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WHO'S HOMELESS AND WHOSE HOMELESS?

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Abstract

This paper discusses what the persistent construction of 'the homeless' and the revitalized term 'our homeless' include, imply, and exclude, respectively. Departing from Simmel's essay 'The poor', in which the poor is defined as the stratum that gets (or would get) public assistance, I claim that "the homeless" comprise only those to whom the society, municipalities and charities acknowledge a responsibility to give shelter. 'Our homeless' tends to reinforce the boundaries towards the tens of thousands of people within the national territory that lack shelter or are temporarily accommodated by other authorities or private providers or individuals. This means, in turn, that actual homelessness in part has institutional causes.

Through an analysis of debates in the Swedish Parliament I investigate in what contexts and to what effect the concept of '(our) homeless' is used or avoided, respectively, and how this category is politically and morally related and distinguished from other homeless groups in the country.

Keywords: 'our homeless', homeless definitions, houseless categories, institutional causes

Introduction

Many years ago, when I went through old records of poor relief in the 19th century in a little Swedish town I was surprised to see the consistency of the list of recipients. The same widows, disabled men and orphans received alms by the church by Midsummer and Christmas every year. These people were called "our poor". When poor relief in 1848 was regulated as an obligation of the secular Poverty Board, there was initially some discussion on whether the 'regular poor' would continue to get poor relief, even though they sometimes did not qualify according to the new legislation. Simmel (1908/1971) referred to this kind of obligation as 'moral induction', i.e., the duty to continue to give alms to someone one has habitually given to previously. These considerations tell us something about the weight of institutionalised conceptions of poverty, poor people and obligations to assist them, and I will argue that similar tendencies prevail regarding homelessness.

Later in the 19th century another distinction became common in this town, namely, between poor people living and registered in the town and 'non-residential poor', who had moved into the town without permission of the Poverty Board or who had lived there too few years to qualify for relief, or where the cause of their poverty could be localised to a previous place of residence. According to the legislation, the Board was only obliged to provide for the local poor, while non-residential poor people were to be expelled or transferred to their home towns. This distinction was common in all European cities as a means to delimit the municipal costs for the poor, as well as a measure to keep contagious diseases out, ever since the 16th century (Geremek 1994). It is also reflected in the current European refugee policies.

While the balance and dominance of individual versus structural causes of homelessness have been debated continuously in political fora, in interventions and prevention, as well as in research (see, e.g., Neale 1997, Fitzpatrick 2005, Somerville 2013, Bullen 2015), the *institutional* causes and perspectives have been less investigated. These include what kind of housing situations, citizenship, national and local belonging etc. that qualify a person for being counted, regarded and treated as 'homeless' in a specific local and historical context. The aim of this paper is to show how the term 'homeless', and in particular 'our homeless' (see below) rely on institutional norms, rules, routines and practices that were essentially formed in the late 1900s, but which reflect the ancient, premodern view of the poor and probably is reinforced today by the new nationalist sentiments.

In his classic essay 'The Poor', Georg Simmel (1908/1971) reflects on the definition and position of the poor and concludes that "(t)he poor person, sociologically speaking, is the individual who receives assistance because of his lack of means" (p. 178). Through this, the poor is related to the society in a way similar to the stranger: he is both outside (confronting it), and inside it (a member of the collectivity). Simmel also highlights that although there is an obligation to provide for the poor, there is no corresponding right to relief on behalf of the poor. Instead, the poverty board is accountable to the tax-payers, and regulation and rule-bound services are developed to satisfy this constituency, rather than the wanting poor.

I want to take Simmel's definition and delimitation of the poor as a point of departure when discussing the definition of 'homeless', as well as the expression 'our homeless', which occurs now and then in political speeches, letters to the editor, or debate articles. What does this term mean, when is it used, why and who are included and excluded, respectively? My examples are from the public debate in Sweden in recent years, and this kind of wording might be specific for this country, but the practical distinction is probably global and has obvious historical precedents.

In the analysis, I will make use of a specific mixture of discourse analytical tools, such as. subject positions, equivalence chains, modality, contrast structures and distinctions. Special attention will be paid to implicit moral accounts and judgements.

The first part of the paper deals with the issue of who is regarded or referred to as homeless by concerned public authorities in Sweden.¹ I will also give brief information on other groups of people in Sweden, whose housing situation qualify for the official definition of 'homeless', but who are named and counted differently and targeted by other policies and authorities. In the second part of the paper I will present and analyse quotes gathered from a few debate articles in the media, but primarily from motions, interpellations and minutes from the Parliament² in recent years (September 2015–June 2017), where 'our homeless' is used and related to other homeless groups by Members of the Parliament.

Except for a summary, the concluding discussion returns to the claim that institutional rules and traditions not only still to a great extent determine definitions and obligations towards homelessness, but also influence our thinking and feeling about various vulnerable groups and their rights.

In the rest of the paper I will use houseless and homeless interchangeably, as synonyms, while 'homeless' will stand for the minority that is institutionally included as such.

I Who's Homeless?

Official definitions

In Sweden, homelessness is a problem that since the 1990s is dealt with by social authorities at central and local levels, as long as it is associated with other social problems, such as mental health problems or substance abuse or children at risk. However, since social services is an obligation of the municipalities, the concerned national authority only gives services to the municipalities through

¹ The Swedish words for 'homeless' or 'houseless' do not appear in the legislation, such as in the Social Services Act.

