note that the expiry date was removed from each container – the scratches on the packages indicate the points where the indication was stripped away)

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'

Source: January 2010, field observation

embarrassment of the volunteer, and regardless of homeless people's feeling of abnormality. Subjective preferences weren't taken into account, because the abstract machines of the 'Love for the poor' diagrammed the practices of care of these FBOs to be equal for everyone, standardised, and based on the assumption that 'the poor' is willing, by definition, to accept everything (even out-of-date food). Encounters like this were common in Turin. The abstract machine of the 'Love for the poor' diagrammed the rules through which services were accessed – using personal identification (ID) cards obtained only after specific meetings with volunteers – and their forms – for instance, in the soup kitchen where I volunteered, every service started with a religious sermon given by one of the nuns in charge, regardless of the fact that the place was frequented by people of different cultural and religious backgrounds. Although these services were (and still are) *fundamental*, it is of pivotal importance to understand how they are framed: the abstract machine governing them was leading homeless people to feel stressed, less than 'normal' and even more stigmatised (and dissociated; Goffman 1990) than the people living and eating out of that machine's spell.

Sometimes the abstract machine of love provided deterritorialisations too. This was most common with the free distribution of secondhand clothes. Homeless people were selling most of the clothes that they had been given by the FBOs on the black market, receiving in return one of the few incomes of their street life. What is interesting to note is that they were deterritorialising the abstract machines of love into a new kind of assemblage, a work – or at least an income – opportunity. In doing so they were showing a particular ability to re-frame both the institutional and the shadow machinery of the street, a point to which I will return later.

The abstract machine of bureaucracy

The second abstract machine concerns the bureaucracy that surrounds obtaining fictional residence in 'Via della Casa Comunale 1'. 'Via della Casa Comunale 1' is a fictional address created for administrative purposes by the City of Turin. In order to becoming fully eligible for the resources offered by the City (such as shelters, social and medical assistance) homeless people applied for a special ID card showing their residential status at this address, therefore declaring their homeless status (Lancione under review-a). To obtain it, individuals needed to demonstrate to the City two fundamental things: that they did not reside anywhere and that they had no possessions. If the first point was quite easy to demonstrate, the second posed some issues. Daniele's story is representative of many I had collected. Daniele was a homeless individual without any documents. However, although no longer in possession of it, Daniele was still *formally* the owner of a car. For this reason the procedure to obtain the ID card was taking more time than it should have:

> I got this car . . . I can't even remember when. [Pause]. I don't have it anymore, of course! But their fucking PC still says that I'm the owner. But owner of what?! I don't have that car anymore. (April 2010, field interview)

The only solution for him was to cancel ownership of the car, but this would have cost about 80 euros and yet further paperwork:

> How can I pay for this? I'm stuck. They do not pay for me. I don't have the money. I can't get the residence. And that's it. I do not understand this system. [Pause]. The best thing would be to go there [to the City offices] and say: fuck you all. Then to run away. (April 2010, field interview)

The bureaucracy necessary to obtain the fictional residence in 'Via della Casa Comunale 1' was an abstract machine of governmentality (Foucault 2000). This machine was territorialising the encounter between the City and homeless individuals under the spell of what is considered to be an efficient way of managing homelessness. However, the procedures to obtain the ID card and the formalities surrounding the encounters with the social

worker were deeply affecting homeless people. At the most basic level they were creating stress, leading the individual to a state of frustration and depression due to the troubles encountered in the process. Moreover, when the residence was finally gained, there was a further stigmatising effect difficult – if not impossible – to counterbalance. Giuseppe – another homeless individual in my study – was claiming that to have that he was residing at 'Via della Casa Comunale 1' written in his ID card was like wearing a sign advertising that he was homeless.

The City's bureaucracy extends well beyond the analysed case, and deterritorialisation of this particular abstract machine occurred too. Complying with the rules in the right way, homeless people could relatively easily receive cards to take free showers in the public baths of Turin (Plate 2). Those cards were sold or bartered in exchange for favours, reterritorialising the bureaucratic machine of the City from a 'way to manage' to a 'way to survive in the street'. This was also happening in the case of shelters. Since few places were usually available, homeless individuals used to queue from early afternoon in order to get a bed. Some of them queued for others, selling their place for a little money: the queuing, diagrammatically emerging from the number of beds available and the strict opening time of the shelters, was re-assembled into a very particular work opportunity.

The abstract machines of work

Abstract machines are not only institution-related (far from it!). In a capitalist economy the necessity to work in a *certain* way is for instance a tremendously powerful abstract machine (Cederstrom and Fleming 2012). Homeless people, especially at the beginning of their street life, cannot escape it. They usually feel that they need to get a

Plate 2   City of Turin's card granting a free shower
Source: April 2010, field observation

job in order to get out of the street, and that this job must be detached from the ones sometimes offered by the FBOs or the City, which are perceived as stigmatising. The job must be 'normal', where normality is diagrammed by means of the canonical abstract machine of work: that of the productive, wealthy and healthy white man with a stable occupation. Seeking such a job without a permanent residence, with few means and precarious resources is painfully difficult. There are a whole set of assemblages to which one necessarily need to relate to be territorialised as-the-machine tells, including formal documents, means to move around the city (money and transportation), a phone on which to be contacted, and so on.

