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HOUSELESSNESS

Kevin Scott Jobe

Whether speaking of the needs of displaced peoples, climate change refugees, migrant workers, immigrants, slum dwellers, single parents with children, veterans, as well as all those displaced, deprived, discriminated against, “doubled-up,” or underemployed due to socioeconomic or political instability, each of these populations the world over shares a common human need: the need for a safe, affordable, and relatively permanent shelter with basic infrastructure. However, in virtually all discussions about homelessness, these and many other categories of housing deprived populations are excluded either wittingly or unwittingly. Even one major book-length treatment on housing and homelessness admits that

not examined in this reader are illegal immigrants, seasonal farm workers, and the victims of natural and human-made disasters who are temporarily or seasonally homeless. All these people become homeless, even if for relatively short periods of time, and seek assistance from social and housing programs that are already severely overburdened.

(Erickson & Wilhelm 2011: xxv)

In the search for a more inclusive, global definition of homelessness, the Urban Secretariat of the United Nations Center for Human Settlements proposed at the turn of the millennium an official substitution of the word “homelessness” with “houselessness” (Springer 2000). At the core of this global redefinition is a notion of *inadequate shelter*, which is defined as a

housing unit without a roof and/or walls that does not allow privacy; without adequate space, adequate security (legal and physical), adequate lighting, heating and ventilation and adequate basic infrastructure, such as water-supply, sanitation and waste-management facilities; without suitable environmental quality and health-related factors, and with housing costs that are not reasonable.

(Springer 2000: 481)

The author notes that such a definition includes not only refugee populations living in substandard camps or tent cities due to conflict or environmental disaster, but also populations such as released prisoners who have no permanent place to go and those who live with a relative (“doubled-up”) because they cannot afford their own shelter due to high urban living costs. Such a definition also,

by implication, includes victims and refugees of domestic, child, or family abuse; shelter and street populations who cannot afford or do not have access to housing options; and even the currently housed or sheltered who are at risk of eviction because of discrimination, abuse, intimidation, or simply failing to pay rising living costs in gentrifying neighborhoods. The UN-Habitat Initiative, in its 2001 Global Report on Human Settlements, endorsed this redefinition of homelessness as houselessness on the grounds that it avoids cultural and regional variation, such that anyone “with no access to housing will be considered as houseless the world over” (196).

The Global Report laments the fact that much of the regional literature on “homelessness” often focuses exclusively on the problems or issues specific to a certain subpopulation, such as the mentally ill, substance abusers, runaway youth, and so on. As the Report indicates, “The problem with these perspectives is that they centre on subjective experiences and backgrounds of individual people, risking their stigmatization and failing to bring into focus the broader structural factors that underpin homelessness” (2001: 196). Indeed, when we take into consideration all those who fall under the UN-Habitat definition of “houseless” or at risk of houselessness due to *inadequate shelter*, it is plain to see that the overwhelming problem is not the specific problems or failings of the various subpopulations of the houseless, but rather the structural causes of houselessness themselves: social, political, economic, and ecological factors which increasingly deprive and dispossess people of their livelihoods, their labor, their land, their homes, their security, and their dignity. Indeed, as Saskia Sassen argues (2014), we have entered a new age of “expulsions,” most acutely in the Global South, connected to the ubiquity of the global economy and the socioeconomic, political, and environmental fallout of predatory finance capitalism. For all these reasons, it has been observed that housing and the management of housing, particularly in the context of the city, is a technology of life and death (Willse 2015). Thus, given a broader, needs-based conception of *adequate shelter*, the public policy solutions governments pursue will always have real consequences for the life and death chances of a wide range of at-risk populations, many of whom already face power inequities of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexual orientation. When we drill down to the real life and death issues, in other words, it is housing insecurity and housing deprivation that “make people sick and make people die” (Willse 2015: 24).