² All parliament discussions, motions, interpellations and written questions by the Members of the Parliament, reports from the Parliament committees, as well as the Ministers' oral and written responses etc. are available at the Parliament's website (www.riksdagen.se). All speeches in the Parliament discussions and debates are transcribed, numbered and equipped with the name and party belonging of the speaker. In this paper I will refer to such speeches as 'posts', followed by the name and party of the MP, the number of the protocol and the date of the Parliament discussion.

national mappings and recommendations. The fact that people who are not viewed as vulnerable cannot find housing is treated as an unavoidable market effect and no authority is obliged to deal with it. There is no enforceable right to housing in Sweden, although the municipalities are obliged to plan for housing provision for their inhabitants.

The Migration Board is responsible for asylum-seekers' accommodation and subsistence, but the social services are expected to take care of and accommodate lone-coming asylum-seeking children (younger than 18). When refugees are granted residence permits the municipalities are responsible for their housing and introduction to the Swedish society during the first two years, although the central state still pays. The police are responsible for expelling people whose asylum applications are rejected or who enter Sweden without the right documents or without applying for asylum. Citizens of other EU-countries who have no work in Sweden are allowed to stay in the country as tourist for three months but no central or local authority is obliged to see to that they have accommodation, with some exceptions for children in emergency situations.

National mappings and their respondents

The official national definition of homelessness in Sweden is claimed to be influenced of the ETHOS definition (see FEANTSA 2006), i.e., focusing on the housing situation, but when used in mappings and counting, the results are coloured by the choice of survey respondents and questions. Since 1993, the National Board of Health and Welfare (NBHW) is counting the homeless in Sweden every sixth year.³ On its website, the NBHW claims that this mapping comprises “persons with Swedish citizenship and persons who have temporary or permanent residence permit in Sweden and are homeless during Week 14” and who are open cases within the local social services, care institutions or NGOs. By this definition, asylum-seekers and undocumented migrants are excluded. In addition, the NBHW explicitly excludes persons placed in special housing for disabled persons, youths and lone-coming refugee children who are taken care of by the social services, as well as persons born abroad without residence permit in Sweden and “persons from the rest of Europe who reside in the municipality but lack anchorage/rootedness there (EU/ESS-third country citizens)” (NBHW 2017a). In 2011, 34,000 individuals were found homeless according to the NBHW (2012). Another section of this authority counts all clients from 21 years and older who were assisted with accommodation by the local social services on the 1st of November every year. In 2016, the number was 11,700 (NBHW 2017b).

Local counts

Municipalities decide for themselves whether and how often they want to count their local homeless people and how these should be defined and delimited. Hence, their definitions and operationalisations differ somewhat. Here I will only mention the three biggest cities' routines. *Stockholm City* gathers information every second year on homeless people who during 24 hours 25–26 September were subject to applications, investigations or interventions with the local social services in the city or with shelter providing NGOs or enterprises funded by the City. 2,420 individuals were found to be homeless in 2016. The target group explicitly excludes ‘vulnerable EU-citizens’ (Stockholm City 2016, p. 5).

Göteborg City uses the NBHW definition with its specific exclusions but counts homeless inhabitants during a period of two weeks. Respondents are social workers with the social services and some outreach social workers employed by NGOs. In the 2016 count, 3,926 adults and 1,693 children were found homeless (Göteborg City 2016).

The social services in *Malmö City* count their homeless clients on a certain day in October each year. There is no explicit exclusion of asylum-seekers, undocumented or EU-migrants but since these groups are mostly not assisted by the local social services they are probably not counted. In October

³ Such mappings have been conducted 1993, 1999, 2005 and 2011. The results of the latest count (April 2017) will be presented by November 30, 2017.

2016, 1,739 adults were 'structurally homeless' and 542 'socially homeless'; on top of that 887 children were reported to be homeless (Malmö City 2017).

Other Houseless Categories

According to the usual interpretation of the Social Services Act, the social authorities in Sweden have no obligation to provide shelter for adult people who are 'only' homeless. Such people are therefore mostly rejected if they apply for shelter or services in the social welfare offices. As a result, the homeless people who can be counted through the local authorities or NGOs often have additional problems (e.g., with substance abuse or mental health) or care for children. Nevertheless, the cities of both Malmö and Göteborg report growing shares of 'structurally homeless people', who are well functioning but too poor to get access to housing on the general rental market.

We do not know the number of homeless people outside the social records, but according to an NGO working against homelessness among young people, there were 353 000 homeless youths in 2016 (jagvillhabostad.nu 2016), and in the housing queues of Stockholm, more than half a million were on the waiting list.

Then we have all 'aliens' without housing.

Asylum seekers

The Migration Board has statistics over the number of asylum seekers in the country, regardless of whether they stay in reception centres ('ABO') or privately, with friends ('EBO'). In December 2015, 181 890 persons were registered in the reception system (Migration Board 2016, p. 40); on February 1, 2017, the number was 115 360, and on the 1st of July 92,828, about half of whom were staying in reception centres. Many municipalities complain over the fact that their immigrant inhabitants feel obliged to accept lodging relatives, which implies overcrowding and financial strain, since asylum seekers are not entitled to any allowances if they choose to stay outside the reception centres (EBO). But according to the NBHW's housing-oriented definitions of homelessness, ABO implies homelessness, too. Not only is this kind of accommodation insecure and allows no privacy, but the standards are exceptionally low. In its annual account for 2015, the Migration Board (2016, p. 42) lists three kinds of accommodation in the ABO system: Apartments (several households share the same flat); Corridor living; and Procured Temporary Accommodation (collective living in youth hostels, student homes or previous nursing homes). The Board also declared that the number of people in a given space had increased:

"Three to four persons in a one-room flat, compared to one or two persons previously. In procured accommodation six individuals in the same room compared to normally four individuals" (Migration Board 2016, p. 45).

