ScienzaePace

Rivista del Centro Interdisciplinare Scienze per la Pace
Università di Pisa

ISSN 2039-1749

Homelessness, Peace, Social Mediation

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Research Papers

n. 4 – novembre 2011

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There are persons who see things as they are and ask, "Why?". I dream things as they never were and ask, "Why not?"

G. B. Shaw, citato da Robert Kennedy

1. Why does homelessness matter for peace?

One might legitimately wonder why a Center for Peace Studies is promoting a public event dedicated to the issues of homelessness. In our perspective, *peace* is not merely the *absence of war* or of more or less *violent conflicts*, but a *process* towards the construction of the fairer society. A process which creates peace while engaging for justice.

Therefore, peace is not a static situation: it is rather a dynamic course, so that we *are in peace* when we *are building peace*. And in order to really and durably build peace, we have to stay "on the streets", i.e., where also homeless people, and those who help them, stay.

The Interdisciplinary Center "Sciences for Peace" is an University body that aims to stand on the streets along with the operators and community workers, which in our sense are *peacemakers.* This is also why we desire to cooperate with them, as well as with all those who work for peace, everywhere.

Moreover, there is also a special cultural reason for our interest in homelessness: "Sciences for Peace" is deeply involved in conflict studies. We uphold a simple and, at the same time, rather revolutionary point of view, based on the conviction that conflicts are not *pathological* events but *natural* ones. According to a certain kind of common sense, conflicts are considered an illness to be prevented by all means, something to evade and to avoid carefully.

* This paper reproduces with few changes the presentation on the *6th Annual Research Conference on Homelessness in Europe*, held in Pisa the 16th September 2011. The Conference was organised by FEANTSA's European Observatory on Homelessness, the ENHR Working Group on Welfare Policy, Homelessness and Social Exclusion, and Interdisciplinary Center for Peace Studies (CISP) - University of Pisa. The key theme for this year's Conference was "Homelessness, Migration and Demographic Change in Europe".

"Sciences for Peace", however, assumes that conflicts are a painful but an inevitable part of life: something that may even create new and favourable options for freedom and human development, if we succeed in managing and transforming it.

To put it in even clearer terms, we suppose that one can "be in conflict" without necessarily suffering this condition, without seeking to "beat" the opponent or to avoid being "overwhelmed" by him/her. We have learned that the "win/lose" framework is not the only possible way to look at conflicts: you can "be in the conflict" in a *cooperative* way, even benefiting by the situation, if just we manage to use a "transformational paradigm".

At the same time, conflicts constitute also the very "structural limit" to the idea of peace. We all stand for peace, at least as long as we stand for the understanding, for harmony, for serenity, etc. But when conflicts arise, this attitude changes and a more traditional logic prevails: "the end justifies the means". We may even see violence as a useful tool for preserving peace when we think we could lose, or when we have already lost.

Under this point of view, "Sciences for Peace" is interested to the issues of social marginality, as far as those issues are linked to or represent various conflict factors. I prefer not to concentrate on the theoretical-practical links existing between social marginality and social conflicts. This crucial connection will be rather implicit, as it constitutes the background for my observations. I would like to emphasise the opportunities related to the use of non-destructive strategies of conflict management and transformation in the area of social marginality, because it represents precisely one of the area of major interest for "Sciences for Peace".

We all claim to be peaceful, but the very sensation of being in a conflict can change the basic conditions of our behaviour. We might engage in violent actions, meant to achieve victory by neutralising or destroying the "other". For those who choose to remain faithful to the principles of nonviolence, and are capable of it, it could be much easier to feel comfortable in conflict dynamics. It is much more difficult to face a conflict for those who want to prevail, to stay in "major position" in the terms of Pat Patfoort (1988).

This last point is essential for those who feel in a conflictual situation when dealing with homeless people: a feeling of unease, that may be stimulated by the conditions of poverty and exclusion in general, possibly generating also personal conflicts. As an example, if we feel ourselves in conflict with homeless people, we may try to reach *ends* such as social harmony or social cohesion,

and yet justify *means* which are more or less violent, as when we create a "civic committee" to prevent the relocation of an homeless centre in our neighbourhood or we dismantle a shelter facility for immigrants through a "forced eviction". In such situations we actually "sacrifice peace in order to maintain peace", so that conflict becomes a structural obstacle to peace.

To understand what happens in such situations, we must go into a deeper consideration of what *peace* is. Specifically, we have to refer to successful social coexistence as a collective process of ensuring everyone's well-being while durably reducing the situations and the roots of injustice and marginality, including those concerning homeless people.