Autonomy

In light of these broader considerations of housing and human need, certain debates over the ethics and politics of “homelessness” become much clearer. In particular, debates in philosophy, political theory, and public policy over the autonomy of “the homeless” would benefit greatly from a broader perspective on *houselessness* and human needs. In some of these debates, discussions are often framed in terms of the *autonomy versus coercion* dichotomy that characterizes much of the literature on analytic ethics in general and biomedical and public health ethics in particular. However, when such debates are framed too narrowly as if the central problem revolves around the special characteristics of a problematic subpopulation (i.e., their deficiency in autonomy), such discussions tend to downplay, ignore, or obscure larger structural causes of houselessness and the role of local and regional struggles and public policy initiatives to meet basic human needs and provide safe affordable shelter for vulnerable populations, as well as achieve sociopolitical, economic, and environmental justice for the needy. When narrowly framed as an issue of “autonomy” versus “paternalism,” for example, much of the literature on homelessness fails to situate *houselessness* as a human need, thus failing to address the kinds of upheaval, displacement, and violence brought on by socioeconomic, political, and environmental (i.e., structural) causes. As Abbarno (1999) points out, framing the issue too narrowly in terms of respecting “autonomy” often leads to ignoring human needs, and our obligation to recognize

peoples' needs as rights themselves. The validity of public goods like social welfare, affordable housing and accessibility initiatives, and other public policy programs for the needy stem from the recognition therefore that the diversity of human needs presents us with a *rights-claim* in the form of a positive moral obligation, and not simply a negative claim to respect peoples' autonomy (Abbarno 1999).

For some, the framing of "homelessness" in terms of *autonomy versus coercion* is seen as a symptom of liberal notions of labor, property, and self-governance shared by liberal democracies of the West. Specifically, American social policy since the 1970s has been premised on the view that the homeless lack the capacity for rational autonomy (Sparks 2012). However, as many theorists and practitioners of social policy and social services have observed,

500 years of Anglo-American law, policy, and other homeless management strategies consistently re-entrenched and reified the notion that the homeless are unfit for rational self-governance and active citizenship . . . wherein the assumed irrationality of the homeless necessitates state intervention and management simply because of the places they must, or may not, inhabit.

(Sparks 2012: 1514)

The close linkage of "home" with "autonomy," rationality, and self-governance in liberal thought ensures that, by default, those without a "home" are viewed as suspect rational agents. In addition, the very notion of propertied "home ownership," as noted by the World Resources Institute, by definition excludes the poor and the majority of the Global South (King et al. 2017: 3). This is for the simple reason that home ownership is not a financial option for the poor and all those without papers who "lack the documentation to qualify for mortgages or subsidies" (King et al. 2017: 3).

Illustrations of this narrow emphasis on autonomy and property abound in contemporary debates, which center on questions about whether or not we ought to allow the homeless to be homeless so as to respect their autonomy (van Leeuwen 2017; Smith 2014), or whether and to what extent we should coerce the homeless to be helped (Watts et al. 2018; van Leeuwen & Merry 2018; Noddings 2002). Here, the problem is defined extremely narrowly as a question about whether "we" ought to coerce a relatively small proportion of individuals (in this case, those with extreme mental health issues) who lack access to adequate shelter. What is purportedly being discussed is the phenomena of "homelessness," but what is in fact being discussed in these debates is one extremely limited aspect of those considered houseless the world over. This is not to downplay these debates or dismiss the need of the subpopulations in questions, but we should not conflate the particular needs of the mentally ill homeless with those of climate change refugees, or migrant workers, or shelter populations, or those fleeing from or displaced by the violence and upheaval brought about by social, political, economic, or environmental instability. And while these categories of houselessness might overlap in some cases, we should be wary of debates that limit our understanding of "homelessness" to one extremely limited and circumscribed aspect of what is undoubtedly an increasingly global phenomenon: the lack of access to basic human needs.

To this end, various "paradigm shifts" have been proposed that seek to transcend the liberal paradigm within which most discussions of home and homelessness are seemingly trapped. One proposal is

to move beyond a narrowly circumscribed defense of negative liberties, with the recognition that liberty be defined as the absence of humanly imposed impediments that

entail not only deliberate coercion of one agent by another, but also denial of access to the means of life and labor sustained by the laws of property and contract.