Dormitories, tents and caravans were also used during 2015 (ibid., p. 45), when unusually many refugees arrived, until the border to Denmark was closed on Nov. 12, 2015.

'Newly arrived'

Despite agreements between the central state and the municipalities, and legislation that gives the state the right to assign each municipality a certain number of them, many refugees who have been granted residence permits, so-called 'newly arrived' are forced to live under similar conditions in the receiving municipalities while waiting for normal housing (NBHBP 2015), or have to remain in reception centres until the municipalities declare that they are ready to receive them.⁴

In the Parliament debates, the newly arrived are sometimes included among the homeless:

⁴ According to the Migration Board's statistics, 12,200 migrants with valid residence permits were still not received by the assigned municipalities on the 1st of July, 2017.

“Both of us [The MP and the addressed Minister] are aware of the fact that there is an acute shortage of housing. The housing queues grow, and the municipalities are heavily burdened with organising housing for the newly arrived.

On top of that, the annual report on homelessness shows that homelessness in Malmö increased with 30 percent during 2016. We see lots of low income people, more families with children and now also more newly arrived becoming homeless.” (Post 46, Ewa Thalén Finné, Moderate Party⁵, Prot. 2016/17:53, Jan. 12, 2017)

The newly arrived are in this quote legitimate clients of the municipalities and referred to as being at risk of homelessness, but at the same time they are separated as a group not only from those in the housing queues, but also from families with children and low-income people, although they many times would qualify as both, through the ‘now also’ in the last sentence. At the same time ‘homelessness’ is distinguished from those in the housing queue and the newly arrived, as it is placed ‘On top of that’. This is but one example of the fact that ‘homeless’ in the political debate only includes people for whom the local social authorities are accountable.

‘Vulnerable EU-migrants’

The ‘vulnerable EU migrants’ or (EU citizens) is a relatively new concept and phenomenon in Sweden, dating from 2007 when Romania and Bulgaria became members of the EU. In colloquial Swedish, the term refers to street begging people, often Roma people, from these two countries. They mostly organise their own temporary shelter family-wise in tents, caravans, cars or sheds in circumstances that often qualify for being categorised as sleeping rough. Although a few charities and NGOs, sometimes with limited public subsidies, have arranged night shelters and provisional facilities for hygiene, food and rest for this group in the big cities, these migrants are generally left to themselves (SKL 2014a).⁶ They are not entitled to regular social services or shelter and are not counted in homelessness mappings, but estimations vary around 4,000 individuals (SOU 2016:6). With regard to the subject of this paper, this group is especially interesting, since it is part of the same European community but not regular or registered Swedish inhabitants, and hence has a situation typical for the stranger, rather than the poor in Simmel’s view, as well as for ‘the alien or non-residential poor’ and the vagrants in the medieval European city states (Geremek 1994). The latter categories were often the first to be excluded, punished for begging and sometimes physically expelled when towns and cities wanted to reduce their expenses.⁷

In January 2015, the Government appointed a national coordinator⁸ to suggest measures for this group. One 10-page chapter of his final report had the heading “Places for accommodation and evictions” but it was all about how evictions of informal camps could be facilitated. He wrote:

“The message from the Swedish society should be clear. EU citizens are welcome here, at the same time Swedish legislation shall be applied. It is prohibited to reside in parks or other public places or on private land.” (SOU 2016:6, p. 9)

⁵ The Moderate Party is the name of the conservative party in the Parliament.

⁶ According to a survey conducted by the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SKL) in 2014, one third of the municipalities had offered emergency shelter anytime to this group, while 57 % had offered help to travel to their home countries (SKL 2014a).

⁷ The Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SKL 2014b, p. 2) states: “A EU citizen can, according to Ch. 8, § 9, Aliens Act (2005:716) be rejected from Sweden during the first three months after arriving here if he or she has shown to be an unreasonable burden to the welfare system according to the Social Services Act.”

⁸ Recently the ex-coordinator of vulnerable EU-migrants publicly declared that he saw a prohibition of begging as a suitable means to get rid of these Roma people who keep begging in the streets (TT, April 24, 2017).

Consequently, new legislation (SFS 2017:467) that facilitates eviction of settlements from private and public land has come into force in July 2017 (see further below).

