

Katia Choppin and Édouard Gardella (2013)

Les Sciences Sociales et le Sans-Abrisme: Recension Bibliographique de Langue Française 1987-2012 [Social Science and Homelessness: French Language Literature Review 1987-2012].

Saint-Étienne: L'université de Saint-Étienne, €26.00.

This in-depth collective work, edited by Katia Choppin and Édouard Gardella, gathers and brings together more than twenty years of research on homelessness in the social sciences. The main aim of the book is to give visibility to this important mass of research and enquiry. It also provides a very accomplished description of the main theoretical axes and concepts that structure the research field, thus offering a summary of accumulated theoretical knowledge.

The scope of the work is limited to French literature, as similar books are already available in English. It focuses on social science research that explains the place, the experience of, and the social and political approach to the fact of living between public spaces and public assistance. Homelessness is understood not as a fixed condition defining the situation of a person but as a process. It is the result of a series of actions that stem from the fact that a person has to survive, for some time, in public places or public shelter structures.

The book is divided into four parts: the research review, strictly speaking; a vocabulary index that gives an overview of the concepts and notions that 'problematise' homelessness; a chronological classification of bibliographical references; and a bibliographical classification of references by author.

The review is set out around the four directions taken by researchers in tackling homelessness, developed in four chapters. Each of these chapters gives a summary of the themes and concepts that are found in the research, followed by a bibliographical list of relevant articles and books. Some of the most relevant research is developed in a few lines to several paragraphs.

Chapter One, *'From a social issue to a scientific issue: names, objectives and enquiries'*, is dedicated to work on identifying, naming and designing approaches to issues relative to homelessness. One section gathers several public empirical enquiries on the theme of: 'Who are those visible persons that live in public spaces and where are they from?'

A second section entitled *'Elaboration of a research field'* gathers the work that *'objectivates'* the *'problem of homelessness'* either by replacing it with more general issues, or by conducted specialised research and looking at new issues, such as life on the streets and public support.

A third section called *'Research approaches: stance, tools and field'* brings together more reflexive work; for example, surveys on homelessness require the elaboration of new methods, as the typical questionnaire formula is not adapted to this type of public. The sensitive subject of homelessness also raises many ethical questions as to whether and how to question homeless people, as it does not provide any solutions to their difficult situations.

Chapter Two deals with *'Homelessness assistance schemes'*. This chapter brings together enquiries on homeless people supported by institutions, including day and night shelters, mobile teams and different forms of outreach. The relation to care is at the centre of all research on this subject, and work has been divided into two groups. The first, a section on institutional support, gathers work that reflects generally on assistance to homeless people: What kind of help? How is it organised? What difficulties and tensions do social helpers have to face? How do users interact with schemes?

The second, called *'Shelter accommodation: from emergency to housing with support'*, is dedicated to examining how assistance is organised within different types of structures. Research focuses on conditions of access to shelters (*hébergement*), on the collective lifestyles that these structures engender, and on the relationships that develop between peers and social providers. Most authors are quite critical about how these schemes operate.

Chapter Three, *'Homelessness as a public problem'*, collects and analyses the work of researchers that approach homelessness from the perspective that it is not only a social problem but also a public problem, as homeless people are not only present in the public and political debate but are also – and especially – physically visible in the public space. The presence of homeless people on the streets raises serious questions about the ability of occidental democracies to deal with the exclusion of those who are most vulnerable.

The first section in this chapter, *'Public action and public arenas'*, collects the work of researchers that approach homelessness as a public problem as well as a social problem. Homelessness, as something that needs to be controlled and regulated, has been subject to the State's actions for centuries. This action has often been ambivalent, falling between assistance and repression. The collective actions of NGOs relayed by the media, along with changes in methods of social intervention and public action in general, has led to a social support approach.

However, as soon as repression was overcome at national level (the offenses of vagrancy and begging were only abolished in 1992), it reappeared at local level though the 'anti-begging' decrees adopted by local authorities. That is why this chapter contains a second section on *'Social control and juridicisation'*, looking at how the law deals with homelessness and revealing ambivalence as to how this public issue is dealt with.

A final section entitled *'Conflicts, tensions, use and negotiations in public places'* outlines the substantial work that has dealt with the 'materiality' of public spaces and with the 'visibility' of its occupants. Questions of citizenship, meetings, space-sharing, giving and exchanging are at the centre of this section.

Chapter Four, *'Between street life and assistance: experiences and expedients'*, synthesises the results of surveys on homelessness. All the studies agree that homeless people are not external to society, and research issues are precisely about how they relate to society. Street life is an experience, in that it transforms those that experience it. However hard it is, every person living on the streets will adapt and develop mechanisms to survive in the most deprived situations and to create some form of social network, with or without social services.

In the section *'Daily life as survival'*, research is outlined that recounts the adaptive and ingenious abilities homeless people must develop to meet their needs. The section *'Precarious housing'* amalgamates research that focuses on people's ability to 'inhabit', even without a roof over their heads. These studies reveal creative abilities with all their limits and constraints.

The last section, *'Life stories and identities'*, gathers work on the relationship homeless people have with their own stories – past and future. By tackling issues such as the end of homelessness, death, daily fights to survive, and difficulties like the need for recognition, studies on the identities and trajectories of homeless people contribute to showing the diversity of paths and experiences that homelessness can take, and expand available categories and descriptions of homelessness and how it is seen in the public space.

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This book is a must-have for anyone who wants a good overview of the concepts of homelessness and the state of homelessness research in social science. It is also a very useful book in helping to choose relevant subjects for study from the mass of existing information. The vocabulary index will be of serious help to anyone who wishes to understand the issues at stake without having to study for several months. The very complete chronological bibliography and traditional bibliography by author will also prove very useful for anyone starting a research study on homelessness.

Natalie Boccadoro

Ministère du Logement et de la ville, Paris, France