(Blomley 2009: 586)

Under this proposal, where the problem is framed as one of trying to provide basic access to housing and infrastructure in the context of capitalist property relations, the problem has far more significance and meaning for a wide range of vulnerable populations the world over, many of whom face similar situations, albeit in quite different contexts. The UN-Habitat's definition of "houselessness" is one overarching proposal that might provide a way beyond narrow limitations and understandings imposed by liberal notions of autonomy and property. However, such a paradigm shift away from liberal notions of autonomy and property and toward a more global, needs-based conception of houselessness is far easier said than done. One basic reason for this is that the socioeconomic policies predominant since at least the 1970s are underpinned by (modified) liberal notions of autonomy, which are utilized in order to justify the outcomes of social policy particularly for vulnerable populations.¹ These governmental strategies and approaches which deploy liberal notions of autonomy to justify negative outcomes for vulnerable populations can be characterized as *neoliberal*.² The following section of the chapter, therefore, will focus on the characteristics of neoliberal social policy, and attempt to explain how neoliberalism utilizes the notion of autonomy in order to justify its own negative outcomes for vulnerable populations, and particularly those considered "houseless" and those at risk of houselessness.

Neoliberalism

Over the past four decades, dramatic shifts in social welfare and labor markets have resulted in reduced state funding and regulation for low-income housing, social safety nets, and employment benefits among other social goods. Employees now tend to work longer hours in multiple jobs or temporary forms of work with no comparable rise in income, benefits, or standard of living – a situation many refer to as the "New Economy" (Henwood 2003). Since the Great Recession of 2008 and the housing eviction crisis that followed, economists, sociologists, urban geographers, and political theorists have called renewed attention to a "neoliberal agenda" of housing deregulation and privatization, welfare and entitlement restructuring, gentrification, urban redevelopment, and real estate and financial speculation (Hodkinson et al. 2013). Pursued in concert as a program of social policy over the past four decades, such policies have taken priority over low-income and affordable housing and social services (Hodkinson et al. 2013; Hackworth 2007; Glynn 2009). Additionally, as Leonard Feldman documents in the case of the United States, ongoing attempts to dismantle and displace single-residency occupancies (SROs) and residential hotels for homeless individuals and families since the 1970s have continued to reduce the availability of real options for low-income housing in most urban centers (2004: 114–137).

Internationally, data show that high rates of homelessness are found in countries like the United States which have "a very weak and diminishing welfare safety net" (Fitzpatrick & Stephens 2007: 57), and that low rates of homelessness are found in countries like Sweden and the Netherlands which have "well-functioning housing and labor markets and generous social security policies" (Fitzpatrick & Stephens 2007: 56). In the case of the United States, between 1970 and 1994, the typical state's family benefits fell 47 percent, federal funding for low-income housing fell 49 percent from 1980 to 2003, and since the 1980s, income has stagnated compared to steadily increasing rents in major cities (National Coalition for the Homeless 2007). At the same time as wages have been stagnating over this period, scholars of the "neoliberal city" have noted the growth of a casual workforce without job security and a living wage, known as the "precariat" (Standing 2016). The precariat is understood as a

workforce characterized by temporary, part-time, and/or fleeting forms of work that places workers on the margins of the economic and legal system; these workers are often subject to political-legal exclusion, harassment, and violence.³ Individuals, for instance, who have “irregular” forms of work and housing arrangements in large urban centers are much more likely to experience harassment, violence, and forms of political and legal exclusion. In response to the violence and exclusionary practices found in urban centers, urban geographers have tracked the emergence of tent cities along the margins of urban development zones as part of governmental strategies of cost externalization and off-loading of financial and social obligation on behalf of state and city governments. Indeed, for many city departments in charge of land development housing, tent cities are viewed as

strategic spatial tools in managing the poor at lower cost amidst the ongoing crises of welfare austerity and expansion of anti-homeless laws . . . the persistence of camps underlines the intertwined crises produced in the expansion of criminalization of homelessness and shortcomings of welfare-provision for the homeless within the broader operations of the local state in managing marginality.