Recently, the Danish Government proposed that the punishment for street begging will be 14 days imprisonment, unconditioned and immediately upon the first breach of the begging prohibition. The reason was allegedly that the Mayor in Copenhagen wanted to put an end to Roma people who sleep rough or in the city's churches, but of course the text of the new legislation is ethnically neutral (*Dagens Nyheter*, June 2, 2017). The law was adopted by the Danish Parliament and is valid since July 2017.⁹

Although it has been suggested and debated, Sweden has so far not prohibited street begging, but the municipalities are encouraged to find their own solutions to the situation. Malmö provides an example. In this city there are no shelter places for homeless EU migrants except for in the winter, and the social services offer them but a return ticket to Romania. According to a newspaper article, the police in Malmö awake EU migrants sleeping in cars and make them step out of the car every second hour. This is possible due to a new local rule of order that prohibits sleeping in cars or tents outside a specific camping site. The police may then remove the car and all that is in it (including passports and medication), and it will cost the owner 2,100 SEK (\approx 270 €) to get it back. This systematic disturbing of car sleepers is defined by the police as 'crime prevention' or 'interruption of on-going crime'. The city has also defined sleeping in the streets as 'disorderly conduct'. Those who protest risk being arrested by the police and driven to the countryside, and then released ten miles outside the city (*Sydsvenskan*, June 3, 2017).¹⁰

Undocumented migrants

The number of undocumented migrants is of course unknown. However, the Migration Board (2016) reported in December 2015 that there were 7 762 'open return cases' with the police, and in its annual report for 2016, the Board declared that it had transferred over 8,000 cases of rejected asylum applications to the police; 5,730 of these had absconded and 2,240 were taken into custody in order to be expelled by force. These cases refer to people who have refused to return voluntarily, why their cases have been turned over to the police for forced expulsion. According to the Aliens Act the police are entitled to check records in the social services for contact information.¹¹ This means that in case families after all have been assisted by the social services they are easily located by the police and expelled from the country.

In the Parliament discussions, it is not unusual to verbally distinguish between undocumented migrants and homeless people, as in the following argument against a sharpened asylum policy:

"... those who have been refused asylum might instead turn up as homeless or undocumented in our municipalities and counties. Consequently, this means that costs are transferred from the state to municipalities and counties." (Post 2, Håkan Svenneling, Left Party, Prot. 2015/16:199 27 April 2016)

The post refers to the fact that the costs for asylum seekers are covered by the Migration Board while the financial responsibility to care for or shelter 'ordinary' homeless people and perhaps also to some extent undocumented migrants in emergency situations are carried by the municipalities.

⁹ The first foreigner to be arrested according to this law was actually a Swede (*Dagens Nyheter*, June 25, 2017).

¹⁰ This kind of repressive treatment of homeless people has been described previously (Sahlin 2009), but it has not had the status of official local policy, and in combination with the exclusion of EU migrants from local shelters, it is obvious that it targets particularly 'alien' homeless people.

¹¹ In Malmö, the social services had given certain emergency assistance to some families with children, despite the fact that they had been denied asylum. In November 2016, the police required – and received – contact information from the social services that helped them find some of these families and take them into custody and then expel them from the country (*Sydsvenskan* Nov. 29, 2016).

In addition to those who have been refused asylum, an unknown number of individuals have entered Sweden without seeking asylum. Many undocumented migrants are in fact quite well anchored in municipalities where they may have lived and worked for many years before they are found and expelled by the police (see, e.g., Holgersson 2011).

The indefinable

According to an MP, there are also other groups of homeless people – here called immigrants – who are not targeted or attended to by any central or local authority.

“...I want to highlight a growing group of immigrants in Sweden who are living in a legal grey zone. /.../ They come from, inter alia, African countries and have received residence permits in southern Europe and come here because they are entitled to do that during three months. When they stay longer than they have the right to do, they become like the undocumented, but the police do not try to reject them. (Post 3, Roland Utbult, Christ. Dem., Prot. 2015/16:4, Sept. 18, 2015)

What solution is there? Mr Minister, either we need to incorporate these persons in the Swedish society completely, or they have to be rejected according to the rules we've got. We cannot go on like this! It is not worthy these people; it is not worthy Sweden” (Post 6, Roland Utbult, Christ. Dem., Prot. 2015/16:4, Sept. 18, 2015)

The last post is characterised by a rather strong modality – no signs of hesitation or reservation (hedges) – and although the group presented is quite sharply delineated as third country immigrants to Southern Europe who come to Sweden for undeclared work, it is presented as indefinable according to the existent repertoire of categories. And this is the main problem, according to this MP (a claim that resembles the endeavour of the “gardening state”, see, e.g., Bauman 2001). In addition, the question to the Minister is formed as either-or: either ‘we’ should accept and integrate these people, or ‘they’ should be excluded from the country. The in-between, grey, neither-nor position is presented as unworthy.

None of the homeless mappings conducted by the NBHW has included homeless people who are asylum seekers, undocumented migrants or EU-migrants, since these groups are target groups of other authorities and policies and/or are not entitled to services, and definitely not to accommodation. Neither can they get shelter through NGOs depending on public funding, or through private landlords, since they lack Swedish ID-numbers, which are necessary for renting rooms or flats. But the hundreds of thousands of people who ‘only’ lack housing and have no other social or permission problems are also defined out from the ‘homeless’ concept.

To sum up, the number of people without homes, and whose housing situations fit with the official definition of ‘homeless’ in Sweden, greatly exceeds the number of homeless people targeted, counted, reported and handled by the social authorities. Despite the official housing-led definition, ‘homeless’ has become an institutional category that excludes the majority of people in Sweden without homes, who are targeted by other authorities, policies and legislation. To paraphrase Simmel (1908/1971), the ‘homeless’ are only those individuals who receive shelter (or support to housing) because of their lack of housing, not all people without housing.

II Whose Homeless?

