

Éva Tessza Udvarhelyi (2014)

***(In)justice On The Streets (Answers to Hungary's Housing Crisis)***

Napvilág Kiadó, 2014

Éva Tessza Udvarhelyi belongs to the new generation of urban sociologists who openly espouse a structuralist (or, more precisely, Marxist) sociological approach. The book deviates from traditional urban and housing sociology analyses as it is not content with simply mapping social problems, but undertakes to explore the possibilities of political agency from the perspective of the victims of the central conflict. In this sense it transcends the traditional structuralist approach, which merely explores the root causes of social conflicts, and proposes methods of dismantling their causes. The author focuses on homelessness in Hungary, or the broader 'housing crisis', which is not only a crucial social issue, but also an excellent field for understanding the possibilities and limits of structuralist analysis.

In *Part 1*, the author defines the framework of the analysis (chapter 1), provides a brief historical overview of Hungary's housing problems, including homelessness (chapter 2), and evaluates policies related to homelessness, particularly the question of criminalizing homelessness (chapter 3). *Part 2* presents housing-related social movements before, during and after the transition to a market society (chapters 4 and 5). Finally, *Part 3* focuses on the structure and possibilities of the social movement for eradicating homelessness, with a particular emphasis on participatory action research and the responsibility of the social sciences (chapters 6 and 7).

The book covers a wide array of problems and analyses housing in a broad historical and theoretical framework, the presentation and thorough assessment of which goes beyond the scope of this review. Nonetheless, three particular issues discussed in the book deserve closer scrutiny, as we oppose the author's standpoint with the approach of mainstream sociology. These are: 1) the structural theory explaining the existence of homelessness (macro-sociological theory); 2) the historical and sociological analysis of homelessness (micro-sociological theory); and 3) the role and possibilities of social movements related to homelessness (political science analysis).

## Structuralist Approach and its Limitations

---

The author bases her analysis on a deliberately simplified version of capitalist democratic class society, composed essentially of oppressors and the oppressed, where the situation of the oppressed can only be effectively influenced by public policy. The latter is largely shaped by political parties, which also represent the interests of the main social groups (the ruling class and their allies), while the interests of the oppressed are represented only by civil society, in alliance with the oppressed. The aim is, therefore, to change the exploitative nature of society through the inclusion of the oppressed and civil society.

The author's key assertions are most certainly compelling: "homelessness is best defined through the structural factors of social subordination", such as exploitation, cultural imperialism, physical violence and powerlessness (pp.29-31). At the same time, a 'sensitive spot' of structuralist approaches is that they do not provide a clear image of an exploitation-free society. A key argument proposed by the author is that (housing and social) movements aiming to improve the living conditions of disadvantaged groups can be divided into two sub-types (on the basis of Fraser, 1995): 'affirmative' and 'transformative' programmes. Affirmative programmes, while helping particular groups and solving a given crisis situation, essentially reinforce the existing (exploitative) structure, while transformative programmes target the factors that were the underlying cause of the crisis. The book contains references to a desirable social order, which – based on Fraser – is probably, in fact, closest to socialism (p.133). This perspective is hardly attractive to social researchers who spent their formative years in Hungary's socialist 'Kádár-era', as socialism did not prove to be a viable social order.

The structuralist approach hides a critique of neoliberal capitalism for which the authoritarian capitalist model is not an acceptable alternative (be it the Chinese, the Russian or the currently forming Orbán model), but neither would a more regulated variety of capitalism be acceptable, where welfare regimes are assessed and chosen according to their usefulness from the viewpoint of the least privileged groups. In the view of the author (and the sociological approach she represents), such a choice does not question fundamental power relations; therefore, it cannot resolve the root causes of social conflict. In other words, choosing between varieties of capitalism, even if directly helpful to the most vulnerable groups, will result in the reinforcement, and not the transformation, of capitalism. The problem with this approach is that the author has no clear vision of the more advanced social order that should replace capitalism, and so it seems extremely difficult to arrive at 'transformative' programmes that truly transcend mere housing issues.

Nonetheless, in examining homelessness and housing poverty, the author has a clear-cut idea of where the boundary lies between affirmative and transformative programmes. The critical analysis of housing policy development is very interesting and an outstanding read, resulting largely from its structuralist approach – namely, that the author connects the explanation of actors and institutions with the current power relations. The most compelling and original part is the critical analysis of the homelessness-related policies of the past two decades. Although this was arguably not the original intention at the early stages of its development, homeless provision services and its specialists have created a sort of ‘paternalist’ system between clients and social workers, clearly indicating a new kind of dependency. As Péter Győri, one of the most renowned experts on the subject puts it: homeless people move into institutions “as free persons”, and then swiftly transform into clients (pp.157, with similar quotes on pages 184-5). This problem is highlighted in the book in multiple instances, and the author formulates a clear criticism of mainstream studies in this area:

“The aim of most current research is to improve homeless services by better understanding the populations they serve. While these studies offer important insights, they continue to operate within the dominant paradigm that manages rather than *prevents* homelessness and treats homeless people as *clients* rather than *citizens*.” (p. 249, author’s emphasis)

The question is: which of the programmes that were launched to manage homelessness transcend the boundary set by structural causes and treat the underlying problems rather than the symptoms? In the housing system, the author considers all programmes to be affirmative if they “do not undermine the existing power relations” (p. 133), while transformative measures include mass squatting, which “problematizes the commodification of housing” (p.134). In my opinion the author has come up against a limitation of structuralist analysis: a new social order should be drawn up against the existing one, which would guarantee the just distribution of goods and thus eliminate the root causes of homelessness and poverty. We have no knowledge of a single modern society that tolerates mass squatting and fully decommodifies housing (that is, entirely removes it from the range of private goods, which provide the basis of capitalism), which leaves us with no existing macroeconomic model in which these elements could be introduced.

## The Historical-Sociological Analysis of Homelessness

---

The author provides a serious critique of traditional sociological approaches, which means that to a great extent the book itself is an examination of the history of sociology. For instance, the longest chapter of the book is an overview of Hungary's housing policies and programmes for dealing with homelessness (housing poverty) in various historical periods. The basis of the historical sociology analysis is the definition of homelessness. Most social science analyses understand homelessness as a special – extreme – form of poverty: a correct understanding in my view. The author reviews homelessness definitions used in the literature (UN, FEANTSA, etc.) without offering an alternative definition that could be used in different periods and housing market situations.

At the same time, the analytical chapters delineate a well-formulated understanding of homelessness. While homelessness is an extreme form of poverty, poverty itself is a social-structural problem, not only a social one (p.256). The author uses the term 'housing poverty', although I find no substantial difference in this context between this term and 'homelessness'. Housing poverty is a special case of poverty, affecting households with insufficient income to cover the costs of a socially acceptable housing solution and where such income is not granted to them through housing allowances or general (non-targeted) income transfers. Homelessness is not simply an outcome of accumulated individual misfortunes, but a product of social and power relations, and it is not 'only' characterised by poor and unstable housing conditions.

As far as I can tell, the wagon-dweller migrants after the border revision of World War I, the rural-to-urban migrants living in workers' hostels during the extensive industrialisation under socialism, and the mass of homeless people that appeared in the 1990s could hardly be classified in one and the same sociological category. The nature and causes of poverty change from one historical period to the next, which makes the historically decontextualized analysis of homelessness highly problematic, as the sociological nature of homelessness is different in the *fin de siècle*, after World War I, under socialism and after the transition.

The overview of the programmes of historical periods is sound and interesting. However, the sociological explanations behind the housing policies do not provide an overarching frame in which the various periods could be placed, and the main elements of the programmes could be connected to the period's key economic and social characteristics. In short, the structuralist explanation for the existence of housing programmes is that they are the concessions of the ruling classes, made in order to pacify political pressures and stabilize the system, and although the analysis shows that the reasons behind such concessions and the nature of the 'solutions' may be very different in the various periods, the socio-economic bases

of these differences remain unexplained. *The simple reason behind them is that socio-economic orders, welfare systems and housing policy were very different during these different periods, which cannot be overlooked in the historical analysis of homelessness.*

The historical analyses and descriptions are compelling, although the sociological and economic analysis of the conflicts examined often remains incomplete. This is, of course, also due to the – often incomplete – source material, as the historical chapter of the book is largely based on the overview of existing literature. This latter is dominated by descriptive studies, making the analytical approach of secondary reviews extremely difficult. The author includes a number of very interesting cases, which could be used to draw important conclusions (or establish important hypotheses) going beyond the simplified structuralist explanations.

- Rent strikes prior to WWI led to institutional solutions, which were a compromise between tenants and landlords, setting limits to rent raises for landlords while also regulating the consequences of the non-payment of rent. Mediatory committees were set up to manage conflicts.
- Controlled housing management<sup>1</sup> during WWI set back housing investment for a prolonged period and even affects current housing issues. (The private rental sector ceased to be a safe investment target for capital, which led to the dominant role of owner-occupied housing.)
- A more in-depth analysis of the 1919 Hungarian Soviet Republic's housing policy could have shown the structural problems of socialist housing policy – namely, the socially-embedded conflicts inherent in the redistribution of housing.
- Housing policy under socialism can be classified into distinct periods, explained by structural changes in society and the economy, but even if analysed separately, housing policy played a clearly detectable role. Some policy elements increased social and income divides; others decreased them.