(Herring & Lutz 2015: 699)

In these ways, scholars of the neoliberal city have highlighted the confluence between the cost-externalization strategies of city managers and officials on the one hand, and the “conservative register of ‘self-sufficiency’ against liberal government hand-outs” on the other (Herring & Lutz 2015: 697). It is here that we begin to find that neoliberal welfare restructuring and social abandonment dovetails nicely with the discourses of “autonomy” and “self-sufficiency” from state dependence often cited in accounts of tent city residents. As Herring and Lutz’s study of Seattle and Fresno show, state and city Departments of Planning and Development have even acknowledged homeless encampments as viable, low-cost options for housing, endorsing the “autonomy” of homeless encampments as a way of managing the perceived threats of tent cities to downtown urban development.

At the same time tent cities have become a commonplace on the margins of major cities, the same city governments often pursue private partnerships with business and technology industries including the “creative class” of the tech boom that has forced housing and property values to skyrocket in major urban centers. As *The New York Times* documents, the tech boom in cities like Seattle and San Francisco has

generated hordes of 20-something millionaires and thousands more with six-figure salaries. While that wealth has created a widely envied economy, housing costs have skyrocketed, and the region’s economic divisions have deepened. The median rent for a one-bedroom apartment in San Francisco is \$3,530 a month, the highest in the country.

(Wingfield 2015)

In cities like Seattle, Fresno, and San Francisco, these developments have gone hand-in-hand with the off-loading of the social costs of rising rents and living expenses onto the most vulnerable and unprotected populations. As Herring and Lutz conclude,

Rather than interpreting the toleration and legalization of encampments as contradicting or challenging the existing policies and theories of the ongoing punitive exclusion of marginalized populations, our research shows how excluding the homeless from prime space while simultaneously assigning specific marginal places to them serves a common goal of neutralizing the “homeless threat” across the city.

(2015: 698)

The seclusion of tent cities to the urban fringe dovetails with their socioeconomic exclusion from prime areas of urban development. In this way, discourses of respecting the autonomy and self-sufficiency of the homeless begin to converge with neoliberal urban policies and “practices of social abandonment in the encroaching shadow of neoliberalism at the close of the 1960s” (Mitchell & Snyder 2015: 101).

In light of this relationship between neoliberal social policy and its utilization of “autonomy,” disability scholars David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder argue that we ought to think about neoliberalism in terms of the following guiding definition:

Neoliberalism involves forms of governance that reject the principle of governing on behalf of devalued populations (systematic provision of government-sponsored support) through the promotion of rampant market profiteering (unregulated corporatizing) and the selling off of public spaces to private interests (the commons).

(2015: 101)

Other definitions by critical theorists, geographers, social workers, and urban theorists define neoliberal government by its abandonment of any obligation to improve the life, health, and well-being of the population in exchange for the pursuit to make every aspect of social life subject to market norms, including the use of one’s autonomy (Willse 2015: 67). Rather than governing to improve the well-being of the population, neoliberalism interprets the independence of individuals as a market opportunity to increase the value of their autonomy. By idealizing values of independence, self-sufficiency, self-esteem, and personal responsibility, neoliberalism champions “autonomy” while at the same time discouraging entitlements and values of dependency on state or federal support (Cacho 2014: 20). As a result, the neoliberal valorization of autonomy and self-sufficiency means that those populations that find themselves most vulnerable, unprotected, marginalized, and indigent are viewed as victims of their own rational choices as individuals, rather than of any external social causes. Thus, according to neoliberal rationality, the social and economic status of such populations “is a choice made by rational individuals who are ultimately resigned to being underpaid, cheated and abused” (Cacho 2014: 19). Therefore, the neoliberal argument is that marginalized populations can only be brought out of their condition through independence, hard work, self-esteem, and an entrepreneurial spirit. In short, the homeless must become “entrepreneurs of themselves” (Foucault 2008: 225–226; Castells & Portes 1989: 11) and “self-managers” of their own physical and economic security. In this context then, framing homelessness primarily within the problematic of “autonomy” narrowly defines the issue in individualistic terms which ignores or obscures broader structural causes detrimental to the needs of vulnerable populations the world over. In what follows, I explore one regional debate over the “autonomy” of the homeless and try to show how the debate too narrowly defines homelessness and therefore obscures a broader, needs-based conception of houselessness and the structural issues that underpin various states of houselessness around the globe and in regional contexts as well.