In this second part of the paper, I will investigate how (our) homeless are defined, delimited, described and distinguished from other houseless groups in the political debate. I will also look for descriptions and characterisation of these: Whose homeless are they? What are they like, and what are they if they are not homeless?

'Our Homeless'

'Our', like 'belonging', has a double connotation of property and community. Being someone's property entails exclusion and degradation on the one hand, but belonging to a group, a 'we', means inclusion and equality on the other. These aspects of 'our homeless' will be highlighted first in this section of the paper. Next, I will focus on how '(our) homeless' in the public debate is being related to other social problems. Then I will consider the naming and description of houseless people excluded from the category of 'homeless', as well as how they are being morally related to '(our) homeless', including reasons for this distinction and which political function the concept 'homeless' seems to serve.

Our protégés and friends

The expression 'our homeless' is sometimes used by the charities, NGOs and their supporters in the Parliament, mainly Christian Democrats, referring especially to clients with shelters and help organisations. In such a context, 'our' has a somewhat paternalistic flavour, which was highlighted in a media debate some years ago, when several NGOs and individual migrants objected to being called 'our migrants' by people in power.

The term 'our homeless' also appears in contexts where it could perhaps be interpreted as 'our friends/colleagues'. Rolf Nilsson, former homeless himself and representing the Association Stockholm's Homeless has published frequent letters to the editor voicing criticism of the society and its authorities. In one such letter,¹² he claims that the Swedish idea of homeless people being in need of special treatment, support and control implies that 30,000 employees get their salaries thanks to the homeless. "So, the help intended for our homeless becomes instead a help to keep already established people occupied" (Nilsson 2008).

Homelessness, misery and crime

Combinations of attributes that appear so often that one of the words gives associations to the others are sometimes called chains of equivalence (LaClau & Mouffe 1985). For instance, 'law and order' make the reader think of law when 'order' is mentioned, and vice versa. Although the context and syntax may help defining the relations between the words, such as if one property causes, includes or is caused by the other, the nature of this relationship may remain obscure. Not least in the Parliament debates, 'homelessness' is often combined with several other problem terms and qualities representing misery, like in the following quotes:

"Because of substance abuse, mental ill-health, debts, insufficient economy, relational problems etc., about 35,000 people in Sweden are homeless." (Post 32, Sofia Modigh, Christ. Dem., prot. 2016/17:81, March 16, 2017).

"... an NGO in Gothenburg, which works with people who have ended up in homelessness, substance abuse, psychiatric problems or several parts of this simultaneously." (Post 55, Roland Utbult, Christ. Dem., Prot. 2016/17:84, March 22, 2017)

"... the substance abuse policy that has been formed for decades up till now has highly reinforced stigmatisation and exclusion. It's a lot about shame, guilt, punishment, refusing clean syringes, refusing care and treatment, deficient social care, homelessness." (Post 31, Karin Rågsjö, Left Party, Prot. 2015/16: 121, June 16, 2016)

In the first of these three quotes homelessness is presented as a result of other individual problems, in the other it is coexisting with other problems and in the third it is caused by a faulty drug policy, but they all underline the association of homelessness with individual problems, especially substance abuse.

¹² Its heading, "Actually, who are helping our homeless?" can in Swedish also be read as "whom are our homeless actually helping?"

Although the term 'homeless' is associated with drug abuse, it is not connected to being 'criminal'. On the contrary, homelessness is sometimes clearly distanced from criminality. In a debate on punishments, an MP states that criminals are not homeless:

"...almost all these criminals live on welfare today. None of them is homeless or have to commit crime to get an income or their daily food." (Post 47, Adam Marttinen, Swed. Dem., Prot. 2016/17:41, Dec. 7, 2016)

"There are no homeless criminals today, but these persons [the criminals] have, in most cases, an apartment and assistance so that they manage their subsistence." (Post 49, Adam Marttinen, Swed. Dem., Prot. 2016/17:41, Dec. 7, 2016)

Note the objective modality – this is presented as objective facts, not as thoughts or personal opinions. Through presenting homelessness as opposite to criminality, and the two phenomena as mutually exclusive, this MP seems to argue that criminals deserve no compassion and, indirectly, that homeless people do.

To conclude, 'our homeless' is generally used for homeless Swedish residents who are mentioned with certain compassion, which is sometimes encouraged through combining and integrating the term with other individual problems, resulting in an image of miserable, helpless people, worthy of sympathy, compassion and help. This impression is strengthened by the fact that they are not associated – and occasionally clearly dissociated – with criminality.

However, 'our homeless' is also used to distinguish one group – often those who are claimed to be worthy of (more) help – from other groups of people without housing.

Others' Homeless – or Homeless Others

In this sub-section I will expand the focus to also include how 'homeless' is distinguished from and morally related to other groups, whose housing conditions and inability to improve them fits with the official definition of homelessness.

Homeless people in other countries?

Self-evidently, the Parliament discussions concern things that the Parliament or Government can do something about. Nevertheless, the term 'homeless' is occasionally used in Parliament discussions (mostly by the Left Party MPs) for people in other countries who have lost their accommodation after natural catastrophes or due to war actions:

"I visited the West Saharan refugee camps in December last year and could see with my own eyes the disaster caused by the rain. There were thousands of demolished houses and schools and roads and about 20,000 homeless families." (Post 2, Lotta Johnsson Fornave, Left Party, Prot. 2016/17:18, Oct. 20, 2016).