The same suffix "-less", that we use here, deserves a closer scrutiny. The fact of people living in a "-less" condition – like the home*less*, the work-*less*, those without property, those without valid documents (in French, *sans papiers*), and so on – is a peculiar feature of our globalised societies, not only of the Western one. We normally suppose that their state consists in "being *less*", that is *without* something: their exclusion from or their subaltern position in position in the social fabric is thus the consequence of their lacking of something essential for being a "full citizen" or a "full person". As a result, the solution against exclusion is usually to give to the "-less people" what they apparently lack: this should cancel their "lessness" and bring them back to the "social normality". The question is if this is true. And, this being true, if this is enough.

Even if this should mean to reveal in advance some of my conclusions, I consider the sketchiness and simplicity of this kind of approach and solution conceals the difficulty we have in facing the problem in more complex and real terms, as well as in approaching social issues like exclusion under different and more "critical" points of view.

Firstly, are we sure that being "-less" always means exclusion, unstead of constituting a certain, different form of inclusion? In fact, the "-less people" do have their place in our societies. Precisely, they might be considered as borderline, and their being at the *margins* is what allows the others to consider themselves as living in the *core* of society. Those who "have" a place in the core of society are also the ones who "have" and not the ones who have not, the "-less people". The marginal presence of the "-less" guarantees in a some way the central position to those who "have", justifying the attitude of keeping the "not having others" on the borderline. In practice, this social frame perpetuates the patterns that preserve the existing social system: by this way the system

provides some basic answers to several issues of justice, without reversing the dominant rules or modifying the existing social positions.

So we can easily affirm that, once the homeless are given a home, if something does not work out it is always because of a fault of the procedure, a lack of organization, a lack of means, or a wrong government policy. Otherwise, the problem would have been solved.

Secondly, there is a structural point of view that we should consider, too. We can't help but notice, especially in the present "time of crisis", that it is apparently difficult to give the "-less people" what they need. Solutions based on universal access to material assets and services are necessary, but nonetheless insufficient. Even the most sophisticated responses of this kind, including services or networks that could teach people how to make up the empty space of the "-less", come up against the reality and against the presumption that what lacks does exist, that sooner or later it can be found. But is it always true?

These are just questions, not yet answers. Nonetheless, these questions highlight the complexity of the issues at stake here and can help us to confront in proper terms with homeless people. They facilitate the transition to a logic that differs from the traditional one, going beyond the usual frame of social assistance that does not really consider the presence of the "-less" as a fundamental social problem, because it implicitly confirms the dominant frame "borderline/centre". Moreover, it confirms the idea that being "-less" means being on the boundaries of the society that is capable of sheltering and giving to "those who need". From this perspective the presence of homeless people can even be reassuring, as long as it does not touch us directly. As long as it does not force us to deal with some troubling questions. As long as *it is not our problem*.

2. Exploring the link between homeless people and social conflicts

The issues of social marginality, especially those related to homeless people represent in our societies a rather inevitable source of conflict, which may be considered from two different points of view.

The first one concerns the already mentioned *conflict between homeless people and "the others", i.e., the "integrated and normal citizens"*. Consider a simple and clear case such as our experiences in many railway stations: the homeless people are not our problem as long as we see them from

afar. They are part of a world that does not belong to us. However, if one of them tries to approach us, tension rises: what does s/he want? This kind of fear provokes an attitude of self-defence that overwhelms any welcoming sense, even when theoretically we believe in being welcoming. We encounter here a second source of the conflict that I cannot address here, related to those multiple aspects of our personality that seem to confound one another in such cases, leaving us unsure about what to do.

The fear of homeless people is also perceived as a conflict when the problem of the response – for instance to the house/dwelling need – is not just "abstract", but concerns us directly as when an NGOs decides to open a "community house" around the corner. In this case there is almost always a group of citizens, who may usually be open, receptive, and civilized, who succumb to fear – fear that by itself is not always unjustified, as I will explain later – who may react in a chaotic and even violent manner – developing a well-known NIMBY ("not in my backyard") syndrome.

It is important to stress that, in such cases, fear can emerge in connection to the cliché image of "the poor". The "down-and-out vagrant lowlife", the stereotypical stock character of the homeless, is frightening because he embodies this cliché of poverty and social maladjustment with no way out. We are not afraid of a homeless person if we meet them, well-dressed, on the train. We do not even recognize its "otherness" of being an homeless.

According to the cliché, we must also include to the picture the "expectation of violence", even before anything really happens. Please note: when we deal with poor people, the fear of possible violence is more significant than in other conflicts that can be clearly and typically violent. We do not think about robbery any time we are in a bank, but we do fear being victim of an aggression every time we meet someone we classify as a pauper.

Normally, social conflict mediation helps in evident conflicts and when the violence is well-defined or definable (as a picket or a barricade). When homeless people are at stake the only expectation of violence is enough to generate a conflictual confrontation, even without any substantial cause. Imagine, then, what happens when the construction of the shelter/hostel for the homeless is announced in our neighbourhood. The anxiety about what could happen is perceived as a real menace. It appears reasonable to hope that what we fear will never occur (and it actually seldom does!), but still in this way we adopt a "precaution principle" that triggers the conflict mechanisms and

associated unilateral defensive strategies even without a clear manifestation of the conflict as such (Sunstein, 2005).

