

Flóra Pőcze (2013)

A Moszkva tér gyermeke [The Children of Moscow Square].

Budapest: Jászöveg Műhely, pp.143, 2290 HUF (€7.50).

The publication of Flóra Pőcze's book on a small community of homeless people living at Moscow Square (one of the main transportation hubs of Budapest) received considerable attention in the Hungarian media, which is remarkable for a study on homelessness. Unfortunately, however, the public attention was less concerned with the important findings relating to poverty and homelessness in Hungary, and instead re-ignited long-standing prejudices, fear and aversion towards homeless people framed by people's astonishment that a young female social scientist would dare to live among homeless people.

The author lived together with a group of homeless rough sleepers for two months, and the book is an account of her experiences. Through her descriptions, the reader becomes acquainted with the members of this small group, how they became homeless, how they earn money and how they spend it. Hungarian publications on homelessness prior to this mostly focused on the history and prevalence of homelessness, epidemiology, the composition and characteristics of homeless people, public policies on homelessness (especially shelters), recent measures of criminalisation and exclusion (including a participatory action research project on the police harassment of homeless people), and social work with homeless people. Until this publication, there had been no study on the everyday lives of homeless people through systematic engagement via participant observation.

The author introduces herself and identifies herself as a social scientist in the book, and she justifies her participant observation approach within a tradition of cultural anthropology. However, there is not much social science or cultural anthropology in the book. Furthermore, the author does not engage with any previous studies on homelessness. Indeed her approach to homelessness sometimes appears rather naïve – for example, when she writes about how surprised she was when she first heard of the presence of tuberculosis among the homeless population she was studying.

The author is also somewhat unclear about the exact meaning and requirements of participant observation. For example, she explains the method as involving 'living together, and becoming one with a group,' but in the very same sentence also writes that it entails 'trying to behave as an outsider' (p.104).¹ There also seems to be some inconsistency in her practice. For example, when one of the members of the group violently attacks a street vendor, she does not assist the police investigation when asked about the assailant's whereabouts – thus prioritising group loyalty over ethical concerns, without much explanation. She also writes of how on one occasion she 'grumbled' in response to someone in the group who was using heroin, and says that 'everyone knew very well' that she 'hated' heroin usage (p.111), thus making explicit her moral judgment about a common practice within the group setting.

Furthermore, the author appears insensitive to the process of 'othering'. She refers to the group as a closed community that establishes its own system of norms and whose unwritten rules are 'diametrically opposed' (p.79) to the laws of majority society.² In places she also refers to group members as 'brigands' (p.16). At one point in the text, when explaining to the reader why she did not want to influence what was happening in the group, she asks the reader: "think about it, where would it lead if you gave smartphones to an African tribe so that they could reach each other easily in the jungle?" (p.104).

Consequently, it is perhaps more appropriate to view this book as a brief journalistic account of the author's personal experiences of spending some time among one particular group of homeless people, accompanied by sentimental and sometimes romanticised monologues addressed to each individual member of that group. It is something like pulp non-fiction and for this reason is very readable and likely to succeed in reaching a broader audience. But what will the book really tell us about homelessness?

To put it simply, there are two broad (often distinct but not mutually exclusive) approaches to challenging the dominant view of homelessness in terms of moving beyond inherent prejudices and processes of de-humanisation within popular discourse. The first approach consists of providing a more accurate and balanced view on homelessness, through inciting the sociological imagination of the audience to open up to the possibility of thinking about homelessness not as a matter of individual misdeeds or misfortune, but as a consequence of market mechanisms and state policies, unequal distribution of resources and power, wages and housing costs, etc., and to bring to the fore the perspectives of homeless people themselves. It is important to move beyond the traditional image of homelessness that

¹ The translations from Hungarian are my own.

² The two norms of the group that are most emphasised in the book – reciprocity and respect for mothers – do not seem to be diametrically opposed to mainstream norms.

relates to visible street homeless people, older bearded males, those suffering from addictions or mental health problems, those who engage in criminal activity, and so on. Many homeless people are, unlike what is commonly assumed, engaged in paid employment but cannot afford – and without significant changes in social policies will never be able to afford – to rent an apartment.

The other approach consists of trying to convey the human side of those who constitute the more visual portion of the homeless population – those who are most discriminated against by society – to show that they, too, are human beings, capable of love and suffering. The first strategy might be more effective in targeting prejudices and politicising the issue of homelessness, but is perhaps less so in challenging the dehumanisation of homeless people. The second strategy, on the other hand, might be more effective in doing just this, but possibly at the cost of strengthening existing prejudices about homelessness and its causes for some.

The Children of Moscow Square obviously belongs to this second approach. Its protagonists mostly confirm the prevailing stereotypes about homeless people; they do not seek job opportunities or work on potential ways to exit homelessness, they beg, sometimes commit crimes and abuse illegal substances. They are also all described as alcoholics, though the book does a good job in explaining that this should be viewed as a consequence, and not a cause, of their homelessness (pp.58–59). With regard to the causes of homelessness, the author emphasises personal tragedies and unique pathways into homelessness (on one occasion, even its ‘voluntary’ nature). Perhaps it would have helped if the author were more explicit and reflective about causation, however. The book is supposed to be about homelessness more broadly, but it is really about one particular community of rough-sleeping individuals who also share some subcultural characteristics, and this particular group must not become representative of all homeless people. Sometimes the author refers to her protagonists as members of the ‘gang’, and seems to understand her subjects to be the inner life of ‘urban gangs’, which diverts the reader away from homelessness and onto a different topic, even if there are some elements of overlap between the two. This lack of clarity regarding its subject and the misleading impression it makes concerning the generalisability of its author’s personal experiences to homelessness in general are major weaknesses of the book.

