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The Emergence of the Homeless as a Public Problem

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Using the model of social problems developed by Herbert Blumer, this article examines the recent public attention directed at homelessness. Based on this analysis, the article places the homeless issue in historical perspective, arguing that it is an element of the recent reemergence of conservative political practices and the traditional style of American social welfare.

During the past century the primary goal of social welfare has been to provide for the needs of individuals within our society. The provision of the most basic needs, such as food, shelter, and warmth, has been seen as the minimum goal of the welfare state. We are shocked when we realize our failure to provide these needs. Indeed, a popular slogan of the early 1980s, concerned with the forced choice between "heating and eating," gained notoriety precisely because it exemplified the failure to provide two things that we believe all persons should have.

Although our failures to provide warmth and food have been much in the news in the past few years, a third basic need—shelter—has received the most public attention. During the early 1980s, homelessness emerged as a significant public problem. It attracted a great amount of news coverage and became the target of public and private efforts at the national, state, and local levels. Yet, much confusion exists about the nature of the problem, who the homeless are, and what can be done about them.

In this article, I wish to address these questions from an unusual perspective. Rather than getting to the "facts" about the homeless, I want to ask how the "homeless" have been conceptualized in the public's mind and what this tells us, not about the homeless, but about ourselves, our officials, and our society. Thus, rather than holding the homeless under the microscope of public and professional enquiry, I want to use the homeless as a means of looking at ourselves.

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First, I will examine the past two years to see how the homeless have become a public problem at the national level, and as a local issue in the city of Philadelphia. Second, I will place the homeless in a historical perspective and speculate about the historical significance of the emergence of this issue. Here I will make the case that the homeless as a public problem reflect the conservative drift in public policy symbolized most graphically by the Reagan administration's attack on the poor.

The Anatomy of a Public Problem

The starting point for my examination of the homeless is Herbert Blumer's seminal essay, "Social Problems as Collective Behavior."[1] Blumer's essential point is that "social problems are fundamentally products of a process of collective definition instead of existing independently as a set of objective social arrangements with an intrinsic makeup."[2] Thus, rather than using the common geological metaphor of social problems—their "discovery" or "uncovering"—it is more appropriate to use a construction metaphor: How do we build social problems? As much as any other element of reality, public problems are socially constructed.[3]

This insight has a number of important implications. First, it suggests that public problems are selective; not all phenomena become public problems. (For example, although by objective measures poverty was more extensive in the 1940s and 1950s, it was not until the 1960s that we "discovered" poverty.)[4] Second, once we agree that a social problem exists, there is competition over what the nature of the problem is. For example, Joseph Gusfield notes in the *Culture of Public Problems* that for most of the postwar period the issue of automobile casualties was seen as a problem of individual competence.[5] Then, in the late 1960s, thanks to the efforts of Ralph Nader and his supporters, a competing definition emerged that stressed problems of automobile design and manufacture as the source of the problem.[6]

Blumer specifies five steps that comprise the career of a social problem: its emergence (through agitation, violence, interest groups, or political attention); its legitimation (when the explanation of the problem is agreed upon); the mobilization of forces to attack the problem; the development of an official "solution"; and the implementation of the plan. Of these steps, perhaps the most interesting is the legitimation stage, for it is there that the issue of who "owns" a problem is decided. Only when a paradigm of the cause of the problem emerges can we

be sure who has a right to "know" about the problem. Again, using the automobile example during the 1950s, psychologists and doctors were the experts who explained the origins of the "drunk driver." In the post-Nader era, however, the ownership of the problem passed to reporters and other investigators of the unsafe automobile.

A final point: at any time in its career a social problem can be sidetracked from its course. When this happens, it recedes from public notice and becomes part of the accepted order of things. Here again, the example of the War on Poverty comes to mind.

The Homeless as a Public Problem

Emergence.—The homeless slowly emerged as a public problem between 1980 and 1982. A combination of activism, publicity, self-interest, and timing account for the power with which homelessness burst upon the public consciousness.

The initial factor in the emergence of the homeless as a public problem appears to have been the legal action undertaken by attorney Robert Hays on behalf of vagrants in the Bowery section of New York City. As early as 1979, the city had agreed to provide more beds for the homeless on Ward's Island.[7] However, it was only the consent decree in the Callahan case signed by the city and the state in August 1981 that brought the issue forcefully to the public consciousness.[8] The decree committed the city to provide clean and safe shelter for every homeless man and woman who sought it and set standards against overcrowding in the shelters.