That fear, based on clichés, suffices to transform a "virtual" conflict into a real one. It generates distances and social ruptures that cannot be mitigated with standard social mediation dynamics. The challenge is thus the following: to question the "normal" attitudes such as "I am not a racist, but…", i.e., the attitude of thinking that it is right to shelter refugees only as long as it is elsewhere, or to give a house to those in need as long as they are not gypsies, etc. In fact, if it may be true that some people tend to conserve an hostile or frightened attitude, it is also true that when the image of the "pauper-other" or of the "down-and-out-dangerous" is dismantled, even the most violent relationship can be changed in something more tolerable and manageable. It is therefore possible to take actions in order to transform a conflict related to homelessness by working on the context in which homelessness occurs, and not necessarily by directly targeting the homeless people themselves.

The second point of view that can be adopted on homelessness concerns *the link between homeless people and social conflict in a systemic approach*. According to this approach, homelessness represents a peculiar "knot" in the social tissue, that intertwines some "external" issues (refugees, immigrants, etc.) with "domestic" ones (social policy, forms and boundaries of citizenship, social inequality and marginalization).

Returning to the starting point of the analysis, we know that social conflict is a "natural state" of social life. In this context, the so called "high marginality" represents at the same time the breaking point of all social actions and a problem apparently to complex to be solved. Homeless people already find themselves in a "point of no return", doomed to stay on the borders of the society forever. The best that can be done for them is also the least, i.e., give them a roof and, if they do not want that (as it may also happen), then provide them with primary assistance.

If we rid ourselves of these clichés, even the "scientific" ones, and manage to perceive and treat these people as persons, we realize that each of them has their own story. In this way, every single homeless re-emerges from the under-caste of the "invisible people". The encounter with marginality becomes just an event of personal lifetime, possibly transitory, not a destiny or the result of a probability calculation.

In conclusion, there is a dual link between homelessness and social conflict. On one hand the homelessness is a result of social conflicts in a larger

sense of the term, including all policies and not only the socio-economic one (as, for example, in the case of war refugees). On the other hand, it can generate conflicts because it represents stories of "marginal diversity". To be clearer: homeless people are not only the passive result of social processes especially of – often violent – dynamics of exclusion. They are often *actors* in those dynamics. Sometimes, they react to what they had to suffer through; in other cases, they show how the "normal course of life" produces their condition.

Social workers should know well how communities of homeless people may often recreate conflictual dynamics, that reproduce such experiences and perpetuate the rules of a social context producing exclusion and stigmatisation. This is also why homeless people too need to be taught, *along with all of us,* how to practice peace-building and to manage interpersonal conflicts in a non-destructive way. If this is true, as I believe, we have to avoid actions that recreates a "bilateral" relationship between the "operators" and the "homeless people", concealing the well-known conflictual frame "us/them". We have to actively engage in establishing relationships that can lead to genuine interpersonal interactions. In this kind of reciprocal relations homeless people are recognised – and are able to recognise themselves – as full persons first, and not just as "representatives of a category of marginal people". At the same time, each social operator can act and be seen as a person too, and not just as a member of an organization, taking care of the homeless people.

If we mobilise social assets in such a manner as to obtain social transformation, those assets will return increased every time we manage exclusion dynamics as structural ones, and not as perpetual emergencies, according to the political strategy of the dominant system of power. This strategy is evident on immigration issues – often connected with homelessness – that are systematically approached as an emergency, even if they are not.

3. How can "Sciences for Peace" respond to homeless people's issues?

"Sciences for Peace" can deal with homelessness in two ways: aiding in addressing the issue of homelessness as such; aiding in addressing the multiple issues related to homelessness.

Concerning the first way, we often believe that giving people a shelter suffices, but this is not enough. We need to *repair social relationships in a durable way*. Having access to an adequate housing is a foundamental social rights and constitutes, of course, a strategical element in fighting exclusion. At

the same time, homeless people need a shelter in its broader meaning, i.e., they need satisfactory social relationships based on recognition and respect of their dignity and personal integrity, which are all necessary elements in peace building. Social networks are crucial for living a human life, but they are extremely fragile, so they need continuous care in order to be reproduced.

Concerning the second way, we have to conceptualise the very specific question of homelessness as a manifestation of a wider systemic conflict. In fact, as I've already explained, social conflicts are related both to the simple presence of homeless people and to the existence of structures and communities assisting them. We hold that these conflicts can be only dealt with by social mediation employed as a tool for the construction and reconstruction of relationships.