Marco's case is just a representative example out of many. One day Marco, who was new to the street at the time I encountered him, received a phone call from an employment agency, which told him to call a certain person to speak about a job opportunity. Unfortunately, Marco had used up all his credit and couldn't afford a top up. He was almost desperate and went to anyone he knew asking for money. When he finally found a working mobile, two hours had passed and it was too late: the job was no longer available. A second case concerns a bricklaying job located on the outskirts of Pinerolo, 40 kilometres southwest of Turin. The first time he tried to reach Pinerolo by bus the journey took one and a half hours and he couldn't reach the building site on time (7.30 am). The second time he tried to go by train, but the inspector found he had no ticket and therefore made him get off the train. Moreover, even if he had managed to reach the site, he wouldn't have been able to have either breakfast or lunch, as in Pinerolo there aren't free services for indigent people. After other similar experiences, Marco desisted and decided to 'do like the others'. Meaning, in brief, to collect alms and sell things on the black market.

Marco, like many others, desperately tried to align himself to the abstract machine of work, to accept its code and territorialise under it. However, that particular abstract machine, which requires whole sets of assemblages to arrive at a stable territorialisation (like a working mobile phone, the possibility to eat and to move around), left him with the only option available: deterritorialisation in the form of becoming part of the informal economy.

Breaking through the abstract machine of homelessness

One may wonder why we should engage with apparently complex concepts, like assemblages and abstract machines, to study homelessness. The answer is simple: these are concepts whose purpose is not to define, but to open up possibilities. For Deleuze a concept is not a way of explaining or containing things, but rather a way of surpassing 'the dualities of ordinary thought [e.g. The
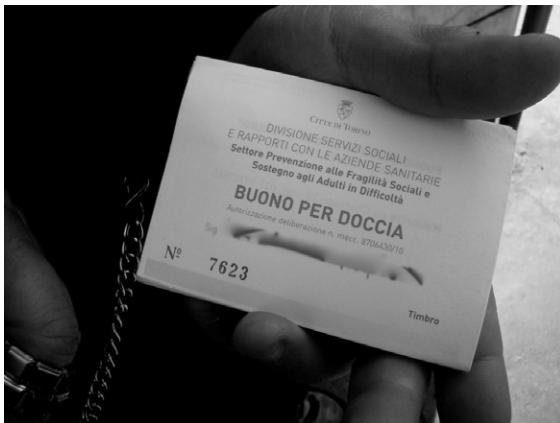
homeless/The city] and give things a new truth, a new distribution, a new way of dividing up the world' (2004 [1956], 22; see also Colebrook 2002). The added value of the approach proposed in this paper can be summarised as follows.

First, abstract machines offer a nuanced understanding of power. The subject is not a punished victim of the machines, since power is a diagram that territorialises/deterritorialises both the self and the assemblages related to it. Second, assemblages and abstract machines help in grasping performances in a truly relational way. In this sense, the notion of abstract machines can provide performative scholarship with a way of taking seriously into consideration the subtle drawbacks of private and public interventions, without diminishing the importance of the performative self. Third, the framework proposed here provides a critical political layer to the performative approach to homelessness.

As has been shown in the analysed cases, abstract machines diagram both territorialisations and deterritorialisations. The latter, however, cannot be considered *complete*, but only *relative* deterritorialisation (Deleuze and Guattari 1994). Turning help into an income opportunity, whether derived from secondhand clothes or a very long queue, does not re-frame the main abstract machine, that of homelessness. To fully deterritorialise the abstract machine of homelessness one would need at least three separate movements: to challenge a powerful stigmatising discourse ('the homeless'; Ruddick 1996); to provide for the lack of heterogeneous means without re-enforcing the above discourse; and to disentangle the embroilment of other, related, abstract machines (such as the ones presented in this work). This is a complex task that cannot be solved in one go. However, the above relative deterritorialisations show patterns that can help in the journey. First, they reveal the constant capacity of homeless people to turn their relations with the city into something that exceeds what is expected and given. Second, they show the role of small devices (like a phone or out-of-date food) in affecting how homelessness is experienced (Desjarlais 1997). It is within those capacities and more-than-human agencies that a new politics of homelessness could germinate.

Normative policies are implemented without taking into consideration either the subject or the more-than-human world, but rather the normative (pathological) categorisation of the group (Canguilhem 1989). In this sense, if it is 'the frame of the encounter, rather than the encounter itself' (Amin 2012, 169) that matters; policies need to be re-worked by deterritorialising the abstract machines that they reproduce. The relation between abstract machines and assemblages is the place to start: if the former diagrams the latter, it is the latter that (once territorialised) sustains the former. Two brief suggestions

can be made. First, the assemblages activated by canonical public policies on homelessness – such as waiting lists, schedules, ID cards – or those activated by the FBOs' interventions – such as discourses of charity, alms, distribution of free goods – need to be re-imagined taking into account the stigmatising discourse, and the emotional effects, that they produce. Second, homeless people do challenge abstract machines and in doing so they reveal unexpected capabilities. The main task that homelessness theory and practice have to face is *how to liberate* these capacities and resources. This is more an epistemological problem than anything else:

> Liberated desire means that desire escapes the impasse of private fantasy: it is not a question of adapting it, socializing it, disciplining it, but of plugging it in such a way that its process not be interrupted in the social body, and that its expression be collective. (Guattari 2009, 43)

A new politics of homelessness should start from the ridiculing of the particular abstract machines that currently impede the full expression of homeless people, which in the end should be understood not only as human being (another static category), but as more-than-human *becoming* subjects.

Acknowledgements

Note

1 It is worth recalling that for Deleuze and Guattari *power*, as much as *desire*, is a positive force; it creates relations; and it can be actualised in many different ways. Territorialisations and deterritorialisations, as well as their effects, are just two of the forces that power actualises.

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