At the national level, this legal action was supported by direct political action. During the Democratic Convention in 1980, a coalition formed by the Community Services Society of New York, Catholic Workers, and other groups held a vigil at St. Francis of Assisi Church near Madison Square Garden in New York City. This demonstration was followed the next year by a veritable publicity blitz as first Ann Marie Rousseau's *Shopping Bag Ladies* and then Ellen Baxter and Kim Hopper's *Private Lives, Public Spaces* were released.[9] The Baxter and Hopper study, a combination of ethnographic observation and advocacy research, was widely publicized and served to focus public attention on the issue.

In Philadelphia, local businessmen aided in pushing the homeless forward as a public problem. In November 1981, the *Inquirer* reported that businessmen in the area of the city most frequented by homeless men were complaining that the men on the street were hurting business. They demanded that the city take action to relieve the problem.[10] At

the same time, other cities, including Washington, D.C., began to pay attention to the problem.

The culminating event in the emergence of the homeless as a public problem, however, was the severe winter of 1981–82. As the newspaper filled with grim stories of the homeless freezing to death, they gained a kind of "newsworthiness" that made them accessible to the television audience.[11]

Legitimation and mobilization.—The legitimation of the homeless is an example of the contestable character of public problems. As I have noted, the goal of legitimation is to forge a paradigm to explain the nature of a problem and to suggest its solution. The resolution of this issue determines who "owns" it. Thus, when there are competing groups interested in "owning" an issue, as has been the case with the homeless, there are competing paradigms to explain and legitimate it as a public problem.

The most successful attempts to legitimate the homeless as an issue point to the deinstitutionalization of mental patients during the 1970s.[12] According to this theory, most of the homeless are severely disturbed individuals who in earlier decades would have been safely warehoused in state facilities. However, because of deinstitutionalization they have been dumped on the street, where they maintain a marginal existence.

As with the emergence of the homeless as a problem, this proposed paradigm had its roots in self-interest, resulting from the overlapping responsibilities of various levels of government. As early as 1980, for example, New York City Mayor Edward Koch was resisting state pressure to open more shelters, while in turn the governor of New York reacted angrily to city officials' attempts to link the homeless to the state's release of psychiatric patients.[13]

The source of this controversy was not simply disinterested social research, but the division of responsibility between the state and city. If the homeless were considered a welfare problem, the city had ultimate responsibility. If they were considered a mental health problem, the state needed to act. The deinstitutionalization theory was again voiced repeatedly by the Koch administration, leading to the mayor's call for legislation to allow the city to involuntarily commit the homeless.[14] The Callahan case rendered the issue moot by holding both the city and state equally responsible for providing shelters.

In Philadelphia, a similar use of the deinstitutionalization issue took place. During the winter of 1982, the city's Department of Public Welfare attempted to draw a distinction between the "homeless" and "street people." Department officials claimed that street people were deinstitutionalized mental patients and should be the responsibility of the health department, while the homeless were their responsibility.[15]

Interestingly, the recession in the winter of 1982–83 changed the paradigm of legitimation. More and more news reports and "experts"

linked the homeless explicitly to unemployment and foreclosures.[16] Thus, as the economic situation of the "normal" population declined, the homeless were portrayed as more normal.

The official plans ultimately agreed upon to fight the problem exemplified the conservativism that characterized the homeless as a public problem. Rather than entering into a complex analysis of the multiple causes of homelessness—housing shortages, gentrification, unemployment, mental problems, and other social and individual problems—almost all agreed on the most simple answer to the problem: providing food and shelter. New York City, under its commitments in the Callahan decision, led the way, and other localities followed.