The defense of homelessness

In the essay “In Defense of Homelessness” (2014), Andrew F. Smith presents a defense of homelessness as a viable lifestyle as a challenge to the “so-called” punitive, institutional model of shelters, homes, housing units, and family structures, all of which Smith claims “communicates to the homeless that their social status is inferior, undesirable, and even pathological” (2014: 34). According to Smith, the “so-called” institutional model consists in “focusing solely

on reforming state and philanthropic institutions that aim at securing shelter for the homeless” (2014: 34). For Smith then, the institutional model seems to include not only emergency shelters or day centers but also any form of housing accommodation provided by local or state initiatives. For Smith, the goals of all these state institutions – from shelters to presumably residential hotels to traditional homes – is to integrate the homeless eventually into work and family life. The common “institutional” responses to homelessness Smith outlines are exclusion, harassment, displacement, and finally containment in shelters, “which represents the most prominent response to homelessness” (2014: 36). Smith writes,

The stated goal of these institutional responses to homelessness, taken individually or collectively, is to facilitate reintegration of the homeless into the workforce and into homes with stable families. This goal thus supports two complementary ethics: the work ethic and the family ethic.

(2014: 37)

By enforcing these two complementary ethics, Smith suggests, the institutional system serves the purpose of reintegrating homeless persons into jobs and stable homes with families. According to Smith, this institutional response exacerbates rather than alleviates the hardships experienced by unhoused persons. Since individuals in the shelter system often have to submit to regular and rigorous screening, abide by shelter rules, wait for services and consent to surveillance, perform unpleasant tasks, actively look for work and housing, and endure interference by shelter staff, Smith argues that the institutional response of the shelter system exacerbates rather than alleviates the hardships of the homeless.

As a challenge to the “institutional response” of the shelter-housing-home system, which Smith does not distinguish from less restrictive accommodations such as SRO or residential hotels (a point returned to later), Smith advocates an alternative vision of the homeless as “fellow citizens who nevertheless are others, outsiders, threats to the contours of American society” (2014: 43). By highlighting forms of community, or “socioeconomic organization,” in tent cities, and among recyclers and panhandlers, Smith argues that there are certain norms specific to “forms of homeless organization” upon which homeless persons rely to escape the institutional system of “the shelters, family abuse, predatory landlords, and harassment by police and the public” (2014: 38). According to Smith, “Adhering to these norms fosters the enjoyment of a degree of security, dignity, and autonomy under conditions of great duress. These norms include *security through community, free sharing of provisions, and equitable exchange*” (2014: 38, italics in original).

Smith references firsthand and ethnographic accounts of homeless communities to highlight how these norms are exhibited in values like sharing and cohesion, but also in values like “resourcefulness and self-discipline” (2014: 39) which, according to Smith, “permits them at least partially avoid the degradation ceremonies performed by social service institutions and also to maintain dignity through productivity” (2014: 39). Most importantly, Smith points to the “self-sufficiency” and “enthusiasm” of recyclers in order to try to explain why individuals engage in such informal work with little income and no benefits or bargaining rights. In the case of recyclers, Smith acknowledges the literature on how the de-unionization and informality of work like recycling is largely the result of the neoliberal withdrawal of social safety nets and the rise of the temporary contracting and services industry. Yet Smith, appealing to the lived experience of recyclers themselves, fails to entertain the notion that the norms of self-sufficiency, self-discipline, and work “enthusiasm” might also be a result of and/or response to the restructuring of work and individual responsibility under neoliberalism. Smith seems to acknowledge that

homeless populations have been deprived of state support and formal opportunities of work under neoliberalism, yet still wants to defend their homelessness on the grounds that they experience greater autonomy and self-sufficiency in such conditions.

While Smith never names “neoliberalism” in the essay “In Defense of Homelessness,” he nonetheless writes that “deindustrialization, deunionization, and the rise of the service sector have generated a sharp decrease in well-paying jobs for low-skilled and unskilled workers with no coinciding increase in state support in the United States” (2014: 39). Again, citing the work of Castells and Portes on the informal economy,⁴ Smith acknowledges that some of the “forms of homeless organization” he is defending such as recycling are

a byproduct of the success the state has had at scaling back the social safety net in combination with outsourcing recycling by the forms that process recyclables to parties that receive little income, no benefits, and no leverage with management.