Mediation is not taken here as a technical term (the intervention of a third neutral part), but in its deeper sense: as *the facilitation of an empowerment process in conflict management*. This kind of mediation is an alternative to the practice and concept of emergency intervention ("you need a home – I'll give you a temporary shelter"). Mediation means working on the social dimension of living in all its complexity. This is why I think that actions really aiming the well-being of homeless people cannot be limited to the pure satisfaction of their essential, basic material needs. *Actions need to target and to transform our society as a whole*.

Moreover, the process of empowerment helps to tie up different relational links in the community. It is of greater impact when the "ordinary" members of society in a "bottom-up" dynamic find the resources that are needed in order to create more adequate kinds of sheltering and to promote active solidarity, rather than confining the entire process in an institutional, "top-down" approach. This is especially true if the solidarity-based community approach can give to homeless people the opportunity to take useful social actions for the common good, countervailing the dominant clichés of those people as "dangerous" or as "a burden" put on the society. This can be done by impulsing a broader participation in the local decision-making process and by focussing on the multiple needs of the territory as a whole.

An overall improvement of human resources, without making too much difference between homeless and not homeless people, demonstrates that "marginal resources" can really transform conflicts and create new models of coexistence. This is why it is necessary to plan and execute interventions that are able to improve both the personal resources of the most vulnerable individuals and the inclusive potential of the local communities.

The experience shows the necessity to integrate primary assistance within an overall relational framework. Once established, such relationships develop a sort of "virtuous circle": homeless people find a path to "escape" their situation and the community offers valid solutions to promote their inclusion.

Moreover, this approach may balance the persistent lack of resources allocated for fighting exclusion and including homeless people, both in the public and in the private sector. Especially in a "time of crisis", we may use the notion of transformation in order to understand that we do not need entirely new policies or techniques, but rather new criteria for analysing, reframing and improving the well-being of *all* members of the society.

The starting point is the recognition and the enhancement of human resources and capabilities – broadly speaking – available in the community, including those of homeless people themselves, of operators/service providers, of the institutions and of all citizens. These resources should be activated in order to find together precise answers to precise questions, that are not – let me repeat it for a last time – about shelters for the homeless, but about the functioning of a society that generates homeless people and then bans them as being "responsible for their own choices" or "victims of the system".

This approach can mobilise and create new "social capital", otherwise idle: producing relationship builds peace and gives each and everyone the *power to change*. The wide implications of this perspective may be outlined by showing the difference between two frames for social intervention:

The *assistance* pattern	**The *mediation/empowerment* pattern**
Assets are purely economic	Assets are only partially economic, the most important asset being social capital
Assets are granted by the State	Assets come from the bottom up, from the territory, from the community, etc.
Commitment on finding/receiving the assets	Commitment on bringing out the assets
"If I'm lucky and manage to find the financial resources, I manage to reduce partially and temporarily the problem, intervening on the effect"	"If we are able to perform good social mediation, we may address the "causes" of social marginality, i.e., the lack of the social networks that produces marginalization.

These two patterns are alternatives, as they represent two fundamentally different ways of thinking, but they are not exclusive. They are both useful: a wider and deeper social intervention, based on mediation and empowerment, does not imply the dismissal of the capability to face actual needs and emergencies. It allows, instead, to support the "assistance" of the State with social mediation, orienting the action toward medium and long-term goals.

If we are able to unite these two patterns of intervention we can work on both the over-riding issue of homelessness and on the challenges that their presence represent for the communities. This "combined approach" is particularly useful in managing and transforming social conflicts. At the same time, we need much more than that: for example, we still do not have enough data to fully understand this multifaceted phenomenon; we do not have dedicated interdisciplinary studies; a sort of "inferiority complex" often permeate those who work on these issues in relation to the "experts" on the so-conceived "really fundamental economic and financial issues".

We are not always able to find a way to insure the replication and repetition of good practices. There are too many important practices that do not become general knowledge, remaining mere individual experiences and "intuitive practices", never being seriously analysed, never being integrated into the mainstream strategy, never becoming "scientific".

In conclusion, approaching homelessness from the perspective of the peace research, we see that durable, efficient and effective responses go further beyond giving simply "assistance". That would be like *trying to mop the flooded floor while the water is still running*.

We need to keep in mind that the "lessness" conceptualisation arises and thrives in the hostile dynamics, that belong to the society "as it is". This approach is useless if we are trying to shape the society "we would like". From this transformed perspective the "-less" are no longer the borders of the normal society, they do not stand helplessly on its outskirts, but can by their very existence clarify what we want our future to be: *a peaceful, cooperative, and integrated society*. The experience of changing the lives of many homeless people, that has been possible by the persevering work of social networking and thanks to relationships established with intelligence and compassion, shows the possibility to create social laboratories of peaceful coexistence based on participation, power distribution and social justice, i.e., situations in which we can really see the *universal rights in action*.

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