The official plan had a number of important features. First, there was a central reliance on traditional voluntary agencies like the Salvation Army and church groups. The new shelter that opened in New York City in 1980 was under the authority of the Volunteers of America, and Mayor Koch was constantly calling on or berating the city's religious institutions to do their share. In addition, the efforts of the city were restricted to the provision of food and shelter. In the emergency of 1982, for example, the city of Philadelphia paid Giffre Hospital $22 per day to shelter those homeless who could not be housed in existing voluntary shelters. By that summer, the city council had passed a bill to provide annually for shelters.[17]

Although in 1983 the activist groups that had originally drawn attention to the homeless were still calling for more sweeping actions to get at the root of the problem, the evidence seemed to suggest that from a social perspective, the problem had been solved. Although the number of homeless had not diminished, they had become part of the accepted order of things. Much like the poor of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the homeless (outcasts, psychotics, and physically impaired) would be with us for the foreseeable future. The only solution was palliative: keep them from freezing or starving and keep them out of fashionable areas where they might provide discomfort for those who were better off. As former Haverford College President John Coleman noted while he was "underground," "Watching people come and go at the Volvo tennis tournament at Madison Square Garden, I sensed how uncomfortable they were at the presence of the homeless. Easy to love in the abstract, not so easy to [love] face to face."[18]

A Public Problem for the Age of Reagan

The emergence of the homeless as a public problem is relatively easy to document. A far more difficult question is why the homeless struck

such a responsive chord in our culture in the early 1980s. Although there was some evidence that the problem was getting worse, the increase in attention was totally out of proportion with the increase in the phenomenon. I propose that the emergence of the homeless was an element of the conservative reaction that brought Ronald Reagan to the presidency and, in Pennsylvania, led to Governor Thornburgh's proposals for the cutoff of welfare to "ablebodied" recipients.

The conservative nature of welfare policy in the 1980s has been widely commented on elsewhere.[19] In its first two years, the Reagan administration took steps to reduce the federal government's role in most of the major welfare programs, including Aid to Families with Dependent Children, Food Stamps, federal housing and education programs, and legal services. At the state level, in Pennsylvania, these reductions were echoed in the governor's proposals to eliminate adult men from the state's general assistance program.

These developments had a complex impact on our society. On the one hand, they represent a return to a "traditional" American approach to poverty. Yet, at the same time, they go against fifty years of government action flowing out of the New Deal. Thus, they present those in control with a delicate issue of legitimation. The response to the homeless emerged as an issue that suited the situation by allowing the better off in society to affirm their continued belief in the New Deal tradition, while reimposing an older vision of the relationship of the poor to the nonpoor.

What is the basis for such a proposal? It rests on a historical perspective of the relationship between the well-off and the poor in America, and the changes that that relationship underwent in the postwar period. Traditionally, the relationship of charity was meant to underline the social position of both parties. The giver was able to confirm his benevolence and the legitimacy of his position, while the poor were expected to understand their inferiority, the stigma attached to their position, and the docility and appreciation they should feel toward the giver. As Gareth Stedman Jones has noted in his under-read *Outcast London,* "In all known traditional societies, the gift has played a central status-maintaining function."[20]

Stedman Jones, following Marcel Mauss, associated the gift relationship with three conditions.[21] The gift implies the idea of sacrifice; it is a symbol of prestige; and it serves as a method of social control. In Jones's words, "To give, from whatever motives, generally imposes an obligation upon the receiver. In order to receive one must behave in an acceptable manner, if only by expressing gratitude and humiliation."[22]

Jones goes on to note that these three conditions imply that the gift entails a personal relationship. "If it is depersonalized, the gift loses

its defining features: the elements of voluntary sacrifice, prestige, subordination, and obligation."[23] He claims that much of the motivation of the British Charity Organization Society in the 1860s and 1870s was to reestablish this set of relationships that urbanization had "deformed."

The United States, too, has traditionally used charity as a means of reinforcing the virtue of the rich and the immorality of the poor. As Michael Katz has recently noted, part of the "identifiable style" of welfare policy and practice in America is the "individual and degraded image of the poor."[24] Indeed, the often-used distinction between the worthy and unworthy poor has had much to do with issues of deference to authority. The worthy poor—widows, children, the insane, and disabled—were expected to be grateful for the beneficence of the welfare ladies, while the unworthy—the shiftless vagrants and other ablebodied recipients—were sly, ungrateful, and mendacious.

These images of the poor and the rich held up through the Great Depression. Indeed, the reports on the psychological impact of unemployment by Kamarovsky and Bakke suggest that self-blame, not anger, was a typical response to the great social crisis of the 1930s.[25] Yet, the dynamics of the Great Depression did set off forces that led to change.