(2014: 40)

Smith even goes so far to acknowledge how scholars of the informal economy are struck by the activities of recyclers “as an example of how firms prey on the weak to maximize profits, often with state complicity” (2014: 40). On this point, Smith writes, “This is undoubtedly so; I do not deny that recyclers, and the homeless in general, are deserving of sustained state support, a salient voice with respect to the conditions of their employment, and a living wage” (2014: 40). However, presumably in order to counter the image of recyclers as victims of neoliberal austerity, restructuring, and economic compulsion, Smith cites the work of Teresa Gowan on the sociology of underground economies in order to make the point that recyclers often “do not express the sullen resentment of people acting out of economic compulsion” (Smith 2014: 40).

However, it is unclear what we are to make of the subjective, “lived experience” of recyclers in the face of Smith’s open acknowledgement that the informalized, de-unionized, and low-wage work of recyclers is the result of the objective economic forces of neoliberalism. Focusing narrowly and exclusively on the subpopulation of male recyclers in San Francisco, Smith acknowledges that recyclers and the homeless in general are actively and systematically being denied state support, bargaining rights, and a living wage, while at the same time downplaying these deprivations by suggesting that the homeless themselves lack any “sullen resentment” about such deprivation and abandonment. Smith offers no reason why informal workers, and the homeless in general, should not be extended a living wage, benefits, bargaining rights, and (not to mention) affordable housing. Indeed, nowhere in the essay does Smith advocate organizing and fighting for more investment in and construction of affordable housing options for the homeless such as residential or SRO hotels, which have been under attack by neoliberal urban redevelopment initiatives for almost 40 years (Feldman 2004: 116–117).

In any case, it is false to suggest that all forms of housing accommodation are more or less equivalent to what Smith casually refers to as the punitive, “institutional” model of the “shelter system.” Instead, we should avoid the danger of conflating the punitive, “institutional” model of the shelter system with *all* forms of housing accommodation and “shelter” as defined by the UN-Habitat initiative. There is no reason to conclude that providing adequate shelter to the needy is always and everywhere punitive, nor need be. Despite legitimate criticisms raised about low-income hotels, hostels, or slums, the fact remains that rates of homelessness throughout the 1980s to the present are due in large part to the disinvestment and destruction of SRO, residential, and affordable low-income housing, in combination with increasing housing costs, wage repression, and welfare abandonment (Feldman 2004: 116–117). Unlike shelters, residential hotels, for example, remain one of the only institutions that provide “limited privacy,

freedom from social control, and the possibility of constituting individual identity and relations of urban sociality” (Feldman 2004: 117). The historian of the residential hotel Paul Groth writes that “hotels remain the cheapest private housing available downtown,” that they make economic sense for a model of public housing, and that they are generally seen as much desirable than either accommodations in shelters or the streets (2004: 293–294). Ironically, urban initiatives in the 1980s and 1990s to remove barriers to convert or demolish hotels led to the consolidation of the punitive, institutional model that Smith decries and identifies with the “family and work ethic” of the shelter system, composed of public–private spaces, shelters, case workers, social services managers, counselors, and so on. Because of all this, Smith misrecognizes the enemy of homeless populations as “the institutional model,” rather than the socioeconomic outcomes of neoliberal social policy, coupled with political and environmental instability which creates populations vulnerable to different but often related kinds of dispossession and displacement.