Here, people have become homeless when their temporary refugee camp has been destroyed; conversely, they were not homeless before even if their accommodation was clearly deficient and insecure. Although the Swedish authorities are not responsible for these homeless people, the suggestion of the MP is to make the Government take on such a responsibility through financial contributions.

Both left and right parties sometimes highlight homelessness as a symptom of government or policy failure. An MP from the Liberal Party claims that a completely deregulated housing market will end homelessness and that countries with a more neoliberal housing policy has succeeded to do that:

“I can guarantee that people are not homeless in Oslo, Copenhagen, Helsinki and Reykjavik. /.../ Go for study visits in Oslo, Copenhagen and Helsinki and see for yourself whether people are homeless there. They are not. /.../ It is, in practice, ever so easy to get housing in Oslo or Copenhagen.” (Post 127, Robert Hanna, Lib. Party, Prot. 2015/16:85, March 23, 2016).

Here the word ‘homeless’ is not per definition constrained to Sweden, but the MP claims that the phenomenon does not exist in neighbouring countries.

In the Parliament, as well as in many public declarations, the responsibility for homeless people from other countries are often explicitly put on the countries of origin, like in the following statement by the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SKL):

“The EU citizens who support themselves through begging in Sweden are primarily Romanian and Bulgarian, belonging to the ethnic group Roma. The individuals who beg in Sweden are a result from the discrimination against Roma in Romania and Bulgaria. SKL thinks that the international cooperation must be reinforced in order to put pressure on the concerned countries to take responsibility for their citizens.” (SKL 2015, p. 2)

Note that homelessness is not mentioned in this quote, only citizenship, ethnicity, begging and discrimination in the countries of origin. The message is clear: Swedish municipalities are not responsible for other countries’ citizens. Just like in the 19th century, the blame and obligation are placed on the jurisdiction where the problem first emerged.

Native vs alien homeless

In most cases ‘homeless’ refers only to homeless clients of the Swedish social services or the charities and does not include homeless people in other countries, or from other countries, unless they are permanently settled and integrated in Sweden. The newly arrived migrants and asylum-seekers are not only excluded from the ‘homeless’ concept, but sometimes also positioned as antagonists to the ‘homeless Swedes’ – especially by the right-wing party Sweden Democrats (SD).

“The housing shortage, which primarily harms the young ones, the elderly and families with children, is ... outright alarming in many parts of the country. For instance, we have heard during several years about young people who cannot leave their homes due to the shortage of housing and about students forced to stay in tents all over the country. Swedish Television reported recently that residents of a nursing home in Värmdö [municipality] had to stay in containers.

At the same time Sweden has in recent years received hundreds of thousands of asylum-seekers, most of whom without real refugee reasons, which also is the main explanation of the current situation. We can see today how municipalities give precedence in the housing queues to so-called newly arrived, while other municipalities choose to offer them single family houses and owner-occupied flats. In many municipalities, the newly arrived are also offered expensive hotel rooms. This occurs at the same time as the proportion of homeless Swedes increases. The situation is deeply unfair and discriminating.

/.../

Minister Eriksson, what measures are you prepared to take to improve the situation for the Swedes who are displaced on the housing market?” (Written question 2016/17:730, Rickard Jomshoff, Swed. Dem., Jan. 26, 2017)

Although it starts with presenting groups that are obstructed from getting housing, the rest of the post is explicitly assigning blame and positioning groups as favoured or disfavoured, respectively. The victims are homeless Swedes, young students and nursing home residents,¹³ while the favoured groups are asylum-seekers (without refugee reasons) and the newly arrived. The blame is primarily put on the

¹³ The MP refers to media news about residents of a nursing home who were temporarily accommodated in barracks outside the ordinary building while it was renovated, which probably had nothing to do with the local shortage of housing.

municipalities, that give, or ‘choose to offer’, attractive housing and ‘expensive hotel rooms’, but also on the state that receives too many asylum-seekers. Accommodation and housing for the newly arrived or asylum-seekers are allegedly provided at the cost of housing for young and old Swedes, and homeless Swedes; the repeated “‘at the same time’ underlines both the asymmetry and the correlation.

The image of old, fragile people living in ‘containers’ versus refugees (without refugee reasons) offered luxurious housing illustrates a rhetorical device called ‘contrast structure’ (Smith 1978), aiming at reinforcing an anomaly, in this case the injustice. ‘Homeless’ is only used for Swedes.

EU migrants are also sometimes positioned as competitors to (Swedish) homeless people, although the battle is now about shelter places. In the following quote, accommodation for EU migrants is allegedly organised at the expense of shelter for Swedish homeless people in a municipality.

“What about our homeless?”

Why are Swedish rough-sleepers treated differently than poor people from Romania/Bulgaria? During the whole of the 2000s (15 years) it has been reported that there is no room for homeless people in Gävle [Swedish municipality] in the local shelters, there is no accommodation. But now suddenly places have been arranged for foreign EU citizens who have travelled here! Now we want to see that also Swedish homeless get accommodation, immediately.

Justice for us Swedes!” (Letter to the editor, *Gefle Dagblad*, Feb. 27, 2015)

Here, there is a striking absence of responsible agents – people are ‘treated’, problems are ‘reported’, there is no room or accommodation – but ‘foreign EU citizens’ have indeed acted (travelled here). The words ‘now suddenly places have been arranged’ indicate that somebody is deciding and acting after all, and indirectly, could have acted before. ‘us Swedes’ in the end of the letter completes the opposition between the relational pair Swedes – foreigners, where homeless people are included among Swedes, while EU citizens may be poor but primarily are foreigners who travelled here. Again, ‘homeless’ is only used for Swedes.