On the other hand, it is quite clear that the author developed a close relationship with the members of the group and therefore can, for the most part, write about them with empathy, which should positively affect how her readers understand the hard realities of homelessness. At moments it grasps intimate moments of human lives and the most impersonal structural causes behind their hardship – also demonstrated, for example, in the works of Elliot Liebow (1993), David Wagner (1993; 1997), Vincent Lyon-Callo (2008) and Teresa Gowan (2000; 2010). Indeed,

this is exactly what was famously called the 'sociological imagination' by C. Wright Mills [1959] (2000): translating personal troubles into larger social issues, which can challenge popular assumptions about homelessness and its causes. This is a challenging endeavour but one that is necessary in order to provide a robust account of a grave and urgent social problem.

► References

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Bálint Misetics

The City is for All (Budapest)

I read this book written by Flóra Pőcze – a young and ambitious author – with great curiosity but also with a critical eye. I read it critically because it is about a controversial topic that invites many unsympathetic comments by those who have a two-dimensional understanding of homelessness. This is why I wrote this review. Flóra Pőcze ventured out to the streets to explore the everyday lives of homeless people through living together with them. She was taken in by a group of rough sleepers and, as she describes in her book, was protected by them while they resided at Moscow Square, one of the main public transportation hubs of Budapest.

Reading this book was important to me as I myself have been homeless for 22 years, and because of this experience, I wanted to know how a young person with stable housing would experience and write about the everyday lives of those living on the street. Her book recounts this experience with remarkable openness and – I think it is justified to say – love. On the other hand...

As a homeless person, I never spent one single day in a homeless shelter or day centre, nor did I ever stand in line at a soup kitchen. I am a homeless person, who, in the past 22 years, has made countless attempts across time and space to secure stable housing and lead a decent, productive life. Through this journey, I have met, talked with and even worked with many different types of homeless people.

The first thing I would like to refute is that homeless people live in gangs or, to quote the out-of-date Hungarian term used in the book, in *galéri*-s. This term evokes the (youth) gangs of the 1970s and 1980s, and groups of criminals who seek to intimidate others. This is not the case for homeless people, the vast majority of whom are simply trying to navigate their marginal position in society as best they can. Many try to carry out their daily lives without being noticed, though in many cases homeless people can be singled out from the rest of the society due to their visibly different life circumstances. Homeless people usually operate either alone and apart from others or with smaller supportive groups that resemble families. Homeless people sometimes need to fight to access scarce resources because that is the only way they can make ends meet. Territories are contested – for example, territories such as locations where people look through the rubbish to find anything that can be eaten, used, recycled or sold.

Alcohol addiction and mental health problems are prevalent amongst the homeless population, but contrary to the impression the readers of this book might get, drug abuse is by no means widespread among homeless people. Addiction obscures the central issues of homelessness. In mainstream housed society, we find alcoholics and substance abusers (including among those from affluent social backgrounds), but being housed can shelter substance use in a way that cannot be done with homeless living. While a heroin overdose may result in the deaths of homeless people in public places (as it happened with Tüsi in the book), a similar death that

occurs indoors is more likely to be hidden from public knowledge. Furthermore, the majority of those addicted to alcohol are not homeless but, again, we do not see them because they are drunk (and perhaps abusive) in the private sphere as opposed to being publicly drunk and perhaps disorderly.

The author could only write about that particular group of homeless people. While she recounted *their* everyday lives sensitively, it is important to know that this group may not be representative of the wider homeless population. Like with the housed population, there are a variety of different opinions and experiences among homeless people. Around 40 percent of homeless people sustain themselves through their own income and work. There are also homeless people who pay for their temporary shelter with their disability benefit or old-age pension, and some of them earn through begging as well.

Furthermore, there are many homeless people – usually couples – who build temporary shacks for themselves on the outskirts of cities in an attempt to create some semblance of a home space. Some shacks have basic furnishings, which are accumulated over time. These temporary structures not only provide a partial feeling of home but also act as provisional protection from the outside world, away from public hostility and prejudice. Despite the struggles they have experienced throughout their lives, homeless people try to maintain a sense of dignity. These efforts and this determination usually remain hidden from view for most.

The author describes the causes of homelessness, or more accurately the story of how her participants became homeless. But there are several other causes of homelessness that are denied or overlooked by public discourse. It cannot be stressed enough that in most cases, homelessness is a consequence of social circumstances. We should seek to prevent homelessness instead of blaming homeless people for their situation! The book includes stories about entering into homelessness after leaving foster care institutions without any support. But there are also women and children who have been victims of domestic violence for years and are eventually unable to withstand any more abuse, becoming homeless by way of escape. There are also those who, following divorce or a relationship breakdown, are unable to support themselves financially and become homeless. Sometimes there is no job, no income, and not even a sublease, a temporary lodging or a workers' hostel.

Being homeless is more than being without a home; homeless people are routinely judged and humiliated for their homeless status by wider society. They are generalised and, thus, misunderstood.

Flóra Pőcze describes to the reader that one specific community of homeless people, which she got to know herself and, indeed, I feel that she writes with affection and empathy about this group. But she only got to know a more extreme segment of the homeless population and it is important to know that there are countless homeless people who live differently. Thus, making any generalisations on homeless people or their lives is inadvisable.

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Activist