From the individual to the global

As disability scholars Mitchell and Snyder (2015) argue, neoliberal attitudes and policies regarding homelessness enact a sort of “bait-and-switch” by ascribing to the individual both the *agency of* and *responsibility for* one’s situation and the toxic consequences to which such a life exposes oneself. By constructing the risks and hazards of informal work and substandard housing as simply part of the experience of being homeless in the current “housing market,” neoliberal rationality deploys liberal notions of autonomy as a way to celebrate “the individual.” As Craig Willse argues,

it is vital to the well-being of neoliberal capitalism that individuals be abandoned to self-directed entrepreneurial activity. In other words, entrepreneurs are exactly what neoliberalism demands— people who can figure out how to make something out of nothing, who can determine on their own how to survive eroding social welfare nets, sinking wages, and decreased opportunities for formal employment and job security. (2015: 67)

In 2014, Mayor Maryann Edwards of Temecula, California, commenting on the city’s “Responsible Compassion” campaign, identified the core of the campaign’s basic approach to homelessness by emphasizing individual responsibility and financial austerity. The city’s “Responsible Compassion” campaign coupled surveillance initiatives and “anti-feeding” ordinances with the reduction and off-loading of housing and homeless services to volunteer and charitable organizations funded by private donors. Remarking on the city’s homeless initiative, the mayor was quoted as saying, “Homeless people panhandling on the off ramps are homeless by choice. . . . They have rejected all forms of help and have chosen instead to play on the sympathy of generous residents” (Keys 2014). As Gershon (2011) argues in her analysis of “Neoliberal Agency,” under this conception of agency, “the care neoliberal agents must take . . . is to minimize the risk and ‘misallocated’ responsibility that these partnerships can potentially lead to” (2011: 540). However, the reconfiguration of all agents as homogenous, risk-calculators therefore also tends to minimize the role of factors like race or gender since these are not considered to have a special effect on the rational calculation of risk. The minimization of the role that gender and race plays in the neoliberal representation of agency can be seen in Smith’s defense of homelessness, in particular the way that race, gender, and vulnerability inflect the experience of homelessness for different populations. Rather than distinguishing the ways in which different subpopulations experience the vulnerabilities

of homelessness and its desirability, Smith argues for the viability and safety of tent cities, followed only with a provisory footnote, highlighting how

racial segregation is commonplace. Moreover, authorities are more likely to raid and shut down predominantly African-American encampments than predominantly white encampments. This permits the latter to become more established and comfortable, thus replicating wider trends of differential and asymmetrical treatment by the state on the basis of race.

(2014: 41n)

Notwithstanding this short provisory footnote about the disproportionate harassment and violence experienced by African-American communities, tent cities are still presented by Smith as a viable and safe alternative for both housed and unhoused individuals who wish to “opt out” of the punitive, institutional model. Indeed, Smith acknowledges – surprising briefly – that different populations experience the vulnerabilities of homelessness in differing degrees, writing in the final footnote,

I remain skeptical, for example, about children experiencing homelessness. Trevor Smith (no relation) also has suggested to me that my thesis speaks more to the plight of homeless men than to homeless women. Given that Wright notes that some men acting as protective figures in encampments exhibited what he perceived to be hyper-masculine behavior, I do not take Smith’s suggestion lightly. Whether a defense specifically of female homelessness is viable is a matter for future investigation.

(2014: 51n)

Therefore, by Smith’s own account, the modest claim being made is that homelessness is a viable and safe alternative *only* for non-African-American adult males. This appears as an odd claim, since it is ethnic minorities and indigenous populations who are overrepresented internationally in homelessness figures (Fitzpatrick & Stephens 2007: 55–56; National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty 2015), and some of the fastest-growing subpopulations since the 1980s have been women and families with children (Erickson & Wilhelm 2011: xxv; National Coalition for the Homeless 2007; Edelman & Mihaly 1989). In addition to identifying lack of affordable housing, gentrification, and predatory lending and real estate practices as the cause of family homelessness, a recent report on homelessness in the state of Florida identified two major contributing factors to homelessness in Florida:

Eroding employment opportunities for large segments of the workforce and declining value and availability of public assistance. Though the overall economy shows a rise in wages, these figures are generally skewed by the fact that low-wage workers are often working longer hours and/or multiple jobs. A reduction in the number of unionized workers, a lack of adjustments in the minimum wage with inflation, a decrease in the number of manufacturing jobs, an increase in the number of service-sector jobs, globalization and a disproportionate increase in temporary and part-time employment compared with full-time employment have further contributed to the growing gap between the rich and the poor.