EU migrants are not only positioned as favoured rivals, but occasionally also as enemies to Swedish homeless people. In a post by an MP from the Sweden Democrats, they are described as criminals victimizing ‘our homeless’:

“These beggars enter staircases, they beg, they pollute in parks and woods, they stand by boats, they attack and steal from our homeless. And the Government just stands watching all this. It is shameful!” (Post 45, Kent Ekeröth, Swed. Dem., Prot. 2015/15:63, Feb. 4, 2016).

Here, ‘our homeless’ serves to reinforce the positioning of the foreign (Roma) beggars as villains. The Government, in turn, is cast – and blamed – as the passive, indifferent bystander, the implication is that it should have taken action not to reduce homelessness, but to punish or exclude the beggars.

Exclusion with a caring face¹⁴

A specific kind of rhetoric is to argue for changes or interventions that would impair the conditions for a certain group in order to prevent the display of unwanted attitudes towards the very same group. Previous examples in Sweden comprise the Discrimination Ombudsman’s recommendation in the 1980s not to let refugees get precedence in the housing queues in order to prevent xenophobic sentiments, as well as arguments for a stricter refugee policy in order to prevent racism and ethnic conflicts. In a debate article journalist Carl Öström warns against the Sweden Democrats’ possible plan to put refugees’ and asylum-seekers’ needs against the ones of Swedish homeless.

¹⁴ Here, I am paraphrasing Dear (1992, p. 290), who has coined the concept ‘NIMBY with a caring face’ for arguments against new housing or institutions in the neighbourhood, with reference to concern for the potential new residents themselves.

“Naturally, the indignation displayed when newly arrived refugees are assigned temporary accommodation upsets Hasse [an interviewed homeless Swede] and other homeless. It is about standards – what is regarded as unacceptable for refugees is commonplace for the homeless.” (Öström 2016)

Note that the author himself distinguishes between ‘refugees’ and ‘homeless’. In an earlier article, Öström contrasted Swedish homeless to homeless EU migrants:

“In the debate the whole focus appears to be directed to homeless EU migrants, particularly Roma people. They are seen all over the country and awake feelings, both positive and negative. There is no doubt that the Roma are one of the most marginalised groups of people in Europe. Many want to help them, which is positive. But in this context homeless Swedes, just like before, fall in the shadow” (Öström 2015).

In the weekly paper *Dagens samhälle*, two professors who have worked and argued for a more humane treatment of poor EU migrants, published a debate article with a heading claiming attention to Swedish homeless people (“Who are engaged in Swedish Homeless?”).

“If we do not take action it might reinforce the xenophobia and the contradictions among groups of homeless people. A generous Swedish refugee policy provides many advantages. We show solidarity and compassion, enrich and internationalise our society, make our population younger and improve our demographics. But if we do not take concrete, effective measures for our own, already vulnerable groups we will add fuel to xenophobia and antagonism grows.” (Swärd & Eriksson 2015)

The authors do not argue for a stricter refugee policy, on the contrary, and they seem to include refugees among ‘groups of homeless people’. But the homeless group in focus, who should be treated better, is ‘our own, already vulnerable groups’. It obviously does not include homeless refugees.

Not homeless, but illegal occupants

If domestic criminals are contrasted to homeless people as two mutually exclusive or at least unrelated categories, the representations of vulnerable EU-migrants are, on the contrary, often mixed with criminals and associated with various crimes and illegalities.

The alleged criminality of the EU migrants is suggested by a particular discourse on ‘organised begging’, as in the debate between an MP from the Moderate Party and the Minister for Home Affairs (in charge of the police) in the Parliament, following the former’s interpellation:

“According to a survey conducted by Swedish Television there may be between 4000 and 5000 persons in Sweden who are begging for their survival. About 80 per cent are claimed to come from Romania, and the majority is said to be Roma, vulnerable in their own country. In addition, there are similar groups from Bulgaria, and youths from Morocco – who all dwell in public environments and are strongly associated with crime like pickpocketing and drug selling.” (Interpellation 2016/17:571 by Jesper Skalberg Karlsson, Mod. Party)

Note the non-specific ‘who all’ – to the reader it is not clear if it refers only to the Morocco youths or also to the begging EU migrants (who have previously not at all been associated with drug-selling and pick-pocketing in the public discourse). The interpellation continues:

“The Swedish Prime Minister has said that begging in Sweden shall and must cease. /.../ In spite of this, the problem with crime coupled to the vagrant EU migrants continues. In the city and county of Stockholm, it has gone so far that people who work with park cleaning have to carry assault alarm with direct connection to SOS alarm. The development is horrifying and negative.” (Ibid.)

Again, the association between the two phenomena – begging and park cleaners' assault alarms – is surprising, mysterious and without any specific backing or reference. In the Parliament debate that followed, the MP developed more crime images:

“... I want to highlight the part of begging where criminal actors control vulnerable people's lives, expose them to human trafficking and oppress them for own economic gain. It can be about exploiting the situation of Roma people without being Roma. /.../ It can also be about men, often the head of the family, who force wife and children to beg in Sweden. /.../ We must recognise that many activities surrounding begging and beggars are criminal and problematic. (Post 30, Jesper Skalberg Karlsson, Mod. Party, Prot. 2016/17:124, June 26, 2017).