The analysis of the transition period and the developments of the 1990s is crucial to understanding the current situation, and this part of the chapter truly is well-structured and of high quality. Housing privatization, income inequalities and the increase in unemployment (and particularly the drop in the number of persons active on the labour market) played a central role in the expansion of poverty and of homelessness. The author correctly points out that post-transition housing policy interventions did not only fail to strengthen security of tenure but had the opposite effect, increasing the probability of losing one's home (p.72).

---

<sup>1</sup> In this period, strict control measures were introduced not only for rent levels, but also for the conditions of terminating a tenant's contract.

The chapter also presents some points inaccurately, however. Rents did not rise in the early 1990s. After a centrally-defined increase in 1989, municipalities did not increase rents in proportion to consumer prices, although utility and household energy costs did grow dramatically in the 1990s (p.72). Arrears in the rental sector were partly explained by the fact that better-off tenants were more likely to purchase their apartments. (A similar process played out recently in relation to Forex mortgage loans, when an early repayment scheme was constructed in such a way that it only remained accessible to wealthier debtors, which pushed the rate of non-performing loans up further.) Furthermore, mortgage loans for housing were only backed by state subsidies until 2004, while mortgage loans between 2004 and 2008 – directly prior to the crisis – were not centrally subsidized (p.83). Also, there was no real demand on behalf of municipalities for the repurchase or return of privatized housing units (p.71).

## **Empowering the Homeless – Class Struggle**

---

The originality of the author's approach lies in the fact that she is actively looking for solutions to the structural root causes of homelessness. In her reasoning, policy is managed by political parties embedded in capitalism; therefore, any movement that aims to redefine the position of the oppressed within the power structure can only be built on the alliance between the oppressed and a civil society institutionally independent from this power structure. This approach considers the actors of institutional homeless provision as part of the power structure, which is clearly indicated by the critique of these institutions, formulated in various parts of the book.

In a simplified summary (for clarity's sake), the book is a manifesto of the inevitable struggle of homeless people as a class, which also critically analyses previous attempts at such manifestos and provides guidance for the movement on how to use the social sciences and research, as well as how to create contacts with those in power.

The understanding of homeless people as a social class seems questionable to me, as their situation is not only defined by the loss of their homes but also through a mix of socio-economic and individual factors, including low incomes (wages and transfers), unemployment, illness, the dismantling of family relations, and untreated personal crises. Housing policy is an important mediator and additional variable but it is not in itself the sole cause of homelessness. The category of 'housing class' did briefly surface in the 1970s urban sociology, but its use here does not seem well-founded.

At this point, there is no sense in returning to the criticism of homeless provision institutions, the main message of which is that these have created a service provider-client relationship with the representative of power on one end (the service provider) and the dependent party on the other (the client). From the point of view of structural

relations producing poverty and homelessness, the movement itself is just as important as the behaviour (and subordination) of homeless people. From a sociological viewpoint, Gyóri's statement (Csongor, 2011) holds true: the client-service provider relationship is the basis of homeless provision in modern societies, and the movement must take this into consideration. The book dedicates a full chapter (6, on action research) to presenting the methodological tools that aim to remove homeless people from this relationship and return them 'from clients to citizens'.

In the view of the author, only civil movements (in alliance with the oppressed) have the potential to pressure those in power into making structural changes. In the historical and social analysis chapters, the author strives to emphasize the role of movements and to justify the impossibility of social change without movements (and citizens taking action). In the socialist period, sociology examined homelessness in relation to poverty, as the former was not separable from the latter. A major piece of research in this field in the 1970s led by István Kemény, as well as the related political movements (SZETA, the democratic opposition, etc.), compelled the government to admit that the socialist system was unable to resolve poverty, an extreme form of which is homelessness. As the author puts it, civil movements have always formed at times of large-scale structural transformations, such as the transition from feudalism to capitalism or the transition from state socialism to new capitalism (p.171). The real question is: can civil society (in alliance with the oppressed) change the underlying structure for the benefit of the oppressed?

In her search for substantial professional solutions, the author states (with truly compelling reasoning) that the basic cause of homelessness is poverty (as a product of social and power relations) and neglect by the housing regime of the issue of poverty, such that homelessness should not be treated within the social provision system, but separately, as a housing problem. A further consequence of this is that broader social strata must be mobilized for the cause of the movement. And, she argues, if homelessness became widely recognized as a housing – rather than social – issue, many more citizens would understand their own role in pressuring their government into making meaningful and systematic changes (p.259). While it is easy to identify with the book's conclusion, according to which a housing movement based on wide social cooperation is absolutely necessary, it is harder to accept its identification of squatting as one of the most outstanding achievements of citizens' movements. In her words, "there is no housing movement without squatters" (p.263).

This is the narrative that the book is attempting to underpin with historical analyses and research findings, and it is presented to both researchers and lay readers as a well-written and compelling read.