The spread of welfare in the 1940s and 1950s and the spark of "community action" of the War on Poverty set off a new posture toward welfare that was symbolized by the welfare rights movement. Rather than seeing welfare as a gift, the National Welfare Rights Organization and like-minded groups attempted to cast it as a right or entitlement, the product of structural, not individual, breakdown.

More important than the NWRO itself during the 1970s was a perceptible change in the stance of welfare recipients. The use of food stamps was no longer a stigma. A new, assertive attitude began to characterize the actions of welfare recipients. As James Patterson noted, "Despite the hostility of the middle classes to increases in welfare, poor Americans refused at last to be cowed from applying for aid. Despite the continuing stigma attached to living on welfare, they stood firm in their determination to stay on the rolls as long as they were in need. . . . Compared to the past, when poor people—harassed and stigmatized by public authorities—were slow to claim their rights, this was a fundamental change."[26]

This change in the attitudes of the poor had an immense impact on the beliefs of nonrecipients. Among conservatives, there was little need for change, since they had been preaching the moral inferiority of welfare bums for decades. Among liberals, however, a greater discomfort set in.

Although liberals, like members of the welfare rights movement,

had been preaching the structural origins of welfare, when the poor actually came to believe them, they were not happy with the results. First, the failure of the programs of the 1960s and 1970s to reduce poverty made it more difficult than ever to expose its "roots." The web of causality seemed too dense to penetrate. Furthermore, overlaid with issues of race, the new attitude of welfare recipients did not include gratitude or deference to their liberal "friends." In short, by the end of the welfare revolution of the 1970s, liberals no longer felt appreciated, the poor were no longer deferential, and the gift relationship, with its affirmation of the virtue of the rich, had broken down.

The way in which the issue of the homeless came to public consciousness in the early 1980s broke with this pattern in three decisive ways. First, it reestablished a direct relationship between the giver and receiver. Second, it was based on exacting "proper" behavior from the recipient. And finally, it simplified the web of causal attribution and strategy formulation that had so frustrated liberals during the 1970s.

The outstanding feature of the official plan to fight homelessness was its reestablishment of the bond between giver and recipient. Although the activists, like the Coalition for the Homeless, promoted the "entitlement" of the homeless to shelter and worked for government action to achieve this, the vast majority of action was directed at voluntarism and individual responsibility. Always in the forefront of the movement to evade governmental responsibility, Mayor Koch called for New York City's 3,500 houses of worship to take in ten homeless people each, and then berated synagogues for not doing their part.[27] Indeed, one notable feature of the homeless problem was the extent to which churches, lay organizations, and individuals did respond to the need by carrying out food drives, setting up shelters, and providing aid.

One of the reasons for this response was the comportment of the recipients. Although much attention was paid to their negative physical characteristics (bad smell, ulcerated sores), this was contrasted with their almost saintlike spirits. Docility and gratitude, not anger and suspicion, were the general images of the homeless. Thus, even for those who did not consciously advocate it, the reestablishment of a "proper" gift relationship was one element of the popularity of the homeless.

Finally, the homeless cut through the tangled web of causality that was typical of poverty policy in the 1970s. Although advocates attempted to draw continuities between the homeless and the explanations of poverty in the 1970s, the massive response of the public simplified the situation. For example, in my experience, a discussion of whether a shelter was a degrading form of aid for the homeless could be cut off with the claim, "People are hungry and cold. That's all there is to

it." Although true enough, the homeless may have actually functioned to reduce the willingness of Americans to explore the complexities of need in the 1980s.

After two decades of guilt and worry, the framing of the homeless issue served to reestablish the gift relationship of a bygone era. Indeed, a particular irony emerged as the old "worthy" and "unworthy" distinction took on a new meaning. As I have noted, in the nineteenth century, the symbol of the worthy poor was the single mother (assumed to be widowed), and that of the unworthy poor was the vagrant and tramp. By the 1970s, the images had been reversed. It was the single mother (assumed not to be married), like those who came to Washington to denounce President Nixon's Family Assistance Plan ("You can't force me to work. . . . You better give me something better than I'm getting on welfare"), who came to symbolize the unworthy,[28] while the docile and appreciative homeless, like Bernice Martin, who asked Mayor Koch, "Can I go to the one [shelter] on Lafayette Street?" became the image of the worthy poor.[29]