The Minister of Home Affairs responded that “above all, we shall sharpen the enforcement of the law” (Post 31, *ibid.*), but the MP then goes on with a concrete suggestion:

“Personally, I do not believe that a prohibition is the whole solution, since most of the things these people are occupied with is already illegal. /.../ we need to facilitate for the police to work to suppress begging and the associated crime.

As we know, many problems concern cars /.../ when these vehicles, which are often deregistered and may occupy others' land, are confiscated, the police must keep them when waiting to destroy them. /.../ An efficient change is to allow the police to immediately destroy cars of modest value.” (Post 32, Jesper Skalberg Karlsson, Mod. Party, *ibid.*)

Through consistently associating beggars with crime, whether as victims or perpetrators, this MP manages to equalise (legal) begging with a variety of crimes and criminal activities, and with crime in general. He never clearly spells out that the Roma beggars should be expelled from the country but his way of describing them as vagrants, oppressors, criminals, human traffickers and violent attackers of cleaning employees etc. implicitly suggests such a measure.

Another illustrative example of the Swedish Parliament's discussions of vulnerable EU migrants is the 50 pages long consideration of a bill on 'Removal' as a simplified kind of eviction of illegal camps or settlements (2016/17:CU13). The explicit motive in the Government's white paper is to facilitate quick evictions of the provisional settlements in cars, caravans and/or tents that groups of foreign poor people have set up in parks or forests:

“In recent years, several large, temporary settlements have been set up on various places in the country and around the bigger cities. These have to a high degree served as habitat for people who temporarily stay in Sweden. In some cases, children have appeared in these settlements. It is often about very vulnerable individuals living in severe poverty in their homelands. /.../ For landowners, a temporary settlement can imply inconveniences in the form of vandalism, littering and fire hazard.” (Ds 2016:17, p. 187).

According to the Swedish customary right to access land, *allmansrätt*, it is legal to camp temporarily a few nights on private land that is not too close to the owner's home, without permission from the land owner, but it has proven time consuming and difficult to evict someone who stays longer than that. 'Homeless/ness' appears only twice in this white paper, except for explicit references to NGOs and the UN conventions, and, curiously, these occasions are about the risk for the evicted to become homeless. Like in the motions and posts regarding people harmed by natural catastrophes in refugee camps in West Sahara, living in severely deficient tents and cars and sheds does not qualify as 'homelessness' for this group. In the Parliament report discussing this white paper (2016/17:CU13), 'homeless' occurs only in connection with a motion by the Left Party, arguing against the way that the bill separates one issue from the overarching problem with homelessness, vulnerability and missing accommodation alternatives (Motion 2016/17:3665).

Conclusion

The official definition of homelessness in Sweden departs from certain housing situations, but in actual counting, reporting and mapping of the homeless population in Sweden, several groups are explicitly excluded in the survey instructions and/or implicitly excluded since they are not attended to by the social workers who report homeless people in the surveys. Just like Simmel wrote more than a century ago about the poor, the homeless is in practice defined as those who (might) get assistance because of their housing situation. Examples of excluded groups are asylum-seekers, undocumented migrants, newly arrived migrants (who recently got residence permits) and so-called EU migrants who come to Sweden from other EU-countries and beg for their living. The reason for excluding these groups are that they are targeted by other institutions, such as the Migration Board and the police, or that they are defined as the responsibility of their home countries – they are others' homeless, not ours.

This institutionally motivated and regulated exclusion of homeless people in Sweden from the category 'homeless' is reflected and reinforced in the political debate. Through analysis of interpellations, motions, written questions and debates in the Parliament I have tried to show that the term 'homeless', and especially 'our homeless', is not only semantically preserved for clients of the Swedish social services, but also morally distinguished from other homeless groups in Sweden. It is notable that 'homeless' is associated with misery and problems like substance abuse and mental ill-health, but not with morally condemned qualities like criminality. The 'homeless' are also positioned as discriminated against to the benefit of the houseless groups that are excluded from the concept. EU migrants, asylum-seekers and newly arrived are described as being favoured by the state and the municipalities, and sometimes even as physical threats to 'our homeless', who in turn are implicitly or explicitly defined as Swedish.

While the 'homeless' are embraced with some compassion and empathy, other terms like settlers, beggars, Roma people, refugees, migrants, newly arrived etc. do not seem to carry the same kind of protective imperative. Their negative connotation is often further reinforced through being combined with phenomena like crime, disorder, violation of property rights etc. – this is especially obvious regarding EU migrants. In this way, they are 'othered' – homeless others or even our homeless' others.

Through positioning '(our) homeless' as victims of the others' crime, or as discriminated against, to the benefit of the other homeless categories, the action demanded of the government is rather to take position against the latter, to make it easier to evict/remove them from public and private land, to expel them from the country or stop them at the border.

This small investigation does not suffice for a clear result, but the disturbing impression and tentative conclusion is that the differentiated treatment of groups with similar, deficient housing situations in Sweden has institutional grounds that willy-nilly reinforce nationalist and xenophobic sentiments among politicians, and that a new political discourse is emerging, where ethnic and national belonging is ascribed more weight than the actual situation and needs of people without homes in Swedish politics and decision-making.

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