(Palm Beach County Government 2008: 13)

In other words, the Palm Beach County report on homelessness attributed the increase in homeless families with children in the state of Florida to the advance of neoliberal social policy

examined previously here. However, because Smith ignores these populations in his own analysis, no account is given of the influence of neoliberalism in how the vulnerabilities of homelessness are distributed by factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, age, or disability. Thus, the overall argument of “In Defense of Homelessness” seems misleading, since the values and norms of “the homeless” population being spoken of by Smith refer only to those positive aspects of homelessness identified with the experience of mostly white, masculine adult homelessness on the streets of San Francisco. Most notably, in this regard, is the exclusion of any discussion of the urban housing crisis in the Global South (King et al. 2017), and the diverse experiences and voices of those with quite different accounts of “homelessness” and the struggle for adequate shelter.

In these ways, Smith’s argument seems too narrowly focused on the “subjective experiences and backgrounds of individual people, risking their stigmatization and failing to bring into focus the broader structural factors that underpin homelessness” (UN-Habitat 2001: 196). This is not to single out one example within a larger trend, but rather to illustrate how academic debates over homelessness can become so insular and narrow in their focus that we lose sight of what is *purportedly* the issue being discussed: *the lack of access to basic adequate shelter*. And if houselessness, as I have argued, is a global phenomenon that at its base is about human needs and the provision of social goods to meet those needs, then it follows that any discussion of houselessness should frame the issue in those terms at the outset. Rather than framing homelessness in terms of a certain problematic subpopulation or presupposing that the main question revolves around the dichotomy of either respecting autonomy or paternalistic care, we would do better to see the forest for the trees.

Indeed, given that only 13 percent of the world’s cities has affordable housing (UN-Habitat 2016),⁵ and given that by 2050 over 60 percent of the world’s population will live in cities (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division 2014: 1), it stands to reason that a more global understanding of housing as a human need is in order. As Abbarno (1999) points out, the increasingly important issues of houselessness are moral issues for the entire global community which present each of us with an obligation to recognize peoples’ needs as rights themselves. And while internationally there does exist some language of rights to housing in various constitutional codes, a “Homeless Bills of Rights” movement and legal struggles to establish a legally enforceable right to *permanent* (rather than temporary or emergency) housing (Fitzpatrick & Stephens 2007: 57), nonetheless “no legal mechanisms are provided to enable homeless individuals to enforce these rights” (Fitzpatrick & Stephens 2007: 57).⁶ However, many of these preliminary achievements have been won through social struggle, popular protest, and public engagement with the political process. And while neoliberalism continues to try to reshape our conceptions of the role of state governments, social welfare, and human rights, we must also recognize the ways in which neoliberalism tries to reshape our conceptions of agency, autonomy, social responsibility, and the obligations of care itself. In this sense, philosophers and ethicists have a distinct social role to play in articulating the importance of the public commons such as investments in affordable housing and worker protections, as well as access to food, clean water, and adequate shelter, while at the same time being vigilant with respect to claims about who or what counts as “homeless,” and who deserves what and who doesn’t. Philosophers therefore need to follow the global public in engaging public policy-makers and arguments which impact all aspects of human need around the globe. Remaining attentive to the global diversity and breadth of human needs around the globe will in turn shed light on the needs of populations in one’s own local and regional context, especially those populations who might go overlooked or ignored by narrow definitions of who or what really counts as “homeless.”

Notes

- 1 This brief characterization of neoliberal social policy is discussed later in this chapter and is inspired by the work of disability scholars David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder (2015: 101).
- 2 For a brief but detailed historical account of neoliberalism, see Harvey (2007).
- 3 See von Mahs (2013).
- 4 See Castells and Portes (1989: 11–37).
- 5 See “Only 13% of World’s Cities Have Affordable Housing – According to New Research,” UN-Habitat, July 26, 2016. <<https://unhabitat.org/only-13-of-worlds-cities-have-affordable-housing-according-to-new-research/>>.
- 6 Fitzpatrick and Stephens (2007: 61–62) note that Sweden and Hungary are the only countries that provide a legally enforceable right to *permanent* housing (not merely temporary or emergency), but only for elderly, ill, or severely disabled homeless populations.

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