The implications of this reversal are important. The distinction between worthiness and unworthiness is often seen as locked in demographic characteristics, while others have argued that it has fluctuated with the needs of the labor market. The experience of the homeless, however, suggests that a key element is comportment. Those poor who are willing to be polite and quiet, grateful and guilty, have a much better chance to be seen favorably than those who are assertive and loud, nondeferential and unbowed. The gift relationship, with all of its complexity, still haunts our welfare system. The American style of welfare remains.[30]

The development of the homeless as a public problem poses a severe dilemma for advocacy groups, such as the Coalition for the Homeless, that have been instrumental in drawing attention to the issue. Although the public prominence the problem has been given will undoubtedly provide more alternatives for those who wish to avail themselves of the services, the way the issue has been cast will frustrate the longer-term goal of activists: to use the homeless as an example of the general inequities of the American social welfare system.

In a sense they share an old radical dilemma. As long as radical activists clearly enunciated their position, they remained isolated from the mainstream of American politics. Only in those times when their concerns converged with those of a wider political sphere—the Socialist Party's antiwar stand in 1917, the Unemployment Councils in the early 1930s—have radicals broken out of this isolation. In the end, they have either had to face repression or surrender their issues to those who had different goals in mind.[31] One hopes that advocates for the homeless will not face this choice; however, events of the past two years do not provide much ground for optimism.

Notes

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1. Herbert Blumer, "Social Problems as Collective Behavior," *Social Problems* 18, no. 3 (Winter 1971): 298–306.
2. Ibid., p. 298.
3. Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1967).
4. On poverty in the immediate postwar period, see James T. Patterson, *America's Struggle against Poverty 1900–1980* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 78–81.
5. Joseph R. Gusfield, *The Culture of Public Problems: Drinking, Driving, and the Symbolic Order* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1981).
6. This leads to an important aside: the limited role of social science in the process of problem definition. For example, in spite of its prevalence during the 1950s, poverty was practically ignored by social researchers during that decade. Only after popular writers such as Michael Harrington and Dwight McDonald focused public attention on it did professional social researchers begin to "discover" poverty (Patterson, p. 99).
7. *New York Times* (January 4, 1980).
8. *New York Times* (August 27, 1981); Kim Hopper et al., *One Year Later: The Homeless Poor in New York City, 1982* (New York: Community Service Society, 1982), pp. 20–23.
9. *New York Times* (February 15, 1981), (March 21, 1981); A. M. Rousseau, *Shopping Bag Ladies: Homeless Women Speak about Their Lives* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1981); Ellen Baxter and Kim Hopper, *Private Lives/Public Spaces: Homeless Adults on the Streets of New York City* (New York: Community Service Society, 1981).
10. *Philadelphia Inquirer* (November 11, 1981).
11. *New York Times* (January 27, 1982).
12. *New York Times* (November 24, 1983).
13. *New York Times* (December 30, 1980).
14. *New York Times* (March 28, 1981), (March 25, 1983).
15. Cynthia Armstrong et al., "Homeless Adults: A Participant Observation Study" (M.S.W. project, University of Pennsylvania, 1982), pp. 65–66.
16. *New York Times* (December 15, 1982).
17. Armstrong et al., p. 65.
18. John R. Coleman, "Diary of a Homeless Man," *New York* (February 21, 1983), p. 30.
19. See, e.g., Alan Gartner, Colin Greer, and Frank Riessman, eds., *What Reagan Is Doing to Us* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982).
20. Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 251.
21. Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1967).
22. Ibid., p. 253.
23. Ibid.
24. Michael B. Katz, *Poverty and Policy in American History* (New York: Academic Press, 1983), pp. 239–40.
25. Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed and How They Fail* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977).
26. Patterson, p. 179.
27. *New York Times* (December 11, 1981), (January 20, 1983).
28. Patterson, p. 195.
29. *New York Times* (March 25, 1983).

30. See Katz, chap. 1, for a discussion of the charity organization movement's view of comportment.

31. Hopper et al., pp. 51–55; Aileen S. Kraditor ("American Radical Historians on Their Heritage," *Past and Present*, no. 56 [August 1972], pp. 136–53) presents a provocative theory of the role of radicals in the American political system.